

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Cultural Cosmopolitan Reflection

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Abstract

This article aims to prove Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children as a cultural cosmopolitan novel through the lance of cosmopolitanism. Out of various types, cultural cosmopolitanism is my focus in this paper. Culturally, cosmopolitanism means openness to different cultures. Cosmopolitanism is a kind of cultural outlook involving an intellectual and aesthetic attitude of openness towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially from different nations. This type of cosmopolitanism refers to an ideal about culture or identity. Cultural cosmopolitans view that membership in a particular community is not essential for one's social identity. It stresses that such cultural membership is irrelevant. It refers to partiality for cultures besides one's own culture of origin as with a traveler or globally conscious person. The parochial feeling of nation and nationalism is, sometimes, an obstacle to the unity and humanitarian feeling. After the outbreak of pandemic Covid 19, people living in any corner of the world have realized- to a great extent- that the feeling of cosmopolitanism and humanism should be at the center of every human. Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children evokes people, in this cosmos, cannot be confined within the boundary of limited nationalism.

Keywords: cultural cosmopolitanism, geopolitical division, humanitarian, distributive justice

Cosmopolitanism: Critical Overview

Cosmopolitanism, if properly studied and understood from a cultural perspective, derives from two Greek words. Equivalent to those two words in English is "Cosmos" and "Polites", having the meanings "world" and "citizen" respectively. This notion was widely used by ancient philosophers such as the "Stoics", and "Cynics" to describe a universal love for humankind as a whole, irrespective of belonging to a particular nation. Daniele Conversi in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* makes a remark about the cosmopolitan view of the Stoics and the Cynics, "The Stoics, like the Cynics, saw man as a rational agent, with universal rights and citizenship in a common Kosmopolis" (34). Cultural cosmopolitanism is central to people's identity. Only a cosmopolitan viewpoint can put up itself to the political challenges of this global age, covering people of multidimensional ideals. Culture is always in the process of change; to locate culture we must look in the dialogue, the embodied actions, 'discursively rearticulated' (Bhabha 177) between individuals in particular sociocultural contexts. Talking about cultural cosmopolitanism Jeremy Waldron's remark is worth quoting; he says that cosmopolitanism "is like living in a Disneyland and thinking that one's surroundings

epitomize what it is for a cultural reality to exist"(763). Cosmopolitanism is not directly concerned with how material goods and resources are to be distributed, but is concerned mainly with the question whether cultural membership is a relevant good to be distributed. The concern of cultural cosmopolitanism is with unveiling the cultural, ethical and legal basis of political order in a world where political communities and states matter, but not exclusively. Cosmopolitanism records and reveals the multiple issues, questions, processes and problems, which affect and bind people together, irrespective of where they were born or reside or which national group they belong to. Brain Barry in *Global Justice* observes, "human beings living in a world of human beings are only incidentally members of polities" (35).

David Held, in *Legal Theory* says, "Cosmopolitanism needs to be reworked for another age. What would such cosmopolitanism amount to? In the little space available here, I cannot unpack what I take to be the multidimensional nature of cosmopolitanism. However, I would like to end on a few words about cultural cosmopolitanism" (2). Cultural cosmopolitanism does not deny cultural difference or the persistent significance of national tradition. It is not against cultural diversity. G. H. Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* states, that cultural cosmopolitanism should be understood as the capacity to mediate between national cultures, communities of fate and alternative styles of life. It encompasses the possibility of dialogue with the traditions and discourses of others with the aim of expanding the horizons of one's own framework of meaning and prejudice. Political agents who can reason from the point of view of others are better equipped to solve the challenging trans-border issues that create overlapping communities.

Kwame Anthony Appiah's view on cultural cosmopolitanism is:"Ordinary people now live in a world in which many of us are closely connected to people in other countries. Many of us were born in one country, make our livelihood in a second, are married to someone from a third." The development of cultural cosmopolitanism depends on the recognition by growing numbers of people of the increasing interconnection of political communities in diverse domains. It also depends on the development of an understanding of overlapping collective fortunes, which require collective solutions: locally, nationally, regionally and globally. Cultural cosmopolitanism, thus, emphasizes the possible fluidity of individual identity. It celebrates, as Rushdie puts it, "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs" (qtd. in Waldron 751). It is the ability to stand outside and think beyond a singular location, the location of one's birth, land, upbringing, conversion, and to reconcile civilizations that exist in various different parts of the cosmos.

