

**Indian Fiction in English**  
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**Lecture - 17**  
**Salman Rushdie in Indian Fiction in English**

Hello everyone. Welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course titled Indian Fiction in English. In the last session, we started talking about *Midnight's Children*, the relevance of that what should event in the history of Indian Fiction in English and also how the novel changed the entire dynamics of how Indian Fiction in English has been positioned and how it also became very different kind of a trendsetter from the moment it got published.

Before we entire into a more detail discussion of *Midnight's Children*, I want you to be aware of the role played by Salman Rushdie and the significance of *Midnight's Children* in this entire field of Indian Fiction in English. It is very important for us to know that because in the last few decades ever since the literary event of *Midnight's Children* happened, it has been difficult to not pay attention to this event or the man who authored this event whenever we are talking about this field of Indian Fiction in English.

So this lecture is a discussion of how Rushdie and his work *Midnight's Children* has been positioned in this larger field and how the critical tradition in general and the other contemporaries have been influenced by this extremely important seminal event.

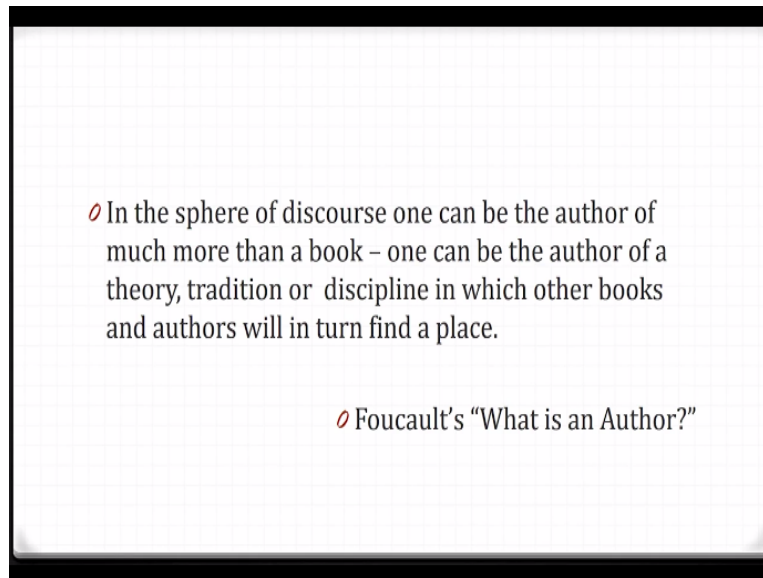
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## Readings:

- o "What is an Author" by Michel Foucault
- o "After Midnight: The Indian Novel in English of the 80s and 90s" by Jon Mee
- o "Edited Out: Indian Women's Writing in English" by Anuradha Marwah
- o "Victim into Protagonist: *Midnight's Children* and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties" - Josna Rege

These are the readings which are important for this lecture. What is an author? The essay written by Michel Foucault. Jon Mee's article on post 80s and 90s novel After Midnight, The Indian Novel in English of the 80s and 90s. Anuradha Marwah's essay Edited Out, Indian Women's Writing in English and Victim into Protagonist, Midnight's Children and the Post-Rushdie National Narratives of the Eighties by Josna Rege, all of these articles are available online.

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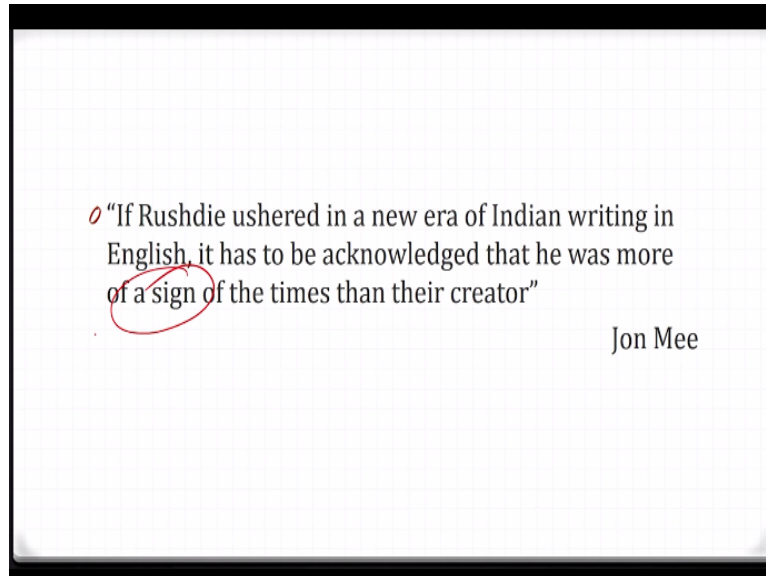


So I begin by drawing your attention to this statement from Foucault's What is an Author? He writes in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book, one can be the author of a theory, a tradition or discipline in which other books and authors will in turn find a place and this is a way in which I also tried to situate Rushdie and Midnight's Children.

In the sphere of this discourse which we now understand as the field Indian Fiction in English, we find that both Rushdie and his seminal work Midnight's Children they have surpassed, they have seized to be just an author and a book, on the contrary they have now been elevated to a status where they also begin to dictate the places which the other books and the other authors occupy.

So it is in such a context that we embark on this discussion of situating Rushdie and Midnight's Children within the literary tradition of Indian Fiction in English.

