



“Landscape” and “Space Consciousness” in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*: Shortfalls in the Analytic Diasporic Eye

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Abstract

The diasporic lens often misses the ground zero reality of the cultural space of the Indian multicultural dynamic. Salman Rushdie dramatized the issue of “space-consciousness” or “borderline-consciousness” of Kashmir, Bangladesh and Bombay in *Midnight’s Children* from an emotional or cognitive mode of mapping. As a mestize, Rushdie’s portrait of Indian culture, history and politics can never be an accurate estimate of the vastness of the Indian experience. Rushdie as a privileged post-colonial cultural relativist viewed Indian multicultural ethnicity from the top (a colonial male gaze). With the help of the compare and contrast research technique, this paper will try to comprehend the limitations of the diasporic cognitive cultural mapping of *Midnight’s Children* as opposed to the strengths of a cartographic landscape assessed through discourse analysis. The comprehension of the “Oriental Crisis” in the domain of literature and cultural studies could enable a gauging of the research gap in determining the limitations of “Landscape” and “Space-Consciousness” from an analytic diasporic eye. “New Mestiza Consciousness”, “Landscape”, “Critical Marxism”, “Eco-Feminism” and “Psycho analytic Criticism” under critical discourse analysis are some multicultural perspectives that may help to identify the research gap and the research questions. Indian history and politics have always had a direct influence in shaping Indian culture, and to some extent the east still carries the “White man’s burden” even in estimating one’s indigenous cultural identity and value before the world. Rushdie as a colonial mimic no doubt extended the legacy of the “White man’s / woman’s burden” seeing it from a diasporic eye. The distinction between “self” and “other” is self-contradictory in any diasporic writing and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is no exception. Saleem’s non-linear narration, imagination, and lack of factual evidence in presenting Indian culture, history and politics are questionable in terms of authenticity before the reader. In *Midnight’s Children*, Padma, portrayed by Rushdie, as an epistemological, metaphoric, oriental puppet often questions Saleem’s reliability as a narrator.

Keywords: Diasporic Eye, Space-Consciousness, Landscape, Cultural Mapping, Postcolonial Analytic Discourse.

1. Introduction

Saleem, as a representative narrator of the text *Midnight’s Children*, believes that the history of his life is the history of the country and that is India. Rushdie, as a critic, criticizes Indian Post Independence politics, specifically Indira Gandhi’s stance during the war against Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971. Saleem being the mouth piece of Rushdie’s point of view tries to represent the cultural, political and historical facts and facets of Indian experience through his narrative, but he presents them fragmentally. Therefore, he mixes reality with imagination as he lacks factual evidence, and misses the chronology of historical events and politics of

Bombay, Bangladesh and Kashmir. Saleem puts all those cultural and religious myths together in order to make them more believable before the readers so that readers or audiences can understand that he has a vast knowledge over Indian history, geography, politics and culture and that may help the readers to believe the fact that truly he represents India and Indianness at the core.

The most interesting twist regarding his reliability or authenticity as a narrator comes when he suffers from insecurities and an inferiority complex in his defensive answers to the questions thrown towards him by Padma and the Boat man Tai, the fisher man. In reality, both the Boat man Tai and Padma have more ground zero experience in perceiving the diversified Indian culture, history, geography and politics. Padma wants a straightforward narrative, but Saleem presents the story line of *Midnight's Children* in a non-linear way, and unobtrusively tries to control the audience's or readers' reception of the story line because as an omniscient narrator of the text, he does not want to lose his authorial control over the text. Rushdie tries to set up a secular attitude/atmosphere in his narrative by taking several references from Hindu, Islamic and Christian myths, but his representation of all those mythical allusions is not perfectly vindicated in the characterization of Padma, Parvati, Shiva (from Hindu mythology), the mythical reference of Adam Aziz and Adam Sinai (from Christian mythology), Naseem Aziz, Amina Sinai (from Islamic cultural background). Always, there works a sense of fear among people belonging to any ethnic community of losing their own indigenous values and cultural identities when they try to merge with another dominant cultural group and their people. No doubt, Saleem as the protagonist and omniscient narrator of the text *Midnight's Children* is a product of duality or an impure hybridity as testified by his cultural and biological stance from his past. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said confesses that "my principal aim is not to separate but to connect and I am interested in this for the main--ontological reason that cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with actuality" (Said, 1994, p. 15). Said further mentions that even the historiography of Postcolonial writings suffers from various disparities as it lacks authenticity due to the invisible dominant narrative structure of the mainstream postcolonial writers. Even in the text *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie suggests that migrant writers have a "double perspective" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 19); they are both insiders and outsiders in the worlds they describe. He agrees with the fact that migrant writers may not be able to determine the precise historical truth of the past, but have more potential in shaping their lives. Critics of *Midnight's Children* criticize the unreliable narrative technique of the protagonist, Saleem as he gets numerical historical events and dates muddled up because he desperately tries to convince the reader that he is at the center of India's history (Rushdie, 1991, p. 24). But the reality is that he is not at all in the center of India's history, geography, politics and culture. Saleem often uses the term "remembered truth" instead of the term "literal truth" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 24). This narrative approach of Saleem Sinai signifies his memory based subjective narration in analyzing and assessing the merit of multicultural Indian values. Surely, multicultural Indian values, history, geography, politics, religion require more specific reality based assessment.

