

## **Mixing Cultural Identities in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: A Postcolonial Study**

### **(Sebuah Studi Tentang Poskolonial yang Membahas Pencampuran Identitas Budaya Dalam Novel *Midnight's Children* Karya Salman Rushdie)**

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#### **Abstrak**

*Midnight's Children* adalah novel karya Salman Rushdie. Novel ini menceritakan bahwa India adalah negara yang hibrid. Hibriditas adalah pencampuran dua kebudayaan atau lebih sebagai akibat dari penjajahan terhadap kebudayaan yang ada didalam masyarakat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kemampuan tokoh-tokoh hibrid dalam mencampur budaya India yang lama dan India yang baru. Penelitian ini juga menunjukkan bahwa India yang hibrid mampu menjauhkan kekuatan penjajah. Riset ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dan deskriptif dalam menggambarkan dan menganalisis data yang berhubungan dengan masalah pasca kolonial terutama dalam bidang hibriditas. Data utama dalam penelitian ini adalah berupa fakta-fakta dan informasi mengenai masalah pasca kolonial melalui kejadian-kejadian yang telah terseleksi dan juga melalui penokohan di dalam novel *Midnight's Children* yang berkenaan tentang hibriditas, sumber lainnya berupa jurnal, skripsi, internet dan buku juga membantu dalam mengumpulkan data. Hasil dari riset ini menunjukkan bahwa tidak ada kebudayaan yang asli. Menghindari keaslian dari budaya tersebut, Rushdie melalui penokohnya mengemukakan bahwa identitas India adalah hibrid. Identitas yang hibrid ini mampu meruntuhkan kekuatan penjajah dan memberikan pandangan baru bagi India, bahwa India tidak selalu berada dalam bayang-bayang kekuatan negara Inggris.

**Kata Kunci:** *poskolonial, hibriditas, pencampuran identitas budaya*

#### **Abstract**

*Midnight's Children* is Salman Rushdie's novel. This novel tells that India is hybrid. Hybridity is a mixing and a blending of two or more cultures as the effects of colonization on cultures in societies. This research aims to analyze the ability of hybrid characters to blend and mix the old and new India. It also shows that India's hybridity successfully estrange the colonial power. This research was conducted by using qualitative research and descriptive way to interpret and analyze the data that relates with postcolonial issue especially in hybridity. The main data are the facts and information about postcolonial issues through selected events and characterizations in the *Midnight's Children* which related on hybridity and other sources such as journal, thesis, internet and the book to help collecting the data. The result of this thesis shows that there is no authentic culture. Avoiding authenticity, Rushdie through his characters found that India's identity is hybrid. This hybrid identity is able to subvert colonial power and gives new image that India does not always live in the shadow of British power.

**Key words:** *post colonialism, hybridity, mixing cultural identity*

#### **Introduction**

Postcolonial literature intentionally criticizes the contemporary post-colonial discourses that have been shaped recent times. Postcolonial studies have focused especially on the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands, and South America. It sometimes encompasses also aspects of British literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, viewed through a perspective that reveals the extent to which the social and economic life represented in the literature was tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation (Abrams, 1999: 236). It means that postcolonial study relates to literature written by authors whose country once become the European colonized country. The literatures of African countries,

Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean, India, Malaysia, etc, can be included in postcolonial Literature.

*Midnight's Children* was written by India's novelist, Salman Rushdie in 1981. The novel deals with India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. It begins with the birth of the main character- Saleem Sinai in the day of India's independence. They who were born in this day are called as midnight children. The midnight's children possesses supernatural abilities. Saleem's gift is the ability to hear the voices of his fellow midnight's children. The text begins with adult Saleem attempting to recount the circumstances of his life from birth to the present. He begins his journey through the past in the text's first section.