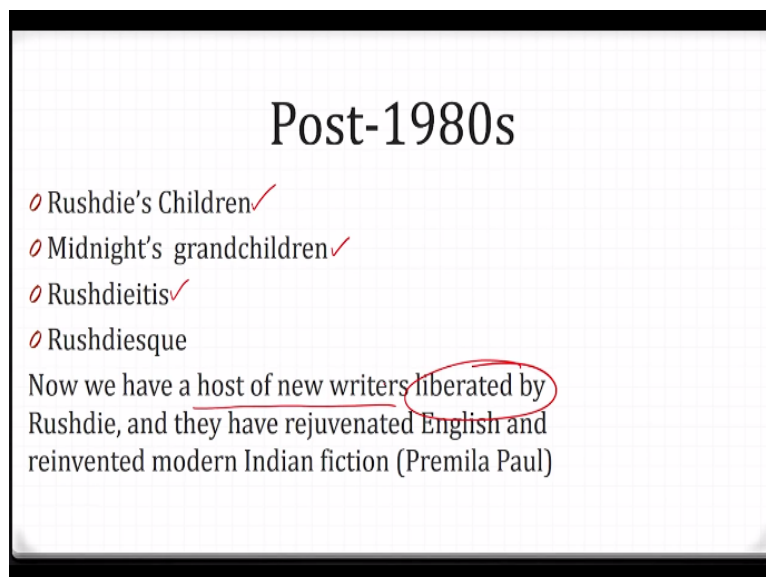
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Jon Mee in his seminal article after *Midnight*, he in the first paragraph itself he begins with this remark, if Rushdie ushered in a new era of Indian writing in English, it has to be acknowledged that he was more of a sign of the times than their creator. So at some level this lecture is also an attempt to look at how Rushdie can be seen as a sign of those times.

And how many others have also felt the same about Rushdie, how many of the other critical writers, how many other historians and other contemporaries of Rushdie have also felt that Rushdie has been a sign of the times than their creator.

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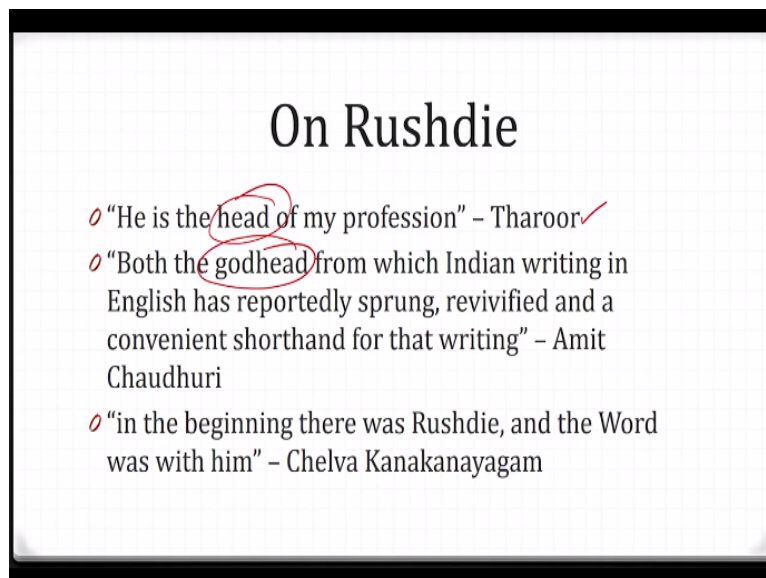
And if we look at post 1980s these are some of the ways in which the post 1980s writers have described, they have been talked about as Rushdie's children obviously and as *Midnight's grandchildren* as a tribute to the novel *Midnight's Children* and Rushdie himself in the first

article that we discussed in his introduction to the Vintage Book of Indian Writing, he talks about how many have spoken about Rushdieitis, how many other writers have also begun to imitate Rushdie writing and how that has been designated as Rushdieitis.

And also there is this term Rushdiesque used to talk about a certain kind of writing popularized by Rushdie primarily due to the chutnification of language and the chutnification of history which is inherent part of his novel *Midnight's Children* and one of the critics Premila Paul in her essay she points out, now we have a host of new writers liberated by Rushdie and they have rejuvenated English and reinvented modern Indian fiction.

So in the post 1980s, it is not any other historical event, it is not any other social, cultural, political event that becomes seminal that becomes a turning point in the history of Indian Fiction in English. On the contrary, it is Rushdie and his work which becomes which acts as a liberatory force and which also spearheads a lot of revolution and lot of reinvention as far as this field is concerned.

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Here we also take a very quick look at how the other contemporary writers have referred to Rushdie. Sashi Tharoor one of the prominent writers and one of the Stephanian writers refers to Rushdie as a head of my profession and Amit Chaudhuri and we did refer to Amit Chaudhuri in one of earlier sessions, he was the editor of the Picador Book of Indian Literature and that was an anthology which came out after Rushdie's *Vintage Book of Indian Writing*.

And according to Amit Chaudhuri, Rushdie is both the godhead from which Indian writing in English has reportedly sprung, revived and a convenient shorthand for that writing and according to an Indian critic Chelva Kananayagam in the beginning there was Rushdie and the word was with him and the religious references over here are so hard to miss. So we even see the uncanny ways in which Rushdie is being talked about by his contemporary writers.

He sees as being just another contemporary writer. He becomes the head, the godhead and the word itself.

