

Local vs. Cosmopolitan: A Comparison of *The Home and the World* and *Midnight's Children*

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This essay through a comparative study of Tagore's The Home and the World, originally written in Bengali, and Rushdie's Midnight's Children highlights the disparities between Indian-English writing and Indian regional language literature that critics have drawn attention to by claiming that while the former aims at a conversation with the world, the latter concentrates on specific local situations. The two novels are separated by a span of sixty-six years. However, the cosmopolitan/local dichotomy between Indian-English and regional language Indian literature and not chronology, the traditional historical read, has been the governing principle for this comparative study of these two texts.

Key Words: *Cosmopolitan Focus, Concentration on the local, Indian-English Literature, Regional Language Indian Writing*

Introduction

Critical discourse has distinguished Indian writing in English and regional language Indian literature in terms of a basic dichotomy of intentions – the former's aim at having a conversation with the world and the latter's concentration on specific local situations. Salman Rushdie dismissed regional language writings from the canon of postcolonial Indian literature on charges of parochialism and backwardness of regional literature, which, in his opinion, make this literature "incapable of a conversation with the world" ("Damme," 2003:151)¹. Countering Rushdie's charge, S. Shankar has claimed that the basis for Rushdie's biased exclusion of regional language writings from the canon of postcolonial Indian literature is the western academy's tendency of privileging transnational postcolonialism, which aims at a conversation with the world, over vernacular postcolonialism² that concentrates on local concerns and issues. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has observed that while vernacular writers aim at a local audience familiar with the Indian circumstances, Indian writers writing in English "are positioned to look in two different directions, towards their Indian readers on one side and their readers in the West in another" (2001). Pankaj Mishra contends that what Rushdie calls "conversation with the world" is actually a conversation with Europe and America, and has argued against considering literature that attempts to figure out the society from which it issues as "parochial" and inferior to

¹ Salman Rushdie in his introduction to an anthology of Indian writings published on the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence declared, "prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period [the first fifty years of Indian independence] by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a more interesting body of work than most of what has been produced in the 'sixteen official languages' of India, the so called vernacular languages, during the same time" (146).

² Shankar has pointed out that vernacular suggests an orientation towards rootedness, cultural autonomy, and specific locality (85). Vernacular sensibility is inextricably connected with an indigenous culture and articulates the nuances, the specificities, and the peculiarities which distinguish that culture from others.

the literature that can hold “a conversation with the world” (2003). According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, as a result of their emphasis on local issues regional language Indian literature cannot cater to the tastes of western audiences, and hence, even when the regional classics are translated into English, they do not get attention from the academic establishments or the publication/distribution system outside the country (2000:180).

Rushdie as well as the anti-Rushdie critics thus demarcate Indian-English literature and regional language Indian writings on the basis of their focus on a world-wide and a local audience, and their consequent articulation of a transnational and a vernacular sensibility. These have also been the criteria determining the reception of Indian writing in English and regional language Indian literature outside the country. Rushdie’s novels, as Keith Booker remarks, have “widespread critical acceptance in the West as masterpieces of postcolonial or postmodern sophistication” (“Midnight’s Children,”1999:309). In fact, *Midnight’s Children* has been acclaimed by *The New York Times* as “a continent finding its voice.” In his editorial introduction to the special issue of the *New Yorker*, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, Bill Buford has commented, “To be an Indian novelist is to be something that has been changing, utterly especially since 1981. That was the year when Salman Rushdie published *Midnight’s Children*, a book that, most authors [. . .] would grudgingly acknowledge, made everything possible” (qtd. in Kumar, 2000:221). The literary and aesthetic merit of Rushdie’s work cannot be questioned. Yet, the claim that it is superior to all Indian literature written prior to it, over years and in a variety of languages, is an overgeneralization. Such an attempt bears evidence of the tendency of the western world to prioritize what is easily accessible to it and judge literature from the Third World in terms of its own expectations. Amitava Kumar criticizes this tendency in his discussion of the above mentioned special issue of the *New Yorker*. Describing its cover page, with the picture of Lord Ganesha browsing through a few books and a white couple dressed for safari in khakis staring agape in wonder, he remarks: “Nothing could have better announced this as the season of the discovery of India. As readers we enter the dark jungle of unknowing. We follow others who are lost but who nevertheless hold out their privileged ignorance like maps” (2000:221).

Rushdie who presents a grand meta-narrative of India, which on the one hand fulfills the western expectations from Third World literature and on the other is easily understandable even by an audience with little or no knowledge of the Indian situation and history, is attributed the status of the voice of this world of unknowing. In sharp contrast, despite Rabindranath Tagore being the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for his collection of poems *Gitanjali*, which suggests he is more than a regional writer writing in a regional language, his novels as Michael Sprinker has pointed out, “[H]ave suffered in their Western reception for being suffused in the lifeworld of Indian civilization while not appearing sufficiently exotic to Westerners, who are inclined to want ‘Eastern mysticism’ from such figures as Tagore” (1996:204).

This essay through a comparative study of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Tagore’s *The Home and the World*, originally written in Bengali, highlights the disparities between Indian-English writing and Indian regional language literature that critics have drawn attention to. The distinct intentions and visions that characterize *Midnight’s Children* and *The Home and the World*, however, do not accord superiority to one novel over the other, but indicate that they

are varied but equally authentic and credible voices of a diverse nation. Although *The Home and the World* and *Midnight's Children* are separated by a span of sixty-six years and belong to British and independent India respectively, these two novels emblemize the cosmopolitan/local dichotomy between Indian-English and regional language Indian literature that critical studies have prominently highlighted. This and not chronology, the traditional historical read, has been the governing principle for this comparative study of these two texts.

