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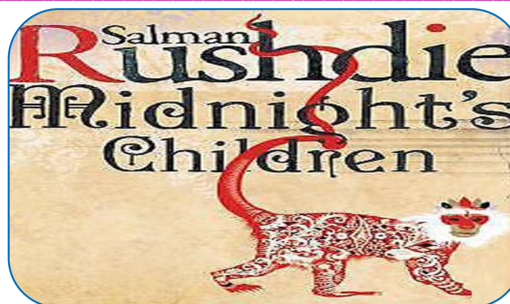
POSTCOLONIAL DISABILITY: LIMINALITY, MIMICRY AND HYBRIDITY IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*



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ABSTRACT:

Disability and post-colonialism are two significant, and interlinked, discourses in the social formation of the nation and of those bodies deemed worthy of social responsibility rights. The aim of the present paper is to examine the ways in which Rushdie depicts physical and mental abnormality in Midnight's Children. As a literary celebrity and public intellectual with significant influence over the way in which western media frames discussions about the East, Rushdie's modes of representation deserve critical scrutiny. Midnight's Children remain in the top of the bestseller lists for weeks after its publication, but it is also credited with inspiring and enabling the success of several other prominent, contemporary South Asian authors. Its success ultimately provided Rushdie with a platform from which to comment on contemporary events, culture, and politics. The present study tries to envisage Rushdie's politics of representation, reevaluating the early works that made him famous and analyzing his more recent works for comparison as well as to examine Rushdie's position as a contemporary author and public intellectual.

KEYWORDS: *disability, post-colonialism, magical realism, liminality, mimicry, hybridity.*

INTRODUCTION

On February 25, 2015, Rushdie sat on a panel with three disability scholars Benjamin Reiss, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Eva Kittay at Emory University. The panel began from the position of universal human rights, responding to the 2008 U.N. document on rights for people with disabilities. While the panel debated the autonomy of the self and the role of environment in creating disability, Rushdie mainly participated by discussing the definition of "human" in the context of disability and the literary uses of disability. He posited that, "disability is often used to put in sharper relief the dependence we have on others to secure our liberties" and also addressed the social stigma that disability continues to face in South Asian contexts. Most significantly, he acknowledged his own propensity for exaggerating a specific capacity of a character to make him/her abnormal "in ways that sometimes now feel problematic illness isn't metaphor, it is illness; it's wrong to use it as a metaphor" ("(Post)colonizing Disability" 11). This specific apology seems like a nod to Garland-Thomson's critique of the narrative prosthesis in literature. Disability and post-colonialism are two significant, and interconnected, discourses in the social formation of the nation and of those bodies deemed worthy of social responsibility rights. Neither disability nor postcolonialism should be comprehended as simply a representation for the other experience; nor should they be rhetorically active as a sign of the subjugation involved in a completely different experience.

Postcolonial themes are frequently used metaphorically within disability studies. Metaphors have been a key element of traditional descriptions of pain, illness and disability; these metaphors have

likened the relationship between disability, illness and the body to such various experiences as military operations, machinery, extra-terrestrialism, sexuality, and colonialism. Homi Bhabha recognizes that traditional ways of thinking and assumptions about the world have often been complicit with longstanding inequalities between nation and people. He recognizes that there is no such things as pure or authentic culture, and that instead we must recognize, even celebrate the mixedness or even impurity culture. Instead of beginning with the idea of pure culture interacting, Bhabha directs out attention to what happens on Boderline of cultures. The result has been a diverse but nevertheless identifiable movement into what are called the liminal space. Although problematic in many ways (often sexist, orientalist, and ableist), Rushdie's depictions of disability and deviance denote power and triumph despite carrying rather burdensome historical, political, and economic back stories. Saleem Sinai's body may be cracking up, but he is telepathic and his overly-large nose has super-sensory capabilities. All of these examples, though they touch on familiar disabilities recognized under the medical model, fall neatly under the umbrella of magical realism and are thus potentially problematic for reading "disability" as a cultural product in a postcolonial context. However, researcher intend to demonstrate how magical realist depictions of bodily difference can carry the subversive potential desired by disability studies scholars for literary representations of disability. Magical Realism both nullifies the typical (non-disabled) reader responses to disabled bodies and resists the typical need for explanation, resolution, or obliteration. Rushdie also depicts disability as it relates to the legacies of colonialism, the problematic modern politics of India and Pakistan, and the continuing impact of neocolonial economic and political systems of power. Rushdie's work is so well- known to both South Asians and western audiences, also seek to situate his two-pronged approach to writing disability within a larger discussion of various attitudes towards disability in South Asian culture.

