



The Bastard Child of History: Representation of the West in Salman

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

One of the major aspects of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is the way it presents the west in terms of the experience of a nation from the very moment of the inception of its postcolonial identity. Living through the nascent phases of the newly independent subcontinent, Saleem Sinai, its protagonist experiences different junctures of history to encounter the failure of postcolonial India to emerge as a nation state built in the ideological mould of the two nation theory posited by the British Raj, the legacy of which was carried forward with its first westernized prime minister Saleem's life, which is a reflection of the newly built nation state, becomes a counter narrative of the nation building process in which Saleem moves through

different patterns of displacement to realize the meaningless and the ineffectuality of the idea of the postcolonial nation built on the artifices of a dream. The paper intends to look into the way the west has been represented in the novel, in the individual, institutional and ideological levels to represent the center-margin dialectic that runs throughout it.

Key words: Postcolonialism, Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, Occidentalism, West, Diaspora

“BASTARD: I like the sound of the word. Baas, a smell, a stinky-poo. Turd, no translation required. Ergo, Bastard, a smelly shit, like, for example, me.”

--Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (104)

One of the essential trajectories of the study of postcolonial experiences is the palimpsest of the ideologies of the postcolonial ruler on the subject. Likewise, the world of *Midnight's Children* (1981) is strongly predicated by the remnants of the Western imperialistic ideological praxis in the development of the Indian nation state. However, when one tries to find the representation of the West in *Midnight's Children*, western characters do not strike out as such in the tangled maze of the plot, nor does the protagonist Saleem Sinai move out of the subcontinent. The very conception and design of the novel is a kind of commentary on the Western imperialistic project, leaving its ideological trappings even after its departure. Thus the depiction of the West over here is more in terms of the sub-continental predicament than in terms of character and setting.

The West is present in the novel in the callousness of its political establishment in dealing with the subcontinent, living through the last moments of its colonial rule. It is presented in its impact on the people of India, on the dominant ideology that the newly independent India would assume as normative as the legacy of the Two-Nation Theory. It is present, according to Rushdie, in the very conception of India itself, a country built along religious lines and in the figures of the westernized elite like Nehru who vehemently upheld the myth of the nation. Thus in *Midnight's Children*, the West is dominantly presented through its impact on the East, and through the experiences that are a direct result of that impact. The novel thus critiques the West through the presentation of the Indian nation which to Rushdie was a bastard offspring of the West and its ingenuous Two-Nation Theory.

Midnight's Children presents multiple patterns of reading into the life of its central character, Saleem Sinai. Saleem represents, on a personal scale, a Muslim of Kashmiri parentage living through the years after independence to experience the trauma of the national Emergency. But he is also representative of the newly emerging nation, “a country which is itself a sort of dream” (159). It is a country which is the product of the Western idea of nation-building and thus a ‘dream’ in both the connotations of the term, of aspiration and of unreality. Being born on the midnight of the 15th of August, 1947, Saleem goes through experiences that stand along the historical point of intersection between the western political domination and the Indian postcolonial experience. There are seminal points in the text that define this myth of the nation. One of them is when Nehru, the first Prime Minister, sends letters to all the *Midnight's Children*, and Saleem receives one of them. The idea of nationhood that Saleem represents and becomes linked to is in fact most clearly delineated in this letter. Thus his representation of the nation was not something that happened accidentally – like his development of the faculty of being a

metaphorical All India Radio receiver by being able to hear others' thoughts – but is a kind of expected role that he is supposed to play; a role hurled upon him by the Prime Minister of this country:

‘Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own’ (167).

However it is not Saleem's life that alone reflects the history of the nation; the narrative does the same too. The lack of a linear development in the narrative is reflective of the resistance in the way of the development of the nation in the mode it is thought to exist in. It is the act of story telling that constantly digresses and disappoints the audience Padma with all possible means that subvert the sense of propriety of the narrative. Thus the narrative of *Midnight's Children* becomes a counter narrative to the idea of the diachronic development of the nation. Nullifying the possibility of a narration that goes by the controls of the literary establishment, the unreliability of the narrator becomes a kind of foregone conclusion. The pickle-making is not only a metaphorical equivalent of the novel writing in which Saleem fails his audience Padma but it is also the technique adopted in the nation building which, like his narrative, is fated for disappointment. It is “the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time” (642). The grand hope invariably alludes to that of the new nation developed through the immediate fathering of the West, as also of Saleem who is supposed to represent it. The failure of the grand hope is the failure of the nation to build itself along the mythical lines, to live by the eloquent political rhetoric of its thoroughly westernized first Prime Minister which poor Saleem took too literally. At a later place in the novel he calls Nehru an “author of framed letters” (240). The

reality of the situation of Saleem's family is brought about by another letter also from the establishment itself, that was not much late in coming, which perfectly counterpoised Nehru's letter. It was that which formally informed Ahmed Sinai that the state has frozen his assets. One of the minor characters sum up the matter in a more political tone: "Then let's see what kind of country we've ended up in!"(185)