The second section of this novel tells the years of independence, partition, and the birth of democratic India. By the end of the second section, Saleem's attempt at political change through his Midnight Children Conference fails and the section ends with the Indo-Pakistani war. The final section of *Midnight's Children* tells about the partition of Pakistan and Indira Gandhi's power. Indira Gandhi rises to power as a dictator, causing fear throughout the nation. Her dictatorship ends a peaceful democratic government as she begins arresting anyone who stands against her rule.

In the novel, Rushdie shows the description of India that cannot be separated from the past construction of tradition, of way of life, even of British's paradigm. I see that this novel tries to criticize the concept of "an original India" that is characterized by its ignorance toward plurality. However, I find that Rushdie intentionally gives other narration to see India by creating the character of midnight's children that do not care whether they are India Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Saleem and other Midnight's children do not believe that there is an original India. They just know that India is the collection of a number different characters, religious beliefs, or identities. For Rushdie, Saleem seems to live between two or more cultural identities without applying a clearly particular identity. Rushdie intentionally tends to show this Saleem's condition as an effort to estrange and disavow colonial authority. It is known as hybridity. Therefore, this research is conducted to investigate the concept of Bhabha's hybridity appeared in *Midnight's Children*.

The term hybridity has been crucial in Homi Bhabha's view of the ambivalence of colonial discourse. It is not simply discussed about cultural mixing between the colonized and colonizer. The old cultural identity and the new cultural identity from this cultural mixing will be seen. However in hybridity, the old identity usually will not disappear easily although the new cultural identity will strongly influence it. Here, what is called by Homi Bhabha's hybridity occurs as the ambiguity of identity that brings a person in a position of "in-between."

In this case, *Midnight's Children* does not try to forget past India's historical events but it tries to place the Indian people's narrative with its own version of history. Eventhough India's people are able to create their own history and identity, They do not trape on admiration and purification. It is like what Saleem does. He ignores the authenticity and replaces it with cultural multiplicity and diversity. This line of attack gives the way to the colonized people gaining some control over their colonizers that the colonized people has been different from what has been commanded or structured by colonizer's mind. This research can also emerges the critique of Salman Rushdie toward New India where he makes a hybrid character like Saleem Sinai.

Based on the description mentioned above, the problems to discuss concern with the following questions:

1. How does the novel blend old and new India through the characters in *Midnight Children*?
2. How does *Midnight's Children* show India's hybridity s estranging colonial power?

## Research Methodology

This research uses qualitative research. In this research, the texts are taken from variety of documents related to the postcolonial issue, especially hibridity. The required data in this research are in the narrations and statements form. Description and interpretation are the way to analyze in this research. Qualitative research is used to describe and show how the novel blends old and new India through the characters of *Midnight's Children* and how *Midnight's Children* shows India's hybridity estranging and subvert colonial power. This study is conducted in several phases.

At the first, I compile, classify, and verify the data that show Eastern's paradigm toward Western culture in the novel and the portrait of purification in India. In the first phase *A concise History of Modern India* is useful to see the history of British colonialism in India and to get information about the portrait of India after colonialism. This first step determines the inferiority of India's people toward British and how the effect of British's colonialism has pushed purification in India as the risk of traumatic memory toward other culture.

The second step is gathering information and data from Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. In this step, I require some concepts of Bhabha's hybridty theory to analyze hybridity on selected events and characterization in the novel. The last step is applying interpretative and descriptive method to expose the intended meanings emerges on those selected events and characterizations about hybridity appeared in *Midnight's Children*. Bhabha's theory of hybridity is used to show the ambivalence of cultural identity so British cannot categorize the position of this hybrid Indian because of his half position. Through hybridity, the hybrid Indian is able to estrange colonial power and subvert colonialist historiography.

## Result

The result finds that Rushdie creates the characters of *Midnight's Children* to live between two or more cultural identities without applying a clearly particular identity. He intentionally uses this mixing of identities as an effort to estrange and disavow colonial authority. Rushdie's characters has successfully made their own destiny and narration that destabilizes the factual history by making his own India's history that is not clear whether it is fact or fiction. In this way, he is able to play India's history by demolishing British's power that although his characters' identities are tied to their colonial histories, they can change the domination of British.

