

ISSN: 2349-2147



# Modern Research Studies

**Editor-in-Chief**  
**Gyanabati Khuraijam**

**An International  
Journal of  
Humanities and Social  
Sciences**

[www.modernresearch.in](http://www.modernresearch.in)

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*Midnight's Children***

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**Volume 1, Issue 1  
June 2014**

**pp. 50–59.**

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**Managing Editor: Yumnam Oken Singh**

## **Misogynist Undertones in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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**Abstract:** The present article is intended to shed light on the undercurrents of misogyny that come across upon examination of the various women characters portrayed by Salman Rushdie in his Booker of Booker's prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children*. The novelist has indeed designed a blot of sorts each for all the women characters, not with an ulterior motive to lend them an aura of being only flesh and blood, but to either demean or stigmatize them: Padma is like a plaything for Saleem; Reverend mother is conventional to a fault; Alia is vindictive; Emerald has no love for her sisters; Amina Sinai, Pia and Lila Sabarmati are tarred with the brush of infidelity; Elvyn and Brass Monkey embody both wildness and violence; Parvati's life ends on a very sordid note and the historical personality Indira Gandhi is depicted as a demon in the form of a woman.

**Keywords:** misogyny, patriarchal aesthetics, perversion, conservative, parochialism, Emergency, melodrama, magnum opus, Free Islam Convocation.

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It won't be a hyperbole to say that Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children*, which has taken the literary world by storm owing to its trail-blazing use of magic realism, extended metaphors, allegories and symbols in depicting the political life of Indian history, has shown women in a bad light, either by condemning them to lead a monotonous and trivial life that concerns carrying out of household chores all through their lives as their birth right or by bringing them into

the public sphere only for wrong reasons. The roles played by women in this novel, though very important, only serve to strengthen or glamorize patriarchal aesthetics and social values, and the portrayal of women as 'the other' is rather writ large.

First and foremost, Saleem's future wife Padma, also the most important female character in the novel, is projected as an embodiment of servitude and cowardice whose primary work is to play the role of a perennial, uncomplaining and ultra-patient audience when Saleem tells her his narrative, besides being at his disposal round the clock to fulfil his needs and demands. Her own needs or demands are of little consequence. Saleem's excessive absorption in the narration of his own history makes him remain frigid and considers Padma's amorous advances toward him as sexual perversion. For all her sacrifices and selfless efforts to fulfil all his desires, Padma falls short of occupying a respectable place in Saleem's estimation. Padma appears to be a woman who is born only to serve Saleem. Such a perception is reinforced by the absence of any description about her family background or her past in the novel, and the manner in which she looks after Saleem with so much love and care, without bothering about her gesture not being reciprocated, not only reduces her to the status of a slave but also demeans women at large in the society. How Salman Rushdie portrays Padma is described by Ramesh Kumar Gupta in the following words:

Padma is Saleem's disdained other, utilizable, exploitable and submissive soul. Here, she is presented as a mere commodity of sex. She is not only a slave of Saleem but also a prey of illiteracy. The novelist presents this paradigm not only for Padma but also for the women in general. (Gupta 87)

Salman Rushdie hardly describes any female character of *Midnight's Children* without attaching a blemish. Reverend mother, Saleem's grandmother, is too conservative to be reformed. Soon after she gets married, Adam Aziz, her husband, in a bid to transform her into a modern Indian woman, tells her to get rid of her purdah; however, she vehemently refuses, telling him that taking off her purdah

is tantamount to walking in front of other men in her birthday suit. Adam Aziz's inability to convince his wife of the little difference that removing of her purdah makes in the concealment of her body is vividly shown by the novelist in the following lines:

‘Your shirt covers you from neck to wrist to knee. Your loose pajamas hide you down to and including your ankles. What we have left are your feet and face. Wife, are your face and feet obscene?’ but she wails, ‘They will see more than that! They will see my deep-deep shame!’ (Rushdie 38)

