

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture – 18
Midnight's Children

Good Morning and welcome to yet another session where we are discussing the seminal novel by Rushdie; *Midnight's Children*. This is a novel which can be read from multiple perspectives. And if you survey the secondary material about the novel you will also realize that, many things have been written about this novel, many interpretations are prevalent and this is a novel which lends itself to different frameworks and lends itself to be interpreted in multiple ways.

As Rushdie himself has noted that in the west, the people tend to read the *Midnight's Children* as a Fantasy. Whereas in India people think of it as a realistic work almost as a history book. And this is extremely interesting because, it allows people position at different vantage points to look at this work from different ways, which is why individual readings and individual's responses to this work they continue to interest us and illuminate our own understanding of this work.

And Rushdie was very conscious of the kind of influence that his work had and continues to have on the subcontinent especially in the preface that he wrote in the 2005 edition to *Midnight's Children*. This was after *Midnight's Children* was declared as the winner of the Booker of Booker's. He very directly talks about the lasting influence that *Midnight's children* have had on the subcontinent.

And here also he talks briefly about the literary risk that he had undertaken by talking about the various events related to Indira Gandhi and emergency and how eventually he realized that that has proved to be worth it. And it is in this context that I invite you to listen to yet another interpretation of *Midnight's children*. To showcase how the novel continues to be extremely relevant even today after decades of its original publication.

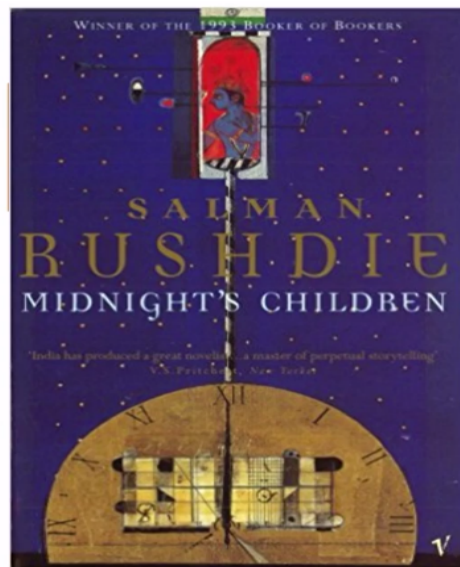
To collaborate this, I read to you from this preface written by Rushdie in 2005 he says; The facts that *Midnight's Children*, is still of interest 25 years later after it first appeared is therefore

reassuring, and he winds this up by noting: Like all novels *Midnight's Children* is a product of its moment in history, touched and shaped by its time in ways in which its author cannot wholly know. I am very glad that it still seems like a book worth reading in this very different time.

If it can pass the test of another generation or 2, it may endure. I will not be around to see that. But I am happy, that I saw it leap the first hurdle. So *Midnight's Children*, being a product of its moment in history it is important to revise and look at that moment and interpret and re-interpret that moment from multiple perspectives at different points of time, which is what Mahima, one of our student will be trying to do it today thru her presentation on *Midnight's Children*.

Wherein, she will be looking at some of the elements which were of interest to her. She will be showcasing some important significant scholarly work which is also enabled the different kinds interpretation which are currently available. I again encourage you to be familiar with the original text; the novel *Midnight's Children* to be able to understand and appreciate these discussions in a better light. I invite Mahima to discuss in detail about this novel and also share some of her insights.

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Mahima M
HS15H017

Good Morning everyone, today I am going to do presentation continuing what Aparna did last day on Salman Rushdie's Booker prize winning novel *Midnight's Children*.

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Objectives

- ❖ The dominant theory of Postcolonialism
- ❖ Binaries in the novel
- ❖ Extensive symbolism



So my objectives are basically to take you through some themes of Post Colonialism which is present in the novel and bring out the binaries in the novel. And also to talk to you about the extensive symbolism that is present.

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Themes of postcolonialism

We will start with the Post colonialism.

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❖ Placed between two antagonistic cultures.

Transgresses both the imperial and provincial orthodoxies.

"Never seen the like. Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it."

❖ Presented from an Indian point of view.

The native experiences. Partition.

