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# The Establishment of National Self: Combating the Influence of the Empire in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

DANIELLE SIMOES

From the years 1815-1914 over 14 million square miles and 450 million people were under the power of the imperial British Empire. To this day, the countries once occupied by the dominating power are struggling to regain their political independence, while simultaneously reasserting and remembering their own country's and peoples' identity. The independence of a country comes with more than just a new government and freedom for the people; there is political unrest, economic upset, and public turmoil as both country and people attempt to establish who and what they are. For India, independence from Britain was not the smooth transition as was hoped; the great mother country left the land in a state of war and division that the new Indian government had to face from the onset of their establishment. With upset raging from the borders of Pakistan, the government of India did not and could not provide its people with a sense of security. Coupled with ethnic and religious tensions that remained from the time of British occupation, as well as the convoluted standards of living left over from the regime, the people of India struggled to identify who they were and what their country stood for. As the British canon of literature focuses strongly on honor, civility, monarchy, and propriety, the climate within the newfound country of India reflected values that both aligned with and diverted from that of their previous law maker. The literature that is produced within a nation has the capability to shape not only readers of the time, but future generations as well.

As a result, a nation's canon must change with the times it faces. Though not all people will always agree on what should be included within such an illustrious group, texts within the canon need to be reflective of both the positive and negative attributes of a nation. For India the literature that is most reflective of their struggles will make the largest impact on their establishment of a new national self-distinction. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* belongs within the canon of Indian literature, as both the novel and characters reflect the nation's need to establish a new identity that not only echoes the India that once was, but also one that embraces the benefits and rejects the negatives of the influence of the Western world.

Through asserting the value of uncontaminated "Indian" characters, the novel claims the importance of cultural purity both during and after the time of British rule, effectively displaying the desire of the people to establish a wholly "Indian" identity. *Midnight's Children* presents the main character, Saleem, as a subjective first-person narrator, looking back on his life from the time of his birth on the eve of Indian independence and reflecting on moments throughout. Readers must analyze and interpret the characters through his storytelling and weave in Saleem's interjections to fully comprehend the change that both he and the country undergo. In the Kashmir of Saleem's grandfather's world, the elderly boatman Tai feels as if the doctor's bag "represents Abroad; it is the alien thing, the invader, progress. And yes, it had indeed taken possession of the Doctor's mind"; "he was an alien, and therefore a person not completely to be trusted" (Rushdie 16, 25). The medical bag that Saleem's grandfather possesses is one that he acquired during his time serving in the British army as a doctor, and in the elderly neighbor's mind the bag is a representation of both the Empire's reach and permeation throughout his beloved India. This comment from a character who is categorized as purely Indian in every aspect of the ancient culture, reflects the sentiments of those who wish to depart from the influences of the British occupation. By placing the unpolluted character as a critique of Western contamination, the novel claims the innate superiority

of the untainted Indian in contrast to the Indian who exhibits or embraces the ways of the imposed Western culture. The acquisition of the British medical bag is a reversal of the phenomenon of the “oriental costume be[ing] seen as a sign of the colonial ‘right’ to appropriate foreign bodies and foreign culture” (Bates 324). This haunting appropriation of Western artifacts, coupled with Saleem’s grandfather’s prizing of the bag, shows the slow transition to colonial ways within the Indian subcontinent. The insistence of those who are seen as wholly Indian to maintain the cultural purity of their people is therefore contrasted within the novel to those who are being transformed by British ways, exemplifying the duality of sentiments that were transpiring in the country.

