

## **Redefining the Body as a Cultural Signifier in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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### **Abstract**

This paper will attempt to redefine the notion of the body as a cultural signifier through Salman Rushdie's celebrated novel *Midnight's Children* (1980). Down the ages, post-colonial subjects have been objects of 'difference' or 'otherness'. One of the principal ways in which this 'otherness' is perpetuated has been through the most visible sign of the body. The body therefore becomes a kind of a 'literal text' through which the suffering of the colonized is rendered. However, Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* defies the colonized idea of the body as a means of perpetuating 'difference'; instead this paper will focus on how the post-colonial subject will use his body as a site of resistance and celebrate his 'otherness'. This paper will also focus through Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* on why there is the need to redefine this western notion of beauty/ body. The image of 'dismemberment' so predominant in *Midnight's Children* point therefore not just to the psychic dismemberment of the colonized but it will also be analyzed as an attempt to reintegration.

This paper attempts to analyze the notion of the body as a cultural signifier through Rushdie's much acclaimed novel *Midnight's Children*. It has been argued that post-colonial subjects have been looked at as objects of 'difference' or 'otherness'; and one of the principal ways in which this 'otherness' has been perpetuated has been through the most visible sign of the body. The body therefore becomes a kind of a 'literal text' in which post-colonial cultures and histories are inscribed. The historical and personal narrative of the subjugated body in *Midnight's Children* calls for a revaluation of the social construction and cultural representation of the post-colonial body. Since the body is a condition of culture, in *Midnight's Children* the post-colonial subject will use his body as a site of resistance and celebrate his 'otherness'. For Foucault modernity has seen the production of a discursive body, "a 'body politic' objectified by 'the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge'" (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 28). But within the postmodern discourse Chris Shilling argues that "the body is viewed simply as a 'blank screen' or 'sign receiving system' ever open to being constructed and reconstructed by external texts or discourses" (*The Body and Social Theory* 39). For Rushdie, the body is a cultural signifier signifying not just an identity marker but a medium of voicing one's 'difference' in a sea of western hegemonic cultural meaning production. In this context, the other issues that will be discussed is the need to redefine the western notion of the body as a cultural signifier; and finally, how the image of

dismemberment which is so predominant in Rushdie's text now calls for the reassembly of dismembered colonial subject to achieve reintegration.

Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children* published in 1980, won the Booker Prize for fiction in 1981. The novel is generally regarded as a discourse on nation, nationalism and postcolonial theory. However, the author has also handled the interplay of fiction, history and autobiography through the body-politic. In the novel Rushdie takes a lot of liberty with chronology although the thirty chapters of the novel corresponds to the thirty years of the narrator. Here Rushdie attempts to reconstruct the past with the help of memory. The history of the country from its Pre-independence period to the period of national emergency (1915-1977) is virtually inscribed on Saleem's body as there are continuous parallels drawn between the growth, maturity, decay and disintegration of individuals with the political history of the Indian Nation. Saleem Sinai, the narrator of the story, narrates the history of his family which is intricately linked with the history of the nation. The novel maps the history of the nation from the moment of its inception in 1947. But history in *Midnight's Children* is not based on a logical pattern of cause and effect with a linear narrative; instead it is a fragmented narrative because Rushdie felt that human beings are capable of only fractured perspective. Rushdie's narration is an attempt to seek out truth out of this fragmentary notion of history by the process of recollection through memory. In the novel Saleem is both a victim of fate and history. He continues to suffer for the crime committed by Mary Pereira who had exchanged him at the moment of his birth with another of Midnight's Child Shiva. Saleem can never free himself from the guilt of having taken over Shiva's life of affluence and condemning Shiva to a life of poverty. When Saleem talks of his birth in the opening chapter "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (9); Saleem Sinai himself becomes a text upon which the history of the nation will henceforth be narrated. Saleem carries the burden of history as he takes upon himself the task of translating the meaning of his life. Barely thirty, already impotent, Saleem finds time running out of his 'crumbling, over-used body' saying: "I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning- yes, meaning- something" (9). It is reminiscent of the comment expressed in *Imaginary Homeland* where Rushdie writes:

When I began the novel (as I've written elsewhere) my purpose was somewhat Proustian. Time and migration had placed a double filter between me and my subject, and I hoped that I could only imagine vividly enough it might be possible to see beyond those filters, to write as if the years had not passed, as if I had never left India for the West. But as I worked I found that what interested me was the process of filtration itself. So my subject changed, was no longer a search for lost time, had become the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool. Saleem's greatest desire is for what he calls meaning, and near the end of his broken life he sets out to write himself, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him. (*Imaginary Homeland* 23-24)

However, more than Proustian overtone, the novel has a Foucauldian overtone because of Foucault's emphasis upon genealogy in the tracing of history. Foucault

refuses to see history as a unified whole, instead the disintegration of history is exposed through the decay of the body. Foucault writes that:

The pretext of... insurmountable conflict... the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History: Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 148)

In *Midnight's Children*, genealogy plays an important role in voicing the history of the nation. Saleem's 'literally disintegrating' and 'fissured body' from which history pours out is the result of socio-political and psychological fragmentation. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Hindu-Muslim riots, the language riots, the Chinese aggression, the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal Mosque, the Language Riots of 1957 and the Partition of the State of Bombay to the creation of the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, the two Indo-Pak war in 1965 and 1971, the secession of Bangladesh, the Emergency are all historical images of fragmentation. The theme of fragmentation is introduced from the first chapter entitled "The Perforated sheet", when Saleem's grandfather, the German educated doctor Aadam Aziz is called upon to treat the illness of Naseem Ghani in a piecemeal fashion, while she remained in purdah. He was to examine the lady through a perforated sheet with a hole seven inches in diameter; until "...gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts" (25), with whom he falls in love with and subsequently gets married to. This image of the 'hole' refuting the construction of any wholesome identity is carried forward throughout the text from hence onwards.

The 'hole' in the postcolonial psyche becomes a kind of an identity marker; and hence Rushdie's characters in *Midnight's Children* relentlessly try to fill in the 'hole' through forging a new identity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) attempts a systematic study to construct postcolonial identity by dismantling the given colonial notion of identity as the 'other'. For Said, the orient signifies a system of representation that is constructed by and in relation to the west. In the same vein Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is all about maintaining imperial hold by means of culture reigned apparently based upon the civilizing mission. Alternatively, culture also becomes one of the powerful agents of resistance in post-colonial societies. Edward Said shows how this binary construction of the Orient and the Occident breaks down as the machinery of colonialism and imperialism impedes. Like in Lamming's reading of Shakespeare, Caliban is a mythic figure of postcoloniality who is trapped forever in language and history. When Caliban voices back to Prospero, he is not merely claiming a different identity. Said suggests we should be able to see that Caliban too has a history of his own, capable of development, as part of a process of work, growth and maturity to which only the Europeans had seemed entitled. Seen from this perspective Saleem's story-telling may be interpreted as voicing his personal history which is closely entwined with the greater history of his

country. But the monolithic portrayal of the culture is challenged by Rushdie as he feels a nation as diverse as India cannot afford to lose its hybrid flavor. Perhaps this is reflected in Rushdie's use of the English language which is heavily Indianized. Profanities referring to sexual organs, almost like the carnivalesque element of Bakhtin, proliferate in the text; which is one way of resisting colonial authority; and to subvert the decent, standard or correct usage of the English language. Any attempt to sanitize Rushdie's language results in the failure of conveying the essence of hybrid complex reality of the Indian Subcontinent.

In this context cultural stereotypes of the colonized being slothful, incestuous, diffident, ugly, grotesque and the 'other' abound in literary representation. Elleke Boehmer defines this process of 'othering' as fundamental in colonization:

The colonized made up the subordinate term in relation to which European individuality was defined. Always with reference to the superiority of an expanding Europe, colonized peoples were represented as lesser: less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass. (*Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* 75-76)