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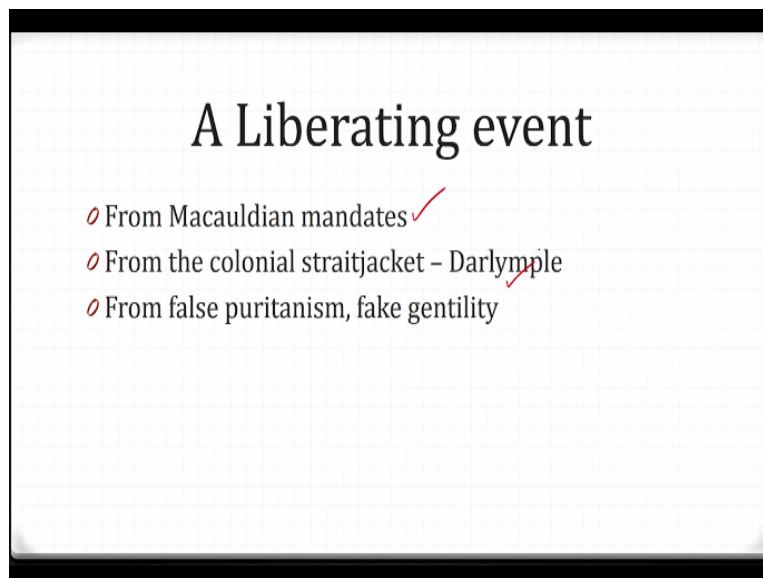
And the work *Midnight's Children*, a number of writers pay their tribute to this work and the contemporary writers they continued to do the same. Mukul Kesavan one of the renowned writers, he happened to listen to one of the readings of *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie and he described that as a religious experience and Pankaj Mishra one of the writers as well as critics. He has confessed that Rushdie has inspired all the writers of the post 80s and 90s to write in a new way.

And Amit Chaudhuri again has described *Midnight's Children* as a Nehruvian epic. Here we see the ways in which *Midnight's Children* is being elevated to a national text itself. Here Rushdie is compared to the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru himself and Anita Desai one of the leading women writers of contemporary fiction. She has once mentioned in one of her interviews that Rushdie has allowed a new freedom of both form and content.

And Bill Buford one of the American journalists as well as critics, according to him it was Rushdie who made everything possible for the postcolonial Indian writers and Arundhati Roy, she has reportedly stated in one of her interviews that after Rushdie after *Midnight's Children*, it is possible for all of us to tell our stories. Interestingly, she does not say I can tell my own story, she says we can just tell our stories.

There is an enabling effect that Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* has or not just one writer not just on a set of isolated writers but on an entire generation of writers who came after Rushdie and Hari Kunzru one of the very recent writers, he has confessed that it was *Midnight's Children* which inspired him to write his novel, *The Impressionists*.

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And Hari said that it is possible to save it, the novel *Midnight's Children* has had a liberating effect on Indian writers and what was this liberation from? First of all, this liberation was from the Macauldian mandates. I also wanted to recall the Macaulay's Minutes which was instrumental in beginning English education in India.

And also we have also taken a look at how historically that could be seen as one of the starting points of our entry into modernity, our entry into our encounter with English language with writing in English with many, many other progressive things that followed and we have also noted how those mandates where seen as residue of the colonial power. We have also noticed and we have always been aware of how those mandates were continuing to dictate our writers and our writings.

To a very large extent, this is quite visible and particularly in the early writers and also we have seen how Srinivasa Iyengar one of the earliest critics how he felt very obliged to the colonial masters about the new reception that Indian writers were receiving and he also felt that one had to always be at the mercy of the colonial writers and the colonial critics to be able to make a mark in the field of writing.

So Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* on account of the language that it was using, on account of the many revolutionary themes that it was pursuing, it could be seen as a liberating event from the Macauldian mandates neither did Rushdie pay attention to how a novel should be written conventionally nor did it pay attention how the king or the queen was using English. Secondly, this liberation was from the colonial straitjacket, this was stated by William Dalrymple.

And Rushdie made it possible for the novel form to be liberated from the colonial straitjacket, it enabled the Indian novel in English to emerge as an independent form not relying on any of the external factors which have been dictating the genre and very ironically this was made possible by at the same time getting an international recognition and also writing about one's own experience with the nation.

And this was a very unique thing as far as Indian Fiction in English was concerned and you have been also following the major novels which have been written till the 1970s and even the early 80s and we also now realize it none of the other novels fit this will when compared to *Midnight's Children* and *Midnight's Children* and Rushdie's language was also a liberation from false puritanism and fake gentility.

