Cognitive Thinking: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Vol. 2, Issue-2 (April-June, 2026), pp.88-93, ISSN: 3107-5088, www.cognitivethinking.in

Rewriting the Nation: Postcolonial Identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Article/Interview: Received: 22/04/2026, Accepted: 20/05/2026, Published:30/05/2026.
D.O.I. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20459073

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) stands as a cornerstone of postcolonial literature, intertwining the personal and national narratives of newly independent India. Set against the backdrop of Partition and India's early nationhood, the novel follows Saleem Sinai—a child born at the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947—and traces how his fragmented identity mirrors that of his country. Through magical realism and nonlinear storytelling, Rushdie suggests that national identity is neither fixed nor unitary but is "continually rewritten" by individual memories and cultural myths. The narrative thus becomes a "palimpsest of postcolonial identity", where colonial legacies and indigenous heritage coexist in tension. This paper examines how Midnight's Children reconceives India's national history as a constructed narrative, drawing on theoretical frameworks of imagined communities, hybridity, and collective memory. It argues that Rushdie (b. 1947) positions the novel itself as a site of "cultural negotiation"—a space (in Homi Bhabha's term, the "Third Space") where personal and political identities merge and evolve. Saleem's story ultimately suggests that postcolonial identity is "always changing," forged through ongoing processes of selection, translation, and mythmaking.

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Memories, Emergency, Western Influences, Family Politics.

Introduction: Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) published *Midnight's Children* in 1981 to great acclaim, and it remains one of the most influential novels in postcolonial studies. The novel uses the life of its narrator, Saleem Sinai, to dramatize India's tumultuous early history—from Partition and the drafting of a constitution to the Emergency of 1975–77—suggesting that individual lives are inextricably linked with national events. Rushdie's immigrant background (born in Bombay, educated in Britain) situates him between cultures, and he transforms this "migrant consciousness into a metaphor for the postcolonial condition". In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's personal memories and magical powers become allegories for the nation's fragmented identity. As literary critic Linda Hutcheon (1988) observes, Rushdie's fusion of history and fantasy makes the novel "historiographic metafiction," a narrative that challenges official history by mixing fact with myth. Similarly, Timothy Brennan argues that the novel's deliberate fragmentation serves as a critique of postcolonial nationalism: Saleem's unreliable narration exposes the "contested identity" of India after independence. This study deepens that analysis by focusing on how Rushdie rewrites national identity through memory, hybrid cultural forms, and narrative play.

Nationhood itself is a constructed concept. Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) famously described a nation as an "imagined community" held together by shared myths, language, and print culture. In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie dramatizes this idea by imagining that Saleem's family history is tangled with India's state history. The novel's key themes—cultural hybridity, telepathic connectivity, and the *chutnification* (mixing) of history—underscore that Indian national identity cannot be reduced to a

singular narrative. Instead, identity emerges from a complex web of voices and memories, a point Chen (2026) emphasizes in her study: the "telepathic conference" of the midnight's children symbolizes a fragmented national voice that stands against official history. Throughout the novel, Saleem's own imaginative narration blends fact and fiction: as Damian Gant (1999) notes, for Rushdie "there are no unqualified facts or an absolute fiction, since the two categories overlap and leak into each other". In other words, Rushdie suggests that history itself is *narrative*, open to interpretation. By drawing on postcolonial theory (Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, et al.), we see *Midnight's Children* not just as a family saga, but as a rewriting of the nation—one that asserts identity is dynamic, contested, and perpetually in flux.

Historical Allegory and Personal Memory: From the very outset of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's personal fate is entwined with India's birth. He is born at midnight as the clock strikes independence, and Rushdie explicitly parallels the opening scenes of the novel with Partition violence. On the page celebrating Saleem's first moments, he nonchalantly states: "I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress in the frontiers of the divided Punjab…". Saleem's refusal to narrate the communal carnage of Partition is itself telling: he does notice what happens, and by choosing not to describe it in detail, he underlines the extent of the tragedy. Indeed, the novel implicitly comments on that violence: as one critic notes, "the birth of both child and nation is violent and bloodstained". The infant Saleem arrives literally covered in blood, and his father Ahmed Sinai even breaks his toe in the struggle to reach his son, while Saleem's nurse Vanita dies in childbirth. Mirroring this, India's Partition also sees death and wounding on an immense scale. By aligning Saleem's origin with history's bloodshed, Rushdie declares that the very beginnings of India and of its narrator are the same traumatic event. This parallel sets up the novel as a national allegory. Saleem's personal history unfolds against landmark events—Nehru's politics, wars with China and Pakistan, Indira Gandhi's Emergency—and these collective occurrences invariably impact Saleem's family and body. For instance, when Saleem's auntie (the "Brass Monkey") is tortured by a teacher, a simultaneous violence flares in East Pakistan and Kashmir. Later, the defeat in the 1962 war with China coincides with Saleem's medical operation ("drained above") that severs him from his telepathic powers. And during the Emergency, Saleem is castrated ("drained below"), losing hope just as the nation undergoes autocratic repression. These synchronicities highlight Saleem as a kind of *proxy* for India: his injuries, silences, and rediscoveries of voice all symbolize India's own displacements and attempts to heal. Critic Camilla Karlsson (2007) observes that as Saleem suffers bodily fragmentation, this mirrors "the disintegration of the Indian nation". Thus, the novel's first major implication is that personal and national histories are inseparable: one cannot narrate India's story without also telling stories like Saleem's, and vice versa.

