

Hybridity, Carnivalism, and Commercialization: Trans-Cultural Adaptation of Traditional Myths in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* adapts traditional myths under the postcolonial and late capitalist context through a magical realism narrative, presenting characteristics of hybridity and carnivalism, and it is ultimately commercialized by the culture industry. This process not only exposes the creative potential of cultural adaptation but also reveals the perpetual cycle of symbolic violence in neocolonialism. Many traditional mythological elements in the novel have been transplanted into the post-colonial historical narrative and present as a hybrid. For example, Saleem, who is based on the mythical prototype of Vishnu, has a mixed identity and cracks in his body. At the same time, the new myths, such as the myth of nation, share similar logic while making use of traditional myths. The novel itself turns into a myth of consumption, making traditional Indian myths a cultural commodity and an exotic spectacle. The magical realism narrative used in the novel has the characteristics of carnivalism, parodying the traditional mythological narratives. Rushdie, by vacuuming the sacred core of mythological prototypes, turns religious symbols into satirical metaphors for post-colonial politics. His infinitely expanding signifier alleviates the heaviness of historical violence. He tries to write the empire back in English, but his writing still relies on Western modernist and post-modernist techniques. Similarly, his attempt to create a new Indian myth as a whole is also destined to fail, just like Saleem turned into pieces in the end. Ultimately, the adapted myths generate resistance yet reveal the asymmetric structure of knowledge hegemony.

Keywords: *Midnight's Children*; Myth, Hybridity; Carnivalism; Commercialization

“‘Blue,’ the young priest said earnestly. ‘All available evidence, my daughter, suggests that Our Lord Christ Jesus was the most beautiful, crystal shade of pale sky blue.’” (103)

When Mary Pereira asks about the color of God, she receives a bizarre response from a young priest who attempts to reconcile Christianity with the Hindu imagery familiar to his audience. His claim that Christ was “blue” invokes the iconography of Hindu deities such as Krishna, who is traditionally depicted as blue-skinned. Rather than resolving theological differences, however, the priest’s explanation exposes the awkwardness of such cultural synthesis. The image of the “blue God” thus becomes a metaphor for the broader dilemma of trans-cultural adaptation in *Midnight’s Children* (1981): myths and religious symbols are reshaped into hybrid forms in an effort to bridge divides of religion, race, caste, and culture, yet these hybridizations often generate new ambiguities instead of harmony.

This tension is most powerfully embodied in the novel’s central pair, Saleem Sinai and Shiva. As mirror images of one another—switched at birth and symbolically opposed—they echo the dualistic structures of Hindu mythology. Their names evoke divine prototypes: Saleem’s association with creation and narrative consciousness parallels aspects of Brahma or Vishnu, while Shiva’s name directly invokes the god of destruction. Yet these mythic archetypes are relocated within the secular, political reality of post-Independence India. In this way, Rushdie reworks ancient Hindu mythology within the modern nation-state, producing characters who are at once mythical figures and historical subjects.

In Hindu mythology, Vishnu is the maintainer, the embodiment of kindness and benevolence, possessing all-powerful abilities to protect and maintain the universe and its order. This precisely corresponds to the heroic image of Saleem in the novel, who has the ideal of saving his country. The character Shiva in the novel is directly named after the great deity Shiva in Hindu mythology, who is a destroyer and possesses a dual personality of reproduction and destruction, creation and destruction. This corresponds to the image of Shiva in the novel as a villain who is violent and power-driven and has a large number of illegitimate children. The essence of Rushdie’s endowing of Saleem and Shiva with superpowers is to transform the collective trauma of India’s post-colonial nation into a perceivable mythological symbol system through a narrative strategy of magical realism. Saleem’s

psychic nose and Shiva's violent knees are not only modern variations of Hindu deities, but also political indicators carrying colonial memories and ethnic conflicts.

