



Fragmented Identities and Political Allegory: A Post-Colonial Critique of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *'Midnight's Children'* stands as a significant work in post-colonial literature, utilizing the experiences of its central character, Saleem Sinai, to reflect India's evolution from colonial oppression to independence and its subsequent challenges. Born at the moment of India's independence, Saleem embodies the fragmented nature of post-colonial identity, navigating a complex landscape of cultural and political affiliations. This paper conducts a critical analysis of Rushdie's distinctive use of magical realism and "chutnified" English, which serve to reclaim colonial language while presenting a narrative that resists traditional Western literary frameworks. Furthermore, the novel operates as a political allegory, encapsulating pivotal moments in Indian history—including Partition, the Emergency, and the emergence of authoritarian nationalism. Through his narrative, Rushdie provides a critique of both colonial dominance and the nationalistic tendencies following independence, revealing the dangers of unchallenged power and the consequences of a homogenized national identity. Ultimately, *'Midnight's Children'* underscores the persistent quest for cultural self-definition and genuine liberation, positioning Rushdie's work as a critical examination of post-colonial power dynamics while celebrating the resilience found within India's diversity and division. This study seeks to investigate these themes of fragmented identities and political allegory, thereby enriching the ongoing dialogue in post-colonial literature.

Key words: Allegory, Cultural hybridity, Magic Realism, *Midnight's Children*, National Identity, Postcolonialism, Salman Rushdie.

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *'Midnight's Children'* is recognized as a seminal piece in post-colonial literature, celebrated for its dynamic

storytelling, inventive use of language, and incisive critique of colonialism's enduring effects on India. Released in 1981, the novel received widespread acclaim and secured the Booker Prize, establishing Rushdie as a

significant figure in the discourse surrounding post-colonial issues (Lee 2015), (Stephen J 2020). The narrative follows Saleem Sinai, born precisely at the moment of India's independence, which symbolically ties his fate to that of the nation. Through Saleem's experiences, Rushdie explores themes of identity, authority, and fragmentation as India transitioned from colonial rule to a modern state. *'Midnight's Children'* provides a nuanced examination of post-colonial themes, merging magical realism with historical allegory to portray the intricate realities of a newly liberated nation.

Historical and Cultural Context

To fully appreciate the post-colonial themes in *'Midnight's Children'*, it is vital to consider the historical and cultural context in which the story unfolds. India's independence in 1947 signified the end of British colonial rule but also initiated a traumatic partition that led to significant social, political, and religious upheaval. In the aftermath of independence, India confronted the task of crafting a cohesive national identity amidst its vast cultural and religious diversity. As an Indian expatriate, Rushdie engages with these intricate issues, drawing upon his personal experiences of displacement and hybrid identity (Sennur 2023). His work reflects the challenges faced by post-colonial societies in forming a unified identity while acknowledging the enduring scars inflicted by colonial powers.

Through Saleem Sinai's journey, Rushdie illustrates a microcosm of India's fragmented identity. Saleem's mixed heritage and his family's diverse cultural background symbolize the hybrid essence of Indian identity in the post-colonial landscape. This backdrop parallels the broader national struggle to reconcile various regional, linguistic, and religious identities within a single entity. Therefore, *'Midnight's Children'* serves as a crucial narrative for understanding the psychological and cultural

ramifications of colonialism on both individual and national identities (Mira Pallav 2023).

Themes of Identity and Nationhood

A central theme in *'Midnight's Children'* is the pursuit of identity—both personal and collective—in the post-colonial context. As a “child of midnight,” Saleem embodies the fragmentation and quest for self-definition characteristic of India's experience. His character reflects hybridity; his lineage is interwoven with the cultural and religious diversity of India, representing a “composite” identity that resonates with the newly independent nation. However, this identity is complicated by Saleem's feelings of being torn between multiple allegiances, resulting in a struggle for belonging. His telepathic abilities further complicate his fragmented identity, allowing him to connect with other “midnight's children”—those born at independence, each endowed with unique gifts (Eloise 2022; Soumya 2024; Benny 2013). Together, they symbolize the myriad voices and experiences within post-colonial India.

Rushdie employs Saleem's fragmented identity as a metaphor for the challenges inherent in post-colonial nation-building. Following colonial rule, newly independent nations often grapple with their cultural multiplicity. In India's case, the difficulty lies in establishing a unified national identity that respects its diversity while moving beyond the legacy of colonialism. Rushdie's narrative encapsulates the tension between the aspiration for unity and the reality of division—a recurring theme that echoes throughout the novel, reflecting the fractured identities resulting from colonial oppression.

