

The Role of the Postcolonial Indian Writer in Promoting Hinduism with Reference to Mysticism

K.S.A Weerasena

Department of Education and Languages, CINEC, Millennium Drive, IT Park, Malabe, Sri Lanka
supipi.weerasena@cinec.edu

Abstract— Postcolonial Indian writing is heavily influenced by the religion of the colonizers and socio-cultural practices of the Westerners. Many studies are conducted to understand how postcolonial literature attempts to counteract alienation by asserting the richness and validity of native cultures in an effort to restore pride in indigenous practices and traditions. However, little research has been conducted to understand the role of the postcolonial Indian writers in glorifying their native cultures and religions which led to identify their works with mysticism. This paper explores the cultural hybridity of the postcolonial Indian writers and their effort to highlight the importance of Indian identity, culture and Hinduism which result the outside readers to identify their works with a touch of mysticism. Though the term “mysticism” is also associated with Christianity, this paper will look in to mysticism associated with post colonialism, Hindu religious practices and beliefs, Hindu gods and myths.

The methodology of this study selects two instruments. Referring to the postcolonial texts: *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao and *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, this paper builds an understanding about mysticism associated with Hinduism. It also explores the effort of the postcolonial writers to situate and promote Hinduism among the world religions which assigned connotations of mysticism and superstition in their writing.

Keywords— Post colonialism, Postcolonial Indian writers, Hinduism, Myth, Mysticism

I. INTRODUCTION

With the process of colonization, the notion of “mystic East” began to expand and it became a popular topic addressed by many scholars within the realm of postcolonial studies. Western imperialism and colonialism interpret the process of colonization both as a giant endeavour aimed at taking care of those regions and societies in the world that otherwise would not develop at all. “It is against this background that Western scientific concepts were introduced and aimed at replacing anything that, according to these concepts, was unscientific, irrational, obscure, and therefore impedimental to progress” [1, p. 18]. The medieval Western scholars quite rarely acknowledged the quality of Indian intellectuality and scientific merits, language, religion and culture. The culturally symbolic, ‘mystic East’ before the eyes of the Westerners was viewed to be irrational, odd and mystic. The binary of “self” and the “other”, the “native” and “colonizer” and “rational” and “mystic” are terms quite often highlighted in scholarly approaches of postcolonial theories. The topic of ‘the Mystic East’ is a prevalent theme in the Western context and mysticism associated with

Hinduism is often explored in relation to power, Christian theology and enlightenment.

This paper endeavours to define ‘mysticism’ associated with Hinduism within the scope of postcolonial studies and the effort of the postcolonial Indian writer to situate and promote their religion among the world religions which assigned implications of mysticism.

The first section of this paper engages in a discussion on mysticism within the postcolonial context, associated with Hinduism. The second section discusses about the role of the postcolonial Indian writer in promoting Hinduism with reference to mysticism, bringing examples from the two postcolonial Indian texts; *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao and *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie.

II. BACKGROUND

The imaginative construction of a ‘mystical’ tradition within Western context seems to have gained increasing credence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. “With a greater awareness of the plurality of religious perspectives throughout the world furnished by colonial encounters, it became inevitable that oriental religions comparisons to take place with Christianity” [2, p. 98]. The collision between European imperialism and third world nationalism problematizes the construction of Europe at the centre of history. The project of dismantling ‘Europe’ as the focal point, results in a clash between Europe and the third world. Being in the centre, the Westerners looked down upon the oriental cultures and considered them to be primitive and irrational.

Today, there are perhaps two powerful images in contemporary Western characterizations of Eastern religions. “One is the continually enduring notion of the ‘mystical East’, a powerful image precisely because for some it represents what is most disturbing and outdated about Eastern culture, while for others it represents the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual that they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture” [3, p. 01]. The backwardness of the Orient therefore appears to sit side by side with its blossoming spirituality and cultural richness in the East deriving from the European imagination and its fascination with the Orient.

The second powerful image in contemporary Western characterizations of Eastern religions is the ‘militant fanatic’ or religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism refers to the belief of an individual or a group of individuals in the absolute authority of a sacred religious text or teachings of a particular religious leader, prophet, or God. They believe that their religion is beyond any form of criticism, and should therefore also be forced upon others.

