

## Saleem Sinai, a diasporic self: Reading Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Humaera Sultana<sup>1</sup>, Afsana Mousume<sup>2</sup>, Debashismoy Dutta<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, Z. H. Sikder University of Science and Technology, Shariatpur, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor and Chairman, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali, Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali, Bangladesh

### Abstract

This article highlights Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight's Children's* protagonist Saleem Sinai who meets identity crisis as a product of diaspora. The study attempts to explore how the legacy of the colonizers affects the personal life of the people of the newly independent country. Due to partition and its subsequent migration, Saleem has lost his family connection and become alienated from his family, motherland and at the same way his diasporic country. The present study further speaks about the struggle of Saleem Sinai to survive within the background of identity crisis both in India and in his migrated land Pakistan. This experiment will employ the theory of post-colonialism through the qualitative investigation. The result of the study reveals how the British colonization is responsible for identity crisis of the post independent generation of India and adds traumatic experience of memory in their diasporic life.

**Keywords:** colonialism, postcolonialism, identity, diaspora, partition, hybridity

### 1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie, the titanic figure in the realm of Indian English literature, was born in India and now is living in Britain and occupies a privileged position as a migrant intellectual. Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) began a new era in English literature for its outstanding literary achievements—Booker Prize (1981), Booker of Bookers Prize (1993), The Best of the Booker (2008). The novel portrays the history of British-India and post-partition India and Pakistan so precisely that it has become a microcosm of "every major event in the subcontinent's past 30 years (1947-1977)" (Blaise 18) [1]. Saleem, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, reflects the issues of national, cultural and diasporic identity in the context of postcolonial India. Through the characterization of Saleem Sinai, the novel engaged with depicting the problematic situation of immigrants which was one of the results of the colonial politics and one of the obvious aftermaths of postcolonial world. Besides, the novel expresses Saleem's search for identity while he is feeling unhomely and facing dilemma of recognition and struggling to prove his identity through behavior and tradition. The main concern of this article is to show how migration creates problematic situation in the personal life of Saleem Sinai and affects his identity.

### 2. Diaspora

The derivation of the word 'diaspora' is from the Greek *dia* (=through/across) and *speirein* (= to scatter). In Ancient Greece the word (diaspora) hence meant "scattering". According to Cambridge Dictionary, the term diaspora refers to a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries. Ashcroft defined 'Diaspora' as the mass relocation, either voluntary or forced, of people from their own homelands to new regions (Kim and McLoughlin 55) [2]. To John Hartley, diasporic communities are groups of people that are distanced from their homeland-

--as political or economic migrants in search of work or refugees escaping war (Batra 48) [3]. Originally, the concept referred to the historic experience of particular groups, especially Jews and Armenians. The Jewish people are the great diasporas of history because they were forced to leave their lands and were spread all over the world where they faced discrimination and oppression.

After the Second World War and the dismantling of colonization, the term "diaspora" holds a prominent place in the history of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial diaspora literature raises issues of immigrant's identity, non-belongingness, sense of displacement, sense of loss and their non-declared, unspoken or say mute desire to return, their pleasures in the foreign land and pains caused by the intimate memories of their homeland, love for motherland, nostalgia, and cultural distance. Hence diasporic literature is not only the literature of mere enjoyment but also it is a cry and the inner voice of the diasporas. When the diasporic communities find themselves dislocated from the home society, they become upset mentally because they think that they cannot be accepted fully by their host country people. Even when they want to assimilate to the new culture of their diasporic country, they find it difficult as they have to face many kinds of discrimination. Salman Rushdie brings these feelings in his *Imaginary Homelands*: "Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools" (Rushdie, 1992, p. 15) [4]. The diasporic people face not only many external problems like disparity and identity crisis but also many inner problems like loneliness and alienation which cause more sufferings to them. In this situation, they either aspire to return to their ancestral homeland or try to escape from the harsh realities of life through nostalgia. Thus under the illusion of collective memory of homeland, they shape their identity. The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 caused the largest diaspora in human history. This diaspora emerges a large number of writers who have given direction to the

progress of English Literature. Indian-English writers like Salman Rushdie, Anitha Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K Bhabha are prominent in the realm of Indian diasporic writing.

