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What is This?

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Abstract
This article explores the function of misogyny in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), an aspect of the novel which is often too easily interpreted as a shortcoming on Rushdie’s part rather than as a conscious and multi-layered strategy. It focuses on the question of woman and her national role, and the striking traits of monstrosity displayed by the female characters. In order to explore the crucial link between their apparent monstrosity and their significance for the nation in the novel, the portrayal of the novel’s monstrous wives, widows and witches is analysed in relation to the representation of Indian womanhood in Indian historiographical and political discourses. The article identifies two main trajectories of the theme of female monstrosity, one aimed at criticizing the nation’s unwillingness to grant women an equal status and the other designed to demonize Indira Gandhi.

Keywords
Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children, historiography, feminism, nationalism, misogyny

Salman Rushdie’s portrayal of women in his novels is often perceived as misogynist. In this article I want to explore the function of misogyny in Midnight’s Children (1981), something which is often too easily
interpreted as a shortcoming on Rushdie’s part rather than as a conscious and multi-layered strategy. In *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem Sinai, the narrator-protagonist, tries to create a meaningful account of his life by imposing a pattern on Indian history with himself at the centre. Saleem’s autobiography and the “biography” of the nation are inextricably intertwined in his account – they are “mysteriously handcuffed” together, his “destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country” and, as Saleem admits, women play a significant part in his life’s story, and thus in the nation’s (his)story. I will focus on the question of woman and her national role and the striking traits of monstrosity displayed by the female characters. In order to explore the crucial link between their apparent monstrosity and their significance for the nation in the novel, I want to analyse the portrayal of the novel’s monstrous wives, widows and witches in relation to the representation of Indian womanhood in Indian historiographical and political discourses. In nationalist discourse Indian women were invested with the role of representing the essence of Indian culture and the core of the authentically Indian nation. I want to explore how the female characters in *Midnight’s Children* reflect this elevated status and how far they conform to or subvert the nationalist ideal of the Indian woman. Of particular interest will be a comparison of Rushdie’s strategies of depicting women (and their compliance with or resistance to patriarchal structures) with the approaches of feminist historiography.

**The Nation’s Script for Its Middle-Class Wives**

The nationalist image of the essential Indian woman was usually only concerned with the middle-class Indian woman and is often perceived as a product of the middle-class negotiation of an alien modernity, with which Indians were confronted by colonialists who were secure in the knowledge of being superior to the native culture in every respect. Partha Chatterjee argues that in the late nineteenth-century nationalist discourse made a distinction between an inner, spiritual domain of the nation and an outer, material domain. In the material sphere, the West was superior but in the spiritual sphere, the East far surpassed the West. The outer/inner domain corresponded to the division of the home and the world – *ghar* and *bahir*. Whereas the world was the domain of the men who had to imitate the scientific and technological advance of the West and its rational and “modern methods of statecraft”, the home was the truly Indian domain where women preserved the “self-identity of national culture”. Any interference by the colonial state in this inner sphere was perceived as “tantamount to annihilation of one’s very identity”. Chatterjee sees Indian nationalism’s creativity
as displayed in this inner domain which was characterized by its difference from western models. One such creative construct was the model of the “new woman” who was modern but in an Indian rather than a western memsahib-aping way. This remoulding of middle-class women was a contradictory, ambivalent and heterogeneous project as women had simultaneously to be defined against lower-class and lower-caste women, westernized women and uneducated middle-class women while preserving the essence of tradition, virtue and Indianness.

Purdah, or the seclusion of women, was a central aspect of the woman question. Imperialist discourse portrayed purdah as yet another instance of female subjection, symbolising the inferior status of Indian civilization. In nationalist discourse, purdah was slowly redefined as the new woman had to have access to education and knowledge of the outside world. The physical boundary of the home came to be displaced by norms of suitable feminine behaviour which were clearly demarcated from norms of male conduct. The new woman could safely venture outside as long as she displayed the “signs of her femininity” in her dress, religiosity and demeanour, which demonstrated that she had internalized the norms of the “new patriarchy”, which was “reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality”. Women often welcomed the space this new reformed patriarchy opened for them and “keenly propagated the nationalist idea of the ‘new woman’”. Because of the imperial context, women’s liberation could not be defined against Indian men as upholders of patriarchal practices, since women shared the nationalist aspiration of Indian men.