Logical explanations and scientific evidences have no place in these belief systems. Such a characterization also has a considerable effect on the contemporary manifestation of the colonial myths about Oriental despotism and the irrationality of the colonial subject.

The argument does not entail that the modern concept of 'Hinduism' is merely a product of Western thought but also a perception promoted by the colonized population. This paper endeavours to look at this effort of the postcolonial Indian writers to promote Hinduism, which ultimately attracted implications of mysticism in to their writing.

III. WHAT IS MYSTICISM

The term "mysticism" has Ancient Greek origins with various historically determined meanings. Derived from the Greek word ($\mu\upsilon\sigma\omicron\varsigma$), meaning "to conceal", mysticism is referred to the biblical liturgical, spiritual, and contemplative dimensions of early and medieval Christianity. During the early modern period, the definition of mysticism grew to include a broad range of beliefs and ideologies related to "extraordinary experiences and states of mind" [3, p. 18]. In modern times, mysticism has acquired a limited definition. Margaret Smith describes mysticism as 'the most vital element in all true religions, rising up in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor. The aim of the mystics, she says, 'is to establish a conscious relation with the Absolute, in which they find the personal object of love' [4, p. 20].

As the study of mysticism has developed along the lines of the comparative study of religion, theistic definitions have become increasingly problematic. Having examined the construction of 'Hinduism' within Western culture and the association of India with the cultural symbolic of the 'mystic East', it is worth while exploring the ways in which Indian religions, as Asian representatives of 'the global phenomenon of mysticism', have been interpreted and located within the modern approaches to study mysticism. "Combined with this contemporary lauding of the 'postcolonial era', the 1990s have brought forth a number of works heralding the move 'beyond Orientalism' [5, p. 59]. The era of British colonial expansion and the subjugation of foreign lands and people, the colonial project assigned new connotations to the term "mysticism".

It has become common place in the modern era to consider mystics, their writings and the phenomenon of mysticism in general as being in some sense antithetical to rationality. Specifically, the characterization of Indian religions such as Hinduism as mystical has also tended to support the exclusion of Hindus from the realm of rationality.

In exorcizing the 'mystical' aspects of Western culture, post-Enlightenment thought has also tended to project these same characteristics onto the 'mystic East', which has played a significant role in defining the Western cultural identity and thought.

It is interesting to note in this context that the association of religions such as Hinduism with mysticism and the stereotype of mystic has come to function as one of the most prevailing cultural representations of Indian religions and culture in the last few centuries. The idea of mysticism was associated with the religious practices, gods, legends, myths and the teachings which were different to Western religions. Such novel practices and beliefs appeared superficial and

exotic in the eyes of the colonizers. Hence the Oriental religions were often seen as mystic and superstitious which lacked reason and logic.

IV. THE EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND CULTURE IN *THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE* BY RAJA RAO

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and The Rope* is rightly acclaimed as a landmark in the Indian fiction in English. Rao has been hailed as a cultural ambassador of India to the Western literary world and most of his work is grounded in the Indian religious tradition. In the novel, *The Serpent and The Rope*, the East-West encounter in relation to culture and religion, role of marriage as envisaged within the Indian ethos and its religious traditions are explored.

Raja Rao employs various Hindu myths to sanctify and extol the institution of marriage in India. Through these myths the novelist re-establishes and demonstrates the meaning of love and marriage in the Indian context with customs and mythical truths embodied, through the ages, which sustained the Indian society. Northrop Frye, one of the most influential myth critics, gives a simple definition of myth. He states, "A myth, in its simplest and most normal significance, is a certain kind of story, generally about a god or other divine being" [6, p. 27]. M.H. Abrams, "A myth is a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives" [7, p. 102].