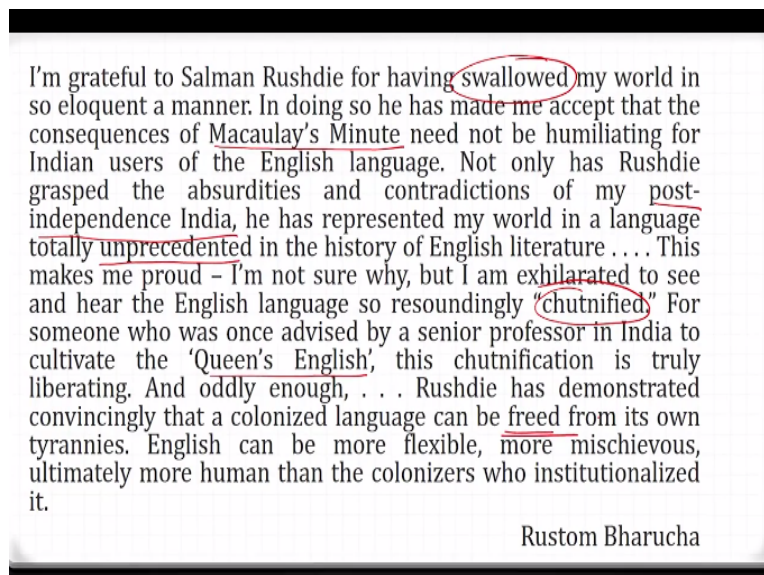
If you began reading *Midnight's Children* or if you already finished reading *Midnight's Children*, you would know that there is no reverence in the way Rushdie uses language. His language is very playful, it is hybrid, it is highly irreverent, it simply does not care and as many writers and critics have already pointed out, he entirely liberated English language and the form of this novel from what was once under the colonial influence or the western influence.

This is not to say that new trends and different kinds of writings were not available in any of the Indian languages. On the contrary, here I want you to pay attention to the fact that there

was a certain pattern, a certain framework or format in which Indian Fiction in English was being written. Since it was being written in an alien language, since the target audience was different, there was always this anxiety as Meenakshi Mukherjee would put it to represent the nation in a certain way to represent individuals in a certain way.

To a very large extent that is possible to say that Rushdie's work is not written with his anxiety. In Rushdie's work, we find a confident post-colonial man writing and we find a person who is confident in using English language and the nuances of the language and the nuances of writing in the way that he is comfortable in and this certainly had been very liberating and enriching experience for many other writers who had to follow.

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Here let me also read out you this extensive quote from Rustom Bharucha who is an Indian academic and critic. In one of his essays on Rushdie, he talks extensively about how grateful he is to Rushdie and *Midnight's Children*. I read this quote from Rustom Bharucha. I am grateful to Salman Rushdie for having swallowed my world in so eloquent manner. In doing so he has made me accept that the consequences of Macaulay's Minute need not be humiliating for Indian users of the Indian language.

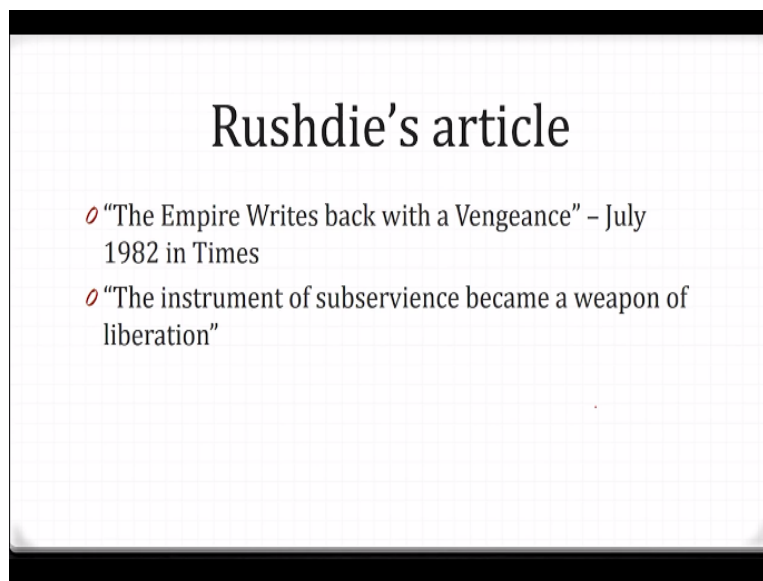
Not only has Rushdie grasped the absurdities and contradictions of my post-independence India, he has represented my world in a language totally unprecedented in the history of English literature. This makes me proud. I am not sure why, I am exhilarated to see and hear the English language so resoundingly chutnified. For someone who was once advised by a



senior professor in India to cultivate the Queen's English, this chutnification is truly liberating.

And oddly enough, Rushdie has demonstrated convincingly that the colonized language can be freed from its own tyrannies. English can be more flexible, more mischievous, ultimately more human than the colonizers who institutionalized it and what makes this even more interesting is the fact that Rushdie was also quite conscious of what he was doing to this language, what he was doing to this genre.

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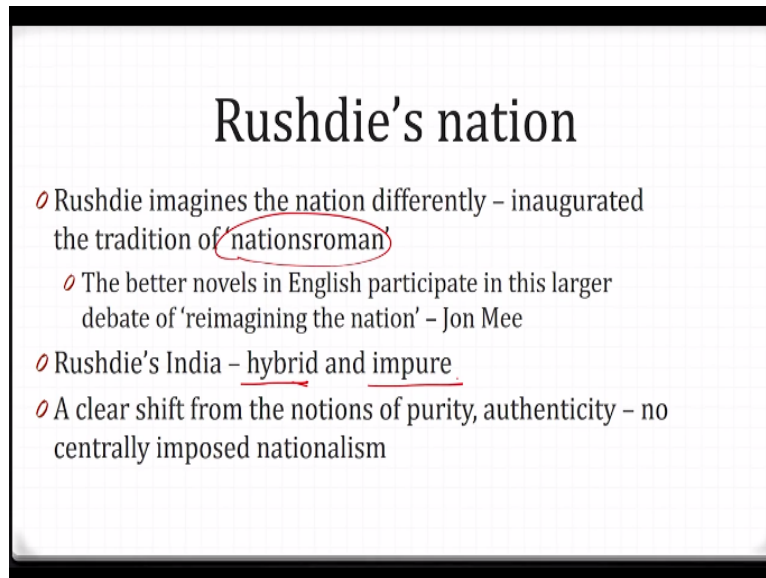
He himself has written in one of his 1982 article which appeared in the Times, The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance. He stated the instrument of subservience which is a language became a weapon of liberation. So Rushdie as a writer and as a person as an Indian, he was also conscious of what he was doing. I must say a postcolonial Indian. He was very conscious of what he was doing.