As his words fall on deaf ears, Adam Aziz finally loses his temper and drags the purdah-veils off his wife's face and burns them. Failing to understand as to why her husband is so desperate to do away with her purdah, she tells him with effrontery that he is a mad man, in response to which her husband makes his intention clear to her:

‘Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman.’ (Rushdie 39)

Reverend mother's image is further tainted by her parochial outlook. When Nadir Shah, a staunch supporter of anti-partition movement, is allowed to hide in the underground room of his house by Adam Aziz to save his life from the assassins, the thought that the presence of a wanted man, a stranger, in a family having young girls—her three daughters namely, Alia, Mumtaz and Emerald—might bring them unprecedented problem exercises Reverend Mother's mind, and she hates her husband's generosity.

As far as her religious outlook is concerned, Reverend Mother seems to respect and appreciate any kind of teaching about her religion even if it talks ill of people of other faiths. This trait of hers comes to the fore when she curses her husband on seeing him kick and manhandle a religious tutor out of their house for telling their children to hate Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. In protest against her husband's sacrilege, she threatens him with an unheard-of oath: “‘I

swear no food will come from my kitchen to your lips! No, not one chapatti, until you bring the maulvi sahib back and kiss his, whatishisname, feet!” (Rushdie 51).

Reverend Mother's three daughters—Alia, Mumtaz and Emerald—do not fit into the category of women of substance. Alia, the eldest sister, harbours an undying grudge against her younger sister Mumtaz for marrying her lover Ahmed Sinai. Earlier, when Alia and Ahmed Sinai, a merchant, came to know each other and were thinking of walking down the aisle, Ahmed Sinai, in a strange quirk of fate, took an instant liking to Mumtaz after a brief meeting and preferred her to Alia. To add insult to injury, her parents decided to get Mumtaz married to Ahmed Sinai instead in order to help her recover from the trauma caused by her divorce from Nadir Shah. Alia thinks of Mumtaz, whose name is changed into Amina Sinai after her second marriage, as the main culprit behind her life-long spinsterhood. She neither forgets the unfortunate incident nor intends to forgive her younger sister. As a safety valve for her desire to exact revenge on Amina's family raging perpetually within her, Alia develops the art of cooking into a form of witchcraft which consists in impregnating food with emotions and causing those who taste the food to suffer from its detrimental effects. Her vindictive nature rears its ugly head when Amina and her family members come to stay with her in Pakistan. Alia's opportune moment arrives when Amina breaks the news of the occurrence of her pregnancy, seventeen years since the first one, to her elder sister in January 1965. The effect of the food cooked by Alia gives Amina nightmares showing her “a monster child with a cauliflower instead of a brain” (Rushdie 461). Besides being afraid of her child, the devastating effect of Alia's cooking makes Amina's life abysmally miserable:

As the months passed, her forty-two years began to take a terrible toll; the weight of her four decades grew daily, crushing beneath her age. In her second month, her hair went white. By the third her face had shrivelled like a rotting mango. In her fourth month she was already an old woman, lined and thick, plagued by verrucas once again. . . . (Rushdie 461)

Ahmed Sinai too suffers badly from the effects of Alia's 'culinary witchcraft'. He becomes negligent and inactive at his workplace. He starts ill-treating his servants and drives a wedge between master weavers and assistant packers by inculcating in them "the eternal verities of the master-servant relationship", culminating in the exodus of the entire workforce from the factory (Rushdie 462).

Amina Sinai's character is tarnished by her inability to give unreserved love both physically and mentally to her husband Ahmed Sinai. She can't help forget her first husband Nadir Shah. She is found to be in touch with Nadir Shah clandestinely on the phone regularly. Her marital infidelity looks more sordid when she is seen during one of her frequent meetings with Nadir Shah at Pioneer café by her son Saleem Sinai. Deprivation of wifely love and care by his wife condemns Ahmed Sinai to alcoholism for good.