Language and Narrative Style as Post-Colonial Tools

In *'Midnight's Children'*, Rushdie utilizes language as a means of post-colonial expression, merging English with Indian vernacular in what he famously refers to as “chutnified” English.

This linguistic blend acts as an act of reclamation, reshaping a language that was once a tool of colonization to suit an Indian context. By employing this hybrid form of English, Rushdie challenges the traditional supremacy of the language and crafts a narrative style that aligns with India's post-colonial identity. The use of "chutnified" language disrupts the colonial legacy, showcasing the plurality that characterizes post-colonial societies.

Moreover, Rushdie's implementation of magical realism further exemplifies his post-colonial critique. This narrative technique, which intertwines fantasy with reality, enables Rushdie to confront Western literary conventions and offer a counterpoint to the colonial realism prevalent in Western literature. The fantastical elements present in *'Midnight's Children'* not only reflect the cultural richness of India but also allow Rushdie to deliver a subjective and culturally resonant portrayal of history. Through magical realism, he merges reality with myth, creating a narrative that resists colonial interpretations while honouring indigenous storytelling traditions.

Allegory of India's Political Struggles

'Midnight's Children' is rich in allegory, with its characters and their journeys mirroring the political challenges faced by India after gaining independence. Saleem's life intersects with pivotal historical events, such as the partition, the rise of authoritarian figures, and the implementation of the Emergency under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Through these narratives, Rushdie critiques the political turbulence and power dynamics that afflicted India during its early years as an independent nation. Saleem's experiences echo the disillusionment many citizens felt as their dreams for a democratic and free society collided with the harsh realities of political corruption and authoritarianism.

For example, the disintegration of Saleem's family serves as a metaphor for the

national division, suggesting that the wounds of colonialism persist and manifest as internal strife. Rushdie's depiction of the Emergency—characterized by the suspension of civil rights—acts as a potent critique of the authoritarianism that took root in post-colonial India. The allegorical link between Saleem's personal struggles and the larger political landscape highlights the theme of disillusionment in post-colonial nations, where the promises of liberty often yield to oppressive power structures.

Critique of Nationalism and Political Power

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie critiques not only the legacy of colonialism but also the nationalism that emerged following India's independence. He examines how nationalist leaders, once celebrated as champions of freedom, can sometimes perpetuate oppression and corruption. This critique is particularly evident in his depiction of the Emergency—a period during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government curtailed civil liberties, leading to widespread political repression and social unrest. Saleem's experiences during this tumultuous time reflect the disillusionment of a generation that confronted the more sinister aspects of nationalism and the hazards of concentrated power.

Rushdie also addresses the concept of collective identity and the politics of "othering" that frequently arise in the pursuit of national unity. Saleem's telepathic bond with other midnight's children underscores the diversity inherent in India, yet the government's suppression of these unique individuals symbolizes the erasure of differences in favor of a singular national identity. Through this lens, Rushdie cautions against the exclusionary practices often associated with nationalist ideologies, suggesting that genuine independence cannot be realized through the oppression of diversity. Thus, *'Midnight's Children'* serves as a cautionary tale regarding

the dangers of nationalism and the intricate journey toward authentic liberation.

Cultural Hybridity

A significant theme in *'Midnight's Children'* is cultural hybridity, which is intricately woven throughout the narrative. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, embodies this hybridity through his mixed heritage that blends Eastern and Western influences. This fusion represents the identity struggles faced by individuals in postcolonial contexts who navigate multiple cultural identities. Rushdie explores these challenges through Saleem's upbringing and his family's engagement with British customs and values, as seen in their acquisition of Methwold's Estate—a mansion built in the style of British colonial architecture. This act of purchasing and inhabiting a British-style mansion in postcolonial India symbolizes the persistent influence of colonialism even after independence. The estate, with its colonial architecture and the customs Saleem's parents are encouraged to uphold, serves as a metaphor for the complexities of fully disentangling from the colonial past.

Rushdie also employs other characters to depict cultural hybridity. Shiva, Saleem's counterpart and adversary, represents an alternative response to cultural hybridity. While Saleem seeks to harmonize his British-influenced upbringing with his Indian identity, Shiva embodies a staunch nationalism and frequently opposes Western influences. The contrasting perspectives of Saleem and Shiva highlight the diverse reactions to the cultural amalgamation resulting from colonial rule, illustrating the internal conflicts faced by postcolonial societies. This theme resonates with Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, which posits that postcolonial individuals occupy a complex and multifaceted "in-between" space, neither fully belonging to one culture nor the other.