❖ Magical Realism

So post colonialist writing is basically those that came after the colonizers left the country and it is written by people of the colonized country and deals with various issues that are prominent for a country that has just been left by these colonizers. So the first aspects of this novel is it is placed between 2 antagonistic cultures by which it tends to create an intermediate space. This space consists of very ambivalent cultures and this theme is not the most prominent theme in the novel but it is evident in some places.

This sentence; it is said by William Methwold before he leaves country. He is talks about India's independence. He is talking to Ahmed Sinai; he says Never seen the like. 100s of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You will admit we were not all bad: built your road. Schools, Railways, trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an Englishman bothered to see to it.

In the beginning Ahmed Sinai moves to Methwold's estate which he leaves behind and he asks the new residents to keep everything as it is, not even remove the wardrobe. So Saleem is born in a place which is not truly his parents but which is also not what belongs to the British anymore. It is obviously presented from an Indian point of view even though he is half British biologically. It shows you what happens in India through the native experiences and it especially deals with events like partition.

Partition, which is an important part of fragmentation, which is mostly present in post colonial writings and also emergency. Next let us talk about Magical Realism which Aparna has already talked about. He inculcates elements of Magic into a realistic setting and in the novel there are 1001 children who had been born at Midnight and intensity of their powers varies between how much distance they have from their birth to midnight. Also there is the aspect of food.

Food is very central in the novel. It begins with him narrating the story in a pickle factory and also he talks about how people who prepare the food puts in their emotions to the food which gets transported to the consumers and affects their actions and lives. Example is Mother Sister Alia, when they move to her house she is jealous because Ahmed Sinai was originally supposed to marry her but then meets Amina and marries her.

So the food that she prepares are very tasty but she pours in her jealousy into it by which Saleem says that her mother gets scared of monster pregnancy and Ahmed Sinai encounters huge losses in his towel factory. And that leads to the family's decay in the end. Also Saleem initially has the power of telepathy. He can read minds. He can go understand past experience of the person, but after he has a surgery, he has nose surgery which is something as simple as that he loses his power, but then he gains another power which is not as grand, but the all factory power he has a very acute sense of smell. He can even smell emotions and what people are feeling.

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❖ Imitation

Cocktail hours. As the colonial subject begins to resemble the colonizer, the differences between the two are reduced.

"Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite."

(The Location of Culture, 1994)

❖ Hybridity

Mixing up of binaries. Saleem's mixture of identities as a reflection of the conflicts within India.

Next is Imitation. This is a quote from the Location of Culture by Homi K. Bhabha. He says that Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite, by which he means that for this, this mimicry is constructed around ambivalence for it to be really effective you have to know that it is not exactly the same. This is obviously the imitation of the colonized of the colonizers and first we can see cocktail hours when Methwold leaves.

He asked Ahmed Sinai to continue the tradition of cocktail hours and every day at 6 pm they will have gathered around and cocktails and also when Ahmed Sinai talks to Methwold he takes on an Oxford brawl. Next we will go to hybridity which is one of the major aspects of post colonial novel. In the novel, we can see mixing up of everything. Saleem Sinai has aspects of several things.

He is biologically half British, half Hindu low caste, but he is brought up in an upper middle class Muslim family. He is well versed in Indian languages and English. Also it is seen that Saleem's these multiple identities are a kind of reflection of India's multiple religions and the conflicts that are going through. He also blends in magic and reality as I already said and the most common reading of this book considers the magic to be from the indigenous part and the realism to be the western part.

Also from the text we can see Amina is the daughter of a highly superstitious mother, Naseem and her father renounced religion. He is a doctor. He is a modern man, but still she goes to Ramram Seth and believes what he talks about, her unborn son. And then there is Aziz versus Tia in the beginning in the valleys. Aziz goes to Germany, becomes a doctor, comes back, and Tai is upset with him because now he analyzes everything with a stethoscope instead of his nose.

So we could see that Aziz is supposed to represent progress while Tai is a representative of changelessness and also there is Saleem who is educated, narrated who is narrating to Padma who is illiterate and he says that she connects him with that world of Ancient learning and sorcerer's laws so despised by most of us nowadays.

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"...a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. "

So this is a quote from the book. He is talking about India, a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will except in a dream we all agreed to dream. It was a mass fantasy sharing varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood.