Rushdie’s treatment of Indian women’s coming out of purdah has to negotiate this contested site of conflicting interpretations and evaluations of what women’s “liberation” entails. In Saleem’s grandmother’s eventual emergence from purdah, *Midnight’s Children* directly refers to a central strand of the nationalist woman’s question, namely the fashioning of the middle-class wife into a modern “companionate” partner. Aadam Aziz attempts to remould Naseem into a modern wife, while at the same time wanting to manage the parameters of that transition in order to give himself a semblance of control over his own entrance into modernity and nationalism. Naseem, however, resists Aadam’s efforts at social engineering as he tries in patriarchal fashion to model her into something he cannot himself live up to. Aadam, who has just realized in Amritsar in 1919, reading the *hartal* pamphlet, that he “does not feel Indian”, demands that Naseem “‘Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman’” (pp. 33–4). This apparently “progressive” piece of advice is framed not only by Aadam’s own ambivalent feelings towards pan-Indian nationalism, but also by his violent and unreasonable behaviour when he nearly burns
down the hotel by incinerating Naseem’s purdah veils in the wastepaper basket. He thus forces his wife out of purdah without leaving any room for her to have a say. Naseem, however, refuses to glide smoothly into the nationalist narrative of women leaving purdah in order to represent the modern feminine face of the Indian nation. The marital estrangement had already set in after Aadam had asked Naseem to “move a little” during sex, which she, horrified, refused on the grounds of it being a corrupting westernized practice or worse:

She shrieked in horror. “My God, what have I married? I know you Europe-returned men. You find terrible women and then you try to make us girls be like them! Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any … bad word women.” (pp. 33–4)

The text’s portrayal of Naseem serves the purpose of resisting a neat resolution of an individual woman’s entry into the national role which was constructed and propagated by nationalist discourse. The fact that her emancipation from purdah is partly triggered off by sexual frustration on Aadam’s part further complicates matters. Both Midnight’s Children and feminist historiography seek to open up spaces where complex and contradictory histories can be delineated without having to be encapsulated in a teleological narrative of continually advancing emancipation and freedom.

Women’s education was a central aspect of the nineteenth-century reform movement and crucial for women’s entry into middle-class respectability and wifely companionship.12 Naseem is aware of her lack of education in comparison to her husband and resents the position of inferiority in which it places her. When she wants to live up to the image of the supportive and loving wife who nurses her apparently wounded and blood-stained husband while gently scolding him for his unwise behaviour, she is stopped in mid-track by Aadam informing her that it is Mercurochrome, not blood which she is treating. Naseem feels humiliated: “Naseem – who had become a whirlwind of activity, seizing clothes, running taps – freezes. ‘You do it on purpose,’ she says, ‘to make me look stupid. I am not stupid. I have read several books’” (p. 35). After the Amritsar massacre, she explicitly makes an effort to be the “modern woman” he wants her to be and ignores the red stains on his clothes but she gets it wrong again:

When my grandfather got home that night, my grandmother was trying hard to be a modern woman, to please him, and so she did not turn a hair at his appearance. “I see you’ve been spilling the Mercurochrome again, clumsy,” she said, appeasingly.

“It’s blood,” he replied, and she fainted. (p. 36)
Twenty-three years later, in 1942, Naseem’s difficult and hazardous entry into modernity has evidently taken its toll as she has developed into the fearsome and tyrannical Reverend Mother, who exercises a tight control over household affairs. The domestic domain was the realm ordained for the middle-class wife, where she worked for the good of the nation by educating her children well and managing a clean, hygienic and efficient household. Naseem takes full possession of this realm and tries to use the enabling elements in the socially sanctioned new woman’s role to stake out a space for herself. However, her appropriation of the domestic realm is a distortion of the nationalist agenda as she uses this space to grow into a powerful, ruthless matriarch instead of the long-suffering, self-sacrificing good Indian wife which nationalist discourse envisaged. The nation’s progress is of no concern to her and she resents Aadam’s nationalist activities.

The overwhelming support of women for the national movement is often credited to Mahatma Gandhi’s legitimation of their neglect of their domestic duties for the good of the nation and his encouragement of their engagement in activities such as the picketing of foreign cloth shops and liquor stores. Gandhi idealized Indian women’s capacity for self-sacrifice which he urged the nation’s men to emulate. While feminist historians are critical of the space Gandhi opened up for women because it affirmed the essentialist nationalist image of woman and her predominantly domestic role, it is nevertheless acknowledged that he enabled women’s unprecedented involvement in the nationalist movement. In *Midnight’s Children* the Gandhian national movement is not given the pre-eminent role it has in nationalist historiography, and the major battles are displaced from the political to the domestic sphere, which can be read as an affirmation of Chatterjee’s elevation of the inner, feminine sphere of the home as the place where Indian nationalism creatively imagined the parameters of the community of the nation. According to the nationalist script, however, this was not meant to be such a conflict-ridden process. *Midnight’s Children* describes two major contests in the Aziz household: the “war of starvation” and the “war of silence”. Both conflicts have ironic Gandhian overtones as he used hunger-strikes and regularly purified himself by means of vows of silence. Both strategies are appropriated by the Aziz couple in their struggle to define the parameters of their family community. The “war of starvation” is waged over the children’s religious education, to which Aadam objects because it “was teaching them to hate” (pp. 42–3). Reverend Mother is unwilling to appreciate the need for religious tolerance for the good of the secular nation and starves her husband almost to death, refusing to fulfil her female nurturing role; he, equally stubbornly, refuses to eat outside the home. Naseem pits her traditions against Aadam’s modernity.
This does not, however, contradict the nationalist script for middle-class wives as they are ordained with the role of guardian of religion and tradition, factors which epitomised India’s superiority towards the West. The good Indian wife is, however, not supposed to have recourse to violent measures for the preservation of Indian spirituality, as Naseem does, since they seem to exceed her role as guardian of Indian culture.

