

The Image of Women in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

This analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* focuses on the construction of womanhood in postcolonial India, with reference to women's image in two significant domains, politics and religion. Within the sphere of politics, women are indissolubly connected to the concept of nation, and Rushdie intertwines personal history with that of the country, using birth metaphor for both children and country. The role of women in the postcolonial society, acknowledging that their part is conditioned by decolonization discourses. Therefore, since nationalism and religion are the pillars that oppose Western colonialism, the characterization of Indian women must observe several rules that are subsumed to such ideas as: the enlivenment of religion, the revisiting of the past and of tradition, the loyalty towards indigenous languages and masterpieces of art and literature, the combat against foreign systems of value and idioms etc. Nationalism presents women as the main bearers of tradition, economic development allows them to make an improvement in their condition, as they are permitted to access the educational system, to work and so on. As the exponent of the Hindu tradition, women are the keepers of the household honour and the protectors, and this is in fact just another manner of controlling their lives. This paper will highlight the emotional and psychological aspects of these women in a bid to understand their character and their behavior.

Ahmad Salman Rushdie, born in 19 June 1947, is a [British Indian](#) novelist and essayist. He has written plethora of novels. He is a master of 'de-familiarization'. His second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), won the [Booker Prize](#) in 1981. Much of his fiction is set on the [Indian subcontinent](#). He is said to combine [magical realism](#) with [historical fiction](#); his work is concerned with the many connections, disruptions, and migrations between [Eastern](#) and [Western civilizations](#). He occupies a distinguished place at the very apex of 'Third World Literature'. What is remarkable in his reading that it is different and superior in narration and construction. His forms of narrativization are diverse enough for critics to conjecture that they belong, in essence, to a generally non-Western, specifically Indian form of non-mimetic narration derived from myths and magic. His novels are the product of his valued imagination.

"It is truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of wife". This famous extract is from Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, who is considered to be the best advocate of women characters. Like Austen, Rushdie's heroines fine recluse by marrying well settled men. Women are presented as suppressed by the patriarchal society of Salman Rushdie's fictional world. As in *Midnight's Children* most of the female characters are relegated to the background, because they don't have 'voice'. In Rushdie's world women are used as sexual objects. The male world is rigid, while the female is flexible enough that it can be transmuted into any shape as per the need of the male world. Males are revolutionary in Rushdie's world. They are recalcitrant and adamant. Thus there is, a certain complicity of a shared starting point between the author and his approach regarding his heroines, generated largely by very conditions in which the idea of a 'Third World Literature' has arisen, which I have endeavoured to elaborate in this paper. Rushdie's own political attitudes and affiliations, his representation of women and the related issue of a possible misogyny; or the aesthetic of despair that issues both from his overvalorization of unbelonging and his own location in the society.

A heroine is a female character who is admired for her noble qualities. This does not mean she has to be a hard core girl who can beat up any one who crosses her path. The important thing is that she is extraordinary in same way or another. Rushdie's novels are also about women and their status in societies and how they cope with men. But in Rushdie's the conditions of women are contrary to the concept of heroine as it is mentioned above. To discover the qualities of heroines are a combination of the good, the bad and the ugly in the construction of characters, depending on the creative susceptibilities of the writer.

In *Midnight's Children* female characters are so suppressed that they don't have enough right to think of their own about their own future. There is scarcity of love for women in Rushdie's fictions. As Mary commits blunder by swapping babies for Joe's love. Mumtaz agrees to remarry with Ahmad Sinai, because she need love and social reputation denied to her by Nadir Khan, her first husband. Saleem Sinai's father is not as benevolent for his daughter Jamila as for his son Saleem. Morality and identity of women characters are also significant issues in this fiction. *Midnight's Children* brings heroines in the field of literary creation into the open and transforms them into the trademarks of the Indian English fiction.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* focuses on the construction of womanhood in postcolonial India, with reference to women's role in two significant domains, politics and religion, as female characters are assigned the part of either homo politicus or homo religious. Within the sphere of politics, women are indissolubly connected to the concept of nation, and Rushdie intertwines personal history with that of the country, using birth metaphors for both children and country. To this end, it firstly needs to take into account the role of Indian women in the postcolonial society, acknowledging that their part is conditioned by decolonization discourses. Therefore, since nationalism and religion are the pillars that oppose Western

colonialism, the characterization of Indian women must observe several rules that are subsumed to such ideas as: the enlivenment of religion, the revisiting of the past and of tradition, the loyalty towards indigenous languages and masterpieces of art and literature, the combat against foreign systems of value and idioms etc. The second domain under scrutiny is set in antithesis with the former, since all women belonging to this class are fundamentally against any political statement, be it Gandhian, peaceful, or otherwise, as their main objective is to follow Islamic laws. Such a complex transfer from one field and type of female character to an opposite one constitutes itself into the challenge of offering a possible interpretation of the novel *Midnight's Children*. The heroine of the novel Mumtaz (later Amina Sinai) is abandoned by Nadir Khan, because of the political circumstances.

Purdah, or the seclusion of women, is a central aspect of the woman question. Imperialist discourse portrayed purdah as yet another instance of female subjection, symbolising the inferior status of Indian civilization. In nationalist discourse, purdah was slowly redefined as the new woman had to have access to education and knowledge of the outside world. The physical boundary of the home came to be displaced by norms of suitable feminine behaviour which were clearly demarcated from norms of male conduct. The new woman could safely venture outside as long as she displayed the "signs of her femininity" in her dress, religiosity and demeanour, which demonstrated that she had internalized the norms of the "new patriarchy", which was "reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality". Women often welcomed the space this new reformed patriarchy opened for them and "keenly propagated the nationalist idea of the 'new woman'". Because of the imperial context, women's liberation could not be defined against Indian men as upholders of patriarchal practices, since women shared the nationalist aspiration of Indian men.

