

**Pranav Jani, *Decentering Rushdie: Cosmopolitanism and the Indian Novel in English*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012. 275 pp. ISBN 978-81-250-4452-9.**

Salman Rushdie became the quintessential postcolonial novelist with the phenomenal success of *Midnight's Children*, his globally acknowledged masterpiece, published in 1981. The staid and emaciated state of English-language fiction in India was shaken up by the aesthetic intrepidity and daring linguistic risks that Rushdie demonstrated in this ground-breaking book. Looking back at the musty and dull aura of the English novel in the 1980s, Rushdie declared indirectly what he intended to do in his books. His writerly credo, to put his words in a slightly altered structure, was to “bite off a big chunk of the universe and chew it over” with “linguistic” as well as “formal innovation” (Rushdie, *Step Across this Line* 38). His evident ambition was to “wrestle with the world,” unlike his contemporary writers who were dealing with “tiny patches of the world, tiny pieces of human experience” (*Step Across this Line* 38.). *Midnight's Children's* magic realist format, deftly used by South American authors such as Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, added a fresh generic momentum to the pallid fiction of the subcontinent. Revealingly, Rushdie pioneered a technique of forging an assortment of perspectives on the nation and interweaving multiple strands of its history, subverting the official versions. With his remarkable feat of melding postmodern techniques and postnational perspectives in his narratives, Rushdie stands out prominently in postcolonial literature – becoming perhaps the only lens through which the new crop of post-imperial subcontinental fiction is viewed. This dominant literary assumption has been interrogated by Pranav Jani in his perceptive and closely argued assessment of seven post-independent Indian novels in English.

In *Decentering Rushdie*, apart from *Midnight's Children*, the novels in focus are Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *Rich Like Us* (1985); Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffee Dams* (1969); Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980); and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). The quality and variety of the postcolonial representations of India in these novels as well as their varied orientations towards the nation have been extensively examined by applying the critical template of “*namak-halaal* cosmopolitanism”, which means “true to one's salt.” As Jani puts it, the postcolonial novels characterized by *namak-halaal* cosmopolitanism are “oriented toward and committed to the nation as a potentially emancipatory space” (7). The term *namak-halaal*, made popular by a Bollywood film, is actually related to Islamic concepts of haram and halal, having their roots in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and “cosmopolitanism,” in Jani's conceptualisation, signifies

diverse explorations of Indian life from an elite standpoint or articulations of cosmopolitan-elite subjectivities as is evidenced by postcolonial novels that are both written and consumed by the English-using middle class authors and readers. More to the point, the contexts in which Indian English novels are produced and consumed are cosmopolitan and elitist ones. Jani seeks to identify the heterogeneous nature of cosmopolitanism in the postcolonial Indian English novel, particularly the difference between the nation-oriented novels written during the early post-independence decades and the novels characterized by postmodern epistemology and postnational orientations. As Jani says, the former set of novels is leavened with *namak-halaal* cosmopolitanism while the novels of the latter category exemplified by *Midnight's Children* tend to turn away from nationalist visions.

Jani takes apart the complex relations between orientations, ideology and aesthetics in postcolonial literature and posits new ways of explicating postcoloniality. In chapter 1, he profiles Rushdie's enormous literary reputation and the overwhelming critical attention *Midnight's Children* has attracted and continues to attract as a paradigmatic postcolonial text in tandem with poststructural and postmodernist thought shaping the Western intellectual landscape. While pointing out *Midnight's Children's* lack of commitment to the tangible nation and the ambivalences of Rushdie's cultural location, Jani offers alternative lenses through which postcoloniality can be viewed – in other words, he argues how the pecking order in the postcolonial Indian novel heavily weighted in favour of Rushdie needs to be reordered and, by implication, an impressive number of works of this genre resituated in conformity with their perspectives on India. Jani declares that the novels with nation-oriented politics and identity written since the 1940s represent significant postcolonial voices. Late Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-77) represented a low point in the emancipatory potential of the postcolonial nation. The Indian nation-state began to be seen as inadequate to the challenges and demands of the free nation. Rushdie's novel plugs into the postnational attitude experienced by the Indian middle-class elites and intellectuals. Jani contends that these novels must be historicised and broken free of the single generic straitjacket.

