
The Excremental Vision of the Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children**

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's novel of postcolonial hope and disenchantment Midnight's Children is conspicuous in its copious use of scatological imagery and situation. As a governing trope of this novel, excremental images not only serve as an index of the failings of a flawed postcolonial nation but also, in my opinion, as a complex, multivalent sign in the novel's engagement with the discourses about the nation and national identity. Excrement, the site of what Kristeva calls the abject, occupies the ambiguous zone between the self and the other. When inscribed upon the body of the nation they thus mediate and inform our understanding of the author's complex ambivalence towards his nation. The in-betweenness of Rushdie's stance vis-à-vis the nation, his simultaneous disenchantment with the actual trajectory of the postcolonial Indian nation and his desperate faith in the resilience of the secular ideal of India thus provide a fertile ground for the reading of the scatological tropes in his novel. This paper aims to envisage an interpretive idiom for reading the use of scatology in Rushdie's novel thereby not only providing new insights into Rushdie's craft but also suggesting the efficacy of scatological humour in capturing the complexities of the postcolonial condition.

Keywords: scatology, abject, nation, plurality, postcolonial India

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is conspicuous in its copious use of scatological imagery and situations. In this preponderance of shit and snot, excrement and filth function as a governing trope serving not only as an index of the failings of a flawed postcolonial nation but also, in my opinion, as a complex, multivalent sign in the novel's engagement with the discourse about the nation, and thereby define the author's ambivalence towards his nation as something which he both owns and disowns.

Bodily wastes, according to Julia Kristeva, belong to the order of the 'abject' which is something that had been a part of the subject but subsequently shunned. Inhabiting a liminal space between subject and object it falls outside the symbolic order and 'disturbs identity, system, order' (4). Kristeva's formulation of the abject's role in the creation of personal identity may be fruitfully applied to our reading of national identity formation and illuminate much of the complex dynamics of scatology in Rushdie's nation-writing in *Midnight's Children*. The ambiguous status of the abject haunting the space between the subject and its Other makes it a fit vehicle for the understanding of the complex and ambiguous response of Rushdie to his nation.

In his book *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie talks of the haunting urge felt by the expatriate writer 'to reclaim, to look back' at his past homeland with full knowledge that it will not be possible to 'reclaim[ing] precisely what was lost' and recreate from memory 'imaginary homelands,' 'Indias of the mind' (10). This ability allows for a comparative double vision that, Rushdie claims, is the peculiar gift of the expatriate author. The primary focus of Rushdie's narrative in *Midnight's Children* is a critique of the progressive denigration of the secular,

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pluralist ideal of India and its ongoing conversion into a monolithic entity by a monopolizing and tyrannical state apparatus, reaching its nadir during the Emergency of 1975. His simultaneous shunning of the narrow homogenizing nationalism of the real India and the desperate bid to reclaim the ideal of pluralist India characterize the ambivalent double vision of Rushdie's nationalism that posits the nation into the space of the abject which belongs to the self and yet not quite. The occurrence and functions of the scatological tropes vis-à-vis the discourse on the nation in the novel may thus be broadly delineated into the following categories: a satiric attack of colonialism either direct or metaphoric, a satire of monoglot forces undermining the Indian ideal of unity in diversity and finally a positive symbol of India's indefinable pluralism.

Discussion

The use of scatological tropes figures prominently in the colonialist discourses about the native, where the native's lowly status and his essential baseness are both literally and figuratively inflected through an emphasis on his lack of cleanliness and sanitation (Mc Clintock 32) where the natives are literally abjected from the symbolic order of the empire in order to preserve its identity. In *Midnight's Children* the tables are turned against the colonial master in a counter-discursive use of the fecal trope against the colonist culture. While looking through Methwold's bungalow which Ahmed Sinai has bought Amina Sinai exclaims:

...You've looked in the bathrooms?... I never believed, but it's true, my God, they wipe their bottoms with paper only! ... (127)

The revolted reaction of Amina Sinai to the alien, and in her eyes, unsanitary toilet practice of the Englishman apparently appears to be a humourous instance of culture-shock, but it innocuously punctures the inflated ego of the colonial culture by reducing it to the same kind of rhetorical abjection by questioning the very definition of sanitation.

