

Post-colonial identity in midnight's children



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Midnight's Children is an allegory on the events that occurred since India gained independence. Several controversial issues are discussed in the novel, as it describes the life story of Salim Sinai and the experiences Salim had in a post-colonial independent India and shows the hidden fear of indigenous Indians as a result of the colonial period which was full of slavery and deceit. This essay is going to analyse the characteristics of post-colonial identity in Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie. Post-colonial identity is the way a person or group of people affected by colonization defines itself. Characteristics of post-colonial identity include being dehumanised, marginalised, voiceless, hybrid, and being classed as 'other' or 'subaltern'. Firstly, dehumanisation is recognised in the text with the use of metaphors. The definition of dehumanization is 'the process of depriving a person or group of positive human qualities.'¹ One example of this is when Salim says that he was "mysteriously handcuffed to history". This infers that Salim experienced a feeling that he was a slave to his life, that his decisions were not his to make, his interests were forced, and he had no control whatsoever over his life. This signifies dehumanization, as the colonizers brainwashed the indigenous inhabitants of the subject country, convincing them that their native culture and standards were inferior and animal-like. Relating to Midnight's Children, this caused the citizens of India to conform to the standards that were introduced by the colonizers, removing their free will completely and planting 'appropriate' interests in their heads. Another way the author does this is with the usage of adjectives. This is presented when Salim talks about the insults that he had to endure throughout his life, "snotnose, stainface, baldy, sniffer, and even piece-of-the-moon". 'Piece-of-

the-moon' is a metaphor that originates from Arabic, where it directly translates to 'baby gazelle'. This is an example of dehumanization, as the people using this to insult Salim could be belittling him because of his skin colour, comparing him to an exotic and wild animal, showing that they believe he does not qualify to be a human. This belief is reinforced with 'stainface', showing that he was being disparaged against just for having a different complexion to the English colonizers who had taken over his home country. Describing his skin colour as a 'stain' is an example of dehumanization, as the people giving him this name were suggesting that he looked improper and unsuitable for human life compared to them. The third way dehumanization is established in the text is through the use of self-deprecation. One example of this is when Salim says that he 'must work fast if I am to end up meaning something'. This can show the outcome of dehumanization, as the people who were colonized had been affected mentally and socially because of the values that the English had convinced them were correct and had to live by in order to mean something as a human. Another example of this is when Salim complains about his 'crumbling, over-used body'. This shows that the colonized were under so much pressure to be like the English but had to work much harder than them to be given the same privileges, so Salim cannot give in to his fatigue, otherwise, he would be classed as lazy and would just remain as useless and unrecognised in colonized society.

Secondly, Rushdie presents the colonized people as 'voiceless'. The definition of 'voiceless' is 'If a group of people is voiceless, it does not have the power or the legal right to express their opinions'². One way Rushdie

does this is through the use of metaphors. An example of this is when Salim reveals that he doesn't have the power to open up about his experiences as he had been a 'swallower of lives'. This signifies that he has bottled up all of his and other people's experiences and their inevitable destiny and purpose inside because he had no power and his opinion would not matter even if he had voiced his thoughts. Another example of this is when he expresses that his destinies were 'indissolubly chained to those of my country'. This can imply that he was psychologically as well as physically being forced to follow the crowd and to not be out of the ordinary. Salim had recognised the situation but he cannot voice his opinion in fear of being ignored or laughed at, showing that he is voiceless because of the standards he had grown up and learned to conform to. These relate to post-colonial identity, as voicelessness is one of the most important aspects of post-colonial literature, and these quotes are evident examples of voicelessness presented in post-colonial literature.

Thirdly, Rushdie presents Salim as a subaltern in the text. The definition of a subaltern is, 'someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed.' One way he does this is through the expression of fear. is when Salim is expressing his feelings and his need to work 'faster than Scheherazade', as he 'fears absurdity'. This infers that Salim would have to work harder than the others in order for him to be taken seriously and be recognised in society. This illustrates the belief created by the British that the Indians were subalterns, and were of a lower species, so the Indians had to prove themselves in order to be taken seriously in society. Another

example of this is when Zuhra condemns black skinned people as human beings as a whole. ⁴ This shows that black people, even in the eyes of the oppressed and marginalized, were lower creatures in the food chain, showing that hypocrisy about race and hierarchy happens everywhere, even if the people insulting another race are the ones being oppressed.

Fourthly, another characteristic of post-colonial identity is that people were marginalised. Marginalisation is a word that is used to describe ' the process of making a group or class of people less important or relegated to a secondary position'. An example of this is when a group of people are all segregated into being ' second class citizens' as if they are lower as humans than ' upper class citizens'. Throughout the novel, Mumtaz is always referred to as ' blackie' because of her skin. In the novel, there are various characters that regard her skin tone as a deficiency. Even her mother disapproved of her daughter's skin colour: " She entered the dreams of her daughter Mumtaz, the blackie whom she had never been able to love because of her skin of a South Indian fisherwoman and realized the trouble would not stop there". ⁴ This shows that in India, white skin is considered beautiful and clean, but people with darker complexion are considered lower class. This point that white complexion was considered attractive, natural and holy is also reaffirmed when Padma criticises Mumtaz, pitying her for being black instead of matching everybody including her own family's expectations and dreams; "Poor girl, ' Padma concludes, " Kashmir are normally fair like mountain snow, but she turned out black." ⁴

Fifthly, hybridity is discussed in *Midnight's Children*, as it is another characteristic of post-colonial identity. "Hybridity refers to any mixing of east and western culture. Within colonial and postcolonial literature, it most commonly refers to colonial subjects from Asia or Africa who have found a balance between eastern and western cultural attributes"². Hybridity is illustrated throughout the novel through the vast variety of contrasting characters. The cultural division of hybridity is shown through Salim's relationship with other characters such as Shiva. Their relationship seems complicated and a little bit conflicted because of the plethora of differences between them, such as birthplace, religion, family etc.³ This demonstrates the criticism hybrid people would have received in the post-colonial and independent era of India, as families which had become mixed with an English person's family were considered higher than their original indigenous counterparts, and so may have been called traitors or weak for mixing their blood with people who had taken everything the country had that was unique.

In my opinion, the post colonial and post independence era of India was very tainted, as colonization had ruined India's culture for the most part and had hurt its entire community. Firstly, the negative impact on people's lives was that people had learned to become voiceless, they had lost all confidence in themselves due to discrimination and marginalization which induced them to believe that indigenous Indians like themselves had no purpose, had no value, and most importantly, were an inferior species that could not make judgment at the same level of intelligence as the English. The Indians had become completely dependant on the English to make all their governmental

decisions, decide where they spend India's money and gold, and overall how to manage the country. This mindset stayed with India for many generations, and India strived to change their outlook on life, as they couldn't function as a country if they kept thinking they were simply an inferior subspecies. The colonial era completely changed India and many other countries and India is lucky that they managed to pull through and try to recover their indigenous culture. Their own culture was taken away from them by the English and was said to be inappropriate, and there are still countries around the world which have not managed to get out of that mindset, living without independence, constantly relying on another country to make all their decisions for them because they are convinced they are not mentally fit to do so themselves.

Word count: 1592

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