Her relationship with Emerald, the youngest sister, is marked by animosity. The seeds of acrimony in their sibling relationship are first sown by Emerald when she hurts her elder sister's feelings by spilling the beans about her shameful marital affair with Nadir Shah to Major Zulfikar, a military officer with whom Emerald is in love. As soon as her family comes to know that Mumtaz is still a virgin even after she has been married to Nadir Shah for two years, Emerald wastes no time in informing Major Zulfikar of the skeleton in the cupboard by rushing to his office, and such an insidious act by the younger sister becomes quite instrumental in Nadir Shah's abrupt departure from her marital life; because the military officer has been on the lookout for Nadir Shah after his disappearance hot on the heels of Mian Abdullah's assassination, the founder of Free Islam Convocation. Mumtaz does not take kindly to Emerald's marriage to major Zulfikar which takes place soon after her divorce from Nadir Shah.

As a married woman, Emerald leads a very luxurious lifestyle emanating from her husband's aggrandizement. However, she is very reluctant to help her sister and other family members. She is not happy when her mother tells her to take Amina Sinai's family and her sister-in-law Pia to Pakistan after her brother Hanif's death. Saleem Sinai thinks of her aunt Emerald as someone "who would no doubt enjoy

showing off her worldly success and status to her unhappy sister and bereaved sister-in-law” (Rushdie 395).

Pia plays the role of a good aunt who looks after Saleem Sinai with love and care when he lives with her family soon after the shocking revelation that he is not the biological child of Ahmed Sinai and Amina. However, she appears to be a very strange or cold character when she does not mourn the death of her husband—the reason for her stoicism being that she has held back her emotions on purpose as a gesture of respect for her husband’s antipathy against any display of melodrama. The credibility of her words of respect for her late husband vanishes into thin air when she enters into extra-marital affairs with many prominent men.

Apart from Amina and Pia, Mary Pareira, who had earlier worked as a nurse at Dr. Narlikar’s hospital, is another woman who accords motherly affection and care to Saleem. Despite her love and kindness toward Saleem, it would be an absolute misnomer to call her a wise and sensible woman; for an irretrievable blunder committed by her out of her folly. In order to impress her lover Joseph D’costa, a radical socialist, she hits upon the notion of providing some kind of social balance by reversing the fortunes of Saleem and Shiva. She switches the name-tags of the two babies after they are born exactly at the midnight hour of the Independence Day at Dr. Narlikar’s hospital, thereby allowing Shiva, the real child of Ahmed and Amina, to be brought up in a poor family and enabling Saleem, the son of Methold and Vanita, to grow up in an affluent environment. Later, being hit by a sense of guilt, she decides to make amends for the sin by becoming a surrogate mother or ayah to Saleem.

Salman Rushdie also paints a pathetic picture of Mary Pareira’s mental equilibrium which is often disturbed by the hallucinatory appearance of Joseph D’Costa’s ghost, reminding her of the biggest sin she had committed in her life. Unable to put up with the guilt preying on her mind, she finally blows the gaff on the switching of the two newborn babies’ name-tags about eleven years ago to Saleem’s entire family, while the family is in the middle of observing a forty-day mourning period for Saleem’s uncle Hanif’s death. The revelation turns

Ahmed into an alcoholic and starts giving his wife a tongue-lashing quite often. Mary's folly is, therefore, though unintentional, really culpable for reducing Saleem Sinai's family to a cauldron of shock and unhappiness.

The description of two girls i.e. Brass Monkey, Saleem's sister, and Elevyn, an American girl on whom Saleem has a crush during his stay at the Methwold Estate, in the novel, makes them look very childish, naughty and wayward to the point of insanity. Brass Monkey, in an attempt to get the attention of others or to make her presence felt, uses burning of others' shoes as a means, and she performs this obnoxious trick as and when she desires attention. She also acquires "the tag of problem-child" for having very bad table manners (Rushdie 209). What really adds to the mysteriousness or complexity of her character is that she is blessed with "the gift of talking to birds, and to cats" and learns to sing from birds and "a form of dangerous independence" from cats (Rushdie 209). However, her ability to talk to dogs or to deal with them disappears after she is bitten by a stray dog at the age of six.