He was very conscious of what the language could achieve in his hands and how this genre could prove to be very liberated and this is again very interesting because when Rushdie was writing Midnight's Children, he was not residing in India and he no longer held an Indian passport but nevertheless he becomes the significant force which would take Indian Fiction in English ahead.

And if you recall one of our earlier discussions in the late 1970s, it was even predicted that this genre Indian Fiction in English will not have much of a future. Uma Parameswaran in

one of her essays had spoken about the death knell of Indian Fiction in English. So what Rushdie did and what *Midnight's Children* made a possible was quite a feat and it would be quite an understatement if we do not talk extensively about this influence which Rushdie and *Midnight Children* had.

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## Rushdie's nation

- Rushdie imagines the nation differently - inaugurated the tradition of nationsroman
- The better novels in English participate in this larger debate of 'reimagining the nation' - Jon Mee
- Rushdie's India - hybrid and impure
- A clear shift from the notions of purity, authenticity - no centrally imposed nationalism

So what made Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* very different? What was so unique about them? First of all, Rushdie imagined the nation very differently and this is something we have started taking a look at from the moment we began discussing *Midnight's Children* and any reference to Rushdie will also obviously draw us to a reference to the nation and it goes without saying that Rushdie imagines a nation very differently.

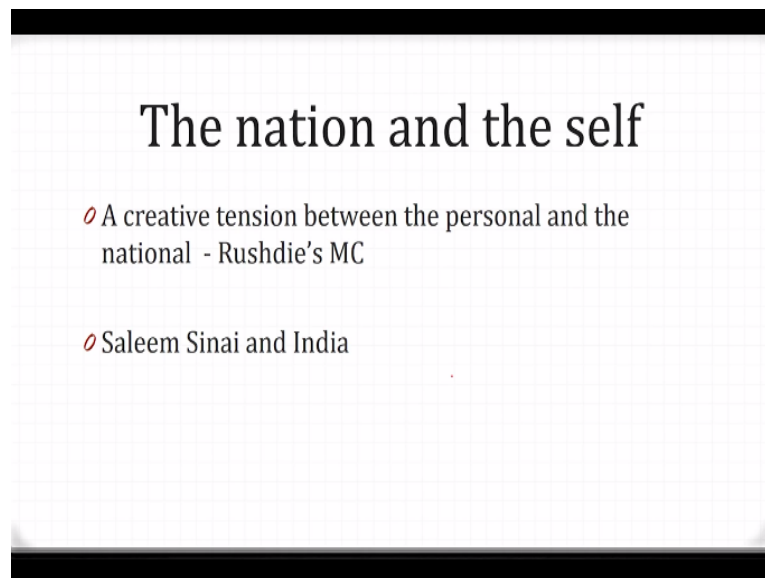
And even inaugurated this tradition of *nationsroman* following the tradition of the *bildungsroman* and in *Midnight's Children* as you are aware it is about the growth of the nation, how the nation is being born and how it goes through different phases and in this context let me also draw your attention to this observation by Jon Mee that the better novels in English, he is talking about Indian English novels, they participate in this larger debate of reimagining the nation.

So for a longtime many leading critics they have felt and they have maintained that writing about the nation, writing about reimagining the nation is perhaps the best way of articulating in fiction and Rushdie certainly led the way for this kind of writing the kind of *nationsroman* that we would come across in many other novels such as *The Shadow Lines* or *Fine Balance* or couple of other novels to which we would soon be taking a look at.

And this sort of a reimagining it was done in an entirely different way, it was not done in a way which we were used to until then, it was not a nationalistic sort of an imagination where one inherently believed that one's nation and one's community and one's practices are superior to all the others. It moved away from that Rushdie's India in that sense was hybrid and impure.

Rushdie really celebrated this notion of India which is hybrid and impure in most of his novels and this was a clear shift from the notions of purity and authenticity and it did not have any centrally imposed nationalism according to which it.

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The figuration of the nation was very different in the sense that the nation could no longer be separated from the self. So in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* accordingly we find a creative tension between the personal and the national and this is something that we can observe in Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* and his relationship with India.

We shall be taking a look at how Saleem Sinai's life and India's future, India's history, they are closely linked with each other and how the birth of one affects the other or the disintegration of one adversely affects the other so on and so forth.

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By 1980, nation and novel had reached a state of impasse: both the unitary model of the modern nation-state and the narrative of the modern Indian English novel needed radical rethinking. The publication of *Midnight's Children* broke both deadlocks simultaneously; at once eulogy and elegy for the unitary model of nation-state that had failed to deliver the promises of Indian freedom movement, and a new literary and conceptual model that opened new worlds of possibility for re-imagining and representing enabling relationships between individual and nation.

