



CULTURE & NATIONHOOD IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *EAST, WEST & MY CHILDREN*



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ABSTRACT

*This paper involves the examination of two works by Salman Rushdie: a short story collection, **East, West** and a novel, *Midnight's Children*. Looking at these texts through a postcolonial lens, I analyse Rushdie's writing in terms of its relationship to the academic debates of the period and the historical context that grounds the works. Throughout the paper, I analyse Rushdie's portrayal of the relationship between culture, nationhood, and identity, while also focusing on different aspects of the works. In the first section I examine the relationship between postcolonialism and magical realism in **East, West**, and argue that Rushdie uses a unique hybrid of magical realism, satire, and intertextuality to complicate the portrayal of culture in his stories as he brings into question the use of the East/West binary that dominated scholarly discourse at the time of the publication of these text. In the section second chapter I discuss the relationship between *Midnight's Children* and **East, West**, examining the portrayal of post-independence India and Rushdie's critiques of the Indian government at the time.*

*While in the section first chapter, stylistic decisions serve as the primary focus of my analysis, in second part, the relationship between technology and national identity becomes the driving question. Using textual and historical evidence, I demonstrate the extent to which these two texts serve as a statement on the nature of cultural and national identity in the postcolonial era, providing no certain answers but instead raising more questions and illuminating the complexities of global interactions. **East, West** is a collection of*

*narratives about identity formation in cross-cultural circumstances. The originality of these stories may be detected by noting many features of Rushdie's novels that are not to be observed here. Rushdie's own statement that "literature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds" could take as the motto of *East, West*, because this is exactly what the stories, individually and collectively, set out to do. Rushdie 1991:424 The wonderful characters he portrays in these short-stories strike us through their ability to mix popular culture with philosophical remarks and informal expressions with subtle psychological awareness. Structurally, the collection is divided into three sections: "East," "West," and "East, West" which consists of nine stories, three in each section. The "East" section contains "Good Advice is Rarer than Rubies," "The Free Radio" and "The Prophet's Hair" while the second section called "West" is made of "Yorick," "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" and "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship." The third part entitled "East, West" includes "The Harmony of the Spheres", "Chekov and Zulu" and "The Courter." The purpose of these demarcations is not to suggest a facile fusion between the two worlds. Rather, Rushdie sets out to offer images of both worlds that connect them rhetorically while suggesting their difference*

KEY WORDS

Postcolonialism, Magical, Realism culture & nationhood, Sheherazadean hotch-potch fantasies "Ex colonial, Imagined Communities, identity and simultaneity,

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn cited 164 definitions of culture, ranging from “*learned behaviour*” to “*ideas in the mind*,” “*a logical construct*,” “*a statistical fiction*,” “*a psychic defence mechanism*”. The definition—or the conception—of culture that is preferred by Kroeber and Kluckhohn and also by a great many other anthropologists is that culture is an abstraction or, more specifically, “*an abstraction from behaviour*.”

Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The representative legislature is a British-American innovation from the 17th and 18th centuries that proved a mighty engine of *nationhood*.

Christopher Demuth, *WSJ*, 9 June 2023 An independent identity, or *nationhood*, is a fantasy.

Jay Noerdlinger, *National Review*, 9 Jan. 2023. The iconic rock, a symbol of Scottish *nationhood* seized by an English king in the 13th century and not returned until 1996, had to be moved to Westminster Abbey in secrecy and amid tight.

With the publication of Salman Rushdie short story collection *East, West* (1994), Rushdie revealed that the book’s title was inspired by his personal connection to its subject matter, saying “I said to most people when I started thinking of calling the stories *East, West* that the most important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma—or at least I live in the comma...I don’t feel like a slash. I feel like a comma.” Rushdie inserts himself, and to an extent, all other migrants, into this title by using his own experiences as the reason for his stylistic choice. He presents an intriguing contrast—the possibility that the space between *East* and *West* could be either a (metaphorical) physical position or a state of being. By using a comma, which connects the two words rather than divides them, Rushdie demonstrates that what connects *East* and *West* are the people who occupy both, who are either living in that hybrid space, or the embodiment of that hybrid space.

The comma that separates the *East* from the *West* plays a key role in the meaning of the phrase. Rather than adhering to the norms of punctuation for the binary phrase and using a slash, Rushdie chooses to show a less abrupt division between the two words, and the two worlds. The complex nature of separation, or more specifically fragmentation, is a theme common among Rushdie’s works, as it appears in not only *East, West* but in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) as well. Arguably his most well-known, and certainly his most lauded work, *Midnight’s Children* portrays the formation and fragmentation of India as a newly independent nation state.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY :

To study the culture & nationhood in Salman Rushdie’s works

In *East, West* Rushdie addresses the dichotomization of the world into *East* and *West* with characters whose lives extend across this separation, like elderly Mary who lives in England but longs for India so strongly that her heart begins to fail, or Indian intelligence agents Chekov and Zulu who turn their lives into a continuous *Star Trek* episode despite

never watching the show. While *East, West* focuses on this fragmentation from a transnational perspective, Rushdie uses *Midnight's Children*, to examine the internal fractures within India, as its wildly diverse collection of citizens struggle to define their relationship to a nation that is suddenly and undeniably their own. In his epic novel which interweaves the protagonist's life story and major events in India's post-independence history including the linguistic reorganization of states and Pakistan's bid for independence, Rushdie brings into question the meaning of nationhood. Just as in *East, West* Rushdie refuses to accept the simplicity of a world divided into the opposing spheres of East and West, in *Midnight's Children* he demonstrates that a nation is defined by far more than its borders. In these two texts, Rushdie addresses the fluid and uncertain nature of cultural and national identity.

