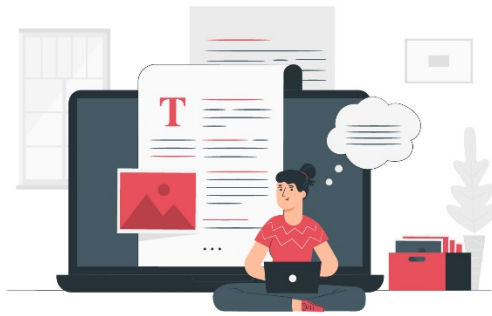


IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12th Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XII, Issue-2 (April 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Painting the Nation: Colour Symbolism in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Article History: Submitted-31/03/2021, Revised-25/04/2021, Accepted-27/04/2021, Published-05/05/2021.

Abstract:

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is noted both for its form and content. Rushdie has used elements of magic realism and fantasy to recreate the modern history of India from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Emergency of 1976.

Rushdie portrays his concerns through an effective use of colour symbolism. The colour blue signifies East and West being the colour of the eyes of the Kashmiri and the Englishman. Red symbolizes blood and destruction but is also salvational being the colour of mercurochrome. White is the color for a diseased nation. Saffron and green are the colours of the Indian flag and the hope of the nation. When Indira Gandhi becomes Prime Minister in the novel saffron and green are substituted with green and black, the colours of oppressiveness and death. *Midnight's Children* indicates that Rushdie has a strong, visual imagination.

Keywords: nation, history, red, black, blue, green, saffron, white.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), which won the Booker's Prize, brought Indian writing in English to the international literary arena. Rushdie fictionalized the modern history of India from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Emergency of 1976, interweaving fact with fiction, history with fantasy. Magic realism is a dominant mode used in the novel so that the fantastical and surreal become tools to comment on and critique history and politics. Emerging from the overall portrayal of events in the novel is a powerful motif of colour symbolism. Blue, red, black, saffron green and white are the dominant colours which highlight central themes in the novel.

The central characters in the novel are fictional children born on 15 August 1947 at midnight. They are linked to the new nation India which is also born on 15 August 1947 at midnight. The children are thus metaphors for India; they are born with magical powers which weaken over time indicating the weakening potential of the country post-Independence. The novel opens about thirty years before Independence and this section traces the career of Dr Adam Aziz, the grandfather of the central character, Saleem Sinai. The mother of Saleem, the main midnight's child, is appropriately described as being black in colour (Rushdie 15).

The colour blue is prominent in the first part of the novel. It is the colour of the eyes of Dr. Aziz, "the blue of Kashmir skies which dripped into my grandfather's eyes" (Rushdie 153). The blue eyes of Dr Aziz also suggest his Westernisation as he has trained as a doctor in Germany. Blue was often the colour of the eyes of colonial Englishmen; if blue is the colour of the eyes of both the Indian and the Englishman it indicates a similarity and equality between them.

Blue is also the colour of both Jesus and Krishna, the religious leaders of the religions of the coloniser and the colonised. Blue thus functions as a racial equalizer and undermines the idea of the racial superiority of the white man. In Kashmir, the Bishop states: "the Hindu love-god, Krishna, is always depicted with a blue skin" In an effort to woo converts he asks the preachers to say that the skin colour of Christ was bluish. This, he hopes, will win converts "blue, it will be a sort of bridge between faiths; "Blue , according to the bishop, is a neutral colour: "it avoids the usual colour problems, Gets you away from black and white(Rushdie 135-36)."

Mary Periera, later Saleem's Ayah, objects to Jesus being described as blue and reproaches the Bishop, telling him men are never blue. The Bishop tells her that men like the Picts and Arab nomads in the past have dyed their skins blue. The woman becomes even more distressed to hear Jesus being compared to pagans. Her husband, a radical, tells her to forget religion and that it is not about the colour blue—Christianity is a white man's religion.

Later, a mad Bengali snake-charmer, who helps snakes escape from captivity by playing his flute is compared to the blue Krishna: "the Tubriwallah was seven feet tall, with bright blue skin. He was Krishna come to chastise his people; he was the sky-hued Jesus of the missionaries" (Rushdie 187).

