

READING *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AND *SONG OF LAWINO* & *SONG OF OCOL* AS WORKS OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

GECEYARISI ÇOCUKLARI VE LAWINO'NUN & OCOL'UN ŞARKISI ESERLERİNİN POSTKOLONYAL TEORİ ÇALIŞMASI OLARAK İNCELENMESİ

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonialism is basically a period of time after colonialism and postcolonial literature addresses the problems of decolonization. It is a term used to talk about writers or their works that deal with the issues of decolonization, political or social independence of the colonized people or countries. In consideration of postcolonialism this paper explores the issue of postcolonialism examining *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol* (1956) by Okot p'Bitek and *Midnight's Children* (1980) by Salman Rushdie. Both writers examine the issue of postcolonialism and discuss it by creating their own histories. In the books we trace the fragmented stories of the characters. While Rushdie provides individualized history of India in the eyes of Saleem, Okot p'Bitek creates the character of Lawino who represents the African nation.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, Okot p'Bitek, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Literature, Africa, India, history.

ÖZ

Postkolonyalizm temel olarak kolonyalizm sonrası zamanı ifade etmek için kullanılan bir terimdir. Postkolonyal edebiyat ise Avrupa sömürgelerinin bağımsızlaşma sürecinin sorunlarına işaret eden; sömürülen ülkelerin ve insanların sosyal ve politik bağımsızlıklarını dile getiren yapıtları veya bu yapıtların yazarlarını kapsayan edebiyattır. Bu bildiri postkolonyalizm kavramı ışığında Salman Rushdie'nin *Geceyarısı Çocukları* ve Okot p'Bitek'in *Lawino'nun Şarkısı & Ocol'un Şarkısı* eserlerini irdelemektedir. Her iki yazar da eserinde kendi hikayelerini anlatarak postkolonyalizmi inceler. Okuyucu eserlerde karakterlerin parçalanmış öykülerinin izini sürer. Rushdie ana karakter Saleem'in

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gözünden Hindistan'ın tarihini ortaya koyarken, Okot p'Bitek ise Afrika ulusunu simgeleyen Lawino karakteriyle okuyucunun karşısına çıkar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Salman Rushdie, Okot p'Bitek, Kolonyalizm, Postkolonyalizm, Postkolonyal Edebiyat, Afrika, Hindistan, tarih.

Postmodernism and Postcolonialism are two theoretical approaches that are jointly integrated in the world of literature. The interplay of postmodernism and postcolonialism is especially reflected in Indian literature. Wattenbarger in her thesis, asserts that "postcolonialism cannot be set aside as a tool for understanding Indian novels. Together, postcolonialism and postmodernism can provide clarity as to the complete character of contemporary Indian literature in English – particularly in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*."²

Based on Gandhi's statement "postmodernism opens the door to postcolonialism,"³ it will be pertinent to define postmodernism. "Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language. About how language restricts, closes down, insists that it stands for something. Postmodernism is about how 'we' are defined within that language, and within specific historical, social, cultural matrices. It's about race, class, gender, erotic identity and practice, nationality, age, ethnicity. It's about difference. [...] Postmodernism is about history. But not the kind of 'History' that lets us think we can know the past. History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold." says Brenda Marshall in her book titled *Teaching Postmodernism: Fiction and Theory*. According to Marshall we are speaking now of "histories" instead of "History". There are no longer absolute and unquestionable truths or facts. It is the voice of postmodernist movement.⁴

As we talk about "histories" rather than "History", history lacks objectivity and thus embraces subjectivity. So many versions of historical truth and many realities may be accepted.⁵ According to Sabrina Haussumani, "[h]istory, it turns out, depends a great deal on who remembers it, how it is retold, and upon the teller's political/personal stake in it."⁶

² Wattenbarger, M.; *Reading Postcolonialism and Postmodernism in Contemporary Indian Literature*, Bachelor's Diploma Thesis, Ohio Dominican University, 2012, p. 30.