## Discussion

One of the effects of colonization is the paradigm that the colonizer's race, culture, or knowledge is superior to the colonized people. There is a belief to maintain the colonial rule (Venn, 2006:8). The portrait of some characters that tend to maintain the colonizer's rules and culture is well described by Rushdie in his novel. He gives a description of

Aadam Aziz's parents that dedicate to send Aadam for learning in medical college in Germany. Aadam's father has a stroke during his son's study in Germany but his mother keeps this news as a secret from her son because his studies abroad are too important (Rushdie, 1981:14). The importance of study in Germany portrays how education is a prestige and the education must fit to Western culture. This paradigm is constructed by the colonizer or West. West system of education gives a huge emphasis on rationality and logic. Western people see Eastern as irrational and teach Eastern following West education. It is as Gandhi cites Said.

"The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education ... It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England" (Gandhi, 1998:30)

This quote shows that Western's education is more prestige than East's education. Learning old book with its Sanskrit language is considered as something unimportant. In *Midnight's Children*, the tendency to learn in Western education done by some elites is the fact that there is inferiority in the mind of Eastern people toward Western people and culture.

In other scene, the admiration of colonized people toward West is gradually shown by Rushdie in very simply things. For example, Saleem's toy is labeled "made as England". Saleem then buries the toy in the garden of his house in Bombay. When he is adult, he tells Padma that he has a world of his own in this toy:

"Padma - did you have, when you were little, a world of your own? A tin orb, on which were imprinted the continents and oceans and polar ice? Two cheap metal hemispheres, clamped together by a plastic stand? No, of course not; but I did. It was a world full of labels: Atlantic Ocean and Amazon and Tropic of Capricorn. And, at the North Pole, it bore the legend: MADE AS ENGLAND" (Rushdie, 1981:483)

The phrase "Made as England" not "Made in England" indicates Bhabha's mimicry. This linguistic error committed by the local, formerly-colonized manufacturers means that toy can be a counterfeit. Rushdie seems to show the fact that the elite among the former colonized people still prefer to English-manufactured goods, just as they value the English culture. They mimic the English culture, "made as England". This stereotype however "confirms the necessity and desirability of colonial government by endlessly confirming the positional superiority of the West over the positional inferiority of the East" (Gandhi, 1998:77). India's government even does not give a good rule to develop their own product to compete with Western product. In this case,

Rushdie sees that the toy's label with the prepositional mistake serves the colonized people's tendency to copy the colonizer's products and their desire to be made as England. The description of the toy signals ambivalent feelings when this toy has lost its stand by August 1958 used for playing football. He uses the globe as a football, kicking it around.

The toy bearing the name of England had lost its stand by August 1958. It is representative of England's fortune. Rushdie tends to show this description with the condition in 1958 when the British Empire had come apart by the decolonization of many of its colonies. The toy with the label "made as England" is kicked and crushed by Saleem. It shows the decline of England and its power over the rest of the world. The world is not made as England anymore.

The British has the reputation of using the motto "Divide and rule." Their colonial history reveals a strategy of setting one faction of the natives against another: Hindus and Moslem fight against each other in colonial India; Palestinians and Jews fight against each other in the Middle East and Catholics against the Protestants in Ireland. Bhaba (1994:83) also points out that knowing the native population, discriminatory and authoritarian forms of political control are considered appropriate. Commonly, it is the poor who are set against each other instead against their real oppressors. The British strategy to divide and rule makes them define their social basis on faith and race category. In this time, there is prejudice to other who is different. They are pushed on the belief there is only one faith or race. Thus their cultural identities are fixed in this category, what is your faith or race. This is the politic based on discriminatory act. It is beneficial to differ in which master or slave. However, colonialist authority requires the production of differentiations through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations. Therefore, their mark of power will be easily identified.