However, the romantic spirit of classical heroes seems out of place in modern Indian society. Despite their mediocre status and doomed endings, modern heroes still exhaust their limited strength to resist the absurdity of the age, composing a tragedy of the era imbued with irony. Though Saleem has possessed numerous divine powers similar to those of Vishnu since his birth, the influence of these divine powers on reality is very limited. Ever since Saleem was walloped hard by his father for claiming that he could hear the words of the Archangels, he has realized that the secrets of his superpower must not be revealed. And his power was not big enough to realize his ideal as Vishnu—that is, to maintain the harmony and unity of the new India. The division of the world caused the cracks in his body and mind to grow wider and wider. After his death, he was trampled into dust by thousands of Indians. In the novel, Shiva can easily take others' lives with his knees, but compared with the power of the great god Shiva, it is also very limited: throughout his life, he wanted to obtain money and power through fighting and hard work, but under the high pressure of totalitarianism, his personal power became insignificant, and eventually his superhuman martial strength and reproductive ability were completely eliminated. The divine castration of Saleem and Shiva is essentially a self-colonization process that reduces native Indian mythology to mere performative symbols. When he attempted to establish a "loose federation of equals" (Rushdie 220) through the *Midnight Children's* Conference, his words were mixed with the paradoxical rhetoric of Gandhian nonviolent resistance and British parliamentary democracy. This schizophrenic ideological collage points to the cognitive dissonance experienced by postcolonial intellectuals in their misappropriation of traditional resources.

Furthermore, *Midnight's Children*, represented by Saleem and Shiva, were not only castrated in terms of divine power but also physically and mentally. This violence extends far beyond mere physical punishment; it is a precise dissection of the body by the power mechanism. The reproductive organs, serving as dual carriers of biological reproduction and cultural symbols, are its target. Their

destruction not only cuts off the possibility of bloodline continuation for the rebels, but also destroys the spiritual foundation of the sacredness of the body in Hindu tradition. The modern discipline techniques described by Foucault here demonstrate their complexity: the Indira regime both inherited the biological control logic of colonial rule and adopted the symbolic violence of pre-modern sacrificial rituals. This hybrid form of power reveals the deep anxiety of post-colonial countries in establishing the legitimacy of their rule. By publicly revealing the process of objectizing body fragments, those in power elevate disciplinary violence to a power spectacle with deterrent effects, causing onlookers (including readers) to unconsciously internalize the ideological boundary of “normal/abnormal” in the contradictory experience of physical discomfort and the thrill of novelty. As for the castrated *Midnight’s Children*, having lost their divine radiance, they no longer become the focus of the text, and the magical realism narrative transforms into a realistic one.

India’s new myths also face challenges from ancient myths. The New India attempts to position August 15, 1947 as the temporal origin of the nation, erasing the land’s prior history and memory—precisely aligning with the operative mechanism of myth: evacuating the historical complexity of original signs through deformation. Yet people gradually discover that the absurdity of the bizarre and terrifying political events unfolding in New India rivals that of India’s ancient myths: “... so that people were seized by atavistic longings, and forgetting the new myth of freedom reverted to their old ways, their old regionalist loyalties and prejudices, and the body politic began to crack” (Rushdie 245).

Liberalism, in its self-proclaimed vision, aspires to safeguard individual liberty, plural coexistence, and cultural autonomy. Yet, in the Indian context, its actual functioning within the apparatus of the state often manifests as selective liberalization—a distribution of freedoms primarily serving the economic and political consolidation of dominant power blocs. When liberalism is reduced to an instrumental discourse, religious, caste-based, or ethnic identities tend to assert themselves as forms of resistance. The linguistic autonomy movements in various states, separatist tendencies in the Northeast, and the Kashmir conflict collectively illustrate the unsustainability of

coercive integration in a plural society. At the same time, Hindu epics and myths constitute India's cultural genome. Their symbolic systems—embodying the principles of Dharma, cyclical reincarnation, and polytheism—transcend spatial and social boundaries, providing the deep cultural grammar of an imagined community. Even under the pressures of colonial modernity, these myths persist as a cipher for resistance. The mythical narrative of the golden age—its fantasy of oneness—is not a historical reality, but rather functions as a compensatory signifier that offsets the identity anxieties engendered by modernity. The *Midnight's Children* possess ancient mystical powers with connections to India's primordial deities—"they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation" (Rushdie 200). At birth, the *Midnight's Children* embodied limitless potential undefined by national myths, but during the sterilization campaign, surgical scalpels not only castrated their superpowers but also symbolized the systematic eradication of heterogeneity by the national myths. Here Rushdie executes a dual deconstruction: exposing Indira's mythmaking while simultaneously implying, through Saleem's identity as a "castrated prophet", that all alternative myths inevitably face co-optation.

