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A Refigurative Portrayal of Women in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

The present paper analyses the portrayal of women in Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children*. The paper deals with both angelic and wicked characteristics lurking in a female character. The women are not as much recognized for their merits as they are taxed for their demerits. As the narrative goes, "Women have made me, and also unmade. From Reverend Mother to the widow and even beyond I have been at the mercy of the so-called gentler sex." Rushdie's representation of women can be described as stronger and more grounded than the typical Indian women. The discussion below is an attempt to scrutinize closely the feminist approach of Salman Rushdie with a view to establish position and role of women in postcolonial India. Man has subjugated woman to his will, used to promote his sexual gratification but never has he desired to elevate her to her genuine rank. To a deeper level it examines the sufferings, suppression and subjugation of women at the hands of male dominance and how patriarchal society prevented woman from realizing their creative potential.

Keywords: postcolonialism, feminism, marginalization, hybridity.

With the postcolonialism, women specially the educated, are caught between tradition and modernism, womanhood and motherhood, cultural laws and universal laws and gender issues, in a way trying to understand the socio-cultural problem of their society specially their own plight. The purpose of the article is to interpret these women and establish a tradition of women, who are strong, self-willed and empowered despite their varied circumstances.

The gradual descent of women from objects of worship to objects of commodity has been devastating. Through the ages, as history was in the making, mammoth changes kept reshaping the society and history of women in India faced gruesome atrocities. The paper deals with the sanction of space for woman in the Indian society and her struggle to emerge as an individual expressing existential anguish. The paper presents the effects of patriarchy on women of different social classes, ages, and the different responses to the restrictive institution of marriage.

Midnight's Children is a postmodern metafictional autobiography of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai with a glimpse of *chutnification* and hybridity in which postcolonial women are portrayed outdoing and outpacing men from managing power to homemaking. The empowering female

symbol still remains an icon to this day, reminding us of the incredible female efforts towards making of a nation. Salman Rushdie's women in *Midnight's Children* resort to unethical acts like indulging in infidelity. On the other hand, they want to be dominated as an object as a subordinate person. Pleasure is experienced by both men and women from within despite their social and psychological constraints. Rushdie's men are indifferent to women's individuality, sensitivity and feelings. Being in uncommitted relationships, they seek for pleasure outside and develop illicit relations. Men regard their women as commodities and mould them in the concept of traditional servility and make them stand meekly and suffer emotionally. Rigorous taboos of our society forbid women to have sexual liaisons by breaking the rigid laws of matrimony in India. However, Amina is an unfaithful wife as Lila Sabarmati. Parvati—the witch traps Saleem to marry her, an infidel who gets her son from Saleem's arch rival Shiva. Vanita and Parvati deliver bastard children. Ahmed Sinai, when defeated by ill-luck and financial disaster looks towards his woman who leads the family to sound financial status, fights legal battles for him and overtakes responsibilities of her man in several instances to rebuild lost fortunes. Entangled in the turmoil of home, family and professional spheres the woman tries to establish her selfhood in the world of alienation. Despite this, they are exhibited as interdependent where individual identity is invariably affected by male counterparts. Strict traditions discriminate women who are regarded as men's property, producers of children and are placed in second position on the social pyramid.

To reveal inconsistencies and inner contradictions the text has been dismantled to refigure and chronicle the life and events of gentler sex. To study multiple and fractured identity, hybridity, religious extremism and marginalization, an effort has been made to closely investigate the various issues.

Naseem, Saleem's grandmother is kept behind "perforated sheet" even at the time when she has to be examined by a doctor. When doctor is puzzled and asks her father about how to examine her without having a look at her, he is told by Naseem's father that, "You European returned chappies forget certain things. Doctor Sahib, my daughter is a decent girl, it goes without saying. She does not flaunt her body under the noses of strange men." A father in the above lines seems to uphold the status and dignity of his daughter against the temptations of onlookers. Naseem is earlier viewed only in her constituent parts through a perforated sheet, and after her marriage she becomes a "prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch's nipples on her face." Such treatment by the author brings about rapid physical ugliness and degeneration. Naseem is an oppositional force that champions the process of asking questions, seeking compromises, and blending together disparate stories. Naseem or The Reverend Mother's ceaseless need for control is primarily manifested in her unwavering command of the domestic sphere.