The attempts of the characters to maintain the pre-occupation mindset of their ancestors, as well as the aim of Indian peoples to remain untainted by negative Western customs, is shown by the novel trumpeting the subservience and docile nature of female characters. Though it is showcased in numerous female characters throughout the book, the specific evolution of the Brass Monkey’s character strikes at the heart of the matter, as her rebellious, out-spoken youth is transformed into the culturally docile behavior expected by her Indian/Pakistani family. Growing up as Saleem’s younger sister, Jamila’s nickname of the Brass Monkey slowly fades as she grows older. After her adaptation to the overtly patriotic persona that she occupies as a singer, the Brass Monkey of Saleem’s youth becomes a young woman who is the embodiment of “truth, beauty, happiness, and pain”, as “being the new daughter-of-the-nation morphed her character owing more to the most strident aspects of the national persona than to the child-world of her Monkey years” (Rushdie 359). Jamila’s metamorphosis into a proper Indian woman is portrayed as a necessary maturation, as the novel presents her as a proper Indian woman whose abandonment of Western influences and embrace of traditional ways is one to be emulated throughout the nation. As observed by Gust—a scholar traveling in India post-independence—in independent India girls were transformed from being “disoriented and misdirected” regarding their future; they abandoned the

“inappropriate sphere” and their “frivolous deviation” from the culturally accepted planned path of docile subservience (Gust 284). By observing the shift in growing adolescent girls from tumultuous childhood mischief to reserve and obedience, Gust’s observations of girls in India directly mirror the behaviors that Rushdie details throughout the novel. The intended subservient lifestyle is thus showcased through not only Jamila’s character, but through the extolling of the female characters who remain within the accepted parameters of female behavior.

With an intense focus on the family dynamics of pre- and post-occupied India, *Midnight’s Children* reinforces the roles of members of Indian households while simultaneously devaluing the British and Western notions of family structure that are synonymous with expectations of female identity. As presented through both Saleem’s parents’ and grandparents’ relationship dynamics, women’s abhorrence to the British contamination of their men is a constant dividing point in marriages. The men simultaneously adhere to the Indian customs of being head of the household, while embracing the British customs of being independent and living in the ways they wish. In her youth, Naseem was appalled by her new husband, shown by the narrator when she shrieks, “I know you Europe-returned men; you find terrible women and then you try to make up girls like them’... it set a tone for their marriage, which rapidly developed into a place of frequent and devastating warfare” (Rushdie 31). The novel therefore promotes the Indian culture and family conventions through the voiced opinions of spouses in each of the detailed generations, with a recurring theme of women accepting their place within the household, providing that the men displayed values that did not appear Westernized. A man’s place was at the head of the family and the maker of decisions, yet if a man became contaminated by Western ways, the woman consequently reserved the right to act in a manner parallel to their husband’s Westernized transgressions. Such women would assume the roles of westernized females in response to their husbands’ behaviors in order to fight back against western influences and to aid them in the family’s return to a more Indian

lifestyle. Their refusal to accept their husbands' colonized ways led the women in the novel to refuse the traditional Indian family dynamic. Regarding self-advancement, "their relationship [that of a husband and wife] was secondary to her position as future wife in the home"; especially regarding the aspects of public appearance and thoughtfulness to the improvement of their family (Gust 279). As a scholar of contemporary Indian studies, Gust's commentary on the roles of women in the shifting society shows the struggle to maintain the identity of an Indian wife in the increasingly westernized world. Based on Gust's research and observations, the dynamic of an Indian wife in the public eye was dependent on a level of docility and subservience to her husband, while in the private realm, her role was to do whatever she had to in order to preserve her family- even if that meant falling into a westernized role. To have a relationship that was entirely Indian was of the utmost importance in the society, even if it meant that a family's private life was riddled with western ways.

With the first several chapters of the novel focusing solely on the establishment of Saleem's lineage and its importance, *Midnight's Children* shows characters' high regard for ancestry and its pertinence when defining one's national self in the new country. At the realization of Saleem's familial illegitimacy, his unpreparedness at Padma's shock leads him to explain to the misunderstanding woman that:

there is something more important than that. It's this... we all found that it made no difference! I was still their son: they remained my parents. In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts. If you had asked my father who his son was, nothing on earth would have induced him to point elsewhere. (Rushdie 131)

This importance of lineage reflected the ideal that bloodlines has less an impact than did the sentiments and feelings of belonging within a family. For a more westernized, and specifically British society, familial lines that are directly linked to blood are placed above a sense of family. If the novel—and consequently Saleem—

had trumpeted British values in this situation, Saleem's family would have been appalled to learn his truth. By adhering instead to a more Indian value system, they accept him as their son, and their lineage and history becomes his own.