³ Gandhi, L.; *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998, p. 30.

⁴ Marshall, B.; *Teaching Postmodernism: Fiction and Theory*, Routledge, USA 1992, p. 4.

⁵ Santos, J.; "Historical Truth in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: A Question of Perspective", Arizona State University 2003, p. 6.

⁶ Haussumani, S.; *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works*, Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, USA 2002, p. 36.

Salman Rushdie himself indicates that “History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. [...] The reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believe, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to ‘read’ the world.”⁷ Rushdie uses fiction and facts to emphasize the ambiguous nature of history. Here he points out each person reads and narrates his/her own world and history in different ways. From this perspective Jennifer Santos notes that “the truth-value of an individual’s perception of history retains a validity independent of the recorded ‘facts’ of history.”⁸

The above discussion is my point of departure which I would like to develop in relation to “Postcolonialism”. This study investigates the historical reflections of the two historical works in the light of the Postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism is a period that comes after the end of Colonialism. The term “Postcolonialism” refers to the ways in which culture, race, ethnicity are represented in modern era just after the colonized countries gained their independence. Postcolonialism is both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled ‘Third World’ culture and how Third World countries have responded and resisted the attacking of European nations. “Postcolonial theory formulates its critique around the social histories, cultural differences and political discrimination that are practiced and normalized by colonial and imperial machineries.”⁹ It examines the origins, effects and political, cultural, and social results of Europe colonization of different cultures and regions of the world through the study of many literary texts. In this sense, postcolonial literature is also a term used to talk about writers or their works that deal with the issues of de-colonization, political or social independence of the colonized people or countries.

Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are the most recognized names in the field of postcolonial theory. With his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said is regarded as the father of postcolonialism. In this theoretical work, Said analyses how European nations initiated colonialism.

In consideration of “Postcolonialism” this paper endeavors to highlight the various historical details mentioned in the two novels, *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol* by Okot p’Bitek and *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie. Both are postmodernist and postcolonial

⁷ Rushdie, S.; *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta Books, London 1991, p. 25.

⁸ Santos, J.; *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁹ Rukundwa, Lazare S; , Andries G van; “The Formation of Postcolonial Theory”. *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*; Vol 63, No 3 (2007), p. 1174.

works written in the 1950s. In these books, history is told by the characters Salem, Lawino and Ocol. We trace the histories of these characters throughout the works.

Both writers are from different countries. Salman Rushdie is an Indian author and Okot p'Bitek is from Africa. Both tell their own history. Okot's narrative poem raises controversial issues which depict the sharp realities of Uganda after the withdrawing of colonial powers. A portrait of colonizing powers' struggle to exploit a country is drawn in this poem sharply and shockingly. They set people against themselves, divide and exploit the target. This is how colonialism goes. The manipulation is well seen in the character of Ocol.¹⁰ Salman Rushdie's novel "evokes the idea of blackness and therefore the question of negritude."¹¹

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Generally, Salman Rushdie examines post-colonial countries, depicting the problems of emigration, cultural oppression and self-determination in his novels. His works are ranked among the post-colonial literatures blending post-structuralism and post-modernism. Rushdie creates a new history based on historical facts – he sets his main character against 'a real historical backdrop' viewing history through the eyes of his characters.¹²

Rushdie's most celebrated novel *Midnight's Children* is often associated with several categories of literary fiction, including magical realism, postcolonial fiction, and postmodern literature. As the novel combines the features of magic realism with historical facts, it could be read as not only fantasy but a "history book".