Mumtaz is asked to change her name after getting married to Ahmed Sinai "Change your name," Ahmed Sinai said, "Time for a fresh start. Throw Mumtaz and her Nadir Khan out of the window, I'll choose you new name. Amina. Amina Sinai: you'd like that? And Mumtaz

passively admits to the will of her husband to be called Amina thereafter. Although she is represented as a loving, devoted mother, she is never able to forget her first husband Nadir Khan.

Padma is a ‘critic within the text’. She is Saleem’s devoted caretaker and future wife. Padma is as strong and down-to-earth as Saleem is weak and dreamy. She provides Saleem with a skeptical yet patient audience. Padma is a victim of male hegemonic view. She is reflected through her animal physicality. Saleem introduces her as “Padma—our plump Padma....she is sulking magnificently. She can’t read.... Padma: strong, jolly, a consolation for my last days. But definitely a bitch-in-the manger.....” Diminishing and derogatory remarks— as a bitch, as fat ‘thick of waist’ and somewhat hairy of forearm— expose a negative image of her. Padma is illiterate, ignorant, and ugly as well. Here Saleem reasserts his dominance saying, “I attempt to educate her. Padma: can’t read and, like all fish- lovers, dislikes all other people knowing anything she doesn’t.” Although it was socio-economic conditions of postcolonial India which pressed the woman to this state yet, she is being directly targeted and stands as a subject of mockery. Though she cooks food for Saleem, makes his bed, performs the role of a skeptic and critic she is portrayed as a mere stereotype or, as a temptress. Her efforts are taken too much for granted, devalued and marginalized. Saleem refers her as ‘my dung goddess.’ It was Saleem’s impotency which cannot bring her any physical fulfillment. He highlights Padma’s suggestive sexual references as if she were a nymphomaniac:

Padma is leaking into me... Despite Padma’s many and varied gifts and ministrations, I can leak into her, not even when she puts her left foot on my right, winds her right leg around my waist, inclines her head up towards mine and makes cooing noises; not even when she whispers in my ears, ‘so now the writer is done, let’s see if we can make your other pencil!’; despite everything she tries, I cannot hit her spittoon.

The very core of Padma’s desires and needs are nothing but emotional and empathic. She holds genuine love for him in heart but it is very shameful of Saleem to view her as a bitch in heat to suggest women as disposable, usable and exploitable as well. A mere commodity, a slave and tool to satisfy thirst for sex and in return looked upon as a great whore and temptress. A very complex state of mind is revealed when Saleem gives superficial compliments to Padma.

I know that Padma is no serpent, and never meant me any harm.....I don’t blame Padma.

Padma’s presence was taken for granted by Saleem and when she was found missing, he feels a vacuum in his everyday life. A paradox arises that neither he acknowledges her efforts nor completely denies her significance.

I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear..... How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps- kept? – my feet on the ground?.....must I now become reconciled to the narrow one- dimensionality of a straight line?our Padma has gone and I miss her. After undervaluing and exploiting her at every level, he still expects her to be grateful to him. Despite these odds Padma still loves him

and is ready to accept his inadequacies and reciprocates love to him. Padma has strong moral and ethical values and in return her sincere and sentimental speeches are mimicked into a joke. The following passage would substantiate how much the existence of Padma in the development of the story is essential to Saleem:

It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life.....i feel cracks widening down the length of the body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear....How to dispense with Padma? How give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle –laden omniscience?.....Our Padma has gone, and I miss her.

All male dominant ideologies need to compensate man's actual degradation and exploitation of woman. Since women constitute one half of India, Padma's position finds its echo in this other India's tragedy or marginalization.

