

Midnight's Children: Rushdie's Mosaic of Post-Colonial Politics, War and Liberation

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Abstract

Tracing the causes behind major socio-political changes in India and the circumstances that led a nation towards civil war and division, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is the saga of migration, colonial legacy, power, identity and chaotic situation of country left behind by the Britishers. Rushdie's narration becomes the allegory of nation when Saleem, the protagonist of the novel, gets a letter from Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Pt. Nehru greets the midnight's child and considers his growth and downfall, the growth and downfall of the nation. Through his magical power of telepathy, he arranges a midnight conference where all the children, who were born in the midnight of Independence Day, participate to discuss the situation of India. Saleem is an archetypal of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity who seems omnipresent in entire country. At one time he was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh and on another he was starving to death in Orissa. Finally, the book depicts the Emergency Period and the gruesome steps taken by Indira Gandhi to save her throne of premiership.

Keyword: Hybridity, Religion, Allegory, Emergency, Chutnification

Born on June 19th, 1947, Salman Rushdie is an Indian born British novelist, whose works have a dramatic role in the Post Colonial Criticism. Rushdie is a complicated writer. He puts history in an atypical manner which is very interesting and mind boggling at the same time for readers. However, Rushdie is a great storyteller who paints a somewhat neutral image of the story, in its raw form, leaving it to the readers to draw their conclusions.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a saga of modern India, its imagination and creation. Rushdie has used magic realism to elucidate his magnum opus which is a very paradigm of Indianness. He ends his novel with 'pickle' and 'chutney' which is an absolute sublimity to conclude the Indian nationhood. Rushdie, from Ahmad Sinai to Methwold's villas, has tried to tell that modern India doesn't hold its over absolute ideologies rather than an agglomeration of various belief systems – very like a pickle. Rushdie has kept the dualism of identity very prominent in the whole novel, not limiting to just people but society and nation as a whole. Despite the grandiose telling and the satirically epic sweeps of the novel, the events lived through the characters/protagonist have an importance which go beyond their individual lives, they do tell us something larger and more symbolic, not just about modern India but also about universal themes including love, marriages, ambition, creativity, survival and storytelling.

Midnight's Children, along with being a national allegory is an autobiography of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Rushdie's subtle writing makes the novel feasible for cosmopolitan readers. Rushdie begins the novel much before the birth of the nation, i.e., the independence of country, because he believes that the

past has a very daunting effect on our future. “Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence.” [17]

Rushdie’s notion of India as a ‘collective fiction’ of myths and fantasies nightmares has political as well as artistic meaning. Rushdie with *Midnight’s Children*, attempts to provide a vision of the country he wants India to be: an attempt to imagine a unifying form for the subcontinent as a whole. Rushdie specifies the ideals that *Midnight’s Children* celebrates: “My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity. The defining image of India is the crowd, by its very nature super abundant, heterogeneous, many things at once.” [32]

On the midnight of August 14th 1947, M. A. Jinnah got his solicitous dream fulfilled. The never-ending shenanigans had finally got him the country he had always dreamt of. But it came with a heavy price. It brought the biggest migration in history as the country was divided on the basis of religion. Millions got displaced and had to leave their everything to start new life elsewhere. The partition had brought ethnic instability and hatred in a nation which for ever had lived united and peacefully. Partition changed the country for ever, it changed its holy soil, air and water. A line brought havoc to the million lives who just happen to be born Hindu and Muslim. Anchal Malhotra, in her book, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*, writes:

“In the months of leading up to partition, whenever my father made a visit to Amritsar, he would come back weighed down by stories of horrific communal violence. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs engaged in a bloody communal war. Slogans of “Le kar rahege Pakistan! We will take Pakistan!” would resound in the air as demand for the new country. But for most people, even the thought of such a division was absurdity. In fact, even after the divide happened, the people expected to stay where they were—continue to leave in India or Pakistan, whichever side of the border they were regardless of their religion.” [52]

Jawaharlal Nehru became the first prime minister of independent India- a secular India, whereas M. A. Jinnah became the first governor general of independent Pakistan – an Islamic Republic. The people of both nations were forced to put their sufferings and agony aside for the ‘greater good’ and the coming future their leaders had promised. “Because the promise of exotic future has always secured, to my mind, the perfect antidote to the disappointment of the present.” [482]

The first elections in Pakistan took place in 1954. Most of the seats were won by the United Front – the coalition government of the opposition parties. However, the entire constituent assembly was dismissed by Malik Ghulam Muhammad. Between 1947 and 1971 Pakistan had multiple phases of military coup. The people living in East Pakistan didn’t get the opportunity to be politically independent. Seventy-five per cent of the national budget was spent on West Pakistan, even though, sixty-two per cent of the West Pakistan was sixty-one per cent more than East Pakistan. Elections were held in Pakistan in 1970 and the results were shocking. “The wretched Bengali’s Awami League Party had won 160 out of a possible 162 East Wings Seats, Mr. Bhutto’s P. P. P had merely taken 81 western constituencies. Yes, an irritating election.” [488-489]

The election results showed the political difference both parts of the country were having. Rushdie says that religion was the only factor that had held together.