It is crucial to note that the prevalence of Indian peoples who mimic or display racist British values is shown clearly throughout the novel, while simultaneously maintaining that Indian values are to be privileged above British values. Reflecting the Western views of "whiteness as purity" the people of India are shown throughout the novel to still exhibit to the racial prejudice and colorism that pervaded the country during British occupation. There is a constant sentiment throughout *Midnight's Children* where characters exclaim, "How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course they know; even blackies know white is nicer. Don't you think so?" (Rushdie 75). As characters throughout the novel are repeatedly judged for the lightness or darkness of their skin tone, *Midnight's Children* singles out the institution of racism as a negative remnant of the Western world that had been so deeply instilled, that even after independence the ideology remained. In a more modern India, it is argued by scholars such as Varma that their "citizens cannot be color-coded into white, black, or yellow"—a clear fighting back against the institutions of Western racism and colorism in an attempt to emulate an Indian identity that is not based off of one's appearance (Varma 48). *Midnight's Children* comments on the importance of overcoming such sentiments in making India a better place, one that is without the negativity of racism and colorism that was introduced through the influence of the British Empire.

Written as the manifestation of the newly independent India, Saleem's character is a direct and intentional manifestation of the nation, with both he and his country facing trials and tribulations, as they mature over time. Even the physical features of Saleem mirror India, as his teacher so crudely points out that "In the face of this ugly ape, do you see the whole map of India" (Rushdie 265). Born at the stroke of midnight on the day of

independence, the novel uses Saleem as a human manifestation of the birth of a new India, going as far as displaying the country's landscape on his physical features. Through such an embodiment, India is treated like a child which allows the reader to see the maturation of both the country and the person through the simultaneous experiences that are presented to readers. Saleem's troubles as an adolescent are mirrored through the struggles of political and ethnic strain that are present from the onset of the nation. *Midnight's Children* consequently reveals that the insecurities and struggles that Saleem faces during his childhood mirror the effects of the British rule "which left Indians with a lack of self-respect from which they have taken decades to recover" (Robinson 63). Though Robinson makes this argument, the Indian people are continuing to recover from the influences of the British Empire. The country continues to mature and outgrow the effects of colonization, much like a maturing individual.

As a final show of control, the encouragement of the British Empire to create Pakistan left the new Indian government as a country which was pushing for division and civil war before dependence from the mother country was even official. Rushdie thus shows the overreaching impact of British colonization and India's desperate attempts regain its stability in the wake of war. The division which created the two separate countries effectively created the further division of the nation, as eight years following independence "India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered 'territories'... language divided us" (Rushdie 216). A nation that was once comprised of numerous ethnical entities was divided not by their ways of life, but how an outside governing force saw fit. Though the British Empire had no formal hand in the post-occupation division of India, their influence was an undoubtable force. Tackling the undoubtable issues that face the self-governing body, scholars argue that "British rule, despite hypocritical government claims to the contrary ... undermined its political unity to keep it under British control, applied a racist rule of law ... for utilitarian reasons" (Robinson 63). When considering this strong point, the novel thus becomes

a commentary on the abuses of the British Empire, while at the same time, the novel acknowledges the issues that face the new Indian national government in its fruition. By tackling the issues of the country head on and calling for acknowledgement of fault, *Midnight's Children* presents itself as a novel which has the improvement of India in mind, not that of the former mother country.

