



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

**Recapturing the Picture of the Past: A Study of Salman Rushdie's
*Midnight's Children***

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Abstract:

This research paper examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a seminal work that masterfully intertwines personal and national histories, utilizing diverse narrative techniques to revisit and reimagine India's past. The study explores how Rushdie's novel, through its protagonist Saleem Sinai, presents a fragmented yet profound reflection on the nation's journey from colonial rule to post-independence challenges. It delves into the narrative's backdrop of the 1947 Partition and its lasting impact, highlighting Rushdie's use of magical realism to blend the ordinary with the extraordinary. This blending creates a complex, symbolic portrayal of India's identity and history. The paper also discusses the subjective nature of historical interpretation as portrayed in the novel, emphasizing memory's role in reconstructing the past. By critically analyzing *Midnight's Children*, this study underscores the novel's significance in postcolonial literature and its power to reshape our understanding of history through storytelling.

Key Words: History, Identity, Memory, Culture, Partition, Magical realism, Nation,

Introduction:

The novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie stands as a literary masterpiece that intricately weaves together the past and present within its narrative. It presents a rich tapestry of national identity, personal experiences, and historical events. Through diverse narrative strategies, the novel recollects and reimagines the past, particularly focusing on the personal experiences of the protagonist and the history of India. Rushdie's narrative spans three significant periods in Indian history: pre-Independence, the aftermath of partition, and the tumultuous years leading up to 1978. The novel's structure mirrors these phases, with each section reflecting the growth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, alongside the nation. Saleem's birth, coinciding with India's independence, symbolizes the inseparability of his life story from the nation's history. This metaphorical linkage underscores the subjective nature of historical interpretation, challenging conventional historiography and highlighting the role of memory in reconstructing the past. Through the lens of magical realism, Rushdie blends the ordinary with the extraordinary, using Saleem's supernatural abilities and fragmented memories to reflect the complexities of historical memory. This approach allows Rushdie to critique and reinterpret historical events, offering a nuanced perspective on India's postcolonial identity. By doing so, *Midnight's Children* not only recaptures the essence of the past but also reshapes our understanding of history, underscoring the power of storytelling in illuminating the multifaceted nature of human experience.



Recapturing the History of India's Partition

Every nation's history is shaped by a number of events and happenings, some of which are significant enough to be remembered while others are tragic enough to be burdened. One such depressing reality of Indian history is "Partition." In August 1947, the British government's nefarious strategy was held accountable for the cultural and religious divide. One such historical occurrence set the stage for subsequent exchanges between Pakistan and India. Millions of people suffered greatly as a result of this historic occasion. There are several ways in which this has an impact. Many subsequent developments may be understood in the context of "partition," which forms their foundation. Any nation's past and destiny are shaped by such occurrences. Thus, history documents everything, and without it, we would be lost. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee once said that "We must have history," and his rhetoric suggests the importance of history because it connects everything. Partha Chatterjee, also, voiced that ". . . the materials of Hindu nationalist rhetoric current in postcolonial India were fashioned from the very birth of nationalist historiography" (126).

Additionally, it includes a few historically accurate accounts of twentieth-century Indian occurrences. And it is via these that we also encounter the socio-political and cultural landscape of our nation. Rushdie uses Saleem as his spokesperson, having recount significant historical events from 1915 until 1978. There are three sections to the book. In the first section, Saleem discusses his grandpa Aadam Aziz and the history of India from 1915 until 1947. The narrative includes references to significant historical occurrences as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Quit India Movement, pre-independence partition politics, and the country's partition.

The first section represents India's and Saleem's birth. The second section covers the years 1947 to 1965 and discusses the slow but steady growth of young Saleem and India as a young nation. This section begins with the declaration of independence for India and Pakistan and discusses the bloody riots that followed the division and the Indo-Pak War of 1965. Rushdie connects the dots between this history and our protagonist's family history. The novel's third section deals with Indian history from 1965 and 1978. The author discusses the independence of Bangladesh in this section, as well as the ambiguous state of emergency that Indira Gandhi imposed in India. As a victim of Emergency, Saleem writes on the then-prime minister's despotic rule and how it negatively impacted people's lives.



Interweaving Personal and National Histories

Rushdie deliberately links Saleem's personal history to India's larger historical narrative, emphasizing their interconnectedness. Saleem's birth, coinciding with India's independence, symbolizes this connection. His memoirs serve to reshape the collective history of the country, highlighting the subjective nature of historical interpretation. In discussing the concept that forms the basis of his *Midnight's Children* story, Rushdie speaks humorously about his hazy recollection. He says, "there was the story of the child growing up and the country growing up, so to say, in parallel, it began with that." (Qtd. in Dwivedi 502)