“In those days, the country’s East and West wings were separated by the unbridgeable land-mass of India, but past and present, too, are divided by an unbridgeable gulf. Religion was the glue of Pakistan, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogenous unity in

time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now.” [490]

Yahya Khan cancelled the elections on 1st March, 1971. This caused a massive uproar in East Pakistan. The roads were flooded with protests. People wanted to create a separate, secular, democratic, socialist country with Bengali creativity as the driving factor. This marked as the foundation of the Bangladeshi liberation war. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder father of Bangladesh, in his iconic speech of 7th March, 1971, says:

“What wrong have we committed? In the elections, the people of Bangladesh entrusted me and the Awami League with the totality of their electoral support...But is a matter of grief that today we are constrained to say in all sadness that the history of the past twenty-three years has been the history of persecution of the people of Bengal...in 1954, we won the elections and yet were not allowed to hold power...But Mr. Bhutto said that if members elected from West Pakistan come here, the Assembly would turn into a slaughter house... We are the majority in Pakistan. Whenever, we Bengalis have attempted to ascend to the heights of power, they have swooped upon us... do not wish to become the Prime Minister. The struggle this time is the struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is the struggle for independence. *Joi Bangla!*” [15,16-20]

Between 10th and 13th March 1971 all Pakistani International flights were cancelled and were urgently rerouted To Dhaka. Pakistani soldiers in large numbers flew to Dhaka in those planes. Rushdie mentions the movement of soldiers through the protagonist Saleem Sinai who had lost his identity and memory at that time. He was now a soldier at war and ready to kill. He had joined Pakistan Army and a special task force to detect landmines named CUTIA. In Rushdie’s world, CUTIA units were formed for the operation. The purpose of this unit is to weed out undesirable elements Rushdie also mentions that Ayooba and Farooq, soldiers at war, were very young and gullible, they were young souls who were filled with hatred and brainwashed to fight.

On March 25th, 1971, a genocide was planned by the Pakistan Army; operation Searchlight. Rushdie Writes:

“Actions not words! One-two double-quick time!’ Airline passengers donned uniforms and took up arms; while Brigadier Iskandar at last announced the purpose of our trip. ‘That Mujib,’ he revealed, ‘We’ll give him what-for all right. We’ll make him jump for sure!’” [495]

Before Mujibur Rahman was arrested, he made a radio announcement – a declaration making Bangladesh a free and independent state. Rushdie has specifically heightened the time of the incident- midnight of March 25th. Midnight has always been important in Rushdie’s novel for it is the time when the past is not passed and the future has not yet come. It’s the time the change happens, its juxtaposition of night and day, darkness and light, lies and truth, oppression and liberation, it’s not entirely black nor white, it is grey. Anthony Mascarenhas, a Pakistani journalist, in his famous story on atrocities carried out in Bangladesh (East Pakistan), entitled “Genocide”, writes:

“Why kill him? I asked with mounting concern”. “I asked with ... concern”. “Because he might be a Hindu as he might be a rebel, perhaps a student or an Awami Leagues...” of course, “he added hastily, “we are only killing the Hindu man... Women were raped, or had their breast torn out with specially fashioned knives. Children did not escape the horror. The lucky ones were killed with their parents; but many thousands of others must go through what life remains through them with eyes goggle out and limbs roughly amputated... West Pakistani officials privately calculate that altogether both sides

have killed 250,000 people. The bone-crushing military operation has two distinctive features... "cleaning process" ... other is "rehabilitation effort". [11]

The Indian government intervened the war when 10 million refugees fled to India across the borders of East Pakistan. The government considered more feasible to fight war with Pakistan than shelter the 10 million refugees. The Indian Army helped East Pakistan to create their separate nation as the West Pakistan Army surrendered. Salman Rushdie, has kept the description of war crimes, killers and its aftermath relatively very minimal. He, rather has focused more on the political arena that caused that. He believes that war and massacres are unavoidable consequences of political decisions. Rushdie has very much antagonised 'Religion' in the novel. He believes Religion has always been kept above people in the Indian subcontinent and caused problems. He believes Indian subcontinent has very volatile people, where religion is a driving factor in their lives. He believes that religion is politics, and religion governs most political decisions. "Once long ago, on another Independence Day, the world had been saffron and green. These mornings, the colours were green, red and gold." [527]

Rushdie concludes with the 'BUDDHA' reference, an enlightenment for the protagonist and his colleagues' enlightenment about war. They realize that lives are always lost on both sides and only the troops die, the poor suffers and die, while the high-ups just sign some papers and get rid of blood in their hands.

