

Religious, Cultural and Gender Issues in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children

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Abstract – The paper discusses how Salman Rushdie's novel 'Midnight's Children' delineates the religious, cultural and gender issues through magic realism technique. The novel presents the life of Kashmiri Muslim family. The women characters are delineated as humble at the beginning of the novel but as the story progresses they grow stronger and stronger. The animosity between the Hindus and the Muslims and the exploitation of Ravana Gang to gain profit by exploiting the Muslim merchants, the religious fanaticism of Muslim people who nearly killed a Hindu just for daring to enter in to their street, the effect of conservative Muslim upbringing and its impact on women characters, the linguistic riots and cultural conflict that caused the fall of Saleem Sinai's MCC network are discussed in this article.

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper observes how the religious and gender issues represented in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the magnum opus of an Indian diasporic novelist which won both the Booker and the Booker of the Bookers award. This novel has been translated into more than twelve languages.

Midnight's Children presents the familial history of a Muslim family from pre-independence era to the period of emergency. The story of the novel covers three major countries of the Indian subcontinent i.e India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The main feature of the novel is that familial history is inter twined with the history of the nation. Thus it also provides subjective history of the Indian subcontinent.

The novel throws light on the Kashmiri Muslim culture in which religion plays very crucial role. The foreign returned young doctor Aziz feels sad when returning to his native land and looks at the proximity of the horizon. He is hated by Tai because Aziz used an imported Heidelberg bag which in Tai's view is made from the skin of the pig. When Naseem, the daughter of blind land owner falls ill, Aziz is summoned to provide treatment to her. But as a Kashmiri Muslim culture, women's body must not be seen by the other men even if he is a doctor. So Ghani finds a solution. He appoints four muscular women hold a bed sheet which has at the centre of it a hole of about seven inches diameter. And Aziz is allowed to see the portion of her body which has problem for her. The irony of the situation is that due to her frequent illness, Aziz is able to see the whole of her body except her face.

It also presents the upbringing of a Muslim girl in a traditional Muslim society where she has limited exposure to the public life. Her family is like everything for her. Aziz is not even allowed to see his patient even when she falls ill. This has profound impact in the course of the novel.

It is due to this kind of upbringing that Naseem is unable to come out of her veil throughout her life. For her, not covering her ankles and feet is nakedness. She does not endorse her husband's idea that the religious teachers' preaching her daughters to hate Hindus, Buddhists and other vegetarians is not a good idea. She is also less supportive to her husband on bed also. When India is divided into three parts, she wants to go to Pakistan quite against her husband's wish. In Pakistan she runs a profitable profession of running a petrol Bunk.

Aziz's mother is also another notable character here. Though she never comes out of her veil throughout her life, when her husband has a stroke, she gains courage and runs a gemstone business for feeding both her husband and her son. Now it is her husband who "sat hidden behind the veil which the stroke had dropped over his brain" (Rushdie, 1995)

When observing the Rushdian women characters in the novel, though they are bound by the religious and cultural conventions, they seem stronger than their male counterparts. It is Naseem who literally controls the whole of the family affairs and even all the servants and people are afraid of her. She stoically accepts the death of her husband Mrs. Briganza, the aaya in Salim's house, later sets up her own pickle factory where Saleem meets

Padma. Aziz's mother feeds the whole family. Pia is able to run a profitable business of running a petrol bunk, Amina Sinai on the one hand, secretly maintains an affair with Nadir Khan, the hummingbird but at the same time she remains committed to her husband. She begins loving her husband bit by bit. She carefully transforms her husband bit by bit to make him an exact replica of her ex-lover Nadir Khan. At the time of need, her courage comes to the fore. When Lifafadas is nearly killed by the Muslim people, she protects him and challenges them that they should kill her before killing him and she has sheltered Lifafadas. Her secularism is commendable. Jamila, Saleem's sister becomes a famous singer in Pakistan. It is she who plans to send Saleem to Cutia unit of the Pakistan's army to get rid of him. Mary Pierera in order to get admiration from her lover, changes the two babies and Saleem the baby born as a result of the relationship between Methold Vanita gets the advantage of the richness and Shiva, the son of the rich Sinais is doomed the life of a poor.