1. Home and the World & the Swadeshi Movement

In *The Home and the World* Tagore questions the ideology and the practices of a particular anti-British movement of Bengal: the Swadeshi Movement (1905-11). Familiarity with the history and the socio-cultural milieu of Bengal of the time period depicted, and Tagore's own standing on the socio-political questions explored in this novel are prerequisites for understanding the work. Furthermore, a sensibility rooted in Bengali culture articulated in the work definitely makes it less accessible to an international audience. Concentration on the local, however, does not in any way erode the merit of *The Home and the World*. The novel is a brilliant examination of the different aspects of the discourse of anti-British nationalism as embodied in the Swadeshi Movement. Tagore compels his readers to consider the negative shades of a movement which is generally esteemed for establishing Bengal's reputation as the vanguard of Indian nationalism by upsetting the settled fact of partition of the province and introducing new techniques of mobilization of Indian politics.³

Tagore was initially one of the pioneers of the movement. However, as Sangeeta Ray points out by 1906 Tagore had begun to be disillusioned by the extremist overtones that the movement was acquiring, as it was being transformed into a full scale resistance movement against the British government. After the summer of 1906, he withdrew from the movement to devote his energy to village reconstruction efforts and educational experiments at Shantiniketan. Between 1905 and 1907 the Swadeshi Movement adopted a program of complete boycott of British administration. At this time, as Ray states, Tagore became sensitive to the needs of the peasant classes, which in eastern Bengal constituted mainly of the Muslim population (2000:94). Sumit Sarkar states that in 1907 Tagore drew attention to the class bias of the movement by arguing that the "peasants were [being] expected to buy inferior and costly goods and face Gurkha lathis . [. . .] for the sake of a cause that must have seemed distant and abstract to them, and that they were being asked to do all this by 'babus' who had treated them so long with contemptuous indifference or at best with condescension" (1973:94). Tagore's withdrawal from the Movement was criticized as a betrayal by a significant section of both the moderates and the extremists.⁴ *The Home and the World*, as Ray suggests, "can be described as Tagore's response

³ For discussion on the Swadeshi Movement, see Joya Chatterji.

⁴ During the Swadeshi Movement for the first time there developed a split in Indian political thinking. One section of the nationalists, known as the moderates, sought to annul the partition and secure administrative reforms through negotiations and petitions. Disappointed with the failure of the moderate methods, the other section, "the extremists" aimed to compel the British to submit to their demands by developing a mass movement through rigorous pursuit of Swadeshi, boycott, and picketing. Revolutionary terrorism i.e. the attempt to counter growing government repression through the bomb and pistol was a development out of the policy of extremism.

to his critics” (2000:95). He had earlier in 1908 defined his standpoint when he had argued in a letter to Abala Bose, “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live” (qtd in Sen,2001). In *The Home and the World*, claims Ranajit Guha, Tagore projects his personal preoccupation with “the individual’s freedom to choose his own way of serving the cause of social and political emancipation” (1993:78).

2. Concentration on the Local

Tagore’s exposition of the darker facets of the Swadeshi Movement is rendered convincing by his investment in the issue through characters. We perceive the events and their consequences through the eyes of the morally upright Nikhil, the misled Bimala, and the dubious Sandip, all three of whom are narrators in the novel. The novel unfolds as Bimala’s Story, Nikhil’s Story, and Sandip’s Story. The three principal characters independently voice their individual subject positions. The same situations and events are thus often projected from three different angles of vision, which highlights their multiple dimensions to the reader. As the narratives of Bimala, Nikhil, and Sandip reveal their thought processes, they come across as convincing human beings caught in a whirlpool of emotions, desires, principles, beliefs, and conventions. Nikhil is the Tagorean thinker embodying Tagore’s humanitarian principles. The assertion that Nikhil is the unreconstructed voice of Tagore’s political views in the novel may be regarded as problematic. This assertion is, however, justified given the fact that *The Home and the World* can be considered as Tagore’s answer to criticism against his withdrawal from the Swadeshi Movement, and the beliefs, ideas, and political standpoint articulated by Nikhil have been repeatedly voiced by Tagore himself in his responses, lectures, essays, and even songs and poems. The argument that Tagore makes in his letter to Abala Bose is clearly echoed in Nikhil’s declaration, “I am willing [. . .] to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for the Right which is far greater than my country” (29). Among the protagonists of Tagore’s novels, Nikhil mirrors most closely Tagore’s own aristocratic social position and his socio-political as well as spiritual ideals.⁵

Nikhil’s commitment to humanist values and his consequent opposition to the Swadeshi Movement for its propagation of destruction and hatred, and use of coercion to compel to submission those opposed to it alienates him from the mainstream thought of the time and also from his wife Bimala, who begins to ardently endorse those thoughts. Tagore remained opposed to ideals that subordinated the individual to the collective. In a letter to C.F Andrews he stated that patriotism “is proud of its bulk [. . .] It talks of unity but forgets that true unity is that of freedom. Uniformity is unity in bondage” (qtd. in Quayum, 2005). To Nikhil attempts to force the poor Muslim traders to identify with a cause that entails economic sufferings for them are unjust and unacceptable. Bandana Purkayastha argues that Tagore did not accept any set of practices that espoused a good cause, but exploited and demeaned other groups for its fulfillment (50). In fact, this was a primary reason for his staunch opposition to nationalism. In his essays

⁵ The criticisms that I have surveyed have equated Nikhil with Tagore. I am aware that studies can prove that Nikhil is simply one of Tagore’s characters and not the voice of the author.

on “Nationalism” (1917), Tagore criticized nationalism for not permitting man to “develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another,” and being the manifestation of “the organized self-interest of people, where it is least human and least spiritual” (qtd. in Quayum,2005). Nikhil anticipates this argument in his question to Sandip, who declares himself to be a worshipper of God in the form of the country, “how is it you propose to conduct your worship of God by hating other countries in which He is equally manifest?” (37). Nikhil denounces revolutionary terrorism practiced by the Swadeshis as a psychological legacy of colonial domination when he remarks, “you have been so used to submit to domination, you have come to believe that to make others submit is a kind of religion” (131). Tagore reiterates this thought in “Nationalism in India” (1917), where he states that the goals of the extremists were “based on Western history” (qtd. in Quayum, 2005).

