

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL ISSUE VOL: 8, No.: 1, SPRING 2018

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

About Us: <http://pintersociety.com/about/>

Editorial Board: <http://pintersociety.com/editorial-board/>

Submission Guidelines: <http://pintersociety.com/submission-guidelines/>

Call for Papers: <http://pintersociety.com/call-for-papers/>

Lapis Lazuli

All Open Access articles published by LLILJ are available online, with free access, under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial License as listed on

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Individual users are allowed non-commercial re-use, sharing and reproduction of the content in any medium, with proper citation of the original publication in LLILJ. For commercial re-use or republication permission, please contact

lapislazulijournal@gmail.com

**Decolonizing the Bildungsroman: Nation and Self in Salman Rushdie's
*Midnight's Children***

Abhisek Upadhyay

Abstract:

Rushdie not merely chutnifies the English language in his novels, he also chutnifies recognizable European literary forms and amalgamates them with indigenous narratological traditions. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie uses the Bildungsroman form to chart the young man Saleem Sinai's coming of age in a society trying to find its identity after freeing itself from colonial shackles. Saleem's life is inexorably handcuffed to the history of India by virtue of the coincidence of his birth with that of the birth of independent India on 15th August, 1947. Saleem with his magical powers tries to embody all of India's voices. However, Saleem fails in his quest for a coherent identity and assimilate into society. Rushdie adopts the coming-of age structure of the Bildungsroman in order to parody the genre's dominant structure of search for stable identity, assimilation into society and self-actualisation which is difficult in the context of the hybridity of culture obtained in postcolonial societies like India. This paper explores how Rushdie decolonizes the genre by subverting the realism and the development framework of the Bildungsroman framework by taking recourse to magic realism and the structure of the anti-bildungsroman. Rushdie's chutnification of generic forms symbolises the fragmented consciousness and identity of the postcolonial subject.

Keywords:

Children's literature, child psychology, Odia literature, composite novel, *bhasha* literature

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I," every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

(Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

Salman Rushdie is not only the most famous of the postcolonial writers but also the most postcolonial. Rushdie's fame rests not merely on his Booker Prize in 1981 for his book *Midnight's Children* and its being adjudged the 'Booker of Bookers,' in 1993, and his controversial essays but also for several non-literary events such as the issue of

a death-fatwa for his book *Satanic Verses*. The prominence of Salman Rushdie as a postcolonial writer is attested by the fact that an authoritative compendium of postcolonial studies *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin draws on one of Rushdie's essays for its title. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie adopts the coming-of age structure of the Bildungsroman in order to parody the genre's dominant structure of search for stable identity, assimilation into society and self-actualisation which is difficult in the context of the hybridity of culture obtained in postcolonial societies like India.

The term Bildungsroman is used today as a label for novels that focus on the development or education of its central character. Etymologically, the word comes from German, and is a compound of two words "*Bildungs*" meaning "building or formation" and "*Roman*" meaning "a novel." The form was originally a peculiarly German novelistic form that was the dominant form of the German novel in the eighteenth century—a form which is preoccupied with the idea of *Bildung* or education of the protagonist. According to James Hardin, the *Bildung* is "the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity" (Hardin 26) In other words, the form embodies the protagonist's quest for identity, a desire for full development of the potentialities of the self, and maturity. A successful *Bildung* entails a reconciliation of the conflict of between individual and society through a compromise of values.

There are conspicuous parallels between the 19th century Bildungsroman and *Midnight's Children*. The novel presents a young man coming of age in a changing society. As in the former, a traumatic event in Saleem's life sends him on a journey of self-realisation. The traumatic event is the ten-year old Saleem's realisation that his biological parents are not the Sinais but Vanita and Wee Willie Winkie, who are both dead. The Sinais begin to privilege his sister over him when they learn that he is not their biological son. Saleem is haunted by his sudden loss of identity. He is no longer a Sinai, nor is he Muslim which he has believed himself to be till now. He is unable to accept his new identity which causes him to to abandon the element of his life that marks him as extraordinary, his ability to communicate telepathically. The indifference of his foster Father and Mother makes him lose interest in assembling the Midnight's Children Conference. He struggles to find a place in the Sinai family and increasingly loses interest in assembling the Midnight's Children Conference.

The events in the novel do not lead to any recognition or realisation on the part of Saleem except of his realisation of the impossibility to find meaning, coherence, and cohesion in the narrative of India's history as well as his own. Saleem is bestowed with many magical powers by virtue of his being born at the hour of India's independence. One of them is the unique ability to get inside the minds of powerful people and listen to stories across the nation of India. Saleem is able to literally see the world through different eyes engrossed in their identities. Saleem confronted with a group of language protestors explains his experience, "I contented myself with discovering, one by one, the secrets of the fabulous beings who had suddenly arrived in my mental field of vision...I plunged whenever possible into the separate, and altogether brighter reality of the five hundred and eighty-one".