It is what Frantz Fanon calls the inescapable 'fact of blackness' (211). In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, one character who refuses to abide by the white code of conduct is the boatman Tai. He is the only man who defies the erosion caused due to history and time through his body. Nobody could remember when Tai had been young; it seemed that he has been rowing the shikhara since ages. Even his wife had no idea of his age- "he was, she said, already leathery when they married" (14). Smug in his world of self-complacency, he eyed with deep suspicion the foreign- returned doctor Aadam Aziz and his medical bag which he abused with no remorse: "Sistersleeping pigskin bag from Abroad full of foreigner's tricks..... That bag should fry in Hell with the testicles of the ungodly" (20). No matter how hard Dr. Aziz tried to make peace with Tai, the Heidelberg bag turned them into antagonists: "To the ferryman, the bag represents Abroad; it is the alien thing, the invader, progress" (21). Tai is the typical colonized subject who is resistant to change and refuses to follow the decorum set by the departing Whites. He rebels through his body:

Meanwhile, the boatman, Tai, had taken his unexplained decision to give up washing. In a valley drenched with freshwater lakes, where even the very poorest could (and did) pride themselves on their cleanliness, Tai chose to stink. For three years now, he had neither bathed nor washed himself after answering calls of nature. He wore the same clothes unwashed, year in, year out; his one concession to winter was to put his chugha-coat over his putrescent pajamas. The little basket of hot coals which he carried inside the chugha, in the Kashmiri fashion, to keep him warm in the bitter cold, only animated and accentuated his evil odors. He took to drifting slowly past the Aziz household, releasing the dreadful fumes of his body across the small garden and into the house. Flowers died; birds fled from the ledge outside old Father Aziz's window.

Naturally, Tai lost work; the English in particular were reluctant to be ferried by a human cesspit. (MC 27)

Similar cultural stereotype assigning a superior identity to the whites as against the other is also seen in the novel. In the chapter called *Many-headed monsters*, Amina Sinai slyly meets the soothsayer Ramram Seth. On her way she is appalled to see street urchins turned into monsters by poverty and disease: "Look, my God, those beautiful children have black teeth! Would you believe...girl children baring their nipples...sweeper women with...collapsed spines,...and cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging...yes, beggars in boxcars, grown men with babies' legs, in crates on wheels" (81). And most of all she is appalled to see a white beggar an oddity "while she looks with embarrassment into a white face with long eyelashes and a curved patrician nose- embarrassment, because he was white, and begging was not for white people" (81-82). Thus cultural stereotypes resulting from the representation of the body result in such fractured perspective; white skinned people as superior and class apart from the 'other'.

Thus even when the Colonizers have attempted to create colonized men like them it was for their convenience's sake, in the process forever deferring their claims of authentic identity. *Macaulay's Minutes* (1835) was an attempt "to create men who will be Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (490). To resist such colonial homogenizing discourse, Bhabha speaks of adopting or adapting to the colonizer's culture, which will eventually lead to mimicry. Bhabha's understands mimicry as not just servile copying but mimicry also as a form of mockery. This comic element of mimicry is important because the colonial discourse is supposed to be solemn and serious, while mimicry aims at exposing such pretension. Mimicry is also a strategy of resistance. Doctor Aadam Aziz represents the foreign educated progressive Kashmiri who after having studied medicine in Germany for five years returns to his native land to realize that a severe gap had been built between him and the conservative Kashmiris. Foreign education had made him learn how "India-like radium- had been 'discovered' by the Europeans" (11); and his religious fervor suffers a setback when he attempts to pray in the conventional manner and he accidentally hits his nose against the earth making him resolve 'never again to kiss earth for any god or man', 'leaving a hole in him, a vacancy in the inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history' (10). He therefore becomes the true mimic man; a comic figure, a man with a 'hole'. Other men characters in the novel like Saleem Sinai, Nadir Khan, and Ahmed Sinai are described as impotent. The writer says when Ahmed Sinai's assets are frozen by the govt., the narrator describes his genitals as frozen for which he drowns himself in his drinking habits. Saleem's real father, Methwold, a departing colonist, almost Samson-like is also undergoes a transformation when he realizes that the sun has really set down upon the British Empire and it was time for them to leave India. This historical event is again alluded to with the help of a bodily metaphor: "Samson-like, William Methwold's power had resided in his hair; but now, bald patch glowing in the dusk, he flings his thatch through the window of his motor-car,...and drives away" (114).