Josna E Rege

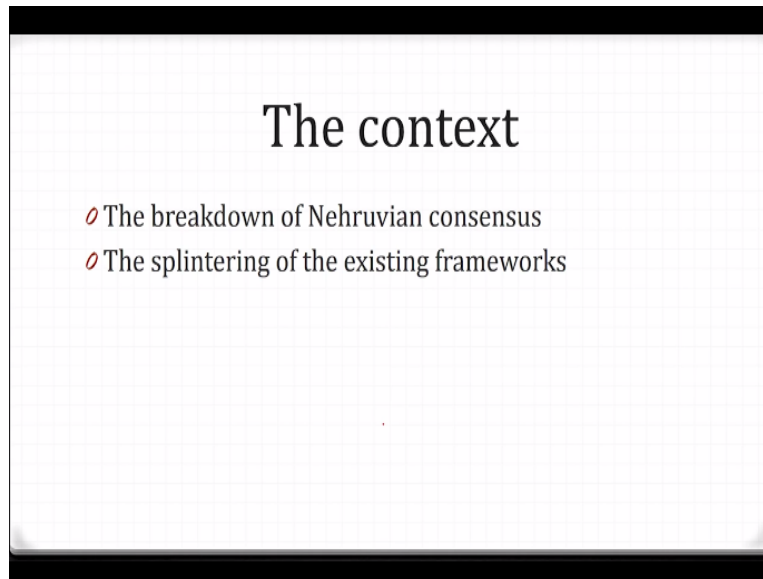
Josna E Rege in one of her articles, she very succinctly captures what *Midnight's Children* had done to post 1980s novel. I read out from her work. By 1980, nation and novel had reached a state of impasse, both the unitary model of the modern nation state and the narrative of the modern Indian English novel needed radical rethinking. The publication of *Midnight's Children* broke both deadlocks simultaneously.

At once eulogy and elegy for the unitary model of nation-state that had failed to deliver the promises of Indian freedom movement and a new literary and conceptual model that had opened new worlds of possibility for re-imagining and representing, enabling relationships between individual and nation. In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, there is a certain personalization of this relationship between the individual and the nation.

It is no longer seen as a relationship which needs to be understood in very detached terms but with *Midnight's Children* we find that there is an inherent connection between the citizen and the nation-state and how one affects the other or how one enables the other and this is something that *Midnight's Children* explores rather extensively and many critics have written about.

And one of the reasons why we always keep *Midnight's Children* as a key referral point in most of our discussions related to post 80s a fiction is that most of the other novels of the 80s and 90s they have also followed this pattern. There is a way in which most of the Indian English writers have try to experiment and have tried to push the limits of this relation between the individual and the nation.

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And this is a context in which *Midnight's Children* was published. There is a breakdown of the Nehruvian consensus which some of you may already be aware of and there is also splintering of the existing frameworks and as Josna Rege also points out the promises of the postcolonial nation which was not delivered during the post-independence period. It became a reason for giving rise to newer energies and newer possibilities and newer kinds of challenges.

So it is in this context where the Nehruvian consensus could no longer hold the center and it is in this context where the existing frameworks began to splinter, the nation itself began to splinter that we find Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* emerging as a dual force in terms of the nation as well as a novel.

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## Rushdie's fiction

"celebrates the non-belongers . . . reinvent the figure of the tramp, the assassin, . . . (so many figures from Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque) . . . because these figures are of the luminal, of the borders of culture, . . . forever on the margins . . . [His narratives are] peppered with diasporic anxieties and diasporic semantics"

Priya Kumar

In Priya Kumar's words, Rushdie's fiction had played a significant role in this context because until that moment Indian Fiction in English, it was seen as an ideal space which had embraced an idea of an essential India but when we come to Rushdie's fiction particularly *Midnight's Children* to begin with we find that his writings celebrate the non-belongers, reinvent the figure of the tramp, the assassin.

Because these figures are of the luminal, of the borders of culture, forever on the margins, peppered with diasporic anxieties and diasporic semantics. These were not talked about otherwise in the space of Indian fiction, so Rushdie's fiction in that sense inaugurates the celebration of non-belongers. It includes all the others who were hitherto in the margins. It gives voice to the diasporic anxieties which were seen otherwise as being more legitimate.

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## Other contemporaries

- ◊ Moving away from essentialising ideas
- ◊ Amitav Ghosh, Mukul Kesavan, Shashi Tharoor – representation of Muslims
- ◊ Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga – caste and dalits
- ◊ Allan Sealy – Anglo-Indians, Mughal history

We find many of the other contemporaries also following this line of writing and they also move away from the essentialising ideas following *Midnight's Children*. Some of those writers are Amitav Ghosh, Mukul Kesavan, Shashi Tharoor in their works we do find the representation of Muslims for example in a very different way as in when we discuss more novels this will become more pronounced.

And to clarify this point if you remember one of the first novels that we discussed *Kanthapura*, it had a Muslim character who was essentially villainized, so there is a conscious effort in the post 80s, 90s period to not to other the figure of the Muslim or any other minority figure not to other anyone in terms of caste, gender or region and this is not to say that this is now a perfect space, a perfect fictional space, there are of course many other issues that we would discuss and we have been trying to unravel and engage with.

But nevertheless there is certainly a change from the 1980s onwards and there is Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga who in different ways have been talking about issues related to caste and also giving voice to dalit characters. One may disagree with the kind of figuration or the kind of narrativization and representation of these dalit characters but nevertheless there is a certain space to discuss about these issues which were hitherto to not part of this space at all.