In *East, West* he complicates the status of culture in a postcolonial setting playing with Oriental stereotypes and manipulating Western classics in his stories which portray many characters, many of whom embark on migratory journeys that raise questions about the relationship between home and identity, and the results of the loss thereof. What is lost in *East, West* seems to be gained in *Midnight's Children*, as the story revolves around the experience of India's newfound independence after England withdraws its colonial regime from the nation. But just as *East, West* addresses the struggles of the loss of cultural identity, *Midnight's Children* demonstrates that the creation of national identity is equally challenging. In text homes and freedoms are woefully abandoned and in the they are triumphantly obtained but both works reveal the uncertainty that accompanies the fallout of colonial and postcolonial relationships. The cultural mix is first of all, reflected in Rushdie's narrative style. His short fiction takes different forms: satire, allegory, parody, parable and postmodern historiographic metafiction.

Rushdie's voice is detached, oral, autobiographical and it can be Joycean as it seems to be in "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella Consummate their Relationship," like Laurence Sterne's in "Yorick," it can be Shakespearean in "The Courter" and oriental, Scheherazade in "The Prophet's hair." Rushdie's dialogic imagination has constantly made room for this kind of multiplicity as the writer himself remarked in his comment on his fiction: "It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world." (Rushdie 1991:394. In keeping with these words, an important critic of the collection, John Carey remarks that the narrative style used in these stories is a mix of "different story-Modes Arabian Nights, 18th-century English, futurist" which create a 'hotch-potch' effect which is a 'counter-measure against ideas of purity-pure race, pure culture, pure religion-which have proved to be the seedbeds of atrocity" (Carey qtd in Reynolds and Noakes 2003: 24) In these tales, Rushdie investigates what happens when East meets West and measures the forces that pull his characters towards the two opposite directions. The stories focus on various cultural aspects of Western and Eastern societies - the lifestyles, events, stereotypes and prejudices that affect people in these areas, especially those who, like Rushdie, migrate from one to the other. Realism and imagination collide just as the rickshaw driver from "The Free Radio" writes letters describing his film star career in Bombay. Fantasy runs over reality in "The Courter" when a mispronunciation leads to an unusual love affair in sixties London or, in another story, when Christopher Columbus dreams of having an affair with Queen Isabella

Midnight's Children. Ramani, the protagonist in "The Free Radio," and Saleem, *Midnight's Children's* narrator and hero, both face a formidable opponent in the Indian

government and Indira Gandhi during the Indian Emergency. In the two texts, radios play a central role as Ramani so longs for a transistor radio of his own that he mimics the broadcasts of All India Radio, and Saleem, instilled since birth with telepathic abilities, acts as a transmitter himself. Given the stories' interests in identity, and the relationship between East and West, these radios carry symbolic weight, as they serve as agents central to the development of national identity, broadcasting information that is consumed by the public and controlled by the government. As the state attempts to recover from the influence of Western powers, the radio becomes an increasingly important device, a technology of coercion and revolution which has come into play not only in Rushdie's texts, but in a multitude of historical conflicts between the colonized and colonizer; between East and West. Somehow, it all comes back to those same two words, separated by a comma and containing within them a host of allusions and thematic references. "East, West" suggests a well-known phrases that relate to the content of the text.

The relationship between the Western and non-Western spheres was a predominant concept during this period (and it continues to be today), as globalization gained speed in the post-Cold War era. Benjamin R. Barber argues in his 1992 article "Jihad vs. McWorld," that globalization is "pressing nations into one commercially homogenous global network." While not a response to Huntington, Barber poses an alternate hypothesis, claiming that instead of producing separate civilizations that would ultimately clash with each other, the powers of globalization will homogenize cultures Edward also posed alternative ideas to Huntington's, in his argument against the theory of the clash of civilization Rushdie recounts his experiences of migration, as he travelled from India to England in his childhood and later to America, saying his writing "[has] to do with where [he] came from, and trying to lay claim to it and to understand it in a new way. East, West addresses the experiences of the migrant, who Rushdie claims "is the defining image of the 20th century...so many people in the human race have ended up in places in which they did not begin." While Huntington saw the world's civilizations as discrete entities, Rushdie's perspective is grounded in integration Rushdie recognizes both the historical and contemporary conflicts between Europe and the non-Occidental world, a conflict spanning centuries back to the medieval era's wars between Jews, Christians and Muslims and continuing today as the effects of the West's imperialistic ventures in the East are still felt throughout the globe. But he also sees the shared characteristics in these areas, interrelatedness that scholars like Huntington don't seem willing to recognize.