Edward Said in his ground breaking polemic work *Orientalism* points out the problem which lies behind estimating an authentic analysis of all those cultural values from the narratives of texts like *Midnight's Children* and many others from the same diasporic zone. Said suggests that it is the "Textual approach" which is basically responsible for creating such problems. As a reader or a researcher, we should be more focused on how to read or interpret a particular text instead of blindly interpreting from the narrator's individual eye. Saleem's

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non-linear and memory based subjective approach of storytelling matches the Rushdian diasporic view from the top in the attempt to project a diversified experience of Indian history, geography, culture and politics - an assessment from the top- (vertical textual approach) - This vertical approach of reading a text misses the ground zero authentic reality or firsthand experience of reading or analyzing a text from the horizontal textual approach in estimating all those values. Without any question Rushdie as an excellent artist has universal insights despite his politics and cultural differences but to some extent, he misses the ground zero reality lensing it from the top through a vertical way of assessing Indian ethnicity, historicity, polity, multiculturalism and locations.

2. Research Gap and Research Questions

The concept of “oriental crisis” in the domain of literature exposes the research gap and research questions in the identification of shortfalls in assessing the cultural, political and historical space of Indian experiences from a diasporic angle. Taking references from Said’s Orientalism, we are going to trace the concept of “crisis”. “Crisis” occurs due to the ontological and epistemological distinction made between the East and the West. The factor of distinction is based on the conflict of two relative issues- “What it is” and “What it should be” where “What it is” is a ground zero reality depending upon the reader’s or viewer’s firsthand experience of the land, culture, history, polity and geography, while “What it should be” is an ideal discourse based on a concept of “false consciousness” or what in the Marxist School of thought is known as “ideology”.

Naturally, lensing an oriental cultural discourse from a diasporic eye is an impure blending which accommodates the damaging conflict between “Self” and “Other”. The contradiction between “Self” and “Other” from a diasporic literary angle justifies the “Otherness of Self” (Bhaba, 1994). More or less, it is a kind of subjective projection based on the writer’s or narrator’s knowledge and some of his past experiences.

In order to define the very concept of “Oriental Crisis” more vividly, we are going to take an example from Edward Said’s Orientalism (Said, 1994, p. 92). Someone describing the fierceness of a lion in his text and instructing the reader on how to deal with that fierceness when he had never seen a lion in reality. Since the age of Napoleon, the historical tradition of canonical texts of occidental writers has never allowed a tangible voice to the Orient and Oriental culture. Rushdie as a mimic artist carries forward that tradition of silence in the projection of “Oriental Culture” through the portrayal of a metaphoric silent puppet in the form of Padma in *Midnight’s Children*. The voice of Padma remains unheard, and her subtle questioning of Saleem’s narration remains suppressed throughout the novel because of the dominant voice of an all knowing scholar like Saleem. In a roundabout way, the voice of Saleem echoes the voice of Salman Rushdie. The typical characteristic posture of Padma reflects the burden of tolerance and re-adjustment which an oriental people or people belonging to such a cultural class and sex have to undergo. Rushdie is accurate enough in depicting the