And Allan Sealy of course he has written about the Anglo-Indians, he is in one of his recent works *Zelaldinus*, he talks about the Mughal history, so many things which were not part of the oeuvre of Indian writing in English, it has now been incorporated in the post 1980s whether such an integration is being done forcefully or whether this has been happening organically, it is a different discussion altogether.

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## Secularism reloaded

- Secular responses to fragmentation
- *Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses, The Shadow Lines, The Great Indian Novel, A Suitable Boy, A Fine Balance*
- "secular narratives of the nation-state, with strong ideas of what it means to be secular in India today" – Neelam Srivastava

And Neelam Srivastava she has argued that in the post-Rushdie period we find a renewed thrust on the ideals of secularism primarily because the idea of secularism was being increasingly challenged, the nation was being splinter, the Nehruvian consensus had fallen apart.

So there are number of novels which she cites as secular responses to fragmentation or beginning with *Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses, The Shadow Lines, The Great Indian Novel, A Suitable Boy, A Fine Balance* and according to Neelam Srivastava, they are all secular narratives of the nation-state with strong ideas of what it means to be secular in India today.

And here we find a fiction playing a various significant role in imagining the nation, in reconfiguring the ideas and the dominant institutions of the nation and as stated earlier, it is not as if Rushdie remains detached from all of these discussions which are happening. He is also a part of the critical tradition which elevates his work and his own personality, his own author self into a different plane altogether.

In imaginary Homelands, his collection of essays there he talks about how *Midnight's Children* participates in this reinstating of the secular during a period when these values are being eroded.

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*Midnight's Children* enters its subject from the point of view of a secular man. I am a member of that generation of Indians who were sold the secular ideal. One of the things I liked, and still like, about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment; I do not consider Hindu culture to be either alien for me or more important than the Islamic heritage. I believe this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience. Saleem Sinai makes use, eclectically, of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses. It may have been easier for his author to do this from outside modern India than inside it

(Imaginary Homelands, 431).

And I read to you from Imaginary Homelands, *Midnight's Children* enters its subject from the point of view of a secular man. I am a member of that generation of Indians who were sold the secular ideal. One of the things I liked and still like about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment. I do not consider Hindu culture to be either alien for me or more important than the Islamic heritage.

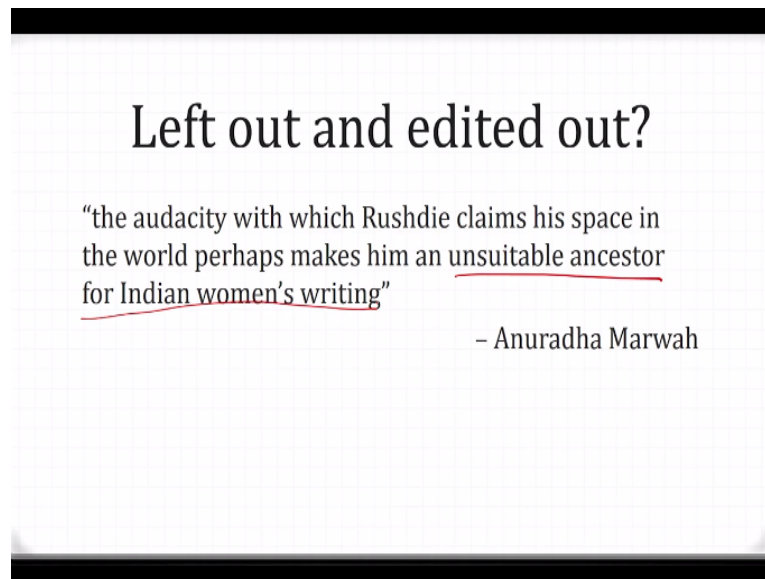
I believe that this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience. Saleem Sinai makes use, eclectically of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses. It may have been easier for his author to do this from outside modern India than inside it.

So many things that Rushdie is trying to do over here, he also justifies how such a work could be produced only from outside modern India rather than inside it. He talks about how his upbringing and his encounter with Bombay and the ambience in which he was raised and how the entire generation which was sold the secular ideal could only respond like this. We will find similar articulations from a number of his contemporaries.

Especially Sashi Tharoor has written extensively about how the secular ambience was part and parcel of their upbringing and how those set of writers, those generations of writers could not have written in any other way. While we continue to be convinced by the set of arguments, while we do not challenge the idea that Indian fiction in English did reiterate the

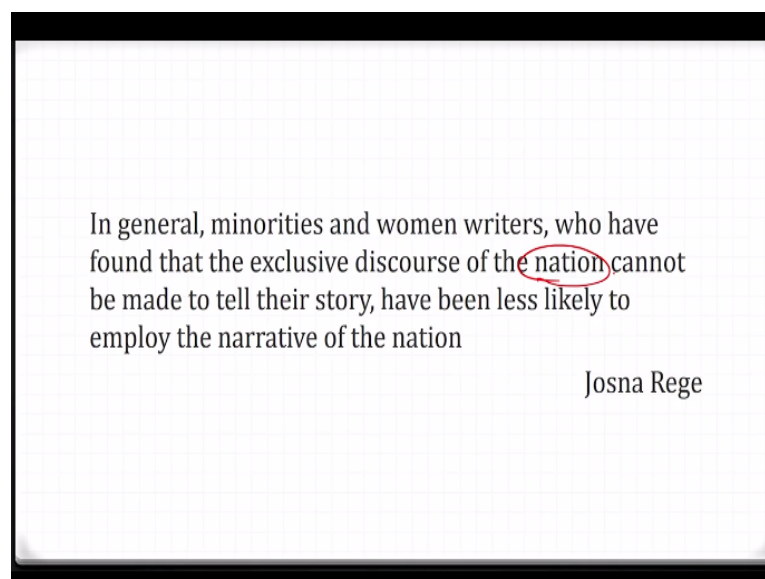
role of secularism in the post 1980s particularly after Midnight's Children and after Rushdie's emergence.

