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Nature as a postcolonial mirror: Memory and identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the intersection of ecocriticism and postcolonialism in Salman Rushdie's novel Midnight's Children, highlighting how these frameworks illuminate the emotional and psychological dimensions of his characters. Rushdie is a renowned writer who gained fame around the time British rule in South Asia was coming to an end. He is known for telling complex stories and exploring the inner thoughts of both male and female characters. His characters often struggle to find their identity in a society that marginalizes them. Many of his stories show feelings of loneliness, unfulfilled love, disappointment, betrayal, and failed dreams. Even when his characters are honest and loyal, they are often left out or ignored. By focusing on human emotion, nature, and culture, Rushdie highlights essential aspects of the human experience. He also shows how people feel and think during times of crisis, such as war. In these moments, emotions play a crucial role in helping people heal and rebuild themselves. This research examines how Rushdie integrates nature and postcolonial themes in his writing to enhance our understanding of both personal and collective struggles.

1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) is widely regarded as a landmark postcolonial novel that intricately weaves personal narratives with historical events to explore identity in post-independence India (Çetin, 2019, p. 57). The novel connects individual experiences to broader political developments, offering a portrayal of the complex and often painful transition the country underwent after gaining independence. Beyond its historical and political dimensions, Midnight's Children also invites an ecocritical reading by revealing how nature, human emotion, and memory are deeply intertwined, especially in the context of national trauma such as the Partition and the forma-

tion of a new national identity. As such, the novel becomes not only a reflection of India's postcolonial condition but also a meditation on how its people process the emotional weight of colonialism, navigate the aftermath of Partition, and attempt to rebuild a sense of belonging in a newly independent nation. This intersection of literature, environment, and postcolonial identity forms a compelling field of study in contemporary literary criticism, and Midnight's Children serves as a rich text for examining these themes.

To deepen this exploration, it is essential to consider the lens of ecocriticism, which offers a unique perspective on how the natural world interacts with human experiences and cultural memory. As it is said, "the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Glotfelty,1996, p. xviii). Ecocriticism is a critical approach that explores the relationship between literature and the environment and is particularly relevant in understanding how nature and human emotions are intricately connected in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. While the novel contains numerous fantastical and surreal elements, nature is often depicted as a force that interacts with and reflects the characters' internal turmoil. The Indian landscape, both natural and urban, functions as a mirror to the emotional and psychological states of the protagonists, who struggle to reconcile their desires with the collective demands of the nation. In this sense, Rushdie's portrayal of the environment becomes a metaphor for the traumatic and often contradictory nature of postcolonial identity. As characters like Saleem grapple with their personal histories, nature becomes a vehicle for exploring their memories, fears, and hopes for the future.

While ecocriticism provides insight into the relationship between nature and human emotion, postcolonial theory offers a complementary lens through which to examine *Midnight's Children*. Postcolonial theory plays a crucial role in this study, as it enables a deeper understanding of the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping the identity of both the land and its people. It critically unpacks the ways colonial rule-imposed power structures that fractured societies and identities, leaving psychological scars that persist long after independence. Another critic who dwells on the concerns between postcolonialism and postcolonial ecocriticism is Timothy Clark. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, he states, "in the encounter between 'post-colonial' thinking and ecocriticism to date, it is ecocriticism that first seems the more in need of revision. For, to many people, modern environmentalism can look like another form of colonialism" (2011, p.120). Moreover, it illuminates the trauma of Partition as a profound rupture—not only geographically but emotionally and culturally—resulting in a fragmented national identity. By focusing on how personal and collective memories are formed and affected by such historical violence, postcolonial theory helps reveal the complexities of identity negotiation and cultural recovery within postcolonial contexts. Rushdie's novel critiques the colonial past while also confronting the complexities of postcolonial identity in a newly independent India. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, we can analyze the psychological scars left by colonial rule, the fractured national identity that results from Partition, and how both personal and collective memories are shaped by historical trauma. This dual approach of ecocritical and postcolonial enriches the reader's interpretation of the novel's engagement with emotional, environmental, and cultural recovery.