With mounting religious and ethnic tensions, newly independent India faced its future with a population that was more divided than united. *Midnight's Children* scripts such sentiments as results of British control and condemns those who align with such beliefs throughout the novel. The sentiments that are strewn between the religiously, ethnically, and culturally divided India become a feature of the novel as the described "damnfool Hindu firebugs" are presented to readers as convoluted naysayers (Rushdie 78). This contrasts with the voiced Hindu sentiments for peace that were popularized during the early post-occupation era. As both the Muslims and the Hindus are villainized and portrayed as at fault throughout *Midnight's Children*, the novel presents readers with the notion that even though the post-occupation time of Pakistani and Indian division was a vital part in the establishment of the new India, it is not a part which should be honored or perpetuated. Before the influence of the British empire there were always moments of disagreement between Muslim and Hindu people, yet with the notion of physical and forced separation, the unrest became violent and catastrophic. The unrest is a key part of the country's history and cannot be forgotten. Though tensions are currently still high between the countries, the religious and ethnic intolerance is an issue brought up in the novel that fixed to create an India that is whole and has overcome the negative impacts of the British regime.

Drawing from the political unrest that was central in the Hindu-Muslim violence, *Midnight's Children* makes the seemingly polar institutions of marriage and politics synonymous by reflecting the commitment of the people to take their past and place it within their future. With the fear of "the brain being softened

by fancy foreign ideas of ... unnatural marriage” coupled with the notion of “India rising up to confound her present; the new-born, secular state was being given an awesome reminder of its fabulous antiquity, in which democracy and votes for women were irrelevant”—exhibiting the people’s desire to return to their pre-occupation roots (Rushdie 73, 81). The use of the phrase “new born” to describe India is one which stipulates that India, much like a child, is the outcome of a relationship. By insinuating that the new Indian government is the product of Indian political tradition and British colonization, Rushdie is making the relationship similar to a marital one. By using marriage as a symbol of creation in regard to a political entity, the novel consequently equates the institutions of marriage and government. Such sentiments show the need of India to abandon the influences of the British people as well as create a new self, drawing on the idea that their history is valuable, and that to return to a true Indian self, they must essentially return to such a time. By using literature to communicate such beliefs, the Indian people are represented as a nation that is desperate to detach itself from the negative influence of the British empire while attempting to retain what inevitably makes it better. Through the reworking of institutions such as marriage and politics, “the idea that political power was something that had to expand, conquer, and subdue was replaced by the idea that political power was the legitimate means of coercion solely for purposes of internal order and external security” (Parel 43). With the inherent need for internal order, the novel recognizes the attempts of the people to find a sense of security through adherence to ancient Indian culture and lifestyle.

The Conference of the Midnight Children within the novel functions as an entity that is entirely Indian by birth, and through the multiplicity of people and situations, the multifaceted futures of the country are shown as both the nation and the children mature. Through this fictitious group, Rushdie is able to present to readers individuals who were all born on the night that India gained its independence from the British Empire. By manufacturing the characters and giving them magical capabilities, the novel shows that the new India can create something that was never before seen—a people

who were an amalgamation of new and old India. In Saleem’s reflection upon the remarkability of the *Midnight Children*, he confesses that:

A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which have never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight children can be made to represent many things according to your point of view ... but what they must not become is a bizarre creation of a rambling diseased mind. (Rushdie 230)

This willingly open interpretation within the novel allows readers to view this fictional feat in theoretically any way they see fit. Nevertheless, despite an individual’s interpretation, the children are presented as a phenomenon that is entirely Indian, uncontaminated by British and western influences of the past. The connection between the group’s members cannot transcend India’s borders, nor can the children forget that they are the first product of this new world. They are a product of India and therefore must remain there to reach their full potential. As India is known by the outside world as “a land where imagination was privileged over reality,” the novel does not shy away from the mystical past, but instead embraces it within the context of the modern world (Bates 312). As the children’s extreme importance is shown through their tumultuous lives, they mirror the country, and much like Saleem himself, become the embodiment of the numerous futures and paths that were available for the people residing within its borders. *Midnight’s Children* therefore solidifies the importance of post-occupation India and the culture it embraced, moving it into a role of utmost importance to the newly independent nation.

