

Transcending Nationalist and Imperialist Boundaries: Rushdie, Seth and the Politics of Emancipatory Feminist Discourse in 20th Century India

Kavita Pillai

PhD Candidate in English
University of Missouri-Columbia
United States of America

Abstract

Using Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, this paper argues that the restrictive rhetoric of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism worked as a subjugating force instead of an emancipating impetus that did more harm than good for the subordinate classes, in this case women. Both novels take place during India's independence and showcase the era's pre-eminent ideals of nationhood and nation-building. The paper argues that the novels follow the period's conversations on nationalism and highlight how the question of women's rights and place in the newly freed nations was a critical issue for the leaders pursuing a just democracy. I posit that this focus stemmed not from a genuine effort to promote equality of gender but from a reactionary mode of defense against critics of Indian leaders, who deemed these leaders ineffective in running a nation that would be safe for all its people, especially women and minorities.

Keywords: Nationalism, Feminism, India, Women, Postcolonial, Rushdie, Seth

Introduction

In E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Aziz joins the revolutionary chorus of a nation when he declares, "India shall be a nation! No foreigners of any sort! Hindu and Moslem and Sikh and all shall be one!" (289). But while Forster suggests that the colonial presence in India is intolerable, completing his novel in the aftermath of the First World War, "he is clearly not convinced by the revolutionary promises of nationalism" (Teresa Heffernan 471); Fielding taunts Aziz with the remark "India a nation! What an apotheosis! Last come to the drab nineteenth-century sisterhood!" (Forster 289). There was a strong sense of India's shortcomings in becoming a democratic nation. One of the concerns was the plight of the minorities in India and that inevitably included women and their "barbaric" treatment, as perceived by the West. "[Gayatri] Spivak's sentence—"White men are saving brown women from brown men"—serves to justify colonial interventions if white men are taken as saviors and brown men are scapegoated as oppressors (of brown women)" (Norton 2112). The British found an excuse to intervene and 'save' the women in India from the oppressive Indian men. "The 'masculine-imperialist' ideology can be said to produce the need for a masculine-imperialist rescue mission" (Rosalind C. Morris, Introduction 3). The rescue mission served as a façade for colonial presence. Focusing on widow-sacrifice (sati) in colonial India, "the British move to abolish the practice," which was justified on the basis of the British "civilizing mission" in India (Ilan Kapoor 1). Sympathy for the *sati* manifests itself as protectionist discourse. Spivak contrasts this position with the then dominant Hindu one, which excused the practice by arguing that the widows "wanted to die" (Kapoor 1). Spivak indicates how each representation legitimizes the other: one purports to be a social mission, saving Hindu women from their own men, the other a reward, allowing the women to commit a 'pure' and 'courageous' act. But all the while, the widow's own voice is ignored. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears...There is no space from which [she] can speak' (Spivak, 1988: 306-307). This protection of women became for the British a signifier for the establishment of a good society. According to the native male, the women voluntarily wanted the practice as an ascription of a free will. Spivak notes however that neither version could represent the voice and will of the woman. This leads to an important phenomenon: 1) the disappearance of the postcolonial woman from discourses that are of pertinence to them and 2) the hijacking of their rights to free will by nationalist leaders.