In stark contrast to Naseem, Rushdie created with Mumtaz/Amina a woman who strives desperately hard to be the quintessential dutiful wife but nevertheless falls short of the expectations associated with that role. After her divorce from Nadir Khan, Mumtaz marries Ahmed Sinai, who renames her Amina as if to cleanse her from her former marriage and reclaim her as virgin territory for himself. The desirability of their loveless marriage and Amina’s one-sided marital mission is persistently questioned:

Why had she married him? – For solace, for children. [...] in my mother’s opinion, a husband deserved unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love. [...] And so, bringing her gift of assiduity to bear, she began to train herself to love him. (p. 68)

Midnight’s Children depicts it as almost inevitable that Amina’s desire to follow the nationalist script for dutiful wives transforms her nature and makes her resemble her mother as she embraces essential Indianness by means of clinging to tradition. This process begins when the Sinais move to Methwold’s estate. In contrast to Ahmed, Amina is “naturally” not so easily taken in by Methwold because she fulfils the Indian woman’s role as the natural repository of culture which is supposed to make her resistant to the mimicry of the West. According to the division of spheres, Indian men go on the mission of mimicking western ways in the knowledge that their women will look after the culture and keep their children Indianized. In order to remain unaffected by “the subtle magic of Methwold’s Estate”, Amina has to pay the price of becoming more like her mother (p. 100). The tradition Amina holds on to, however, is the dubious one of believing in the seer Ramram Seth’s prophecy:

the supernatural conceits of Naseem Aziz had begun to influence her thoughts and behaviour [...]. “Even if we’re sitting in the middle of all this English garbage,” my mother was beginning to think, “this is still India, and people like Ramram Seth know what they know.” In this way the scepticism of her beloved father was replaced by the credulity of my grandmother. (p. 100)

This could be an example of Amina acting in accordance with the nationalist precepts of defending superior Indian spirituality against the encroachments of western decadent modernity into the sacredness
of the Indian home, if it were not for her championing of Indian superstition, against which nationalist discourse clearly defined the newly reformed Indian traditions. Following the nation’s script is portrayed as a tricky business.

Amina’s desire to live up to the image of the model wife is ultimately portrayed as grinding her down and breaking her spirit. She cannot help but transgress the norms of the national role of the middle-class wife. Amina’s defining epithet is her guilt: “[l]ooking back at her now, it seems to me that a fog of guilt had begun to form around her head” (p. 158). The root of her all-consuming guilt is located in her affair with Nadir Khan, in which for the first time she subordinates her family’s interests to her own happiness. Saleem succeeds in breaking up Amina’s relationship with Nadir, but at a high cost since from then on she is only a shadow of her former self. When Amina leaves Ahmed temporarily because his behaviour becomes intolerable, she declines further as she perceives herself as having no function in life without a husband: “[t]he Brass Monkey and I were helpless observers, in those days, of my wilting mother. [...] Deprived of two husbands, she was also deprived (in her own eyes) of meaning” (p. 287).

Midnight’s Children portrays two contrasting strategies of responding to the nationalist image of the model Indian wife. Amina is the only female character who is portrayed as persistently trying to follow the nationalist script for middle-class women and in doing so provides a contrast to the other less scrupulous women, who are, however, far more resilient than she is. Consequently Midnight’s Children depicts as rather undesirable any attempt by women to correspond to an image in which nationalist concerns are inextricably interwoven with patriarchal interests. Of all the female characters in the pre-Independence part of the novel, it is Naseem who dominates this era. Her characteristic feature is her unwillingness to live up to the nationalist script for Indian women, as she has no inclination for sacrificing herself for the nation and her family. Her fearsome status grows after Independence, as does that of most women in Midnight’s Children. From more or less willing partners in the national project, they appear transformed after Independence as they increasingly display monstrous traits.