The novel is set in the 20th century India and reveals the historical and political issues. History is a giant machine that affects the whole characters in the novel. "The history in *Midnight's Children* is seen through the eyes of an individual: it is not the dominant, official 'History' but a history that is personalized and therefore given life, significance, and meaning."¹³ In the novel the protagonist Saleem Sinai re-imagines his own history to comprise a new reality from his fragments of memory. So the novel "is out to show that history does have meaning; in fact, history has many meanings. For Rushdie, history is individual, and history's meaning is determined by the present. The message is, to a great

¹⁰ www.writework.com

¹¹ Mitra, R. (ed.); *Salman Rusdie's Midnight's Children*, "Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children': History and Fiction as Co-ordinates in Search for Meaning", Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, India 2006, p. 738.

¹² Polcarova, D.; *Historical and Political Issues of India as Reflected in Rushdie's Midnight's Children*, Bachelor's Diploma Thesis, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts 2008, p. 16.

¹³ Santos, J.; *Ibid*, p. 3.

extent, that history is not logical, it is not scientific or even objective but it still can have meaning.”¹⁴

Midnight’s Children is a literary response to a series of real life situations that have been cleverly fictionalized through allusions, disguised as well as direct, to the country’s recent as well as not so recent past. “The novel has an epic sweep covering about six decades in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Book One covers the time from the Jallianwala Bagh incident in April, 1919, to the birth of the protagonist, Saleem, on August 15, 1947; Book Two extends up to the end of the Indo-Pakistan war in September, 1965, and Book Three envelopes the period up to the end of the Emergency in March, 1977, and includes the Bangladesh war, as well.”¹⁵

Written after India gained its independence, this novel takes an important place in Indian literature. The political upheaval and constant threat of violence that marked the independence of India form the backdrop for the novel. Like Rushdie himself, Saleem, the narrator of Midnight’s Children, is born on the eve of independence, and the events of his life closely parallel events in the development of both India and Pakistan. In Rushdie’s novel the development of India as an independent and therefore ‘new’ country is compared to the development of a new-born baby, Saleem Sinai. The reader is convinced that what happens to India is heavily influenced by unfortunate accidents that happened to Saleem and therefore that Saleem has a major impact on India’s development. But one must admit that not only Saleem changes the India’s direction of development, but also his family and close friends have a significant impact on India.¹⁶

It is stated that Midnight’s Children’s importance and significance as a postcolonial text arises from the novel’s ability to intertwine three major themes: the creation and telling of history, the creation and telling of a nation’s and an individual’s identity, and the creation and telling of stories. This novel expresses the themes of the creation and re-telling of history, identity, and stories. By doing so, it introduces the problems of postcolonial identity through the forms of hybridity.¹⁷

There are various and different characters in the novel each of whom tells his/her own history. Saleem is the most significant of all these characters. With the character of Saleem Sinai, Rushdie combines India’s narrative into his personal narrative.¹⁸ In the novel history is given meaning through the voices of these diverse characters and their individual experiences

¹⁴ Santos, J.; Ibid, p. 4-5.

¹⁵ Mitra, R. (ed.); Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁶ Polcarova, D.; Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁷Bounse, Sarah H.; “Hybridity and Postcoloniality: Formal, Social, and Historical Innovations in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*”, 2009, pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ Bounse, Sarah H.; Ibid, p. 13.

as the retelling of history is fragmented. So history is seen subjectively through the eyes of Saleem. He tells his own truth:

I told you the truth, I say yet again, Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent versions of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (p. 108)

We understand from this quotation that Saleem rearranges his history. For Saleem everything he says is true. Because, as it is indicated in Eric Grekowiez's essay, reality itself is a construct, any story is 'true' so long as it helps people make sense of their world. And also a story is 'false' when it cannot accomplish this end. Realities exist because of the ways that cultures conceptualize them - rather than as separate ontological entities.¹⁹ In this respect, while he is interpreting his and his nation's history Saleem creates a new pattern. And this pattern serves as truth.

Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the day of India's independence from British rule, Saleem's life becomes a microcosm of post-Independent India. His life parallels with that of India. So his attempt to reconcile his various multiple identities reflects India's struggle to reunite its multiple nationhoods after the colonial rule.²⁰

We see Saleem Sinai as the voice and living embodiment of his nation who is yoked by his birth to India's fate.²¹ He says he is "mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country." (p. 214) By "handcuffing" India to Saleem, Rushdie provides Saleem a unique possibility to change the course of Indian history, and therefore allowing him to identify himself with his country.²² "He was born exactly at midnight, simultaneously with the free Indian nation: "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came" (p. 1), writes Saleem. "Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world" (p. 1). Saleem's fate is

¹⁹ Grekowiez, E.; "Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and the Metaphorics of Fragmentation", *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 31/32, No. 1-2, 1996/1997, p. 220.

²⁰ Miller, Cathy C.; "Salman Rushdie's 'Stereoscopic Vision:' Postcolonial Environments in *Midnight's Children*", *New Horizons in Environmental Rhetoric*, San Diego State University, Oct. 2005, p. 49.

²¹ Györke, A.; "Allegories of nation in 'Midnight's Children'", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 2001, p. 181.

²² Polcarova, D.; *Ibid*, p. 27.

entangled with that of his country, his body comes to represent the body of the nation, and he becomes the allegorical figure of the Indian nation.²³

Thus, Saleem becomes the representative of his nation and his generation:

I am everyone everything whose being in the world was affected by mine. [...] Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each “I”, everyone of the now six-hundred-million plus of us contains a similar multitude. (p. 195)

Here he connects himself to his nation and its people. As a product of postcolonial India, Saleem must piece together the multifarious fragments of his identity, just as India must begin anew in rebuilding her identity in the wake of colonialism. His story represents the plural identities of India and the fragmented search for self through memory.²⁴

SONG OF LAWINO & SONG OF OCOL

Throughout the history it is known that Africa has undergone many difficulties in terms social and political issues. Of all these issues, the colonization is the most prominent one. Between the 1870s and 1900, Africa faced European imperialist aggression, diplomatic pressures, military invasion, and eventual conquest and colonization. At the same time, African societies put up various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their countries and impose foreign domination. By the early twentieth century, however, much of Africa had been colonized by European powers.²⁵

“Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol” is a long narrative poem written in 1956 by Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek. It was first published in Luo and later translated into other languages including English in 1966. Song of Lawino has become one of the most widely read literary works originating from Sub-Saharan Africa. It has also become culturally ironic within Africa, because of its display of how African society was being destroyed by the colonization of Africa.

Okot p’Bitek is an African writer. In his poem he wishes to express African ideas by choosing the two characters – Lawino and Ocol. These characters have become prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa.

The story is told as a dialogue between Lawino and her husband. The poem is separated in different chapters, each one detailing the problems facing Lawino and Ocol in

²³ Mitra, R. (ed.); Ibid, pp. 170-171.

²⁴ Miller, Cathy C.; Ibid, p. 42.

²⁵ www.exhibitions.nypl.org

their marriage, their differences and value systems. It is very clear that Lawino stands for traditions in the poem. On the other hand, Ocol, her husband defends both change and westernization; he is also a symbol of colonization.

The poem itself addresses the issues that Africa has faced. It poses these questions: What kind of liberation should Africa take on? Should it honor its traditions, or should it adopt the European values that were already set in place during colonialism? Okot p'Bitek addresses these questions by telling the story of Lawino "to explore the negative consequences of Western colonialism and culture on Africa."²⁶

The Song of Lawino is a very rich poem. It addresses important issues which affected Africa. And it is regarded as a satirical comment on the neo-colonial mentality of the African petty bourgeoisie – the intellectuals and political leaders of Africa.²⁷

Lawino, the major character in the poem, is a woman whose husband, Ocol, throws her out of their home and brings home a more Europeanized woman as a wife. Lawino criticizes her husband because he has abandoned her for another woman called Clementine who is educated, modern, speaks in English and acts like a white lady. Unlike Clementine, Lawino has not been to school. She was never baptized. She can't dance like the white people. She says:

I cannot dance the rumba,
My mother taught me
The beautiful dances of Acoli.
I don not know the dances of
White People.
I will not deceive you,
I cannot dance the samba! (p. 42)

Lawino tells us her husband insults her all the time:

Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the
stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief,

²⁶ Otiso, Kefa M.; *Culture and Customs of Uganda*, Greenwood Press, USA 2006, p. 40.