By belonging to the Indian canon of literature, *Midnight’s Children* embodies the struggle of the Indian people to establish a new sense of self that is separate from the negative influences of the Western world as possible. In spite of the innate need to establish a communal self, the novel also exemplifies the struggle of determining what exactly this self was. Because India was never an organized country before British colonization, the collection

of numerous ethnicities, religions, and cultures under a singular government became a struggle for both the early British Empire and the early Indian government. “Indian-ness” thus become a new projection—one which takes the old and combines it with the new, creating a fusion of thoughts that become a new national self-identity. Embodied throughout Rushdie’s work, the Indian canon of literature is presented as one which is birthed by independence, mirrored in both the structure and character development throughout the novel. Through the authorship of the book, Rushdie adds to the genre of Indian literature through a similar approach of the much-revered Gandhi; he “updated the old Indian canon and made the innovated version suitable for a recognizably Indian way of thinking” (Parel 40). Though Gandhi was a prominent political figure in India, his thoughts are shown as those of a nation and consequently must be represented throughout the nation’s literature. *Midnight’s Children* places itself within this new national canon by mirroring the evolution of thought and structure throughout time with the emergence of a people that were an amalgamation of their multiple pasts and futures.

Without this novel in the country’s canon, the struggle to develop a sense of self in the aftermath of the British Empire would be lost. To recover from imperialism, India faced numerous struggles and was forced to mature by tackling issues of belonging head on. The novel presents to readers the idea that the transition of power was difficult and multifaceted—there was no easy path to create a definable people. Though independence was declared in a single day, the process of creating a national identity is one which is ever fluctuating. *Midnight’s Children* presents to readers the notion that the path to identity, namely an Indian identity, moves in a direction that is difficult to navigate. There is maturity and experience that comes with age, and with such age come the increase in responsibility and issues. Rushdie provides to the people of India a lens to look through, knowing that each part of their identity is not manifested overnight, but comes instead with struggles that must be faced and lessons that must be learned. Shaping and identifying the culture of India, *Midnight’s Children*

places value on the retention of ancient Indian thought while simultaneously acknowledging the influences of Western culture. By doing so, it shows the people of the Indian nation that such influences are acceptable as long as there is a remembrance of and adherence to the old ways of the subcontinent.

The Indian canon of literature is one which will continue to evolve, much like any other body of work. As a result, it is imperative to include works within the canon that showcase the evolution of the country after its gained independence. Post colonization, the struggle to regain a sense of self and national identity is a pertinent issue which faces such countries, and literary canons identify the hardships and progress along the way. By providing readers with a value system to follow and recognize themselves within, a nation’s canon of literature is vital to the progression of the self-identity within a country. It is unpardonable to reject a work for a national canon if it does not show that nation in an entirely positive light. In cases where a text is being considered for a country’s literary canon, there are always people or groups who oppose it for one reason or another. At times it is because the content may not fit into the country’s past canon, or there may be trouble with the material or author’s opinions. Novels that challenge the country are those that should be widely read and appreciated—not for what they say, necessarily, but for what they expose and try to change. An author should be honored for a work that looks critically at a nation and all it has faced, for creating a masterpiece that is the embodiment of a people’s sense of self. No country can mature without the influence of its people, and no people can establish their sense of self without the knowledge of what their national identity means.

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Danielle Simoes is a senior majoring in both Elementary and Special Education, as well as English. Her research paper was completed under the guidance of Dr. Allyson Ferrante (English) in her Recent British Fiction course. Danielle has completed her English degree and plans to graduate in the Fall of 2018 with her bachelor’s degree in Elementary and Special Education. She plans to go on to teach in an inclusive Elementary School setting at the beginning of 2019.