### 3. Discussion

Diaspora and identity crisis are the common topics of Rushdie's novels. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie views history, politics and identity of the Indian subcontinent through a migrant's point of view. In the novel, he has shown the situation of Muslims after the independence of India through the depiction of Saleem's family condition. After partition, India becomes a secular country and the government freezes the wealth of the well-off Muslims to compel them to leave India. As a result, Saleem with his family moves to Pakistan to live with his Aunt Emerald and Uncle General Zulfikar. In Pakistan, they are considered as diasporic people who never get the honor of being first class citizen in their migrated country rather they are considered as an inferior class. Rushdie shows here how an Indian elite Sinai family is treated as "subaltern" in Pakistan. "By 'subaltern' Spivak meant the oppressed subject [...] or more generally those 'of inferior rank'" (Gandhi 1) <sup>[5]</sup>. Inferiority starts from the day when Saleem's family makes the journey towards Pakistan because they reached Rawalpindi by "hot, dusty train" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 396) <sup>[6]</sup> whereas their host Emerald and General Zulfikar travelled in "Air-Conditioned" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 396) <sup>[6]</sup>. Saleem claims:

[...] we were well-established as social inferiors, the helpless poor relations of the great Zulfikars (Rushdie, 1981, p. 407) <sup>[6]</sup> [and] We Sinais – and Pia Aziz – were helpless, non-productive members of the Zulfikar household, and the General did not wish us to forget it: 'Even a damn hundred-year-old beagle bitch can earn her damn living,' he was heard to mutter, 'but my house is full of people who can't get organized into one damn thing (Rushdie, 1981, p. 398) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Thus a rich family turns into 'unproductive' and has been compelled to lead their life like beggars in Pakistan due to colonialism because "everywhere it (colonialism) locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history" (Loomba 2) <sup>[7]</sup>. Saleem has telepathic power by which he can communicate with the midnight children in India but he loses the power in Pakistan and becomes vulnerable to all forms of abuse in his uncle's house. Saleem asserts that "[...] exiled once more from my home, I was also exiled from the gift which was my truest birthright: the gift of the midnight children" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 394) <sup>[6]</sup> and thereby deprived of power, Saleem transforms himself into an outsider and becomes an ordinary powerless dependent person in his diasporic country. Bapsi Sidhwa also depicts such issue in *Ice-Candy Man* (1989) where after partition Hindu Ayah is shown as an outsider in Muslim Pakistan (Lahore) <sup>[8]</sup>. This is not the end of partition effect rather it also destroys the psychological solace of the whole Indian subcontinent people. When people have to leave their own motherland, they cannot forget their birthplace and feel lonely in their newly inhabited land. Pramad K. Nayar says, "The literature of diaspora is characterized by nostalgia for the lost homeland" (Nayar 49) <sup>[9]</sup> because the migrants