Analyzing the disabled characters and deviant bodies in Rushdie's work also allows for an exploration of the potential intersections of postcolonial studies and disability studies. In recent years scholars from both disciplines have noted the need for such an examination and how the two approaches could help one another address problematic assumptions and rhetoric within the respective fields. Postcolonial literature is particularly suited to a disability studies reading because of, among other reasons, the repeated use of the body as allegory for nation. In addition to the use of bodies as metaphor and the emphasis on the experiences of the marginalized in postcolonial texts, the rampant ableist rhetoric used in postcolonial studies makes the project of reexamining the field through this lens both necessary and exciting. At the same time, the analysis of identity formation, the focus on marginalized populations, and the commitment to exploring the diverse specificity of human experience as part of postcolonial studies has significant value for scholars in the disability studies field which, up until recently, lacked a global perspective.

The disabled character critiques colonialism which Quayson argues has been "a major force of disabling the colonized from taking their place in the flow of history other than in a position of stigmatized underprivileged" ("Aesthetic Nervousness" 8). This is perhaps an accurate description of one way in which disability is used in postcolonial texts, but it also highlights one of the significant criticisms of postcolonial critics by disability scholars and that is Quayson's use of ableist language to describe the negative legacy of colonialism. Furthermore, as critics like Sherry argue, scholars in both disciplines should seek to move beyond this general interest in disability as a prosthesis in postcolonial texts: "Rather than simply bemoan disability as a symbol of the horrors of imperialism, a far more interesting approach is to unpack the power dynamics which link the two experiences, both in practice and in rhetoric" ("(Post)colonizing Disability" 16). Rushdie is well-known for his use of the disabled body as an allegory for nation, but instead of using it to shore up wholeness and a hyper-masculine nationalism, he uses it to critique colonial legacy, traditional nationalism, and neocolonial legacies. In much of Rushdie's work, he champions bodily deviance, associating it with superhero status. Additionally, he often aligns himself as the narrator/storyteller with a disabled character. For example, both Moraes in The Moor's Last Sigh and Saleem in Midnight's Children are writer/artist characters whose bodies fail them, but who prevail in telling their stories despite those failing bodies. Finally, he also explores the historical, political, and economic circumstances that generate disabled bodies and

subsequently how they are managed by the ruling elite and or absorbed/covered up by nationalist rhetoric and neocolonial policies.

Midnight's Children is arguably Rushdie's most well-known publication and certainly one of the only books written by him to be analyzed for its depictions of physical abnormality. As a foundational text in the study of postcolonial literature and as one of the most famous novels about South Asia in the West, its depictions of colonial and postcolonial disability deserve more critical attention. Beginning with the story of a Kashmiri family with a western-educated patriarch and traditional Muslim matriarch, Midnight's Children explores the promises for and alternate histories of India and Pakistan throughout their independence and partition. Saleem, as the protagonist, is born at the hour of midnight on the eve of independence and subsequently finds himself tied to the history of his nation. Through the story of his life, the reader experiences the significant moments of Indian and Pakistani history after the partition. As part of his project, which is to critique South Asian post-independence and partition politics, Rushdie examines the codes of nationalism and history and specifically the systemic exclusion of certain kinds of people and certain kinds of histories from the official narratives of nation.