One aspect by which the macrocosm of the Western political establishment is represented in the "Micro-Macro Symbiosis" (Dhar 16) of *Midnight's Children* is through the Methwold estate. It is Methwold who represents the ostensibly departing colonial British Raj in the novel. In being the real biological father of Saleem, who represents the new born nation of India, he is representative of a culture that has given rise to the nation as a kind of illegitimate and surreptitious bonding of heterogeneous ideologies that gave rise to the Indian nationhood, coming out of the Two-Nation Theory. The rather strange deal that Methwold strikes with Saleem's father, of retaining all his belongings of the house despite the transfer, hints at two things. First, despite the transfer and the departure of Methwold, and the West, the presence of Methwold in the life of the estate and that of the colonial West in that of the newborn nation would always be there. It also suggests that the newly emergent nation will carry on bearing the burden of its colonial past. The fact that Amina Sinai grumbles at the idea of being surrounded by the belongings of Methwold is a kind of plea of 'self designation' in cultural terms which is impossible in the postcolonial situation (Dayal 432). That Methwold estate is employed by the novelist to represent the West is evident from his, and Methwold's choice of the day of the transfer of the estate to be on the day of Indian independence.

Evie Burns, Saleem's childhood sweetheart, represents the other aspect of the West. She is American, strong and is able to transcend pain. She has some deformities in her teeth and has

to wear braces, but Saleem finds that she can endure toothache even when it becomes extreme. She indulges in all sorts of food that give her extreme toothache but never complains about it or give them up. The strength in her represents to Saleem something of her racial characteristics. “It has been observed that all Americans need a frontier: pain was hers, and she was determined to push it out” (220). Saleem admires her and attributes his admiration to the typical Indian’s sycophancy for the West:

In India, we’ve always been vulnerable to Europeans... Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. (We had done *Cyrano*, in a simplified version, at school; I had also read the *Classics Illustrated* comic book.) Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself, in India, as farce... Evie was American. Same thing (221).

This is a recurring motif in the novel as the sense of the legacy of colonial servitude of the West is something that comes out in the “Oxford drawl” (106) of Saleem’s father whose voice instinctively changes when he talks with Methwold. Just before Methwold’s departure he even lies to Methwold about his family line claiming that it came from the Mughals just in order to answer Methwold’s boastings about the first Methwold and his clan. All these evince a kind of attitude of ambivalence towards the West that Saleem locates in his family. It is the same ambivalence that comes out in the fact that the name of Methwold estate remains unchanged even though Methwold leaves the estate never to return. Samir Dayal points out on in this respect how this is later underscored by the character of Wee Willie Winkie who, wondering how these people are able to stay in an estate that bears the name and legacy of Methwold, asserts that “no new place is real until it has seen a birth” (quoted in Dayal 432). Though the main action of the

novel begins with the birth of Saleem which coincides with the birth of the postcolonial India, the latter has not experienced any renewal at all. It is just a reincarnation of its former self.

It is in this postcolonial world that has been created by the West and the westernized political leaders that brings about a sense of a lack of belonging. Remarkable are the places in the novel that the nation state in the European model seems to be thoroughly lacking in the sense of being a home for Saleem, as also for others like him. This is littered throughout the novel and the result that it bears for the novel is a kind of deep distrust in the European myth of nation building. As an answer to the collective idea of the disoriented nation, comes the personal feeling of the nation that is in tatters not solely because of the homelessness of its inhabitants but also of the peculiarly postcolonial experience that its English creators has hurled it into particularly because of the Two-Nation Theory. Throughout his life, Saleem has to suffer because of being linked with history in the peculiar way that he is. And the way he resorts to alleviate this suffering is to fall back upon the cross-cultural community experience that his role as a receiver of All India Radio affords him. Thus the way of escape from the oppressive and mythical Western nation is shown to be individual communities, which, though multicultural and heterogeneous, is far more liberating.

