

# On the “Occidentalized Indianness” behind “Blue” Image in *Midnight’s Children* from the World Literature Perspective

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**Abstract**—With the traits of exoticism and assimilation in world literature, the image of color “blue” in Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* presents the “hybridity” with extremely rich connotation. It is showed from aspects of material life, identity pursuit and religion reconsideration, which reveal the “Occidentalized Indianness” in postcolonial South Asian Subcontinent. It not only critically implies the influence from the colonial authority and western centralism, but also conveys a wish of return and adherence to the essence of “Indianness”, another form of world literature.

**Keywords**—blue, *Midnight’s Children*, occidentalized Indianness, world literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Midnight’s Children* (1981) written by Salman Rushdie has won The Man Booker Prize of 1981, and then won special Booker Prizes for celebration of its 25th and 40th anniversary. Incredibly various colors are used in this work, of which “blue” appears up to 95 times (see the Table A1 in Appendix), manifesting Rushdie’s preference and its important function. In Rushdie’s works, “Indianness” is first manifested in his believing that English can be *svadesh* (of or belonging to one’s own country in Hindu) and a tool that can express the life and emotions of the Indian nation; Secondly, it is reflected in the strong regional cultural characteristics of the story and the deep structure of the work reflects the influence of traditional Indian spirit and values, which is the most profound imprint of Indian culture in Rushdie’s creation. Although Rushdie comes into contact with western culture and writes in English, he does not make his creation an anthropological book to show westerners the strange customs of India. In *Midnight’s Children*, though occidentalized influence can be traced nearly everywhere, the core standpoint is the exploration and expression to the “Indianness”. “Blue” images is a representative in the text, which can be divided into three types of natural scenes, social products and characters’ traits, which take on the “hybridity” of material life, ethnic identity and religious concepts in India. It can be seen from the “hybridity” that India has been extensively affected by the West so that its “Indianness” presents the occidentalized properties. However, “blue” images do not symbolize a surrender to the West, but a negotiation of which the fundamental purpose sticks to “Indianness”. This paper will analyze the “hybridity” of India shown through “Blue” images in *Midnight’s Children*, based on which discusses the “Occidentalized Indianness” under the world literature context in order to critically reflect the influence from the western colonialism and the unique resistance of India in

with a global vision.

## II. STUDIES OF *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN*

The story of *Midnight’s Children* spans the entire South Asian subcontinent in space and covers about 63 years from 1915 to 1978 in time. According to Gokak [1], an Indian scholar, Indian literature is diverse and plural, and the one that connects various languages, including Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and even English, is “Indianness”. Its foremost feature is the complex and unified nature of South Asian culture. Although religions, ideologies, and lifestyles are complex, Indian culture is fundamentally stable and unified. The task of Indian writers is to strive to make their literary works with “Indianness”, and through it to explore the “Indianness” of their own culture [2]. *Midnight’s Children* is a successful writing practice hitting the point.

*Midnight’s Children*, once published, has received widespread attention and research of scholars. According to statistics from CNKI and JSTOR, there are more than 300 literatures about it at home and abroad. However, there is a few relevant to colors in the text whereas a large number applies postcolonial theories or interprets its world-literature connotations. Moreover, existing studies lack a discussion of the “Indianness” imparted in the text.

Domestic related papers demonstrate that “blue symbolizes hope [3, 4]” whereas foreign ones solely treat it as supplementary to discuss the language style, particularly of magic realism. In general, the researches focusing on colors are relatively small in quantity, and the thought of reasoning is also rather simple. Color is a valuable entry point for understanding the gist of *Midnight’s Children*. “Blue” in the story is not only an adjunct, but also a mirror of cultural “hybridity” and more significantly a reflex of “Occidentalized Indianness.” Therefore, this paper thus chooses “blue” to interpret “Occidentalized Indianness” in the world literature context.

## III. “HYBRIDITY” THEORY OF WORLD LITERATURE

Homi Bhabha introduces the term “hybridity” into the field of cultural research and makes it an indispensable concept, even a complex ideological system, in world literature critical terminology. The “hybridity” theory advocates an anti-colonial resistance model different from the previous which asserts and emphasizes on pre-colonial traditions, for the colonized will firstly lose the language and consciousness on which to construct self-identity, and cannot form a resistance subject independent of the oppressor if its resistance is carried out in the language of the colonizer [5].

Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” is used to describe the

construction of cultural authority in situations of political opposition or inequality. "Hybridity" can open up a space of binary opposition that helps to reject social confrontation in the hegemonic practice of colonizers, creating a kind of expressive "gap" activity [6]. Bhabha believes that the mixing of multiple cultures not only makes it possible for different cultures to interpose with each other, but also generates many new meanings in the process of releasing the energy of cross-border culture. "Hybridity" takes many forms while Bhabha's focuses on the complex process mechanism of cultural contact, invasion, fusion, and fracture [7]. Bhabha seeks to position "hybridity" in colonial and postcolonial settings in many literary and artistic works, and believes that hybridity is a transformational gesture that makes many problems open and constantly questioned and negotiated in the process [8]. Liang [9] proposed that culture mainly includes three parts of material, society and spirit. In *Midnight's Children*, material part can be seen from the artificial products of daily life, social part from characters' cognition of their identity and spiritual part from the religion worship all of which are illustrated through the "blue" images.

#### IV. THE CULTURAL "HYBRIDITY" OF "BLUE" IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

"Blue" images include elements of nature environment like sky and sea, objects of social life like buildings and clothing, and characteristics of roles' appearance like pupil and skin. In addition, there are also many collocations of language such as "blue murder", "black and blue" and "bolts from the blue". They embody cultural "hybridity" from different aspects though it seems those types are independent and non-correlative. Although all images take on westernized traits, their common intrinsic quality is acceptance and optimization of "Occidentalized Indianness".

##### A. Material Life

Bhabha [10] believes the narrative focus is to uphold a dimension between countries, to transform boundaries or limits of national space into a kind of intermediary space, and discuss the significance of cultural and political authority through it. *Midnight's Children* blurs the geographical boundaries of countries of South Asia and connects them integrally with "hybridity" through "blue" images especially using objects with commonality of Britain and India. In *Midnight's Children*, "blue" is closely related to sky and sea in nature, and is also an indispensable color in the social life of South Asia. Sky and sea echo respectively at the upper and the lower ends with plentiful "blue" images are scattered between them, achieving a consistency of colors for the space impression construct.

The cultural "hybridity" of material life is more bespoken by the artifacts. As the color for "suit", "crib", "pram", "pool", "clocktower", "bus", "bike", "the printer's ink of the Daily Jang", "velvet" and so on, covering almost every side of life, "blue" causes a recognition that people of South Asia just live in "blue". However, such a "blue" is not thoroughly Indian, but with western aesthetics and pragmatism. For example, "blue" suits belong to classes like polices, foreign visitors and children from rich families. The introduced

goods such as bus, bike, newspaper and velvet manifests that people's living habits have been significantly influenced and changed by the west. It can be said that such a phenomenon presents the cultural penetration of India by the West, even though this process is still on the way and has not shaken the cultural foundation of India.

"Blue" organically integrates multiple cultural objects, indicates subliminal influence of western culture on South Asia's material even spiritual life, thereby emphasizing the inescapable "hybridity" of culture in the postcolonial period. "Blue", though seemingly harmonious, is treacherous for invasion, assimilation and transformation of western culture. Physical products with associated customs of India have irreversibly occidentalized though those things still keep as novelties or vehicles to the crowd.

##### B. Identity Pursuit

Bhabha questions the superiority of Western culture ethnocentrism, and to criticize the nationality essentialism [11]. "Blue" used to describe the pupil color relates to four characters: Aadam, Methwold, Saleem and Sinai. Their relationships indicate the disturbing ethnic identity crisis caused by cultural "hybridity", expose mercilessly the fantasy of the West lied in Indians and point out the final restoration.