Building upon the ecocritical and postcolonial frameworks outlined above, this study aims to demonstrate how *Midnight's Children* intricately weaves nature with postcolonial memory, trauma,

and identity to reveal the active role of the environment in shaping both personal and collective experiences. Central to this analysis is the way Rushdie employs nature not merely as a backdrop, but as an active force that shapes the psychological and emotional experiences of his characters, particularly the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. By integrating ecocriticism and postcolonial theory, this research uncovers how the natural world in the novel serves as a symbolic site where colonial histories, traumatic memories, and fractured identities converge and are negotiated. Through the analysis of key moments in the novel, this study will explore how Rushdie employs both ecological and postcolonial lenses to examine the enduring impact of colonialism, the trauma of independence, and the fragmentation of identity in postcolonial India. By analyzing the text through these critical perspectives, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how *Midnight's Children* reflects the challenges of forming a cohesive national consciousness, while also revealing the complex interplay between environment, memory, and identity in the wake of historical upheaval.

This study uses two main theories- ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. These help us understand how nature, memory, and identity connect in the novel. Important ideas are trauma, which means deep pain from colonial rule and Partition, and memory, which includes personal and shared stories. This research focuses only on ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Other views, such as psychoanalysis or gender studies, are not covered here but could provide additional insight.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research method. It focuses on close reading and thematic analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The main themes studied are trauma, memory, and identity fragmentation. The analysis examines literary features such as imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and narrative voice. These features illustrate the connection between nature and postcolonial identity in the novel. The research is grounded in two primary theories: ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. It examines how the novel uses nature as more than just a background. Nature is shown as a symbol of political tension, historical trauma, and shared memory after India's independence. The study also examines the novel's structure and how the characters evolve emotionally and psychologically. This growth reflects the wider struggles of the nation and culture. The research draws on ideas from ecocriticism experts, such as Lawrence Buell, and postcolonial thinkers, including Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Secondary sources, including critical essays, scholarly articles, and relevant literary analyses, are used to provide contextual support and deepen the interpretation.

3. Results and Discussions

Salman Rushdie is widely regarded as a leading figure among Anglo-Indian authors, with a writing career spanning nearly forty years. Renowned for his ability to capture human emotions and their connection to nature, Rushdie combines realism with a deep emotional and perceptive understanding of the complexities of Indian society. His works often highlight the lives of ordinary people, including the poor, orphans, refugees, and those impacted by the turbulent Hindu-Muslim relations during the partition.

Midnight's Children is a multi-layered novel that blends confession, polemics, history, memoir, political allegory, and fantasy. It juxtaposes the fantastical with historical realities, starting with the birth of its protagonist, Saleem Sinai, and the creation of the fictional Midnight's Children's Club. This imaginative group operates in a space that blurs the lines between dream and reality. Employing epic and mythic structures, Rushdie transforms these elements into tools of liberation, adding a comedic dimension to his narrative. The novel serves as an allegory of modern India's history, recounting the lives of 1,001 children born during the nation's first hour of independence on August 14, 1947. Rushdie's second novel spans six decades and three generations, exploring both pre- and post-colonial Indian history. The narrator intricately weaves interconnected tales, symbolizing the innumerable stories that shape India's identity in a perpetual cycle of storytelling. In this novel, the narrator, Salim Sinai, remarks:

> I paradoxically took my first tentative steps towards that involvement with mighty events and public lives from which I would never again be free… never (that is)… until the widow (Indira Gandhi, late Prime Minister of India)… There begins another story (Rushdie, 1981, p. 432).

Human emotion is often regarded as a lens through which the complexities of fatigue and mystery are understood. This perspective reflects an attitude that concepts such as truth, tradition, history, and self are not fixed but rather constructed and subject to critique. Notably, the notion of the freedom struggle is reexamined and questioned in several novels from the 1980s, leading to its portrayal as a fading or obsolete theme. In this context, identity and human emotion take on pivotal roles throughout the narrative. As it is said, *Midnight's Children* is a critique of Indian mentality, diversity, politics, and history, but at the same time a study on human relations (Bratanoviæ, 2018, p. 5)." The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, serves as a vehicle for exploring these themes, as he navigates significant social and historical moments in India's past. Throughout his journey, the novel explores the challenges of self-discovery and the quest for a coherent sense of identity amidst a constantly shifting cultural and historical landscape. Saleem confesses that, in order to avoid absurdity, he must work faster than Scheherazade to ensure that he ends up meaning something.