The novel *The Serpent and the Rope* portrays one crucial moment in the life history of its chief protagonist, K. S. Ramaswamy, a Brahmin from south India. He is referred to as Rama in the novel. He is a student of history and goes to France to do research on the Catharist heresy of the Albigensians. His attempt is to trace back its Eastern, or if possible, Indian origin. After his father's death, he takes his Little Mother (i.e. step-mother) and her infant son, Sridhara, to Benares to perform the obsequies of his deceased father strictly in accordance with the Hindu tradition. This visit to India and Benares in particular brings a thorough change in his attitude towards India. Moreover, he is introduced to Savithri, a daughter of Raja Raghbir Singh of Surajpur. They develop a close friendship and often visit each other. When Madeline gives birth to a still born child for the second time, she renounces the world for Buddhism and considers her body as a composition of *astadasa dhatu* (the eighteen aggregates of the human body) and decides to break her marital bond with Rama. After a deep anguish filled introspection nearly for three days he is suddenly spiritually enlightened to realize that he needs a Guru or spiritual teacher, not God. His spiritual quest comes to an end when he decides to seek his Guru's blessings at Travencore in India for self-realization.

The impossibility of a unification of West and East due to religious and cultural indifferences is highlighted through Rama and his wife's broken marriage. Rama fails to reconcile himself to Madeleine's indifference to Hindu gods. Her disapproval of the many superstitions that are intertwined with Hinduism upsets Rama who is a devout Hindu. Madeleine "burst out laughing" when Rama says, "Parvathi is singing to Shiva" as if "her unbelief itself was

the proof of my truth” [8, p. 56]. He realizes that his marriage to Madeliene has necessitated in accepting her beliefs. With passage of time, Rama’s love for his wife deteriorates to the state of being abstract and impersonal. Rama painfully realizes that Madeleine couldn’t lend herself to the sacrifices entailed in this transcendental approach, for she “smelt the things of the earth, as though, sound, form, touch, taste, smell, were such realities that you could not go beyond them even if you tried” ([8, p. 18]. Madeline bares a logical attitude towards life and struggles to compromise with the Hindu beliefs and teachings; which leads to a failed marriage.

The myth of Savithri used in the novel to highlight the relationship between Rama and Savithri has many structural parallels. Savithri is the most sacred verse of the Rig-Veda. It is also known as Gayatri Mantra. Savithri is a name derived from the Sanskrit root ‘su’ which means ‘stimulate.’ Every dutiful Brahmin even today repeats it mentally in his morning and evening prayers addressed to the Vedic solar deity who stands for the vitalizing power of the sun.” [9, p. 111]. The implication of this myth is very clear in the history of Rama, for the myth is used as another important structural strand in the novel. At the hotel where Rama Sojourns in London, Savithri imagines Rama to be Krishna and herself to be Radha and accordingly worships Rama. She says, “This Cambridge undergraduate, who smokes like a chimney and dances to barbarian jazz, she says unto you, I’ve known my Lord for a thousand times, from ‘janam’ to ‘janam’ have I known my Krishna” [8, p. 212]. To this, Rama readily responds, for he too shares her transcendental mythical experience willingly: “And the Lord knows himself because Radha is, else he would have gone into penance and sat on Himalaya...” [8, p. 212]. He places his mother’s toe-rings on Savithri’s second toes, for they represent the continuing tradition of his family.

The Rama and Sita myth from the Ramayana epic also finds place in the novel. This myth also hints at the failure of the marriage of Rama and Madeleine. The Ramaswamy’s name is after Rama, the hero of the Ramayana. If mythical Rama kills Ravana the demon king and the demons of Lanka, the fictional Rama kills his ego and realizes the self within. Moreover, Rama of the novel is a great admirer of Bhavabhuti’s Uttaramacharita (8th century A.D.). When Rama recites some Sanskrit verses from it to Madeleine as if he had the premonition of the failure of their marriage, the significance of this myth becomes evident. These verses reflect the mythical Rama’s grief over his separation from his wife Sita when he visits, one, Panchavati, a hermitage where once Rama and Sita lived happily. It may be noted here that Rama is the fictional parallel to the mythical Rama. But it must be admitted that Madeleine is no Sita, he sees Sita in Savithri.

To an Indian, the relationship between Radha and Krishna is nothing but the relationship between the seeker and the sought. According to Indian tradition, marriage is a means to attain salvation or ‘moksha’ from the eternal cob-web of life and death. For this, husband and wife are complementary to each other. Each must perform his or her own duty or ‘dharma’, which alone enables them to attain salvation which Madeleine fails to fulfil.

