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History: A Thematic Concern of the Post-Colonial in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*

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Abstract:

Colonialism is a negation of the other person and entails a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity. The colonists force the colonised to answer the question 'who am I?' in terms of the dominant western traditions and customs. Post-colonialism, on the contrary, is an assertion of the self and individual tradition and customs attributing all those human values to it which were till recently deemed part of the colonist only. Salman Rushdie in his novel *The Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* blends national history with personal history of his characters to reclaim the lost identity of the colonised. This paper aims to show how the colonised's history is distorted and reshaped from the colonizer's point of view and how the colonised is trying to assert his identity by rewriting his own history.

Keywords: Post-colonial, colonizer, colonised, negation, identity, reclaim, history, nation.

Majority of people who lived in the last century were influenced, directly or indirectly, by the experience of colonialism. Colonialism made western man decisively non-eastern and gave him a self-image and worldview conducive to the expansion of the empire. Racism was central to colonialism and even today a major feature of post-colonial societies. To the black American writers, for instance, colonialism is an everyday reality in the form of white racism. Variables include the distortion the distortion of the historical past of the colonized, confusion of individual or group identities, color prejudice and caste system. The colonizer adopted a dual device of 'refining' those who were cooperative and ruthlessly cutting down others who chose to rebel. On the whole, the colonizer regarded colonialism as some kind of civilization mission.

According to Ashis Nandy, colonialism is said to have begun psychologically when the domination took on a cultural tone (2-3). This resulted in the re-arranging of cultural priorities.

The East-West encounter often involved a process of accommodation and response. But, colonialism resulted in the rupture of the traditional order, thereby establishing the superiority of the colonizer over the colonized. The colonizer still did not aim at the total disappearance of the native culture. He tried to distort and disfigure the past in such a way that the new order, comprising of western ideas, educational process and power-structures, appeared to represent a more just and equal world. The British, for example, derided India's rich cultural heritage as the dead past and held that the country could be revived only through modernization along western lines. The culture of the colonizer was, thus, frozen enabling a reshaping of the colonial consciousness. The colonizer's culture had seeped in so much into the native psyche that the colonized showed a natural preference for anything that was western. The colonial domination was, thus, social, political, religious, and intellectual. Post-colonialism was born to such a context to resist the claims of the colonizer.

Post-colonial fiction writers, hence, make immense use of history at the thematic level in finding out an identity for the colonized. These writers show how the history of the colonized is distorted and created from the colonizers' point of view. It is this contorted history of the colonized that world literature and established Euro-centric discourse embrace. The distortion even goes to the extent of stating that before the arrival of the colonizers, the natives did not have a history at all. This representation of the colonized as having 'little history' is challenged by post-colonial writers like Salman Rushdie. These writers realized that history created from the native's point of view is as important and significant as that of the colonizers. So, Salman Rushdie, in his novels *Midnight's Children (MC)*, creates the history of the colonised from the colonised's point of view by mingling national history with the personal history of his characters.

Midnight's Children encapsulates the experiences of three generations of the Sinai family, living in Srinagar, Amritsar, and Agra and then in Bombay and finally migrating to Karachi. Saleem Sinai, the narrator engaged in the actual writing of the story, works at a pickle factory by day and records his experience by night hoping that

[...] one day perhaps the world may taste the pickle of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth (MC 550).

The birth of Saleem Sinai, the narrator-protagonist in *Midnight's Children* is coincided precisely with that of modern India- midnight on August 15, 1947. What follows is the intertwined stories of Saleem and his country, as well as meditation on the intersection of individual and public life, of personal history and the historical record.

Midnight's Children also attempts to undermine our assumptions about what constitutes a life story or a nation's history. Saleem frequently pauses to comment on the book he is writing, and in one such instance, he realizes that he has given in the wrong date for the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi: "But I cannot say now what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (MC 190). If Saleem's history of India raises questions about the enterprise of recording history in general, his refusal to impose a conventional shape on his own story raises questions about how the readers understand their own lives. Saleem conforms to convention by beginning his book thus: "I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time" (MC 3). However, by the next page he has changed his mind about how to begin, telling us, "I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty two years before anything as obvious, as present as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth" (MC 4). Saleem then introduces Aadam Aziz who he calls his grandfather and whose life Saleem chronicles in some detail. Later in the novel, however, we learn that Ahmed and Amina Sinai are not, in fact, Saleem's parents; rather he is the product of an adulterous fling between Vanita, a poor Indian woman and an English man. Mary Pereira, a servant of the Sinai's switched him at birth with their own son, Shiva. This could be one of many that prompt Saleem to observe that "there are so many stories ... so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane. I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (MC 4).