Materials and Methods

I am using Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* to show how the restrictive rhetoric of imperialism, colonialism and nationalism work as a subjugating force instead of being an emancipating impetus, and in the end, does more harm than good for the subordinate class, i.e. women in this case. Both these novels take place during the time of India's independence, and showcase the ideals of nationhood and nation-building that was going on at the time. These novels' main plots follow the discourse on nationalism that was prevalent at the time, and how the question of women's rights and place in the new India was one of the issues that was the central focus for the leaders pursuing a just democracy. I argue that this movement stemmed not from a genuine effort to promote equality of gender but from a reactionary mode of defence against critiques of the inefficiency of Indian leaders' to make India a safe place for all its people, especially women and minorities. Sati (the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband) was one of the biggest critiques of India, something used by the British, time and again, to show the ineffectiveness of the Indian man to be able to protect his woman. The British were the ones responsible for banning Sati and declaring it inhumane. But the effect of the abolition of Sati in the end was, that "[g]roups rendered psychologically marginal by the exposure to Western impact...had come under pressure to demonstrate to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture" (Spivak 1988: 298). Both Rushdie's and Seth's novels show how this pressure to perform, pressure to please the west put pressure on the men in India to create a certain mold for their women to fit, so as to be able to portray their own competence in matters of governance, and this in turn put a sort of twofold pressure on the women in India: to pretend to be modern and free of oppression, but at the same time, not too modern and/or western. The women were still expected to adhere to the qualities of real "Indianness," moral purity and traditional culture, but with an exhibition of liberation and modernity. The men and women in the novels are caricatures of these roles and help to confirm the hypocrisy that left women in a position of passive subservience. As a result, the nationalist discourse of postcolonialism sidelined women for the sake of nationalist agenda that favored men and left women in charge of domestic matters, with no voice in the newly formed nation-state.

Hence, when nationalism became the pre-eminent cause during India's struggle for independence from the British, claiming Indian superiority became the tool of cultural revivalism, resulting in an essentializing model of Indian womanhood. Consequently, women's parity was not just a question of women's rights but one of the ways for the upcoming nationalist leaders to demonstrate the nation's aptitude in forming a just democracy. Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's feminist movement was initiated by men and later joined by women—men who wanted to show "the Raj" that they treated their women well, and hence, by doing so, contributed to bringing about the wave of "involuntary feminism." The new woman could safely venture outside as long as she displayed the signs of modesty and femininity in her dress, religiosity and demeanor, "which demonstrated that she had internalized the norms of the 'new patriarchy', which was 'reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality'" (Partha Chatterjee 1993: 127-30).

Consequently, the nationalist discourse as set by men dictated women's liberation movements, and in order to show the western critics a "modern" India free of barbaric prejudices, the nation's feminist movement was born. However, this idea of feminism was one that was fashioned by men, and they expected women to stage themselves as a liberated woman but at the same time not let go of the religious and traditional roles that were an essential element of the "ideal Indian" woman, daughter and wife. Fundamentally, the women's ostensible freedoms were essentially still controlled by the men who sought to show their own resourcefulness in running a nation. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappear[ed], not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1988: 301). Women became the bearers of the nationalist discourse's honor and the face of modern India as presented by men and were more or less not given a real option to choose their freedoms separate from the interests of these patriarchal idealists. As Simone de Beauvoir illustrates in *The Second Sex*, women were forced to relinquish their claims to transcendence and authentic subjectivity by a progressively more stringent acceptance of the "passive" and "alienated" role to man's "active" and "subjective" demands (Norton 1266-67). "They remained trapped inside themselves thereby perpetuating the passive role determined for them by the male" (Helene Cixous, Norton 1953).

I explore the theme of violation as liberation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. *Midnight's Children* not favorably but rather sardonically portrays the ill-fittedness of a matriarchal society through its creation of the hypocritical character of Saleem, whereas *A Suitable Boy's* stringent separation of men and women's roles in society espouses the importance of the patriarchal Indian society. This analysis enables an investigation of what conditions obtrude to mute the speech of third world woman, to render her speech and her acts illegible to those who occupy the space produced by patriarchal complicity (whether of imperialism or nationalism), forcing us to go back, to "unlearn" with Spivak the normative ideals of piety and excess with which the third world woman has come to be associated in the interlaced ideological formations of both West and East. As Spivak argued in *Can the Subaltern Speak*, "historical circumstances and ideological structures" conspire to efface the possibility of being heard (something related to but not identical to silence) for those who are variously "located as the others of imperial masculinity" (Spivak 1988: 297).