Through the novel Rao attempts to explain the Vendantic tradition and the Hindu marriage rituals as leading religious

practices which are hostile to the Westerners. His project of associating the Hindu myth of Rama and Seetha with marriage gives a superficial mystical association to the general practice of marriage. Though the intention of the writer is to place the sacred position of marriage in Hinduism, a foreign reader could interpret these practices in mystic terms romanticizing the Eastern cultural norms.

V. COLONIAL HYBRIDITY AND HINDU MYSTICISM IN *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN* BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

Midnight’s Children (1981) by Salman Rushdie is a loose allegory for events in India both before and, primarily, after the independence and partition of India in 1947. The narrative framework of *Midnight’s Children* consists of the tale which Saleem Sinai recounts orally to his wife-to-be Padma. This self-referential narrative recalls indigenous Indian culture and religious practices in India

Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, opens the novel by explaining that he was born at midnight on 15th August 1947, at the exact moment India gained its independence from British rule. He imagines that his miraculously timed birth ties him to the fate of the country. He later discovers that all children born in India between 12.00 a.m and 1.00 a.m on 15th August 1947 are gifted with special powers. Saleem thus attempts to use these powers to convene the eponymous children. He acts as a telepathic conduit, bringing hundreds of geographically disparate children into contact while also attempting to discover the meaning of their gifts. In particular, those children who are born closest to the stroke of midnight possess more powerful gifts than the others.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* deals with religious mythological references to the abundant diversity of Hindu mythology. The Parvati-Shiva traditional myth textualized in the novel and is altered by the dynamic shifting of identities of the primary characters. For example, Shiva-of-the-knees and Saleem, whose fates have been intertwined since they were switched at birth, dually portray the traditional Hindu Shiva in that they alternatively share the consort Parvati the witch. Yet, simultaneously, the fictional relationship between these two struggling opponents, Saleem and his ‘alter ego’ Shiva-of-the-knees also resembles the mythic traditional opposition between Hindu gods Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer.

Several myths and legends are invoked as Saleem’s fable like story unfolds. Characters and legends from the Hindu epics like Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, Arjuna, Bhima and the battle of Kuruksetra are referred in the novel. There are multiple references to the Musa or Moses, Quran and Muhammad, especially in Ahmed Sinai’s preoccupations with reordering the Quran. Saleem identifies himself with “the elephant-headed Lord Ganesh” because of his nose and his love for writing [10, p. 123].

In Rushdie’s fiction, the argument of “cultural diversity” runs as a thread through all the chapters. In the book *Salman Rushdie; Contemporary World Writers*, Catherine Cundy underscores the hybridity of Rushdie’s background, the paradox of his being “too English for the Indian” and “too Indian for the English” [11, p. 25]. In her analysis on *Midnight’s Children* she projects the novel as an amalgamation of eastern content and western form to achieve the near ideal of a “hybrid post-colonial text”.

Cundy highlights the technical brilliance of *Midnight's Children*. Different narrative techniques are effectively debated in the text mythic, filmic, real, and fantastic preoccupations jostle one another with amazing ease even as realism is subverted with genius strokes. The real and the fantastic in relation to characters have parallels to mythical archetypes in the Hindu gods. Saleem, like Rushdie, knows Hindu stories and the textual Shiva is Saleem's alter ego. Rushdie infuses the supernatural into everyday experiences. "Literary traditions are combined with techniques like non-linear progression of events, lengthy digressions, and recursive inconsistent narration adopted from Indian epic literature and oral forms of storytelling" [12, p. 89].

In a country that founded four major religions, Rushdie's extensive use of religious motifs is a necessity in acknowledging India's inherent spirituality. Rushdie uses this religious saturation to provide a narrative and thematic framework with which to familiarize the reader to the story. Incidentally, as Wendy Faris suggests, it is quite conceivable that *Midnight's Children's* characters could actually be incarnations of Hindu gods. Faris writes, In India, of course, beliefs regarding reincarnation make metamorphoses through time particularly ubiquitous, and many of the characters in *Midnight's Children* duplicate a deity, Saleem's much mentioned nose (to cite only one instance) corresponding to Ganesh the elephant-headed god's trunk. Parvati acts especially as a stabilizing force thus restoring order. She is the one who helps Saleem return to Delhi by using her magic basket, making him invisible. She tempers even the most overwhelming of Shiva's sexual urges, a task that none other had managed before. She is a positive accomplished feminine figure [13].