cannot delete the memory of native land from their mind and they feel homesick. Therefore, loss and nostalgia constitute the key elements of any diasporic writing. For being a child of postcolonial India, Saleem remains struck with his past memory and cannot live a harmonious life in his new country and mentally he goes through an identity crisis. His family wants to start a completely new life in Pakistan. But Saleem "was forever tainted with Bombayness, his head was full of all sorts of religions apart from Allah's" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 431) <sup>[6]</sup> and he thinks that, "not even learning could make him feel a part of this country devoid of midnight children" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 431) <sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, his activities prove that postcolonial diasporic people are always going back to their memory because of getting solace. It may be helpful to turn to Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) where Thamma has been compelled to live India because of partition but she can never forget her original home in Dhaka. Tridib, the narrator of the novel, says that "[...] people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 214) <sup>[10]</sup>. So recollection is the ultimate destiny of diasporic people. In a postcolonial diasporic country, no one is interested in his future because the future is meaningless without a past. Therefore, preservation is a common idea for the diasporic people. Saleem is also working for the preservation of memory as he says; "The past has dripped into me [...] so we can't ignore it" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 44-45) <sup>[6]</sup>. Gabriel Garcia Marquez also depicts the idea of perpetuating memory in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) where Jose Arcadio Buendia writes the names and use of things on pieces of papers and pastes them onto those things during the time of insomnia plague in Macondo <sup>[11]</sup>. Saleem fears that in his amnesia he may forget his past and history. As a solution, he starts writing the story and history to preserve his memory. Thus because of his past memory, Saleem is unable to create a new identity in his new land Pakistan. As a result, only in memories he can create an imaginary homeland.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem's family history is related to the Indian history and this is why; he has no historical or cultural specific basement in Pakistan and thus he has no right to speak about any political or cultural matter of Pakistan. Actually, without history establishing new root in a diasporic country remains impossible. In his famous essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific" (Hall 1996) <sup>[12]</sup>. So history is the centre and a person becomes rootless in a diasporic country because of weariness and boredom of maintaining different cultures and lack of historical background. A diasporic modern girl like Ila in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) experiences the lack of roots in one culture when her marriage with British Nick has been collapsed <sup>[10]</sup>. However, in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem's family tries to cope up with their native identity as well as the place of settlement but ultimately fails because of lacking history and culture. Same crisis of non-belongingness we see in Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) where José Arcadio Buendía claims that "A person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground" (Marquez, 1967, p.14) <sup>[11]</sup>. Here 'dead' person is the past history and therefore, history must be needed to create an identity <sup>[11]</sup>. In that case,

the very diasporic people become helpless and live in identity crisis as Jhumpa Lahiri portrays the life of Gogol who remains outsider after being changed according to the American status in *The Namesake* (2003) <sup>[13]</sup>. In Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem finds him unable to feel at home in the overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistan and the distance from the homeland makes him impartial. Even he cannot make any judgment over Pakistan when he helps the officers to map out their strategy against India, using peppercorns and other condiment jars to symbolize troop movements. To understand this matter, it may be helpful to turn to Rushdie's novel *Shame* (1983) where the immigrants are considered as intruders who have no right to speak in policy matters. Rushdie wonders upon this matter: "Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] We reject your authority" (Rushdie, 1983, p. 28) <sup>[14]</sup>. These sentences prove that the search for national authenticity is an unreasonable one in a diasporic country. About Pakistan, Saleem says, "Anyway, it was not 'my' country – or not then. Not my country, although I stayed in it – as refugee, not citizen" (Rushdie, 1981, p.405) <sup>[6]</sup>. Thus, diasporic people have to lead their lives in disillusionment and they become frustrated about their true identity in their new land.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem has hybrid identity because "Saleem is the biological child of Methwold, the departing English colonizer, and Vanita, a low-class Hindu; he is raised by Amina and Ahmed, bourgeois Indian Muslims, and he later adopts various father figures, including his uncle Zulfikar, a General in the Pakistani army" (Teverson 128-129) <sup>[15]</sup>. Actually Saleem is the creation of the colonizers who left India but kept their legacy through Saleem Sinai so that the people of Indian subcontinent could lead life in identity crisis. Though Saleem's birth is warmly celebrated, his identity is cracked and fallen apart by the dirty politics of postcolonial India. Because of Saleem's psychological crisis resulting from the forfeiture of identity, he feels alienated and rootless not only in India but also in his migrated country. When Saleem is informed about his fractured individual identity that Sinai family is not his own family, he always fears about his being kicked from the family. To escape this angst and to be an original part of the Sinai family, Saleem gets engaged in incestuous relationship and starts loving his sister as Estha and Rahel did in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* <sup>[16]</sup>. But the desire to return to origin through incest merely becomes a further fracturing, further hybridity which destroys Saleem and Jamila's brother-sister relationship. Thus, in Pakistan Saleem is totally lost and his identity remains in danger. Saleem portrays the struggle and problems of migration and identity in a postcolonial world: "Who am I? Who were we? We were are shall be the gods you never had" (Rushdie, 1981, p.112) <sup>[6]</sup>. Knowing the absolute root always remains invalid to the people of postcolonial world. Again, in the case of the immigrants in any society, their identity is threatened by the culture of the host country. Hall summarizes cultural identity in one word: "positioning" (Hall 226) <sup>[12]</sup>. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), the positioning of Sinai family is clearly visible when they struggle in finding a place in Pakistan. For this, Saleem's father Ahmed buys a towel factory, names it after his wife, and declares that someday he will produce the most famous towel in the world. Soon after, Saleem's sister Jamila becomes a famous singer and she performs behind a curtain

