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Cultural Catastrophe and Religious Rebellion in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

To a conservative reader of the Indian subcontinent, religion is not just a religion in the sense most Westerners use the term – a private faith which provides hope and consolation within a secular world. Here, it is a way of life, a body of law and an all-embracing cultural framework. The novelist should not dare to satirize fundamental religious beliefs. This paper is a humble effort to trace out such incident in Midnight's Children, which makes this novel interesting to read.

Key words: Culture, Catastrophe, Religion, Rebellion and Revolution

INTRODUCTION

In the Twentieth century, the novel came to be viewed as primarily oppositional, critical of the culture which produced it. Modern novels are praised for their courage in exposing hypocrisy, challenging traditions and exploring forbidden themes. If blasphemy is not the common technique in Western fiction, it is so because very few writers take religion seriously enough to feel it worth attacking. Popular religious books are

generally excluded from the New York Times best seller list as unworthy of notice, no matter how well they sell.

Salman Rushdie (b. June19, 1947) who came from a liberal westernized family, was never an adherent of that type of Islam which believes that apostasy is a capital offence. Rushdie in his essay *In God we Trust*, States "My relationship with formal religious belief has been somewhat checkered. I was brought up in an Indian Muslim household, but while both my parents were believers, neither was insistent or doctrinaire."1

Almost all of Rushdie's works contain controversial themes; Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* starts with a bang. He relates the birth of Saleem to the mythical legend of birth of Ganesha, the Lord, from God Shiva and Goddess Parvati. Rushdie makes this boy having miraculous and magical powers of entering into the minds of others. But the outcome of his magical powers has no moral suggestion. Again Rushdie comments about Aziz's nose and compares it with Lord Ganesha's. On hitting the ground three drops of blood fell from his noses which were turned into rubies. Then Rushdie points out, "Doctor Aziz's nose-comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed God Ganesh..."[2] Rushdie in his passion distorts the very spirit of Hindu religion. Otherwise, this parody of Lord Ganesh would not have been there.

Rushdie presents his narrative in a way which appeals to the western world and sensibility. The three women figures named after the three goddesses, namely, Padma, Parvati and Durga have been presented with disrespect. Padma is repeatedly presented as, "that she had been named after the lotus goddess...the one who possesses Dung."[3] The fact is that the Hindus worship the Goddess *Saraswati* as the provider or

[1] Rushdie, Salman. *In God We Trust, Imaginary Homelands: Essays And Criticism*, London: Granta Books, 1981-1991,pp. 376-377

[2] Rushdie, Salman. Midnight's *Children.* London: Picador, 1981,p.9

[3] Ibid.p.21

owner of wisdom and not as the possessor of dung. Again, Padma is presented as an immoral and sexually perverted lady. Parvati is always referred to as 'Parvati-the witch.' She is also shown to be abnormal and involved in unwanted relationship with Major Shiva of Indian Army. This Major Shiva was becoming a notorious seducer: a "ladies-man"[4]. She elopes with Shiva while Saleem is busy in politics:

> Parvati-the witch turned those simple Army quarters into a palace, a Kailasha fit for Shiva-the-God; and Major Shiva, …Parvati kneeling at his feet, fully aware of his views on the subject, told him that she was going to have his child...the liaison of Shiva and Parvati now becomes a tempestuous business.[5]

Thus the murdering of Hindu religious myths goes on unabatedly in this novel. Lord Shiva and Parvati are the preserver of this universe and their holy union symbolizes the meeting of Purusha and Prakriti – the male and female creative forces. But the filthy terms that Rushdie has used for qualifying Parvati (the witch) and Shiva (the seducer) amply demonstrate his purpose.

Once again, Rushdie demonizes the sanctity of religious ideology when he states: "Once upon a time, there were Radha and Krishna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu...and all lovers are in a sense the avatars of their predecessors."[6]

The writer without going into the details of 'Radha-Krishna' and Rama-Sita', who are worshipped throughout the subcontinent, tries to equate them with 'Laila-Majnu' and 'Romeo-Juliet'. The point Rushdie failed to notice is that he equates the purely physical love of his fictional characters with the sublimated love of legends. Rushdie again in his parodic mode tries to tickle with Buddha. Saleem is nicknamed Buddha, by his colleagues in their military operation in

[4] Ibid.p.487
[5] Ibid p.492
[6] Ibid p.311

Bangladesh forests. But the way he is nick named is totally devastating: "...they give him the nickname of Buddha, 'old man'."[7]

Further, the author cites numerous references from *The Holy Quran*, but only as mere incidents: To quote a few: "The sheet, incidentally, is stained too, with three drops of old, faded redness. As the Quran tells us: "Recite, in the name of the Lord thy creator, who created man from clots of blood."[8] The purpose of these references remains unsolved. Here, the author refers to that 'perforated sheet' through which Dr. Aziz examines and glares the voluptuous body of Naseem. But Rushdie refers to the 'three drops of blood during sexual intercourse on that sheet.' In other examples, the writer quotes *The Quran* in his own daily life and tries to equate the act of characters, namely, Saleem and reverend mother, with those in *The Quran*.