Aryan, one tribe of Caucasoid, so-called "white race", is regarded to be the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages. "Aryan" means "noble" in Sanskrit. In ancient Indian legend, Aryan people have "blue eyes". It can be seen that racial integration has taken place in an early period, and the "blue" eyes are not unique to the West. Aadam, nominal great-grandfather of Saleem, born in a Muslim family in Kashmir, a British colony at that time, has studied medicine abroad thus suspecting his faith. After his return, his previous friend thinks that his "blue" eyes changes from the clear and pure "Kashmir blue" to the "European blue" that bring pain to the South Asian subcontinent. Methwold is a British man living in India. He boasts about his British background, and haughtily remarks about the independence of India, whose attitude gets no exclusion, but pursuit. He has an affair with Vanita, who then is delivered of Saleem and dies for dystocia, and leaves India by car the same day when Vanita dies. Saleem has never met his biological father Methwold, but always been influenced by him, just as India in the postcolonial era cannot really get rid of the colonial influence of Europe. Saleem's "blue eyes" are inherited from Methwold. However, before the event of "child exchange" has not been disclosed, everyone believes his eyes comes from his great-grandfather, Aadam. The "blue" of the eyes, in this respect, is endowed with the "hybridity" of "South Asia" and "Britain". Saleem also carries the task of negotiator between the western central culture and the eastern marginal culture, as well as the eastern marginal culture inside. The nominal son of Saleem, Sinai, is actually born by Parvati and Shiva, the real great-grandson of Aadam. Therefore, the extended family line from Aadam returns in blood by coincidence, forming a closed loop. It is "the blue of recurrence, the fateful blue of Kashmiri sky [12]", which hints his tangled fate with the other three characters.

The "hybridity" of characters' ethnic identity not only exhibits the racial impact and oppression brought by

occidental colonialism in South Asia especially India, but also ushers the contempt for the nostalgia to it. Saleem's identification to his miscegenation identity and the final return to the right consanguinity lay stress on that conservation of "Indianness" in the world-literature context.

C. Religion Reconsideration

"Blue" occurs over ten times in the dialogue concerning god's skin between Mary and a priest. This argument reveals the "hybridity" of religious values in India in the postcolonial context, thereby further clarifying the kernel of different faiths.

Mary is an Indian who believes in Christianity. However, her love, Joseph, who is involved in the conflicts between Islamism and Hinduism has judged her that "The god of white skin should be left to white people. At this time, our own people are dying." Mary desires to find an answer about god's skin color. Facing her confusion, the priest replies that God's skin is "the most beautiful crystal shade of white sky blue [12]." However, she believes "People are not blue." The priest then recalls the bishop's interpretation: "God is love; and the Hindu love-god, Krishna, is always depicted with blue skin. Tell them blue; it will be a sort of bridge between the faiths; gently does it, you follow; and besides blue is a neutral sort of colour, avoids the usual Colour problems, gets you away from black and white [12]." Mary dissatisfies the priest's reply. The doubt remains in her heart, driving her "child exchange" behavior: switch the packages of Saleem and Shiva at their birth. Saleem thus grows up in a family of rich Muslim businessmen, whereas Shiva lives with his father as a poor and wandering artist. It is not too much to say *Midnight's Children* revolves around such a social experiment.

Incursion of western religious power undoubtedly exacerbates the "hybridity" of religious situation of the Indian subcontinent. The dialogue referred deduces the communication dilemma between religions whether between the oriental and the occidental or in the oriental self but also proclaims the root of solving this problem. In other words, although the situation has been complicated by western influences, the characteristics of "Indianness" equip itself with the ability to solve it.

V. CONCLUSION

"Blue" in *Midnight's Children* transcends over the simple scientific phenomenon of light with a world-literature connotation under the narrative background of the South Asian subcontinent. It reflects the "hybridity" of its space, ethnic identity and religion. The "hybridity" is the result of the joint work of the legacy of western colonialism and the local culture of South Asia, which not only presents the occidentalizing of the whole society, particularly in India, in the global era, but also demonstrates the stability and unification of "Indianness". "Occidentalized Indianness" is not a kind of eclecticism, but an exploration for the transformation or junction between cultures. It emphasizes to make the best of occidental factors on the premise of identifying and ensuring the universal subjectivity, which plays a positive and dynamic role in the whole process of seeking culture survival to those who are displaced or marginalized based on culture, civilization or the so-called

backwardness of morality and spirit. It is from the subjects condemned by history, those who have been conquered, ruled and dispersed, that the most enduring life and thought lessons can be learned.

