

**THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF ‘OTHER’ IN THE PORTRAYAL OF  
WOMEN CHARACTERS OF SALMAN RUSHDIE  
IN *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN***

MAHALAKSHMI BH.

Feminism appears to have begun with the mission to emancipate woman from the clutches of a patriarchal institution in which woman is oppressed and viewed as the ‘Other’. This universal desire to liberate women has been articulated in various forms by the feminist writers and the same is manifested in the contemporary fiction. Feminism and theories relating to it perceived the male/female binary as a mere social construction. Feminism began as a political movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and fought for the equality of sexes and to end discrimination against women. The gender perspective is oriented towards questioning issues like education, marriage, economics, sexuality and morals. Social biases see woman as only the ‘Other’ of the male and the woman’s identity is never separate but is subsumed under that of the male. The woman is typecast as “Mother Nature” who is perpetually giving and all-forgiving that demands nothing and is willing to suffer. This ‘Otherness’ is feigned by the patriarchal world as a positive attribute by terming it the ‘feminine principle’.

Woman is the ‘Other’ of man as she is subjected to discrimination, subdued and manufactured on the stereotypes like weak, vulnerable etc. The Post-colonial woman is also the ‘Other’ of the European counterparts, as she is viewed as one without education, independence etc. hence, the Third-World woman faces double jeopardy in the hands of the male chauvinists as well as their European counterparts, who deem themselves to be a class apart from the Post-colonial women.

Consciousness of the ‘Other’ has always been an important position that Rushdie has taken in his fiction. There is no exception to this even in the case of the novel *Midnight’s Children*. The female characters of the novel, like Padma, Amina Sinai, Mary Pereira, Naseem Ghani, Rani-of-cooch-naheen and Parvati-the-witch can be viewed as the possessors of unconditional love,

which can be said to be the feminine principle, which makes the consciousness of the Other complete.

A feminist interpretation of the portrayal of the characters of *Midnight's Children* may help in the evaluation of the making of the Post-Colonial narrative. At one point in the novel, the protagonist Saleem announces that women have made him and also unmade. If Post-Colonialism is one major aspect in the analysis of the novel, feminine principle forms another basic aspect of the novel.

A woman is always perceived as a domesticated being that does the daily chores while running the family and is expected to be a bundle of love, care and is branded as the one who is highly emotional and attached. In other words, she ought to work like a slave who serves the family. The more mundane things like cooking, cleaning the house etc. are said to be a woman's work while the things relating to intelligence and intellect are branded as a man's domain which includes earning for the wellbeing of the family. Contrary to men, a woman is always expected to be a giver, one who offers paramount love to her partner and children and the other members of the family. This attitude of love and care of a woman can be defined as the 'feminine principle'. Giving birth to babies and taking care of them comes naturally to a woman as she is biologically built in that fashion. This makes woman service oriented and imparting love becomes her primary prerogative.

The feminist writer, Simone de Beauvoir's statement from *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", is pivotal to the writings of many feminists. A woman is not born: she becomes, is made a woman, she is 'manufactured'. A woman is made as the embodiment of qualities like weakness, feeble-mindedness, patience and so on. De Beauvoir's statement is justifiable since the patriarchy or phallogocentric male suggests that a woman is not strong enough to go out into the world and that she is to be protected. A woman's sexualities are made and treated as subservient to that of the male. This aspect is evident in the novel *Midnight's Children*. The

description rightly fits the character of Jamila Singer, when this tomboyish girl who had been educated in the metropolitan city of Bombay, which stands for secularism, turns into a docile and conservative woman following the system of *pardah* when she emigrates to Pakistan.

The relation between Feminism and Post-Colonialism is to be defined at this juncture. Feminism and Post-Colonial theory, up to a point have followed a certain 'path of convergent evolution' (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 249). Both feminism and Post-Colonialism follow a similar theory in their defense of the marginalized 'Other', within the dominating repressive structures. These bodies of thought have attempted to invert the prevailing hierarchies of gender, culture and race. At one point of time a collision occurred between the native or third-world women and the imperial feminists. The third-world woman or in other words, the Post-Colonial woman has become a victim of both imperial ideology and native and foreign patriarchies. As Gayatri Spivak writes, 'marginality' (1988) has become the buzzword in the cultural critique. The consciousness of difference had set up a cultural hierarchy and created a difference between the western feminist and her native counterpart as I-who-have-made-it and you-who-cannot-make-it. The Post-Colonial or the third-world woman underwent double colonization. She was labeled as the 'Other' who is ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated and family-oriented while her western counterpart was described as educated and modern. The Post-Colonial woman was seen as one who cannot represent herself and that she must be represented. As Gayatri Spivak elaborates,

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (1988: 306)

The imperial feminist thus fractured the potential unity between Post-Colonialism and feminism by belittling her sibling - the native third-world woman or the Post-Colonial woman.

