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A Transnational Approach to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract:

Colonialism and post-colonialism have led to the development of transnationalism that is the interconnectivity among people and nation states in terms of the economic and social significance of boundaries. When transnational approach is applied to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), it allows researchers to analyse transnational impact on race, culture and gender not only in host countries but also in home countries. The traditional cultural heritage of India and British imperialism's impact on Indian society are told through dual identities of the narrator Saleem Sinai who has double parents. Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, a Western-trained physician, scorns his wife Naseem who could not notice the difference between mercurochrome and blood stains. As a traditional Indian wife Naseem's response to the immoral sexual desires of her husband who has adopted the Western culture is a reaction to British cultural environment in India. Saleem's mother Amina's cultural conflict caused by colonialism is emphasized because she has to carry on her traditional culture-specific daily habits in her new house bought from a colonialist without changing the order established by Methwold. Despite gaining their independence, Indians cannot get rid of the impact of British colonialism. In terms of transnationalism, Indians are considered as undeveloped, ignorant and wild by British.

Key Words:

Transnationalism, Otherness, Salman Rushdie, "Midnight's Children".

Introduction

The introduction part of this study provides brief information about colonialism, post-colonialism, transnationalism and Salman Rushdie. The main part of the study analyses six quotations cited from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*¹ (1981) in terms of transnationalism.

The need to operate the raw materials obtained through geographical discoveries beginning at the end of the 16th century and innovations like steam-power launched the process of industrialization in Europe, especially in England. Due to industrialization and mechanization, there was the need to sell overproduction, find new markets and buy larger amounts of raw materials at cheapest price. For these reasons, most developed European countries occupied territories especially in areas with no political and economic structures from the 16th century to the 20th century in terms of colonialism (Hall, 2000, p. 5). In addition to economic and political reasons for British colonialism, there was the so-called 'civilizing mission' because British people believed in the superiority of their civilization. The Eurocentric aspect of the fundamental philosophical basis for the ideology of colonialism was Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Said criticizes the Western point of view which created arbitrary geographic separation through drawing boundaries between itself and 'Other', and referring to 'Other's land as 'the land of barbarians' (Said, 1979, p.54). In this sense, transnational literature has created a discourse of 'otherness' on colonial rights which means that the indigenous people are undeveloped, ignorant and wild; speak an incomprehensible language, wear strange clothes and eat strange meals; thus, they have to be civilized and introduced to the Western civilization (Çelikel, 2011, p. 36).² According to this discourse, no one can introduce them civilization except for British people.

After the Second World War, colonies became independent through national liberation movement of the 1960s which launched the period of post-colonialism. Many migrants went to European countries not only for security but also to increase their social and economic opportunities. However, residents that remain at home are also affected by the transnational experience. "The knowledge and exchanges in which they are involved change how they see

¹ This article is an extended and improved version of abstract paper titled "Gender, Class, Culture and Race in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*", verbally presented at 8th International Conference on Culture and Civilization on 22nd August 2020 in Trabzon, Turkey.

² Quotes from Turkish references were translated into English by the author of this study.

themselves and the rest of their world and differ significantly from those individuals that do not have similar relationships” (Lee and Francis, 2009, p. 227). Colonialism and post-colonialism have led to the development of transnationalism.

Transnationalism is the interconnectivity among people and nation states in terms of the economic and social significance of boundaries. Transnationalism, which was the area of interest of international economists to define labour and capital flows, was then applied on migration and diaspora studies. Transnational literature is about transnational impact on race, culture and gender not only in host countries but also in home countries (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, pp. 129-56). One of the authors who has experienced the consequences of transnationalism is Salman Rushdie. He was born to an affluent family in Bombay, India in June, 1947. Two months after Rushdie’s birth, India gained its independence at midnight on August 15th. He was raised in a wealthy Muslim family. Rushdie who graduated from the University of Oxford in 1968 moved to Pakistan because his family had immigrated there after Partition. Then, he returned to England where he worked not only as an actor but also as a copywriter. After India had gained its independence, political and social tensions between Hindus and Muslims which divided India into two separate countries and also caused wide-scale riots that led to death of hundreds of people. Violence together with independence were the beginning of many wars and coups. (SparkNotes Editors, 24th August 2020). Political uprising together with the threat of violence in the first thirty years of Indian independence shape the story for Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

A Transnational Approach to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

The novel, *Midnight’s Children*, is about India that gets rid of British colonialism to gain independence and the division of British India. Like Rushdie himself, Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, was born in Bombay on August 15th, 1947 that means the midnight of Indian independence. At that midnight hour 1001 children were born. Each of these children had an extraordinary talent. Saleem is one of these children. Saleem has sensitive sense of smell and power of telepathy. The events of his life are parallel events in the development of India in the 20th century. The traditional cultural heritage of India and British imperialism’s impact on Indian society are told through dual identities of Saleem Sinai who has double parents. The narration of the book is presented to the readers in fragments due to split personality of the narrator Saleem Sinai. Introductory paragraph of *Midnight’s Children* is

about the narrator Saleem Sinai's birth: "I was born in the city of Bombay... on August 15th, 1947. On the stroke of midnight,... at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world" (Rushdie, 1995, p. 9). The novel's introductory paragraph declares the organic connection of Indian independence period to the British Empire. Establishing parallels between his own life and the history of his country, the narrator Saleem Sinai, in fact, reveals the life in India to be shaped by colonialism. This contradiction in narration also reflects Saleem's destiny to be moulded by colonialism impact.

Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz, is a physician who goes to Europe during the colonial period for being trained in medicine. After his return to India he gets married with an Indian woman Naseem. In response to his sexual desires, Naseem says: "I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls be like them! Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any... bad word woman" (Rushdie, 1995, p. 34). Traumatic consequences of transnationalism can be seen in people's marriage life belonging to different cultures. As a traditional Indian wife Naseem's response to the European and immoral sexual desires of her husband who has adopted the Western culture is, in fact, a reaction to British presence and its cultural environment in India.

On the eve of Amritsar massacre, doctor Aziz uses mercurochrome to disinfect the wounds of protesters. When Aziz gets home, his wife Naseem considers mercurochrome stains on his clothes to be blood stains and says: "Why must you make a fool of me even when you're hurt? Must your wife not look after you, even?" (Rushdie, 1995, p. 35). When Aziz informs Naseem that it is mercurochrome stains which are red medicine, she seizes clothes, runs taps and freezes. She thinks that her husband does it on purpose to make her look stupid. In order to defend herself, she says that she is not stupid because has read several books. Here, Aziz scorns and excludes Naseem who could not notice the difference between mercurochrome and blood stains. In order not to be humiliated alongside her Western-trained husband, Naseem emphasizes that she has read several books. Naseem experiences identity crisis. On the one hand, not knowing what mercurochrome is strengthens Naseem's indigenous identity as an ignorant person. On the other hand, putting forward the 'reading' model to hide her ignorance indicates that she no longer sticks to traditional values as an Indian woman.

When Saleem's parents Ahmed and Amina Sinai wants to buy the house of Methwold who is one of British colonialists being about to leave Bombay during the days of India's gaining independence, Methwold says the following things about colonialism: "You'll admit we... built your roads, schools, railway trains, parliamentary system... Taj Mahal was falling

down until an Englishman bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly independence” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 96). Methwold tries to justify colonialism through so-called British ‘civilizing mission’. In this sense, he excludes the indigenous people who are considered undeveloped and ignorant.

When - as a condition of sale of the house - Methwold requests them not to change anything in the house until British have left completely the country, Ahmed Sinai’s wife Amina says to her husband as follows: “For two months we must live like those Britishers?... No water near the pot [in the bathrooms]. I never believed, but it’s true, my God, they wipe their bottoms with paper only! (Rushdie, 1995, p. 96). Methwold’s house represents colonial administration in India. Amina’s cultural conflict caused by colonialism is emphasized because she has to carry on her traditional culture-specific daily habits in a house of a colonialist without changing the order established by Methwold. This obligation shows the superiority of British culture over Indian culture. There is also irony because there is no Indian independence though they are said to have gained their independence. Saleem’s stepfather Ahmed Sinai is unconsciously about to buy the house of Saleem’s biological father Methwold. Saleem has a split personality because of his Christian origin from his biological father Methwold, Muslim from his stepfather Ahmed Sinai and Hindu from his biological mother Vanita. Therefore, his split personality represents India and its split reality both in religious and political aspects.

Saleem’s baby sitter Mary makes the following comment to her social radical husband Joseph about the struggle for independence and the clashes between Muslims and Sikhs: “Even if it’s true about killing, they’re Hindu and Muslim people only; why get good Christian folk mixed up in their fight? Those, ones have killed each other for ever and ever” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 105). In parallel to their split Indian identities, the Indian couple Mary and Joseph are mouthpiece of Christian product of the ‘Christian mission’. In her own cultural perception Mary recreates the history of India which she regards as secondary. West’s perception of history which is based on rewriting the history of the third world trivializes the history of non-western countries and keeps itself out of this categorization. However, the history which is trivialized by West through keeping itself out of this categorization is the history created and excluded by colonialism. This Indian couple is criticized as they are indifferent to problems in their country.

Conclusion

Having created a discourse of ‘otherness’ on colonial rights, transnational literature deals with the impact of colonialism on race, culture and gender not only in host countries but also in home countries. Establishing parallels between his own life and the history of his country, the narrator Saleem Sinai, in fact, reveals the life in India to be shaped by British colonialism. Furthermore, Saleem’s split personality represents India and its split reality both in religious and political aspects. As a Western-trained physician Aziz scorns and excludes his Indian wife Naseem who could not notice the difference between mercurochrome and blood stains. As a British colonialist Methwold tries to justify colonialism through what the British call ‘civilizing mission’. It seems that Salman Rushdie neither extols the superiority of British culture nor celebrates Indian culture; thus, he has a critical approach to both cultures. Despite gaining their independence, Indians cannot get rid of the impact of British colonialism. In terms of transnationalism, Indians are considered as undeveloped, ignorant and wild by British.

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