THE IMAGE OF THE WISE (OLD) MAN IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN"

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Abstract: *The paper dwells on five characters in Salman Rushdie's novel "Midnight's Children": the boatman Tai, Shri Ramram Seth, the sadhu Purushottam, Dr. Schaapsteker and Saleem Sinai. Though not all of them are physically old, all five have special traits that include them among "magical" people. Their "wisdom" refers to their special knowledge, which exceeds that of ordinary persons and could not have been acquired by ordinary means. Still, we shall see that, despite their special abilities and knowledge, these characters are pretty well integrated in the society in which they live.*

Keywords: *wisdom, old age, serpent*.

According to Chevalier and Gheerbrant, old age is a sign of wisdom and virtue. Old people inspire respect because they are repositories of experience and reflection, an imperfect image of immortality, since to be old means to have existed before the appearance of the world and to continue to exist after its disappearance as well. (1993 I: 182) In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* there are five characters that we can discuss in relation to wisdom and old age: the boatman Tai, Shri Ramram Seth, the sadhu Purushottam, Dr. Schaapsteker and Saleem Sinai. Though not all of them are physically old, all five have special traits that include them among "magical" people. Their "wisdom" refers to their special knowledge, which exceeds that of ordinary persons and could not have been acquired by ordinary means. However, we should not forget that we are dealing with a novel that belongs to magic realism characterized by

> the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skilful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable (Cuddon, 1999: 488),

where the existence of characters with superhuman qualities would be normal and even expected.

The boatman Tai is one of the physically old wise men in Rushdie's novel. As a matter of fact, his age is immemorial to such an extent that nobody knows it, not even himself.

> Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes … Forever. As far as anyone knew. […] Tai himself cheerily admitted he had no idea of his age. Neither did his wife – he was, she said, already leathery when they married. His face was a sculpture of wind on water: ripples made of hide. He had two golden teeth and no others. In the town, he had few friends. (Rushdie, 7)

Tai's age is not only unknown, but it also seems to be a taboo subject. When his apparently only friend, the young child Aadam Aziz asks him how old he is, the boatman is at first shocked, then angry, then he answers: "I have watched the mountains

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being born; I have seen Emperors die. (…) I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came to Kashmir." (Rushdie, 9) According to him, Christ, who was bald and rather gluttonous, was very respectful to him, which might mean that even then he was old. Such an age is supposed to guarantee wisdom, but it is connected by some people with senility. "The general opinion of Tai had been voiced long ago by Aadam Aziz's father the gemstone merchant: 'His brain fell out with his teeth'. " (Rushdie, 7) Indeed, he is considered odd "because he rows standing up … Among other reasons." (Rushdie, 6)

He talks all the time, very often to himself, in monologues that are fantastic, grandiloquent and ceaseless, and that people laugh at, though with awe and fear.

> Awe, because the old halfwit knew the lakes and hills better than any of his detractors; fear, because of his claim to an antiquity so immense that it defied numbering, and moreover hung so lightly round his chicken's neck that it hadn't prevented him from winning a highly desirable wife and fathering four sons upon her … And a few more, the story went, on other lakeside wives (Rushdie, 7).

Aadam's mother considers Tai filthy and full of lice and washes the child thoroughly after every time they meet. Though rumoured to be rich, on account of his (only) two golden teeth, Tai makes his living as a simple ferryman, taking animals, people, vegetables and other goods across the lakes for cash. He is illiterate, but he has the school of life and the gift of "seeing" (Rushdie, 6), and Aadam learns from him not only the secrets of the lake – where you can swim safely, the varieties of water snakes, etc. – but also to follow his remarkably big nose if he wants to get far because the nose, being "the place where the outside world meets the world inside you", will signal "if they don't get on" (Rushdie, 10) by itching. Aadam will not follow, however, the sign given by his nose when going to a new patient that will become his wife, and their marriage will not be very happy.

Like all elderly people, Tai rejects everything that is new and is upset with Aziz for having studied abroad. His aversion is directed especially at the young doctor's bag, brought from Heidelberg. As Aadam "diagnoses", "to the ferryman, the bag represents Abroad. It is the alien thing, the invader, progress." (Rushdie, 14) Moreover, it stays between the two old friends. Perceiving the young doctor as a stranger, Tai tries to drive him away from the place by refusing to wash for three years and laying the blame for this decision on Aadam, who will be isolated by people as a consequence. Moreover, when he falls ill, Tai refuses to go to his former friend.