Results and Discussion

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born on midnight, August 15, 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from the British. Now nearing his thirty-first birthday, Saleem believes that his body is beginning to crack and fall apart. Fearing that his death is imminent, he grows anxious to tell his life story. Padma, his loyal and loving companion, serves as his patient, often skeptical audience. Saleem later discovers that all children born in India between 12 a.m. and 1 a.m. on that date are imbued with special powers. Using his telepathic powers, Saleem assembles a Midnight Children's Conference, reflective of the issues India faced in its early statehood concerning the cultural, linguistic, religious, and political differences faced by a vastly diverse nation. Saleem acts as a telepathic conduit, bringing hundreds of geographically disparate children into contact with each other, while also attempting to discover the meaning of their gifts; children born closest to the stroke of midnight wield more powerful gifts than the others. Saleem later becomes involved with the Emergency declared by India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. For a time Saleem is held as a political prisoner; these passages contain scathing criticisms of Indira Gandhi's overreach during the Emergency as well as a personal lust for power bordering on godhood. The Emergency signals the end of the potency of the *Midnight's Children*, and there is little left for Saleem to do but pick up the few pieces of his life he may still find and write the chronicle that encompasses both his personal history and that of his still-young nation; a chronicle written for his son, who, like his father, is both chained and supernaturally endowed by history.

The second novel that I investigate, *A Suitable Boy*, is set in post-independence, post-partition India. Seth's novel follows the story of four families over a period of 18 months as a mother searches for a suitable boy for her daughter. The 1349-page novel alternatively offers satirical and earnest examinations of national political issues in the period leading up to the first post-Independence national election of 1952, including inter-sectarian animosity, the status of lower caste peoples, land reforms and the eclipse of the feudal princes and landlords, property rights, women's empowerment movements, academic affairs, inter- and intra-family relations, and a range of issues in post-colonial India. *A Suitable Boy* centres on Mrs. Rupa Mehra's efforts to arrange the marriage of her younger daughter, Lata, with a "suitable boy". At the heart of the novel it is a love story, set in a young, newly independent India.

Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* reflects upon "the connections between domesticity and colonial patriarchy, and the continuance of these connections in nationalist ideology," a reflection that resonates with discussions of Indian feminism, most notably Gayatri Spivak's famous comments on the silencing of Indian women by "colonial, nationalist, and intellectual representations of them" (Sara Upstone). These representations restrict their roles as primarily positioned "in the domestic domain"—the realm ordained for the middle-class wife, where she worked for the good of the nation by educating her children well and managing a clean, hygienic, and efficient household (Bannerji 1991: 51). This domestic domain is the only world made available to the women in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. This explains the exclusion of women in any political debate in *A Suitable Boy*, and it also helps the reader to understand their depiction as vain, gossiping housewives forever concerned with day-to-day household errands and having no desire for partaking in national matters of higher caliber. The character of Malati, the only outspoken woman in the novel points this out in the novel: "One pleasant side of election fever is the rediscovery of women...[to restore her to the] status she occupied in ancient India." She is quick to point out that this position was that of complete dependence on men, as they were perceived as conniving creatures full of "wrath, sensuality, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct" (Seth 1257).

Malati understands the double standard that goes with the so-called election fever. Also, Padma's inaction in *Midnight's Children* is not an oversight. Padma's role as the outsider is the constant reminder of the impossibility of women's inclusion in either of Saleem's tales of the nation. (Heffernan). Padma, to whom Saleem tells his tale, remains on the periphery of Saleem's story of the nation. Her comments and suggestions are available to the reader but are never incorporated into Saleem's narrative. Yet, although this is clearly a hierarchical relationship, Saleem is also entirely and utterly dependent as she "sits at his feet and holds him together; when she leaves, his cracks widen and he cannot write" (Rushdie 149). Padma's peripheral status reflects the position of women in nationalist struggles, where they are at once absolutely crucial and yet silent, especially on matters of gender. She is wanted for emotional and moral support and to play the part of a supporting, motherly/wifely figure but, at the same time, irrelevant in changing the course of events. Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern speak?", discusses the problems that colonial and "native" representations of third world women pose for the women themselves and how their voices get lost in stories of their representation.