In the novel *Midnight's Children*, along with Saleem, the character of Padma, the wife-to-be of Saleem evokes much interest among the readers. She remains one of the principal female characters who contribute towards the shaping of the entire narrative with her curiosity and 'whatnextism'. In other words, she is the female audience to whom the entire narrative is addressed. She is very loyal and faithful and a great devotee to Saleem, who loves him from the core of her heart. Despite her loyalty, Padma has been subjected to gender injustice. Her sexual urge is voiced when she asks the writer Saleem to see if his 'other pencil works'. Saleem derides her for illiteracy. She is the feminine 'Other' who lacks education and is seen primarily as a mere stereotype. Gender prejudice is generated by the male power in a Post-Colonial society. One's role in the society determines one's gender. Cooking food, washing clothes, giving birth to children, making beds for the husband are considered women's trades and the rest are superior works and hence are supposed to be done by men. This indicates that man has power over women.

Saleem takes Padma's loyalty for granted; he thinks it his male prerogative to put her down, as she pines for his love and union, thinking that Saleem must be physically fit. Saleem being an impotent fails to satiate her physical urge and even emotionally he is detached to her. He looks at her only as a servant and he prefers to parade his masculine power. Politically, Padma could be taken as a representative of the gullible people of the subcontinent who are easily duped by the demagogues in the Post-Colonial country.

Padma is depicted mostly through her animal instincts, Saleem talks of her as: "Padma - our plump Padma...sulking magnificently (she can't read. Padma strong, jolly, a consolation for my last days. But definitely a bitch in the manager)" (1981:24)

Saleem further says,

"Padma snorts, wrist smacks against forehead. 'Okay, starve, starve, who cares two pice?' Another louder, conclusive snort....Thick of waist, somewhat fairy of forearm, she flounces, gesticulates, exists. Poor Padma" (*Ibid*)

Besides being portrayed as illiterate and ignorant, Padma is compared to a witch. This derogatory term is once again used by Saleem when he says

that Padma “*really- truly was a witch*” (1981: 381). This is enough proof of Saleem’s male attitude towards his female partner. Padma’s love for Saleem, despite his attitude towards her, can be seen as the eternal feminine principle. Padma is portrayed in a better fashion in her absence than in her presence. She can be taken as the symbol of the ‘*Other*’. She is a prey of illiteracy; Salman Rushdie presents this paradigm for female characters in general. The gap that belies Saleem’s elitist education and Padma’s illiteracy sadly reflects the existing social reality. Padma is sketched out as a stereotype, as a character representative of her gender. The novel fails to offer any details particularly in relation to Padma. Her past is not presented to the reader, she is shown as a comic caricature and is attached to the very mundane or material things while Saleem poses in front of her as the one who is quite superior and constantly puts her down as one who possesses low intellect. Padma nurtures Adam, the son of Saleem and instantly becomes Adam Sinai’s mother when they enter the pickle factory; she takes care of him as her own son. She stands for the eternal feminine principle like any other Post-Colonial woman. Padma becomes the ‘*Other*’ of Saleem.

Salman Rushdie is a fine crusader of women’s strength and rights. The freedom and oppression faced by women in their traditional roles are delineated and a diversity of strong women who create their own space is portrayed by him. They reach out and control their own destinies despite the traditional codes of conduct. Uma Parameswaran, aptly states that one could,

Bring forward Robert Graves and Leslie fielder, Edward Said and Jacques Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva, to show that Rushdie is indeed weaving patterns mythic, historical, anticolonial, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, semiotic - which delineate women with an authenticity of detail. (2007: 111)

Rushdie incorporates women as the redefined ‘*Other*’, mostly in control of themselves and at times of others as well. Saleem Sinai, it is understood, has three mothers, Vanita, the biological mother; Amina Sinai, the one who takes him for her own baby ignorant of the baby swapping done by the nurse Mary Pereira in the Narlikar Hospitals; and Mary Pereira herself

