

The Idea of Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

The article discusses the fluid nationalism Rushdie depicts in this novel. Rushdie does not just advocate a fluid nationalism, which he considers an imaginary boundary, but also a culture of hybridity, exemplified by his character, Saleem Sinai, who is a bit of this and a bit of that. He often claims he is disintegrating into parts, indicating that the nation is not a homogeneous entity. Through his characters, Rushdie depicts the prospects for the country achieving independence and the challenges during the Emergency. He also does not fail to mention the challenges to the nation when the optimism disease gradually disappeared from the scene after the assassination of Miah Abdullah, the Hummingbird. He borrows Homi K. Bhabha, Timothy Brennan, and Benedict Anderson's ideas of nation and national belonging, as well as Salman Rushdie's rich non-fictional repository, to delineate the true meaning of a hybrid existence.

Keywords: *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie, Hybridity, Nationalism, Homi K Bhabha, Timothy Brennan, Benedict Anderson

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's masterpiece, *Midnight's Children*, explores the complex and often chaotic nature of Indian identity. Central to this expansive, magical realist novel is a deep reflection on "hybrid nationalism." Rushdie argues that India's survival as a modern nation relies entirely on its acceptance of diversity, multiplicity, and secular values. In contrast, lacking this hybridity-manifested through exclusionary nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and efforts to maintain cultural "purity"-threatens the country's very existence.

Through the symbolic journey of its protagonist, Saleem Sinai, the novel explores the turbulent birth, optimistic childhood, and complex growth of the Indian republic. Rushdie uses Saleem not just as a witness to history, who is handcuffed to history, but as a literal symbol of the nation itself. By highlighting the contrast between Saleem's diverse, blended existence and the destructive, unified power of his arch-rival, Shiva, Rushdie presents a strong argument: India is a vibrant but infantile nation that must address the dangerous threat of fanaticism to survive. Through Saleem, Rushdie shows, "hybridity is the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative." (Bhabha 162)

Saleem Sinai: The Embodiment of Hybridity

The novel's protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai, embodies Rushdie's idealised vision of a hybrid India. He symbolises the country's rich and mixed history, the result of centuries of sedimentation by innumerable invaders and settlers, as a "bastard child of history." Saleem was

brought up in a middle-class Muslim family, yet his biological background offers an interesting case study. His biological father is William Methwold, a British colonialist departing India, while his biological mother is Vanita, a Hindu woman married to a poor street performer named Wee Willie Winkie. Additionally, he was raised by Mary Pereira, an Indian Catholic ayah.

Rushdie envisions a hybrid nation through his protagonist, whose origin is mixed- a British father, a Hindu mother and a Catholic ayah takes care of him. More interestingly, this birth is not natural or approved by society, as he is the offspring of a union outside marriage and hence not approved by society. Both of these things have a very important consequence for the novel. On the one hand, this represents the true nature of India, where cultures from around the world have come and mixed like spices when cooked, becoming inseparable. On the other hand, through this character, he points out the inevitability of such cross-cultural intermingling when so many diverse communities live together for centuries. To purge Indian culture of the so-called impurity would involve denying historical change and undoing history. Similarly, Rushdie, in his Essay "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist", denounces this bogey of authenticity, terming it as one of the major roots of all fundamentalism. He argues that it is impossible to achieve anything pure, as we cannot undo the historical process through which we have inherited whatever we have now. He argues:

Authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition. Or else. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 67)

Rushdie emphasises this heavily in his essays, noting that we are all products of historical collisions. As he eloquently states in his essay collection *Imaginary Homelands*:

Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, like flavours when you cook. (*Imaginary Homelands*, 394)

Although Rushdie often dismisses the strict, artificial idea of the traditional nation-state, when he depicts the Indian nation as fictional, he ensures it is presented in a deeply pluralistic manner. For Rushdie, "the nation ... is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined." (Brennan 49) Saleem describes India's Independence in the following words:

...there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, ... was nevertheless quite imaginary. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 150)

This perfectly aligns with Anderson's observation that theorists of nationalism are "perplexed" by "the objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists" (Anderson 5) and that nationalism is "a deep horizontal comradeship." (Anderson 7)

The Shadow of Partition and the Disease of Optimism

Before Saleem is even born, Rushdie sets the stage by depicting the ideological battles that preceded India's independence. Saleem is deeply sceptical of the type of exclusionary

nationalism and religious communalism that India was slowly succumbing to in the years leading up to 1947.