Narrator and Narrative: Magic Realism as Identity: Rushdie frames *Midnight's Children* as Saleem's autobiographical confession to a stranger. Saleem acts as an **unreliable narrator** and plays with the act of storytelling itself. He frequently acknowledges his narrative artifice—speaking directly to the reader, apologizing for inaccuracies, and even promising to rewrite or omit sections. This metafictional stance reinforces the theme that history is malleable. As Rushdie himself has written about the novel, "history is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and [are] capable of being given many meanings". In other words, even the author acknowledges that in *Midnight's Children* one must actively create meaning from fragmented evidence. Gant's commentary captures this well: Rushdie sees no clear line between "fact" and "fiction". Saleem's narrative is full of distortions (misdated events, anachronistic technology, absurd metaphors), but these are *intentional*—they reveal how a postcolonial subject might reassemble a shattered past into a coherent *story*.

Crucially, *Midnight's Children* employs magic realism to illustrate hybridity of experience. Saleem himself has telepathic powers and a giant nose that connects him to 1,001 other children born in the first hour of independence. These telepathic "midnight's children" collectively hold India's concealed

memory, like a communal unconscious. Saleem's powers symbolize the multiplicity within the nation: his body is the locus where "both colonial and national inscriptions coexist in unresolved tension". The fantastic elements (talking vegetables, anthropomorphic snakes, the Narrator's time-travel snail, etc.) all serve to blend the extraordinary with the everyday, just as India's reality blends myth and fact. As Chen (2026) notes, Rushdie's magical realism "converts historical trauma into narrative innovation". Each surreal episode can be interpreted through Homi K. Bhabha's lens of hybridity: it is *not* meant to erase conflict, but to show how clashing histories and cultures intermingle. Indeed, as the novel famously proclaims, "I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done…" (*MC* 447) – this suggests that Saleem (and thus India) is constructed from layered identities.

Saleem's unreliability underscores that memory is subjective. At times he deliberately misremembers or promises to "spell it out," implying he's shaping the narrative as needed. This self-aware textualization aligns with Linda Hutcheon's idea of historiographic metafiction: it invites the reader to question official history by exposing its storytelling components. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's narrative slips remind us that national history is itself a chosen story, subject to bias and erasure. Saleem even overtly acknowledges this freedom in his chronicling: he admits he is "cutting up history to suit himself". By foregrounding this, Rushdie invites the reader to see India's past as incomplete without marginal voices. The novel thus "blurs truth and fiction", suggesting that identity (individual or collective) must be pieced together from mythic elements as much as from facts.

Cultural Hybridity and the Third Space: Another key aspect of *Midnight's Children* is its celebration of cultural hybridity. Saleem himself is of mixed heritage (Anglo-Indian and Kashmiri Muslim), and India itself is portrayed as a syncretic society of languages, religions, and traditions. Rushdie consistently shows that cultures overlap and transform one another rather than remaining pure. As Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz remarks, cultural contact can lead to a "miracle … no bloodshed, no grief," where "everything melts" in the mixing bowl of history (*MC* 18). This notion aligns with the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and his concept of hybridity and the "Third Space". Bhabha suggests that when colonized and colonizer cultures meet, a new "in-between" space arises, where fixed identities dissolve. In this vein, Saleem's hybrid identity makes him a "representative Anglicized middle-class intellectual", but he is also subject to traditional Hindu-Muslim imaginations.

Rushdie explicitly endorses the creative potential of this mixed heritage. As one character advises, one should "actively choose the hand that history has dealt". In other words, rather than lament one's fragmented lineage, the self can harness it. Saleem in fact clings to the idea that translation between cultures can yield gains, not just loss. He muses: "It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained." This assertion captures the heart of cultural negotiation: Rushdie implies that India's identity, like Saleem's, is built in translation across religious and imperial divides.