which has a single hole for her lips. "Through the hole in a perforated sheet, Jamila Singer dedicated herself to patriotism" (Rushdie, 1981, p.438) <sup>[6]</sup>. Here again "positioning" is working because Jamila completely accepts the Pakistani culture of "Purdah" system like Gogol who changed his name in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) <sup>[13]</sup>. In this way, Rushdie depicts the struggle of the postcolonial diasporic people against the difficulty to establish their own identification in their new land. But Saleem feels that his identity is not safe in Pakistan where words and action are quite contrary to each other. Even he leads a kind of exiled life in this migrated country. Here Saleem becomes the true bearer of Derek Walcott's question of identity in the poem 'A Far Cry from Africa': "I who am poisoned with the blood of both / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" (26-27)

Rushdie sums up the biblical history in *Midnight's Children* (1981). The narrator, Saleem Sinai, constantly relates on past events to subsequent events in retrospective future tense because the events for which the characters must wait are already known to him. Incidentally, prophecies play a significant role in the life of the postcolonial people. Because of Saleem's multifarious identities, he must wander out of his original home until the Last Day; until the Apocalypse which is predetermined and inevitable, foretold by Ramram. This is why; Saleem is always haunted by the fear of impending doom; of shame as he says, "My future, perhaps; my special doom, of which I was aware from the beginning [...] impossible to ignore" (Rushdie, 1981, p.167) <sup>[6]</sup>. This line indicates that Saleem is the postcolonial Oedipus whose fate, disintegration and death are foretold before his birth. His destiny is fated for a kind of destruction. So an apocalyptic war between Pakistan and India destroys his family members in Pakistan and he becomes alone in this universe. The explosion that killed his family deprived Saleem of bodily sensations and any memory of his life before and thus he forgets his identity. All that remains is his hyper-acute sense of smell, which the army puts to use by turning Saleem into a tracker, a member of the "CUTIA Unit 22" (Rushdie, 1981, p.485) <sup>[6]</sup>. Consequently, his body has gone fully "Numb" (Rushdie, 1981, p.487) <sup>[6]</sup>, the only sense active being his sense of smell. Saleem sits beneath a tree "cross-legged, blue-eyed, staring into space (Rushdie, 1981, p.485) <sup>[6]</sup> [...] unable to remember grief, numb as ice, wiped clean as a slate (Rushdie, 1981, p.488) <sup>[6]</sup> and for this reason, his fellow soldiers start calling him 'Buddha'—there hung around him an air of great antiquity (Rushdie, 1981, p.487) <sup>[6]</sup>. Here Saleem Sinai is presented as the microcosm of all the diasporic generation who are treated animally in their newly inhabited territories. Again in 1971, Saleem faces a civil war that broke out in Pakistan. When the Pakistani army invades East Bengal to put down the rebellion that led to the creation of Bangladesh, Saleem with his remarkable nose is sent along to sniff out subversive intellectuals. Pakistani army shows their extreme brutalities to the people of East Pakistan. Eventually, unable to tolerate the violence and absurdity of war, Saleem leads several of his men to the Sundarbans where he sees ghosts which are the symbol of past. Ironically, in this forest, Saleem's amnesia is gone and his memory is restored by the bite of the snake. Reluctantly, Saleem and his friends make their way back to the city and at that time, Saleem removes his "uniform, including the she-dog badge of the CUTIA units, and become anonymous,

a deserter" (Rushdie, 1981, p.525) [6] because he claims that "the purpose of that entire war had been to re-unite me with an old life, to bring me back together with my old friends" (Rushdie, 1981, p.520-521) [6]. The fact that Saleem crosses borders in "the basket of invisibility" (Rushdie, 1981, p.531) [6] and literally disappears from Dhaka to reappear in Delhi through the help of Parvati-the-witch, one of the former midnight's children and thus "without passport or permit" (Rushdie, 1981, p.532) [6], he returned to the land of his birth. In this way, Saleem is regenerated in India through the destruction of his family.