Having been born at a crucial moment of history, Saleem Sinai claims a place at the center of things and on the authority of Prime Minister Nehru's letter to him "the role of the mirror of the nation more than the sloganized centrality of Indira Gandhi" (MC 510). In many ways India is Saleem and Saleem is India. The very time of 'clock-ridden, crime-stained birth' (MC 4) handcuffs him to Indian history. Geography, too, is not less important. Saleem Sinai stands for miniature India; her vastness is reflected in the largeness of his "map face". The disfiguring birth marks on the face appear to be the creation of the holocaust of the partition of

India by creating Pakistan. The “Byzantine domes” on his forehead and his “sky blue eyes” are symbols of Himalayas and Kashmir respectively. The “dark stain” and the “dark patch” on his face stand for the two wings of Pakistan. His long nose is indicative of India’s pride and self-glorification.

Midnight's Children also covers the agitation against Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the formation of the Indian National Army, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, communal riots, the dawn of independence, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu Succession Bill, the closing of the Suez Canal, Reorganization of states. Language riots in Bombay elections of 1957, the 1962 Indo-Chinese war, the sensational Nanavathi trial, the theft of the sacred locks in Hazrat Bal, death of Nehru, Indo-Pak war of 1965, the Bangladesh war of 1971, and the imposition and lifting of Emergency. Through Saleem Sinai’s “flash-towards’ and flash-backs, and commentaries, Rushdie, with his splendid imagination, recaptures the feelings of those times for us.

Saleem is linked to history by different modes of connection and stands in manifold relationship to history, both as its creator and its victim. His date of birth itself is a dividing line between the old world and the new. Saleem remarks “I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen emperors die” (MC 11). Saleem dislikes the walls that divide mankind. He hates everything that suffocates the free spirit of man. He views the scenario of history with pungent irony. His moral stance can be gauged in the large number of description of historical personalities and events.

Writing history as autobiography is another way of connecting the individual component of society with the collective stream of history. This is most pervasive in Saleem’s own religious “friction”, mixed ancestries and loss of identity, to the extent that in him we might notice Rushdie with his English father, Indian mother, mission-schooling and cared by a Catholic ayah. The symbols used to link the autobiography of an individual to the history of a nation are obvious, sometimes heavy-handed. Saleem Sinai, the narrator, is at the center of a vast web of stories which constitutes post-colonial Indian history which is also his own life story. In his quest for individual identity, Saleem weaves together the stories of his family through several generations of India’s independence and partition, of the State Emergency in 1975, of Indian myths, both Hindu and Muslim and of the thousand and one children born in the first hour of

India's independence. In this attempt, he is forced to rewrite the whole of Indian history experientially with himself at its center and draw correspondence between national events and his personal life dissolving referentiality into fantasy, forging connections in order to confer meaning on chaos:

And am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning that I'm prepared to distort everything to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today in my confusion I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. For me there can be no going back (MC 166).

In the same way, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (MLS) is set against the background of the political world of India. The history of India up to the present day is mirrored by the history of the fictitious Zogoiby family. The novel has a historical panorama of almost a century. Rushdie uses the past to show the evolution of history and to highlight what has befallen contemporary India. He uses memory as a tool for recovering the past. Memory in the novel becomes a personal and political necessity. The narrator of the novel is a familiar figure from Rushdie's fiction: an outsider struggling to make sense of a life torn apart by the anarchic currents of history. The Moor wants to get out of the memories of his own past,

I must peel of history, the prison of the past. It is time for a sort of ending, for the truth about myself to struggle out, at last, from under my parents' stifling power; from under my own black skin. These words are a dream come true. A painful dream that I do not deny; for in the waking world a man's not as easy to fly as a banana, no matter how ripe he be. And Aurora and Abraham will take some shaking off (MLS 136-37).

There are many historical parallels in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It traces the downward spiral of expectations experienced by India as post-independence hopes of democracy rumble during the Emergency rule declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, and early dreams of pluralism gave way to sectarian violence and political corruption. India's fate is embodied in the ups and downs of the Da Gama Zogoiby family. India forms the background of the novel; Bharath Matha is the Moor's own mother. The paintings of Aurora Zogoiby serve as allegories of the changing face of India. The Moor's relationship with her suggests the relationship between Indira Gandhi and her

son Sanjay Gandhi. The cerebral reconstruction of the “reality” of Moorish Spain becomes a historical mirror of the secular, democratic India under Nehru where “the Catholic reconquest of the former in the 15th century presages, for Rushdie, the contemporary Hindu threat to the latter” (Cundy 111).