The kind of nationalism that Nikhil opposes is essentially destructive in nature. He has been a pioneer of “Swadeshi” much before the concept had been popularized. Nikhil has exclusively embraced the positive aspect; he has been engaged in, what can be defined as, “constructive Swadeshi” as opposed to Sandip’s “destructive” Swadeshi. As Indrani Mitra points out, Tagore himself adhered to the philosophy of “constructive” Swadeshi (1995:247). He withdrew to rural Bengal and continued his experimentations in education and village work. However, Nikhil’s quite “constructive” Swadeshi, devoid of inflammatory rhetoric and paraphernalia, remains unappreciated. In his essays and letters, Tagore had denounced nationalism as a highly intoxicating and addictive sentiment that breeds radicalism and passionate excitement.⁶ As *The Home and the World* implies, Nikhil’s Swadeshi and by extension Tagore’s Swadeshi failed to capture popular imagination as it did not evoke such excitement.

Critics have claimed that what made Tagore’s and his protagonist Nikhil’s pursuit of “constructive” Swadeshi possible was their aristocratic class position. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar argue that Tagore’s brand of politics emphasizing the cultural, the symbolic, and the creative, over the active or the violent was a result of his class position. He belonged to the landed gentry and hence, like Nikhil, had the financial means to execute “constructive” nationalist projects (1997:83). Mitra contends that since Tagore belonged to one of the wealthiest landowning families of the time, his sympathies were aligned with this group (1995:252). According to Ray, Tagore’s as an intellectual and financial status allowed him to continue his “constructive” work in a “tradition that resembled a benevolent feudalism” (2000:99). In her words, “Nikhil exemplifies Tagore’s beliefs on the function of an aristocratic patriotic leader” (2000:97).

The last representative of an aristocratic family, Nikhil is a preserver of the order and stability of home. Home for him is not just his mansion but his entire estate. Nikhil is conscious of the heterogeneous religious character of his home, and is aware that a movement with distinct Hindu overtones that deliberately overlooks this heterogeneity can entail detrimental consequences. His negative perception of the Swadeshi Movement proves true when it ravages his home beyond repair. The threat to the social order represented by Nikhil is posed not by the

⁶ The letter referred to here in particular is written from New York, and is dated December 20, 1920, and the essays are Tagore’s various essays on nationalism.

masses, but by self-appointed bourgeois representatives of the masses like Sandip and his followers, who are far from identifying the true needs of the people they claim to represent. Sandip belongs to the ranks of the educated elite. Mitra draws attention to the fact that, with the exception of Amulya, Sandip's followers are never addressed by their names. They are referred to as the "graduate," the "undergraduate," "the history student," and the "Master of Arts" (1995:253). This clearly implies that they are affiliated with the educated elite and not the peasant masses.

Swadeshi intrudes into Nikhil's mansion and his estate in the form of Sandip. Contrary to Nikhil, the preserver, Sandip is the agent of change. Fiery, passionate, manipulative, and a master rhetorician, Sandip represents the view point orthogonal to Nikhil's. Tagore had been averse to nationalism, because, as he stated in his essay "Nationalism in India," he thought it "upset man's moral balance, [and] obscure[ed] his human side" (qtd. in Quayum,2005). While in Nikhil we find an aversion towards nationalism on this ground, Sandip argues that one must "set aside [. . .] conscience by putting the country in its place" (127). According to Homi Bhabha, there are two ideas of the nation: the "pedagogical" and the "performative." The "pedagogical" emphasizes the idea of an imagined unity, where as the "performative" takes into account the heterogeneity of national life with its various conflicts and struggles.⁷ Nikhil adheres to the performative idea; he is sensitive to the growing split between the Hindus and the Muslims in the Swadeshi period. He argues that any political move should be based not on coercion but on consensus of all sections of the population. Sandip, on the other hand, adopts the pedagogical notion for political convenience. He prefers to subjugate the unrelenting Muslims by force and attempts to project the vision of a homogenous Hindu India revolting against its foreign conquerors.

Sandip, however, does not simply represent Nikhil's opposite ideology: a different version of patriotism, or communalism as opposed to Nikhil's secularism. He is a character with distinct negative traits. Critics have differed in their interpretation of Sandip. In the reading of Ghosh and Sarkar, he is the fiery, passionate Don Juan, the opposite of Nikhil, the calm rationalist (1997:76). Sprinker argues that "Sandip is intended to represent less an ordinary criminal or sinner than the quite different figure of the Nietzschean superman, the transvaluer of all values (1996:210). I, however, argue that since in *The Home and the World* Tagore intended not only to investigate conflicting nationalist discourses but also to highlight the negative impact of the Swadeshi Movement, Sandip is projected as the worst kind of nationalist leader. Tanika Sarkar has observed that Bengali literature of the time often focused not so much on the hostile relationship with the British, but on the damages caused by native villains like the urbanized "babu," the absentee landlord, and the Shylockian usurer (2001:259). Sandip, the urbanized "babu" leader, who claims to lead the subaltern masses, belongs to this category of native villains. By the last third of the novel he is no more than a scheming villain, whose relegation of the movement and concerns for the country to a position secondary to his own interests is complete. Sandip's unprincipled individualism destroys the equanimity of both Nikhil's subjects and his family.