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Midnight's Children stands as a profoundly authentic novel, with Saleem Sinai's narrative intricately tied to India's history. As Vandana Saini says, Rushdie's concern in this novel, to fictionalize an experience of recent Indian history, suggests that his novel might potentially be considered as a form of historical fiction (2023, p. 16). Born on the night of India's independence from British rule,

Saleem's life is symbolically and literally entwined with the nation's destiny. This connection is deepened through elements of magical realism, as Saleem is one of a thousand and one children gifted with extraordinary abilities. He has the telepathic power to communicate with these children, allowing them to deliberate on the struggles confronting the newly formed nation. The novel unfolds through Saleem's narration to Padma, his companion in the "Chutney factory," as he reflects on his life while nearing death in his thirties. His pursuit of identity is intricately linked with India's history, as he juxtaposes his personal story with the nation's historical trajectory: "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (Rushdie, 1981, p. 9).

However, as Reder (1999, p. 231) observes, the novel challenges the notion of a singular history of India. Rather than adhering to conventional history, Rushdie reimagines it through Saleem Sinai's viewpoint, intertwining myth, epic, and allegory to reshape the narrative of the nation. The story of *Midnight's Children* opens more than thirty years after the simultaneous births of Saleem Sinai and the establishment of independent India. Saleem, worn down both physically and emotionally, foresees his early demise while employed at a pickle factory. Frail and aged beyond his years, his personal struggles reflect the chaotic history of his nation. He shares his life story with Padma, a devoted and illiterate young woman who cares for and loves him. Saleem's narrative begins by delving into 32 years of his family's history leading up to his birth.

In the novel's opening scenes, Dr. Adam Aziz experiences a pivotal moment when he first sees Nazeem Ghani's uncovered face. The removal of the black cloth veil that had concealed her face leads to the culmination of their relationship in marriage. This moment reflects the social fabric of the time, highlighting the intersection of traditional customs and evolving practices. The sociological foundation established by such unions underscores the cohesive family structures that sustained society until the 20th century.

Dr. Aziz's wish to see Nazeem's face ultimately finds fulfillment through their marriage, symbolizing the triumph of personal desires within the bounds of tradition. Saleem's life, marked by a series of pivotal moments, parallels key historical events of national importance, blending the personal with the political in an intricate narrative tapestry. Ahmed Sinai, originally intending to marry Alia, changed his mind and chose Mumtaz instead. With the Aziz family's consent, Ahmed and Mumtaz, who later adopted the name Amina, were married and eventually settled in Delhi. However, as challenges mounted for Ahmed's business endeavors in Delhi, he accepted an opportunity from his friend Dr. Narlikar to join the real estate industry in Bombay, leading the couple to relocate there.

Adam Aziz's experiences reflect a similar trajectory of transformation. After spending a year in Germany as a student, Aadam adopted certain mental frameworks of the European West. Upon returning to his homeland, he struggled to reconnect with the idyllic vision of his childhood, described as "his childhood's springs in Paradise (1981, p. 6)." Ultimately, Aadam was compelled to embrace a new, culturally hybrid identity, a shift symbolized by blood and tears. This mirrors the broader narrative of India's redefined role on the global stage—a role it had no choice but to assume. Saleem Sinai highlights the turbulent identity struggles of post-independence India, rooted in these profound transformations. He records Jawaharlal Nehru's iconic speech at the dawn of independence, framing the moment as an Indian Renaissance:

> A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance.... We end today a period of ill-fortune." (Rushdie, 1981, p. 7)