In the historiography of *Midnight's Children* there is a kind of photographic approach that even overcomes the "inevitable distortions of the pickling process" (644). Edward Barnaby has even gone to the extent of finding the general interpretative ideas of magic realism actually eclipse this photographic realism which lurks through despite the unreliability of the narrator. And it is in these moments that the delineation of the Western concept of nationhood comes out most explicitly. The letter that actually ruins the Sinai family for no apparent fault of theirs, standing in contrast to the framed letter bearing the promises of the mythical nation, is one such

moment. However, it also comes out in not so accurate moments of the narrative, particularly when Saleem deliberately mistakes the date of Gandhi's assassination. It does not qualify as a mistake in the text as Saleem at another point admits to making the mistake. If the reaction of Amina Sinai at the news of Gandhi's assassinator's name is a photographic moment that Barnaby talks of, — “‘Thank God,’ Amina burst out, ‘It’s not a Muslim name!’”(197) — the mistake conveys the message that the fictional creation of the narrative is also a kind of creation of the nation and both are linked together though Saleem gets occasional chances of wish fulfillment as a narrator. “In my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time” (230), he announces.

Nevertheless, the next moment, we find him desperately trying to preserve the inviolability of the representative role of his narrative:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write 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; I must finish what I've started, even if, inevitably, what I finish turns out not to be what I began... (230).

And the solution to his crisis of being unable to form the unitary narrative that will reflect the possibility of the unity in the diversity that the nation and the framed letters ideally aim to attend to, comes in the very next line: “Ye Akashvani hai. This is All-India Radio” (230). It refers to the development of his magical ability to hear other's thoughts, be a kind of a radio receiver, where different voices coexist. And it is here that rests Rushdie's provisional substitute of a nation on the Western model, as a kind of amorphous community. It is in the polyphony of the

communities on the mental radio receiver that there is a proper representation of all the voices that constitute his substitute nation. The substitute to the nation is in the individual, the world of one's own and not ideologies of state polity, propagated by framed letters, concealing a coercive establishment that castrates in the name of development. It is the "passive metaphorical" *Midnight's Children* Conference that he calls "my very own M.C.C." (287) which also offers a kind of substitute, albeit temporary. While on the one hand the use of the Stream of Consciousness mode of unreliable narrator sets up a discourse countering the grand narrative of nationalistic ideologies exemplified by Nehru's framed letters or his "tryst with destiny" speech, on the other hand it brings about the impression of homogeneity, rarely realized in the nationalistic set up imposed upon Saleem from birth, in its refusal to follow the dictates of the linear narrative from without. It is Saleem's temporary substitute for a nation, a community that, as he himself says, places him the centre rather than making him part of a system:

Because the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were mine, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow making them happen... which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist (241).

Just as Saleem's recourse to the MCC is a kind of alternative to him for a nation that is just a legacy of a Raj that has long died, his use of the language that he has personalized in his own way represent his abrogation of the Western linguistic tradition. The affiliation to the inward community and a self-fashioned language for narrating his experience, for securing the pickling process, compensates the failure to be a part of the fiction of the nation. It compensates for the doubts in the identity that the national selfhood cannot satisfy. To him there was "nothing but

trouble outside my head, nothing but miracles inside it” (287). Thus the decolonizing process that Rushdie talks about as something that *Midnight’s Children* instinctively bears (Dayal 432) can happen at a purely personal level, at the third front. A nation like India, born out of the illegitimate union with the West can never hope to decolonize itself at the collective level.

The West appears in a number of ways in the fictions of Rushdie. *Midnight’s Children* is one of the very few works of Rushdie in which the West is not presented directly as a chronotope as Saleem never moves out of the subcontinent. It is a novel which deals with the West in the colonial context, in the result of the Western colonial enterprise. However, though the consciousness of *Midnight’s Children* is essentially dominated by the experience of a kind of spiritual expatriation, there is a distinct shift in most of Rushdie’s other novels in which the West is represented in a more direct manner in which it becomes the adopted ‘home’ of the expatriate Indian and presented in the way it is seen through the Diaspora sensibility. If in the *Midnight’s Children* the West is presented in a way akin to a Diaspora perspective.

Saleem, the reflection of India in *Midnight’s Children*, is a bastard. Due to a tempestuous love affair, he was born of the union of the Anglo-Indian Methwood and his biological mother Vanita. The nation too, Rushdie suggests is founded on ambiguity, born of the illicit union of the ideologies of the East and the West. The crumbling off of Saleem at the end of the novel suggests the ineffectuality of such a union. Being bastard is actually lacking in identity, the identity that one normally gets from the family one is born in. Saleem’s quest for his parents stand for his quest of that identity and their sudden death in a bomb explosion seals the fate of the quest.

Thus, postcolonial India is represented in the novel as not only living through the political hangover of the western rule over it for two centuries, the very ideology of the creation of the nation state in the western model makes the novel also question the ideology of the nation state constructed in the western developmental paradigm. It is in this reality that Saleem's identity has to be sought out by him, though in vain. And it is this reality that the individual craves for an alternative belonging that comes from his predicament of being placed both in the centre and the margin at the same time.

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