Further, there is a digressional obsession of the Indian imagination when the writer through Saleem quotes from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharta*. Ravana, is quoted as a gangster. "Ahmed Sinai waits for Ravana".[9] Even the Lord Hanuman is not spared. While discussing monkeys at the old Fort, Saleem at once points out,

> "...I shall call him Hanuman, after the monkey god who help prince Rama defeat the original Ravana, Hanuman of the flying chariots...rubbing his rear on the stones...Hanuman races to the alcove here, on the topmost landing, in which the three men have left three soft grey alien things..."[10]

The writer could have easily got on with referring to a monkey doing funny things. But his insistence on Hanuman only challenges the cultural and social bondage. The writer quotes again, "when Valmiki, the author of *the Ramayana*, dictated his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, did the God walk out

[7] Ibid .p.418
[8] Ibid. p.4
[9] Ibid.p.93
[10] Ibid. p.96

on him half way."[11] This imaginative flair for fiction-writing flares the temper of the reader as he finds it difficult to admit such irrelevant details.

This obscene description smacks of sinister politics. The concept of paradise is mocked at with a tangy and chilly taste. Rushdie falters while describing the life in The Holy City, Amritsar. Amritsar is Mecca for nearly every Sikh. Rushdie does not spare even this city and looks for dung here too. It is not the great and wonderful structure of Golden Temple that pleases him but the filth and excreta that he sees. He says, "Amritsar dung was fresh and worse redundant. Nor was it all bovine. It issued from the rumps of the horses between the shafts of the city's many tongas, ikkas and gharries, and mules and men and dogs attended nature's calls, mingling in a brotherhood of shit."[12]

This is the picture; he paints of Amritsar for the Western world. Was it necessary to present such description or is there any significance of these in understanding the text or is there any moral impulse present here? What is foregrounded here is a deliberate attempt to portray India as a bizarre, exotic entity on the world map.

Rushdie again forgets that Guru Nanak was a great saint and is holy to the Sikhs. Instead of showing his picture in the Gurudwara, he points out to Dr. Aziz who, in a fit of rage, throws away the belongings of his wife, "...in to a wastepaper basket made of tin with a painting of Guru Nanak on the side, and sets fire to them."[13]

One gets uncomfortable with Rushdie's complete disregard for the religious values. Further, there has to be a difference between a common man's world-view and that of a novelist like Rushdie. As a writer, Rushdie has greater religious

[11] Ibid.p.197
[12] Ibid. p.32
[13] Ibid.p33

responsibility. Further, Rushdie cites from the Quran, but only as mere incident:

> "On Mount Sinai, the prophet Musa or Moses heard disembodied commandments; On Mount Hira, the prophet Muhammad (also known as Mohammed, Mahomet, the Last But-One, and Mahound) spoke to the Archangel. (Gabriel or Jibreel, as you please)...but like Musa or Moses, like Muhammad, the Penultimate, I heard voices on a hill."[14]

The purpose of this reference remains unsolved. Here the writer negates the holy message of Prophet Muhammad. Again Rushdie mocks at the very essence of Muslim religious places when he describes the words of Maulana Dawood.

Rushdie's defence of his fictional politics has its own aesthetic logic. To Rushdie, the writer is not a teacher or a reformer as he aptly says that he "cannot bear the idea of the writer as a secular prophet."[15] Literature, according to Rushdie, is an unfinished project that involves the interfacing between the self and the world. And because of this constant contest and conflict between the self and the world, art is created. Rushdie rightly comments:

> "Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist, and so it can never be 'finished' or 'perfect, …We must not become what we oppose. The only privilege literature deserves and this privilege it requires in order to exist – is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out."[16]

CONCLUSION:

As the author is privileged with a special liberty in the name of freedom of speech but he should have taken care of the religious

[14] Ibid.p192
[15]Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands; Essays and Criticism 1981-1991.* London: Granta, 1991,p.427
[16] Ibid.p.427

and cultural feelings of the masses, he is writing about. As a postmodern novelist Salman Rushdie should have at least spared the god and goddess from his sharp parody. Not only the reader but also the community is deliberately affected by the literature, especially the contemporary one. So, it is the ethical responsibility of the authors to present an exemplary society to follow with.