This phrase "mixed up" is critical in terms of Rushdie's own experiences, and his perspective on postcolonial cultures. In an interview, he discussed the shared "Ex colonial" status held by India and the U.S., saying, "They're both cultures made up of mixtures...made up of people who come from elsewhere...They're both mixed up people. Rushdie tackles several issues in this passage, as he combines a discussion of Eliot's mental instability while also alluding to Khan's experiences as an Indian immigrant in England. In this sense, Rushdie uses a manipulated form of magical realism, as he uses T S Eliot's (literally) insane perspective to describe the problems that accompany Khan's real-life situations, changing the recounting of Eliot's paranoid delusions significantly when the narrator switches from third to first person. The first statement describes Eliot's fantasies, and because Khan labels them as "conspiracy [theories]," it is clear that there is a separation of reality and delusion. The relationship between the radio and national identity in postcolonial nations, or nations in general, has not generated much scholarly attention. While the role that prints media and television play in the development and preservation of national and cultural identity has been

the object of an extensive amount of scholarship, the radio is often overlooked in these discussions. A few scholars have recently published works on the topic, including Joelle Neulander, who examines the role of radio programming in encouraging socially conservative family values in France and the portrayal of colonial nations which radio shows offered to France's audiences. Radio plays and songs broadcast in France which depicted the exotic space of colonized nations focused "not on satisfaction and happiness outside France, but rather on the danger that lurked beyond the national borders. Radio programming ensured that France's colonial territories seemed primitive and frightening, suggesting not just superiority of the French lifestyle but also the altruism of the French government's actions, as they risked their citizens' lives in their attempts to assist their colonial subjects.

After all, Neulander notes, "colonial subjects did not reflect back the image of bourgeois patriarchal morality that radio producers saw as their ideal." The dissatisfaction and resistance expressed by France's colonial subjects, such as the djebel forces in Algeria, did not align with the illustration of the French colonial project that the radio programs portrayed. The radio's role in India echoes elements of its position in Algeria and France, as a device of simultaneity and as an object available for manipulation. Both "The Free Radio" and *Midnight's Children* address this element of Indian culture, as the texts' protagonists engage with AllIndia Radio and create their own versions of radios. Rushdie portrays Saleem and Ramani's unwavering belief in their radios' efficacy as he aligns their faith in the radio with their belief in the national project.

The radios in both stories reflect their position as objects which are central to the development of national identity, but their cultural influence is mitigated and manipulated by the political machinations of the postcolonial state. Both texts display the ongoing tension that exists between the use of the radio by the Indian audience versus the Indian authorities. The radio serves as an object of nationhood, encouraging in its listeners a sense of simultaneity. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* writes about the newspaper as an object of national identity and simultaneity, writing that as people across a nation consume the morning and evening editions of the newspaper, "Each communicant is simultaneously aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. The radio takes on the same role as the newspaper, uniting its listeners across the nation. Anderson's newspaper, the radio became a ritual for the Indian public, and as the radio's popularity expanded so did its influence, making the technology increasingly important to the government as a mode of communication and control. But despite the government's interest in broadcasting classical music and "rescu[ing] the general public from the vulgarities of Indian film songs," the listening public managed to circumvent the government's discontinuation of the broadcast of film music by listening to Radio Ceylon, a station based in what is now Sri Lanka. After a survey in 1957 revealed that nine out of ten stations were tuned to Radio Ceylon, with each tenth set being broken, the Indian government relented in the hopes that listeners would tune to the broadcasts whose contents they could control when necessary.

"The Free Radio" portrays the evolving relationship between the Widow and Ramani, as they meet and eventually marry. The union between the pair appears as a calculated move on the part of the Widow, readily accepted by the gullible Ramani. From the start, the narrator explains that she is the wrong woman for Ramani, ten years older than him and a mother to five children. Just as the radio reflects the dual perspective of force and consent, the Widow's contrasting relationships with Saleem and Ramani can be viewed in those terms as well, as

Ramani willingly engages in marriage with her while Saleem grows up in fear of the Widow. Saleem encounters the Widow for only a brief period of the novel. She appears in his dreams as a child and plays a critical role in Book Three, as Saleem's life and India's political turmoil collide. While Saleem's encounters with the Widow are much briefer, her destructive abilities are just as potent

Conclusion

Midnight's Children and East, West exemplify Rushdie's writing during his early career, as Midnight's Children became Rushdie's first major success and the assorted stories from East, West were written throughout the early 1980s to mid 1990s. These two texts grapple with issues that were highly relevant at the time of their publication, as Rushdie addresses India's development as an independent nation, the relationship between and the perception of the East and the West, and the positions of postcolonial scholars at the time. Several decades later, these texts are relics of an earlier era, as more than 60 years have passed since India gained its independence, and scholarly discussion of the binary of East and West has been replaced with talk of the global North and South

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