Sandip's seduction of Bimala, mainly through the power of his rhetoric, is a challenge to the very institution of monogamy. He argues, "'Affinity!' Why should there be only one? [. . .]

⁷ For further discussion, see Homi Bhaba "Dissemi-Nation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation."

I have discovered many in my own life up to now [. . .] She has also discovered her own affinity to me” (48). Although Sandip apparently seeks to empower Bimala by declaring her superiority to him and proclaiming her to be the Mother Goddess synonymous with the country and the Queen Bee of the Swadeshi workers, he is averse to Bimala mastering the strength of resisting him or superseding him as Amulya’s mentor. Sandip’s adherence to dual standards manifested in this response to Bimala becomes further evident when he, who claims to represent the concerns of the impoverished masses, is shown to crave wealth. While Nikhil, the believer in the Tagorean passivist universalist philosophy, is portrayed as the idealist, the extremist leader is depicted as one who seeks to blur distinctions between truth and untruth, right and wrong to serve his own ends. Sandip is the opportunist, who invokes ruin on others but himself escapes the repercussions of his own actions: he escapes to Calcutta while Amulya is killed and Nikhil is fatally wounded in the communal riots that his activities in Nikhil’s estate unleash.

Tagore’s depiction of Sandip as an irredeemably dark character reflects his strong disapproval of the means adopted by the Swadeshi Movement and the price paid by it to secure the annulment of the partition. However, some aspects of the movement which are projected negatively in the novel such as worshipping the country as god or mother and deliberately invoking religious symbols had proved to be very effective in the context of the Movement. Moreover, the political extremism of the Movement emblemized by Sandip was the result of disillusionment with moderate methods of resistance. There are different views about Tagore’s discontent with the Swadeshi agenda as reflected in *The Home and the World*. According to Ghosh and Sarkar, Tagore, who belonged to the aristocracy, ignored “the street politics (mass politics) of the nationalist movement and chose to advocate social reform and cultural advancement” (1997:78). Ray states that Tagore’s opposition to nationalism fails to take into account the ideological difference between bourgeois nationalism and nationalitarianism, which explained the involvement of the colonized “masses” in different kinds of nationalist struggles (2000:99). I would say that Tagore’s disapproval of the Swadeshi Movement, as is evident in his portrayal of Sandip in addition to other implications, asserts his conviction that the end alone cannot justify the means.

In *The Home and the World* tumult created by the Swadeshi Movement jeopardizes the order of Nikhil’s estate and also taints the honor of his family through the seduction of Bimala by Sandip. Tagore’s depiction of Bimala intertwines the nationalist question with the woman’s question. Bimala is the site on which conflicting discourses of nationalism unfold, because, as Ghosh and Sarkar remark, “Bimala finds herself straddling two myths: that of the Eastern ‘spiritual’ inspiration eulogized by Sandip, and that of the Western political, liberated and educated woman constructed by Nikhilesh” (1997:81). Partha Chatterjee suggests that the discourse of nationalism was essentially gendered in nature. It identified women as representatives of the space of “home,” the last citadel of traditional values (1990:247-48). *The Home and the World* illustrates the harsh consequences of a woman’s inability to effectively negotiate the transition from the tradition of home to the modernity of the world. Chatterjee points out that even when women were allowed to venture into the public sphere, they were expected to preserve their sanctity of conduct, in sharp contrast to the men who were capitulating to the pressures of the outside world (1990:247-48). Bimala falls short of this ideal feminine role visualized by nationalism. The denouement of her failure to temper the world with the

spirituality of her home, and, instead, allowing the duality of the two realms to collapse is the loss of her surrogate son Amulya and the impending death of her husband. Bimala's predicament hints at the inability of the nationalist discourse to provide an answer to the women's question beyond its defined parameters, and Tagore's endorsement of the role for women advocated by the nationalist patriarchy.

Bimala exemplifies patriarchy's denial of individuality to women. To both Nikhil and Sandip she is their construct. For Sandip she is merely an object of his desire. Nikhil's emancipatory project that grants Bimala the freedom of education and the right of entering the world is intended only to fashion her into a suitable companion for him. Nikhil is thus deeply grieved to find that his modernizing mission prompts Bimala to aspire to a subject position independent of him. Bimala, however, is never completely subservient to either man. Although in her initial days of matrimony she is conditioned by a sense of inferiority to her husband, she refuses to abide by all his prescriptions of modernization; she disapproves of his excessive goodness and is critical of Nikhil's giving in to Sandip's extorting tactics. The significant moment of Bimala's entry into the world is chosen not by Nikhil but by Bimala herself. At certain points she even overpowers Sandip. Despite her intoxicating attraction to him, Bimala does not fail to perceive his diabolical nature, and with the very power that Sandip pretends to invest in her, Bimala succeeds in freeing Amulya from his mesmerizing grip. Yet, she is portrayed as completely lacking the capability and preparedness to confront the world, especially the current of nationalism which in the novel emerges as a destructive force. She allows her attraction for Sandip and the elevated pedestal he places her on to completely overshadow her past as well as present perceptions of the selfish and greedy traits of his character and disrupt the stability of her marital life. Bimala, whom Nikhil had envisioned as evolving into his perfect companion, degenerates into a seductress when she attempts to use not only her intellectual prowess but also her physical beauty to persuade her husband into banishing foreign goods from his market.