The conflict between secularism and fundamentalism is one of the major themes in the novel. In Aziz's family there is always conflict between his liberal ideas and his wife's conservative ideas. He does not want the partition of India whereas she wants it. It is Naseem who finally wins in the war and takes control of the whole of the family.

Mian Abdullah's murder is another notable event in the novel. He starts free Islam Convention and working to unite likeminded people so as to prevent the nation from division. He also has the desire to unite both Hindus and Muslims. Dr Aziz, the Rani of Cooch Naheen are the members of the commission. Nadir Khan is the general secretary. However their aim of forming an alternative to the dogmatism of the Muslim Leaguers is considered a threat to Muslim Leaguers. Hence he is murdered cruelly. The views of the conservative Muslims towards Mian Abdullah is expressed through Naseem's hatred towards him as she says to her husband

“You have your Hummingbird,’..... ‘but I, whatsitsname, have the Call of God. A better noise, whatsitsname, than that man's hum”[2]

On the other hand, the conflict is another kind in Agra. Ahmed Sinai, father of Saleem Sinai suffers a lot due to the religious hatred towards Muslims in India. The Ravana Gang is robbing the Muslim merchants in the name of religion.. Ravana is the name of many headed demon in Ramayana. But this name is used by a group of incendiary rogues. It is a fanatical anti-Muslim movement. They in order to provoke Muslims leave the pigs' heads in the courtyards of Friday mosques. They paint out slogans on the walls of the cities that Muslims are the Jews of Asia. It soon becomes a brilliantly conceived commercial enterprise. The members of the gang begin demanding money from the Muslim merchants to let their world unburnt. Ahmed Sinai,

the narrator's father is also demanded a sum of money to let his godown unburnt. Though Sinai takes the money to give it to the gang to save his world, he is unable to give it because the monkeys snatch his money bag and throws the money all over and thereby he becomes unable to pay the money demanded by the gang and as a result his reccine godown is burnt into ashes that makes him become anti- Hindu.

Similarly Lifafadas becomes another victim of religious hatred. When he goes to Muslim neighborhood near Chandini Chowk with his mobile Dhunia Dheko machine and showing the pictures of Tajmahal, Meenakshi Temple and the holy Ganges, a petty quarrel, on the issue of the seniority of peeping into the machine turns communal. As soon as the people come to know that he is a Hindu, they become angry and begin attacking him. They even try to kill him because he dares to enter into a Muslim area. However Amina saves him from their attack.

The cultural conflict is the reason behind the fall of Saleem's Midnight Children's Conference. It is he who forms The Midnight Children's conference-MCC with the help of his supernatural powers. When he is sucked into the MCC network, he discovers an exciting word inside his head because he is not only able to pick up the children's transmission and send his own messages but also act as a sort of national network. The children can speak to one another through him between twelve and one during the night. But soon this society fails miserably. It begins to disintegrate due to the influence of their parents' prejudices; the children from Maharashtra begin hating Gujaraties, and the fair skin Northerners are hateful of Dravidian blacks. Brahmin children are not ready to have even the touch of the shadow of untouchables there are also religious rivalries and class rivalries that enter the conference. So the narrator says in the novel that in a way the MCC reflects Nehru's prophecy and become a sort of mirror of the nation. It becomes a victim to the British divide and rule policy. Intolerance linguistic conflicts, religious and caste rivalries and untouchability are the main reasons for the disintegration of our nation that is reflected through the theme of MCC.

In Bombay the conflict is of another kind. It presents the language riots of 1957. Large number of people marched on street demanding separate state not on the basis of mountains or rivers but on the basis of language. The supporters of Marathi and Gujarati organized huge processions. It resulted in a bloody war and killing of so many people that resulted in the division of Bombay.

Thus Rushdie ironically depicts the cultural, religious gender issues in his novel. His description of the events is post-modernist. For instance he calls secularism a dangerous optimistic epidemic,

Pakistan a god ridden country. Even political figures like Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Nehru and even Gandhiji are not spared from his satirical description. So it is cultural as well as political satire.

REFERENCE

1. Rushdie, Salman (1995). *Midnight's Children*. London: Vintage, p. 7
2. Ibid p50

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