APPENDIX

Table A1: A Collection of "Blue" in the Text of *Midnight's Children*

Number of Times	Related Content
2	"Aadam's eyes are a clear blue, the astonishing blue of mountain sky..."
1	"Memory of my blue bedroom wall..."
1	"Aadam is rushing indoors...blue eyes blinking in the sudden interior gloom..."
1	"...on the back, blue-shadowed yellow crying thank god!..."
1	"...still the blue of Kashmiri sky..."
1	"...goldfish swam in pale blue pools..."
12	"blue," the young priest said earnestly. "...Our Lord Christ Jesus was the most beautiful crystal shade of pale sky blue.'...Then: 'But how, Father? People are not blue. No people are blue in the whole big world!'...thus spake the Bishop, 'God is love; and the Hindu love-god, Krishna, is always depicted with blue skin. Tell them blue...and besides blue is a neutral sort of colour...'What type of answer is blue...but one does not have to be Pope to know that the mens are not ever blue!'...'Skins have been dyed blue,' he stumbles. 'The Picts; the blue Arab nomads...there is something more important lurking behind this blue business..."
1	"On that day, my inheritance began to form-the blue of Kashmiri sky..."
1	"...but the alienness of blue eyes remains."
1	"Blue Jesus leaked into me;"
1	"...lock himself in a blue room and try..."
1	"...blue of its occupants' uniforms..."
2	"...with eyes as blue as Kashmiri sky-which were also eyes as blue as Methwold's..."
2	"...the picture which hung on a sky-blue wall in Buckingham Villa, directly above the sky-blue crib..."
1	"A tailor sat in a sky-blue room..."
2	"...as a shimmering grey presence in that sky-blue room...across a brief expanse of sky-blue wall..."
1	"...eccentricity of my sky-blue eyes..."
6	"The eyes were too blue: Kashmiri-blue, changeling-blue, blue with the weight of unspilled tears, too blue to blink...they observed my icy blueness..."
1	"...Mary Pereira in a sky-blue pram..."
1	"...an eerie flame, blue-green-yellow..."
1	"...or does a baby blush in a sky-blue crib?"
1	"...the Tubriwallah was seven feet tall, with bright blue skin..."
3	"Here it is, in a sky-blue crib in a sky-blue room...it has darkened them to deep navy blue..."
1	"...against a background of Dal Lake and ice-blue Kashmiri sky..."
1	"A pale blue clocktower..."
1	"...who shared my sky-blue room..."
1	"...wearing a blue-striped elastic belt..."
1	"...through ice-blue eyes I see a slip follow the sari..."
1	"...who was sleeping as usual on a cane mat in a sky-blue room..."
1	"...coming into a sky-blue room..."
1	"...who filled our blue room..."
1	"...tall and blue and flaking..."
3	"...in front of me was the blue two-wheeler of Sonny Ibrahim... but still blue streaked towards silver...silver wheel touched blue..."
1	"...yelling blue murder..."
1	"...there was a blue-eyed child..."
1	"...I was bruised black and blue..."
1	"...while the blue-eyed member for Kashmir fell into a lake..."
1	"...when right out of the blue she wrote me the letter..."
1	"...his eyes were still blue..."

1	"...a delicate tracery of colourless lines against the blue..."
1	"...replacing me in the blue room of my childhood..."
1	"...began to yell blue murder."
4	"...the blue-and-yellowness of their uniforms; but most of all the blue blue blue of the sea..."
1	"...my father's office and my own blue room....."
1	"...the printer's ink of the Daily Jang shared a quality of blueness..."
1	"...bolts from the blue..."
1	"...on undulating blue velvet"
2	"Cross-legged, blue-eyed, staring into space, he sits beneath a tree...His nose: bulbous, cucumbery, tip blue with cold."
1	"...he gives me the creeps, yaar, it's those blue eyes."
1	"...there was a blue crackle playing around the end of his gargantuan nose..."
1	"The General Officer Commanding (in a nattily blue double-breasted suit)..."
1	"...in his habitually milky- blue eyes..."
1	"... 'If it wasn't for you, buddha-Allah, you freak with your blue eyes of a foreigner, O God, yaar, how you stink!'"
1	"Saucer eyes searching milky blue."
1	"Japanese tourists in identical blue suits..."
4	"She had turned bright blue, Krishna-blue, blue as Jesus, the blue of Kashmiri sky, which sometimes leaks into eyes;"
1	"...in a blue room overlooking the sea..."
4	"...I observed their colour, which was blue. Ice-blue, the blue of recurrence, the fateful blue of Kashmiri sky..."
1	"Once, in a blue room, Ahmed Sinai improvised endings for fairy-tales..."
1	"...did Aadam Sinai open blue eyes..."
1	"But also: eyes, blue as ice..."

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tan wrote and edited the paper, and Li wrote and analysis

the paper. Both authors had approved the final version.

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