The other instance of scatological satire directed against colonial culture is not specifically anti-British, but more generally against the incursion of Western culture into the indigenous traditions symbolized in the figure of boatman Tai. If in Tai's worldview foreign culture is unclean and contaminating like the unclean pigskin bag, his means of protest is to adopt a similarly extreme degree of uncleanness. Tai gave up washing and 'chose to stink. For three years now, he had neither bathed nor washed himself after answering calls of nature.' (29) In an act of subversive mimicry, the 'human cesspool' would drift slowly past the Aziz's home 'releasing the dreadful fumes of his body' (29) and when asked for a reason for such an action he would retaliate 'Ask your foreign-returned doctor, ... that German Aziz' (29). However, there is more to Tai's association with griminess than a simple repudiation of colonialism. Even before his adoption of filthiness for protest he is described in scatological terms: 'He lived somewhere in the *insanitary bowels* of the old wooden-house quarters' (10, emphasis added). Aadam's mother would bathe him in boiled water to kill the bugs that might have infested him from Tai's festering body (12). Hence, if scatology functions as a satiric tool, then Tai himself cannot be said to be immune to it. The novel's sympathies are definitely with syncretism and assimilation rather than with purity and authenticity. Thus, his stink, in the end, becomes the rotting stink of a culture that is sure to die because of its imperviousness to external influence and the ideal of integration which is a cornerstone of the nationalist idea of India. This then leads on to the next thematic set of scatological tropes that is the criticism of the gradual undermining of India's multiplicity and heterogeneity in the post-independence phase.

Here again, excremental imagery is almost never directly applied to the real geo-political nation and its material condition, but associated with the character of Saleem Sinai, the twin in birth with the Indian nation and the possessor of a mirrored fate. Of the various foul secretions of the human body, it is snot that is primarily associated with Saleem. The running nose and nose goo become almost a synecdoche for Saleem's body. What dominates his face is 'Baby

Saleem's nose: it was monstrous; and it ran' (169). Saleem remarks '[F]rom my nose there flowed a shining cascade of goo' (170). References to nasal secretions abound in the novel till Saleem is operated upon to decongest his nasal sinuses. That this image of the running nose is indeed meant to be read as a parodic instrument of deflation marking the gap between the enormous expectation and real fruits of his fortuitous birth is indicated by the constant emphasis on Saleem's self-deprecating depiction of himself as a black sheep, his guilt and inferiority complex in juxtaposition to his family's expectations, that runs as a constant thread through this section of the narrative. Following the allegorical equivalence, Saleem's nose-dripping, untidy, almost abject visage is an indirect indictment of the promises and failures of the fledgling nation. The connection becomes even more apparent if we look at the instances of the achievements of the new nation enumerated by the narrator.

The gaping gulf between the ideal of India as a home to unity in diversity and the real India ridden with religious, caste and linguistic strife is emphasized by the account of the nation's achievements in the initial years after its birth. Referring to a rumoured snake attack the narrator remarks 'Religious leaders described the snake escape as a warning... a punishment for the nation's official renunciation of its deities' (187). This secular posturing of the new nation which angers the Hindu fundamentalists apparently also fails to convince the Muslims because, for example, the freezing of Ahmed Sinai's assets is ascribed by him as a proof of anti-Muslim conspiracy by the government. The demands for separate states for separate linguistic communities again undermined the united fabric of India's melting pot. Numerous such instances of failed ideals and frustrated hope can be recalled, but this suffices to prove that the two children of midnight pursue almost parallel trajectories after their birth.

Thus, the snot-smear, clumsy, almost repulsive child Saleem stands for the bungling steps of the new nation, the nasal waste symbolizing the chance wasted, of promises frustrated. But the nose's significance does not end at that. In an almost Bakhtinian vein the boatman Tai says to Aadam Aziz about his nose: 'It's the place where the outside world meets the world inside you. If they don't get on you feel it here' (15). In his discussion of the grotesque bodies Bakhtin emphasizes the significance of the orifices (particularly the oral, genital and anal) through which the world enters the body and the body leaks into the world (317-18). The nose functions similarly for Saleem, connecting him intimately to history and to the nation. If Saleem's fragmenting body is taken to symbolize the Foucauldian idea of the body overwritten with history as Linda Hutcheon argues (117) then the nose certainly functions as history's point of entry.

The centrality of the nose as the signifier of Saleem's linkage with the destiny of the nation, of the invasion of history into his story can also be inferred from the fact that the decongestion of his sinuses deprives him of his telepathic connection with his compatriots. The nose, particularly the nose goo, is here invested with the magical quality of inducing a telepathic communion, a power that may be looked upon as a stretching of the boundaries of one's identity, of diffusing the gap between the subject and the object. Moreover, the mucus in its viscosity challenges the very idea of a fixed categorization, a fixed identity. It is, as Mary Douglas formulates a 'matter out of place' (36). In its state of anomaly between the solid and the liquid the nose goo urges us to recall what Sartre says about a child's encounter with honey. According to Sartre:

Its stickiness is a trap... it attacks the boundary between myself and it. ... I remain solid, but to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity. ... [The child] has learnt something about himself and the properties of matter and the interrelation between self and other things. (quoted in Douglas 39)

This interrelation between the self and the other, this fluidity of identity and empathetic identification with imagined compatriots, which lies at the basis of the concept of Indian unity, is also what the nasal exudates seem to signify. Transcending its merely satirical purpose the

nasal secretion thus becomes a multilayered symbol looking askance at the stuttering steps of the infant nation and its failure to attain its ideal while simultaneously affirming and upholding the ideals of difference and assimilation germane to the concept of Indian national identity. Located at the juxtaposition of the two categories of scatological tropes enumerated above, it thus functions as the correlative of the very ambivalence of Rushdie's attitude towards the nation in its amalgamation of critique and affirmation.