After the Second World War, as a reaction against the Holocaust and other massacres, the concept of crimes against humanity becomes a generally accepted category in international law. The concept of cosmopolitan law/right started to be considered as a guiding principle to protect people from war. The Concept of universal hospitality becomes popular.

The philosophical cosmopolitans are Universalists. They believe that all humans, not only compatriots or fellow citizens, come under the same moral values. A glimpse of political/sociological and moral/ institutional cosmopolitanism becomes useful to portray a clear cut picture of cultural cosmopolitanism.

Political and sociological cosmopolitanism denies the traditional notion of nation-state politics. This type of cosmopolitanism stresses that it sees global capital as a possible threat to a nation-state. Political and sociological cosmopolitan theory is in opposition to traditional nation-state politics. Nation-state theory believes in power relations only between different state actors and excludes a global economy. Political and sociological cosmopolitanism rests upon some fundamental foundations: it acknowledges the otherness of other nationalities, acknowledges the otherness of those who are culturally different and it also acknowledges the otherness of the future and nature.

Moral and institutional cosmopolitanism is not concerned directly with the question of how global institutions are to be ordered, but its concern is with the justificatory basis of these institutions. Nothing in this interpretation of cosmopolitanism demands the idea of a world state. A moral cosmopolitan can preserve national self-determination if he/she believes that the notion of equal and impartial concern for individuals is best realized by respecting his/her claims to national sovereignty. Distributive justice depends on cosmopolitan moral view. Individuals are the ultimate units of moral worth and are entitled to equal and impartial concern regardless of their nationality. The idea of justice must also depend on institutional cosmopolitanism i.e., a world government. There is possibility of different global institutional arrangements for redistributing wealth and resources globally without administrative powers of a world state. It is only through the institutionalization of a world state and its accompanying idea of global citizenship the well-being of all individuals can be effectively accepted with equal moral concern.

Midnight's Children: a Portrayal of Cultural Cosmopolitanism

As the objective of this article is to investigate the notion of cosmopolitanism, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* -- a celebrated novel about India after the British Empire -- mainly through the observation of some of the major characters I mainly discuss Saleem - the narrator and Tai - the boatman. Saleem is exchanged with another infant at birth and then raised by his adopted parents. This private mix-up prefigures the novel's several mistakes of political history. *Midnight's Children* presents cultural mix-ups as accidents of colonialism. However, mix-ups become attitudes and positions of immigrant culture where not only the narrator is mixed up in cultures of different types but he also presents a vision that the boundaries of any sort a nation creates are erased by notions of globalism and cosmopolitanism. Indian nationalists abandoned the desire to be European. They assumed that the concept of individual rights was universal. Therefore, they wanted to be both Indians and European citizens. Saleem's lineage suggests that the idea of individual rights, the basis of the modern nation, is historically specific.

In *Midnight's Children*, Tai invokes a sense of community that is founded not on individualistic and private historical narratives of progress but on a sense of humanity as

universal, ahistorical, and timeless. The metaphor of “swallowing the world” that Saleem again and again calls upon in his attempt to narrate the nation depicts the weakness of both the historical and ahistorical models. The speechmaking of democracy and individual rights leads him to the problem of the particular posing as the universal. The rhetoric of community, the pressures of having to rise above place and time, leaves him distracted and disembodied. The new civilization, the umma--the Islamic nation--is secured by the shari’a. The shari’a, as a legislative body, serves to unite the community. Ahmad Hussein Amin, in *Muslim World*, says that it “is seen as static and immutable, free from the currents of time, applicable to all societies that accept Islam as religion” (223). Both the umma and the modern nation are secured by the figure of the unveiled woman, who, in her very exclusion, is critical to these models.

Rushdie emphasizes the popular and the unimportant rather than the traditional, the correct, and the necessary values. He suggests that such values persevere or have risen not only in new forms of racism and fundamentalism but also in forms of “planetary humanism.” By “Planetary humanism” we mean multiculturalism and in a sense some brands of cosmopolitanism. Flirting and mixing things up, Rushdie imagines new opportunities for agency and intimacy within the imposed conditions of cultural encounter. Rushdie moves to England at the age of fourteen; then after he occasionally visits the subcontinent. Timothy Brennan—a critic-- in *Myths of the Nation: Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, says that it should not be hard to understand the reason why a country with a recent and long history of colonialism was doubtful of a writer residing in the West and writing largely for a Western audience claiming to speak for entire nations (India and Pakistan), and doing so in rather unflattering ways (36).