Until recently, most of the scholarship on Midnight's Children focuses on Saleem's allegorical role in the context of postcolonial nation-building. One exception is Eliana Avila's "Neither Sword Nor Pen: Phallacious Impotence in Midnight's Children" wherein Avila argues that the narrative impotence so often claimed by the narrator serves largely to shore up Saleem's story as a master narrative which reinforces gender and class norms. Although Avila only briefly alludes to Rushdie's use of a deformed body as a problematic metaphor, her observations concerning disability in the story pave the way for a complex and nuanced reading of Rushdie's inclusion (and exclusions) of physical and mental difference. Another exception is "Disability and Postcoloniality in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Third-World Novels" by Sanjeev Uprety. Uprety argues, "It is this experience of disability that is literalized in the works of third-world artists, an experience of losing their voice and vision even as they enter the symbolic networks of the global culture and political economy" ("Disability and Postcoloniality in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children"* 381). In the case of Midnight's Children, he suggests that Rushdie challenges the imaginary "wholeness" of nationalism with the magically gifted midnight children whose deviance is constructed entirely by a local elite bent on forcing bodies to assimilate to a specific, national standard. In 2014 and in response to the avocation by scholars for an intersection of the two fields described above, Clare Barker published "Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Disability and Postcolonial Studies." Barker suggests that Rushdie's approach to disability in Midnight's Children is complex instead of reductive, and she argues for reading practices of disability that "account for the multiple vectors of difference and the diverse cultural contexts of disability that postcolonial writing offers." Barker's analysis focuses on examining traditional modes of reading Saleem as an allegory for nation and the problematic use of a disabled body as a metaphor for postcolonial experience as well as how Rushdie crafts a pointed and culturally-specific critique of the exclusion of difference in modern myths of nation. Barker concludes correctly that "[v]arious strands of meaning are present in Rushdie's engagements with disability – celebratory and oppressive, progressive and recidivist alike . . . . This does not mean, however, that it is definitively damaging. Indeed, texts like Midnight's Children grant disability the opportunity to be as multiple, as complicated, and as contradictory as any other aspect of identity" ("Disabling postcolonialism" 18).

While Rushdie's depictions of disability and bodily deviance often complicate dominant notions of citizenship and selfhood as part of his larger postcolonial project, he also uses disability regularly as a metaphor, or narrative prosthesis, for colonial and postcolonial experience. Saleem is an allegory for nation and his crumbling, deviant body signifies the fragmentation, potential, and marginalization of the post-independence Indian nation. The use of allegory to tell the story of nation is not uncommon in postcolonial literature. Lenny Sethi in Cracking India is an example of this trope. Both Saleem and Lenny are disabled characters whose lives are inextricably linked with the histories of their countries. Lenny's position as a disabled character is linked to both the legacies of colonialism and the development of postcolonial nationalism:

it is Lenny's disabled, minor body that is continually linked to the fragmenting national body; her

birthday falls on the day India is partitioned, and her disability due to polio (blamed by Dr. Bharucha on the British who brought polio to India) is a metaphor for the birth of two nations as disabled by the British partitioning of the subcontinent. Thus, the child Lenny's minoritized, female, disabled body materially represents the legacy of British colonialism: disease and a disabled South Asia ("The World After Empire" 78).

Similarly, Saleem is born at midnight on the eve of partition, the product of a departing British official and an Indian servant, and his subsequent physical deterioration is linked both with the country's colonial past as well as the postcolonial histories of India and Pakistan. "Handcuffed" to forces of history, Saleem faces a literal disintegration of his body as a result of a chain of related "disabling" moments including developing bowed legs, losing hearing in one ear, maiming a finger, and castration: "I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams" (*Midnight's Children* 36).

This is perhaps most evident in Rushdie's depictions of Saleem's fellow midnight children, all of whom are born on the eve of India's independence. Each of the children has an extraordinary gift such as changing sex at will, telepathy, and independent flight. With the rise of the postcolonial state, these individuals become a threat to the ruling regime. The midnight children and their deviant bodies stand in for the subversive individuals that become the scapegoats of national identity after independence. By representing their condemnation by society and persecution by the state as grounded in their bodily deviance, Rushdie critiques the notion that "the colonized are only able to 'become men,' to establish a national identity in the historical moment of decolonization, through the reification of a new category of monsters—the disabled, the deformed, the mad" ("Revising the Subject"141). Traditionally, these children would function narratively as visibly deviant monsters, against which the image of the healthy, ideal citizen can be articulated. Though they are the children of the independence, they would not have a place in its future because their heterogeneity threatens the homogenizing and unifying impulse of nation-building. Mitchell and Snyder suggest that "One cannot narrate the story of a healthy body or national reform movement without the contrastive device of disability to bear out the symbolic potency of the message" (*Cultural Locations of Disability* 215). Thus, Rushdie's reliance on the narrative prosthesis is not an unconscious use of disability as metaphor, but rather a productive examination of the "normalizing" impulse for deviant bodies located within national boundaries and identity.