²⁷ Ngara, E.; *Ideology & Form in African Poetry: Implications for Communication*, Villiers Publications, London 1990, p. 63.

Now you compare me
With the rubbish in the rubbish
pit, (p. 34)

And she goes on:

He says I am rubbish,
[...]
He says I am primitive
Because I cannot play the guitar,
He says my eyes are dead
And I cannot read,
He says my ears are blocked
And cannot hear a single foreign
word,
That I cannot count the coins. (p. 35)

Ocol also insults her parents, the black people and all the African ways although he is himself a black man:

He says my mother is a witch,
That my clansmen are fools
Because they eat rats,
He says we are all Kaffirs.
We do not know the ways of
God,
We sit in deep darkness
And do not know the Gospel,
He says my mother hides her
charms
In her necklace
And that we are all sorcerers. (p. 35)

Ocol is so thoroughly colonized that he hates his people and Africa. He also denies his Africanness. The whole story of the work is set around this conflict.

Ocol reflects the situation of the native people of an African country willing to imitate the western culture. His notion is at the same time the notion of European culture he embraces. He is regarded as the victim of the cultural onslaught. "He has adopted all the culture of the Western world: ballroom dancing, kissing, Western dressing, smoking, eating

Western foods, Western technology, Christianity and the meaningless names that the adherents give their children. He savagely attacks all the cultural practices of his people, dismissing them as backward.”²⁸ So in this respect it is widely accepted that to colonize a country you must first colonize the minds of the people. After colonizers have imposed the western values into the minds of these people as portrayed in Okot's work, there is no need to invade that country by force because they are already conquered. They are ready to give what the western powers demand.

Ocol even despises her body and black skin:

He says I soil his white shirt
If I touch him,
My husband treats me
As if I am suffering from
The 'Don't touch me' disease!
He says that I make his bed-
sheets dirty
And his bed smelly. (p. 53)

All of the issues the poem address are the ones that have concerned and divided African nations since liberation from colonialism. For all these perceptions the poem is regarded as a response to colonialism.

As it is understood, Okot p'Bitek's poem can be defined as a kind of literary resistance against colonizers. Moreover “Okot took African poetry from defense to attack.” (p. 15) It is very clear that in this poem p'Bitek primarily deals with African culture, e.g. their dancing, colonizers' approaches to them, colonizers' values. His first concern is to defend his culture from colonizers and through his poem he achieves it successfully.

To conclude; in this study the two books – *Midnight's Children* and *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol* – have been investigated in the light of postcolonialism because both works are regarded as postcolonial works. Both writers examine the issue of postcolonialism and discuss it by creating their own histories. Thus the books have been analyzed according to the historical concepts.

As history is an individual and of course subjective entity, we trace the fragmented stories of the characters. While Rushdie provides individualized history of India, Okot p'Bitek creates the character of Lawino who represents the African nation. In both works we see the

²⁸ P'bitek, O.; *Song of Lawino*, Kenya Litho Ltd., Kenya 2009, p. 7.

psychological effects of colonial domination on the nation and also its people. Saleem and Lawino are created as the embodiments of their culture. “By paralleling Saleem’s life with the events following India’s independence, Rushdie ties the identity of the postcolonial country directly to the individuals that are products of it.”²⁹ On the other hand Okot p’Bitek, with character of Lawino, mocks all Ocols who care the habits and traditions of the White. His work provides a defense of African culture.

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²⁹ Miller, Cathy C.; *Ibid*, p. 49.

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