Indira Gandhi who emerges as a destructive force in *Midnight's Children* reappears in the background of this novel. Aurora who, in the text, is the alternative to Bharath Matha, like Indira, serves as proof for the fact that she can be loving and destructive:

Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again loved her children and with whom the children's passionate conjoining and eternal quarrel stretched loving beyond the grave; who stretched into great mountains like exclamations of the soul and along vast rivers full of money and disease and across harsh drought-ridden plateau on which men hacked with pickaxes at the dry infertile soil; Mother India with her oceans and coco-palms and rice-fields and bullocks hangers and high circling kites and the mimicry of mynahs and the yellow-beaked brutality of crows, a protean Mother India who could turn monstrous who could be a worm rising from the sea with Epifania's face at the top of a long and scaly neck; who could turn murderous, dancing cross-eyed and Kali-tongued while thousands died; but above all, in the very center of the ceiling, at the point where all the horn-of-plenty lines converged, Mother India with Belle's face (MLS 60-61).

We find that Aurora's paintings are obsessed with a “mythic-romantic mode in which history, family, politics and fantasy jostled each other [...]” (MLS 203). Her art allegorizes the changing moods and preoccupations of the nation. Catherine Cundy comments “it is again a recurrence of a theme within *Midnight's Children* and much of Rushdie's fictional and non-fictional writing, the question of the best way of depicting reality” (Cundy 112).

The novel also depicts Aurora as Nehru's mistress who is loathed by India. During Aurora's twenty-first birthday, Nehru writes a long letter to Aurora apologizing for his absence from her birthday celebrations. This letter establishes the relationship between Nehru and Aurora. This novel creates a world of hyper-reality which has no bearing on the actual reality.

Rushdie makes use of personalities and events from actual history to create the novel's simulacrum. Rushdie even goes to the extreme of criticizing Indian politics. Epifania stands on the side of England and criticizes the Indian National Congress as "just a talk-shop for frogs" (MLS 19) and she even warns her children Aires and Camoens by saying "Nehru, Tilak, all these rogue gangsters from the North. Ignore your mother! Keep it up! Then it'll be the jailhouse for you, chop-chop" (MLS 19).

The megalomaniac character, Raman Fielding in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, distorts the history of India to make it coincide with his convictions. Raman Fielding is inspired by the real life character of Bal Thackeray, the leader of Hindu fundamentalists in Bombay. Fielding's encouragement of religious apartheid leads to the destruction of Bombay at the end of the novel when the city goes up in flames. For Rushdie, Bombay synecdochically stands for India; the fragile unity of which the author correctly senses is under siege. The control of history becomes devastating when a Hindu fundamentalist takes it upon himself to rewrite it. Thackeray follows the step of Indira Gandhi's attempts at reducing the pantheon of Hindu gods to a monovocal power. He privileges the reign of the Hindu avatara Rama. That is to say that the downfall of Bombay's plurality is commensurate with the plurality of the Hindu pantheon symbolized by the single voiced authority of Indira and Raman Fielding, the extreme right-wing mayor and former cartoonist appears at the head of a Hindu mob wanting to chase Muslims away. He forbids the Pakistani cricket team from playing in Bombay; Fielding accuses the Indian team's Muslim player Abbas Ali Baig of deliberately "eliminating" himself from the match against Pakistan and consequently reducing their chances of winning. The name of Fielding's party "the Mumbai Axis" originates from the name of the Goddess of the city of Bombay.

The history of the country is rewritten from the Hindu perspective. They demonstrate an account of a past that had no Muslims, no privileges to the weaker sections of the society and no politicization; Ram becomes full history. In the novel, the communal conflicts culminate, as in the real history of India, in the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque that Zeenat Vakil, the brilliant art critic, attributes to the victory of one piece of religious fiction over another. It becomes clear that manipulation of historical fact is potentially disastrous. In the last decade, Hindu right-wing parties have made an effort to propagate their own version of history. Some of India's great secular historians have taken up arms against this historical revisionism of the Hindu right-wing

parties by hailing nineteenth century Muslim predominance and claiming that Hindus and Muslims in India represented two equally notable nations. For the very same historians it is British colonial reign that created communalism and the conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

Midnight's Children, and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, thus, endeavor to denaturalize history. Linda Hutcheon comments that "desire to denaturalize history is anew self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them" (238). Rushdie, in his novels, does not idealize the past but rewrites history. In these post-colonial novels by Rushdie, story-telling becomes a historical and political act and a bond is established between the teller and the told, within the historical, political, social as well as inter-textual context. Thus, Rushdie does not idealize the past but rewrites history. Rushdie's words merit consideration here. He says:

If books and films could be consumed in the belly of the whale, it might be possible to consider them merely as entertainment, or even, on occasion as art. But in our whaleness world, in this world, without quiet corners there can be easy escapes from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible, unquiet fuss (Imaginary Homeland 101).

Hence, by rewriting the history of India in these novels, Rushdie has asserted the native's right to have a full-fledged history which is as important and valid as that of the colonizers.

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