Indeed, Saleem's very existence is "a palimpsest of postcolonial identity". He literally wears the legacy of colonialism on his body: his Third Eye powers originate from genetic tampering by his grandfather's British superior, and even his large nose is a symbol of outsider influence (a joke about colonial nose-standards). His constant allergy to Western influences (sneezing uncontrollably at reminders of the Raj) also speaks to this uneasy hybridization. Yet by accepting this mixed self, Saleem can serve as India's mouthpiece. The novel implies that Indian national identity is similarly syncretic and cannot be pinned down to one "essence." As Chen argues, Rushdie's narrative enacts Bhabha's theory: Saleem's fragmented body and voice materialize the "Third Space" where multiple heritages collide. The midnight children's conference itself is a diverse collective where speakers of Urdu, English, Bengali, and other tongues intertwine; it celebrates diversity rather than enforcing unity.

Rushdie also emphasizes language hybridity. His prose mixes Standard English with Hindi, Urdu, and invented vernaculars, reflecting Saleem's linguistic fusion. This "chutnification" of English demonstrates that India's colonial tongue cannot be pure: it too is creolized. By making this mixture visible, Rushdie suggests that national culture emerges as a creative synthesis of "unequal power dynamics". In sum, *Midnight's Children* presents Indian identity not as a static tradition, but as an ongoing "negotiation of contradictory historical legacies". The characters learn (at least implicitly) that acknowledging hybridity is the way forward.

Memory, History, and the Politics of Narrative: A further layer of Rushdie's critique involves memory and forgetting. Anderson's classic account of nationalism argues that archives, maps, and museums shape collective identity; Rushdie's novel inverts this by privileging personal memory. Saleem keeps a "pickle jar" of family stories, and he often comments on how official accounts omit truths that only personal narratives retain. This tension between official history and subaltern memory aligns with postcolonial concerns (e.g. Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern"), though Rushdie does not directly cite subaltern voices. However, he implicitly allows the voices of common people (and a schizophrenic ex-prime minister, a carnival performer, a Muslim extremist, etc.) to reshape the grand narrative. For example, Saleem's grandmother refuses to let religious conflict define her life and constructs her own peaceful world. Through such characters, the novel suggests that history is made up of many silent resistances and private experiences.

Rushdie also alludes to Frantz Fanon (2004) and the idea that postcolonial nations are born through trauma. The simultaneous tragedies at Saleem's birth and at India's independence recall Fanon's insight that "not triumph but trauma births the nation." Rushdie dramatizes this, yet he refuses a simplistic nationalist conclusion. Instead, identity is shown as contingent and multiple. Linda Hutcheon (1988) would classify Rushdie's approach as postmodern history: by mixing genres, he destabilizes any single truth. In practice, *Midnight's Children* compels readers to see history as a narrative collage: there is no escape from the date of birth or national timeline, but its meaning must be interpreted.

Ultimately, Rushdie's novel is both a personal coming-of-age story and an explicit commentary on historiography. Saleem proclaims, "I could not spend my life in just repeating what he [my father] said.*"* In the same spirit, Rushdie will not simply reiterate dry facts; he reconstructs India's story in mythic form. This writerly stance echoes Rushdie's own description in his afterword *"Eldorado"*, where he acknowledges that writing *Midnight's Children* was an attempt to "restore the past … not in the faded greys of old family albums" but as a living narrative. Through this act of narration, Rushdie positions himself (and Saleem) as agents who reforge national memory from shattered pieces.

Summary of Findings: The analysis of *Midnight's Children* deepens by examining how Rushdie's narrative techniques and thematic choices reflect broader postcolonial concerns. Saleem Sinai's unreliable narration—admitted even within the text—becomes a deliberate device. Saleem openly acknowledges the "commingling of the improbable and the mundane," warning readers of "unbelievable" events. His companion Padma represents the sceptical reader: she disputes only the most fantastical claims ("What nonsense,' our Padma says, 'How can a picture talk?'), yet Saleem adapts, coaxing belief by logical framing. This metanarrative choice shows Rushdie inviting reader engagement while subtly undermining any single authoritative history.

Gender and family politics are also foregrounded. Early feminist critics found Rushdie's female characters troubling; as Horn (2015) notes, *Midnight's Children* largely "view[s] women as a destructive force or else exclude[s] them altogether," creating a "gallery of women who are either frigid and desexualized… or driven to despair". Indeed, Saleem's proud declaration ("women have always been the ones to change my life*"*) sparked debate. In practice, the novel's women—whether saints like Mariam (Durga) or monstrous like Aadam Aziz's nurse Parvati—embody conventional stereotypes. Yet

Rushdie layers these portrayals within family sagas: marital alliances, births, and betrayals. The family becomes a microcosm of national splintering; patriarchal figures often prop up national myths (Ahmed Sinai as an Indian at heart), whereas women's agency is often linked to fertility or spiritual strength (e.g. Baby's regeneration narrative). By aligning Saleem's lineage with political upheavals, Rushdie comments on how gender dynamics shape a fragmented nation. The dissonance between Rushdie's professed liberalism and the novel's gender portrayals remains a point of critical contention.