The narrator Saleem Sinai makes a claim that "women have always been the ones to change my life."The passage quoted above becomes the flash point for critics to investigate Rushdie's treatment of gender. The male characters by and large are positively coded in contrast to female characters. Gayatri Spivak notes that despite "his anxiety to write women into the narrative of history"(82), Rushdie places his female characters within a confining "gender code that is never opened up, never questioned" (83). Catherine Cundy, observes that, "women in Rushdie's novels are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequalities, and then effectively demeanedor marginalized by the writing itself. Powerful males like Homi Catrack, Mr. Dubash and Commander Sabarmati in contrast with these illustrious figures are portrayed as idiots and fanatics. Lila Sabarmati is an adulterous with "expensive tastes." Thus, while the men are wealthy, accomplished and ambitious, the women are either incompetent, mentally deficient, or borderline insane.

A similarly unbalanced dynamic prevails in the magician's ghetto. Despite being a powerful sorceress, Parvati-the witch plays second fiddle to "The Most Charming Man in the World." Parvati is a real witch, and, like Saleem, one of the children born at the moment of India's independence. Parvati is Saleem's closest ally as a child who later becomes his wife. Despite her fantastic powers, she is unable to make Saleem fall in love with her and, having heard of Saleem's impotence she decides to take her fate into her own hands. Using a magical spell, she summons Shiva to her and embarks on an affair with him. Their relationship soon grows violent and Parvati releases Shiva from her spell. Finding Parvati pregnant, in the magician's ghetto everyone shuns her. Saleem accepts the plea of Picture Singh and accepts her as his wife. Parvati embraces Islam and becomes Laylah. Once again there is loss of identity.

Saleem's sister Jamila the third generation female- a religious superstar, is also put behind Purdah. "And when Jamila Singer's fame had reached the point at which she could no longer avoid giving a public concert.....it was Major Latif who devised her famous, all concealing,

white silk chaddar, the curtain or veil, heavily embroidered in gold brocade work and religious calligraphy, behind which she sat demurely whenever she performed in public.

The fundamental discourse in *Midnight's Children* is one of hybridity and secondly to establish that within the narrative men are overwhelmingly given primacy. Even female characters who appear only briefly are illustrated according to their sexuality; the most complete portraits of women in the *Midnight's Children* other than Parvatiare of Sundari the beggar girl, whose stunning face was slashed to prevent her from blinding people, and the unnamed twin sisters, who “despite their impressive plainness both possessed the ability of making every man who saw them fall hopelessly and often suicidally in love.”According to Cundy, “women and their sexuality offer both security and the threat of loss of identity.”Within this binary, women can either use their sexuality to confer male identity, or to destroy it. Such is the case with Jamila Singer, who banishes her brother to the outer reaches of the Pakistani army as punishment for his forbidden feelings towards her. As a result, Saleem completely loses his memory and becomes the emotional figure of the Buddha. By and large, the women of the novel are deprived of what truly belongs to them. Rushdie lays out the ugliness of the few women, who are neither young nor sexually attractive with gusto, describing mole nipples, wrinkles, unsightly hair, and obesity. Alia Aziz, Naseem Aziz, Sonia Aziz and Amina Sinai are all portrayed in this ugly light. The most extreme example of emasculating womanhood in the novel is neither Naseem, nor Durga nor even Aunt Sonia. Instead Saleem reserves the major portion of his vitriol for Indira Gandhi , who otherwise is known as “the widow.”Rushdie’s portrayal of Mrs. Gandhi goes far beyond baiting. In the figure of the Widow Rushdie skillfully combines the two narrative threads of women as the enemies of hybridity and a menace to masculinity.

The discussion surrounding women in *Midnight's Children* is a testament to the complexity of his gender politics. The fabric of the novel is dependent upon this “othering” of women. In the words of Catherine Cundy Rushdie invokes the ‘iconic feminist victim’ in the male imprisoned zenobia. What comes with force is the hostility towards female autonomy and the resulting insistence on their powerlessness vis-à-vis men. This is seen as Rushdie’s possible guilt of self-deception as ‘champion of women.’

The narrator neither acknowledges the worth of women in his making nor completely denies their significance and contribution in the making of the nation. He rather averts punishing himself to the front to gain heightened momentum and women struggling with cultural shackles to carve out an identity of their own.

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