There are several things to be taken into consideration in Tai's presentation. First, he is a boatman, which makes us associate him with Caron, the one who took the spirits of the dead across the Styx. His boat is a symbol of the travel, of the crossing performed by the living or by the dead, but also a symbol of certainty. In our case, Tai will take Aadam Aziz not to the nether world, but to his future wife, something which will change his life, nonetheless. Secondly, his face, "a sculpture of wind on water", is a mixture of two of the fundamental elements, air and water. The air is an active and masculine element, associated with the wind and the breath, representing the world placed between the earth and the sky, filled with the universal soul necessary to all living things. Moreover, the wind is a symbol of vanity, instability and inconsistency. The water is a passive and feminine element, the origin of life, a means of purification, a centre of regeneration, a symbol of fertility, purity, wisdom and virtue. (*cf.* Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1993) As we can see, they are conflicting symbols, all conflicts being however present in Tai. He is unstable and inconsistent, which made him have many children with several women. On the other hand, however, this also makes him fertile.

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Though a boatman, thus permanently in contact with water, he refuses to be purified by refusing to wash. He is wise, he knows many things, but he is also vain about it. The loss of his teeth signifies the fact that he was deprived of his vital force; however, the fact that he can still enjoy his two remaining teeth signifies joy and youth. Moreover, gold, the material from which the two remaining teeth are made, is the perfect metal, a symbol of knowledge. Thirdly, his incessant talking, that most people associate with stupidity and strangeness, is actually meant to hide things rather than to reveal them. When he has something to tell, he tells it very clearly, otherwise he just seems to babble meaninglessly.

Shri Ramram Seth is a rather young wise man, who cannot be ignored, however, because he is the one who prophesizes Saleem's future before Saleem's birth. This prophecy is offered as a reward to Amina by Ramram's cousin, Lifafa Das, whose life she saved from the fury of the crowd by means of the public announcement of the fact that she was pregnant.

The story of the child with a huge nose and with telepathic powers until doctors clean his sinuses, who is born on the very first moment of India's independence, is changed at birth with another boy with lethal knees, is tortured by the country's leaders because they fear his powers, and who will bring up his rival's son confirms the prophesy:

> A son, Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland – neither older, nor younger. [...] There will be two heads – but you shall see only one – there will be knees and nose, a nose and knees. [...] Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him – but crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep, cobra will creep ... [...] Washing will hide him – voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him – blood will betray him! [...] Spittoons will brain him – doctors will drain him – jungle will claim him - ... – tyrants will fry him ... [...] He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! And he will die ... Before he is dead! (Rushdie, 86)

The only problem is that this prophesized child is not actually Amina's biological son. Moreover, there are some indications in the text that, despite being presented by Lifafa Das as a great seer, palmist, astrologer and fortune-teller, Ramram Seth is actually more of a charlatan. First of all, when she sets eyes on him, Amina has the impression that he is levitating, but then realizes that he is actually sitting on a little shelf six inches above the ground. Amina considers it a cheap trick and starts wondering what she is doing there, but, encouraged by the others, accepts having her future told. Secondly, during and after the prophecy he behaves unusually, unlike what his cousins present there had ever experienced, frightening both them and Amina, who is soon made to leave. Saleem, the unreliable narrator, makes us wonder whether the prophecy had not been actually made by somebody else, Ramram Seth being just a medium, a channel through which the words are transmitted. Moreover, Amina does not understand the prophecy, and neither do the others that hear it. The mystery is increased by the fact that the visit takes place in the evening, and the "seer" lives in a poor and rather frightening neighbourhood, with narrow streets, which is the district of the beggars, children mutilated by their parents to inspire more mercy and get more money.

The sadhu Purushottam is a "holy man" (Rushdie, 113), who had come, as he himself says, "to await the coming of the One" (Rushdie, 113) under the garden tap in the yard of the Sinais' house in Bombay. He does that six hours before Saleem's birth. Indeed, immediately after his arrival, Amina goes into labour. He is described as "a long, stringy man, wearing three rows of beads around his neck, and a belt of chicken-bones

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around his waist; his dark skin stained with ashes, his hair loose and long – naked except for beads and ashes." (Rushdie, 113) Nicknamed by the children Puru-the-guru, he devotes his life to keeping an eye on Saleem, at the same time teaching his father palmistry and "witching away" his mother's verrucas. Sadhu Purushottam dies when Saleem is 10, as a consequence of some hiccups that make him hit the garden tap with his head repeatedly. Though presented in a rather ridiculous manner, with a strange appearance and strange habits (at least to the European reader), he is never mocked at by people, even the children seeming aware of his special status (which, however, he does not confirm by any special deeds except for the initial act of clairvoyance).