The Nation at the Mercy of Its Monstrous Women

With Independence, the nation’s organized middle-class women expected the independent state to fulfil its promises of equality. However, when women’s actual situation was investigated by a committee appointed by the government in the early 1970s, its conclusions published in 1974, the verdict was very negative. Towards Equality: Report of the Committee
on the Status of Women in India demonstrated that women’s status “had not improved but had, in fact, declined since Independence”. Another commentator noted that the “report was an eye-opener, its detailed analyses [a powerful and effective] indictment of the nation’s priorities in its first quarter century”. Whereas much feminist research concentrates on disclosing women’s disadvantaged position, Midnight’s Children takes a very different path. Saleem does not perceive women as victimized but portrays himself as victimized by women. Since Saleem depicts his fate as “handcuffed” to that of the nation, it is not surprising that his perceived victimization by women results in their portrayal as a national menace.

There is a strong tendency in Midnight’s Children to portray its female characters as endowed with a form of monstrosity which is in general directed against men and which leaves them either dead or emasculated. Rushdie develops the dark underside of the nationalist construct of women which seeks to mobilize women’s strength, while trying to contain its threatening potential lest it undermine patriarchal structures. In Midnight’s Children the containment of the nation’s women becomes precarious in independent India. Naseem, for example, was difficult to contain in pre-Independence India, but after the event she becomes unmanageable. She inverts the nationalist ideal of a good wife as her main victim is her husband Aadam Aziz. She is described as vampire-like, sucking out the life of her hapless husband, as her “strength of will seemed to increase as Aziz was ground down by age” (p. 111). The images associated with her float freely between various monstrous creatures such as witch, vampire and demon:

as he declined, Reverend Mother grew larger and stronger; she […] now appeared to thrive on his weakness, as though their marriage had been one of those mythical unions in which succubi appear to men as innocent damsels, and, after luring them into the matrimonial bed, regain their true, awful aspect and begin to swallow their souls. (p. 274)

Monstrosity and female power seem to go hand in hand since women in Midnight’s Children cannot be portrayed as powerful without at the same time carrying the potential for the monstrous.

Reverend Mother’s husband-crushing potential is echoed by Durga, the washerwoman, who is the target of some of Saleem’s most vehement misogynist invective. Durga is a character only introduced in the final chapter but she does not appear unfamiliar because she is the epitome and culmination of the monstrous women who seem to dominate the nation and reduce men to shadows of their former selves. Durga stands for the emasculation of the failed saviour, Picture Singh. Saleem deeply resents Picture Singh’s infatuation with Durga, even though he acknowledges
her awe-inspiring qualities: “[s]he was a woman whose biceps bulged; whose preternatural breasts unleashed a torrent of milk capable of nourishing regiments; and who, it was rumoured darkly (although I suspect the rumour of being started by myself) had two wombs” (p. 445). Women like Durga and Naseem are portrayed by Saleem as destructive of progressive change in India as they ruin men’s capacity to fulfil the promises of the independent nation.

Patriarchal anxiety about women’s power over men has made the image of the widow a very precarious one. Images of Indian widows, specifically high-caste Hindu widows, emphasize their potential for suffering and self-sacrifice as they are supposed to spend the rest of their lives in selfless service for others. However, there are also more sinister connotations of widowhood, as widows are perceived to have fallen short of properly caring for their husbands, since otherwise they would be still alive. So the ascetic lives widows are supposed to lead can also be understood as a punishment for failing to live up to the image of a good wife. Midnight’s Children refers to such fears connected to widows as its female characters are endowed with dangerous powers, be it as wives who are capable of deciding whether their husbands live or die, or as widows who have proven their destructive potential by having already one corpse to account for, namely that of their husband.

Yet the novel does not so much insist that women are monstrous but that they appear monstrous to Saleem. The majority of Midnight’s Children’s female characters are undoubtedly resourceful, resilient and at times ruthless but the attempt to portray them as monstrous, men-harming creatures clearly belongs to Saleem’s agenda. The novel often lays bare the absurdity of Saleem’s views on women and exposes Saleem’s growing hysteria in his increasingly grotesque perception of the women who surround him. Lurking underneath Saleem’s obsessive concern about women’s transgressions are the fearful consequences of female sexuality and power let loose and wreaking havoc. Ashis Nandy’s analysis of Indian cultural psychology can be read as suggesting that Saleem has a representative status. Nandy locates the origin of the concern about woman’s destructive potential, which Saleem obviously displays, in the Indian family structure, which provides the male child with a perspective of utter dependence on a fickle mother:

simultaneously Indian society inculcates in women self-doubt, and in men a certain ambivalence toward womanhood. This ambivalence is very different from the ambivalence which the Western man feels toward woman […]. In Indian society, except for small sectors in which the martial values predominate, the man’s fear is not that he will lapse into womanliness and thus lose his masculinity and potency. In fact, potency in India is not generally something men strive for, protect or protest in
the external world. The masculine fear here is that a man may fall foul
of the cosmic feminine principle, that woman will betray, aggress, pollute,
or at least fail to protect.23