This role-playing that Aadam reminds Naseem of—"[s]tart thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (Rushdie 34)—points to the same nationalist discourse that required women to act a certain way. Further, when Aadam tries to insist that his wife abandon purdah, she protests, "they will see my deepest shame!" Aadam is not really concerned with the wishes of his wife. His act of liberation is also an act of violation as he "drags all his wife's purdah-veils from her suitcase ... and sets fire to them" (Rushdie 34). Naseem's "deepest shame" is thus the double violation by colonialism and patriarchy that leaves her literally without a place, "for all her presence and bulk ... adrift in the universe" (Heffernan 13). Aadam, half enamored with Western narratives of citizenship, liberates Naseem only to insist that she be "modern" and submit to the sexual/social contract that guarantees the European model of nationalism: "move a little, I mean, like a woman" (Rushdie 34), Aadam demands of his newly "liberated" bride.

In *Midnight's Children*, after Independence, the women's roles seem to reverse as these "liberated women" start to have power over men in general and Saleem in particular. Throughout the novel, Saleem's relationships with women are rather troublesome. In fact, he unmistakably claims: "Women have made me; and also unmade...I have been at the mercy of the so-called (erroneously, in my opinion!) gentler sex" (Rushdie 483). Indeed, from the virginal nurse Mary Pereira, to his sister The Brass Monkey (later Jamila Singer), to his wife Parvati, Saleem's situations with women are far from functional...the troubles stem primarily from one cause: Saleem's vision of female sexuality—possessed entirely of fear and loathing. Apparently for him, "there is no good woman but a desexed woman, and this is seen through many episodes, ending with the actual castrating of him via Indira Gandhi" (Ashok Rajamani 8). Saleem's fearful loathing of women suggests the threat felt by the patriarchs concerning the growing power/masculinity of women. Indeed, Saleem's main sexual encounter is with a five-hundred-and-twelve years old whore—"the oldest whore in the world" (Rushdie 381). "Female sexuality finally arrives, but only out of a cracked wrinkled leather-ancient body. Women are radically desexualized to such an extent that even the whore – the only acceptable sexualized woman -- is in reality, a monstrous, skeletal witch. This chaotic image of "desexualization" of women means to serve as a premonition to the horrifying effects of a matriarchal society where gender roles would be reversed.

This matriarchal society in the novel that is so horrendously scary is presented in the form of Indira Gandhi's declaration of emergency in India. This widow is portrayed as an antagonist to the desirable woman that the nationalist discourse imagined and "makes a mockery of men," according to Saleem. Residing in a magician's ghetto in Delhi, Saleem along with other midnight's children, is "taken to the Widow's Hostel, a 'home for bereaved women,' where they are imprisoned and forcibly sterilized. A 'testectomy,' to be precise" (Rushdie 437). This part pertaining to the emergency episode renders an inevitably aberrant quality to woman power—women power is equaled to desexing of women. Ashok Rajamani disusses this:

What can be read merely as an indictment on Indira politics takes on a heightened level after witnessing the previous representations of female sexuality. In other words, Indira Gandhi is not to be loathed for her laws, but for being a woman in power: "An Avenging Goddess" who wreaks pain because she is a Widow, a Widow who has nevertheless subverted her sexuality into political tyranny...she proves this by doing the exact thing that Saleem has probably been fearing – and possibly desiring: she takes away his manhood. (Rajamani 12)

Female power is more or less established as stripping away male dignity and bringing an end to their manhood. This demonization of female power and liberation works in tandem with the lack of feminist initiative in Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, where most women are sexually desirable and upholders of male control including Lata as evidenced by her choice of a suitable husband—someone who would be not her equal but would fit in as the patriarch of the family—a provider.