Saleem's ability to experience the world from the perspectives of others should enable him to form connections across individual narratives and reach some sort of coherence. This however doesn't happen and Saleem is unable to deal with the chaos of individual narratives and diverse identities. Saleem is not only caught on the threshold of youth and adulthood, he is caught in between religions and social classes. This diversity of perspective and experience rather than enriching his understanding fragments his perception of the self, nation and text. Saleem's identity progressively becomes an amalgamation of cultures that mirrors India's diverse population, eclipsing his own identity and blurring his understanding of reality. Saleem's loss of religious and class identity is the triggering event which sends him on the journey of self-discovery. Saleem not only fails to unite the diverse identities and narratives of India but also fails to reach a coherent understanding of his own identity and story.

Saleem is destined upon his death to break into as many pieces as there are citizens of India. Saleem Sinai embodies India within his individual self. The concept of a single individual representing a teeming, diverse, multitudinous nation like India encapsulates one of the novel's fundamental concerns: the tension between the single and the many. The conflict between individual and society of the Bildungsroman structure takes the form of the conflict between singularity and multiplicity. The give and take relationship between Saleem's individual life and the collective life of the nation suggests that public and private will always influence one another. Throughout the novel, Saleem struggles to contain all of India's voices within himself. He tries to weave his own personal story with the stories of India. This attempt leads to his eventual disintegration and collapse at the end.

Allegorically speaking, the conflict of the single and the many inside Saleem Sinai reflects the tension between the single and the many which characterises India itself. India is an incredibly diverse nation in terms of geography, climate, languages, culture and religion. India is an incredibly diverse nation. India recognizes twenty-two official languages and its population practices religions as varied as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism, among many others. Indian culture too is an amalgamation of many cultures which have had its influence during over the millennia of its evolution. Although, unity in diversity has been the ideal of the Indian ethos, coming to terms with India's sprawling diversity has proved difficult for some communities and individuals. India's partition into the Islamic nation of Pakistan and the secular, but Hindu dominated India is the most prominent instance of the failure of efforts to contain and unify the diversity of India. Saleem Sinai's Bildung is allegory of the failure of the unification of the diversity of the Indian nation.

Saleem Sinai is symbolic of India's diversity and plurality by virtue of his mixed bloodline, ambiguous class affiliation, eclectic religious influences and telepathic transgression of language barriers, multitude of experiences and sensitivities. Saleem represents the assimilative and inclusive impulse of Indian culture. In contrast to the language protestors of Bombay, the supporters of Pakistan and Indira Gandhi represent desire for singularity and purity which breeds intolerance and incites violence and repression. Saleem Sinai's *Midnight Children's Conference* is a model for pluralism and a testimony to the potential power inherent within coexisting diversity, which is a natural and definitive element of Indian culture.

Midnight's Children embodies the *Bildung* of not only Saleem Sinai but also the nation of India. Saleem Sinai, is thus, a metaphor for India in the novel. Handcuffed to history by the coincidence of his birth with the birth of the modern nation of India, Saleem Sinai is India and India is Saleem Sinai. The many selves and many parents of Saleem mirror the multitudinous intricacies that is *India* herself. India which was born at midnight on 15 August 1947 had offered hopes and dreams of equality, justice, fraternity, democracy and socialism which has been enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of India and was visible in Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' speech. Saleem Sinai and India failed to live up to the hopes they offered at the time of their birth. The novel which charts the development of India in its first six decades of its existence and shows that it has failed to its ideals which it had set out to achieve and has failed to achieve maturation as a nation.

One of the foremost theorists of Postcolonial Studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" expresses her concern for the complicity between postcolonial studies, informed by European theories, and neo-colonialism. It is argued by some critics that the arcane nature of the language of contemporary criticism which stems from European, and especially, French theories, such as deconstruction and Foucauldian theories of discourse, constitutes a neo-colonialism of texts of the third world. The same charge is made against postcolonial writers writing in English language and those adopting European literary forms. The allegation is that adoption of colonial language and literary forms reinscribe, co-opt and rehearse neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure. A similarity exists regarding the persistence of the colonial language in the erstwhile colonies of European imperialist powers.