August 15, 1947, was the birthdate of Saleem Sinai and a new India, both at midnight. The choice of *Midnight's Children* as the title for this book comes from the fact that many more children were born during this hour. Based only on what is retained in memory, the growth of these newborns and India is viewed in parallel, not linearly but rather fragmentarily and surrealistically. The representation of actual people with historical events is what truly gives it historical significance. The author interweaves his fictional plot with these genuine elements to depict a whole new perspective of history. Many people, including Pandit Nehru, celebrate the birth of our protagonist in this book, who made headlines in Indian newspapers. Given that he was born in the same year as India, he was unique. In this sense, historical events that are both real and imagined coexist and form a cohesive whole. Saleem documents his recollections and attempts to provide a sense of Indian history, of which he is a part. He remembers:

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence... (MC 09)

Salman Rushdie implies in a number of ways that the history of India is the history of his main character. By employing the metaphor of "birth," he symbolically links Saleem's personal and familial history to the history of the country. The choice made by Saleem to pen his memoirs is another example of this. This recounting of individual experiences reshapes the country's collective history in a manner similar to that of a scanner. Saleem affirms, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (MC 1). His birth at exactly midnight gives him the chance to



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write on a variety of Indian historical topics. To make his life seem more authentic, real individuals are included. In the tale, Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and Saleem celebrate India's birth together. The former extends congratulations to the latter, stating: "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young, we shall be watching over your life with the closest attention, it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (MC 167). Once more, the metaphor of "birth" is employed to establish a link between his lineage and the Indian. His son's birth unintentionally links him to another significant Indian historical event. His son is born at midnight on the day when Indira Gandhi declared "Emergency."

... at exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil rights, and censorship-of-the- press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements; something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not end for two long years, my son, the child of the renewed ticktock, came out into the world. (MC 585)

The viewer is also given the mental image of geographical India as a human body by this "Birth" metaphor. Historians regard India's early years as developing into a fledgling country, much like a child does. Neil Ten Kortenaar, in his essay entitled "*Midnight's Children and the Allegory of History*," writes that: ". . . a historian talks of growth and maturity of the nation as if the nation were a human child. They talk of directions, progress and dangers as if the nation were on a journey. Rushdie has made this metaphor of the nation as a human body literal" (32). Similar to how a person's life narrative develops as a result of several events, India's identity was transformed into something new and hybrid by a number of historical occurrences, where ideas about culture, language, sociopolitical life, and religion were always changing. They can no longer be taken for granted in the same manner as before since they have changed with time. Here, the Indian history is seen as distinct from the prevailing Western ideology in order to foster the growth of the indigenous viewpoint.

Following the story of his birth, Saleem talks about his grandpa Adam Aziz's life. There are remnants of those historical events in his recounting of his family's past that are highly important to Indian history. He continues by discussing the "satyagraha" of Mahatma Gandhi, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the founding of the Muslim League, the Quit India Movement, pre-independence politics, and the pinnacle of the liberation movement that resulted in the division of India and Pakistan and the independence of both



nations. P.C. Pradhan in his article entitled "Contextualizing Postcolonial Studies," suggests that Saleem, "chooses the dates of the events around the characters that appear to be a part of contemporary history themselves" (Qtd. in *Imagining India* 83). In order to perceive Dr. Aziz as a genuine personage or witness to General Dyer's brutality in killing numerous innocent persons at Jalliwala Bagh in 1919, readers follow his journey to Amritsar. He says, "It is April 13th, and they are still in Amritsar" (MC 40). Native Americans are still feeling the effects of this horrible event. The racial, religious, political, and social climate of colonial India is hinted at in Saleem's narration.

Memory and Fragmentation

Memory plays a central role in *Midnight's Children*, with Saleem's fragmented recollections contributing to the rewriting of history. Rushdie challenges the traditional notions of historiography, emphasizing the subjective nature of historical narratives. Saleem's imperfect memories mirror the disorderly nature of historical memory, blurring the lines between myth and reality. Reger in his "Rewriting History and Identity: The Reinvention of Myth, Epic, and Allegory in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," suggests that: "History, like making chutney, involves both preserving and combining a finite number of ingredients from an almost indefinite number of choices. It also involves the altering of form, changing yet preserving" (242).

Undoubtedly, this resurgence of recollection lends this work a historical flavor behind the thin veneer of realism. The narrative of this book is constructed from the fragments of history that he can still recall. In this book, Salman Rushdie attempts to use memory to rewrite history, claiming for himself that:

The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind's eye, now my two eyes were assaulted by colours, by the vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of cactus-leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillea creeper. It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight 's Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself . . . I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim. (Imaginary Homelands 9-10)

He forces Saleem to utilize his broken memories in order to do this. For this reason, the storyline of *Midnight's Children* does not follow the conventional historical books' strict chronological sequence. Since Rushdie wants to use his writing to recreate history, he doesn't care about form or order. As a result, there is



no appropriate beginning, middle, or end for the readers to discover here. In addition to his magic realism, Rushdie fully utilizes the flashback and flashforward techniques, lending his writing a postmodern feel. The novel's format aligns with Rushdie's conception of history. We are faced with a jumbled reality and must come up with our own interpretation of historical events.

Rushdie permits Saleem to make mistakes in her memorization of location and time. He purposefully doubts his narrative because, as Rushdie himself says, he set out to challenge the objectivity and veracity of history. "Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge" (IH 25).