Though not directly a bodily effulgence, another prominent association with the unclean that Saleem has is with the washing chest where the young Saleem, haunted by a sense of worthlessness, would often take refuge. Not only does the soiled-cloth-enveloped Saleem remind of the squalor of existence in post-independence India, of the stoic philosophy of 'dignity-despite-everything' for a nation whose hopes had largely been betrayed, but the washing chest also serves as some kind of a charmed passage leading into the secret, magical gift of the favoured child of midnight. In a parody of the biblical and Islamic myths of divine revelation where the words of God are revealed to the prophets on the sacred sites of Mount Sinai or Mount Hira, the genius of prophetic insight is revealed to the modern-day hero on the utterly unsacred heap of the dirty linen. Saleem himself is aware of the irony of the revelation in the washing chest as his allusions to Moses and Muhammad indicate.

What then is the purpose of the framing of this most important event of Saleem's life by such an unsanitary, non-sacred, almost absurd space? In my opinion, the association of this unsanitary space with the revelation of Saleem's midnight-given greatness at once urges us to question the 'greatness' of this revelation. Saleem uses it to set up a communion with all the magical children born around the midnight of 15th August 1947 and particularly with Shiva, an alter-ego synchronic in birth. This results in the Midnight Children's Conference or MCC described as, 'a loose federation of equals' where 'all points of view [are] given free expression' (305). Modelled on the idealistic lines of the fictitious Free Islam Convocation of Mian Abdullah as well as the secular pluralist politics of the National Congress, the MCC throws open the gaps and fissures in the national imaginary of the comprador elite leadership and its failure in the post-independence era to address the needs of the racial, communal, religious diversity that their ideal of the nation stood for. Mirroring the national assembly, the strife that soon engulfs the MCC is reflective of the real problems undermining the socialist, secular, all-assimilating ideal of the Indian nation. That such ideals remained more in the realm of ideas, and equality was far from achieved in a nation ruled by an elite who failed to account for the poorer classes or at most had a paternalistic attitude, is reflected in the confrontation of Saleem and Shiva where the latter seems to speak for the disenfranchised subaltern masses and their right to be heard.

The failure of the conference is an ironic comment on the inability of the independent nation to lend its ears to the individual tenors in the Babel of multiple voices that make up its diverse fabric. The high hopes and its bathetic deflation that the MCC's as well as the nation state's trajectory charts, is indicated a priori by setting its germs within a space associated with bodily exudates. The episode of the washing chest thus functions as a parody of the scriptural episodes of divine revelation that led to an effective mobilization of huge populations, to reveal the disconnect between the diversity of the Indian population and the Western educated, elitist government and the problems associated with the incursion of a monoglot worldview in a nation of such multiplicity; the scatological association hinting at the staggering absurdity of such a prospect of unified mobilization which is inevitably doomed to failure.

As already discussed, the central movement of Saleem's narrative is from the celebratory inception of the postcolonial nation as a site of plurality, secularism, difference and heteroglossia, to its fall from the ideal with the onslaught of forces of monoglossia. In Saleem's historiography the state Emergency of 1975 signifies the nadir for the pluralist ideal of India as the ascendancy of the Widow with the solipsistic motto 'Indira is India' sounding the death

knell of divergent voices. The compulsory vasectomy programme undertaken by the Indira government signifies in Saleem's view a means of controlling the diversity of India signified by the magical children of the midnight and specifically Saleem. 'Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves' (613).