Yet, somewhat contradictorily, he states that the “fantasy of a castrating,
phallic woman is also always round the corner in the Indian’s inner
world”.24 Even though his interpretations and sweeping generalizations
do not go unquestioned by feminists, they fit Saleem’s paranoia, which
frequently spills over into misogynist remarks and characterizations. It
is remarkable how rarely Saleem feels threatened by men in comparison
to the omnipresent threat women appear to constitute. Saleem seems to
be an ideal exemplar of Nandy’s hypotheses since he admits that women
scare him. He ponders the role of women in his life and portrays them
as having a power which exceeds that of men, both in their nurturing
function and in their potential for destruction:

(Women have always been the ones to change my life: Mary Pereira, Evie
Burns, Jamila Singer, Parvati-the-witch must answer for who I am; and
the Widow, who I’m keeping for the end; and after the end, Padma, my
goddess of dung. Women have fixed me all right, but perhaps they were
never central – perhaps the place which they should have filled, the hole in
the centre of me which was my inheritance from my grandfather Aadam
Aziz, was occupied for too long by my voices. Or perhaps – one must
consider all possibilities – they always made me a little afraid). (p. 192)

Women are referred to as almost a species in their own right by Saleem
as he enumerates the entire female cast in order to demonstrate that
“[f]or sixty-three years, before and after midnight, women have done their
best; and also, I’m bound to say, their worst” (p. 404). This enumeration
conjures up an unmanageable and overwhelming excess: “[w]omen
and women and women” (p. 405). Saleem significantly refrains from
listing the influence of men on his life, who, at least in the political sphere,
carry far more weight.

In order to justify his fear of women, Saleem invokes the divine
symbol of women’s power, Shakti. Some feminists have used this symbol
of powerful female sexuality as a source of inspiration and strength.
Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi perceive Shakti cults as precursors of an
indigenous Indian women’s movement:

The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti – the female
power principle – was recognised thousands of years ago. In this form the
women’s movement represents, not merely an oppositional force fuelled
by anger, a rather negative reaction to oppression, but the development
of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men
and women alike.25
The way that Saleem uses the symbol of Shakti, however, does not suggest itself as an inspiration for men, but rather as a reason for men’s need to be wary of women’s power. Saleem effaces women’s individuality by imagining them as a powerful cosmic force which makes their portrayal as a collective entity with both mothering and monstrous qualities possible:

How are we to understand my too-many women? [...] as the dynamic aspect of maya, as cosmic energy, which is represented as the female organ?

Maya, in its dynamic aspect, is called Shakti; perhaps it is no accident that, in the Hindu pantheon, the active power of a deity is contained within his queen! Maya-Shakti mothers, but also “muffles consciousness in its dream-web”. Too-many-women: are they all aspects of Devi, the goddess – who is Shakti, who slew the buffalo-demon, who defeated the ogre Mahisha, who is Kali Durga Chandi Chamunda Uma Sati Parvati ... and who, when active, is coloured red?

“I don’t know about that,” Padma brings me down to earth, “They are just women, that’s all”. (p. 406)

It is significant that Padma counteracts Saleem’s homogenization of women as an abstract principle, which merges them into a fearsome and not quite human entity. Nandy draws attention to the disabling effects of the concept of Shakti and mother-goddess worship for women: “[u]nlike in the West, where the concept of a patriarchal god has often legitimized male dominance, in India divine matriarchy burdened women with the task of coping with shared fantasies of womanly responsibility for failures of nature and nurture”.26 The concept of Shakti, however, does not sit easily with the nationalist image of woman as a repository of culture, since the power associated with Shakti is far in excess of what is required of women in order to stand in for the authentic nation. Feminists try to reclaim this symbol of power and creatively use it as an enabling concept but in Midnight’s Children the emphasis is on how men use this symbol to legitimize the need to constrain women and their role in the nation.

Feminism aims at finding a way out of patriarchal mechanisms and stresses the potential for change by laying bare the strategies that are used in order to keep patriarchal structures in place. Midnight’s Children displays similar concerns but in an ambivalent and implicit way. One of the purposes of Saleem’s monstrosity-bestowing description of Indian women is criticism of those strategies which make women appear monstrous in the first place, whenever they violate the essentialist image of feminine nature and demeanour. The text emphasizes Saleem’s discrepancy in condemning deeds according to whether they are committed by women or men. While the novel clearly shows sympathy for its strong and resilient...
women, they remain largely commented on by Saleem and rarely speak for themselves. For example, Saleem tries to reduce Padma’s role to that of a mute and appreciative audience. Whenever she gets a word in, however, she tends to contradict him, as she does when she resists Saleem’s efforts to portray women as an abstract cosmic principle. Her objection is directed at the illusory empowering of women by investing them with divine attributes and responsibilities: “‘They are just women, that’s all’” (p. 406). The nationalist ideal of womanhood is increasingly exposed as sustaining patriarchal structures rather than serving the nation in _Midnight’s Children_. The Nehruvian nation may stress its inclusiveness and equality and thereby disavow its patriarchal basis, but Saleem’s depiction of women belies this claim of equality. _Midnight’s Children_’s criticism is directed at the nation, which is not prepared to let its women shape it in an equal way but brands every transgression of the restrictive nationalist ideal of womanhood as monstrous.