*Midnight's Children* combines the perspectives of many postcolonial people through Saleem's power of telepathy. It shows that that India's history and culture are hybrids. This awareness is legalized in the discussion of Midnight Children's Conference. Saleem is the leader of this conference. Saleem begins opening this conference by emerging the origin of midnight's children:

"Understand what I'm saying: during the first hour of August 15th, 1947-between midnight and one a.m.—no less than one thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India. In itself, that is not an unusual fact although the resonances of the number are strangely literary ... as though history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time" (Rushdie, 1981:352).

The excerpt illustrates how all these midnight's children are associated with Indian independence. Saleem believes that



all of their gifts stem from "history which had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world had seen up to that time". Through *Midnight's Children* conference, Saleem can explore many perspectives and narratives within his own mind. He demonstrates the importance of multiplicity and diversity within a postcolonial India. From this conference, Saleem shows that India cannot be filled with single idea and it is fixed. India's character is hybrid. This hybridity must be firstly recognized by the people. As Saleem does, this conference emerges as the symbol to enter dominant narration, the first is from their puritan India people and the second is from British power. Bhabha explains that this "hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition" (Bhabha, 1994:114). This *Midnight's Children's* conference is functioned as the counter hegemony to estrange the dominant discourse.

Through *Midnight's Children* conference, Saleem becomes able to discuss with the *Midnight's Children* theoretical ideas regarding any issues within his own mind, in the *Midnight Children's* Conference. By communicating with the other children, each of whom has different cultural backgrounds and religions, Saleem becomes able to encounter new ideas, different from his own family. One of the lesson from his family is he has complicated identity traced from his origin. It means that Rushdie in this novel rejects India in a fixed identity that means there is only one culture or religious belief legalized in India. Conducting this paradigm, Saleem knows it will evoke the spirit of anti-colonial solidarities rather than trapped on puritanism and orthodoxy that rejects west at all. This hybridity is able to release the ambivalence of cultural identity where the colonial power hardly determines or categorizes the position of native because of his half position:

"For Bhabha, the colonised subject is rather more ontologically incalculable. As he argues, this figure's ambivalent response to the colonial invader: 'half acquiescent, half oppositional, always untrustworthy—produces an unresolvable problem of cultural difference for the very address of colonial cultural authority'" (Gandhi, 1998:135)

This novel shows how its narration builds upon past and new traditions. It demonstrates how Saleem participates in identity creation of his personal history and national history. According to Bhabha, "the history of modernity's antique dreams is to be found in the writing out of the colonial and postcolonial moment in resisting...attempts to normalize the time-lagged colonial moment" (1994:250). To normalize this time-lagged colonial moment, Rushdie sees the necessity to write a new different historical perspective. Through the character of Saleem, he is rewriting Indian history in the novel so it can be read as a challenge to the Eurocentric historiography as a discourse. Historiography as the totalitarian Eurocentric history writing of the colonizer

reduces the heterogeneity of the Indian past. It is what makes *Midnight's Children* attempts at subverting Western scientific historiography by offering a non-linear and personal story.

Rushdie creates a parody between fact and fiction in his novel. This parody serves as a tool to prove that historical accounts are artifacts. For example, Saleem tries to formulate the real reasons for the Indo-Pakistani war and to stick to the facts; however, what follows is a fictional explanation, which forces the reader to question the historical event. He lets his readers to question what fact is and what is the motives behind the writing of the history. For Saleem, everyone has an ability to write history since a historical fact is written by interpretation of each writer. Thus, the best way to write history is by making it as parody.

In writing India's history, Saleem places himself on the distance of narrative where he does not absolutely trapped on personal narrative or national narrative. Although there is no objective historical writing, he does not want to be trapped on personal opinion. He sees that the multiple historical writing must be seen as the plurality of understanding.