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It is also important to ask this very important question who has been left out and edited out in this entire process. Anuradha Marwah in her essay edited out, she talks about the audacity with which Rushdie claims his space in the world perhaps makes him an unsuitable ancestor for Indian women's writing. This is something that we have been briefly mentioning in some of our earlier discussions as well about how there is not much of a women writing presence in this fairly large space of Indian Fiction in English.

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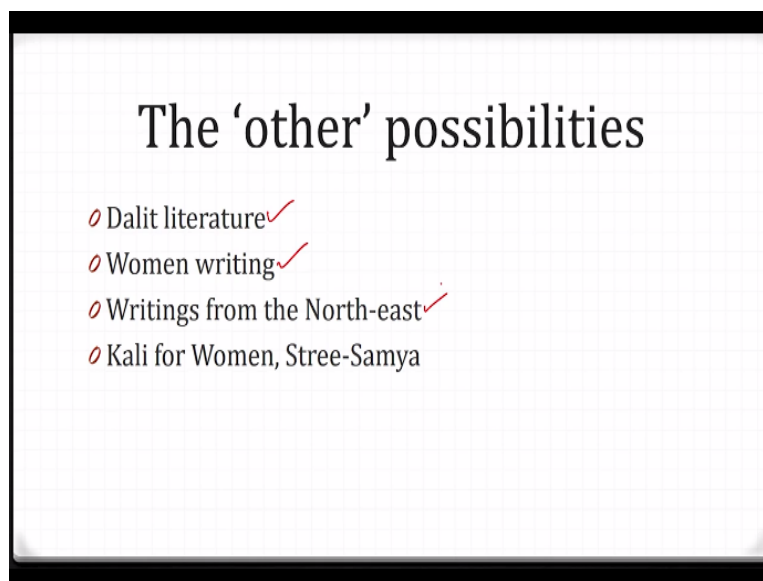


In Josna Rege's article also she talks about how in general minorities and women writers who have found that the exclusive discourse of the nation cannot be made to tell their story, have

been less likely to employ the narrative of the nation. So this is a flip side of celebrating Rushdie of celebrating *Midnight's Children* as the inaugural moment as the watershed moment of the post 1980s and post 90s.

Why we cannot be contested that Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* did play a huge role, a significant unbeatable role in reinstating Indian Fiction in English in enduring the visibility globally and enduring the critical success globally. We cannot forget the fact that minority as women writers, dalit writing, there are number of such local talents which have been left out and edited out in this process.

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So as we begin to wrap up this lecture, I also want you to be aware of these many other possibilities, the new other challenging fields which have been emerging. There is dalit literature, women writing, writings form the North-East and there are also these newer publishing houses which have been coming up Kali for Women which is now Zubaan and Stree-Samya which talks extensively about gender and caste issues.

This is not to say that these are the only kinds of different other possibilities which have been emerging but I also wanted to stay alert to the many other things which are happening in contemporary Indian publishing scene which in a certain way continues to be dominated by the market dictated by Indian Fiction written in English.

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## Women Writing in India

there existed, outside the framework of Indo-Anglian writing (which had come to be seen as modern Indian writing), a wealth of literature in the regional languages that represented some of the most dynamic trends in Indian writing, that had had little exposure beyond its region.

Tharu and Lalita

So as we wind up, I leave you with this observation by Tharu and Lalita in their seminal volume *Women Writing in India* where there is an anthology compiling the writings by women from India from 600 BC onwards and this is an important aspect that they draw our attention to that in this flurry of writings which appear in English, one should not forget that there are alternative traditions that there are alternative discourses which also need to be paid attention to.

I read from Tharu and Lalita. There existed outside the framework of Indo-Anglian writing which had come to be seen as modern Indian writing, a wealth of literature in the regional languages that represented some of the most dynamic trends in Indian writing that had had little exposure beyond its region.

Though this is a course primarily on Indian Fiction writing in English, the discussions and the entire discourse, the entire framework within which this discourse is generated, it will make only partial sense if we are oblivious about the many other things which are happening outside the framework of Indo-Anglian writing and as Tharu and Lalita point out this for some reason or the other has been now seen as modern Indian writing.

And there is certainly a limitation in looking at Indian writing in English or Indian Fiction in English as the only kind of modern Indian writing. So as when you go through this course even when you are aware of the kind of position that Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* occupy.

Even when you are aware of the power that Rushdie and *Midnight's Children* have in dictating critical tradition, in dictating certain tenants, in dictating certain kind of superiority, you also as students of literature as young academics and also as people with the critical acumen, you should certainly be aware of these many of the possibilities and many other challenges which would perhaps enrich this space in a different way altogether.

Having said that I continue to encourage you to read the novel *Midnight's Children*, so that you will be ready for the discussions which are coming up and it should be in the light of these discussions in the light of these understandings that you will be evaluating the novel *Midnight's Children*. So with this we wrap up this lecture. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.