Dr. Schaapstecker is an old European doctor who studies the medicinal functions of snake venom and devises antivenenes. Amina lets him the upper storey of Buckingham Villa in Bombay because her family has financial problems. Nicknamed Scharpsticker sahib, the snake doctor is eighty-one years old when he makes his first appearance in the novel and not only that he studies serpents, but he even looks like them, having acquired a semi-anthropomorphic character: "his tongue flicked constantly in and out between his papery lips." (Rushdie, 138) His obsession and his appearance make people tell all sorts of things about him.

> Dr. Schaapsteker was a man who engendered wild stories. The more superstitious orderlies at his Institute swore that he had the capacity of dreaming every night about being bitten by snakes, and thus remained immune to their bites. Others whispered that he was half-snake himself, the child of an unnatural union between a woman and a cobra. His obsession with the venom of the banded krait – bungarus fasciatus – was becoming legendary. There is no known antivenene to the bite of bungarus; but Schaapstecker had devoted his life to finding one. (Rushdie p. 139)

Because he makes experiments on horses that still die after being injected with venom, he is rumoured to have the power of killing horses simply by approaching them with a hypodermic syringe. Well aware not only of the negative, but also of the positive effects of snake venom, dr. Schaapsteker cures baby Saleem, aged one, of typhoid fever with diluted venom of the king cobra. The venom is presented as a remedy that can either kill or cure, but the baby's grandfather, himself a doctor, gives it to him knowing that he would die anyway. It is to be noted that Schaapsteker is not asked for help, he offers it voluntarily, that he is not rewarded for it either and that the child, who gets well, will also have a special relationship to snakes, recognizing, at a certain point, that he also had become a serpentine being.

At 92, Schaapsteker is "the incarnation of snakehood" (Rushdie, 269). He had come to believe that "he was the last of a line which began when a king cobra mated with a woman who gave birth to a human (but serpentine) child ..." (Rushdie, 270) Saleem, on the other hand, spends more and more time in the old doctor's rooms, where "the sun neither rose, nor set, and no clocks ticked." (Rushdie, 270)

In the same manner in which Tai had taught Aadam the secrets of the lake, Schaapsteker teaches Saleem about the snakes: their occult powers and their enemies. Like his supposed grandfather long ago, Saleem is fascinated with the old man, but this time the old man is also fascinated with the young boy. He even considers himself and asks Saleem to consider him as another father because he had saved his life. Schaapsteker reveals to Saleem the cobra that lies coiled within himself and, again like Tai, he offers advice to the young boy: "Be wise, child. Imitate the action of the snake. Be secret; strike from the cover of a bush." (Rushdie, 270) Unlike Aadam, Saleem listens to the advice of the old man and strikes like a snake, hurting two women at once:

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Lila Sabarmati, who was cheating on her husband, causing her husband to kill her lover and hurt her, and his mother, who was secretly dating her first husband, causing her to abandon the dates. Unlike Aadam's mother, Amina pays no attention to her son's relationship to the doctor or to the stories told about the latter. More pragmatic, she is satisfied with his paying his rent.

The ultimate wise old man is Saleem Sinai himself. One of the 1,001 children endowed with magical powers born during the first hour of August 15, 1947, the day when India declared its independence from Britain, he is the possessor of a very large nose and of the gift of telepathy. He loses this gift when doctors clean his sinuses, but discovers, at the same moment, the sense of smell, which allows him to perceive not only ordinary things, but also feelings, live love, hatred, envy or bitterness. This sense enables him to work as a man-dog in a canine unit that also includes three young soldiers. At first frightened by their unusual "dog" and his powers to track anything, the three nickname him buddha, "old man", because he was old before his time (actually he is in his thirties), and "there hung around him an air of great antiquity". (Rushdie, 365) It is interesting, however, that Saleem makes the difference not only between "buddha", with hard and plosive Ds, meaning "old man", and Buddha, with soft-tongued Ds, meaning "he-who-achieved-enlightenment-under-the-bodhi-tree" (Rushdie, 365), but also between "I, Saleem" and "he, the buddha" (Rushdie, 376). "He, the buddha" differs from Saleem in that he is separated from his past, having been deprived of his memory in a bombing that killed his entire family.

