

The main characters in midnight's children and mother courage and her children re...

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There is no doubt that war and conflict affect people living within its perimeters. How war affects people, though, is more important than the fact that it does. What consequences does conflict have on a person, or society? Two works present the more abstract perils of conflict- Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*. By comparing Rushdie's protagonist Saleem Sinai and Brecht's *Mother Courage*, we can gain a better understanding of the implications of war.

Background

Midnight's Children

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* follows Saleem Sinai throughout his life up to his 31st birthday, with his birth coinciding with the exact moment that India gained independence. Saleem provides the audience with his family's background and political events leading up to his birth, setting the stage for how things later unfold. He explains that he was switched at birth, and given to a rich family instead of his true impoverished father; while the true rich child, Shiva, was placed into poverty. Saleem also accounts how he, as well as all the other children born the same night between 12A. M. and 1A. M., hold unique and phenomenal abilities. Saleem's account progresses through his life covering many historical events in India's postcolonial history including the Pakistani wars and Indira Gandhi's 'State of Emergency'. The story concludes with Saleem nearing his birthday, feeling as though he is literally falling apart because of his life.

Midnight's Children is an allegory to explain postcolonial India, and all its issues. Saleem represents India itself, with his birth being the birth of a free nation. The *Midnight Children* represent all the diversity of culture, society,

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and sentiment in India following decolonization; their magical nature a metaphor for the great things that diversity could bring to the country. This concept is evident when Saleem states at the end that he will crumble to dust beneath the feet of the nation on his 31st birthday because it is the fate of all midnight children to be lost in society (Rushdie pp. 236, 2003). This statement conveys that while diversity can bring immense good to a nation, it cannot coexist with peace.

Mother Courage

Mother Courage and Her Children is set in the 1600's during the Thirty Years War, a war between the Catholics and Protestants. The story follows Courage and her family through 12 years of the war, noting on a variety of unsavory events. At the beginning of the story, Courage has all three of her children and a decent business, selling various wares to civilians and military men alike. Over the course of the war, she loses all three children leaving her only her business (which the long-term viability of is often questioned). Despite losing what she reports is most important to her, she expresses that she must continue on.

Comparison of Saleem and Courage

Necessary Action

At the beginning of her story, Mother Courage explains how she got her name; by having the courage to do what was needed to get through the war, specifically driving through the fight to be able to sell bread before it went bad (Brecht pp. 3, 1939). This sentiment is echoed continuously throughout her story, including her final lines. Mother Courage does what is needed to get by and to be able to continue to forge a life through the war, conveying

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the message that what you make of life during conflict is simply up to you: you can choose to give up and be a victim or make the best out of a bad situation. This differs significantly from Saleem. Saleem finds himself living in poverty later in life in a slum at the time of the birth of his son Adam (Shiva's biological child). He describes that although he was a one time wealthy, now Shiva has found prosperity instead through the war (Rashdie pp. 210, 2003). While Saleem does not identify as a victim of situation, he is passive in most cases and allows events to simply transpire without pushback. There are many examples through *Midnight's Children* in which instead of trying to make any gains, Saleem simply goes along with whatever is expected.

Business

During his time in the magician's ghetto, Saleem adopts communist views. He states that it was comforting to become "red", as he found that he had been abandoned by business (Rashdie pp. 201, 2003). Saleem scrapes by doing what he can to make money, but does nothing to truly improve his situation. Mother Courage, however, consistently tries to make a living in capitalist fashion. In the second act, Courage tries to haggle with the General's cook over the price of a capon until she realizes that the meal will also be for her son Eilif (Brecht pp. 11-12, 1939). She repeatedly relays that helping others is a hinderance to her own prosperity; such as when the Chaplin takes her white shirts for bandages, Courage cries out "I'm ruined" (Brecht pp. 45, 1939). Communism is centered around economic equality, which is the opposite of what Courage is trying to accomplish during the war.

Family

Family is important to both Saleem and Mother Courage, though the level of importance changes during each of their stories. At the beginning of Courage's story, she claims she is just trying to make it through the war with her three children, though she loses all three to war. Despite losing them she says that business must go on (Brecht pp. 84, 1939). To Saleem family is a strange concept as he has the family he has known, and the biological family he doesn't know. He loses his family through various means including conflict and suicide; and the family he has left he is happy (Rashdie pp. 200-201, 2003) However the family created of Midnight Children was very important to him, as was his son Aadam.

Magic

Midnight's Children is riddled with magical elements. The special powers of the Midnight Children, Parvati's basket, and the prophetic dreams are all examples of this. The elements of magic that Saleem utilizes, such as telepathy and an enhanced sense of smell, are critical parts of his life. His ability to prophesize helps him prepare for danger, telepathy aids him in connecting with the other Midnight Children, and his sense of smell provides him with income and insight. While Mother Courage is also claimed to possess enhanced supernatural capabilities in the form of second sight, her 'powers' are more an illusion to drive in her points of how the war will consume everyone (Brecht pp. 7, 1939). In both instances magic seems to be a coping mechanism for uncontrollable events around these characters, albeit at very different ends of the spectrum.

Outlook

Saleem Sinai presents his final outlook as being rather bleak, saying that “... it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace” (Rashdie pp. 237, 2003). Saleem believed that there could not be a time in which diversity and peace could coexist. Similarly, Mother Courage’s last song reads (Brecht pp. 84, 1939):

“ With all its luck and all its danger

The war is dragging on a bit

Another hundred years or longer

The common man won’t benefit.

Filthy his food, no soap to shave him

The regiment steals half his pay.

But still a miracle may save him:

Tomorrow is another day!”

While her outlook rings along with Saleem’s that things are not really getting better, she still has hope that they will. Saleem’s outlook holds that his sentiments are absolute.

Conclusion

How does war impact those it affects? We can see through comparing Saleem and Mother Courage that war and conflict can cause positivity and negativity, assertiveness and passiveness, enterprise and socialism. War and conflict produces personal view that shows whether one is a victim of circumstance or a fighter with will to persevere. Through their similarities and differences, Saleem Sinai and Mother Courage show us the wide array of how war and conflict imposes on those it surrounds.