Back to the "blue God", the priest then tried to cite the Piets and the blue Arab nomads to explain that there *are* people who have blue coloured skin—the attempt to prove an untenable view of this encyclopedic argument creates a carnival and dramatic effect, which deconstructs the sanctity and the transcendental truth of myths. Salman Rushdie also discussed about myths as defined by Roland Barthes in *Shame* (1983): "Few mythologies survive close examination, however. And they can become very unpopular indeed if they're rammed down people's throats" (251). In this sense, myths disguise power relations as eternal truths by concealing their historicity, but once their artificial nature and ideological functions are exposed, the legitimacy of myths will be questioned. In the meantime, Rushdie's carnival writing style also corresponds with the characteristics of myths, which present themselves and expand their symbolic signifier to the greatest extent. Just like Barthes writes in the first chapter of *Mythologies*, titled "The World of Wrestling," he offers a detailed interpretation of the myth of wrestling: "The virtue of wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess" (Barthes 13).

The exaggerated postures and performances in wrestling vividly excite the audience, reflecting the principles of classical art: “This emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, this exhaustion of the content by the form” (Barthes 16-17). *Midnight’s Children*, to some extent, embodies the style of classical art described by Barthes, filled with exaggerated and captivating characters, actions, plots, and imagery. The significance of fairness, meaning, motivation, and outcomes in the performances yields to the overwhelming impact they create. For example, the presentation of the superpower of *Midnight’s Children* parodies the narrative of traditional myths, which spares no details at all:

Those children born in the last seconds of the hour were (to be frank) little more than circus freaks: bearded girls, a boy with the fully-operative gills of a freshwater mahaseer trout, Siamese twins with two bodies dangling off a single head and neck — the head could speak in two voices, one male, one female, and every language and dialect spoken in the subcontinent; but for all their marvellousness, these were the unfortunates, the living casualties of that numinous hour. (Rushdie 198)

The extravagant and exaggerated depiction of some of the *Midnight’s Children* that have superpower, shows a cynical attitude towards the traditional myths, even adding some seemingly digressive satirical commentary about the numerous languages and dialect in the subcontinent. But meanwhile, when writing about the spectacles of Indian slums, Rushdie makes jugglers and “circus freaks” appear like they also have some superpower:

... she (Parvati) had grown up amid ventriloquists who could make stones tell jokes and contortionists who could swallow their own legs and fire-eaters who exhaled flames from their arseholes and tragic clowns who could extract glass tears from the corners of their eyes; ... (Rushdie 199)

These grotesque arts constitute a dual subversion of official discourse: On the one hand, they deploy the grotesque body to counter the “normative rational body” extolled by colonial modernity— analogous to the “public square” theorized by Bakhtin as the vessel of folk carnival culture, wherein

folk laughter culture dismantles hierarchical order by degrading the sublime and elevating the lowly (Bakhtin 89). On the other hand, they manifest the slum—as a second world antithetical to official culture—through its inverted, chaotic, hallucinatory and peculiar visage. Yet this subversiveness becomes co-opted by consumer logic as exotic spectacle. The poorness of the slum gets spectacularized into a theatrical stage gratifying the voyeuristic desires of the middle class, while genuine structural oppression vanishes within the carnivalized narrative.