**The Wicked Witch of the East**

Whereas _Midnight’s Children_ uses the theme of female monstrosity to criticize the patriarchal nation, which ostracizes women who fall foul of the nationalist ideal of good wives and mothers, there is another counteracting trajectory of the monstrosity theme in the text which also uses misogynist stereotypes strategically, but for almost opposing ends. The target of this misogynist trajectory is Indira Gandhi and her dictatorial Emergency rule (1975–77). To accuse her of trying to destroy her father Nehru’s idea of India in the form of the midnight’s children’s sterilization was apparently not sufficient for Rushdie. _Midnight’s Children_ aims at demonizing Indira Gandhi and pursues a remarkably elaborate and persistent strategy in order to achieve this. Both the derogatory connotations of widowhood and witchcraft are combined to create the phantasmagorical image of the witch-like Widow who haunts the novel but who is only disclosed at the very end as identical with Indira Gandhi.

The consistently strategic use of misogynist imagery in _Midnight’s Children_ is often not perceived as such but interpreted as Rushdie’s internalization of misogynist stereotypes. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan criticizes Rushdie’s emphatic use of the widow image, which she considers as unwittingly playing into the hands of misogynist stereotypes towards (Hindu) widows:

> The powerful negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male, are associated with a (widowed) Prime Minister whose defining act is the massive sterilization programme of the Emergency. […] But the hostility in [Rushdie’s] foregrounding of her
widowhood must remain inexplicable except as a culturally conditioned misogyny.27

Rushdie’s strategy in reducing Indira Gandhi to her widowhood might be effective because he tapped popular prejudice about Indira’s widowhood, a fact which is apparently unmentionable in “official” biographies, which usually shy away from analysing the problem of Indira Gandhi’s gender by dividing her into a private gendered self and a neutral political self.28

It is undoubtedly true that Indira Gandhi’s demonization in *Midnight’s Children* would not have been so successful if Rushdie had not drawn on the powerful stereotype of the widow, but it is the explicit combination of the images of the widow and the witch which makes this vilification of Indira Gandhi so potent in the text. Widowhood can only be referred to, whereas a witch can be painted in the most lurid colours and associated with nightmarish visions, which is exactly what Rushdie does in *Midnight’s Children*. A sense of an all-pervasive presence of the witch is created in the novel by branding almost all female character as witches. It is remarkable how women are persistently referred to as witches in *Midnight’s Children* with all the manifold connotations this term evokes. Frequently the word “witch” is used as a standard misogynist term with offensive connotations but real witches are also mentioned as members of the midnight’s children, with Parvati-the-Witch as the most prominent. There is no tightly-knit discourse about witches in *Midnight’s Children*, but they function as a major leitmotif which underscores the ominous aura of women in the novel. From Naseem’s witch-like connotations, with her moles “like witchnipples” (p. 115), to the “long series of women who have bewitched and finally undone me good and proper” (p. 241), almost all the female characters are associated with the witch leitmotif, with a few exceptions such as Amina and Padma. This witch leitmotif is strategically constructed in order that it can climax in revealing Indira Gandhi as the wickedest witch of all.

Belief in witches in India is often referred to as a marginal tribal or rural phenomenon, attributed to the superstitions of backward people which will eventually be obliterated by progress and literacy. However, in *Midnight’s Children* the image of the witch is at the heart of the narrative and a defining characteristic of women. Feminist scholars have also noted that the image of the witch is readily applied to women, especially widows:

Chief among […] sinister/destructive images are those of the widow and the witch. […] Although women in general are regarded as capable of becoming witches, witch suspects are typically either those who are arid (*baanjh*) or those who are widowed at a young age. […] Despite the discrepancy between the alleged harm potential of the two types
Belief in witchcraft appears to be widespread, but also considerably varied in India. Carstairs points out the remarkable similarities of the general characteristics attributed to witch suspects in Europe and India: “[i]n both cases witches are perceived as a group apart […] who like to congregate at midnight in cemeteries or cremation-grounds, riding naked on the backs of wolves (in Europe) or hyenas (in Rajasthan).” It is children who are most vulnerable to witches, as reflected in Saleem’s nightmare in *Midnight’s Children*, where the black and green witch harms young children.

