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‘How does postcolonial literature challenge orthodoxies, both in content and form?’

Whilst the term ‘postcolonial’ contains a temporal prefix, implying a period of time following colonialism, the scope of its academic criticism holds significant complexity. For the purpose of this essay, I will characterise postcolonial literature as being an emergence of perspectives previously trapped and oppressed under colonial rule. With this stance in mind, the ideas most prevalent are accounts of entrapment, newly-obtained freedom and joyousness at reclaimed identity. Despite each individual cultural or ethnic community experiencing the effects of colonialism in distinctive ways, the common thread linking their identities is the subversion of orthodoxy, whether religious, social or literary. This essay will explore the ways in which the three following texts challenge the aforementioned areas of orthodoxy, focussing particularly on the theme of absurdity concerning the effects of the 1947 partition of India: *Toba Tek Singh* by Saadat Hasan Manto (1955), *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie (1981) and *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000). The most common association with this historical event is the rigid division between various intrinsically intertwined ethnic groups, evoking feelings of resentment and hostility, often portrayed in its contemporaneous literature. However, through analysis of the literary devices, style and form of the texts, I will instead argue that the foremost ideas presented are that of confusion, uncertainty and indeed, absurdity.

Firstly, religion is a fundamental element of the postcolonial narrative, as its Western orthodoxies-namely the missionary work of Christianity- led to a suppression of local religious practices. Furthermore, it held a crucial role in the events of the 1947 partition, as Western executive powers, albeit alongside Gandhi, divided the country into three- India, Pakistan and Bangladesh- based on the two most prominent religions, whilst disregarding the nuances of culture, identity and family ties. This vast oversimplification of Pakistan for the Muslims and India for the Hindus bred confusion and disbelief, as portrayed in the following texts. In *Midnight’s Children* (Rushdie, 1981), Rushdie utilises the protagonist’s grandfather, Aadam Aziz, to portray the jarring simplicity of overcoming religious orthodoxy. The name ‘Aadam’ itself has notable similarities to the name of the Biblical figure ‘Adam’, allowing further similarities to be drawn, namely the overlap concerning the expulsion of Aadam from India and the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden. This is further emphasised by Rushdie describing Kashmir, the native region of Aadam, as being ‘Paradise’. Despite this allegory being an example of the postcolonial concept of mimicry, defined by Homi Bhaba as the adoption or imitation of coloniser’s culture showing the dominant function of the colonial power (Bhaba, 1994), Rushdie subverts these ideas by using the Biblical model to mount his own cultural narrative. The fickle nature of religion is inferred from the bizarre way in which Aadam loses his faith. After having a nosebleed while kneeling to pray, he ‘resolve[s] never again to kiss the earth for any god’, which to the reader appears as a comically extreme overreaction, developing the tone of absurdity. Moreover, the nosebleed is described as ‘three drops of blood’ using the metaphor ‘transformed into rubies’, displaying irony as the three drops of blood is a symbolic

reference to the Quran's teaching that man was made from clots of blood; a teaching from the religion he imminently goes on to denounce. Smith places an equal importance on names in her novel *White Teeth* (Smith, 2000) as she mingles names of seemingly incongruous, or unexpected, ethnic and religious backgrounds: 'Isaac Leung', 'Danny Rahman' and 'Quang O'Rourke'. This allows Smith to dismantle stereotypes often associated with certain religious and cultural groups portraying the postcolonial concept of Hybridity. This further develops through the characters of Sita, a white girl and her friend Sharon, a Pakistani girl. Whilst this stark inversion of expectation is superficially humorous, it raises the question of power imbalances between the coloniser and the colonised still present in generations 3 to 4 decades following decolonisation. The dissonance between name and ethnicity is more palatable to the white girl, as her parents have been given the privilege to choose a name based on preference alone, whereas the person-of-colour is forced into a name erasing her culture in order to protect her from an unequal society. The feeling of the mixed heritage character Irie entering the house of a stereotypical white family is portrayed using the religious similes 'like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac', subverting the strict rules of orthodox religion in order for Irie's character to gain independence and agency. Manto, however, approaches the subversion of religious orthodoxy in a lateral manner within his short story *Toba Tek Singh* (Manto, 1955). Despite explicitly assigning each character's reaction to the partition to separate religious groups 'a Sikh', 'two Anglo-Indians', 'a Hindu lawyer', 'Muslims', he does not highlight any difference between their reactions. This is inferred as a commentary on the forcible division of the country based on religion, even though the individuals hold no intrinsic differences, highlighting the random and arbitrary nature of the partition. Furthermore, this is developed by the Muslim and the Sikh 'lunatic' inmates both claiming to be their respective religious and political leaders, being separated after being deemed dangerous, showing the external limitations placed onto religious groups by Western officials. Overall, the three texts all subvert religious orthodoxy in order to transfer power to the voices of the postcolonial novels, as well as to highlight the confusion, uncertainty and absurdity of the circumstances of the 1947 Partition.