After India's independence and its entry into a consumer society, religion and deities also became subject to commodification. For instance, the Arjuna Indiabike that appears in the novel takes its name from the heroic archer in the *Mahabharata*. The bow and arrow of Ajuna symbolizes the sacred duty and the glory of war, while the bicycle was the most common means of transportation for civilians in India after its independence, representing the daily struggles of ordinary people. Rushdie deconstructed the sublimity of traditional epics by endowing the bicycle with the name of the hero. Ironically, the owner of the company was a Muslim, and Ajuna's warehouse was eventually burned to ashes by a gang of Hindu arsonists called "Ravana." Ravana is the core villain in the Indian epic *Ramayana*, also known as the "Ten-Headed King" or "the Roaring Rakshasa King." The arsonists, named after Ravana, not only indicated their Hindu stance but also hinted that they were the mob like ten-headed demons, and even more so, they burned the factories, shops and warehouses of Muslim merchants who did not pay protection money, just as Ravana, after abducting Sita, had his minions torch the camps of the monkey warriors. The struggle between "Ajuna" and "Ravana," which seems like a mythical holy war between heroes and demons, is in reality a conflict of interests between Muslim merchants and Hindu gangs: "behind this facade of racial hatred, the Ravana gang was a brilliantly-conceived commercial enterprise" (Rushdie 72). The sanctity of religion was stripped away and turned into a tool for plundering goods and money.

The commodification of gods not only appropriates religious symbols, but also replaces traditional religious practices through the creation of "consumption rituals." These maintain consumers' emotional attachment through pseudo-sanctity, as exemplified by the fabrication of the

new religious guru—Lord Khusro. Originally named Cyrus, he was a childhood companion of Saleem. In school plays, he played girls' parts in school plays, excelled academically, and even gave expert lectures on female anatomy. Yet under the manipulation of his fanatically religious mother, Mrs. Dubash, he was packaged as “Only True Lord” and “the most successful holy child in history; in no time at all he was being hailed by crowds half a million strong, and credited with miracles” (269). Advertisements featuring Lord Khusro saturated public spaces, catapulting him to immense wealth complete with a luxury liner and an aircraft. Ironically. This powerless guru ultimately drowned attempting to walk on water. Thus, an ordinary, childlike boy—utterly ignorant of the religious propaganda surrounding him—became both an object of worship and a vehicle for profit. The narrator sharply exposes this deception: “In all those years, did no person understand that what Mrs Dubash had done was to rework and reinvent the most potent of all modern myths—the legend of the coming of the superman?” (Rushdie 270)

The American superhero comic *Superman* is a modern myth wrapped in the shell of modern technology, which undoubtedly follows the same formula as that created by Lord Khusro. In modern society, the myth about Lord Khusro is artificial rather than naturally formed, and the goal of this deification movement is also obvious, that is, to create a religious idol and a consumption symbol, so that people can enthusiastically contribute their money.

Furthermore, Hanif's failure to be the only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry, also signaled that the traditional mythological narrative had fallen from its pedestal and become a secular commodity. “Hanif was fond of railing against princes and demons, gods and heroes, against, in fact, the entire iconography of the Bombay film” (Rushdie 244), believing that these elements were the continuation of India's dream of five thousand years and were illusions detached from reality. The images of deities and monsters in traditional Indian films originally carried the sacredness of religion or culture, but in the film industry, they were mass-produced as entertainment consumer goods and became commercialized gods for public entertainment. This appropriation of myths strips away their spiritual core and simplifies them into visual spectacles that

attract audiences. The narrator comments on this: “in the temple of illusions, he had become the high priest of reality” (Rushdie 244), suggesting that film has become the new religion of modern society. In traditional religions, deities have been replaced by fictional characters on the screen, and audiences’ obsession with movies is like believers’ worship of deities. This transformation reveals the alienation of religious symbols in consumerism—sacredness is replaced by entertainment, and faith is dominated by box office demand.