Saleem's grandfather, a Doctor who studied in Germany and who played an important part in saving many people's lives during the Jaliwanwalabagh massacre, roams the city "astride his bicycle, leather attache attached to carrier" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 46) and continuously whistling, struck by optimism disease. However, he is suffering from optimism disease because he is engulfed with the thought of an independent secular India while completely forgetting the other divisive threats that are gradually looming large.

Rushdie portrays one such picture where the growing communalism within the country is rearing its ugly head. Here, the victim is Lifafa Das, a Hindu peepshow man who was on his usual routine of showing the small kids his collection of pictures and shouting "Duniya Dekho", unlike other days when he would shout "Dilli Dekho". He enters a predominantly Muslim mohalla, and the Muslims of the mohalla, finding a soft target, gather around him, and Lifafa Das mixes up his "Duniya Dekho" with "Dilli Dekho". Saleem's mother, Amina Sinai, then pregnant with Saleem or Shiva, intervenes and gets the man into her house and shouts at the crazy mob, daring them to touch the man. This scene foreshadows the communal division the country was eventually plunged into when it was partitioned on the basis of religion.

Rushdie depicts a moving picture which shows the lofty rhetoric of the political leaders and the harrowing suffering the Muslim minorities underwent after the partition of the country, as the Ravana Gang set their leathercloth godown on fire. This shows the hypocrisy of the newly independent nation, as expressed in the speech of Dr Narlikar, a friend of Saleem's father, Ahmad Sinai. Dr Narlikar says when Ahmad Sinai's assets are frozen with a government order:

These are bad times, Sinai bhai — freeze a Muslim's assets, they say, and you make him run to Pakistan, leaving all his wealth behind him. Catch the lizard's tail and he'll snap it off! This so-called secular state gets some damn clever ideas. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 185)

The hypocrisy is more telling when the narrator juxtaposes the hollow rhetoric of the political leaders and the ground-level suffering caused by these very political leaders, "'We are a secular State,' Nehru announced, and Morarji and Patel and Menon all agreed; but still Ahmed Sinai shivered under the influence of the freeze." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 187-88)

The Midnight's Children's Conference: A Parliament of Magic

Saleem's crowning achievement in the novel is his telepathic convocation of the Midnight's Children's Conference (MCC). This conference serves as the novel's central metaphor—a magical microcosm of India itself. Exactly one thousand and one children are born during the midnight hour of August 15, 1947. Because they are born at the exact moment the nation comes into being, they are endowed with magical powers. Crucially, the power of this magic increases with the closeness of their birth to the stroke of midnight. When Saleem finally manages to tune his mind to the voices of the other children, he becomes a telepathic radio receiver, gathering them into a congress of the mind. In his telepathic conference, Saleem meets a variety of children endowed with different magical powers, symbolising the nascent nation-state's

diverse potential. There, he comes across children who can change their sex, multiply fish, travel through time, etc.

The MCC is initially a place of boundless potential and vibrant debate. It is a true democracy of voices, reflecting a heterogeneous nation capable of accommodating infinite differences. The conference represents the utopian ideal of post-colonial India: a space where the marginalised, the poor, the rich, the north, and the south can communicate and collaborate. Rushdie uses this conference to depict a nation which, despite astronomical odds, poverty, and historical trauma, is functioning through the sheer willpower of its collective, varied consciousness.