Blue is also the colour of Saleem's room in his house in the Methwold estate in Bombay constructed in the colonial era by an Englishman. The blue eyes of Saleem's grandfather and the

blue room in Bombay signify Saleem's ancestry and also his contemporary Westernized upbringing. Blue as a colour thus signifies India's old past and the colonial era. It signifies the cross cultural influences that have shaped the modern Indian. "*Midnight's Children* ...achieves a successful fusion of East and west (Cundy,27)."

The novel blends the English language with Indian words and Indian mythology with references to Western art and literature. The multicultural nuances of the colour blue as used in *Midnight's Children* indicate Rushdie's amalgamation of Eastern and western influences in the novel.

Rushdie shows the impact of visual arts on his imagination in the novel. There are several references to works of art in the novel. In Saleem Sinai's bedroom in Bombay hangs a painting where the young Raleigh looks at an old fisherman whose apparel is red and points out to the sea. The backdrop is a blue wall in the room. The crib of baby Saleem is blue. The attire of Raleigh in the painting is copied by a local tailor to make a dress for Saleem on his birthday. The anglicized background of Saleem's family is indicated and there is an implicit comparison between the English boy, Raleigh, and the Indian child, Saleem. The painting remains in the house after the British owner, Methwold, leaves reminding us of the colonial antecedents of modern India.

When Dr. Aziz visits the house of Ghani, the landowner he observes a painting of Diana, the huntress, in a golden frame. Behind the girl, Diana, is a stag, with an arrow from her bow piercing his side. Ghani says he bought the painting from an Englishman. The painting indicates the cultural impact of Western civilisation on Indians brought by colonials. The painting also indicates how Aziz will be struck by love when he sees Ghani's daughter, Naseem.

In the streets of Bombay Lifafa Das puts up a peepshow. The black box is placed against a backdrop of a red swastika on a wall which has been painted here by Hindu fundamentalists. The peepshow has many images of India—the Taj Mahal, Meenakshi Temple, the Ganges, Nehru. It is thus secular in spirit and a kaliedascoic view of India through these pictures. However, since it is placed in front of the red swastika, Muslim fundamentalists mistake Lifafa Das to be a Hindu fundamentalist and attack him. This shows how bigotry and suspicion are overtaking the populace.

Another prominent colour in the novel is the colour, red. It is associated with blood and destruction and also with healing. We first encounter this colour when Dr Aziz returns to

Kashmir and his nose bleeds. Three drops of blood fall from his nose Three drops of blood also fall on the sheet when Dr Aziz later consummates his marriage. "As the Quran tells us: "Recite in the name of the Lord thy creator, who created man from clots of blood" (Rushdie 4)." Jesus and the crucifixion are recurrently mentioned in the novel so that the salvational role of blood and red is implied.

The colour red surfaces strongly in the description of the Jalianwala massacre in Amritstar on 6 April,1919. The wounded are covered in blood. Dr Aziz treats the wounded patients with merchurochrome which is also red. So here red is associated with death but also with healing:

He is bandaging wounds, dabbing them liberally with Merchurochrome, which makes them look bloodier than ever but at least disinfects them. Finally, he returns to his hotel room, his clothes soaked in red stains"(Rushdie 39).

When Mian Abdullah is murdered, the swords of the assassins are " stained with blood (Rushdie 58)". Red is also the colour of anger-- when Nadir Khan, assistant to Mian Abdullah manages to flee, the military officer in charge of the operation is furious: " O awesome rage of Major Zulfy when he found the bird had flown: this was the colour he saw: red (Rushdie 79)."

Red is also the colour of spit from those who chew betel. Mian Abdullah's followers in the Free Islam Convocation play the game, hit-the-spittoon--whoever can spit the farthest is the winner.The spitting is directed at spittoons. So lost are they in the game they do not see the danger to their plans: they " ignored the cracks in the earth"(Rushdie 57).

Edited history in the novel is compared to a piece of meat drained of blood (that is of interesting episodes):

Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately, this makes the stories less juicy; so, I am about to become the first and only member of my family to flout the laws of halal (Rushdie 74)."

The colour white is usually a symbol of purity. In the novel it is associated with disease and a diseased nation. Just as the midnight's children represent the fading power of the nation, the Rani of Cooch Nahin becomes diseased and represents the sickness of the nation. She is

aghast at Muslim politics and the idea of the Partition of India: " the Rani of Cooch Nahin, who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence (Rushdie 53)."