The suspicion and uneasiness regarding the use of colonial language is poignantly expressed in James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by Stephen Dedalus during a conversation with the Dean of Studies in Chapter 5:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

The passage exemplifies the unrest, uneasiness and turmoil of writing in a colonial language. During the preceding conversation, the dean, who is English, fails to follow the meaning of what "tundish", and assumes that it is an Irish word. Stephen's new awareness of the borrowed nature of his language has a strong effect on him, as he knows that language is central to his artistic mission. By the end of the novel, Stephen acknowledges that Irish English is a borrowed language, and resolves to use that knowledge to shape English into a tool for expressing the soul of the imprisoned Irish race. Joyce's remaking of English language for expressing the consciousness of the imprisoned Irish race is akin to Rushdie's "chutnification of English" to express the fragmented consciousness of the Indian nation.

As the decolonisation process unfolded in the 1950s, a debate about choice of language erupted and vexed authors throughout the world. Some Postcolonial writers have

concluded that the colonizers' language is permanently tainted, and that to write in it involves a crucial acquiescence in colonial structures. This apprehension is expressed by the African author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o who claims that language is a carrier of culture and plays an important role in hierarchies and systems of oppression. Thiong'o does not consider English to be an African language and says that African authors should be aware of the fact that when they write in English they are contributing to the expansion of, and dependence on, the English language.

Bill Ashcroft et al in the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* explain the controlling aspect of language which has vexed many postcolonial writers:

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre-whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in a new place-remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. (Postcolonial Studies Reader, 261)

A different solution to the problem of writing in a colonial language is expressed by another African author Chinua Achebe in his essay "The African Writer and the English Language." In this essay, Achebe discusses how the process of colonialism – for all its ills – provided colonised people from varying linguistic backgrounds "a language with which to talk to one another". English becomes for Achebe "the one central language enjoying nationwide currency" by which he can communicate across Nigeria which was not possible in any of the indigenous languages and dialects as they lacked nationwide prevalence. Thus, for post-colonial writers like Achebe, who use English language to suit their creative purpose, English is no longer a coloniser's language for it has become a tool of decolonisation.

The use of a colonial language to write about African and Indian subject matter comes with several setbacks such as descriptions of situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life. Faced with such a situation, a postcolonial writer can adopt two methods. He can attempt and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate indigenous modes of thoughts and manners of behaviour. Most postcolonial writers, like Achebe, writing in English have adopted the latter path and have extended the frontiers of English. In *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, by altering syntax, usage, and idiom, Achebe transforms the English language into a distinctly African style.

Although the problem of writing in a colonial language vexed many authors writing in English in India, it was Raja Rao, among the Indian novelists, who first grappled with this problem in the preface to his magnum opus *Kanthapura*:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I used the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not.

We can write only as Indians. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

After language the next problem is that of style. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life had gone into the making of theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are interminable. The *Mahabharata* has 214,778 verses and the *Ramayana* 48,000. Puranas there are endless and innumerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us – we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story. (Rao 5)

In *Kanthapura*, Rao set about making the language of the oppressor one's own, and conveying—through its serpentine sentences, quaint vocabulary, and its tendency to consistently veer away from the plot—the sights, sounds, smells, flavours and tempo of Indian life. Rao's aim was to produce a work that is Indian at heart, yet in English. It was a vision document for the future of Indian writers writing in English.