At the conclusion of the novel, Sandip is partly redeemed when he returns Bimala's ornaments and the gold coins, Nikhil is rendered a martyr, but Bimala's life becomes perpetually conditioned by her failure to effectively negotiate the gap between the terrains of the home and the world. Tagore had been concerned with the women's question since his novel *Gora* (1910), and he resolved it for himself by unequivocally prescribing a traditional role for women in *Char Adhyay* ("Four Episodes," 1934). *The Home and the World* seems to affirm Tagore's faith in nineteenth century male reformism and marks a movement towards his endorsement of a partially reformed traditional role for women in *Char Adhyay*.

As the discussion reflects, like most regional language writings, *The Home and the World* mandates an awareness of the historical backdrop of the period it depicts and contemporary socio-political discourses along with Tagore's stand point on them, especially on nationalism and the women's question. The novel also makes references to a variety of Bengali-Hindu cultural markers, some of which are explained in the English translation through footnotes. For instance, Bimala's reverence for Nikhil finds expression in her taking the dust of his feet. Bimala's giving away her ornaments to Sandip is a significant gesture because a married Bengali woman wears ornaments to indicate her solicitude for her husband's welfare and for the duties entrusted to her. With the death of the husband, ornaments are cast aside as a mark of the widow's renunciation of

the world. Hence, the giving up of ornaments by a married woman is an act of exceptional fortitude. Bimala and Nikhil are not able to meet frequently in the day time as it was considered inappropriate for the husband to visit the inner quarters except during times of meal and rest. Bimala is referred to as the Chota Rani and her elder sister-in-law as the Bara Rani because in joint families the women were addressed in terms of their ranks as junior and senior, although a junior person could wield power which was contingent upon her husband's position. Two relationships in the novel, Nikhil's relationship with his sister-in-law and Bimala's sister/brother relationship with Amulya, also derive their significance from Bengali cultural ethos. With Bimala and his world being lost to him, Nikhil turns to his sister-in-law for solace and nostalgically recalls the bond of intimacy he had shared with her as a child and a young adult. The sister-in-law is also shown to be constantly indulgent to and protective of Nikhil. In Bengali households a sister-in law and a younger brother-in-law often share a special relationship of affection and friendship; Tagore himself was closely bonded to his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi. On the other hand, Bimala's motherly affection for Amulya, which helps to break Sandip's spell over her, draws on the fact that in the Bengali family an elder sister is considered to be a surrogate mother for her younger brother, to whom, in terms of importance, her position is secondary only to the mother. It is thus obvious that the novel presupposes an audience from Bengal in particular and India in general. In contrast to such an orientation, *Midnight's Children* with its trope of hybridity, attempt at reproducing a heteroglossic India, and creating a national allegory is aimed at a transnational readership.

3. Focus on the Cosmopolitan: Reproducing a Heteroglossic India

With an orientation sharply divergent from *The Home and the World*, *Midnight's Children* endorses the cosmopolitan/local binary which critical discourse has identified as constituting the principal distinction between Indian-English literature and regional language writings. In *Midnight's Children*, like an outsider or to make India easily accessible to an outsider, Rushdie takes a sweeping glance at the country superficially evoking its complex plural nature without any effort to concentrate on specific issues that are of immense importance for the insiders who have to live with them, and to which regional language writers aiming at an inside audience are usually attentive. *Midnight's Children* does function as a road map leading the unfamiliar western audiences (symbolized by the white couple dressed for safari on the cover of the *New Yorker*) into what appears to be the unknown exotic zone of India. This explains why the work has been gradually appropriated into theoretical discourse about nation, history, and their narrativity, although it was initially estimated as only a comic, irreverent, and high spirited novel about a fantastic protagonist whose birth coincided with the independence of India.⁸

While *The Home and the World* depicts India of a particular time period beset by specific concerns, *Midnight's Children* attempts to present as it were an all encompassing heteroglossic vision of India. Rushdie seems to have created a modern day version of the epic *Mahabharata*,

⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee has noted this change in the critical estimation of *Midnight's Children*. For further discussion, see Mukherjee "Introduction."

within the grand scope of which can be located all significant aspects of modern Indian experience. Like the *Mahabharata* of which it is said that whatever is not in the *Mahabharata* is not in Bharata (India), *Midnight's Children* simulates the sense of capturing the infinitely diverse elements that constitute modern India. Through its use of the epic conventions of numerous digressions and narration of multiple stories woven into each other, the novel seems to include all aspects of Indian life from Bollywood movies, myths, and legends to class conflicts and political autocracy. The central trope of the novel, the exchange of the babies, is a very popular Bollywood movie theme; specific reference to Bollywood is also made through the mention of Saleem's uncle Hanif Aziz, an unsuccessful movie-maker, and his actress wife Pia. Several myths and legends are invoked as Saleem's fable like story unfolds. Reference is made to the battle of Kuruksetra and to a host of characters from the Hindu epics such as Brahma, Vishnu, Rama, Arjuna, and Bhima. Along with the mention of different Hindu gurus and saints, there are multiple references to the *Koran* and Muhammad, especially in Ahmed Sinai's preoccupations with reordering the *Koran*. Mujeebuddin Syed suggests that although Saleem identifies himself with the elephant-headed god Ganesh, because of his nose and his love for writing, he actually plays the role of Vishnu throughout the novel. Like Lord Vishnu he sees himself as the agent of everything that happens in the world of the text, and presents his characters as being so much a part of him that they appear like Vishnu's various avatars to be avatars of Saleem (1999:154). Saleem's Vishnu like stance that Syed draws attention to is apparent in his self-definition as, "I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am every one everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine" (457-58). This self-description echoes the *Bhagavat Gita* where Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu of that age, defines himself as everything and everyone, the beginning, the existence, and the end of the world.