who nurses him by becoming his ayah to get rid of her guilt. Amina Sinai and Mary Pereira compete with each other in loving baby Saleem. Both these women, it appears, have been prey to male chauvinism. It can be observed that the sexist bias operates against nearly all women characters in the novel. The situation of woman is that, she, an autonomous being like all creatures finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. Women fall prey to the male ego and masculine might. Amina Sinai (Mumtaz) is portrayed as graceful, modest and obedient. She loves her father dearly and always tries to be of comfort to him which he does not get from her mother. She surrenders to her father's wish and marries Nadir Khan, who later declares divorce and leaves, despite this situation she maintains her calm and faces the pain with fortitude. When Mumtaz remarries Ahmed Sinai he chose her a new name Amina. She accepts this new name along with the new life with him without complaints of any kind. She understands that a husband deserves unquestioning loyalty and whole-hearted love. She trained herself to love him bit by bit; Amina possessed all the qualities of a good housewife, she proves to be a dutiful mother too. She offers unconditional love to Saleem despite knowing the fact that he is a changeling and not her biological son. Amina Sinai can be seen as the eternal mother who embodies the feminine principle. Though Rushdie suggests that Amina Sinai is getting adulterous with her reunion with her former husband, it does not seem really important to the reader as Nadir Khan is already declared impotent, for which reason he divorces her and escapes. The strength of Amina is once again evident when she takes up the burden of running her family. When her husband Ahmed Sinai gives into taking alcohol as his business goes off the track, Amina rises to the situation and does not think twice to enter into Horse-racing, to earn for the smooth running of the family. She appears to be a modern woman while she drives a car, which is normally a man's thing. This modernity of Amina Sinai juxtaposes with the imperial concept of the Post-Colonial woman. Amina emerges as a strong woman who is no less when compared to any

European woman, she is educated, modern and takes liberties while making decisions when it comes to her family and also in situations which include her emotions and sexuality.

Amina, at a particular point in the novel, separates from her husband Ahmed Sinai and moves to Pakistan along with her son Saleem and daughter Jamila on the insistence of her reverend mother Naseem. She lives in the house of her elder sister. Amina's womanly vulnerability allows her mother to take the situation into her hands and force her daughter to leave her drunkard and womanizer husband behind in India as they move to Karachi, Pakistan.

Amina Sinai becomes the epitome of the feminine principle when she proves to be highly accommodative despite knowing the fact that her husband had become a drunkard and is having extra-marital affairs with his secretaries. Amina forgives him and forgets all his adulterous acts. She appears to be a representative of any Post-Colonial woman who accepts the male ego and domination; she gives up her individuality besides being educated and sensible. She prefers to adhere to her marital relationship and accepts life as it comes. Rushdie makes the character of Amina both modern and conservative. She does not walk out of her husband's life forever as her imperial counterpart would have done under her circumstances. She undoubtedly stands as a representative of the feminine principle.

Saleem's another mother, Mary Pereira, can be considered as another embodiment of the feminine principle, her very act of swapping babies is done to please her communist lover, Joseph D'Costa whom she admired dearly. This Joseph D'Coata has problems with the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming much poorer. As a reaction to his Marxist thinking Mary swaps babies at birth and gives a poor man's son into a rich household and gives the baby of the rich a life of penury. Later she feels guilty and regrets her action but since she is helpless, she joins the Sinai family as an *ayah* for their son Saleem. She lives in the household of the Sinais and takes care of Saleem as her own son. Saleem receives the love and attention of two mothers as his

mother and the *ayah* compete with each other to show how much they care for the little one. Towards the end of the novel Saleem ends up as a worker in Mary Pereira's Pickle factory, and once again receives unconditional love. His son Adam is also offered enough affection by Mary as well as Padma.

A very vulnerable and weak NaseemGhani, the grandmother of Saleem, is introduced in the novel as the shy daughter of Ghani, who remains in Veil. She falls in love with Adam Aziz, the European returned doctor who frequents her house to treat her as she is presented to him for treatment through a perforated sheet. Even after marriage she attaches herself to conservatism and is transformed into a bloated and imposing figure. She becomes threatening and masculine just as her husband Dr. Aziz becomes weak and submissive. Naseem develops a 'fearsome ability to invade her daughters' and husband's dreams.' This change or transformation in her character can be understood in the light of the portrayal of women characters in a Rushdie novel. Repression leads to resistance and sometimes violence in Rushdie's women. Naseem Ghani is rightly addressed as Reverend Mother; the transformation of mothers into witch-like figures reflects an aspect of Indian psyche, as Ashis Nandy states,

In terms of organization of personality... the Indian lives in his inner world less with a feared father than with a powerful, aggressive and unreliable mother. Manifestly, he idealizes her and sees her as the repository of all nurture and motherliness. Underneath this, there are deep doubts about the nature and the way she might use her powers to aggress. Contrarily, the father is seen as non-interfering, inefficacious, distant and a co-victim of the castrating mother figure (1983: 107)

The Reverend mother alters her roles between a nurturing woman and a destructive woman. She appears to have developed a love-hate relationship even with her daughters and occasionally becomes uncommunicative if something disagreeable crops up. At times she appears to be a comic figure evoking laughter. In Rushdie's world, women appear to be the redefined 'Other', in control of their personal space and at times of others as well. The veil adheres to a concept of negative traditionalism. The foremost rule that Dr.