Scatological satire also colours this fall of the Indian ideal where the size of the turd excreted by a man becomes indexical of the degradation of India. Awaiting his marriage with Padma and his final annihilation Saleem sees a man around midnight shitting outside his window. Seeing Saleem the man proudly flaunts his powers of defecation by producing 'the longest turd I have ever seen.' The 'champion defecator' proudly declares it to be fifteen inches long and challenges Saleem to which he can only reply "'Seven on a good day'" (639). Thus, Saleem's seven inches turd compared to the fifteen inches of the champion symbolizes the progressive debasement of the nation; the quantity of dump serving as an index of its failure and corruption. The progressively bitter and pessimistic tone of Saleem's narrative ending with the bleak vision of his annihilation as he is trampled underfoot by the overwhelming multitude 'reducing me to specks of voiceless dust' (647) makes it appear unredeemed in its pessimism. However, to accept this hopelessness as the final message of the novel would constitute a partial reading at best. Saleem's narrative is an endeavour to save the body from being overwritten by the onslaught of history. His endless proliferation of stories in a quest for meaning becomes a resilient vestige of India's multiplicity and regeneration. Hence, instead of a vision of final destruction Mujeebuddin Syed reads Saleem's dismemberment in terms of the primordial explosion of the Puranic creation myth as the dissemination, in the form of narratives, of everything Saleem, the swallower of lives had assimilated in his lifetime (Syed 103). It is in delineating this regenerative potential of Saleem vis-à-vis India that another aspect of the multivalence of scatological symbolism of the novel is revealed. As Rushdie claims in *Imaginary Homelands* the novel is a "'privileged arena" of conflicting discourses' (426) accommodating 'voices talking about everything in every possible way' (429). It is in this accommodation of different voices teeming in its heteroglossic multiplicity, in the fecundity and diversity of India that the novel launches a counterattack on the hegemony of monoglot forces. Through this discursive practice Rushdie wants to put faith in the vision of the secular India that is yet to be achieved in practice. Hence for Rushdie, the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems'. The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. (16)

It is this teeming, vital, ever-renewing aspect of the Indian nation that too is projected through a scatological idiom, this time through excrement's association with Padma, Saleem's lover and nurse in his final days. The scatological tropes of the novel thus, transcend its function as mere tools of satire and become a symbol of positivity and hope.

From her very first appearance in Saleem's narrative Padma is associated with dung: 'she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is 'The One Who Possesses Dung'' (24). Padma is not simply a coworker in the pickle factory where Saleem works and spends his last days writing his autobiography, she is his only caregiver as well as the sole audience to his bizarre life story. Through her commenting and questioning she helps Saleem in his virtually endless quest for meaning. If it is the endless stream of stories that represents the multiplicity and diversity of the Indian ethos, Padma would be a co-progenitor of this stream along with Saleem. She is at the same time associated with the principle of fertility and generation. Reflecting on the mythic archetype of the lotus flower Saleem waxes eloquent:

Padma, ... is one of the Guardians of Life, beguiling and comforting mortal men while they pass through the dream-web of Maya ... Padma, the lotus calyx, which grew out of Vishnu's navel, and from which Brahma himself was born; Padma the Source, the mother of Time! (270) She is however named after a flower that grows in the mud and mythologized as the 'One Who Possesses Dung.' Padma, the embodiment of growth and regeneration, is also invested with scatological symbolism. But here the excremental association paradoxically functions as a positive attribute supplementing the regenerative role Padma plays in the novel. If for the most part faeces has had a negative connotation with a satiric intent, here it is its fertility that becomes the focus. In a humorous aside Saleem praises the value of dung in order to appease Padma.

Dung, that fertilizes and causes the crops to grow! Dung, which is patted into thin chapati-like cakes when still fresh and moist, and is sold to the village builders, who use it to secure and strengthen the walls of kachcha buildings made of mud! (35)

Padma, by nurturing Saleem as his health fails and by providing his thoughts a patient ear and her life as a wife also tries to provide him a home acting out the nurturing role of her mythic element, the dung. Padma, in her act of pickling, is intimately connected to the mixed, hybrid, composite nature of India, for to pickle is to bring together different flavours and to eternalize them— 'to pickle is to give immortality' (644). Hence Padma not only becomes the single important force of redemption but also becomes complementary to Saleem as an emblem of India. Thus, this ambivalence of scatological symbolism seems to confirm what John Clement Ball calls the 'pessoptimism' of the novel's ultimate vision (234) in opposition to the apparent negativity of its conclusion.

Conclusion

The in-betweenness of Rushdie's stance vis-à-vis the nation, his simultaneous disillusionment with the trajectory of national history, and his desperate faith in the resilience of the Indian spirit of secularism thus provide a fertile ground for the reading of the scatological tropes in his novel, for such an in-betweenness is also characteristic of the abject which inhabits the boundary between the self and a radical otherness. The above discussion thus demonstrates the efficacy of excremental tropes in approximating the complex interplay between post-independence national expectations and postcolonial disenchantment. It thereby extends the current understanding of Rushdie's narrative art where scatology serves not merely as a source of entertaining humour but as a chosen vehicle of nation writing. What has also emerged in the course of the discussion is the possibility of establishing an interpretive model for reading scatological tropes which occur quite frequently in other fictional chronicles of the postcolonial nation by writers as diverse as Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah and James Joyce. So far as the postcolonial nations across the world exhibit a history of confronting a dystopic colonial rule with the utopia of a nationalist rule followed by a permanent deferral of the utopia as the decolonized nation lapses into vicious structures of inequality and despotism, postcolonial existence will be marked by such a critical idiom of disenchantment together with the persistence of a future utopia, for which scatology becomes the most appropriate vehicle.

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