Similarly, in a consumer society, individuals find themselves bound by a relentless torrent of desires, yearning for spiritual fulfillment and externalized expressions of their subjective essence. This fuels the emergence of secularized deities and consumer idols—celebrities. In *Midnight’s Children*, Jamila Singer embodies precisely such a meticulously packaged and hyped star idol. While her enchanting voice earned her modest recognition, it was the mystique deliberately crafted around her that catapulted her to nationwide fame in Pakistan: “fabricated rumors claimed she had been involved in a terrible, disfiguring car-crash, compelling her to perform completely veiled. Audiences could only glimpse her silhouette through a hole cut in a chadar with gold thread” (Rushdie 313). Jamila became a highly symbolic vessel—a projection screen for consumer desires and an idealized image of perfection. She was fervently worshipped as a divine figure, even as the public remained profoundly ignorant of her true nature. In *Midnight’s Children*, Indian society emerges as a mythological theatre staged through commodities: Hindu deities shed their religious context to become cultural merchandise in the consumer world, while mundane goods themselves are imbued with divine halos, transforming into fetishized objects of modern society.

Salman Rushdie’s postcolonial narratives, while attempting to deploy indigenous myths against Eurocentrism, often inadvertently replicate the epistemological framework of colonial knowledge production. The novel’s appropriation of Hindu symbols forms a hidden genealogy with the Oriental spectacles in 19th-century colonial literature. Shiva’s violent imagery is reduced to a mode of “subaltern resistance,” thereby perpetuating Western stereotypes about barbaric revolutions in the Third World. Meanwhile, Parvati’s fantastical journey across the India-Pakistan border using

the basket of invisibility reduces complex territorial disputes to supernatural adventures, obscuring structural violence in geopolitics. As Edward Said observed: “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 2). Rushdie’s English narratives remain trapped within the inherent violence of imperial language—his magical metaphors transmute from critical weapons into consumerist labels, becoming standardized symbols of postcolonial exoticism. His elite perspective suspends the narrative between imperial nostalgia and nation-building fissures.

When Rushdie employs the narrative framework of *One Thousand and One Nights*, he simultaneously mimics Indian oral traditions and caters to Western expectations of Oriental talesca “meta-story” about the mysterious East. *Midnight’s Children* is packaged as a “commodity of cultural difference”, and its exoticism becomes a passport for transnational capital circulation. Yet its global journey reveals a cruel dialectic: the more fiercely Third World cultures resist, the more readily their heterogeneity transforms into commodified symbols of difference. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued, the culture industry falsely satisfies people’s desire for rebellion while psychologically castrating them, reducing them to mere consumers. The cultural industry not only satisfies these customers, but also tells them that they must passively accept the consumer goods provided by the cultural industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 94-136). From this perspective, *Midnight’s Children*, as a consumer product of the cultural industry, seems to criticize reality, but this precisely weakens its resistance in reality. When Hindu deities and colonial memories are displayed together in the window of world literature, and when Saleem’s chutney factory becomes a specimen for cultural studies, what we see is not only the mythologization of India, but also the domestication of heterogeneous experiences by the global cultural production system. This domestication will not cease unless we re-understand “consumption” itself—not the possession of symbols, but the continuous questioning of the mechanism of meaning generation.

Rushdie’s textual strategy itself has fallen into the cognitive hegemony he criticizes, and the pursuit of a “purely Indian” aesthetic has also become a neocolonialist myth. Although *Midnight’s*

Children makes extensive use of Indian traditional myths, dialects and proverb, his adaptation of James Joyce's techniques of stream of consciousness, his parodies of Jorge Borges' maze narrative, and his transformation of García Márquez's magical realism all reveal the prominent genes of European modernism and postmodernism in his technical lineage. The duality of this narrative strategy precisely confirms the subjective predicament of postcolonial intellectuals—they have no choice but to deconstruct the empire with imperial language and criticize the West with Western forms. This dual interpretive approach, which simultaneously examines its representation of the “nation-state” and the “Third World” while emphasizing the “Indian-style” self-referential narrative techniques, leads to an inevitable yet paradoxical outcome: the fact that its ideology is rooted in the highbrow culture of the modern metropolitan bourgeoisie becomes obscured, while core issues unrelated to nationalist or Third World discourse—yet central to its narrative essence, ranging from the cultural logic of transnational capitalism to the subject predicament of postcolonial intellectuals—are systematically suppressed.

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