As soon as she arrives on New year's Day in 1957 to stay in one of the apartments of Methwold Estate with her widower father, Elvyn gives a forecast for her outlandish nature by tearing a necklace of flowers, presented to her by Saleem as an expression of his love for her, with a pellet fired from her air pistol and tells him that she does not wear flowers. Her extraordinary ability to perform high-risk but spectacular stunts on a bicycle is quite unbecoming of a normal girl's nature. Saleem describes how she comes riding a bicycle while he and other children are playing cricket and, in a boastful display of her talent, performs a stunt for them:

On and off the cheetah-seat, Evie performed. One foot on the seat, one leg stretched out behind her, she whirled around us; she built up speed and then did a headstand on the seat! She could straddle the front wheel, facing the rear, and work the pedals the wrong way round. . . . (Rushdie 252)



Her demeanour of being a sane girl invites a very serious question when she indulges in gunning down stones and other things, presented to her as targets by the residents of the estate, with her air pistol. Moreover, she guns down a lot of cats, when they invade the houses of the Methwold Estate and ruin the water supply pipes, with the same weapon in return for a good sum of money. Interestingly enough, Elvyn's sadistic massacre of cats drives Brass Monkey crazy, leading to a fierce fight between them.

Parvati and Lita are other important minor characters in the novel who cannot steer clear of assassination. At the outset, Parvati, the witch, is portrayed as an embodiment of courage and guile, for she saves the life of Saleem and helps him escape from East Pakistan in a way that is too daring for a normal woman. However, her bravado is conspicuous by its absence when she is jilted by Shiva. She is ill-treated by Shiva upon telling him that she is carrying his child in her womb. He drags her by the hair and leaves her in the slum. She also becomes the butt of her people's abuses in her slum. Ironically enough, in a bid to save her honour, she marries Saleem and gives birth to Shiva's child. Thus Parvati's life goes from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Lita's illicit affair with Homi Catrack, despite being a married woman, vividly evinces that she does not have it in her to be considered a woman of substance, and any form of punishment given to her for her infidelity would hardly tug at the heartstrings. However, the manner in which the novelist glorifies Lila's fate is most likely to stir up a real hornet's nest among womenfolk. As soon as her husband Commander Sabarmati gets wind of her liaison with Homi Catrack, he goes to the apartment block with a gun during their togetherness and shoots them, killing the man brutally and leaving the woman almost dead. The violent act, though a big crime in the eyes of law, is greeted with overwhelming accolade by the general public:

Commander Sabarmati was the most popular murderer in the history of Indian jurisprudence. Husbands acclaimed his punishment of an errant wife; faithful women felt justified in their fidelity. (Rushdie 364)

One of the most striking features of the novel is the manner in which it deals with one of the greatest political figures of the country namely Mrs. Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India who is remembered for being the engineer behind the Emergency, also called the reign of terror. She is projected as the mother of the Emergency and is repeatedly referred to as Widow, with capital 'W', and it is nothing but an appellation signifying inhuman qualities, like cruelty, harshness, and to crown it all, an uncontrolled power over the household, due to the drying up of emotions. "Such a gross exaggeration makes her seem almost ridiculous—a Demon instead of a Devi" (Mathur 23). Salman Rushdie, therefore, portrays Indira Gandhi as a devil incarnate. Moreover, "some critics find in the portrayal of character of the widow an indecent hasty authorial taste" (Dey 94).

The women characters, both major and minor, do play an instrumental role in making *Midnight's Children* a trail-blazing fiction allegorizing the political history of India from the time of the First World War to the days of Indira Gandhi's reign in post-Independence India. Many of them have qualities which merit respect and admiration. However, an intent look at the picture of these characters gives the impression that the novelist has assigned them each a kind of flaw that is good enough to knock them off their pedestal. They are projected as personifications of servility, infidelity, parochialism, jealousy, perversion, insanity and extreme cruelty.

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