

Indian Women, Religion and Politics in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

This analysis of Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children focuses on the construction of womanhood in postcolonial India, with reference to women's role in two significant domains, politics and religion, as female characters are assigned the part of either homo politicus or homo religiosus. Within the sphere of politics, women are indissolubly connected to the concept of nation, and Rushdie intertwines personal history with that of the country, using birth metaphors for both children and country.

The second domain under scrutiny is set in antithesis with the former, since all women belonging to this class are fundamentally against any political statement, be it Gandhian, peaceful, or otherwise, as their main objective is to follow Islamic laws. Such a complex transfer from one field and type of female character to an opposite one constitutes itself into the challenge of offering a possible interpretation of the novel Midnight's Children.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, womanhood, stereotype, *homo politicus*, *homo religiosus*

The present paper analyses Salman Rushdie's women characters in the novel *Midnight's Children*, with emphasis on the way in which they are constructed within the frame of postcolonial India.

To this end, it firstly needs to take into account the role of Indian women in the postcolonial society, acknowledging that their part is conditioned by decolonisation discourses. Therefore, since nationalism and religion are the pillars that oppose Western colonialism, the characterisation of Indian women must observe several rules that are subsumed to such ideas as: the enlivenment of religion, the revisiting of the past and of tradition, the loyalty towards indigenous languages and masterpieces of art and literature, the combat against foreign systems of value and idioms etc.

To be fair, an observer of the phenomenon under scrutiny should admit that, although nationalism presents women as the main bearers of tradition, economic development allows them to make an improvement

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in their condition, as they are permitted to access the educational system, to work and so on.

Still, womanhood is defined within the context of gendered discourses that construct the concept according to Indian culture's ideologies, that define femininity in agreement with the autochthonous past and tradition as a form of antagonism to the denigrating British discourse that took women's status/degradation as an index of the low, undeveloped type of society and thus justified the need for colonisation and for domination. In this respect, R. Rajan and Y. Park observe as stereotypes of the third world women such attributes as *silence, the veil, absence and negativity* (Schwarz and Ray 2005: 55).

As the exponent of the Hindu tradition, women are the keepers of the household honour and the procreators, and this is in fact just another manner of controlling their lives. In these conditions, the conceptualization of womanhood is to be related to the epic-religious tradition which envisages female persons within the social structure of the family according to the image of the ideal wife after the models of Sita and Savitri, on the one hand, and to national ideology that connects the image of the ideal mother with that of Mother India which is a pure locus unprofaned by colonisation, on the other hand. This innocence is then bestowed upon women who are placed in connection to the family and who are supposed to preserve the purity of their home and all that is done in order to disqualify British colonialism.

These accounts regarding womanhood bring to the fore the necessity to examine a very pressing matter in India: widowhood. If the role of women is confined to their marriage, the death of the husbands determines the loss of the spouse's status, and thus women's uselessness. Also, since any Indian woman's place is with her husband, the devoted widow must perform sati, a practice that is mentioned even in *Mahabharata*. The other 'opportunities' of widowhood are to submit completely to an ascetic life and to family needs, or, if so allowed by her kin, to marry the dead man's brother.

In addition to the wife and widow stances, there are other roles assigned to women, such as motherhood, and in this respect the relationship between this hypostasis and the concept of nation is well illustrated by the notion of *Mother India* (with references to both popular representations and to literary ones).

However, as J. McLeod claims, quoting C.L. Innes, "nationalism is very frequently a gendered discourse; it traffics in representations of men and women which serve to reinforce patriarchal inequalities

between them. Nationalist representations have been in danger of perpetuating dis-empowering representations of women" (1998: 114).

When it comes to the positioning of women in nationalist discourses, McLeod refers to the theory of Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, who identify five stereotypes of femininity:

1. "Biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities"

In order to belong to certain ethnic groups, women are compelled by the state to accept that their obligation is to have babies to grow the numbers of the nation.

2. "Reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic /national groups"

Women are bound to make sure that they do not place the identity of the group in jeopardy by engaging in unaccepted reproduction alliances.

3. "Participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of its culture"

Female individuals are meant to educate the children and to engage them in the traditions of the national culture.

4. "Signifiers of ethnic/national differences - as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic categories"

Women are used as iconic representations (e.g. nation - mother) and this is a means by which they can contribute to anti-colonial nationalism.

5. "Participants in national, economic, political and military struggles" (2000: 116).

Women are contributors to the efforts in the spheres of economy, politics and nationalism.