If the men are physically weak and impotent, women in this novel are threateningly menacing. We notice muscular women like ‘professional wrestlers’ holding the perforated sheet that separated Naseem from Aadam Aziz. But after marriage the same delicate Naseem transforms into the figure of Reverend Mother; “She had become prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch’s nipples on her face; and she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties” (40). Likewise another woman character, a wet-nurse of Aadam Sinai and washerwoman called Durga is characterized as a woman ‘whose biceps bulged; whose preternatural breasts unleashed a torrent of milk capable of nourishing regiments; and who, it was rumored darkly had two wombs’ (445). The apparent silence of the women figures in the novel is voiced through these bodily disfigurements. The narrative would remain incomplete without the most important woman character, Padma. If Saleem is the narrator of the country’s history Padma is the narratee. Although Padma is described as ignorant and superstitious, she provides the ‘necessary counterweight to Saleem’s miracle-laden omniscience’. She checks his flights of fancy and resists fragmentation. As Padma is vociferous in her demand for physical fulfillment while Saleem is narrating his tale, the whole event is reminiscent of Scheherazade’s telling of tales to King Shahriyar in *Arabian Nights* to avert a sexual encounter. Timothy Brennan regards Padma as a “plebian commentator” (Brennan 100-9). Seen against such reading, then Saleem becomes the central/bourgeois/ male agent dominating over the liminal/plebian / female identity. Yet Padma’s desire to know, her inquisitiveness over ‘what-happened-next’, her thirst for knowledge, makes her superior to the men around her. Although confined to the domestic realm of cooking and taking care of the impotent Saleem, she exudes an identity of her own. Saleem’s story would have remained incomplete without Padma. Brennan argues: “Padma is not only a passive receptor or disembodied voice of the national conscience, but a literary critic” (101). Padma is ‘plump’; Padma is thick of waist’; Padma is ‘somewhat hairy of forearm’; Padma ‘snorts’; Padma ‘gesticulates’; ‘poor Padma’; ‘a bitch in the manger’ – are various bodily expressions used in the novel to describe Padma. Her name in the Hindu Mythology means the lotus goddess, which is similar to the Goddess Aphrodite in the Greek Mythology, associated with desire and fertility. Most critics have studied Padma as a figure of gaps and absences as nothing is told to the reader about her history, her family, her social background. This is because women are barely made visible in such critical discourse of colonization and patriarchy. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains the idea that a trace of something non-present and pre-discursive remains when considering the socio-political representation of the female body (148-9). Spivak says even when women speak; men are unable to decode their voices. The silence of the women as a subaltern is a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. Padma unabashedly exudes carnal desire; she articulates her desire to love and to be loved in return. Sonia Kruks has rightly said: “The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of ‘one’s difference. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different” (85). Padma, in this sense, demands to be respected for being ‘different’. Similarly, if Saleem’s narrative employs the deferment of closure; and is impatient with Padma’s demand for a linear narrative; Padma’s desire to reveal is again expressed with a bodily metaphor: “....And certainly Padma is leaking into me. As history pours out of my fissured body, my lotus is quietly

dripping in, with her down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous-so it's appropriate that I'm about to tell the story of the death of Miah Abdullah" (38). Padma is therefore not just a 'necessary ear' (149), but a co-creator of the narrative. It is as much her story as it is Saleem's. Here the creative urge of writing is akin to the unleashing of the libido.