Secondly, orthodoxies additionally present themselves in a social context, as colonialism creates a forced mingling of two societies, the effects of which remain post-colonialism. This causes dichotomies within postcolonial narratives as there is constant conflict between two clashing identities. The three texts handle this conflict of identity through comical story-telling, presenting the trauma of colonialism in a light-hearted manner, rendering it more palatable to both the reader and the characters within the texts. In *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1981) society materialises itself as the suffocating force of fate, portrayed by an abundance of metaphors of the protagonist, Saleem, being trapped and running out of time: 'handcuffed to history', 'indissolubly chained…to my country.' This is ironic and subversive as it is used to describe the moment of his birth- midnight of the day India gained independence. This juxtaposition between India's independence and Saleem's entrapment is jarring to the reader, creating a tone of bewilderment and shock, mirroring the feelings of ordinary people during the 1947 partition. The

social orthodoxy is also challenged through the loss of Aadam's patriotism and love for his natural surroundings after studying in a Western medical school, through a further juxtaposition of Aadam returning home, yet feeling out of place. The dichotomy between his Western and Eastern identities are personified through 'the old place resent[ing] his return.' Similarly, in *White Teeth* (Smith, 2000), characters experience internal conflicts concerning Western and Eastern values. The immigrant parents' greatest fear is the dilution of ethnicity over generations hence leading to an erasure of culture. However, this fear magnifies into an avoidance and disapproval of 'miscegenation', the dilution of race. Despite this being a significantly xenophobic attitude, it is portrayed satirically through a scientific metaphor of genetic make-up, with 'Bengali-ness' portrayed as (BB) whilst (aa) is representative of the Aryan race. This in itself is subversive, as it places the previously colonised race as scientifically dominant, whereas in reality they have carried less power during the 1947 partition as well as during the immigration process. In contrast to these two previous texts, *Toba Tek Singh* (Manto, 1955) instead portrays the lack of conflict between the different nationalities by using the microcosmic setting of a 'lunatic asylum' in which the patients are being repatriated to their newly created countries. The focalisation of asylum inmates, a group often ostracised from society, reveals the perspectives of a community with little awareness of external events, holding minimal impact on the society around them. Overall, postcolonial partition literature is often constrained by the circumstances of the society around them, yet these texts manage to use humour and satire to shock and confuse the reader, further developing the theme of absurdity.

Lastly, all three authors subvert literary orthodoxy through the style, form and tone of language. A significant point to note on *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie, 1981), is that it is written in English, despite following the narrative of a Muslim man living in 1950s India. Rushdie himself stated that 'the ironic proposition that India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear' (Rushdie, 1997) showing his subversion of the assumption that postcolonial literature must align themselves with either its native or colonised identity. *Toba Tek Singh* (Manot, 1955), however, is written in his native Urdu, with the better part of academics studying it in translation, unavoidably removing areas of authenticity for the ability of Western consumption. *White Teeth* (Smith, 2000) is written in third person omniscient narrative perspective, allowing Smith to utilise authorial intervention to show the effects of postcolonialism on characters in the periphery of the protagonists, allowing for a larger breadth of representation. Similarly, *Toba Tek Singh* (Manot, 1955) uses a third person omniscient narrator, however, focalises on several individual perspectives each displaying a confused attitude. In contrast, Rushdie writes in first person, with a direct and informal stream of consciousness writing style. This is shown by his repeated backtracking and parenthetical explanations. The spontaneity and fast paced nature of story-telling, such as switching immediately from the story of Saleem's birth to Aadam's nosebleed while praying, is seemingly random, adding to the elements of absurdity. In *Toba Tek Singh* (Manto, 1955) the excessive repetition of the countries 'India' and 'Pakistan' renders the

words meaningless: ‘India-Pakistan-Pakistan-India rigmarole’, paired with the list of rhetorical questions, it highlights the ridiculousness of the arbitrary split of borders: ‘If they were in India, then where was Pakistan?’ The overarching similarity in style across the three texts is the use of humour, irony and satire in order to filter the horrific reality of the Partition and its repercussions. The comedic tone stems from the willful ignorance of the gravity of the situation, through quick-witted anecdotes and an ever-changing narrative. This creates a palatable and enjoyable experience in which to absorb postcolonial stories portraying the confusion, uncertainty and absurdity of the 1947 Partition.

To conclude, the effects of postcolonialism are complex and varied, and it is a futile task to ascertain a singular universal experience in response to it. However, through the analysis of literature, specifically Partition literature, various links and commonalities can be drawn. In particular, the constant subversion of orthodoxies, religious, social and literary, in order to reclaim identity and agency over colonial powers as well as to display the nuanced and mixed postcolonial image, unique to each individual. Furthermore, as explored in my essay, the theme of absurdity is a thread linking the experiences portrayed in each of the three texts, with the specific focus on confusion and uncertainty layered on top of the often highlighted pain and hatred making for more palatable, entertaining and authentic literature.

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