Partha Chatterjee argues that nationalist discourse made a distinction between an inner, spiritual domain of the nation and an outer, material domain. In the material sphere, the West was superior, but in the spiritual sphere, the East far surpassed the West—division of the home and the world. Whereas the world was the domain of the men who had to imitate the scientific and technological advance of the West and its rational and “modern methods of statecraft”, the home was the truly Indian domain where women preserved the “self-identity of national culture” (Chatterjee 1993:120). This model of society's hierarchical structure is strictly endorsed in *A Suitable Boy*. All women, with the exception of Begum Abida Khan, are restricted to the role of homemakers. Although they are educated and smart, their main objective is to keep the family life running smoothly for the men in their lives, adequately fulfilling their roles laid out by the nationalist discourse. This nationalist discourse's creative construct was the model of the ‘new woman’ who was modern but in an Indian rather than a “Western memsahib-aping way” (Chatterjee 127). According to the testament of this new woman guidelines, Lata is the ideal and not Meenakshi. Meenakshi is too “westernized” and far too liberal to be a good Indian woman. Education was crucial for the new woman so that she could become a better home-maker, an able educator of her children and her husband's fit partner in modernity. This is indubitably seen with everyone from Mrs. Rupa Mehra to Lata to Savita; they are educated and then expected to be good role models for their families and children and also a support system to their husbands. Their lives are considered incomplete and useless if they are not educated and “worldly” as in the case of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor and Saeeda Begum by the same men who in practice only want them to be concerned with their lives on the homefront without bothering about the national scene or career ambitions. Example of Mr. Mahesh Kapoor would be apt here as he is always criticizing his own wife as being “stupid and ignorant and superstitious” for being uneducated and stuck in the old ways of a vain life but is not supportive of his daughter-in-law's ambitions to pursue a career in law. He is portrayed as this progressive politician who is all for women's rights and their education and fair treatment but believes there are boundaries that are in place for a reason and once women do get their rights and the purported equality with men, their ultimate goal is to be of use at home and not interfere with things like building of the nation. His dual standards, which are seen here, portray the general outlook about women's role in society. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who is endearingly called “Father of the Nation,” had his own prejudices when it came to women. His idea of women's liberation was linked to deep-seated malaise.

This remolding of middle-class women was a contradictory, ambivalent and heterogeneous project as “women had simultaneously to be defined against lower class women and lower caste women, “Westernised” women and uneducated middle-class women while preserving the essence of tradition, virtue and Indianness” (Chatterjee 1993: 127). There are no real portrayals of lower class women or lower caste women in *A Suitable Boy*; Meenakshi can be seen as a more “Westernised” woman, and she is not depicted in a positive light and instead is making a cuckold of a loving husband. Moreover, the uneducated woman as in the case of Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is constantly belittled by her husband and shown in a pitiful state. All the other women in *A Suitable Boy* fit inside the mold of traditional Indian women expected of them. The implication seems to be that when the women are restricted to the liberation standards set by men and do not overstep their boundaries or resist the change, they are considered modern but not overly monstrous as evidenced in *Midnight's Children*, where women are showcased as over ambitious and manly and castrating men. Both novels point towards the harmony that is required in men-women relationships and how the patriarchal nature of Indian society helps balance this harmony. Women's education was a central aspect of the nineteenth-century reform movement and crucial for women's entry into middle class respectability and wifely companionship. “Naseem (in *Midnight's Children* as well as Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor in *A Suitable Boy* are) aware of (their) lack of education in comparison to their husband(s) and resent the position of inferiority in which it places (them)” (Thiara 61). Women's education and modernization are verified to be significant as long as they are also in the dictated form of men's expectations of them and attributes that would assist the men in showing off their credibility to form the “civilized” nation that is “their” burden. It is after all of most importance for the men to look modern and civilized first in order to be taken seriously by their western critics.