It also explores the biological role of motherhood in the social and emotional realm. The woman as mother expands her locus of power in a family and in society. She is empowered not just by her sex but also by what it achieves for her. It also discusses whether the emotional make up of the mother figure determines her locus of control. Motherhood an essentially biologically empowering role can be seen as an important power role as well. Every mother is maternal and yet, in Rushdie's novels there is a division between the power wielding matriarch and the power indifferent maternal mother. Betty Friedan defines the mother in *The Feminine Mystique* (1984):

Motherliness is a way of life. It enables a woman to express her total self with the tender feelings, the protective attitudes, the encompassing love of the motherly woman. (58) The image of the virtuous goddess like woman is an often seen one in South Asia. In this image, the women must devote themselves to their husbands and show loyalty and sacrifice in even the most extreme circumstances. There is enormous pressure to conform to the norms of society and the patriarchal system of family life. But now there is the questioning of the dominant patriarchal tradition and their role. This questioning and seeking leads to more complexity in the women characters and women are multi layered and more aware.

The patriarchal concept of oppression and imprisonment is increasingly being objected to and rejected by writers and women. The two greatest Indian Epics- the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*- depict women in two main forms. One as the preserver and the other as the destroyer. Kaushalya is the symbol of the mother who readily sacrifices and accepts Bharata in the place of Rama, her own son, to rule the country. Kaikeyi on the other hand is the queen who demands a hefty price of a promise made by the king. She urges her son Bharata to aspire for the throne even as she connives at sending Rama on exile to the forest. Gandhari in the *Mahabharata* has been portrayed as a mother who (literally and figuratively) blindly supports her sons out of her love for and loyalty to them.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981) the first 'mother' in the maternal and the literal sense is Naseem Aziz. Often called Reverend Mother, she is grandmother to Saleem, mother to Alia, Mumtaz, Hanif, Mustapha and Emerald. Naseem is portrayed as a shy, retiring woman, who is horrified by minute changes in her routine and in her life. When her husband and she move to Amritsar from Kashmir after their marriage, "Naseem Aziz had a sharp headache... life outside her quiet valley had come as something of a shock to her." (32)

An attempt at adaptation to the situation is accompanied by plaints and complaints. This martyr complex in Rushdie's women characters emerges from an almost obsessive focus on their roles as wives, housekeepers, and mothers- their biological role. In the novel Saleem's mother Amina suffers from the martyr complex and takes on guilt and blame for the way everyone, especially her children have turned out. She thinks of her ailments as punishment for her sin.

The idea of the prevalence of feminine strength in the domestic realm does not preclude men; giving new life could be a man's prerogative as well; the man does so by marriage. An instance of this is the character of Amina Sinai. She was Mumtaz, before she became Amina. Her changed name reflects her changed life as well. As Mumtaz, she lived an unconsummated married life in an underground crypt, with her husband -in -hiding, Nadir Khan. When his arrest became imminent, Khan leaves a divorce paper and flees the scene. Mumtaz's sister, Alia's beau, Ahmed Sinai, gravitates towards Mumtaz and asks to marry her. He also changes her name to Amina, and in doing so, gives her new life. Rushdie speaks of her new form in the following way: And now Aadam Aziz lifted his daughter (with his own arms) passing her up after the dowry into the care of this man who had renamed her and so re-invented her, thus becoming in a sense her father as well as her husband..(66) Parvati is another woman character who plays a pivotal role in Saleem's life. The name Parvati means she who dwells in the mountains or the mountain girl. Her mythology is inextricably linked to that of her spouse. The goddess Parvati is above all known as Shiva's wife, who obtained her husband through great heroic effort and she is the one who provokes him

into creating their child, this being necessary for the conservation of the world. In the novel, Rushdie's own version of Parvati is similar to her namesake in her exploits: "Parvati...oiled his moustache, caressed his knees and... produced a dinner of biriani so exquisite that (Shiva)...devotes his undivided attentions to her for four whole months..."(411). According to myth Parvati gives birth to a son named Ganesh, after four months of uninterrupted coitus with Shiva. Later this son takes the head of an elephant, echoing in this Parvati's son, Adam Sinai, who is born with enormous ears: "ears so colossally huge (that people believed)...that it was the head of a tiny elephant... he was the true son of Shiva and Parvati; he was elephant-headed Ganesh" (419-420).

It would appear in *Midnight's Children* (1981) that the women find identity as mother than wives. As the latter they take on the identity the man give them but as mother they come into their own.

Saleem refers to Mary Pereira and Amina as his two mothers who seemingly compete to love him. In Rushdie's words, "Baby Saleem became, after that, the battleground of their loves; they strove to outdo one another in demonstration of affection..."(127). Amina's actions created a rage in her husband" and his growing anger at my mother's preoccupation with her child found a new outlet behind his office door-Ahmad Sinai began to flirt with his secretaries" (132). Rushdie seems to suggest that the mother's role takes precedence over the one she plays as a wife.

Thus Salman Rushdie addresses issues of motherhood in and out of postcolonial society in his books. He portrays the mothers as caged women, as teachers, and as bearers of both shame and joy. By analyzing motherhood in his novels, the author explains the significance of maternal influences which supply a foundation for a society's history.

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