

Role of Kashmir in the Novel *Midnight's Children*

Abstract

The fantastical- yet real to the bone- unofficial history of India by an unreliable narrator in Saleem Sinai, it is not just a book, *Midnight's Children* is a world in itself. An allegory of the Indian affairs in magic realist mode, it is a psychedelic mix of jokes, farce, facts, fabrications, fiction, fantasy. Having acquired the status of a cult classic, Booker of the booker, the book has been a subject of many analyses from multiple standpoints for almost four decades now. This paper tries to understand what the opening chapters of the book, set in Kashmir, stand for May be in difficult times like these we need to know what *kashmiriyat* actually entails.

Keywords: Kashmir, Nationalism, Categorical identities, History.

Introduction

On the very first page of the novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) Salman Rushdie takes us to Kashmir where the early spring of 1915 had set in. It was on this very morning that Aadam Aziz a Heidelberg-return-medical- student hit his nose against a "frost hardened tussock of earth" while attempting to pray thereby resolving "never again to kiss earth for any god or man." This decision often read as Aadam Aziz's transition in to a modern man (one who has chosen national modernity over religious dogmatism) can be linked to the great nationalistic spirit of the time where millions of Indians dreamt of a nation called India. India had never existed before although it had five thousand years of history to its name. Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* has attempted to create an alternative history of India, different from the official history of the nation, by juxtaposing national modernity with local traditionalism, facts with myths and memory with imagination.

".... It is the function of the Kashmir chapters to outline the transition to imagination from what went before the local, practical identity was displaced by national modernity, but it serves nonetheless as one model for a different sort of national or semi national connectedness, a third way." (Patrick Hogan).

Aadam Aziz represents a transitional group, a hybrid being, who with all his foreign education and degrees has estranged himself from the Kashmiri tradition. His stay at Germany has not turned him into a German either. This new class of young men with a vision became forerunners of the national movement which focused on imagination of nationhood; very conveniently ignoring the categorical identities of the people (something that would fall apart some decades in to the Independence in the form of Naxalism, demand for Khalistan and situation after the formation of Mandal commission). Aadam the new man is the polar opposite of Tai. Tai represents the cultural purity of Kashmir when it has not yet become a part of the larger nationalist discourse, a collective consciousness which forcibly demanded all of us to be Indians. He represents pre modern Kashmir which can be considered a microcosmic model of pre modern India-- Edenic, beautiful and no military state like the Kashmir of today.

"In those days there was no army camp at the lake side, no endless snakes of camouflaged trucks and jeeps clogged the narrow mountain roads.....the valley had hardly changed since the Mogul empire....". (*Midnight's Children*)

The weight of Kashmir's woes are heaped on the ancient shoulders of unfashionable and uncouth Tai who believes himself to be more of a Kashmiri than an Indian and gets killed shouting "Kashmir for Kashmiris". Tai dies in the year of partition when



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“infuriated by India and Pakistan’s struggle over his valley” he walks to Chhamb to stand in between the Indo-Pak forces and gets shot. This in a sense to say was Tai’s stand against the idea of nationhood which created antagonistic classes the other which was to be ousted. Once the British were no more here, we created the other from amongst us on the basis of religion and then on the basis of language, caste, class and more recently on the basis of political selves. Tai represents Kashmiri tradition, Kashmiri habits and beliefs. He is the ‘tie’ that binds the present to the past (Hogan). Tai tells Aadam that he had seen empires being born and emperors die, Tai, therefore, precedes religion and empire. He is ageless and timeless like is the Indian way of life—based on the ideals of universal brotherhood and tolerance.

In an attempt to write the unofficial history of India post 1947 and the years immediately preceding it, Rushdie very smartly added the Kashmiri chapters as prelude where he provided no historical facts about Kashmir. Primitive Kashmir (1915) stands in stark opposition to modern India, the latter being self conscious of its origins and development. It is only after Aadam Aziz steps out of Kashmir and witnesses the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (implying national history is always a history of violence and oppression) that he becomes a full Indian. This reminded me of Shahid Kapoor’s character in *Haider* who in order to “grow” had to see the rest of India. Interestingly this particular episode in the film is linked to the glorification of violence in Kashmiri society of the late 1980s and the more recent episodes of burning schools down—the ones which did not follow the separatist calendar.

Rushdie sets the tone of the novel in the Kashmir chapter. By making Aadam fall for Naseem, he suggests that modernity and reactionary traditionalism always go hand in hand, something we are witnessing today where digital explosion is going hand in hand with mob lynching and internet trolling. Like present India, Aziz (liberal) is wedded to Naseem (traditional) and both are inseparable.

Aadam dreams of Naseem as a “partitioned woman” not to say partition of the sub continent would follow close on heels, a realization of the farfetched dream that Iqbal dreamt of when he first gave the idea of Pakistan. It were these conflicting categorical identities, therefore, that gave rise to partition, something which we are witnessing today in the continent especially in the form of sectarian conflicts in the neighboring Pakistan. Analogies are reinforced between Kashmir and Eden, Aadam becomes Adam, who after the Fall ie his decision never again to kiss earth for any god or man is evicted from the Paradise (Kashmir) and after Aadam leaves Eden, Eden never thrives (reminds one of the exodus of Pundits from the Valley and the sites of closed theatres). One must therefore steer clear not only from nativist stand but be cautious of being irrationally wedded to an ideology to the point of making fellow brethren outsiders in their own land.

After Saleem leaves ‘Bombay’, MCC (*Midnight’s Children Club*) disintegrates, shoe-burning

Brass Monkey becomes a singer behind the veil in her new found home. After Aadam leaves Kashmir, there develops a hole inside him. The politics of nomenclature starts in Kashmir the same way it happened after partition and is happening now (reminds me actress Swara Bhaskar’s comment on twitter saying why do they have to rename Akbar road and why cannot they just build another road and name it Maharana Pratap road). Shankarcharya hill is renamed Takth-e-Suleman. Mumtaz becomes Amina, brass Monkey becomes Jamila Singer in Pakistan, India gets split into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Certain troupes keep reappearing in the entire text for example Tai’s act of defiance, not cleaning him is carried forward by Nadir Khan and Saleem. The stained sheet reappears when the birth of a nation costs many lives forcing us ask if it is the farcical third time that the history is being repeated?

Aim of the study

Aim of the paper is to understand the role that Kashmir plays in the novel *Midnight’s Children*. The opening chapters of the novel take us to the valley of Kashmir which serves as a foreground to the rest of the novel set in independent India and Pakistan. While the freedom movement was based on modern ideals of nationhood and freedom, the Kashmir chapters highlight the local aspirations, a standalonesingsong in contrast to the Indian chorus. Kashmir serves both as a preface and a counterpoint to the nationalist sentiment. The aim of this paper is to understand the affect that these chapters have on the action and characters of the novel.

Conclusion

Aadam’s despair in the end leads him to Kashmir where he kills himself, the disease of optimism and his commitment towards progress leaves him vulnerable to history, Kashmir is devastated, Tai is killed, Naseem is killed in Pakistan, three different ideological stands which these Kashmiris stood for could not come to the rescue of Kashmir. Thus Kashmir becomes the microcosmic model of the post-independence Indian subcontinent which is torn by wars, handcuffed to its past and which has taken the idea of a nation state too seriously, we are left pondering if the Indian way of life (harmony and coexistence) is slowly dying?

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