Naturally, all these stereotypes have suffered some alterations along the decades, and this evolution of womanhood outside gender boundaries is well illustrated in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Analysing Rushdie's female characters through the lenses of politics and religion involves operating with the terms *homo politicus* and *homo religiosus* and observing the manifestation of their characteristics in the case of the Indian/ Muslim population within the postcolonial era.

Robert Dahl defines *homo politicus* as "the citizen actively engaged in governmental processes", while *homo civicus* is represented by "the vast majority of potential voters who rarely pursued their interests by engaging in politics". The former is the elected representative, interest group advocate and political activist who actually "participated in the

process of government". If *homo politicus* uses his strategies/ resources to meet political ends, *homo civicus* uses his strategies/ resources to meet personal ends" (in B. Cruikshank 1999: 30). As for the notion of *homo religiosus*, it should be said that the term designates the faithful person who is motivated at all times by religious intentionality.

Within the geographical area that hosts the characters of *Midnight's Children*, Muslim stereotypes occupy a forefront position, their definition by K. Brill's in *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* proving useful for the present study:

Stereotypes either depict Muslim women as exotic, oppressed and almost totally enslaved by men in Islam, or as defending the virtues of Islam and the status and rights accorded to women (2005: 755).

In fact, Brill goes even further than that, and states that Muslim Indian women "suffer from various stereotypes of backwardness; their status is attributed to the prevalence of the purdah, polygamy, divorce and large family size. [...] The stereotypes and the real situations of women are guided by the prevailing power relations, but often justified in the name of religion" (755). The author does not leave aside the idea that discrimination against women must also be sought in the fact that "patriarchal norms and hegemonic ideologies use a selective interpretation of religion and culture" (756).

Once the necessary theoretical distinctions between *homo politicus* and *homo religiosus* are delineated, one may take a look upon the definite examples of Rushdie's female characters in the novel under scrutiny.

As mentioned above, the organic bond between womanhood and nation defines the female political role in postcolonial discourse, and this paper starts from U. Parameswaran's premises that Rushdie makes use of different narrative devices to connect the main character's personal history with the history of India:

Three of the main structural devices are:

- (a) he uses birth images and metaphors to mark turning points in history and symbolize their long-term significance;
- (b) he links political and historical events, starting with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, with one or other of Saleem's circle of friends and family, and
- (c) he uses Padma as a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic levels (1983: 38).

Indeed, Rushdie employs birth images and metaphors related to womanhood par excellence for political purposes. For instance, the birth of the newly independent India is simultaneous with that of the one thousand and one children, including Saleem and his rival, Shiva. The labour of Saleem's mother began when Pakistan came into being. Aadam, Saleem and Parvati's son, with Shiva as the biological father, is born at the same time as Indira Gandhi's own child, the Emergency:

... push, come on Parvati, push push push, and while Parvati pushed in the ghetto, J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai were also goading Indira Gandhi, while triplets yelled push push push the leaders of the Janata Morcha urged the police and Army to disobey the illegal orders of the disqualified Prime Minister, so in a sense they were forcing Mrs Gandhi to push, and as the night darkened towards the midnight hour, because nothing ever happens at any other time, triplets began to screech it's coming coming coming, and elsewhere the Prime Minister was giving birth to a child of her own... [...] when the three contortionists had washed the baby and wrapped it in an old sari and brought it out for its father to see, at exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements (419).

Salman Rushdie avails himself the opportunity to present both the theme of birth (as the novel refers to the appearance of India and Pakistan, and to the problems specific to 'new life'), and that of problematic parentage (as the literary work parallels not only the confusion specific to postcolonial India, but also the hybridity specific to so many sets of possible 'descendants'). The very formation of Pakistan out of a problematic 'parentage' represents a good example in this respect, as its history is formed after re-writing Indian history. In what concerns the theme of birth, it should be said that it is pervasive throughout the novel. The reader witnesses an impressive number of births: that of Saleem, that of the 1001 children, of Aadam, of the hero's relatives, and these events are the equivalent of a fertility ritual which is meant to be the counterpoint of the widows' sterilization programme. Moreover, the perforated sheet that allows Dr. Sinai to access different parts of Naseem's body is not only a symbol of the partially revealed narrative, but also a metaphor for the perforated hymen that leads to the path of conception. Along these lines, many women are somehow

connected to a perforated sheet: Naseem is seen through a perforated sheet, and so is Jamila Singer when she performs in the Land of the Pure, not to mention Saleem's grandmother who sits behind a perforated cloud to wait for his death.