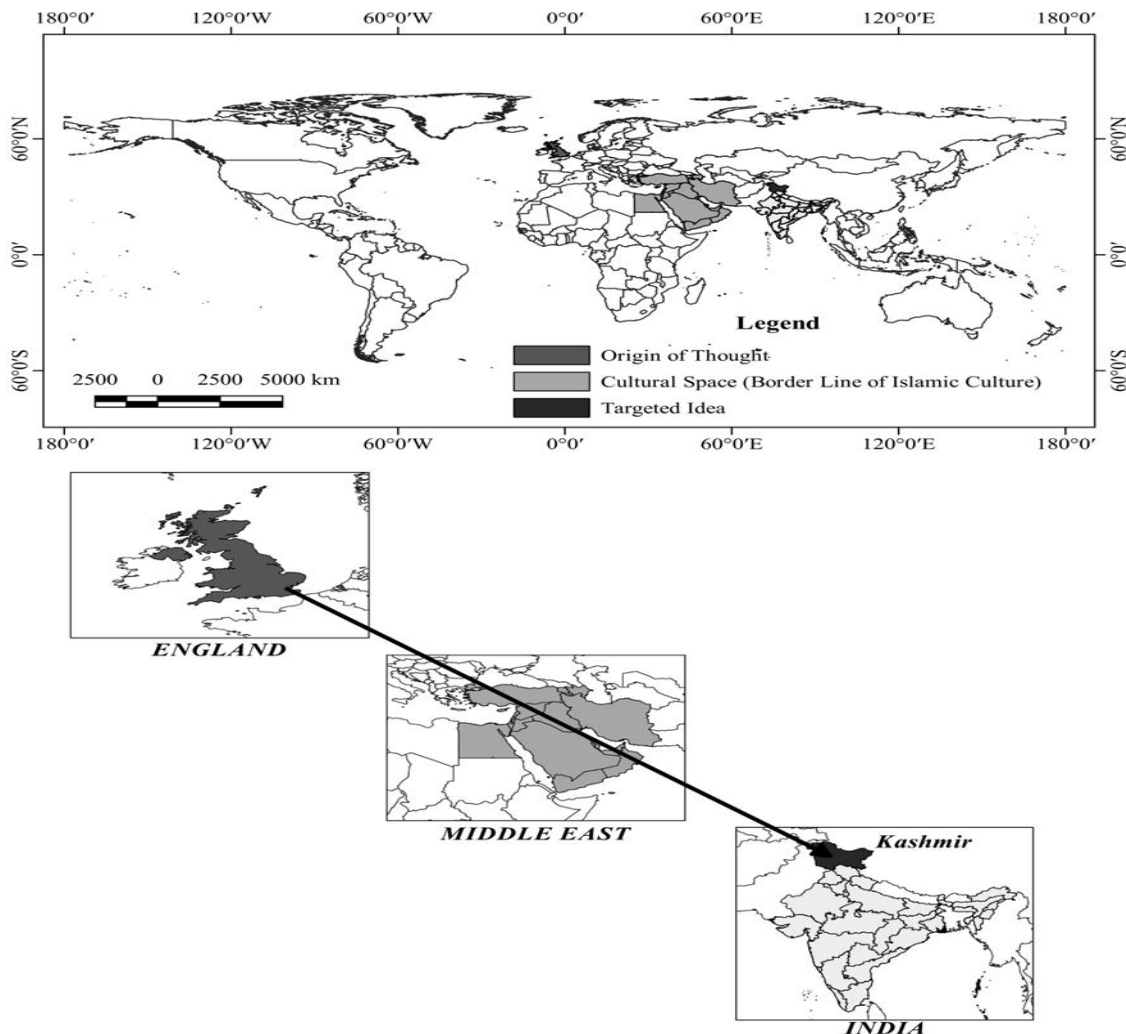
silence of Padma, but he ignores the elusive “talking back” quality which Padma inherits. She is indeed more adamant and stronger than Saleem Sinai. Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak in her polemic essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* explores the issue of the silent voice of the third world women belonging to the margin as they have a very liminal space of their own nature and culture. The answer of the question is implied within the title of the essay. Yes, women can talk back, but the reality is that no one acknowledges the voice of women like Padma. The ugly and uncomfortable reality is even more deplorable when the voice of Padma is rejected and snubbed by her own ethnic cultural community even though of a different sex and class. Salman Rushdie's shortfalls are revealed when the reader of a text views the narration and the narrator's explanatory tone from the same lens without assessing its analytic value and without raising a single question or doubt at the authenticity of the narration. It seems as if the reader or an interpreter accepts all authorial domination. Indirectly speaking it's a kind of colonial manipulative approach (a male gaze) while viewing the textual discourse and simultaneously denying its shortfalls (Said, 1994, p. 94).