Aziz sets to his new bride is to give up purdha, for which Naseem reacts with dismay and objects to do it. Dr. Aziz sets fire to her purdha veils and asks her to shed her traditional inhibitions in favour of modernity. He insists his wife to “forget about being a good Kashmiri girl” and “start thinking like a modern Indian woman.”(1981:33). This is the point at which disagreement enters the lives of Dr. Aziz and his wife Naseem which sets the tone for their marriage and Dr. Aziz perpetually loses his every battle with his wife. He starves as she rejects him food and water for days together to prove her supremacy and power over him in the domain of kitchen. He loses his health and apparently recovers with the love and service offered by his daughter Mumtaz (Amina). Naseem is seen as a typical Indian mother-in-law who nags her ex film-actress daughter-in-law Pia. Naseem dreams of migrating to Pakistan and owning a petrol pump. Her wishful thinking comes true as she migrates to Pakistan along with her daughter-in-law Pia where she owns a petrol pump. She adheres to the business and spends much of her time in the glass chambers of the petrol pump listening to the sufferings of her customers and giving them motherly suggestions. She enjoys her job as a consultant and advisor. The veil is shed as she gets old and she becomes quite accommodative. Even earlier, Dr. Aziz’s mother sheds her veil or purdha to rise to the exigencies of being a businesswoman, while taking care of the family’s Gemstone business in the absence of her husband due to his ill health. This aspect of purdha forms the core of Rushdie’s delineation of woman characters. Purdha or the veil defines the Muslim woman to which she adheres as an act of purity and respectfulness. All his women are more extreme in their response to the world than the males around them. He bestows most of his females with far more power and more survival capacities than his male characters. Despite the strength, his women characters are exploited.

Feminism seeks to retrieve the sense of self of the female, it endorse that a woman should be a controller rather than the controlled. In this paradigm, Rushdie portrays women characters that consciously shrug off the

traditional role and gender-traits, they are individuals who are independent and control others. Rani of Cooch Naheen is a minor character in the novel who happens to be a patron of Mian Abdulla and Nadir Khan in support of the cause of Indian Patriots who were opposing partition of India as demanded by the Muslim League on the ground that carving out a pure land for the Muslims will not serve the poor people among the community. She is a constant giver who selflessly bestows money for a cause. She appears to be very feminine and respectable.

Parvati-the witch is a crucial character in the novel who is one of the 1001 midnight's children born on the midnight of August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947. She possesses magical powers and is said to be good at witch craft. Saleem returns from Pakistan to the Magician's ghetto in India with the help of Parvati-the witch. She tries to convince Saleem to marry her but he rejects her and claims to be an impotent. Parvati casts a spell on Shiva, the rival and changeling brother of Saleem; she seduces him and gets impregnated. This is one character in the novel which approaches her sexual freedom openly. She later marries Saleem and thus her son becomes the son of Saleem too.

Rushdie's women are powerful forces and his girl characters are high spirited, always in control of their own world despite their traditional environment. In the novel, we have three girls- Evie Burns, Jamila and ToxyCatrack. Out of the three girls, two can be labeled as rebels, tomboys and brats, not signifying any female traits like gentleness, docility or physical weakness. Jamila who is aptly called by her family as the 'brass-monkey', grows up to be Jamila Singer, Pakistan's most popular and patriotic radio voice. Her character grows from a brat and a modern-educated child in Bombay who constantly fights with her sibling and especially her male friends to a much docile and feminine Jamila Singer who always lives in a *purdha* veil covering her entire body except her eyes.

Pia the daughter-in-law of NaseemGhani, the wife of HanifGhani is shown in the beginning as a career oriented woman, who is very modern and

fashionable and a heroine in the Bombay film world. After marrying Hanif, a director of movies, she loses financial independence and is made to live like a typical housewife. She is found to be unable to adjust to this more down-to-earth life and the lack of attention from the outside world as well as her husband makes her a mere stereotypical nag of a wife. She ends up having a brief extra-marital relationship with a rich producer. For a period of time, Saleem is left with his Hanif uncle and aunt and at that point she takes care of Saleem as she would do if it were her own son. She becomes extremely motherly and gentle to him.