Furthermore, Saleem is born in Bombay and then reborn in the Sunderbans, a place which is filled with eroticism, where he is captured by the charms of the houris in the temple of Kali. Since his identity is lost, he is re-conceived when the snakes, symbolising spermatozoa, bite the vulnerable heel, an allusion to the myth of Achilles. He is born through the basket of Parvati the Witch, a woman who also gives his name back. She embodies the alternative, the dichotomic pair of yet another witch – the Widow. Although Parvati marries Saleem, she gives birth to Shiva's son, in fact the real descendant of the initial couple who met through the perforated sheet. Parvati is killed in the ghetto, and her son suffers just like his 'father' Saleem as a reflection of the *macrocosmic disease*, but he is also brought back to life by a woman – Durga.

The ghetto's destruction, Parvati's murder, the children's arrest in order to perform the 'draining of hope' represent a critique of the abusive sterilization programme, understood as a genocide of the people, inflicted by political leaders.

However, the antithesis between female *homo politicus* and *homo religiosus* is obvious when examining Naseem and the Rani of Cooch Naheen. The former is a *homo religiosus* who performs all her actions as a result of doctrinarism and who is ignorant of governmental issues, while the latter is clearly a *homo politicus* in her own right.

Naseem knows nothing about the public or the political spheres of life:

'I do not understand this hartal when nobody is dead,' Naseem is crying softly.

'Why will the train not run? How long are we stuck for?'

Doctor Aziz notices a soldierly young man in the street, and thinks- the Indians have fought for the British; so many of them have seen the world by now, and been tainted by Abroad. They will not easily go back to the old world. The British are wrong to try and turn back the clock.

'It was a mistake to pass the Rowlatt Act,' he murmurs.

'What rowlatt?' wails Naseem. 'This is nonsense where I'm concerned!'

'Against political agitation,' Aziz explains, and returns to his thoughts.

Tai once said: 'Kashmiris are different. Cowards, for instance. Put a gun in a Kashmiri's hand and it will have to go off by itself - he'll never dare to pull the trigger. We are not like Indians, always making battles.' Aziz, with Tai in his head, does not feel Indian. Kashmir, after all, is not strictly speaking a part of the Empire, but an independent princely state (32).

There is no doubt that the woman is far from comprehending the non-violent Gandhian way of demanding independence, and that she has no idea concerning the Rowlatt Act and its consequences in India. Her remarks are opposed to her husband's thoughts, which are permeated with political and ethnic concerns. Her position is suggested by the fact that she mostly asks questions, while the man formulates statements.

Moreover, once time has passed over their family, she admits no political debates in her home and in this respect she is presented in antithesis with Rani of Cooch Naheen: "Among the things to which she denied entry were all political matters. When Doctor Aziz wished to talk about such things, he visited his friend the Rani, and Reverend Mother sulked; but not very hard, because she knew his visits represented a victory for her" (40).

Naseem is very determined when it comes to such matters, although the idea of her husband's visiting another woman to discuss politics is not very comforting (as the connotation of the word *sulk* implies).

Her true bias is towards religion and as a consequence she insists on a traditional education for her children who were supposed to be good Muslims and learn the teachings of the Quran:

She made only one educational stipulation: religious instruction. Unlike Aziz, who was racked by ambiguity, she had remained devout. 'You have your Hummingbird,' she told him, 'but I, whatsitsname, have the Call of God. A better noise, whatsitsname, than that man's hum.' It was one of her rare political comments ... (42).

The collision between Islamic fundamentalism and the convictions concerning a unified nation characterized by consensus, hybridity and secularism determines the husband to move towards the prohibition of intolerance. Still, the wife cannot fight her religious beliefs and prefers discrimination to lack of basic Islamic knowledge:

And Aziz, 'Do you know what that man was teaching your children? 'And Reverend Mother hurling question against question, 'What will you not do to bring disaster, whatsitsname, on our heads?'-But now Aziz, 'You think it was Nastaliq script? Eh?'- to which his wife, warming up: 'Would you eat pig? Whatsitsname? Would you spit on the Quran?' And, voice rising, the doctor ripostes, 'Or was it some verses of "The Cow"? You think that?' ...Paying no attention, Reverend Mother arrives at her climax: 'Would you marry your daughters to Germans!?' And pauses, fighting for breath, letting my grandfather reveal, 'He was teaching them to hate, wife. He tells them to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians. Will you have hateful children, woman?' 'Will you have godless ones?' Reverend Mother envisages the legions of the Archangel Gabriel descending at night to carry her heathen brood to hell. She has vivid pictures of hell. It is as hot as Rajputana in June and everyone is made to learn seven foreign languages... 'I take this oath, whatsitsname,' my grandmother said, 'I swear no food will come from my kitchen to your lips! No, not one chapati, until you bring the maulvi sahib back and kiss his, whatsitsname, feet!' (42-3)