After Nehru passed away in 1969, India was in need of a new leader, a new strong leader who could bear the responsibilities of a complex nation. Salman Rushdie has marked the phase after the war of 1965, by Saleem Sinai memory and identity loss- a phase of unconsciousness and numbness. Saleem was in an enigmatic situation and so was India. It had lost one of its finest leaders and was having a transitional period.

Daughter of the first prime minister of independent India, Indira Gandhi's identity had never been of Nehru's daughter, but of 'The Indira', who was a fearless leader, the dictator of 'Indian Democracy'. Rushdie puts a phantasmagorical image of Indira. Indira Gandhi primarily enters in *Midnight's Children*, with the regaining of Saleem's memory, commemorating the new leader of modern India. "The supposed political rebirth of Mrs Indira Gandhi; but when I returned to India, concealed in a wicker basket, 'The Madam' was basking in the fullness of her glory." (538)

Though disputed, Indira Gandhi's political career was one of the most influential one in Indian political history. The national emergency of 1975 was one of the most pivotal decisions for both Indira and India. Political experts still have quite varied and mixed remarks on the imposition of Emergency. However, the third emergency after India's independence was not just a sudden decision but a result of unpleasant incidents cascading onto the government.

In the year 1969, nationalisation of 14 banks was decided by the Congress government. The decision was opposed by several businessmen like J.R.D Tata, investors and shareholders. On 18th July 1969, the government decided to pass it through an Ordinance. The Parliament session was due begin on 21st July and the president was due leave his office on 20th. The ordinance was drafted in hurry, almost overnight, and was signed by the President of India before the Parliament session began.

Indira Gandhi justified this decision that nationalisation of banks shall allow the banks to reach every nook and corner of the country and be feasible for the common people. R.C. Cooper, one of the shareholders of Central Bank of India, when approached the Supreme Court regarding the decision, the court rejects the ordinance of the government. This marked the beginning of Indira Gandhi government versus judiciary.

The government, in response, brought a new amendment to the constitution next year that reversed the Supreme Court's judgement.

The Congress government introduced a bill in 1971 to end Privy Purse. When, the bill couldn't pass in Rajya Sabha, the government made a proclamation that Princely states would no longer be recognized as such and hence Privy Purse wouldn't be needed. Once again, the matter reached the Supreme Court and the court declared the proclamation null & void. The Indira Gandhi government added another constitutional amendment stating that the Privy Purse would be abolished for the ruling families, reversing the judgement of court.

As it had become so powerful corruption crept into the congress party, a major scam involving the Chief Minister of Gujrat surfaced. People came out on the roads to protest and students also joined them. Buses were burned and shops looted and the police were attacked. Indira Gandhi had to dissolve the state government of Gujrat due to the rising turmoil among the people. Rushdie writes:

"Dark clouds were gathering in political skies as well: in Bihar, where corruption inflation hunger illiteracy landlessness ruled the roost, Jaya- Prakash Narayan led a coalition of students and workers against the governing Indira Congress; in Gujrat there were riots, railway trains were burnt and Morarji Desai went onto a fast- unto death to living down the corrupt government of the Congress (under Chiman Bhai Patel) in that drought-ridden state" (575)

J.P. Narayan led non-violent protests by students against the corruption in the congress government and demanded the dissolution of the Bihar government. Another leader George Fernandes carried out a 3-day railway strike for demanding better work conditions and better salary for the railway workers. More than 17 million workers protested in it. It became the largest industrial strike in the world at the time. Rushdie talks about the image Indira Gandhi had right before the Emergency. Very like the centre-parting in Indira's hair she had two varied impressions on people. Indira Gandhi was being idealised by the people. A cult following was developing for her and the other side a solid criticism and hatred.

Rushdie refers 'Labia- lips' as a 'congress wallah' who is commending the works of the congress government and promoting the ideologies of the party. Then he talks about Picture Singh, who mocks and irritates the 'congress-wallah'. Rushdie, here draws a contrast present in the society. He says that Picture Singh's hold on reality was absolute. Rushdie compares the ghetto's situation with that of India. The characters of the 'snake-charmer' 'Picture Singh' and 'Labia lips' represent the mindset of different sections of society at the time. He says that religious disputes were almost absent and things that held relevance at the time were the jobs, economy and corruption. Salman Rushdie writes:

"Country's corrupt, 'black' economy had grown as large as the official 'white', which he did by showing me a newspaper photograph of Mrs Gandhi... God damn this election business... Whenever they come, something bad happens, and our country behave like clowns.... I had entered a milieu in which, while religious and regionist bigotry were wholly absent, our ancient national gift for fissiparousness had found new outlets." [555, 557]

In March of 1975, Indira Gandhi gets another shock from the Allahabad High Court. A case filed by Raj Narain, a socialist election candidate, against Indira Gandhi for using unfair means to win her seat in the election. The court declared her seat null and void and she was removed from the Lok Sabha. The newspapers at the time printed that the court unseated the Prime Minister from her seat, an exceptional achievement. Rallies were being held, while some in favour of Indira Gandhi, most of them were against. One such was led by J.P. Narayan. He urged the students to come and protest, urged the people to stop

obeying the police. He told the police and armed forces to disobey the orders of the government. A rise of civil disobedience was in the air.