The names of the characters in the novel have mythic resonances. Shiva is the Hindu god of destruction and thus in the novel the midnight's child Shiva is an embodiment of chaos, a threat to order and stability. Parvati, the daughter of the Mountain King Himalayas, is Shiva's wife and the mother goddess; in *Midnight's Children* Parvati and Shiva, the only midnight's child who is not rendered impotent, together create life in the form of Aadam. Durga is the name for Parvati in her incarnation as the destroyer of evil; Padma or the lotus is the national flower and an emblem of peace. The last name Sinai, as Timothy Brennan suggests, is a cross between the secular philosopher Ibn Sina and the failed Muslim prophet Ibn Sinan. Brennan states that Sinai means barrenness, infertility, and end, and, therefore, the protagonist's last name "prepares us for the castration of the *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's future as 'bits of voiceless dust,' and the apocalypse of history with which the novel closes" (1989:93).

Various other aspects of Indian life are also touched upon. Religious charlatanism, a common practice in India, is parodied through Cyrus, who is transformed into "India's richest guru" (322). Syed detects traits of Sufism in the text. He states that Saleem's feverish state that makes him eloquent is comparable to Sama, the feverish state of religious exaltation in Sufism. Syed points out that Padma often refers to Saleem as the "Madman from somewhere," and madness is an attribute of the Sufi tradition (155). The Indian Communist party, a formidable but not fully realized opposition to the ruling Congress Government, are represented through the magicians of the Magicians Ghetto; the neglected and deprived subalterns for whom

independence did not bring much promise find a place in the novel through Padma, while the conflict between Saleem and Shiva emblemizes the clash of the haves and the have-nots. Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency and Sanjay Gandhi's vasectomy project symbolize erasure of the democratic prospects generated by independence, and castration of the Midnight's Children epitomize the temporary lapse of hopes of natural growth and development in the country. This panoramic vision of India presented in Rushdie's epic saga is, however, essentially the gaze of the outsider or a gaze meant for the outsider. As Tim S.Gauthier comments, "Rushdie can be perceived as approaching the idea of India, the question of India, from a largely Western point of view" (2006:139). Rushdie highlights the diverse elements that come together to create the Indian experience. However, he never attempts to analyze in depth any of them in an effort to account for the Indian situation, as an insider or a regional language author writing primarily for an Indian audience would have endeavored to do.

The novel along with touching upon the multifarious elements that comprise India also covers the vast range of Indian history from the pre-independence era to the first thirty years following the independence of the country. Significant historical events like the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, the independence of the country, partition, Emergency, Indo-China war, and independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan find a mention. The rendition of history in Rushdie's work is, however, very different from that in *The Home and the World*. Unlike Tagore, Rushdie's personal perspective on specific historical events or political trends in history do not emerge prominently in the novel; it is only in his satirical depiction of the Emergency and satirizing of the then Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi as the widow who castrates Saleem that we get a glimpse of Rushdie's own political view point - his disapproval of the measures and the dictatorial role adopted by Indira Gandhi. At all other times, he evades a distinct political standpoint and history is caricatured by the narration of the comic protagonist. Saleem makes light of even a terrible event like the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy by narrating it in a comic vein.

Midnight's Children records history as recollected by an individual and that too, what Rushdie terms, an unreliable narrator.⁹ Historical facts are thus not rendered either accurately or comprehensively. It is mentioned that General Dyer's British troops opened fire on the crowd gathered at Jallianwala Bagh, while in reality the troops were Indian. The blood bath of the partition riots, a crucial entailment of Indian independence, is completely left out. There is no coverage of the anti-British movement, nor is there any mention of Gandhi, Subhash Bose, and other pivotal figures of the Indian freedom struggle or of the conflicting ideologies which were at work in the efforts to gain independence.

According to Michael Reder, in *Midnight's Children* what is presented is not a dominant, official version of history, but a history that is personalized and therefore is given life, significance, and meaning (1999:226). The novel personifies history to the extent that history almost seems to be generated within the space of the text. For example, the negotiations concerning India's independence are presented as an Englishman Methwold compelling the Indian buyers of his estate to maintain it and its practices unchanged till independence, while the moment of independence is epitomized by Saleem's birth at the midnight hour of the country becoming free and the passing on of the Methwold estate to Indian buyers of the bourgeois class,

⁹ Rushdie describes Saleem as an unreliable narrator in his essay "Errata: Or Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*."

implying the inheritance of political power as well as colonial legacies by the Indian bourgeoisie from the colonizers with independence. Through such a personalized version of history, Rushdie seems to challenge the claim of official historical discourse of accurately representing the past. He writes, "History is always ambiguous. Facts are always hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings [. . .] The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be [. . .] a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to "read" the world ("Errata," 1991:25).

Contrary to official history which overshadows the commoner's experiences, and in contrast to *The Home and the World* where historical events shape the situation of the characters, in Rushdie's narrative historical events derive significance from being connected to Saleem's life. In his analysis of contemporary fiction, Michael Wood examines literature's relationship to politics and history. He argues that literature "entertains history, the way we entertain an idea; [. . .] and in its more radical form it invites history to think again" (1998:13). History is handled in such a fashion in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem repeatedly uses qualifiers as "maybe yes" and "why not" in his narrative which compel us to ponder upon the validity and the truth of what he narrates; Rushdie thus hints at the questionability of that which is depicted as absolute historical truth. However, Rushdie never attempts to challenge traditional western historiography of India, either by emphasizing factors that western historians have overlooked or by adopting an angle of vision different from theirs. He also does not seek to unearth voices that have been lost in the dominant historical discourse in the manner of the Subaltern Studies historians.¹⁰ Neil ten Kortenaar suggests, Rushdie emphasizes the same kinds of political events that western historians do in their accounts of Indian history (1999:29). Booker argues that by focusing on the upper classes and giving undue weight to the experiences of the Muslim minorities, Rushdie emulates the traditional path of western historians of India set by John Mill ("*Midnight's Children*," 1999: 294). History is thus recorded in *Midnight's Children* in a form known to the West. Moreover, history is represented through allegorical personalization in the novel which completely erases any necessity of prior knowledge of Indian history on the part of the readers. Historical events can be simply viewed as comic occurrences in the saga of Saleem.

