

# The widow: rushdie's portrayal of indira gandhi in midnight's children



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In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie uses witch imagery to depict Indira Gandhi as the Widow. Critics have discussed the historical context of this decision, with some finding it problematic. However, by interpreting the Widow as an element of political satire, we can see that Rushdie's gendered portrayal of Indira Gandhi reveals a valid critique of her political leadership without blaming her for all of India's problems. Additionally, Rushdie's use of witch references for other female characters indicates a more contemporary view of powerful women in India.

Nicole Weickgenannt accuses Rushdie of misogyny in "The Nation's Monstrous Women, Widows, and Witches in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*." Criticizing his portrayal of female characters, Weickgenannt considers Indira Gandhi and "her dictatorial Emergency rule" as the "target of [Rushdie's] misogynist trajectory" (Weickgenannt 77). She takes issue with Rushdie's accusation that Indira Gandhi destroyed her father's vision of India "in the form of the midnight's children conference." Her argument focuses primarily on the archetypes Rushdie utilizes to characterize Indira Gandhi as a villain in *Midnight's Children*. To Weickgenannt, Rushdie "demonizes" Gandhi through the "derogatory connotations of widowhood and witchcraft" (76). Though accurate, Weickgenannt's criticism of Rushdie ignores the valid arguments raised in *Midnight's Children*. Unable to delegitimize Rushdie's criticism of Indira Gandhi, her argument is so lacking in substance that it inadvertently categorizes the Gandhi's rule as "dictatorial," rather than "allegedly dictatorial."

Even her criticism of the other female characters is flawed. Weickgenannt discusses how Rushdie's depiction of Indira Gandhi is based on Margaret

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Hamilton's portrayal of the Wicked Witch in The Wizard of Oz, citing an essay where Rushdie refers to the Widow as a "coming together of the Wicked Witches of the East and the West" (79). In this essay, Rushdie refers to the Wicked Witch as a symbol of "powerful womanhood." Although he considers the Wicked Witch more powerful than Glenda the Good Witch, the Wizard of Oz analogy reconciles his depiction of other female characters as witches. In fact, Rushdie's characterization of women can be considered feminist.

Building on the Wizard of Oz references, Rushdie's portrayal of women as witches demonstrates the power of women. Like Saleem, Parvati-the-witch is also one of midnight's children. By referring to Parvati as a witch, Rushdie indicates that "witch" isn't an inherently negative word. This is no different from The Wizard of Oz, which draws a distinction between good witches and bad witches.

Upon marrying Parvati-the-witch, Saleem demonstrates reverence toward women by stating that "women have made me; and also unmade. From Reverend Mother to the Widow, I have been at the mercy of the so-called (erroneously, my opinion!) gentler sex" (Rushdie 465). With this in mind, Weickgenannt's accusation of misogyny seems hollow. Yes, the Widow is characterized with gendered stereotypes, but upon further analysis, powerful women are clearly depicted in both positive and negative light. Padma echoes this sentiment by reassuring Saleem that "a little uncertainty is no bad thing," since "cocksure men do terrible deeds. Women too" (243). Still, other critics interpret the Widow as an indication that women have taken over the state. In *Self, Nation, Text* in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Neil Ten Kortenaar argues that "the widow, Indira Gandhi, quite literally

threatens men with the loss of their manhood...in the form of forced sterilizations” and “ castrations performed on all the Midnight’s Children” (Kortenaar 138). This is a somewhat flawed argument, since there are female Midnight’s Children. Either way, Kortenaar argues that these castrations reduce all of the Midnight’s Children, “ male and female alike” to women.

Rama Lohani-Chase offers a more objective analysis of Rushdie’s witch trope. In “ Political (W)holes: Post-Colonial Identity, Contingency of Meaning, and History in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children,” she discusses the historical context of Rushdie’s Indira Gandhi character. She argues that the Widow’s role in the Midnight’s Children Conference is “ one of the most important aspects of the book” since it offers “ commentary on the rule of Indira Gandhi, who gave up the values of secularism espoused by her father Nehru...to gain Hindu votes” (Chase 42). Giving additional credence to Rushdie’s parody of Indira Gandhi, Chase discusses the events referenced by Rushdie’s allegory. She mentions how Indira Gandhi’s administration “ forced sterilization on slum dwellers and conjured a state-of-emergency to consolidate power against increasingly popular communist factions” (43).

Thus, characterizing Indira Gandhi as a witch for the latter political decision can easily be considered misogynistic. But the act of sterilizing slum dwellers is a human rights violation that justifies Rushdie’s parody of Gandhi as a witch who sterilizes the midnight’s children. To criticize Rushdie rather than Gandhi in this scenario demonstrates the facile nature of Weickgenannt’s argument. Moreover, the historical context of Chase’s argument debunks

Kortenaar's psychoanalytic analysis of Indira Gandhi as a threat to Saleem's manhood.

Despite his scathing critique of Indira Gandhi as the destroyer of hope for a secular and diverse India, Rushdie doesn't place all of the blame on her. Commenting on the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Saleem notices that it "occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date" (Rushdie 190). Saleem mentions his inability to identify "the actual sequence of events," arguing that "in [his] India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time." This observation demonstrates the opinion that Gandhi's assassination deprived an independent India of proper leadership, shifting some of the blame away from Indira Gandhi and toward Nathuran Godse. The conflict between Muslims and Hindus is exemplified by the revelation that Godse had killed Mahatma Gandhi. When Godse is named as his murderer over the radio, Amina exclaims "thank God...it's not a Muslim name" (163). Aadam tells her that "Godse is nothing to be grateful for." Rushdie features a play on words in this passage by mentioning how "Gandhi's death had placed a new burden of age" on Aadam.

Gandhi's assassination takes place a few months after India gains independence, implying this "burden of age" was present from the beginning of India's independence. India needed to find a way to cope with its religious diversity, and without Mahatma Gandhi, this would be difficult. By pandering exclusively to Hindus, Indira Gandhi abandons her father's secular view of government. This can be interpreted as the catalyst of India's problems, rather than their cause.

The witch tropes utilized by Salman Rushdie have sexist connotations, but *Midnight's Children* is not a misogynistic text. Instead, it clearly indicates Rushdie's opinion that women can be just as powerful as men, whether they be good or evil. Rushdie doesn't slander Indira Gandhi for being a threat to manhood; he criticizes her tyrannical policies, religious demagoguery, and human rights violations.

## **Works Cited**

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