In her article “Cartographies of Struggle” Chandra Mohanty offers an analysis of feminisms in the third world, their diverse histories and struggles by demonstrating how various power structures or “relations of ruling” like state rule, economic shifts and hegemonic discourses intersect and position women differently depending on their historical, geographical and political locations in order to build a heterogeneous impure hybrid identity structure (Mohanty, 2003). Chandra Mohanty further declares that “no one becomes a woman----- because she is female but rather it is intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, hetero sexuality and nation that position us as women” (Addante, 2009, pp. 12-13).

The essence of a borderline consciousness or space consciousness is nothing but a separation of the “Self” from the “Other”. The tension between “domestic ideo-space” and “foreign finance space” enhances the existing problem or shortfalls of third world countries like India especially for women belonging to the underprivileged community. The problem becomes more aggravated and acute when people of a particular “ethno-space” have to merge with another dominant cultural community basically under the mandatory compulsion to explore the “finance space” crossing the border line of “Self”. Class discourse is an absent cause, neither thoroughly visible nor perfectly measured. The culture of domination has various layers. For example, upper and middle class mestizas can adopt alien cross cultural values easily but adaptation becomes very tough for people belonging to a particular “ideo-space” with domestic values without any fixed financial support. So, assessing Indian multi-cultural values after crossing a cultural zone and viewing them from a diasporic eye can never be an accurate estimation of all those cultural values and spaces. The following map with indexations will try to figure out the problems and shortfalls of viewing from the top in terms of assessing the cross cultural values, locations and spaces from a diasporic eye in the context of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

3. Cartographic vs Cognitive Mapping (viewing from the top): A Diasporic Eye or A Colonial Male Gaze towards Indian Culture, Space, Locations, History, Religions, Gender and Political Discourse:

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(QGIS, diva-gis.com)

4. Comparative Character Discourses in *Midnight’s Children*: A Postcolonial Diasporic Analysis:

The Rushdian diasporic lens overlooked some important aspects of postcolonial discourse while sketching some important characters through a diasporic angle in the text *Midnight’s Children*. For example, certain characters like Padma, Dr. Adam Aziz, Boatman Tai, Naseem Aziz are not subjected to the postcolonial critical lens. With the help of the comparative character discourse we can identify certain shortfalls which the Rushdian diasporic eye misses while dealing with those above characters. The deconstructive method can be adopted in order to highlight the loopholes in viewing and assessing these characters from the Rushdian diasporic lens. Deconstruction helps us to see the critic not as a mere interpreter of the text but as a co-creator as well. (Captani, 2015) Uma Parameswaram comments that Padma “is many things within the novel and certainly deserves a full length study” (Parameswaram, 1983, p. 23). Salman Rushdie’s portrayal of Padma’s anguish and mental trauma is lopsided since it is a figment of the imagination of the colonial male gaze. Perhaps Toril Moi’s very apt

observation is most relevant in this context. “Yes, men can be feminists but they can’t be women, just as whites can be anti-racist but not black; under patriarchy men will always speak from a different position than women” (Moi, 1997, p. 208).

