



A STUDY ON THE USE OF RELIGIONS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The watershed event of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into East and West Pakistan with India in between them brought with it unimaginable communal violence. This paper throws focus on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which has been hailed as the greatest post-modern text and it is a proof that it has acclaimed the best of Booker Prize winning novels. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai, is a poor Hindu by birth but is switched by the nurse Miss Mary Pereira and hence he is raised by an affluent Muslim family. Though a Muslim, he knows the Hindu Mythology and in many places of the text, he quotes and alludes to it. There are many references to multi-religious places of importance in the text. Even though, the main focus of the novel is about the tension between the newly partitioned countries in South Asia, there are references to communal harmony too.

KEYWORDS : God, Harmony, Mythology, Partition and Religion

INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has been hailed as the greatest post-modern text and it is a proof that it has acclaimed the best of Booker Prize winning novels. The novel dealt with the march of the Indian nation from the early twentieth century, through India's Partition and independence and its evolution up to the Emergency period declared by the then Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai, is a poor Hindu by birth but is switched by the nurse Miss Mary Pereira and hence he is raised by an affluent Muslim family. She is the Christian nurse in the doctor's clinic and she becomes his nanny. When the young Mary questions the priests and Bishop of St Thomas's Cathedral regarding the colour of God, they allude her that both Lord Jesus Christ and the Hindu God, Lord Krishna, are both blue in colour and thus they make a bridge between the two religions.

At the beginning of the novel, there is a reference to the Sankara Acharya temple of Kashmir. Dr. Adam Aziz, the German returned doctor and his wife Naseem Aziz leave for Agra where he has taken up the job at the Agra University, he sees the Sankara Acharya temple. The Muslims call the mountain of the temple as "Takht-e-Sulaiman or Seat of Solomon" (MC 34) and it does not pay attention to the leaving bride and groom. Old Naseem who is called as the Reverend Mother becomes so huge that "she resembled the Sankara Acharya mountain" (MC 378). His nose can be compared to the trunk of Lord Vinayaka who has an elephant head. Though he does not believe in the existence of God from his tender age, at the age of sixty-eight, during the mourning period of his dear son Hanif Aziz, he declares his family that he had revelation and seen God. And since he did not believe in God, He had stolen his son: "Because I never believed, he stole my son!" (MC 384). His son committed suicide because of his failure in the Bombay film industry. Finally he met his death stumbling in his attempt to reach the hill top of Sankara Acharya hill or Solomon's seat and buried there in the valley of his birth.

There are references to goddess Mumbadevi from whose name the city's name Mumbai is received through Mumbabai. But the Portuguese who landed on the shore christened it Bom Bahia which means 'good bay' in Portuguese. It is so because of its natural harbor. The city was handed over to the British crown as a marriage dowry of Catherine de Braganza of Portugal to Charles II of Britain. Mumbadevi started to decline her power as days pass on and the elephant headed son of Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesh, became popular in the state. As

Ganesh Chaturthi is a dedicated day for Him, which brings the monsoon to the island city, huge plaster effigies of Lord Ganesh are taken as processions and are thrown into the sea. When Lord Ganesh has a day of His own, Mumbadevi does not have a day for her own.

Though a Muslim, Saleem was "very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh" (MC 206). He heard stories about Hindu Mythology and it was Lord Ganesh who wrote the great epic *Ramayana* which was dictated by Valmiki. When Padma to whom he is narrating his life story leaves him for two days in search of the love potion, he makes a comparison whether Lord Ganesh too left Valmiki? Whenever he talks of Padma, he reminds of Lotus Goddess too. In another reference, Padma is the Lotus Calyx, "which grew out of Vishnu's navel, and from which Brahma himself was born" (MC 270). So Padma becomes the Source of everything.

Mount Sinai is a peak in Egypt and it is considered to be a principal site of divine revelation for multiple religions. In Jewish history, it is there God appeared to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. In Christian tradition, it is there where God guided the Israelites who were on their exodus. For the Muslims, it is an important pilgrimage site since it is there Moses spoke with God. Mount Hira is a peak near Mecca it is there where Prophet Mohammed had the first revelation of the Quran and spoke to the archangel, Jibreel. There is a reference to these multi religions mounts when Saleem was able to listen to the voices of the other midnight's children. He acts as a radio receiver, since he could increase or decrease the volume, he could select the individual voices and he could stop it even. When he informed all these to his family, all of them thought that he was blabbering and his father went to the extent of slapping him leaving his left ear working partially.