Jani is arguably pushing the envelope of the postcolonial genre by stressing on the multiple "cosmopolitanisms" of the post-independence Indian novel in English. In his analysis of Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*, Jani contends that these writers, despite their ideological differences, have common orientations toward the nation. The former is nation-statist while the latter is subaltern-centred but both Sahgal and Markandaya look at the legacy of the national liberation struggle and find the project of national regeneration still incomplete, if not dumped altogether. The critique of the Indian nation-state has a distinctive flavour in *The Day in Shadow* in that Sahgal's sceptical edge shows in her portrayal of India. In this novel, the

heft of social concerns expands like that in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* with "an attempt to refashion the nation into a gender-egalitarian space" (102). The novelistic plea for rewriting the nation in the interests of women has been configured but it is still tied to the framework of Indian nationalism or *namak-balaal* cosmopolitanism.

The postnational turn in the Indian English novel is amply evident in Rushdie's book. Here the representation of the Indian nation is remarkably different from that in Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, which also taps into the political convulsions of India during the Emergency. The fictional processing of the Indian material in the two novels follows divergent tracks and yet, in a nuanced reading of their thematic preoccupations, there are some similarities. The salient points of Jani's book may be extracted from the following differentiation between the two kinds of postcolonial novels:

*Namak-balaal* cosmopolitan narratives construct ethical and political universes in which the implied authors employ characterization and voice to exhort the implied audience to support, and potentially engage in, projects of national regeneration – whether or not they are nationalist. But postnational texts explicitly subvert *namak-balaal* narratives, often emphasizing the impossibility of national regeneration through the disintegration of narrative cohesion. (186)

The failures of decolonisation and the desire for the nation inform both sets of novels, but postnational novels like *Midnight's Children* are less concerned about future possibilities of the nation than *namak-balaal* texts such as *Rich Like Us*. The novels of the latter category look back to the recovery of the nation-state, without which the liberatory project would lose a real terrain.

Jani considers Arundhati Roy's celebrated novel, *The God of Small Things*, a unique text in the postcolonial Indian English novel for its "historicist and subaltern-centred perspective" (230). Through her strategies of characterisation Roy opens doors for the poor and disenfranchised from the corridors of the elite in this novel. Subaltern suffering in the Indian English novel is usually couched in elite self-reflection but Roy has rendered the powerless as tangible and vibrant. More significantly, Jani states that Roy's novel conforms to the protocols of *namak-balaal* cosmopolitanism even as it sits well with magic realist texts. "It is Roy's materialist critique of postcoloniality, resisting both the transnational dismissal of the nation and the expatriate's abstract longing for it," Jani notes, "that produces her subaltern-centred version of *namak-balaal* cosmopolitanism" (240-41). Within his expanded remit of postcoloniality, Jani endorses Roy's model of narrating the nation – warts and all. However, he misses the significance of Rushdie's focus on the boy (Aadam Sinai) as India's future in *Midnight's Children's* closing lines: "One empty jar... how to end?"

(461). Rushdie said in an interview: “[T]he thing the book is most criticized for is that it gets very pessimistic. And that is what I was trying to explain, saying that Salim gets pessimistic. And the feeling of the book seems to me to be very affirmative, in its abundance” (“Doing the Dangerous Thing” 220).

Most of the points in Jani’s critique of *Midnight’s Children* have already been pitched at Rushdie. Aparna Mahanta and Timothy Brennan have problematised his socio-cultural location and found him pandering to metropolitan intellectual elite. Aijaz Ahmad and M. Keith Booker have contended that Rushdie’s fiction seeks to advance the discourses preferred by the Anglo-American Academy. Jani’s contribution to *Midnight’s Children*’s reassessment, however, is that he has airbrushed Rushdie’s postcolonial position with the paradigm of *namak-balaal* cosmopolitanism. This theoretical formulation has enabled him to explore the varied perspectives of the Indian English novels analysed in this study with a semblance of originality and freshness. All in all, *Decentering Rushdie* is a notable critical intervention in the evaluation of the Anglophone postcolonial Indian novel.

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