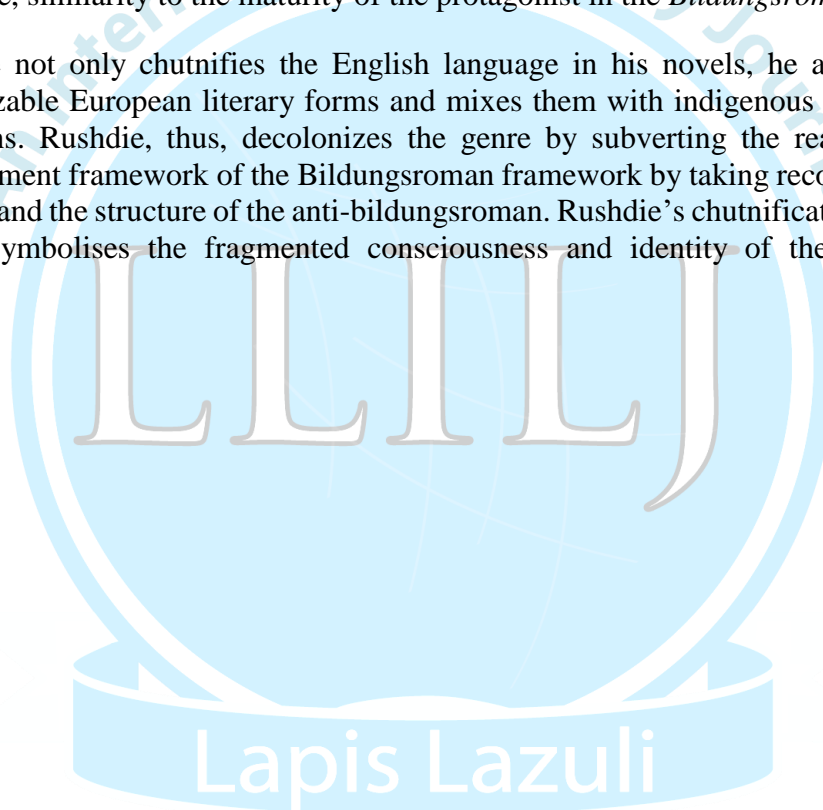
This decolonization of English initiated by Rao was vigorously carried forward by G V Desani in *All About H. Haterr* and Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* who really supplanted the "Englishness" of their English with "Indianness." In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie undertakes the "chutnification" of English, or the creation of a hybrid language to "de-colonize" English. "Chutnification" is used by Rushdie himself in the text of *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 459). He uses the term to express "the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time". "Chutney" is an Indian side dish prepared with a mixture of fruits or vegetables with sugar or salt to be had with food. It is extremely flavourful and supposed to add extra zing to the food. Similarly, all the linguistic, historical and other technical experimentations that Rushdie includes in his novel add the extra punch to the narrative. This word itself is coined in a similar manner (chutney + fication) adding the English suffix 'fication', thus meaning "process" to the Indian word 'chutney". Rushdie's linguistic experimentation includes coinages and experimentation with words and phrases, inclusion of direct translations from the regional Hindi/Urdu dialect in to English. Rushdie takes the language popularized by Hindi cinema with its street-slang, fast pace, melodrama, romance, and action, and fuses it into his narrative to render a surprisingly modern, energetic view of India. The underlying hypothesis behind this chutnification is the belief that identity is a construct, which is the result of linguistic determinism because it is the linguistic reality, which controls and constructs the processes of epistemological constructions and ontological realities.

Like language the question of form has perplexed postcolonial writers writing in English from the very beginning. The use of a colonial literary form within a postcolonial context is apprehended as an unconscious redistribution of an imperialist mode that will in turn "re"-perpetuate the ideology of a Eurocentric vision which "claims to be universal and general". The postcolonial writers respond to this

apprehension by using primarily indigenous forms, supplemented with European-derived influences, rather than as working primarily within European genres like the novel and merely adding to them a degree of exotic indigenization.

Peter Barry, in his book *Beginning Theory*, discovers a patterned transition regarding the use of European literary forms in the evolution of postcolonial literatures and divides this transition into three phases. The first phase is the 'Adopt' phase of colonial literature, wherein the colonial subject writing in English due to his unquestioned acceptance of the authority of European models as it is and aims to write masterpieces which fit entirely to the European tradition assuming its universal validity. In the 'Adapt phase, the postcolonial writer tries to adapt the European form to postcolonial subject matter assuming partial rights of intervention of the genre. The final phase is the 'Adept' phase, wherein the postcolonial writer declares complete cultural independence and remakes the form to the specifications demanded by the postcolonial context without any reference to European norms. The transitional phases of postcolonial writing mirror the phases of *Bildung* of the protagonist in a *Bildungsroman*. In the first phase the postcolonial writer is a humble apprentice like the immature protagonist of the *Bildungsroman* to develop into a master of colonial language, similarity to the maturity of the protagonist in the *Bildungsroman*.

Rushdie not only chutnifies the English language in his novels, he also chutnifies recognizable European literary forms and mixes them with indigenous narratological traditions. Rushdie, thus, decolonizes the genre by subverting the realism and the development framework of the *Bildungsroman* framework by taking recourse to magic realism and the structure of the anti-*bildungsroman*. Rushdie's chutnification of generic forms symbolises the fragmented consciousness and identity of the postcolonial subject.



WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, eds. 1995. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2nd ed. 2002)
- Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) realism*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Hardin, James. "Introduction." *In Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*. Ed. James Hardin. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.
- Joyce, James. *The Portrait of an Artist As a Young Man*. New York: Viking, 1965.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice-Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1971
- Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children* London: Pan Books, 1982
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.
- Warnes, Chris. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. London: Palgrave, 2009.

BIO NOTE

Abhisek Upadhyay is a Lecturer in English in BJB College, Bhubaneswar. His interests lie in Postcolonial Studies, Comparative Literature, Bhasa Literature, and Indian English Literature.

Email: abhisek.upadhyay@gmail.com