Fredric Jameson has argued that "all third world texts are necessarily [. . .] to be read as [. . .] national allegories" (1986:69). He claims that in Third World literature "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society" (1986:69). Aijaz Ahmad has contested such a categorization of Third World literature. Ahmad contends that since so many texts from the Third World do not fit into the description of 'national allegory' "one wonders why Jameson insists so much on the category, 'all'" (1992:107). *Midnight's Children*, however, befits the description of a national allegory. According to Dubravka Juraga, Rushdie emphasizes the allegorical nature of his text mainly by drawing attention to Saleem's allegorical nature (1999:176). Saleem emblemizes postcolonial India, and the thirty years of his life is a record of the history of the first thirty years of the nascent state. The allegorical connection between Saleem and India is established through the letter of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to the child born at the stroke of the

¹⁰ Historians of the Subaltern Studies group emphasize the role of the subalterns in Indian history, especially subaltern contributions to the Indian freedom movement, which they claim have been ignored by elite historiography.

very hour in which the country became independent, which stated, “Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own” (238).

Since Saleem is India, the different episodes of his life influence the country’s history. The nation’s actions also affect him directly. Further, his own state is a commentary on the condition of the country. At the conclusion of the novel, set in the late nineteen-seventies, when his body, “the bomb in Bombay,” is about to explode into “specks of voiceless dust” India itself seems to be disintegrating because of internal dissensions (462). Thinking back about Nehru’s words, Saleem questions himself, “In what sense?” is his life a mirror of India’s situation. He concludes, “actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically, and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined in my world” (160). In the analysis of Gauthier, Saleem’s life is “actively-literally” connected to the country through his actions which directly impinge on the nation’s development. He is “passively-metaphorically” linked to India by being born at the exact moment of India’s independence, and thus his growth mirrors the nation’s growth (2006: 160). Not only is Rushdie’s protagonist an allegorical representation of the nation, but, as Ashutosh Banerjee writes, “From the beginning Rushdie maintains a continuous effort at synchronizing national and domestic life, so that the odyssey of the Azizes and the Sinais also become the odyssey of the nation” (1990:26). The allegorical synchronization of microcosmic private life with the macrocosm of Indian national life in *Midnight’s Children* lends, to use Kortenaar’s words, “imaginative form to India and its history” (2000:28).

As a national allegory, and in its depiction of India and handling of the country’s history, *Midnight’s Children* therefore emulates a pattern familiar or easily comprehensible to the western readers. Syed has argued that *Midnight’s Children* has achieved its success in the West partly due to its use of modernist/postmodernist techniques and its ability to “tell strange stories in familiar ways” (1999:149). In the opinion of Brennan, one of the reasons for *Midnight’s Children’s* successful intervention in the western literary scene is the western readers’ familiarity with its different aspects. Rushdie, argues Brennan, skillfully uses tools of European art to render the Third World. Brennan terms this as Rushdie’s “overt cosmopolitanism” (1989:82). Such cosmopolitanism, while distinguishing *Midnight’s Children* from regional language Indian writings, has appealed to a global audience to the extent of earning the novel the status of the most prominent literary representative of the Indian nation and the Third World.

Rushdie’s orienting his work towards an audience outside Indian parameters is also obvious in his linguistic craftsmanship. Hindi words are interspersed within the English narrative, but all such words are explained with their English equivalents, which suggests the intended audience’s lack of acquaintance with them. An English translation inevitably precedes or follows a Hindi word in the text. For example, Saleem mentions that he has been called by various names, “Piece-of-the-Moon” being one of them (9); the Hindi phrase for this is mentioned a little later. Again, the “Muslim muhallas” are specified as “The Muslim muhallas or neighborhoods” (76). Sometimes Hindi and English words are joined together to form a phrase or a name like Picture-Singh. Such bilingualism, however, is not intended at articulating a sensibility that is specifically Indian; rather, it makes the novel not conducive to translation in the Indian languages, because in them it would cause the problem of redundant repetition.¹¹ It

¹¹ For discussion concerning the problems of the Hindi translation of *Midnight’s Children*, see Trivedi.

functions to evoke for outsiders, what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls, the plurality of India which cannot be adequately conveyed through any single language (“Introduction,” 1999:19). The use of Hindi words also serves as a mark of authenticity and an indicator of the author’s intimacy with Indian culture. Harish Trivedi claims that, “Such use of Hindi words, to which the Western reader would not have had access on his own, defines the cultural difference between him/her and the author [. . .] and it serves to testify to an inwardness with his subject which the author possesses and the reader does not” (1999:74).

When questioned about his audience, Rushdie had commented, “In the case of *Midnight’s Children* I certainly felt that if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West.” (“Imaginary Homelands,” 1991: 19). However, the fact that, unlike regional language Indian writers, the Indian reader is not his priority is also reflected in his explaining what is obvious and explicit to this readership. Saleem tells us that he was born in Bombay, on August 15, 1947 on “the stroke of midnight” (8). No Indian reader can be oblivious to the significance of this date and time. But Saleem goes on to add, “Oh, spell it out, spell it out; at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world” (9). These details are undoubtedly spelled out for an audience that lacks acquaintance with even the basics of Indian history.