This new woman pictured by the men could safely venture outside as long as she displayed the “signs of her femininity” in her dress, religiosity and demeanour, which demonstrated that she had internalized the norms of the “new patriarchy”, which was “reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality”. (Chatterjee 1993: 127-30).

Rushdie’s treatment of Indian women’s coming out of purdah has to negotiate this contested site of conflicting interpretations and evaluations of what women’s ‘liberation’ entails. *Midnight’s Children* begins with a scenario in which women want to be in purdah. The fact that coming out of the purdah is not described as liberation can be read as an attempt not to feed the imperialist discourse of native women suffering from oppressive despotic customs. In *Midnight’s Children*, it is a native woman who first initiates the exit from purdah but she does not perceive this as an act of emancipation. (Thiara 59-60)

Coming out of the Purdah in this scenario stands more for patriarchal pressure, hypocrisy and deception than women’s liberation. “From the very beginning, *Midnight’s Children*’s depiction of women in purdah resists simplifying this complex issue in which women’s wishes may not correspond to narratives of liberation scripted by benevolent men” (Thiara 60). This also depicts how men and women saw liberation differently. For women, it is the freedom to “choose” what they want to do and how they want to live, but for men, it is the image that “their women” projected to the foreigner, which is of primary concern. Mann in *A Suitable Boy* contemplates—“It’s as if he didn’t exist, as if he’s in purdah...like the women...I suppose they exist. Or perhaps they don’t” (Seth 667). Mann’s thoughts about the purdah reflect the thoughts of the foreigner about the purdah, which became the symbol of women’s suppression. It is this image that the nationalist discourse wanted to discard of and this is why Naseem is also forced out of her purdah—in order to meet the expectations of the new woman.

In Naseem’s eventual emergence from purdah, *Midnight’s Children* directly refers to a central strand of the nationalist woman’s question, namely the fashioning of the middle-class wife into a modern, compassionate partner (Sangari and Vaid 1990: 19-20). Later, *Midnight’s Children*’s wives are shown as overstepping the boundaries set for them and hence, are uncompassionate as wives or mothers. In *A Suitable Boy*, Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor is not the ideal companion (as per her husband) because of her stupid beliefs and her not so modern ways. Both of these types of women are not shown as the ideal “new woman” who is supposed to be Indian but modern at the same time. Aadam Aziz demands that Naseem “Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman.” (Rushdie 33-4). “He thus forces his wife out of the purdah without leaving any room for her to have a say” (Thiara 60). The text’s portrayal of Naseem serves the purpose of resisting a neat resolution of an individual woman’s entry into the national role, which was constructed and propagated by nationalist discourse (Thiara 61). Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor too struggles to fit into this mold.

Another important aspect of the nationalist discourse was the elevation of women as mothers in order to glorify women’s role according to the nationalist ideal (Amin 1996: 91-3). *A Suitable Boy* revolves around womanhood, motherhood, relationship between women and their household duties. In *Midnight’s Children*, however, “motherhood is rarely discussed as such, and women’s roles as wives and sexual partners are foregrounded (Thiara 62). As discussed earlier, “The domestic domain was the realm ordained for the middle-class wife, where she worked for the good of the nation by educating her children well and managing a clean, hygienic and efficient household” (Bannerji 1991: 51). Most of the women in *A Suitable Boy* fit this expectation very well and life is caricatured as running like “normal.” On the other hand, in *Midnight’s Children* this expectation is not met as the women’s “appropriation of the domestic realm is a distortion of the nationalist agenda as they use this space to into powerful, ruthless matriarchs instead of long-suffering, self-sacrificing good Indian wives which nationalist discourse envisaged” (Thiara 62). In fact, it is the husbands and the children who suffer under her dominating and implacable regime. *A Suitable Boy*’s women are religious and homely and concerned about their kin at all times. This does not contradict “the nationalist script for middle-class wives as they are ordained with the role of religion, tradition, factors which epitomized India’s superiority towards the West” (Thiara 64). The traditional and the modern are inextricably intertwined in the Indian middle-class project of modernity. It is estimated that “Indian men can go on the mission of mimicking Western ways in the knowledge that their women will look after the culture and keep their children Indianised” (Thiara 66). An ideal wife is one who is educated and modern to the permissible level, but is rooted in the Indian tradition when it comes to the role of a homemaker. Mrs. Mahesh Kapoor’s favorite tree is the harsinger—“a modest, unhandsome [unpretentious] tree by day, glorious at night, full of a delicate fragrance, surrounded by enchanted insects. The tree flowers, but keeps nothing to itself” (Seth 1135). This depiction of the tree would also be very desirable in a woman for its abnegating virtuosity.