Though Saleem was brought up in an affluent Muslim family, while penning his story to Padma he talked about the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga which was a fourth phase in the current Maha-Yuga cycle. For Brahma, the Hindu God of Creation, thousand Maha-Yugas constitute just one day. He also talks about Ira, Kashyap and Old Tortoise Man. Though a Muslim, he believes in the birth signs like the Hindus. Both Saleem and his "alter ego" (MC 306) Shiva were born under Capricorn sign, Shiva alone has the power over the knees which is a significant symbol of Capricorn sign.

When a monkey ripped off the money which Ahmed Sinai and his partners brought to be handed over to the Ravana gang, the monkey is compared with Lord Hanuman: "the monkey

god who helped Prince Rama defeat the original Ravana" (MC 110-111). Saleem's sister is called the Brass Monkey because she has thick red golden hair like thatch and in order to gain the attention of the family members, she makes loud noises and burns the shoes. Like her great grandfather, she has the gift of talking to birds and even to dogs and cats. Especially, it is "From birds she learned how to sing" (MC 209). A sadhu by name Purushottam sat under the tap in the garden of Saleem's house. He thought that Saleem is the Mubarak, the Blessed One. Though he is a Hindu, he believes in the Mubarak and considers Saleem as a blessed baby. There is a reference to a Bengali snake charmer who travelled the entire country releasing the captive snakes and by taking vengeance on the partition of his beloved Golden Bengal. This Tubriwallah was a tall man seven feet high and has a skin tone of blue colour. People thought that he was Lord Krishna who was also in the same colour. During his travels, he was chastising the people of the country. Some people thought that "he was the sky-hued Jesus of the missionaries" (MC 187).

Mary who was a true Christian, believed that the country was under the invasion of some supernatural elements. She heard stories about a Sikh woman who witnessed the Kurushetra war between the Gauravas and Pandavas outside her hut. They had even seen the marks of Arjuna's chariot on the mud. In Gwalior, people had seen the ghost of the Rani of Jhansi. She was frightened to hear the rumour about the finding of the tomb of Jesus Christ in Kashmir. In addition to this, a fisherwoman had seen two feet smeared with blood on the tombstone of Jesus Christ.

Saleem's sister started to move towards Christianity even in her tender age mainly because of its influence through her European friends and Mary Pereira. She started to speak highly of Jesus Christ as gentle, meek and mild and to sing Christian songs. Her mother accepted her and she too mimicked the songs. As per her wish, a nun's outfit was gifted to her. Often she whispers "Hail-Mary-full-of-grace" (MC 352). She fasted during the Lent days and not during the holy month of Ramzan. When Amina Sinai became pregnant after some fifteen years, the entire family was killed in the shell explosion thrown by the Indian Army during the Indo-Pakistan war. Saleem's sister, Jamila, who emerged as a famous singer took refugee with the nuns and led her life in isolation and concealment.

There is a reference to Acharya Vinobha Bhave when Saleem was making a message out of newspaper cuttings Vinobha Bhave for his land donation campaign, had requested the land owners to donate their lands for the cause and upliftment of the landless poor. After ten years of persuasion, he has received nearly million acres of land as donation.

Cyrus, the son of the Dubashes, was a "school prodigy" (MC 373). The Dubashes were Saleem's neighbours in Bombay. Having lost his father in household mishap, his mother had made him as Lord Khusro Khusrovand and he became the "most successful holy child in history" (MC 374). Unfortunately, he met his end by drowning in the sea in his late twenties.

Thus, the novel, though written by a Muslim about a Hindu born Muslim brought up protagonist, talks about all the religions. Since it has the perfect blend of all the religions, it can be quoted as an example communal harmony. Even though, the main focus of the novel is about the tension between the newly partitioned countries in South Asia, there are references to communal harmony.

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