Booker notes that Rushdie’s works because of their ability to draw on both eastern and western cultural traditions and Rushdie’s own special cultural hybridity as a Muslim from India who has lived most of his life and done all his writings in Great Britain have been particularly attractive to postcolonial critics for whom cultural hybridity is a crucial critical category (“Introduction,” 1999: 3). Shankar states that the emphasis on hybridity results from the fact that postcolonial theory has characterized postcolonial societies as hybrid societies, and many of the signature themes of postcolonial criticism and theory have emerged directly out of this characterization of the postcolonial condition (2004:83). The hybrid nature of *Midnight’s Children* is manifested in Rushdie combining western influences with eastern literary traditions. Influences of *The Arabian Nights*, Gabriel Garcia-Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*, and Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* on *Midnight’s Children* can be clearly perceived.¹² Early in the novel Saleem writes, “But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning” (9). The allusion to Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights* narrating a new story every night to King Shahryar in order to prevent herself from being killed is explicit. This reference to Scheherazade invests the number 1001, which is also the count of the *Midnight’s Children* in the text, with special significance. Rushdie’s use of magic realism echoes *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like Garcia-Marquez, Rushdie emphasizes the interdependence between reality and fantasy and by privileging the improbable suggests that ordinary lives may also contain elements of the extraordinary. In a vein similar to *One Hundred*

¹² Patricia Merivale has traced Grass’s influence on Rushdie by examining the parallels between *The Tin Drum* and *Midnight’s Children*. Sanga and Robert Alter have analyzed Rushdie’s rendering of Saleem and his narrative in the mode of Sterne’s hero Tristram Shandy.

Years of Solitude, *Midnight's Children* infuses the supernatural into everyday experiences. Such outside literary traditions are combined in *Midnight's Children* with techniques like non-linear progression of events, lengthy digressions, and recursive inconsistent narration adopted from Indian epic literature and oral forms of story telling. There are also extensive allusions to and borrowings from Indian history and mythology. This complex intermingling of different literary traditions indicates, as Sanga suggests, the possibility of making intricate connections between disparate worlds (2001:93).

In *Midnight's Children* hybridity operates at the level of characterization and handling of language as well. Saleem is a hybrid figure within whom is contained a multitude of lives. The sense of a fixed identity is also eroded by Saleem being both the self and his Other, Shiva. At their birth Mary Pereira switches the infants of disparate social backgrounds. Saleem thus is actually Shiva, while Shiva is Saleem. Saleem's identity is further rendered unstable by his multiple parentages. Saleem, whose various parental figures are British (Methwold), Hindu (Wee Willie Winkie), Muslim (Nadir Khan, Ahmed Sinai, Amina Sinai), and Catholic (Mary Periera) is like India a product of diverse influences. Language is hybridized in the novel by Rushdie's "chutnification" of English. By Indianizing English or "chutnifying" English through the insertion of words from Indian languages into the English narrative, Rushdie constructs a hybrid language. These multiple levels of hybridity establish *Midnight's Children* as a text with varied linguistic, cultural, and literary allegiances.

Its use of allegory and language, elements of hybridity, panoramic vision of India, handling of historical facts, and combining of varied literary allegiances and techniques indicate that *Midnight's Children* is a text not aimed at a specific culture and audience, but is the work of a cosmopolitan writer who is open to global influences and seeks to reach out to an international audience.

Conclusion

In *The Home and the World* Tagore appears as an elite at home, concentrating on a local situation of a particular point of time. In adherence to the Indian vernacular literary tradition, his work is deeply rooted in Bengali culture and expresses specific Bengali sensibilities. Understanding this novel necessitates acquaintance with the Bengali cultural ethos of the projected period, the different strands of the historical situation depicted in the novel, and Tagore's own standpoint as a prominent intellectual of the time on various socio-political issues. This limits the appeal of his work to an outside audience, who either have specific expectations from an Indian text or to whom Tagore's work seems uninteresting because of its remoteness in terms of time and experience. Rushdie, on the other hand, adopts the stance of a spokesperson of India to an international community. His text finds easy acceptance among a global audience as through its allegiance to western literary techniques and its elements of hybridity, allegory, and kaleidoscopic vision of India it follows a pattern well known to this audience. Moreover, since it can also be simply read as the story of a comic protagonist, it makes the Indian experience available to those with little or no familiarity with the Indian situation.

The literary and aesthetic merit of *The Home and the World* is in no way compromised by the text being less conducive to “a conversation with the world.” The novel remains a brilliant and thought provoking reflection on the different aspects of the Swadeshi Movement and the socio-cultural issues woven into it. Similarly, Rushdie’s orientating his work to an outside audience does not render it less meritorious. The publication of *Midnight’s Children* has been a turning point for Indian-English literature. The novel has added a new dimension to Indian writing in English through its introduction of distinctly Indian elements and the element of the comic to Indian-English literature, as well as its confident Indianizing of the English language. It has been a seminal influence for Indian-English novelists succeeding Rushdie. The primary differences between *The Home and the World* and *Midnight’s Children* are not of aesthetic merit but of intention, vision, and sensibility, which according to critical discourse are the basic differences between regional language Indian writings and Indian-English literature. The study of these two novels endorses the critical claim that Indian writing in English aims at an audience drawn from different parts of the world and therefore articulates a transnational sensibility, while regional language Indian literature attends to a local audience and consequently gives expression to a vernacular sensibility.

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