Rushdie makes this responsible daughter-in-law stick to her mother-in-law even after the death of her husband Hanif. She moves to Pakistan along with the Reverend Mother. Her frustration and depression and her want for attention make her end up in numerous liaisons with the Pakistani cricketers and actors. She is so vulnerable that she constantly pines for attention and security. Rushdie fails to hold at least one example of an independent strong-minded woman who proclaimed sexual freedom except for Parvati-the-witch. Apart from Evie Burns all the women characters in the novel are portrayed in very traditional or stereotypical roles. Evie is definitely the opponent of the Other in many ways; she is an American and can be taken as the symbol of the new Imperialism, opposing the Post-Colonial natives and their feminine principle.

Yet another portrayal that fails to go with the feminine principle is that of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Rushdie's description of Mrs. Gandhi trespasses the norms that define the feminine principle as she is shown as a woman who superimposes an entire Post-Colonial nation. Indira Gandhi, who, in this novel is repeatedly called 'widow', is the mother of Emergency. The appellation 'widow' might be said to signify the drying up of emotions, the harshness etc. which might have led to her uncontrolled power over the country. She was a dictator during the period of Emergency. The media which was state controlled, projected her as Devi or Mother Goddess, and the slogan "Indira is

India” (1981: 427) is relayed over the media. Rushdie makes Saleem exaggerate when he records,

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 Shakti of the Gods, a multi-limbed divinity, with a centre parting and schizophrenic hair. (1981: 522)

Rushdie’s exaggeration in the portrayal of Indira Gandhi makes her character ridiculous. The widow in the novel remains a part of history and outgrows the feminine principle to the extent of Mother Goddess.

To conclude, feminist theories can be seen as a part of the Post-Colonial consciousness in the work of Rushdie. The work can be juxtaposed with the notion of Simone de Beauvoir, as stated in *The Second Sex* that one ‘becomes a woman’ and is not just born. It sinks with the theory of the post-structuralist feminist thinker, Judith Butler, who deconstructs the stereotypes of male and female stating that gender can be “flexible and free-floating”. Rushdie successfully imparts the notion of ‘Other’ to most of his characters. The protagonist Saleem, who is central to the novel, can also be read as a follower of the feminine principle despite his chauvinistic attitude. He can be termed effeminate owing to his sensitivity, both physically and psychologically. Besides, Saleem is an impotent which makes him unfit to be called anything close to masculine or macho. He becomes both father and mother to Adam, who is not his biological son. He imparts motherly love to that child and accepts him unconditionally. Despite his disintegrating and troubling body he lives only for the sake of his son. Saleem thus becomes a contributor to the feminine principle. Salman Rushdie successfully weaves feminine patterns in his characters. He rejects the masculine above feminine category because he recognizes the violence inherent in their hierarchical composition. He creates strong woman who can withstand all circumstances and finally end up successful apart from being discriminated as uneducated or weak by their male counterparts. The lives of his women characters are less dominated and

more successful when compared to his male characters like Saleem or Dr. Aziz. Salman Rushdie's pen is double edged as he creates his female characters that fall within two extremes. His women characters can be labeled into four categories as far as the novel *Midnight's Children* goes. The first category comprises of women such as Amina Sinai, Padma etc. who offer love unconditionally besides being belittled by their partners. Characters like the Reverend Mother, her daughter-in-law Pia, Parvati-the-witch etc. fall into the second category where docile women become stronger by the day due to their circumstances. Pia and Parvati go one step ahead and reach out their sexual interests. The third category comprises of Jamila Singer, a brat who turns religious and conservative as she leaves the City of Bombay for Pakistan, the land of the pure. Circumstances carve her into being very feminine. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, enters this historical metafiction as a superimposer and thoroughly commands and dictates an entire nation, she can be uniquely categorized, unmatched to any other Rushdie women. Though Rushdie vehemently detests Indira Gandhi, he indirectly proclaims that the Post-Colonial woman or the 'Other' need not be represented, as her European counterpart talks of her, since she can successfully open new avenues beyond just being recognized. If circumstances demand she can become supreme and jeopardize democracy to meet her ends. The representation of Indira Gandhi can be seen in the backdrop of Gayatri Spivak questioning the authenticity of the Europeans to patronize and represent the Third World women as the weak and vulnerable 'Other'.

### References:

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helene Tiffin. *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge , 1995
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 'Can The Subaltern Speak', reprinted in *Marxist Interpretations of Culture*. edit. Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, pp. 271-313. 1988.

- Nandy, Ashish. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Parameswaran, Uma, *Salman Rushdie's Early Fiction*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2007.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. London: Picador, 1981.
- Simone de Beauvoir. *The Prime of Life*. Trans. P.Green. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.