Magical Realism as a Post-Colonial Tool

Salman Rushdie employs magical realism in *Midnight's Children* to convey the surreal aspects of the postcolonial experience, merging fantastical elements with historical events to illustrate the intricate impact of colonialism on both personal and national identities (Abdullah et al., 2014; Trivedi 2021; Sharma 2021). The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, possesses supernatural powers—such as telepathy—that enable him to connect with other "midnight's children" born at the precise moment of India's independence. This connection symbolizes India's potential for unity amidst its diversity, reflecting the challenges inherent in constructing a national identity within a society characterized by cultural, religious, and social divisions. Saleem's heightened olfactory sense, which allows him to perceive emotions and intentions, further underscores the inherited trauma of colonialism, illustrating how the postcolonial psyche is attuned to the lingering effects of the past.

Other characters, like Shiva and Parvati-the-Witch, enrich this symbolic fabric of magical realism. Shiva's remarkable physical strength signifies the emergence of military and authoritarian power in post-independence India, particularly during the Emergency, highlighting how the idealism of independence can devolve into oppression. In contrast, Parvati's magical abilities symbolize the resilience and adaptability of Indian identity, rooted in mystical and indigenous traditions that endure despite colonial disruptions. The supernatural abilities of these characters serve as metaphors for India's political and cultural complexities, illustrating how postcolonial identities are shaped by both historical trauma and the blending of Eastern and Western influences.

By utilizing magical realism, Rushdie subverts Western literary conventions, crafting a non-linear and fragmented narrative that

mirrors India's diverse and multifaceted cultural history. This approach enables Rushdie to simultaneously critique and celebrate postcolonial identity, as exemplified in episodes such as Saleem's memory loss in the Sundarbans, which reflects India's struggle to define itself in the wake of colonial rule. Through these fantastical yet profoundly symbolic occurrences, *Midnight's Children* employs magical realism to examine the contradictions of postcolonial identity, presenting a nuanced portrayal of India as it grapples with its colonial legacy and its aspirations for an independent future.

The Dangers of Authoritarianism

In '*Midnight's Children*', Rushdie critiques authoritarianism by illustrating how postcolonial leaders can jeopardize the diversity and freedoms of their societies. Through the oppressive methods employed during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule (1975-1977), he reveals the perils of centralizing power within a newly independent state. During this period, Saleem and the other midnight's children – who embody the varied and fragmented identities of India – are subjected to sterilization in a government initiative designed to suppress dissent and manage the nation's future. This action, referred to as "The Widow's Hand" in the novel, serves as an allegory for the suppression of India's rich cultural diversity, reducing individuals to mere subjects under a unifying but oppressive regime. Saleem's identity as a midnight child, marked by his telepathic connections to others like him, represents the collective aspirations and potential of the nation, which are stifled by the demands of authoritarian governance.

Through these events, Rushdie warns against a type of nationalism that mirrors colonial repression, echoing Fanon's concerns about the dangers of postcolonial authoritarianism. Saleem's abilities, which allow him to perceive the thoughts and

identities of others, reflect India's pluralism and suggest that true freedom lies in embracing rather than constraining these differences. By targeting the midnight's children, the government effectively attacks India's fragmented yet interconnected identities, attempting to substitute diversity with uniformity. Thus, Rushdie's novel acts as both a celebration of postcolonial identity and a political allegory cautioning against authoritarian tendencies that threaten to suppress it, illustrating how the quest for absolute control can undermine the principles of unity, freedom, and diversity essential for the development of a postcolonial nation.

Conclusion

Midnight's Children intricately explores the postcolonial experience, intertwining themes of identity, language, politics, and history. Rushdie's use of allegory and magical realism enables him to critique both colonial and post-colonial systems, shedding light on the persistent effects of colonialism on personal and national identities. The novel highlights the fragmentation of identity within postcolonial societies and the challenge of achieving coherence amid cultural multiplicity and historical trauma.

By reclaiming language and integrating it with Indian expressions, Rushdie provides a potent postcolonial response that confronts the legacy of colonial oppression. His narrative underscores the resilience of cultural identity and the importance of self-definition in postcolonial contexts. Through '*Midnight's Children*', Rushdie has made a lasting contribution to postcolonial literature, influencing future generations of writers and enhancing the understanding of the complexities involved in the formation of postcolonial identities. The novel's critique of nationalism and power remains significant, serving as a reminder of the perils of replacing one form of oppression with another and

emphasizing the ongoing fight for true liberation in postcolonial societies.

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