Ajay Skaria argues that what characterizes a witch’s violence is the element of gratuitousness which makes it unpredictable and therefore particularly dangerous. In his study of witchcraft beliefs in nineteenth-century western India he finds that in general witches are thought of as attacking “for some reason”, which would make their aggression rational, reciprocal and manageable. But it is the aspect of a witch’s gratuitous violence, which implies that theoretically anybody could be a witch’s victim at any time, which accounts for the excessive brutality of the treatment of witches. Tests which are conducted to prove a woman’s guilt or innocence and procedures which are aimed at provoking her confession and a promise to desist from further using her witchcraft against a specific victim, are often so cruel that they kill the suspected witch even though that is not the aim because a dead witch might cause even more harm.

The notion of gratuitous violence corresponds with the way the witch-like Widow is portrayed in *Midnight’s Children*. The figure of the Widow is not explicitly identified with Indira Gandhi in the novel until the end but seems to be a character in her own right. The Widow and the “climax in a widows’ hostel” is frequently referred to and vaguely associated with a “clear proof of meaning”, which builds up suspense and underscores her centrality despite the fact that she has only one major scene in the novel (p. 181). A threatening, mysterious aura is gradually constructed around the figure of the Widow, which has its climax in the middle part of the novel in Saleem’s nightmare. In the dream the term “witch” is never explicitly mentioned in connection with the Widow, but she has undeniable witch-like features. The tone is hypnotic and breathless and the atmosphere hallucinatory, as the scene is saturated with the colours “green and black” (p. 207). The Widow’s violence towards the defenceless children is bound to appear gratuitous and inexplicable. She mishandles children, tearing them apart and rolling them into little balls, though it is not suggested that she devours them. In Saleem’s fevered dream, he
is the helpless victim of the Widow’s excessive, apparently irrational violence, which gives her a pleasure that cannot be accounted for.

The image of the witch, however, is not entirely bereft of positive connotations and a witch’s potential power possesses partially enabling facets. Skaria argues that the perception of women as witches is “simultaneously an acknowledgement of their power and a reflection on the fundamental illegitimacy of that power”. But it is precisely this perceived power which may lead some women to proclaim themselves as witches. By drawing on the powerful image of the witch they can enjoy “considerable social status […] fear and respect” and procure resources which are out of reach from ordinary women from those who try to placate them. An entire village can benefit from the protection a witch can provide. So the image of the witch does not completely lack enabling aspects for women but that does not change the fact that the power derived from the image of the witch is seen as illegitimate by society. When Indira Gandhi is identified as a witch by way of the Widow figure this can imply that her power as head of government is also illegitimate, and this putative illegitimacy is inextricably linked to her being a woman; only women can be witches.

The fact that Rushdie modelled the Widow on the character of the Wicked Witch of the West in the Hollywood film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) adds further layers to the image of the witch-like Widow in *Midnight’s Children*. In his essay on the film Rushdie mentions that Saleem’s “nightmare of Indira Gandhi is fused with the equally nightmarish figure of Margaret Hamilton [the actress playing the Wicked Witch of the West]: a coming-together of the Wicked Witches of the East and of the West”. Rushdie confesses to have had “a sneaking regard for the Wicked Witch, and, some might say, a secret sympathy for all persons of her witchy disposition which has remained with me ever since”. He clearly sides with the Wicked Witch against the Good Witch Glenda:

frilly pink versus slimline black. No contest. […] just as feminism has sought to rehabilitate pejorative old words such as hag, crone, witch, so the Wicked Witch of the West could be said to represent the more positive of the two images of powerful womanhood on offer here.

However, the wickedness of the film’s “evil” witch is so delightful because it is reassuringly familiar and containable. The very charm of Hollywood witches is the result of the domestication of their wickedness in Europe in the eighteenth century:

Witch personae could thus blossom as comic grotesques at the very time when real witches were disappearing from the daily fears of the educated. In due course the connotations of witchiness would also change: the stereotypical village hag would be superseded by the *femme fatale* and
the vamp [...]. Meanwhile the shawl-clad crone, with her conical black hat, living in a cottage with her cat, and stirring a cauldron, lived on in Romantic fairy-tales, children’s fiction and, in the twentieth century, in Disney.40

The power of the domesticated witch is hardly enabling for women but it is at the same time stripped of most of its misogynist potential too. By referring to the image of the domesticated Hollywood witch, *Midnight’s Children* signals its own self-consciously ambivalent use of the image of the witch.

The closer Indira Gandhi comes to being identified as the Widow, the more obvious the deliberate misogyny of the construct of the Widow and the way it is used to condemn Indira Gandhi and the Emergency becomes. As with the theme of female monstrosity, in which women’s alleged monstrosity is disclosed as not being inherent in the female characters, but as a patriarchal strategy to discredit their attempt to lead a more self-determined life, so a foregrounding of the misogynist constructedness of the witch-like Widow image similarly reveals the patriarchal anxieties at work here. But the novel also keeps promising a resolution for the Widow-Witch image which will ultimately justify its misogyny. In the last third of the novel, the “unavoidable Widow” (p. 346) is mentioned in every chapter but her secret identity is not yet furnished. Only after the declaration of the Emergency are the Widow and Indira Gandhi explicitly identified as the same person. Whereas they had occupied nearly autonomous zones in *Midnight’s Children* earlier, once the two strands are collapsed Indira Gandhi is referred to almost exclusively as the Widow.