## Conclusion

*Midnight's Children* shows the blend of perspectives from many postcolonial people. The characters in the novel live between two or more cultural identities without embracing a clearly particular identity. They are hybrid characters. These hybrid characters show India's hybridity. Rushdie seems aware of India's hybridity represented by his characters. Through the novel, he criticizes "an original India" characterized by its singularity. However, hybridity can be an effort to estrange and disavow colonial authority. Meanwhile, the concept of original India brought by Indira Gandhi traps India on the status of the colonized.

The hybrid identities give an image of India that does not always live in the shadow of British's power since hybrid character cannot be determined as the original India. Thus, Rushdie demonstrates the importance of multiplicity and diversity within a postcolonial India. The novel shows that India cannot be filled with single idea and it is fixed.

The consequence of hybridity is that there is no authentic identity. Rushdie in this novel rejects India in a fixed identity that regards there is only one culture or religious belief legalized in India. Conducting this paradigm, it will evoke the spirit of anti-colonial solidarities rather than trapped on puritanism and orthodoxy that rejects west at all. This hybridity is able to release the ambivalence of cultural identity where the colonial power hardly determines or categorizes the position of native because of his half position. For Rushdie, hybridity is also a possibility to construct a new history of India and its cultural identity without trapped on India exoticism and orthodoxy.

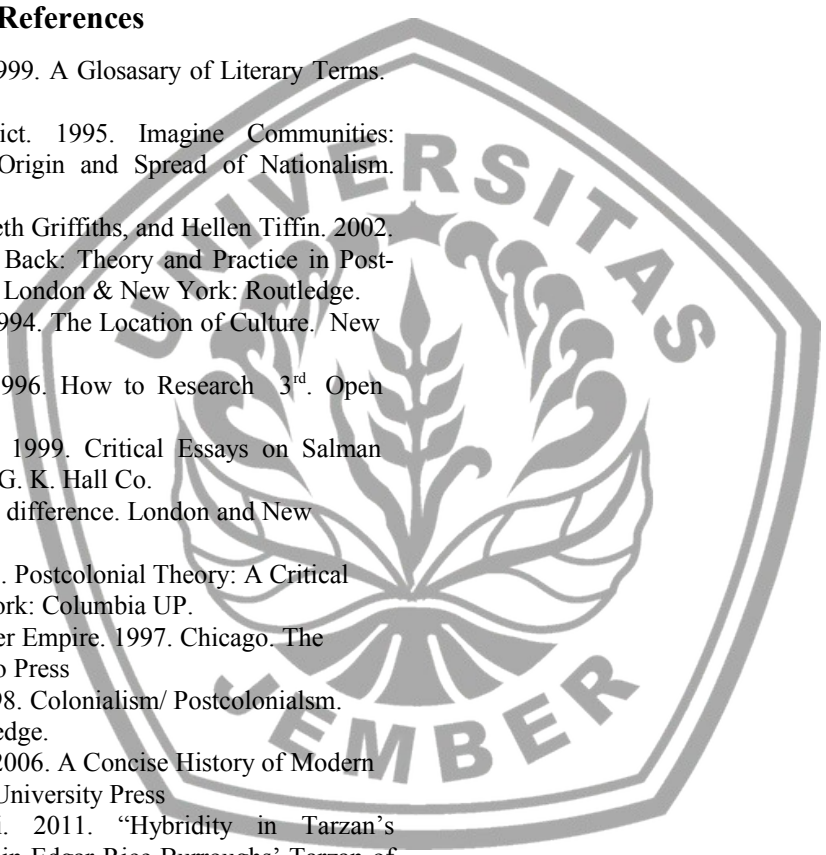
Therefore, by depicting many characters, the novel demonstrates the impossibility of identifying a true "authentic" Indian identity or history. Instead, the novel shows that if a postcolonial people are able to create his or her own history and identity, it becomes possible to ignore

questions of authenticity and instead cultural multiplicity and diversity. Avoiding authenticity, Rushdie through his novel sees that identity is hybrid. This hybrid identity however is able to subvert colonial power.

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