

The Criterion

December 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue IV

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

Editor-In-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Postcolonialism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Tripa Felicia

Teacher of Romanian

Colegiul Tehnic Energetic "Dragomir Hurmuzescu" Deva, Romania

"Postcolonialism-inspired by the fall of European colonial governments in the Third World following World War II, postcolonialism is the political and cultural analysis of societies freed from colonial rule. The endeavour has obvious relevance to the traditional work of history, but because of the strangeness of the colonial situation, postcolonialism also bears upon general issues of race, class, education, the West and capitalism. Colonialism was not just a simple suppression and exploitation of native peoples. Though inspired by economic motives (European governments and businesses coveted the natural resources of other lands), colonialism also entailed imposing the colonists' language and culture upon the local populace."¹

As related to the above mentioned quotation, Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, is an outstanding example of postcolonial literature and it brilliantly describes the way in which people's lives were changed at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. As Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947, that was an important day in the Indian history- after one hundred years, both India and Pakistan were near to the end of the colonial rule, his novel is a vivid description of the postcolonial regime. Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist, focuses on the presentation of the story of his life beyond a background of political shifts, insecurity, violence and tumult that immediately followed independence. *Midnight's children* includes several chapters that illustrate the political upheaval and the events that occurred in Saleem's life as compared to the development of both India and Pakistan. At once an Indian and a British writer, Rushdie enjoys a double status as both insider and outsider that allows him to comment both on the history of his native land and on the contemporary politics of Britain with savage and comic incisiveness, his dual position allowing him to present a world governed by different rules.

The novel *Midnight's Children* makes use of a series of themes and motifs that are related to the field of politics in India. The first characteristic of the novel is expressed by its intrusion in the world of magical realism that is made even from the very beginning of the book. Just like Rushdie himself, the narrator, Saleem, is born on the eve of independence and he is pursued all his life, to some extent, by the violent struggles between the different classes, religions, language and geographical regions. Being switched at birth with a child from a rich family, Saleem leads a life of luxury until the mistake is discovered. The book opens with the description of the main character who introduces himself and, thus, the reader finds out that his father came to the Kashmir region of India in 1915 after receiving his medical degree from Oxford and he also discovers the way in which the doctor met his future wife: he was solicited by a wealthy landowner to examine his daughter but he was not permitted to look at her, even if the examinations lasted for

¹ X. J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia, Mark Bauerlein, *Handbook of literary terms*, USA, Pearson Longman, 2005, p. 117.

several months. Unexpectedly, soon after, the doctor falls in love with the girl he had examined for so long and they get married: "I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then, at night. No, it's important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. [...] I had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was no escape. Sooth-sayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, [...] had become heavily embroiled in Fate."² This opening passage of the novel (Book One- 'The perforated sheet') emphasizes the fact that the narrator, like other children born at night, and whom he calls "the children of midnight", has mystical powers. Surprisingly, even if Saleem has got these mystical powers, he cannot make use of them and, consequently, his life is a continuous struggle, ruining before he is able to find harmony. What is noticeable is the fact that, in terms of structure, the novel is divided into three books, each of them containing several named chapters that announce, somehow, the events that are going to take place in that particular part of the book. For instance, the opening chapter, 'The perforated sheet', makes the reader think of a particular object. In fact, the perforated sheet is a symbol that covers two fields: firstly, it represents the piece of cloth that covers the woman's face and forbids the doctor to see her and, secondly, it may symbolize the veil that is taken of India when it gains independence.

Due to the numerous descriptive passages, Rushdie succeeds in taking the readers on an imaginative trip that allows them seeing his native country in a way they never dreamt of. Using the first-person narrative, Saleem continues the story of his life by telling the reader that, after Aadam and Naseem got married, they had three daughters, Alia, Mumtaz and Emerald and two sons, Mustapha and Hanif. Throughout his life, Aadam becomes a follower of the activist Milan Abdullah and after the latter is killed, the entire family has to live in the basement of their house. In a politically insecure climate, several events occur in the characters' lives: Nadir Khan falls in love with Mumtaz and they secretly get married, Emerald gets married to a Pakistani officer, Major Zafar, to whom she reveals the fact that the entire family is hidden in a secret place in the house. By the unveiling of all these family aspects, the author wants to show the fact that life goes on even under the most terrible situations and that political issues are always connected to the every-day life.

Blending fiction, politics and magic realism, Rushdie creates a universe of his own, a world that is so similar to his own life. He definitely rejects in his novel the idea of exile, feeling that the duty of postcolonial literature is to provide the readers with pleasure, historical information and the sense of belonging to both cultures. In fact, the author wants to emphasize the idea that colonization had its positive effects, as well and in spite of the exile, that period succeeded in the blending of cultures, blurring to a certain extent the rigid boundaries imposed by the postcolonial definitions.

² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, Great Britain, Cox & Wyman Ltd., Reading, Berkshire, Vintage, 1995, p. 9.

In fact, postcolonial literature marks the split existing between an inner world of emotions, intimacy and domestic life and an outer world related to politics, public exposure, violence and the dominating regimes. The inspiration that Rushdie extracts from the Indian culture is also memorable in his fiction. If one reads India's encyclopedia, he immediately realizes that the information he finds in there corresponds with the information provided in the novel: "Most colonial governments consisted of a governor or viceroy, assisted by a mainly European civil service. A typical example of this was the Indian Civil Service. British officials were few-there were only about 1000 for the whole of India- but they commanded large numbers of local subordinates. They had great power and were once described as "the steel frame" of British rule in India. [...] The Government of India Act of 1935 put Indians in almost complete control of the provinces, but the British kept a tight hold of the central administration, based in New Delhi."³ This fragment extracted from India's encyclopedia perfectly states the country's situation in terms of administrative control during the period when the UK government began operating a policy of 'Indianization'. Rushdie's novel succeeds in incorporating several fantastical elements into its fiction and the book offers the writer's Indian perspective on the English language.

The evolution of the story, from Saleem's birth and life to the history of India and the subcontinent may often be compared to Roland Barthes' idea related to "the pleasure of text". There is no doubt that Rushdie's text presents various "rebirths" in order to illustrate Saleem Sinai's complicated family history. The characters are renamed several times throughout the development of the plot: Naseem Aziz (Saleem's grandmother) is The Reverend Mother, Mumtaz Aziz becomes Amina Sinai, The Brass Sister is renamed Jamila Singer. In fact, this process of 'name shift' has a double significance: on the one hand, it refers to the fact that each birth corresponds to the existence of new parents that are often at odds with the old ones. On the other hand, this 'name shift' can be related to India's rebirth in terms of arrival at independence on August 15, 1947 and the emphasis of the difference existing between British imperialism and India's cultural lineage.

The novel remarks itself by dramatic irony given by Saleem's mistaken birthright. The motif of the double reveals the existence of two distinct worlds, of two separate class positions: Saleem's childhood in the haute bourgeois Sinai family and Shiva's childhood (the Sinai's real child) in the environment of the working class. This reversal of fate and the two sets of parents prove the futility of life and the end of the novel illustrates the way in which irony becomes even more palpable towards the end of the book, when Saleem gets married to Parvati the Witch and adopts her son whose father is in fact Shival. This event confirms the cyclic character of the novel, the motif of the double that appears over and over again, but also the 'double-parentage' of India as both a native and colonial country. Clearly, Saleem and Shiva are the symbols of a 'double-birth' that reflects India's rebirth into independence.

Another fascinating aspect in the novel is the presence of an incisive desire of the writer to unfold, reveal and exhibit facts and events that had never grabbed the reader's attention. As compared to *Tritram Shandy*, the novel *Midnight's Children* does not embody the same type of fictional autobiography in which the birth of the narrator coincides with the present of the writing, but it is centred more on the time of utterance than on the time of narration: "Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been playing the

³ William N. Hault, Andrew B. Gonzalez et alii, *The World Book Encyclopedia. India*. USA, Chicago, Illinois, Library of Congress, 1999, p. 48.

same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes... forever. As far as anyone knew.”⁴ The excerpt above mentioned emphasizes the idea that the section of time is also that of the continuous present of creation and this present of the narrative in the eternal present of the text shows that Saleem feels that he is so near of death.

Rushdie's novels hum with an eclectic mix of prose styles, which echo the rhythm and slang of English as it is colloquially spoken in India. Familiar English words get combined in new and unusual ways, and long, unbroken sentences run on freely, sometimes spanning a page or more. The inspiration Rushdie draws from both ancient and contemporary Indian culture is also notable in his fiction. Elements taken from traditional Indian mythology and religion thread themselves through the novel, as do the artistic conventions of modern Bollywood, the vigorous, populist cinema industry based in Bombay. In its sheer exuberance and sprawling range of cultural sources, as well as its attempt to include as much of India's vast cultural identity and contemporary history as possible, *Midnight's Children* is as complete a reflection of the life and character of the subcontinent as any single novel could possibly provide. “In this encyclopaedic book, the writing oscillates between the impossibility of total mimesis and the refusal of any partial disclosure. The reader is confronted to the "potential infinity of language" (Julia Kristeva) and constantly has to find new landmarks for representation.”

Works Cited:

Ahsan, A.R., *Sacrilege versus civility: Muslim perspectives on the Satanis Verses affair*
Markfield, Leicester: Islamic Foundation [1993]; ISBN: 0860372359
Akhtar, Shabbir, *Be careful with Muhammad!: the Salman Rushdie affair*
London: Bellew Publishers [1989]; ISBN: 0947792279

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 14.