Rushdie's depictions of disability also attend to the "material analysis of disability in its familial, social, and national contexts" ("Disabling postcolonialism" 17). For example, Rushdie critiques the reality of India as "a country where any physical or mental peculiarity in a child is a source of deep family shame" (18) by illustrating the rejection by his father after Saleem speaks up about his magical gift. Rushdie also alludes to the connection between poverty and disability that exists within the postcolonial context. India's beggar slums are notorious in the West for the wide-spread mutilation of children for higher profit. It is estimated that 44,000 children are rounded up by beggar mafias per year. In *Midnight's Children*, Shiva, who is Saleem's arch-rival and fellow midnight child, is born into a slum community and faces forced mutilation to increase his earning potential as a beggar. However, he stops his father's attempt to break his legs with a hammer by using his midnight gift—extraordinarily strong knees. Later, he initiates the bulldozing campaign to wipe out the "slums" of Bombay and participates in the capture and forcible vasectomies/oophorectomies of the other midnight children. This incident in the narrative gestures to the forced sterilization of slum inhabitants during the Emergency which was spear-headed by Indira Gandhi. In Shiva's story, Rushdie depicts the material conditions of disability in postcolonial South Asia and explores how poverty itself is coded as a disability that is endangering the health of nation.

Rushdie, in this brief but significant mention of Shiva's history, illustrates Rushdie's optimism about the future potential of the midnight children to change what seems like predetermined fates based on restrictive social, political, and economic factors. Essentially Rushdie pits the deviant bodies and extraordinary gifts of the midnight children against the exclusionary practices of postcolonial (and neocolonial) economics and systemic oppression within a postcolonial context. This potential, however,

is never realized not only because they are thwarted by the regime of Indira Gandhi and the Emergency, but also because they succumb to sectarian divisions. Rushdie expresses the potential of the midnight children in Saleem's vision for a limitless Utopia in the Midnight Children's Conference, but also in their ultimate defeat by the Widow:

But what I learned from the Widow's Hand is that those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities; and that, that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hated feared destroyed by the Widow, who was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods, a multi-limbed divinity with a center- parting and schizophrenic hair. (*Midnight's Children* 504)

As "potential deities" the midnight children are positioned as a potential alternative to the corrupt and oppressive rule of Indira Gandhi's politics. Her defeat of the midnight children suggests that modern Indian politics are trampling the potential of an entire postcolonial generation—a view that Rushdie has also expressed elsewhere.

After the forced operations on the midnight children, Saleem returns to being "nine-fingered, horn-templed, monk's-tonsured, stain-faced, bow-legged, cucumber- nosed, castrated, and now prematurely aged" (*Midnight's Children* 515). Robbed of his ability to procreate, Saleem's investment lies in finishing his story and in raising his adopted son. While many scholars have debated about the significance of the story's ending, Rushdie has clarified his intention for an optimistic view of the future of India many times. Saleem ends his story by imagining his own life ending: "cracking now, fission of Saleem, I am the bomb of Bombay, watch me explode, bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd, bag of bones falling down down down . . . they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust" (*Midnight's Children* 533). While its optimism for the future of Indian politics may be questionable, the ending's value lies in its refusal for closure. As Barker states, "The novel ends ambiguously with an image of Saleem's unruly, protesting body fragmenting and being absorbed into the heterogeneous crowd of India. Rushdie therefore stakes a claim for a national identity that incorporates impairment" ("The Empire Writes Back" 78). In contrast to some of the postcolonial works under discussion in the scholarship of disability and postcoloniality, *Midnight's Children* does not attempt to end its narrative with an imagined sense of wholeness or an imagined body that is not deformed or deviant. As part of Rushdie's project to uncover the complexities of identity within narratives of nationalism, Saleem's fragmentation is neither cured nor pitied, but absorbed into the body of the nation.

This paper has endeavored to illustrate the challenging approaches towards the intersection of disability and postcolonialism that reinforces a great deal of the literature. It has emphasized that disability should not be treated as a metaphor for postcolonialism, and that postcolonialism should not be treated as a metaphor for disability. Each experience may share some similarities, but they are also quite distinct. The paper has concluded by identifying more promising ways of unpacking this complex relationship. It has underlined the rhetorical connections between disability and postcolonialism in racist and sexist discourses of contamination and disease, and has stressed the prominence of further research into the racist creation of disability. The paper has also emphasized the importance of scrutinizing the interconnections of sexism, racism and disablism in postcolonialism and in the study of disability. It has highlighted the need for disability studies to examine the subtle forms of resistance that can be theorized in more complex ways than a simple model of unilateral oppression would suggest. Likewise, the paper has stressed the need for more attention to the issue of embodiment within postcolonial literature. All of these suggested changes would create a more theoretically rigorous approach to both the study of postcolonialism and disability.

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