

The British in Midnight's Children

Abstract

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* put the Indian-English novel on the world map in an unprecedented way. His exuberant humour, brilliant wit, imaginative boldness, enormous talent, prodigious powers of storytelling, debt to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, Laurence Sterne all became part of the vocabulary of critical acclaim that greeted *Midnight's Children*. The book gathered numerous favourable reviews as well. Its impact, in the subcontinent and the West, can perhaps be best gauged through the fact that the novel marks the coming of age the generation of sub continental writers for whom English was their first language. The success of *Midnight's Children* led to a flood of novels by Indian English novelists and like this novel they too won numerous awards – national and international.

Keyword: Misshapen, plunder, colonize, inhabitants, nostalgia, civilize, caricature, exploitation, junk, revolutionary, monarchism, amiability.

Introduction

In *Midnight's Children*, the writer establishes a strong connection between the history of India and the life of Saleem, his protagonist as if the two were Siamese twins. Right from the moment of his birth, Saleem is described as being:

My steriously hand-cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was no escape. (Rushdie 3) The writer sets the scene for us to believe a strange tale, that Saleem Sinai by being born in Bombay on 15th August 1947 at the stroke of midnight, becomes the first child born in independent India, and his story is the history of free India. The connection that the writer establishes between every personal event in Saleem's life and that of his family, and the political and historical events that unfold in independent India is carefully maintained throughout the novel, even though sometimes it can sound a bit forced as in the latter part of the novel.

The writer's growing child Saleem only grows older; he does not evolve. And as he grows older he gets more and more misshapen and ugly and closer to death. He is emasculated and castrated during the Emergency, and he passively waits for death. He seems to have become a person who has lost all control over his life because of political circumstances and lack of will. Through this person the writer is trying to represent not a nation full of hope but a nation whose voice has been muzzled and which is in a hopeless state because of the historical-political events.

The writer attacks British colonialism and its representatives symbolised in characters such as Methwold with a ruthless clarity and makes every attempt to link up many of the ills in independent India to the mischief played by the British during their reign. The moral of his representation is that had the foreigner never come here to plunder and colonize, India would have been a beautiful country.

Chapter 7 titled "Methwold" Bombay, (or microcosm India) is represented in its pristine beauty and populated by the fisherfolk called the Kolis – its earliest inhabitants. The writer describes how this primeval world was overrun by different invaders beginning with the Portuguese who used the harbour to shelter there the merchant ships and their men-of-war. This was followed by the East India Company led by an officer named William Methwold who successfully realised a vision of a British Bombay when in 1668 the East India Company did get its hands on the island. The worst sufferers were the fisherfolk as the invaders changed the very character of the city they had begun to rule (Rushdie 123). Regret and nostalgia marks Rushdie's narration as if he would like to put the clock back physically. The nostalgia turns to anger as his narration challenges the myth created by the British of having come here to civilize India.

The writer's Methwold is a caricature, a symbol of evil and moral degeneration rather than a fully fleshed out character. The writer uses him

Fahmeeda Jan
Research Scholar
Deptt. of English
Barkatullah University
Bhopal

to convey his views about colonialism. Methwold in the novel is a descendent of the Methwold who was the first officer to the East India Company, and he is the last European to rule India before India got its freedom. This first and last Englishman thus becomes the direct object the writer's anger as he symbolizes for him the entire colonial adventure of exploitation and demoralisation

Right from the beginning when Methwold or "Myth world" is described as "a six foot titan with a centre-parting in his hair, [His] face the pink of roses and eternal youth," (Rushdie 125) one gets the message clear from the writer – "Here's a man not to be trusted." So, the centre-parting itself becomes a defining characteristic of the British, now only too well-known for their 'Divide and rule' policy which was very much responsible for cutting up of British India to an Independent Pakistan and an Independent India – one piece for the Muslims and the other for the Non-Muslims.

The myth of the Britain's civilizational mission is easily exposed when having identified Methwold as a lair, one edits every statement of Methwold's from the new perspective of mistrust. When Methwold describes to Ahmed Sinai (Saleem's father) how much the Indians owe to the British, seems as yet another fiction written by a ruler:

You will admit we weren't all bad; built your roads, schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things... (Rushdie 126) Methwold's "we" is necessarily restricted to the British; he views his people as the men who were the civilizing influence on the Indian subcontinent and would like to remind the Indians about it on the eve of his departure. He is simply unable to acknowledge the existence of any culture other than his own. There is nothing on the Estate where he lives that would suggest anything other than European culture. The architecture used in the buildings resembles medieval England's:

Durable mansions with red roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory white corner towers wearing pointy red tiled hats. (Rushdie 125)

William Methwold had named the four mansions after the famous places of Europe – Versailles, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sansouci Villa (Rushdie 125) – thus denying the existence of local architectural traditions. The act also exposes the colonizer's desire to superimpose historical European paradigms on the Indian landscape and consciousness and make the colonized pliant.

Methwold, like India's last Governor General, Lord Mountbatten insists that India should retain the economic and political framework of the British. When the inhabitants are compelled to retain the estate and the four mansions with every piece of junk within them is a game of Britishers which they were playing on them. Methwold said:

Those are my terms. A whim, Mr. Sinai... you will permit a departing colonial his little game? We do not have much to do, we British, except to play our games. (Rushdie 126) This may seem unbelievable but it is a fact that those colonies were given independence earlier where Britain was certain that the new govt would remain within its economic and political orbit. It is also a fact that the most lasting and intense warfare for example, in South Africa occurred where the freedom

struggle was both nationalist as well as revolutionary, and where de-colonization would mean confiscation of foreign investments and severance of economic ties with the colonizing country. The politics of colonialism is well-documented today.

The writer makes us aware that the game that Methwold plays concerns not only names but objects as well. The names of the houses on his Estate are of course the names of famous European palaces which were either built at the height of absolute monarchism in Europe or as an expression of nostalgia of that kind of absolute power.

The writer is brutal in his attack through his exaggerated portrayal and caricature of Methwold. He not only exposes the myth of the so-called superiority of the British, but also the colonial games that the British had played specially since Macaulay's time to create Indians who were English in spirit and mental dependents on the British. It is too big a price to buy a house to live in but as the writer shows it was the price that the country paid for getting its freedom. The Estate symbolizes India, earlier possessed by the British, now being handed over to Indian owners (rulers), intact with the colonizer's political and economic systems.

Methwold (The British) was not off the mark in his vision of colonizing the Indian mind because as Saleem admits "Methwold's estate is changing them". As Methwold joins them at the cocktail hour, his very presence elicits the imitative Oxford drawls among Ahmed Sinai and his friends (Rushdie 131). The departing British had through planned psychological conditioning ensured the continued slavery of the Indian. This is the meaning of the puzzling transfer of the Estate and the house with everything intact in them which very clearly show that the writer takes great pains to expose that the amiability is only meant as a cover-up for deeper designs.

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