Midnight's Children has its origin in a political situation; it has its basis of an outcome of rage and struggle against colonialism. In the text Rushdie’s anger rejects to take something simply because it is given, that counters all past authority, which carries out itself in the contemporary time. This discussion and mapping out how *Midnight's Children* attempts to present the notion of cosmopolitanism and how it works as a text resisting colonial authority through varieties of post-colonial strategies helps understand how truly the novel and successfully the text is depiction of cultural cosmopolitanism. This also intends to prove that the novel can and does work as a political tool that attempts to effect social change and that its functioning on this level equals its value as an important literary text.

The consequences of *Midnight's Children* are of several different types: the history, language, and textual authority of the colonial legacy in India are questioned and re-inscribed to empower the post-colonial subject. The mixing up of politics and literature in this case gives voice and presence to post-coloniality. The imperial imposition of silence and absence upon the colonial subject is resisted and rejected in the novel. The term “post-colonial” is complex. It should not be read and understood simply and only as a word describing a people under the rule of a conquering and occupying nation. It also should not be viewed and seen as a term that refers to a nation. After attaining

independence a nation is free to pursue an existence that is unaffected and uncontaminated by the history, language, and politics of colonial rule.

The post-colonial subject is that thing whose constructed identity is formed and informed both by impressions and words of the colonizer and the self-perceptions of the colonized subject's own nation. In terms of *Midnight's Children*, there is a distinction between the colonial and post-colonial subjects based on the nature of the way Indians react and respond to the British. The relationship of the narrator--Saleem--with the history of his family and nation in *Midnight's Children* is part of this post-colonial vision. Saleem/Rushdie--and the novel's narration invites a unification of the character and the novelist. Traditional history is seen not as a relatively factual description of the past and asan objectively reported and recorded reality; but it is presented as a story narrated by those in power. Conventional history discussed in the novel is synonymous with Eurocentric history; that is, a story of the past told with a strong prejudice toward the special interests of the European colonizer. Although using the English language, Saleem's strategic inclusion and fusion of various Indian languages create a form, which, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, use the expression, "vibrate with a new intensity" (19). He not only uses words and syntax from regional languages, but forms such as film structure and oral narrative to create a different flow of language. By such multiple means of approach to enter the language, there is a manipulation and subversion of colonial English to the extent that a new language - one that speaks to and from the postcolonial subject.

Robert Maciel says: ". . . cultural cosmopolitanism does not necessarily concern itself with the questions of rights of duties of the . . . on the relationship between cultural groups and the self." The post-colonial vision, in *Midnight's Children*, that Rushdie offers is a plurality that closely comes close to the concept of Indian culture in its diversity. Rushdie does not fully reject English language but takes it as a given, coming as it does from colonial rule. He revises and rewrites to create a vibrant language that speaks for the post-colonial subject. The past texts of Western and Eastern heritage, fundamental as they are to Rushdie's text, are combined into *Midnight's Children*, mixed in and often adulterated to fit the political needs of the post-colonial time.

Conclusion: Culture as a Cosmopolitan Construct in *Midnight's Children*

Though culture is individual, psychological, as well as social, in today's world it is a cosmopolitan construct; it exists individually as well as globally. People acquire culture by being associated with social groups. Cultural cosmopolitanism focuses on human equality. But it does not believe in universality of individuality. Therefore, boundaries of all types can be crossed and should be crossed or erased for the creation of the feeling of nearness, unity, and oneness among people living in any part of the world and following any culture. Thus, cosmopolitanism stresses the idea of a World-citizen. World-citizen denotes a person who rejects traditional geopolitical divisions resulting from national citizenship. Cosmopolitanism, as a single community of humans based on a shared morality, believes in world-government.

The notion of cosmopolitanism stresses that all human beings, regardless of their boundary making notions--citizenship, religion, political affiliation and so on--belong to a single community. The cosmopolitan notion of the world is the humanitarian world without borders. Cosmopolitanism as a principle of justice believes that the principle of distribution ought to apply to all individuals globally and not be controlled and shaped by national boundaries of any sort. Cosmopolitan distributive justice ignores membership in national culture or national groups. We all humans living in any part of the world should esteem and consider humanity at the center forgetting all kinds of differences is what the cultural cosmopolitanism discussed in *Midnight's Children*. Through the analysis of the major characters and the plot of the novel it becomes clear that there is a strong feeling of cosmopolitanism to them, which I have shown in this article. As far as my judgment to the text that I have analyzed is concerned, Rushdie is successful in presenting the notion of cosmopolitan philosophy. For further research, I recommend two deserving theoretical areas such as 'the notion of globalism,' and 'the notion of nationalism' in *Midnight's Children*.

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