Elaine Showalter’s “Gynocriticism” too lays emphasis on a similar thought, suggesting the need of a sub-culture within the masculine culture of totality in order to recreate a woman’s individual space of femininity as opposed to that of her male counterpart. Showalter in her female sub cultural model sees the “female tradition as a positive source of strength and solidarity” which can make its own symbol a “Wild Zone” of experience as opposed to that of the male tradition. Showalter develops the idea of the female “Wild Zone”, where men are forbidden to enter through a diagram from Ardener. “Wild Zone” or no-man’s land is a different space for the female body which in a practical way refers to the symbolic female consciousness, an invisible place forbidden to her male counterpart. Showalter tries to visualize the invisible space of female consciousness demanding the muted female cultural group to speak. It is also a fact that most of the revolutionary and feminine language of protest comes out from this particular “Wild Zone” (Showalter, 1981, p.200). In a similar mode of speaking Simon de Beauvoir another feminist critic in her ground breaking work *The Second Sex* (1949) develops the concept of the “other”. Many critics raise their voice against Salman Rushdie’s misogynistic depiction of Padma. While dealing with some important cultural and psychological issues of characters like Padma in his text *Midnight’s Children* Salman Rushdie misses the actual analysis because of his view from a colonial male angle. For example, Saleem as a mouth piece of the Rushdian eye describes the body parts of Padma in a vulgar way; the description contains an inhuman or an animalistic approach. Saleem introduces Padma for the first time to the reader saying—“Padma, our plump Padma is magnificent.....she can’t readdefinitely a bitch in the magnet” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 24). A male gaze justifies Padma’s utmost sexual desires when Padma tries to make impotent Saleem stronger in sexual deeds offering a herbal jadibuti. But the ground zero reality is not like that because it is the same Padma who ties her knock with the diseased Saleem to a life-long relationship despite knowing the fact that Saleem is unable to meet her sexual demands. The way Saleem bullies Padma is similar to the approach of a colonial master towards a colonized victim. To some extent it seems as if it is the duty of Saleem to educate Padma: “I attempt to educate her” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 44). This particular line of the text truly establishes Saleem’s misogynistic outlook while assessing or valuing Padma’s position in his life. The manner in which the diasporic Rushdian eye defines Padma’s domestic skills of caring, nurturing, cooking, raising children reflects the mean or devaluing attitude of a narrator towards a third world underprivileged metaphoric female character like Padma. To some great extent we, the readers are compelled to think that Padma is happy in her domestic Zone of life, but the reality is that she enjoys her own space, and her own far-reaching vision that extends beyond those domestic values of life. Perhaps the invisible domination from the hand of an omniscient narrator makes Padma a silent character throughout the novel. It is not that Padma does not have any voice or voice of protest, but that her experience of life and the quality of being rational and practical have been presented incorrectly before the readers. The fact is that Salman Rushdie misses the actual struggle and sufferings of Padma while showing empathy towards her trauma and poor condition. Saleem wants to be the safe-guard for woman like Padma which is hinted and reflected through his narration. But the real twist lies in the reason behind wanting to be the protector for an uneducated woman like Padma. In a roundabout way of speaking, Saleem discards Padma’s individual identity, compelling her to be dependent on his knowledge of storytelling or economic privileging. In a nut shell, we can say that Padma’s character is composed more by the absence of her individual self rather than its presence. As an active reader, if we go through the text closely, we can easily comprehend the actual reality that it is not Padma but the diseased Saleem who really suffers from various neurotic and sexual problems, and insecurities that render him in constant need of a strong and adamant woman like Padma in his life. Actually, it is not the absence of Padma but the invisible presence of Padma which helps Saleem to become Saleem, the narrator. Saleem forgets to

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narrate Padma’s past history, her identity and her cultural locations, but represents his own identity, past history, cultural locations thoroughly. Here come the shortfalls of viewing or assessing the narration of a particular group of people’s history, identity, cultural locations in Postcolonial domain of literature from a diasporic Rushdian eye. Similarly Postcolonial mainstream history of literature misses the narration of people belonging to the underprivileged minority section. As a matter of fact, mainstream Postcolonial history of literature is not through our critical lens. Basically, the Postcolonial history of literature describes the history, geography, politics and culture of people belonging to a particular group as controlled by the class, race, economy, and gender of its narrator. So, it can never be an accurate estimation of cultural and historical values as it ignores the history, polity, locations and culture of people belonging to the margin or the periphery. (Bhaba, 1994).

In continuation of the character discourse analysis, we are going to assess the cultural image of the Islamic religion as described in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* develops the concept of oriental crisis suggesting that the difference between Western and Eastern cultural values can never be authentically presented before the readers without taking recourse to the landscape view of the difference from ground zero. In western texts, the image of Muslim people is of a “looter”. Islamic culture is also characterized through its orthodox values, prejudiced irrational mentality and a scant respect for life. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* extended the legacy of such images of the muslim people and their cultural values following the traditional textual approach. With the help of a comparative character discourse, we can relate the characters of Dr. Adam Aziz, Naseem Aziz, Boatman Tai, and Methwold to visualize some shortfalls of the Rushdian diasporic eye in assessing the cultural images and values of Islam and their people. Having graduated in Medical Science from West Germany, Dr. Adam Aziz is a progressive Kashmiri man who rejects primitive and ancestral family values as irrational. We notice the western mind set of Dr. Aziz when he performs his duties after returning to Kashmir from Germany. He tries to apply the newly adopted western values to the lives of the Kashmiri people in order to give them a better living. The representation of Adam Aziz’s character reflects the symbolic portrayal of Christian missionaries in a colonized land. Aziz questions the prejudiced Islamic values and belief system. In contrast, Boatman Tai and Naseem Aziz represent the orthodox Muslim values. Boatman Tai compares the home coming of Dr. Aziz to an evil intrusion into the paradisaical land of Kashmir. He wants to preserve and protect Islamic cultural values and his indigenous Kashmiri identity desperately. At the time of protest in the land of Kashmir Boatman Tai fears the loss of his identity and the indigenous space of his belief. Dr. Aziz wants his wife Naseem Aziz to come out from purdah so that she can be a modern Indian wife rejecting her primitive self of a good Kashmiri girl. While the characterization of Dr. Aziz is marked by adaptation to cross cultural values in order to promote his recognition and identity on a global platform, the characterizations of Naseem Aziz and Boatman Tai are marked by preservation of indigenous natural values and belief system without crossing any cartographic borderline or without sharing their individual cognitive space.