Rushdie's language and register perform similar ideology. He "Indianises" English by flooding it with Hindi-Urdu idioms. Phrases like *"ekdum"*, *"angrez"*, and *"garam masala"* appear without explanation. This "mongrel street language" gives cultural authenticity and defamiliarizes colonial English. As O. P. Dwivedi (2017) observes, this code-mixing is no mere ornament: it situates the narrative in its subcontinent setting and "subvert[s] a language associated with colonial powers". Rushdie declined to footnote such words, insisting the *text* itself explain them. The result is postcolonial English: a hybrid idiom mirroring India's linguistic multiplicity. In mixed registers—from the grandly formal (Nehru's speeches) to the earthy (Aunt Tilottama's dialect)—Rushdie underscores class and cultural divides while asserting a uniquely Indian English. Postcolonial trauma and healing underlie these devices. The novel's magic realism externalizes collective wounds: grandmother's three-year vow of silence symbolizes Partition's voiceless grief, and Saleem's dislocated memories reflect fragmented history. Although a formal "healing" is never attained, Rushdie gestures at catharsis through narrative itself. By "filling in the gaps" of Saleem's memory with mythic logic, the story attempts to integrate past horrors into a coherent mythos. The final conference of the "*Midnight's Children*" is itself communal storytelling—transforming trauma into shared, if eccentric, family myth. In psychoanalytic terms, Rushdie posits that accepting ambiguity may be a form of healing: Padma's earthy pragmatism keeps Saleem "grounded" even as he paints the painful past in magical hues. The novel thus enacts a therapy of narrative, where history's ghostly silences (Freud's "unheimlich" anxiety) are confronted through story.

Intertextuality and myth pervade Rushdie's carnival of history. Saleem's family members often carry names or roles from Indian or Western myth. For example, five characters in *Midnight's Children* are literally named for Hindu gods (Buddha, Shiva, Ganesh, Parvati, Durga). Shiva in particular embodies a "false double" of Saleem ("victor and victim" with Saleem). Mythic images also function subtly: Aadam Aziz's ritualized chicken fight evokes ancient sacrifice, and Saleem's sensory powers recall mythic prophets. Majoul (2024) notes how Rushdie "encodes mythical imagery in his narrative, thus creating a familiar…space" for readers steeped in these traditions. Intertextual play extends to Western sources too: Rushdie invokes Tristram Shandy (inspiration for the title), *One Thousand and One Nights* (frame narrative echoes), even the Qur'an (allusions in Indira's chants). These layered allusions signal that national history itself is a palimpsest of stories. Borrowing from Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Majoul argues that Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a "dialogic" text: it "draws on history while providing the writer's contextual interpretation of it". The novel thus subverts monolithic mythmaking by reweaving it into a chaotic mosaic.

Conclusion: The Nation as Narrative: In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie demonstrates that postcolonial identity is a continual process of storytelling. The novel's rich tapestry of characters and events shows that India's people must piece together their multifaceted histories from memory, myth, and everyday life. Saleem Sinai, born in the "Extraordinary Hour" when one hundred and one babies become national symbols, is emblematic of this project: his fragmented life forces the reader to confront the fragmentary nature of any shared past. As Chen observes, Rushdie's framing treats identity "as an ongoing process rather than a static synthesis". In effect, *Midnight's Children* enacts a *third space* of narrative where colonial residue and indigenous culture intersect-yielding neither pure assimilation nor total separation but a hybrid new world.

By foregrounding storytelling itself, Rushdie also implies a political lesson: dominant histories can never fully capture the truth. As Saleem "averts his eyes" from Partition's bloodshed, or rewrites historical events for dramatic effect, he reveals the silences and contradictions in his official account. *Midnight's Children* thus invites the nation to remember differently, acknowledging both its tragedies and absurdities. National identity, the novel suggests, is not a fixed inheritance but a collective narrative that must be constantly renegotiated. In Rushdie's words, through its "hybrid aesthetics and magical realist mode" the novel "gesture[s] toward prototypes of transnational identity—forms of belonging that resist essentialist closure". Through Saleem's life-story, Rushdie ultimately rewrites India's birth and growth as a tale of multiplicity: a reminder that every nation is imagined, every identity pieced together by storytellers, and every conclusion only provisional.

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