Saleem and Shiva: The Battle for the Nation's Soul

However, this utopian microcosm is inherently flawed, largely because of the presence of Saleem's arch-rival, Shiva. Named after the Hindu god of destruction, Shiva possesses the terrifying power of brute force and war. He was born at the exact same second as Saleem, but while Saleem's power is the ability to connect (telepathy), Shiva's power lies in his knees—the ability to crush, fight, and destroy. The relationship between Saleem and Shiva is the novel's most critical thematic element, hinging on an event that occurred at Narlikar's Nursing Home shortly after their birth. Mary Pereira, driven by her own misguided sense of revolutionary justice to help the poor, switches the babies' nametags. Thus, Shiva, the true biological son of the wealthy British coloniser and the Hindu woman, is condemned to a life of extreme poverty. Saleem, the true biological son of the poor street entertainer, is raised in middle-class, Muslim comfort.

This exchange is profoundly significant. Rushdie is suggesting that after the British departed, India stood at a crossroads. The country could easily have turned into a majoritarian, religious, and militaristic state, much like the trajectory its neighbour, Pakistan, eventually took. The possibility of succumbing to fundamentalism was always present at the nation's birth. But because the children were exchanged—thanks to the intervention of the marginalised Mary Pereira—India was given the opportunity to become a secular democracy, guided by the “bastard” hybridity that Saleem represents.

Shiva represents the dark alternative: what India *could* have become had it taken a different turn, and what it constantly threatens to become when exclusionary nationalism takes hold. He is an “apostle of purity,” a religious fundamentalist in spirit, if not in theology. He believes purely in the right of the strong to dominate the weak, in singular truths rather than pluralistic ones. Saleem convenes the first Midnight's Children's Conference when, after being discovered in the washing chests, he goes unnoticed to the broken clock tower and connects through telepathy, his magical power conferred upon him by his eventful birth at the stroke of midnight on 15th August 1947. Although 1001 children were born, only 581 survived to attend the telepathic meeting. This conference resembles a mini parliament where his principal opposition is Shiva, who jeers at him and mocks him because of his privileged upbringing. Shiva's target is Saleem, who acts as a unifying force in the conference, and Shiva wants all the children to act according to his wishes; Saleem is the principal competitor who challenges his authority.

The conflict between these two boys is not a natural one, but it has a more serious note: a fight between a secular hybrid force represented by Saleem and the religious fundamentalism, homogenisation, and bogey of purity represented by Shiva. Salman Rushdie has always been very sensitive to all sorts of fanaticism, and in one of his essays, he points this out. He argues:

“Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings.”
(Imaginary Homelands, 394)

Shiva is the ultimate purveyor of a “total explanation”—the belief that might makes right and that diversity is a weakness to be eradicated. As he gains power in the real world, becoming a decorated military hero, he simultaneously brings the Midnight’s Children—and by extension, the country—near disintegration.

Exile, War, and the Topography of the Subcontinent

After the independence, as the optimism disease gradually wanes and Saleem’s family suffers a catastrophic blow at the hands of the Ravana Gang and the government freezing power, Saleem and his family relocate to Pakistan, which reflects the collapse of the ethos of harmony which was in the air during the outbreak of the optimistic disease. In Pakistan, Saleem loses his memory—a metaphorical forgetting of his syncretic roots—and is literally reduced to acting as a “man-dog,” a tracker for the West Pakistani army. During this dark period, Saleem eventually partakes in West Pakistan’s brutal military campaign against East Pakistan (which would result in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971). The war in East Pakistan, which eventually created Bangladesh, on the basis of language, plays a very important role in the novel. Rushdie again points out the futility of the homogenising trend, which the creation of both Pakistanis on the basis of religion demonstrated. The disintegration of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh demonstrated one fact that if one’s diversity is overlooked and a different identity is imposed, it may bring fatal catastrophe.