Homy Bhabha states that "the master discourse is appropriated by the native whose agency reflects cultural resistance in the form of the mimicry and parody of colonial authority" [14, p. 144]. In *Midnight's Children*, the resistance to colonial shadows is presented through a discussion with the flavour of Hindu mythology. The mystic portrayal of Hinduism by Rushdie is a form of resistance where the occident reader relates with superstition and mysticism.

Rushdie's manipulation of roles regarding the anti-self, marks his fundamental divergence from the rest of magical realism. While transculturation is evident and continuing throughout the novel, it is never truly implemented and completed. A prominent aspect of Farris's extensive discussion of transculturation focuses on the idea that the process in "magical realism is a two-way cultural bridge", which enables "a cultural conversation that heals" [13, p. 155-57]. This healing occurs through the convergence, and ultimate merging, of the colonizer's empirical reality with the native culture's ancient spiritualism, creating a collective national identity. In this novel, Rushdie leverages many of the techniques typical of transculturation in an effort to show the similarities of differing cultures. Shiva is Saleem's anti-self, the person from whom he realizes and gains power, suggests it is not only the colonizer that India must overcome to achieve unification, but also its own discursive cultural identities.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study helps to gain a vivid understanding about the role played by the Indian postcolonial writers to project Hinduism in mystic lenses. While defining mysticism through Hindu religious practices, gods, legends and myths, I have made an attempt to understand the reasons which lead the outside readers to identify the works of the postcolonial Indian writers with a touch of mysticism. This study allows the reader to understand the socio-political and cultural events which lead the postcolonial writers to propagate Hinduism in association with mysticism and exoticism and their marginalized colonized mentality which forced them to place their culture among the other governing, more popular western ideologies of the time. Moreover, the study provides space to recapture the notion of myth and irrationality (social: class division, emotional: beliefs) in Hindu philosophy and also the importance and values in the Indian culture. This study proves the culture collision and post-colonial hybridity, the fear of losing belonging, ambivalence, otherness, and alienation result the postcolonial Indian writers to glorify their cultural aspects and place Hinduism among the realm of other world religions.

REFERENCES

- [1] Pradeep Chakkarath "Stereotypes in Social Psychology: The "West-East" Differentiation as a Reflection of Western Traditions of Thought" 2009, pp 18.
- [2] Richard King. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the "Mystic East"* London, Routledge, 1999.
- [3] Richard King. *Orientalism and the Modern Myth of "Hinduism"*, 2012, pp 01.
- [4] Margaret Smith. 'The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism', in Richard Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism*, London, Athlone Press, 1980.
- [5] Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (eds), *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-cultural Studies*, Amsterdam, Atlanta GA, Rodopi, Poznan: *Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities*, Vol. 59, 1997.
- [6] Northrop Frye. "Literature and Myth". *Relations of Literary Study: Essays on Interdisciplinary Contributions*. Ed. James Thorpe. New York: 1967.
- [7] M.H Abrams. *"A Glossary of Literary Terms"*. 3rd ed. Madras : Macmillan, 1988.
- [8] Raja Rao. *The Serpent and the Rope*. India. Penguin. 1960.
- [9] John Dowson. *"A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature"*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1984.
- [10] Salman Rushdie, *Salman. Midnight's Children*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1997.
- [11] Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie; Contemporary World Writers* Manchester University Press, 1996.
- [12] Fredric Jameson. *"Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism."* Social Text, 1986.
- [13] W B. Faris. In *Magical Realism: Theory, History Community* published in *Scheherazade's Children Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction* ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Faris W B Durham, NC: duke UP, 1995, pp 179.
- [14] Homi Bhabha, 'Signs taken for wonders: questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817', in *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1985, pp. 144-65.