It is possible to see memory's function in Saleem's historical reconstruction as a rejection of the traditional historiography's insistence on objective documentation. He disputes the historical discourses' claimed veracity. Since history is only an individual's mirror of the past, no historical discourse can claim to portray the past as it actually was. History isn't impartial. The historians' subjective perspective is applied to historical data. A historian cannot make a claim to accurate portrayal. There is no set reality; rather, reality is based on our viewpoint, as Saleem states later in the book: "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible . . . the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality " (MC 229).

Allegorical Representation of History

In many ways, *Midnight's Children* is distinct. It purposefully paints a hazy, cohesive historical portrait of India. Readers attempt to fill the void left by what is missing by considering alternative options. It is a metaphor for our nation rather than only the history of the Senai family. The story connects personal and national histories via a multitude of themes that are presented either directly or indirectly. This novel is hyper realistic because nearly every imagined and real-life event is interconnected.

A country's history is shaped by its inhabitants. If one were to personify it, it is also a story of everything that forms the identity or character of a country. The national character can be observed in the ways that it manifests as a nation where equality, fraternity, human rights, public services, and a civil code exist for the welfare of all citizens, just as any individual's character is evaluated based on his or her deeds, morality, behavior, beliefs, and integrity. This is a broad classification. However, this work presents the



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readers with every aspect of its identity up until 1978. We may examine both the past development of India and its potential for the future on these historical premises. In order to create a metaphoric link, Saleem's background is set within the larger context of India's history. A portrayal of true history can likewise have a genuine quality when viewed through the eyes of a fictional witness.

One effective resource for developing this metaphoric link is Saleem's "Autobiography." Rushdie uses this framing story to connect everything. This provides an ideal framework for the meta narrative of Indian history. There is not a single historical truth left in this work. These instances form the basis of our nation's multifaceted nature. As a result, what is framed is reframed and examined from an alternative angle. India is Saleem, and Saleem is India. His past is the events that took place in India. He embodies Indian history in a sense. He himself sets the stage for this idea when he states:

I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in the- world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-millionplus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (MC 383)

According to Saleem's narration, he swings back and forth between the past and the present. In an attempt to understand the purpose of his existence, he goes back and forth across Indian history. He doesn't have a consistent identity, and no one can guide him in that direction. He adopts a changeable persona. He's broken. And the readers are able to perceive him in connection to these broken bits as a whole. Here is where we get the opportunity to go back in time as Saleem gives Padma a connected tale about her personal and public past. As he himself argues, Rushdie aims to underline and allegorize the reevaluation of history: "You cannot separate the two. They interpenetrate and that is how the writer needs to examine them, the one in the context of other" (Qtd. in Reena Mitra 12).

The novel's storyline moves across modern Indian history's pre-Independence, partition, and post-Independence periods. Allegorically, these three historical eras reflect, in turn, the experiences of the Senai family's three generations. The trip that his parents and grandparents took from Kashmir to Amritsar, then to Agra, and finally to Delhi is a progression that happens concurrently with the Indian independence movement from Jallianwala Bagh until the country's split. According to R.S. Pathak, "*Midnight's Children*



is Rushdie's interpretation of a period of about seventy years in India's modern history dealing with the events leading to the partition and beyond" (68).

Elements of Magical Realism

Magical realism is employed as a storytelling device, blending the extraordinary with the commonplace to explore deeper aspects of India's identity and history. Saleem and other children born at the stroke of midnight possess magical abilities, symbolizing the nation's potential and its burdensome past. Through allegory and metaphor, Rushdie invites readers to reconsider their understanding of India's journey towards independence and its aftermath. *Midnight's Children* stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to recapture the essence of the past and reshape our understanding of history.

Salman Rushdie uses a blend of magical realism, fractured narrative, and personal and national history to bring the past back to life in *Midnight's Children*. Born during India's freedom, the main character, Saleem Sinai, documents his life as it relates to important moments in the nation's history. The story is infused with mystical elements that symbolize India's wealth and promise through magical realism. Saleem's haphazard and imprecise recollections are a reflection of the disorderly structure of historical memory. This approach blends myth and reality to provide a complex, symbolic portrayal of India's journey towards independence and its aftermath, along with a nuanced analysis of political events.

Conclusion:

In Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, the intertwining of personal and national histories creates a vibrant tapestry that illuminates the complexities of India's past. Through the protagonist Saleem Sinai, Rushdie navigates the turbulent waters of postcolonial identity, drawing parallels between Saleem's life and the trajectory of the nation. The novel's use of magical realism adds an enchanting layer to the narrative, symbolizing both the burden of history and the promise of the future. As Saleem recounts his fragmented memories, Rushdie challenges conventional historiography, asserting that history is subjective and multifaceted. Through allegory and metaphor, Rushdie invites readers to reconsider their understanding of India's journey towards independence and its aftermath. *Midnight's Children* stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to recapture the essence of the past and reshape our understanding of history.



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