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❖ Miscegenation

(The mixing of different racial groups through marriage, cohabitation, sexual relations, or procreation.)

"What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?"

❖ Diaspora

In the name of an original homeland. 'The Other'

Excessive belonging. Pakistan "The Land of the Pure"

The next aspect is very obvious. It is miscegenation. It has given it is a mixing of different racial groups through marriage, or the sexual relations and Saleem is the example of this aspect. He is born of an affair between William Methwold and Vanita, the wife of Wee Willie Winkie, but most

people are not aware of that fact until he is about 11 or 12 and Mary Pereira confesses. This is what Padma says when he reveals that he was not a truly the son of his parents.

She says what are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own? And he defends himself saying that he is Saleem. He was not born of his parents, but he was brought up by them. The next aspect is Diaspora. So, here we can see the attempt of the people for self definition and a quest for identity. The people either search for identity in their own country or start to consider the rest of the people as another.

This leads to then standing between cultural assimilation and cultural alienation and they tend to take a strategy of an excessive belonging as in like the reverend mother, she keeps telling everyone she wants to go to Pakistan and buy a petrol pump. Also the narrator Salman Rushdie, he was born in Bombay, then he moved to Pakistan and Britain. So you could say that he belongs to all these palaces, but he never truly belongs to any of them just like Saleem Sinai, he is born in Bombay, he moves to Pakistan and Bangladesh and he will never really settle anywhere until he comes back to Bombay into the pickle factor.

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❖ Postcolonial Feminism

Naseem. Mumtaz/Amina. Mary Pereira. Jamila. Parvati-the-witch.
Padma. The Widow.

"Women have made me; and also unmade. From Reverend Mother to the Widow, and even beyond, I have been at the mercy of the so-called (erroneously in my opinion!) gentler sex. It is perhaps a matter of connection; is not Mother India, Bharat -Mata, commonly thought of as female? And, as you know, there's no escape from her."

The next is aspect of postcolonial Feminism. The book is not really a feminist book, but there are so many characters that are very relevant to his life and his story, like his grandmother Naseem, mother Amina, his aaya Mary Pereira, sisters Jamila, his wife Parvati-the-witch, the listener

Padma and the widow. What we can see is that the women in the novel exists in relation to him. They make him and he in turn also make these women.

Mary is the very reason that this entire thing happens. He grows up in the Sinai family, but there are some aspects which we could consider like when the freeze affects Ahmed Sinai and all his assets are frozen. He does nothing and just sits at home drunk, and Amina takes it upon herself to go to the race courses and win money so that they could win the case and get back all their belongings. Also there is this aspect that most characters are made blameworthy by Saleem like Amina is not faithful to her husband.

She goes to meet her ex-husband Nadir Khan in Cafe and which makes him really angry and he plots revenge against his mother. Then there is Mary of course she exchanges the babies and that is considered a sin and Parvati, she has illegitimate child with Shiva and also these women also receive punishment in a way like the other character Leela Sabramathi she has an affair. She gets, Saleem's sends anonymous letter to her husband who goes and shoots her and her lover.

This was the way for Saleem to scare his mother into stop seeing Nadir Khan and it works actually and then Parvathi, she gets killed. Mary is constantly haunted by the ghost of Joseph D'Costa and her husband who died. She finally confesses when she mistakes somebody else for him also. The main Padma who is the listener inside the story is also a woman.

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Binaries

❖Estate – Slum

❖Creation – Destruction

"Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepperpots..."

❖One - Many

Next we will go to the binaries present in the novel. So Saleem was born in this Methwold's state. He was reasonably rich and it is said that he wore really good clothes. His hair was always combed, but then a lot of misfortunes befall upon him and he moves to this magician slum and he lives in sheds with Parvati who he marries. So there is this aspect of creation and destruction. This is said by Saleem. Midnight has many children, the offsprings of Independence were not all human.

Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed, and pepper pots. Saleem is said to have in a way created India by his actions and also he created the Midnight's children's conference which Shiva destroys, like the God of destruction is supposed to personify destruction. Saleem as opposed to Shiva personifies Brahma, but also in spite of creating so much destruction, Shiva has a lot of illegitimate children across India.