The concept of tolerance towards any of the religions embraced by the people of India, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikh or Jainism, is opposed by Naseem, who makes use of culturally specific terms like *Quran*, *maulvi*, and forbidden practices like eating pork, subordinated to the field of Islam.

The confrontation of politics and religion is underlined both with reference to husband-wife relationship and with reference to husband's friend-wife relationship:

Like Aadam Aziz, like the Rani of Cooch Naheen, Nadir Khan loathed the Muslim League ('That bunch of toadies!' the Rani cried in her silvery voice, swooping around the octaves like a skier. 'Landowners with vested interests to protect! What do they have to do with Muslims? They go like toads to the British and form governments for them, now that the Congress refuses to do it!' It was the year of the 'Quit India' resolution. 'And what's more,' the Rani said with finality, 'they are mad. Otherwise why would they want to partition India?') (46).

The Rani is not only a nationalist who pleads for an independent India, but also a firm supporter of secularism. She proves her analytic prowess when she identifies the true purposes of Partition, that is the concerns of the rich. Still, her question shows that she is an idealist as she raises the

best interest of the country above all mundane affairs and considers that one has to be insane to act against this desideratum.

This *homo politicus* becomes a mirror of her political goals and of her idealism, a victim of the cross-cultural paradigm of thought:

And behind them, looking benignly on, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence ... 'I am the victim,' the Rani whispers, through photographed lips that never move, 'the hapless victim of my cross-cultural concerns. My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit.' (45)

The Rani's ideas are accompanied by concordant actions and she financially supports the right political beliefs she is convinced her country may benefit from:

In the throes of the optimism epidemic, the Hummingbird's patron, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, never mentioned the clouds on the horizon. She never pointed out that Agra was a Muslim League stronghold, saying only, 'Aadam my boy, if the Hummingbird wants to hold Convocation here, I'm not about to suggest he goes to Allahabad.' She was bearing the entire expense of the event without complaint or interference; not, let it be said, without making enemies in the town. (47)

Naturally, such actions cannot go unnoticed in a patriarchal type of society and the narrator establishes an antithesis between the Rani's silence and modesty in pecuniary matters and her rivals' attitude.

The superior political cause is malevolently misinterpreted and her rivals resort to (what else?) the confinement of such noble enterprises to woman's lust, to dark practices and the like:

The Rani did not live like other Indian princes. Instead of teetar-hunts, she endowed scholarships. Instead of hotel scandals, she had politics. And so the rumours began. 'These scholars of hers, man, everyone knows they have to perform extra-curricular duties. They go to her bedroom in the dark, and she never lets them see her blotchy face, but bewitches them into bed with her voice of a singing witch!' Aadam Aziz had never believed in witches. He enjoyed her brilliant circle of friends who were as much at home in Persian as they were in German. But Naseem Aziz, who half-believed the stories about the Rani, never accompanied him to the princess's house. 'If God meant people to speak many tongues,' she argued, 'why did he put only one in our heads?' (47).

The antithesis between the rationality of the Rani and Naseem's religious beliefs is peremptory, for the latter admits as truths the statements of the gossipers and asserts that her husband's friend goes against God's intention for people.

As a matter of fact, the Rani is not seen only in opposition to common town folk and to Naseem, but also to another political figure, a female leader – Indira Gandhi – who performs her role as a *homo politicus* by implementing her reforms, her sterilization programme, by suspending civil rights and so on.

To conclude, it may be pointed out that, on the one hand, Rushdie associates the image of the nation with that of womanhood and, on the other hand, at the level of the literary text, this relationship is transposed by making use of the specific role subsumed to femininity, i.e. that of giving birth, which is extrapolated and translated into the field of politics, of state formation to be precise.

From the standpoint of politics vs. religion, women are conceived in antithetic pairs. Thus, the instances of *homo politicus* are contrasted to those of *homo religiosus*. In addition, *homo politicus* is subject to another sub-classification: there is the Gandhian, peaceful, nationalist type of politically devoted women and the harsh, autocratic, dictatorial and violent female characters involved in politics.

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