Salman Rushdie has put the imposition of Emergency with the birth of Saleem's son Aadam Sinai. Aadam was born to Parvati, the witch, in a quite dramatic manner. Parvati's wretchedness with the baby represents Indira's growing anxiousness with the political tensions in the country. Salman Rushdie writes:

"I don't know what's going to come out of her but it isn't going to be good....Yes she has begun to push....push push push and while Parvati yes she has begun to push, come on Parvati, push push push, and while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push push push the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister, so in a sense they were forcing Mrs Gandhi to push." [584]

On June 25th 1975, Indira Gandhi consults with some of her ministers and sends a written note, to the then President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed requesting to declare an internal emergency in the country. On the night of 25th when Adam was about to born, the country was being born once again. Within a few hours several opposition leaders were arrested including Morarji Desai, J. P. Narayan, L. K. Advani and Charan Singh. The government cuts the supply to the newspaper offices in Delhi that night, so that no newspaper could be printed that night. Democratic spirit was ending and tyranny was established. Voices that spoke against were being silenced. Fear was being instilled among the people. Rushdie draws a comparison between the dictatorial behaviour of Indira's government and the British rule. "Then the tear-gas came and we had to flee, coughing spluttering blind, from riot police, like criminals, crying falsely as we ran (Just as once in Jallianwalabagh- but at least there were no bullets on this occasion)." (577)

Sanjay Gandhi, the famous son of Indira Gandhi wasn't a very appealing man to Rushdie. Rushdie, in fact, has been particularly critical to the influence of 'family' in the Congress government. He points to the uncontrollable powers Sanjay Gandhi had when her mother was the prime minister of the country. The infamous mass sterilisation run by Sanjay, sterilized men in an unsafe manner to reduce the population.

While the Emergency widely has been called as a dark phase of Indian history some positive outcomes came from it, the trains were always regular, everyone was on time, and businesses ran efficiently. Perhaps, it was the fear or just the country working normally without protests, riots and strikes. Although, free speech and media was censored, Indira Gandhi was very cautious about her image in the international community. She says that emergency didn't destroy democracy rather safeguarded it. She puts that certain 'unwanted elements' were planning to paralyze the working government and often hard steps are required to make things going well. In one of her Press Meet, Indira Gandhi Said:

"There was violence. Students were not attending college. We had strikes. In fact at all levels there was such indiscipline that even government functioning was becoming extremely difficult.... There are many different types of people involved. They are the recognized political parties, there were certain groups with whom they had combined which said they were not political, which didn't believe in democracy...The government is functioning as it was functioning. I have no powers than I had before." [5]

The time around the Emergency holds a significant relevance in shaping Modern India. During Emergency, it was the first time after independence that people protested at such a large scale; last, they did was to fight the British. What made them to come to streets again was the tyranny of someone in Power. The congress government had been ruling from more than two decades and was on its way to a

totalitarian government. The spirit of democracy, freedom of expression, and a choice in government making lacked during the rule of Congress Government, which had made Indira Gandhi the unofficial "queen of India". "When the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers, I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air...". (592). Rushdie points that the Emergency was an attempt to crush the rising opposition and safeguard the congress rule for the upcoming years. Indira Gandhi didn't like the leaders who raised voice and questioned the Congress government. Their voices were suppressed during the Emergency. "Deepest motive behind the declaration of a State of Emergency was the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight." (597)

Rushdie says there were two sides of the Emergency - black and white. Saleem Sinai locked up in a dark cell with little furniture and cockroaches refers to the situation of India at time- whose people were either in lock-ups or silent. Rushdie says that politics, a macrocosmic activity, is 'bad dirty business' in which there are things that hold much more importance than the lives of common individuals. The Emergency taught these common people surviving and gave birth to something new and Important - a united front against the Congress regime. While Indira Gandhi tried to suppress the revolting community, the Emergency gave them an opportunity to be united and fight against the shackles of tyranny and injustice. Rushdie writes:

"Yes, here is optimism, like a disease: one day she'll have to let us out and then, and then, wait and see, maybe we should form, I don't know, a new political party, yes, the Midnight Party, what chance do politics have against people who can multiply fishes and turn base metals into gold? Children, something is being born here, in this dark time of our captivity; let Widows do their worst; unity is invincibility! Children: we've won!" [610]

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