Also in turn being a part of the creation process. Then there is aspect of 1 and many Saleem is a single person who is supposed to represent the whole of India and he is constantly trying to draw parallels between his life and what is happening to India and even trying to show as how what he did affected what happened in India.

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❖East - West

❖Orphan - Multiple parents

".. My inheritance includes this gift, the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers..."

There is a East-West aspect that we already talked about the hybridity, how he grows up as an Indian but he is also half British. Then the most noteworthy aspect is that of orphan and multiple parents. He says this My inheritance includes this gift, the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers. So his mother dies in childbirth and his father has already moved away, but his Wee Willie Winkie should have been his foster father who brought up Shiva.

But then he also dies so he is an orphan but then he has his Sinai's who brought him up and then there is Mary Pereira who he considers a second mother. His uncle and aunt, who Hanif and Pia, who cannot have children, but take him as a son. Then there is Major Zulfikar who gets embarrassed by his son and kind of a way adopts Saleem as his own son. There is a lot of symbolism in the novel that continues in the beginning till the end.

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Symbolism

❖ Silver spittoon

❖ The perforated sheet

"..And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole."

❖ Chutneys and pickles

"..the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!"

❖ Knees and nose and nose and knees

These images keep coming up repeatedly and explicitly. So there is this silver spittoon and spittoon is a bowl that is used for spitting these beetle nut juices and from what I read it is a object of common people, but in the novel The Rani of Cooch Naheen she has a really elaborate and intricate silver spittoon in which she invites people to play the game called hit the Spittoon and this silver Spittoon is given as a gift in Nadir Khan on his wedding which Ameena takes and then Saleem carries everywhere.

This is also the object that gives him amnesia when the bomb hits his house, he is outside and it hits his head and when he wakes up this the only object that connects him to his past and he carries it till it is buried in when the magician slum is destroyed. We could say that the silver Spittoon is something of the masses, but it came from the rich people just like Saleem who was born to a low caste Hindu mother and who should have lived in poverty, but he is brought up by a rich family.

Then there is a perforated sheet by which the novel actually begins. This is what happens to Aadam Aziz . He was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole. This hole is shown throughout the novel present in various human beings. So if we talk about the perforated sheet in the beginning. It is through which Aadam sees parts of Naseem and falls in love with parts of her, but not the whole of it and the marriage does not really work out very well.

Also after that during his own parent's life it is metaphorical. Amina only loves Ahmed partly. She is never able to love him completely. Also then it again comes back in the form of a heavily embroidered sheet which Jamila Sinai, her sister she uses while she performs to hide her face from the masses. In Jamila's case, she is known to push away people who confesses their love to him just like (()) (19:59).

So even when Saleem tells her that he loves her he uses it as a kind of protection against everything and the people who love her. This hole comes back again and again as a metaphorical hole within the character, for Aadam Aziz it was the hole created by the lack of religion, Amina; when Nadir Khan left with the lack of love. Then there is chutneys and pickles. So this is what we see is one of the last factors. The feasibility of the chutnification of history.

The grand hope of the pickling of time. So what I read was that chutneys is an attempt at preservation. They keep the ingredient as unchangingly to the present and pickling is supposed to change the reality of the ingredient and make new products. I am not sure if that is exactly right with the sentence. Also knees and nose which he talks about in the beginning and which is said by Ramram Seth about the child Amina is going to have and also described as a place where the inside and outside meet.

And also in the beginning the boatman Tai who tells his Saleem's grandfather Aadam that he has a nose to start a family on and he is said to lose his religious believe when he hits his nose and there is blood. Ahmed Sinai he is described a man who cannot follow his nose. He has no sense of direction and he is supposed to always make bad decisions and encounter huge loses of river. He is also an alcoholic and tends to distance himself from everything.

So Saleem himself got his power from the nose and looses it through that symbol surgery and he is supposed through his nose connects the outside world inside his head. So when it comes to knees it is as supposed to the passive nose which just connects and analyses knees actually take action. Knees is used to represent Shiva who has this huge enormous knees by which he chokes people to death. They are active as suppose to the nose.

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This might be clear. Thank you.