On the other hand, a “suitable” husband is one who is authoritative and someone ‘with character...like your father. Someone you cannot push around’ (Seth 1466) is a comment made by Malati’s mother. Lata’s choice in *A Suitable Boy* vouches for this view of patriarchal society that is the accepted norm. Malati points out rather sarcastically that the “one pleasant side of election fever” is the rediscovery of women—‘The time has come when woman must be restored to the status she occupied in ancient India: we must combine the best of the past and the present, of the West and the East...’—the rhetoric of nationalist discourse. Poignantly she reminds what this ancient India thinks of women:

Day and night, women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. In childhood, a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and in old age to her son, a woman must never be independent because she is innately as impure as falsehood...The Lord created woman as one who is full of sensuality, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct. (Seth 1257)

Saleem’s fear and condemnation of women in power, running the nation to ground and destroying the masculinity that is so desirable for a successful governing of a peaceful regime reaffirms Malati’s conviction. When things do not go according to this model, society gets chaotic and the nation’s men are rendered impotent because of the “witches” as illustrated in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

The exceptional chastity of Indian women has been perceived to be an essential part of India’s ancient tradition as exemplified by the characters of Sita of the *Ramayana* and Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*. However, the women who undermine the guiding principle of the nationalist discourse are portrayed as going “astray and choosing sexual partners who are not their husbands” (Thiara 69). Unfaithful wives are a recurrent motif in *Midnight’s Children*: Amina, Vanita, Pia, Lila and Shiva’s partners have adulterous relationships. Also, one of the more disliked women in *A Suitable Boy*, Meenakshi, is also making a cuckold of her husband. Hence, these women are clearly stepping their boundaries when it comes to following the model of the desirable, Indian woman.

Conclusion

Women and power are represented as being incompatible as the women in the novels “cannot be portrayed as powerful without at the same time carrying the potential for the monstrous” (Thiara 71). Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* seems to be declaring that too much affirmation of women’s rights threatens the masculinity of men, which is dangerous to the national well being, and the normality of national panorama, with men governing the nation and women taking care of the home front in *A Suitable Boy*, reaffirms this patriarchal structure. *Midnight’s Children* not approvingly but rather satirically portrays the ill-fittedness of a matriarchal society through its creation of the hypocritical character of Saleem, where as *A Suitable Boy*’s strict separation of men and women’s roles in society upholds the importance of the patriarchal Indian society. Mr. Mahesh Kapoor of *A Suitable Boy* can be compared to Saleem Sinai in his attitudes towards his wife and his family and the women around him whom he perceives as rather futile and unproductive and a threat to his “secular image” with their “chanting and hypocrisy” (Seth 355). And this is the man who is one of the front-runners in the “women’s rights movement” in India, belonging to a major political party. Lata in *A Suitable Boy* claims challengingly to her mother, “I know all your prejudices and I share none of them” (Seth 607). It seems Rushdie is saying this to his men in *Midnight’s Children* and bringing their hypocrisy to light with the character of Saleem Sinai. Men in both novels “have done nothing aside from creat[ing] a faulty impression, an impression women [are forced] to believe without question” (Helene Cixous). The phallogocentric structures of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy repress women, keep them trapped inside themselves thereby perpetuating the passive role determined for them by the men, and keep them from transcending to gain a more equal status in society.

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