> … the important distinctions between Buddha and Saleem lie in the qualities of their existence both outside and inside this world. Buddha's otherworldly state was one of detached awareness, while Saleem's is one of forgetful ignorance. And in worldly terms, Buddha fought a pacifist battle against ideas he felt impeded spiritual progress. Saleem, on the other hand, becomes the tool of a regime that uses religion to squelch freedom (Clark, 2001: 82)

It is snake venom that connects him again to his past. In the same manner in which it had saved his live years before, now it returns his memory. It happens in the jungle, where he is bitten by a venomous, blind, translucid serpent while sitting under a tree. D. Grant regards the episode as a symbolic reconception of the hero.

> Saleem … has to undergo a more complex process of renewal, involving not only rebirth but 'reconception'; and it is here that we have the last twist of the metaphor … the blind snakes of the Sundarbans are as it were spermatozoa; the bite in the heel (mythologically a vulnerable part) is the decisive moment at which life takes hold. This provides an unusually complete, elaborated and satisfying version of the metaphor of rebirth … linking him to the evolutionary chain of DNA as well as to his own personal history (1999: 53-54).

If the stay in the jungle is for Saleem like a descent to hell, and the snake bite represents his reconception, then his rebirth is enacted with the help of Parvati-the-witch, who calls him by name, then helps him return to his native place in her basket.

Speaking of Saleem's special relationship to snakes, we have to mention not only that they save his life and make him recover from amnesia, but also that they teach him what to expect from life. In his childhood, he loves the game Snakes and Ladders, a "perfect balance of rewards and penalties", from which he learns "the eternal truth that for every ladder you climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner; and for every snake, a ladder will compensate". (Rushdie, 143) Still, he finds very early in his life "that the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity – because (...) it is also

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possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake." (Rushdie, 143) He makes frequent references to this game and these truths throughout his story. More than that, his name contains the letter S, "sinuous as a snake" (Rushdie, 320), his umbilical cord, looking like a serpent, is built at the foundation of the house the family wants to build, a house that will fail to stand in spite of this, and after the recovery of his memory and the end of the war he will come to live among snakes with the magicians in Delhi.

The serpent is at the other end of the evolution scale than man. The man and the snake are opposed to each other, complementary, rivals. The man has some characteristics of the serpent, but in that part of his which is the least controlled by reason. The serpent symbolizes what is mysterious, impossible to understand. It comes among people, then suddenly returns to its world. It is linked to the idea of life. The visible serpent is the temporary embodiment of a Great Unseen Serpent which masters the vital principle and all forces of nature. It is an old primordial god that is at the basis of any cosmogenesis and that was dethroned by the religions of the spirit. It is the double symbol of the soul and of the libido.

The snake assures the stability of the world. Before building a house in India, people thrust a stake in the head of the subterranean nâga serpent. Moreover, the snake can appear as a mythical forefather and civilizing hero (hence the mating with women), a doctor and fortune teller and a symbol of fecundity (*cf.* Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1993), all these aspects being present in the novel in connection either with Dr. Schaapsteker or with Saleem.

Two final remarks must be made about these men. One would be that we are not told anything about their deaths, except for Purushottam's. All we have are just speculations and rumours, which might entitle us to consider them immortal. The second remark is that, with two exceptions, they have only one name, being denoted by it and by their profession. The two exceptions are Shri Ramram Seth and Saleem Sinai, the two "charlatans". While he makes no comment on Seth's name, Saleem comments extensively on his own, and on the relationship between it and his destiny.

> Our names contain our fates; living as we do in a place where names have not acquired the meaninglessness of the West, and are still more than mere sounds, we are also the victims of our titles. Sinai contains Ibn Sina, master magician, Sufi adept; and also Sin the moon, the ancient god of Hadhramant, with his own mode of connection, his powers of action-at-a-distance upon the tides of the world. But Sin is also the letter S, as sinuous as a snake; serpents lie coiled within the name. And there is also the accident of transliteration – Sinai, when in Roman script, though not in Nastaliq, is also the name of the place-of-revelation, of put-off-thy-shoes, of commandments and golden calves; but when all that is said and done; when Ibn Sina is forgotten and the moon has set; when snakes lie hidden and revelations end, it is the name of the desert – of barrenness, infertility, dust; the name of the end. (Rushdie, 320)

An end that Saleem is expecting soon.

As we can notice, unlike other characters of this type, presented in other novels, these five are surprisingly "normal", despite their special knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they are not isolated, living close to other people, they are accessible, and they are neither feared nor much respected. They have become part of the community in which they live.

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