The Rani figures in a photograph with Dr Aziz and his friend, Mian Abdullah, who forms the Free Islam Convocation to oppose the Muslim League. In the photograph he has a lock of white hair and a white shirt. Here white represents the spirit of freedom. The Rani represents the conflicts of the times, political and social; like Abdullah she wants a free, secular India: " ' I am the victim,' the Rani whispers, through photographed lips that never move 'the hapless victim of my cross- cultural concerns. My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit (Rushdie 54).'" White represents thus both sickness and the aspiration for a free secular India.

Black occurs occasionally in the novel. Later the Emergency is associated with black and white: " the Emergency had a black part as well as a white (Rushdie 597)." Here both black and white have negative associations-- the corruption of the Congress is clear; it is black and white.

The colour green is associated with chutney and the idea of the chutnification of history. Green is the colour of chutney. As a man eating pakoras in a restaurant in Bombay Saleem is served with green chutney and memories of a past when the narrator's ayah had served pakora with green chutney comes back--the same chutney which, back in 1957, Saleem's ayah Mary Periera had made so perfectly; the grasshopper-green chutney which was associated with those days--carried them back into the world of their past, while chutney mellowed them.

Commenting on the significance of chutney as a metaphor Gopal states that food more than any other image or metaphor in the novel, comes to represent the complexity of Rushdie's engagement with history. The Braganza pickle factory where Saleem narrates his story is also the place to create a metaphor for the ' chutnification of history, the grand hope of the pickling if time' in the form of the novel' (Gopal 459)... The coming together of ingredients in food preparation is "akin to the writing of history where facts and interpretation must also be worked together in a complicated manner so that one ingredient is inseparable from another, as in a chutney (Gopal 99-100).

The colours saffron and green are mentioned in the novel referring obviously to the Indian flag and Independent India and are evoked when the birth of the midnight" children and the nation is described: outside Dr Narlikar's Nursing Home, there are fireworks and crowds

dress in the colours of the flag- saffron rockets; the men in shirts of zaffron hue, the women in saris of lime. On a saffron-and-green carpet Dr Narlikar talks to Ahmed Sinai: "saffron shifted, green-skirted they throng on the illuminated streets... little Dia lamps... conform to our two-tone colour scheme: half the lamps burn saffron, the others flame with green ... the din of Independence which hangs saffron-and-green in the night sky (Rushdie 154-56).

This vivid description of saffron and green associated with joy and hope of 15 August 1947 contrasts sharply with the later description of Indira Gandhi as the Widow who is linked to the colours green and black representing the death of hope. Saffron, the colour of purity, is replaced with black and green, the colour of hope, is now associated with death: " the Widow and her virtual dictatorship are presented as green and black (the negation of saffron) (Goonetilleke,34) ". In contrast to the paragraph above evoking green and saffron is the following paragraph describing Indira Gandhi:

No colours except green and black ... the walls are green the sky is black--the stars are green the Widow is green the seat is black the Widow's hair has a centre parting it is green on the left and on the right black ... the Widow's arm is long as death its skin is green, the fingernails are long and sharp and black ... the Widow's arm is long as death its skin is green, the fingernails are long sharp and black ... the Widow's arm is hunting see the children run and scream ... Now the Widow's hand is lifting one by one the children green their blood is black ... the Widow laughs her tongue is green her teeth are black and children torn in two Widow hands which rolling rolling halves of children roll them into little balls the balls are green the night is black (Rushdie 288).

In the above paragraph, Indira Gandhi, the Widow, jealous of the magical powers of children who signify the hope of the nation, destroys them and hence represents the new destructive oppressive forces that have overtaken the nation. The colours of the flag, saffron and green, indicating hope and growth are substituted here by the combination of green and black-- here green is the colour of death and black of the death of hope.

When Saleem's son, Aadam, is born he is first "saffron, then saffron-and-green, and finally the colour of grass (Rushdie 391)." The second Aadam of the novel represents India post the Emergency of 1976 and is born when the Emergency is declared; at first, he is saffron, associated with purity, then green and saffron, associated with the Indian flag and finally green

which as we have seen associated with the Widow has become the colour of death. Aadam Sinai thus signifies the different stages of the deteriorating nation.

Rushdie effectively uses colours to underpin some of his major concerns in the novel. The use of colour symbolism in the novel indicates Rushdie' strong visual imagination. The writer has painted his fictional canvas with a a range of colours to render vivid the world of the novel.

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