Similarly a lot of birth images have been used by Rushdie to suggest the painful evolution of the Indian nation after Independence. Saleem's birth coincides with the birth of the Independent India on the stroke of midnight August 14-15, 1947. All one thousand and one children born on the midnight of Indian independence are promised with plentitude. All these children are supposedly blessed with miraculous powers. Saleem is referred as the 'nose' due to his sensitive olfactory powers and Shiva, another of Midnight's child with whom he is exchanged at birth, is referred as the 'knees' due to his physical prowess. Apparently Ramram Seth's predictions at Saleem's birth to his mother do come out to be true: "a son, sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland- neither older nor younger... There will be two heads-but you shall see only one- there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees. Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him-but crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep...Washing will hide him-voices will guide him.....He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! And he will die before he is dead" (87-88). Saleem is born rightly at the moment of India's Independence and therefore he is as old as his country. If Saleem is the nose; Shiva is the knees. Saleem is actually the son of the departing colonialist Methwold and the low caste Vanitha; but he is exchanged by a nurse Mary Pereira with Shiva who is actually the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai. Saleem is monstrous because of his ability to change shapes and size. As a baby he is gargantuan, growing at an enormous speed, with blue alien eyes that never blink, monstrous nose, eating and defecating in monumental amount. His physical grotesqueness makes him stand apart from others: "I was not a beautiful baby. Baby-snaps reveal that my large moon-face was too large; too perfectly round. Something lacking in the region of the chin. Fair skin curved across my features- but birthmarks disfigured it; dark stains spread down my western hairline, a dark patch colored my eastern ear. And my temples: too prominent: bulbous Byzantine domes" (124). He is further mutilated by his sadist teacher Zagalo in school. In the 1971 war, Saleem suffers from amnesia as a result of shock after hearing about the death of his parents; he is enrolled in the dog unit of the army. This is the lowest point (man-dog) in Saleem's life as he virtually reduces himself into an animal. Later he is rendered impotent by the forced sterilization camp imposed by Smt. Indira Gandhi during the Emergency period between 1975-76 when all civil liberties were suspended to curb dissension. Sanjay Gandhi's act of forcibly castrating the people as an act of population control is the worst bestial act perpetrated on the individual body. Similarly, the progress of Parvati's pregnancy is paralleled with the growing power of the Janata Party. Parvati's thirteen day labor coincides with the thirteen days of political tumult when Indira Gandhi refused to resign after the verdict of the Allahabad High Court. While Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J.P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were forcing Mrs. Gandhi to push. So on the midnight of June 25, 1975, Parvati brings forth her child, Aadam Sinai; Indira Gandhi too brings forth her child in the form of a declaration of a National Emergency.

Both the child and the nation suffer from birth pangs and the trauma of adolescence with a 'holed' psyche. We find such 'gaps' and 'hole' not as an aberration; rather it is an intrinsic part of the colonized make-up. The filling of the 'hole' is needed in the creation of a 'whole' perspective. The narrator's "urge to encapsulate the whole of reality" is similar to Lifa Das, the peep show man, who promises to capture "the whole of reality" in his box. Rushdie fills such 'holes' and 'gaps' in the story with fantasy and myth. In the last section of the novel, Saleem's son, Aadam Sinai is described as 'the true son of Shiva-and-Parvati- the elephant-headed Ganesh.'" Likewise Shiva in Hindu Mythology is the God of destruction; the Shiva in the novel creates havoc in the lives of people around him. The rivalry between Saleem and Shiva in the novel echoes the Hindu mythological rivalry between Shiva and Brahma. Similarly Padma, meaning the lotus goddess; is somebody who born in mud and slime but capable of rising to the higher things of life. She is in fact the mix of the sordid and the beautiful. Mythicizing personal and political history, Saleem seeks his individual identity:

"Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done to me. I am everyone 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', everyone 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" (MC 383).

The birth of Aadam Sinai, born at midnight of the day when Indira Gandhi had clamped emergency to control dissension, is actually the real son of Shiva, and therefore the real great-grandson of Doctor Aadam Aziz, replaces the genealogy in order. Aadam Sinai is everything opposite to that of Saleem. If Saleem is known for his verbal verbosity, Aadam Sinai refuses to speak out. What marks him different is his large flapping ears, perhaps ingesting all that is going around him and a protruding navel, reveals his determination to resist evil. The euphoria that marked the birth of midnight's children is beset with despair and disillusionment; but through the birth of 'strong-willed' Aadam Aziz, Saleem hopes for a restoration of a new world order. Being the biological son of Shiva and Parvati, he is the 'elephant-headed Ganesh', the Hindu Mythological God of good fortune. The birth of Ganesh during the period of Emergency suggests that good will be borne out of evil. As the novel draws to a close around 15<sup>th</sup> august, 1978, we see Saleem hanging up his shoes in anticipation of 'new myths'.



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