In the postcolonial world, the migrants have to live in different places but they never satisfy with their new place. A sense of belongingness works in their mind and sometimes their nationhood is also changed. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Saleem Sinai wanders among three counties but he cannot find a fixed place and he has no authentic identity. After returning to India, Saleem's diasporic feeling continues and he is "in law an illegal immigrant" (Rushdie, 1981, p.542) [6] because he is a Pakistani "defeated-soldier-on-the-run" (Rushdie, 1981, p.542) [6] and has been "a traitor, too" (Rushdie, 1981, p.547) [6]. In India, even he is refused to be sheltered in his own uncle Mustapha's house. His aunt claims: "Don't you have a brain to think with? You come to a Senior Civil Servant's house – an escaped war criminal, Allah! You want to lose your uncle his job?... Go – go, get out, or better, we should call the police and hand you over just now!" (Rushdie, 1981, p.584) [6]. This passage indicates that movement is the ultimate destiny of diasporic people. It may be clear if we turn to Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) where a character Jethamoshai asserts: "Once you start moving you never stop [...] you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 237)<sup>[10]</sup>. This speech may be applicable to Saleem Sinai because he was born in India, then migrated to Pakistan, then came to Bangladesh and at last returned to India but didn't find a proper place to live in. That means he is the eyewitness of history and his identity is always in moving.

Paul Zeleza, in an introductory overview essay titled "*Diaspora Dialogues: Engagements between Africa and Its Diasporas*," defines that a migrant who returns does not belong to the diaspora because not "the intention but the duration of the stay" is relevant (Zeleza 41)<sup>[18]</sup>. Therefore, according to Zeleza's definition Saleem does not belong to the diaspora because he stays for several years in Pakistan, but eventually returns to India. According to many other critics, he is at least partly diasporic because on returning to India, it becomes evident that Saleem's stay in Pakistan has influenced him significantly. He spends certain period of time in Pakistan and returns back India with burdens which are still recalling his memories back. Even he is so traumatized that he cannot make a physical relationship with his wife Parvati because of his Pakistani incestuous felling. Thus, colonialism and subsequent migration destroy the personal happiness of the common people. Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, puts this idea clearly, "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and

destroys it" (Hall 224) <sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, Saleem Sinai is the embodiment of the collective identity of Indian diaspora and victim of colonialism. His attempt to search for identity in his migrated country portrays the miserable condition of non-belongingness of the partition victims. Saleem's diasporic life makes him powerless and snatches his "comfort" (Rushdie, 1981, p.554) [6] and compels him to live "like a beggar into the world" (Rushdie, 1981, p.554) [6]. His effort to preserve memory represents the inner feeling of the diasporic people.

#### 4. Conclusion

Various aspects of diaspora and identity crisis of the postcolonial Indian people make *Midnight's Children* an interesting novel. Rushdie's literary work synthesizes almost all levels of human reality including the mythical and historic, the humorous and tragic, and the fantastic and logical. The novel's structural configuration represents a family (Sinai), countries (India & Pakistan), and a sub-continent (India). No matter in what way the novel is read, it is a wonderful literary. The protagonist of the novel Saleem Sinai represents the victimization of the colonizers towards the colonized Indian subjects. The British created partition and compelled the native to move on and lead a miserable life in this universe. Because of Saleem's migration, he becomes alien in India. In Pakistan, he is rootless. He was born in India, then migrated to Pakistan, then came to Bangladesh, again returned to India. That means he is in existential crisis. As a result, Saleem becomes "an outsider" in Pakistan because of his Indian birth, he becomes "an outsider" in India because of his being a Muslim, and he becomes "an outsider" in his family because of his English blood. Thus, the first child of independent India has to live in identity crisis in this hostile world because of colonialism. To sum up it can be said that Rushdie brings the plights of diasporic people through the depiction of the life story of Saleem Sinai. Rushdie actually gives indication that the creation of India and Pakistan is a great mistake of the colonizers. Saleem proves that for being a migrated person, he has no room in this earth and this is why; now he creates an imaginary homeland.

#### 5. References

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