As with the seemingly monstrous female characters, the horrifying potential of the figure of the witch-like Widow loses part of its persuasiveness by being so closely associated with the personal agenda of Saleem, who appears willing to use any means – fair or foul – to discredit his main adversary. By the time he accuses Indira Gandhi of harbouring the desire to become the “Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect”, his credibility has suffered considerably, especially as it has been Saleem himself who has betrayed the other midnight’s children to the Widow’s helpers:

But what I learned from the Widow’s Hand is that those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities; and that, that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hated feared destroyed by the Widow, who was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods, a multi-limbed divinity with a centre-parting and schizophrenic hair ... And that was how I learned my meaning.
in the crumbling palace of the bruise-breasted women. [...] We were are shall be the gods you never had. (p. 438)

Since Saleem directly competes with Indira Gandhi in personifying the nation, and goes so far as to picture himself in a divine light, his invalidation of her ambitions must at the same time question his own.

By seemingly laying bare its strategy of using misogynist imagery in order to undermine Indira Gandhi’s legitimacy as political leader, the novel partly disavows this strategy and even criticizes it. At the same time, however, the text relies on the functioning of this allegedly disavowed strategy. It is still the novel’s aim to discredit Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in a way that will make a deep impression. So, despite various qualifications of the emphatic misogyny of the main image for Indira Gandhi, namely the nightmarish Widow-Witch, this image is nevertheless meant to perform its function in signalling the Emergency’s illegitimacy. While the text questions the strategic use of misogynist imagery, it relies on the power of these images to serve their purpose. This is underscored by the eventual return of *Midnight’s Children* to the image of the Widow-Witch, when Saleem and the other midnight’s children are tortured and their magic annihilated, as the woman in charge of this procedure is associated with the black and green Widow of Saleem’s nightmare. Unlike female monstrosity, which is emphatically portrayed as being the expression of Saleem’s patriarchal anxiety, the horror of the Widow-Witch has its correspondence in the actual brutality and totalitarian measures during the Emergency and cannot be discounted as merely existing in Saleem’s imagination.

This article has attempted to unravel the ambivalent characterizations of women in *Midnight’s Children* and to identify two main trajectories of the theme of female monstrosity, one aimed at criticizing the nation’s unwillingness to grant women an equal status and an equal say in constituting the nation, and the other designed to demonize Indira Gandhi. Eventually, the latter strategy is given a clearer emphasis in the text and the former concern often appears subordinated to the dominant aim of condemning Indira Gandhi’s politics and questioning her legitimacy. Thus, apparently paradoxically, the nation is implicitly criticized for the status it bestows on its women, while the same “misogynist” strategies which point to the nation’s discriminatory practices are used to blame Indira Gandhi for its decline because of her dictatorial Emergency regime.

I have used the findings of Indian feminist historiography to explore *Midnight’s Children’s* characterizations of female figures in the historical context in which they are situated. This approach enabled me to do justice to the complexity of the novel’s portrayal of women. Feminist historiography’s analysis of imperialist and nationalist discourses on women
has added new dimensions to our understanding of how these discourses and the models of women they constructed have influenced actual women. *Midnight's Children* reflects the prevalence and longevity of nationalist images of ideal womanhood, whereas the novel’s portrayal of women suggests that these images can only be made to fit by doing violence to women. Even the strong and resilient female characters are scarred by the limited ways of imagining a life for women and the way transgressors are branded as monsters and witches. However, this strategic use of misogynist elements in order to reveal the way gendered stereotypes are employed to reinforce patriarchal structures can, paradoxically, appear to confirm rather than undermine those stereotypes since they may be perceived as too naturalized to jar.

**NOTES**

1. See, for example, Charu Verma, “Padma’s Tragedy: A Feminist Deconstruction of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*”, *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, ed. Sushila Singh, New Delhi: Prestige, 1991, p. 154, who notices “several disturbing sexist biases both in Rushdie and his narrator-protagonist”.


3. For a more detailed study of Rushdie’s engagement with historiographical discourses, see my *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography: Writing the Nation Into Being*, Palgrave, forthcoming.


5. *ibid.*


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17 The Nation and Its Fragments, p. 6.
18 ibid., pp. 143–4.
23 ibid., p. 37.
24 ibid., p. 42.
26 At the Edge of Psychology, p. 24.
28 ibid., p. 115.
33 ibid., 120–1.
34 ibid., 125.
35 ibid., 132.
36 ibid., 134–5.
38 ibid., p. 17.