After West Pakistan loses the war, Saleem’s memory is restored, and with the help of Parvati-the-witch, another member of the Midnight’s Children, he returns to India. However, he does not return to the affluent Bombay of his childhood. Instead, he starts residing with Parvati in the Magicians’ Ghetto, a sprawling slum near Delhi. Rushdie takes us from the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai to the slums of Delhi, where the downtrodden people who are snake charmers and illusionists live. In this slum, one of the most important members of Midnight’s Children lives: Parvati, the witch with whom Saleem develops a fondness that transforms into their marriage. The message the novelist implies here is that this slum is also an equal part of India. In this way, the novelist displays his version of a hybrid nation of India to which everyone, from large city dwellers to the dwellers in slums, and even a homogenising force like Shiva, though undesirable, can make an equal claim.

The Emergency: The Fragmentation of Multiplicity

The recurrent threat of disintegration throughout Saleem’s narration finally reaches its devastating climax with the imposition of “The Emergency” (1975–1977) by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whom Saleem refers to as “The Widow.” If Nehru represented the flawed but earnest attempt to hold the diverse nation together through secular democracy, The Widow

represents the authoritarian desire to crush diversity in the name of singular control. During the Emergency, civil liberties are suspended, political opponents are jailed, and a chilling campaign of forced sterilisation is launched.

The tragic moment in the novel occurs when the Emergency is announced. The actual Emergency was in itself a harsh instrument used by the state to suppress protests against the state. In the novel too, we find its reflection as during the Emergency, all of the midnight's children are rounded up, confined and sterilised by the state-sponsored sterilisation drive. It is during this time that the state, indicated as the widow in the novel, utilises the destructive power of Shiva, who, with immense physical prowess, destroys the diversity that the midnight's children stood for. Thus, Shiva acts as an "apostle of purity". This dark event in the novel highlights the importance of diversity, and, interestingly, during this dark hour, a child is born to Saleem's wife, Parvati, whose biological father is Shiva. The novel ends with suspense regarding the nature of the children of Emergency.

Conclusion: The Imperative of the Secular State

Midnight's Children is a brilliant tale about the birth and progress of the nation-state of India and, to some extent, Pakistan. The novel spans roughly 1916 to 1977. It depicts how the nation undergoes all the phases from the massacre at the Jalianwalabagh, the assassination of Miah Abdullah, the Hummingbird, the birth of Saleem from an illicit relationship between Mr Methowld and Vanita, then the birth of the nation and of the midnight's children, representing the hope of a nascent nation-state, and culminates with the dark Emergency. Through all of these, the novelist highlights the need for cultural and religious diversity. It is because of this lack that Pakistan disintegrated into two parts, and because of this the Emergency came, which caused a huge dent in the nation's aspirations. The novel also highlights the point leading to independence, when Lifafa Das was targeted by Muslim mobs, Saleem Sinai's godown was set on fire by the Ravana gang, and the freezing of his assets, which made Dr Narlikar comment on the hypocrisy of Indian politicians in terms of the implementation of a secular ethos in practice, all of which pointed in one direction, the waning of the optimism disease. As Rushdie powerfully concludes in his non-fiction, echoing the very heartbeat of his greatest novel:

"...if the secularist principle were abandoned, India could simply explode. It is a paradoxical fact that secularism, which has been much under attack of late, outside India as well as inside it, is the only way of safeguarding the constitutional, civil, human and, yes, religious rights of minority groups." (Imaginary Homelands, 2-3)

Overall, the novel is an important demonstration of the rise and fall of cultural and religious hybridity, but it does not end on a sad note; it ends with a glimmer of hope, as it ends with the birth of the children of the Emergency, who will take the reins of the post-Emergency country. To be Indian, Rushdie argues, is to be a composite. To survive as a nation is to fiercely protect that chaotic, beautiful, and fundamentally hybrid composition from those who would seek to purify it into nothingness.

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