Unfortunately, Boatman Tai dies at the time of protest when Indian and Pakistani armies march into the valley of Kashmir. He loses his life at the time of protest because he wants to protect Kashmir from the clutches of both the armies in order to see his dreamland Kashmir as a separate territory. Naseem Aziz too builds an emotional wall of Muslim values and Kashmiri belief around herself in order to protect her Kashmiri identity from the rest of her family members. While critiquing all those emotional values of Kashmiri people and their land, Rushdie as a postcolonial cultural relativist misses the ground zero experience and misunderstands the actual emotional ground of those people who are deeply attached to the land of Kashmir. Rushdie has his own emotional way (subjective mode) of mapping the

regional, political, cultural, historical values of Kashmiri people which indeed is different from the accurate emotional and cultural values of the people who live there.

The characterization of Methwold by Salman Rushdie in the text *Midnight's Children* is an example of colonial mimicking from a diasporic eye as it fails to satisfy an authentic postcolonial analytic discourse. No doubt the character of Methwold stands for the moral depravities of the British Colonizer who exploited Indian wealth and economy to an extreme and fled to Britain. Escape or migration from one's place of belonging to another place on the part of writers can never be a solution to an existing challenge or crisis. As a matter of fact, the Rushdian diasporic eye misses the actual graphic and historic narration of the post-independence Indian cultural crisis. In a negative way of speaking continuing the legacy of "escape", viewing and sharing the cultural discourse of the particular land from where one escaped many a years ago is nothing but mimicking the tradition of the Occidental master artists in shaping the vastness of multicultural Oriental charms and experiences.

5. Conclusion

Salman Rushdie tries to be the voice of third world feminist values through *Midnight's Children* but ends up being a mimic voice from the center (a diasporic gazing) as he misses the authentic ground zero reality while shaping the storyline of Indian history, politics, culture and geographical locations. Rushdie as a privileged diasporic writer narrates his story line basically from a one dimensional angle of bookish knowledge and of his past experience with the land or with the people of the land whose lives are closely attached to the land. Therefore he misses some of the important aspects like situational consciousness, cultural consciousness and political consciousness of the group of people whose story he narrates in *Midnight's Children* from a diasporic angle. The authentic estimation of all these consciousnesses and the multicultural values of a particular group of people or people belonging to a certain ethnic space depend on the interconnecting factor between Time and Memory. Lensing and interpreting the text *Midnight's Children*, a text of 1981 and relating its importance to the contemporary Indian multicultural, historical, political and geographical situation/context in terms of assessing its authentic value is definitely a shortfall before the readers if those values and narrations are viewed through the same lens which Rushdie as a diasporic writer used many years ago. Time has changed and with the passage of time, Indian multicultural values, politics, history, geographical landscape - everything received a massive dramatic change. Needless to say, all these things have had a direct influence in shaping the actual diagram of Literature and Cultural Study. "New Mestiza" or borderline consciousness in the domain of literature and cultural study simply means adaptation of cultural values through one's individual racial identity while merging or crossing the borderline in order to share cross cultural hybrid values on the global platform. "New Mestiza Consciousness" in the domain of literature and cultural study is an inclusive term which incorporates "political consciousness", "situational consciousness" and "space consciousness" all together. No doubt Salman Rushdie as a mestize has a universal insight in sharing Indian multicultural dynamism to the global platform and in doing so he became successful in the domain of Postcolonial literature as a cultural relativist critic. But to some extent he misses an authentic narration in estimating all the cross-cultural values and consciousnesses of the vast Indian land and its people. Naturally, the reception of all those cultural values along with the description of "Landscape" and "Space Consciousness" of India as narrated in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* from a diasporic lens has its shortfalls as per as the ground zero experiences of the land and the people of the land are concerned.

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