Ahmed Sinai purchased a flat in the Methwold Estate, which the departing colonial administrator, William Methwold, had previously owned. Methwold had seduced Vanita, the wife of Wee Willie Winkie, a street singer. At the same time, both Vanita and Amina became pregnant. Coincidentally, both women gave birth on the same night, August 14, 1947, in the Narlikar Emergency Hospital. This historic night marked not only the birth of the two children but also the nation's independence. In a twist of fate, the newborns were switched by nurse Mary Pereira to fulfill the revolutionary ambitions of Joseph D'Costa, the man she loved. As a result, the Sinai's biological child, Shiva, was raised as an orphan in the streets by Wee Willie Winkie, while Vanita's son, Saleem Sinai, was brought up in the affluent Sinai household in the Methwold Estate. The first part of the narrative concludes with the introduction of Saleem Sinai as a symbolic figure:

> A Charming Pose of Baby Saleem Sinai, who was born last night at the exact moment of our Nation's independence—the happy Child of that glorious Hour! (1981, p. 5).

At the stroke of midnight, on the night of India's independence, 1001 children were born, each blessed with a unique power as a gift for their simultaneous birth during the moment of national liberation. Among these children, Saleem had the ability to read minds at will, while Shiva was gifted with incredibly powerful knees that could knock down anyone. Parvati had the magical power to make people appear and disappear at her command, and Picture Singh could control any type of snake, including cobras.

Saleem was recognized as the leader of the Midnight's Children. Although Shiva was born at the same moment, Saleem's elevated family background earned him greater recognition, positioning him as a symbolic representation of India. Representation of a particular group or culture in literary works can significantly impact what it represents (Huda & Yustisia, 2024). As Josna E. Rege observes, Saleem's life is deeply connected to the fate of the nation, with the boundless potential of the newborn reflecting that of the newly independent country. Rege describes him as:

> Confidently identifying Saleem's life with that of India itself, the letter links the unlimited potential of the newborn infant both with that of the nascent state (2003, p. 4).

Dr. Narlikar encouraged Ahmed to venture into the business of manufacturing solid tetra pods, partnering with him on a 50:50 profit-sharing basis. Although Ahmed earned a substantial income, he soon found himself in trouble when the government froze his assets, which had a significant impact on him. This setback drove him to drink excessively, and he became a victim of a skin disease that turned his entire body white. Meanwhile, Amina ventured into horse racing and managed to make a considerable fortune. She also started receiving clandestine phone calls from her former husband, Nadir Khan, reigniting their relationship in secrecy. However, Saleem discovered their affair using his extraordinary abilities.

Alia moved to Pakistan, where she adopted a monastic lifestyle. Emerald married Major Zulfikar, and they too relocated to Pakistan. Hanif pursued a career as a film director and producer, marrying Pia, a celebrated actress and singer. Disenchanted with commercial cinema, Hanif transitioned to creating art films, including one based on a script about a pickle factory. Mustafa joined the Indian government service and married Sonia, who was of mixed Iranian heritage. The couple settled in Delhi in a house aptly named "Saleem's Fly," where Saleem's sister was born, whom he affectionately nicknamed Brass Monkey.

The narrative of *Midnight's Children* is deeply connected to the theme of freedom, a motif introduced early in the novel. Padma, to whom Saleem recounts his story, assumes the responsibility of looking after Aadam Sinai. Despite knowing Saleem's significance to her, Padma suggests that he marry her for his own well-being, as someone needed to care for him during his declining health. Saleem, however, enjoyed teasing her by avoiding the real issues, choosing instead to divert the conversation with playful tactics.

> 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 15, 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. (1981, p. 9)

Amina, Ahmed Sinai's wife, is portrayed as participating in gambling at horse races. The novel critiques the ongoing social problems in post-independence India, including poverty, casteism, and unemployment, which persisted after the country gained independence and, in fact, seemed to worsen. The irony of this situation is underscored by the shortage of essential resources, such as water, with the novel ironically remarking: "the water shortage had reached the point where milkmen could no longer find clean water with which to adulterate the milk" (1981, p. 22). Furthermore, the condition of untouchability is depicted as follows:

> Brahmins began to feel uneasy at permitting even their thoughts to touch the thoughts of untouchables; while, among the low-born, the pressures of poverty and communism were becoming evident. (1981, p. 23)

In Pakistan, the Siniais live with Amina's estranged sister, Alia, who still resents Amina for marrying Ahmed, the man she had once hoped to marry. Ahmed begins a new venture in towel manufacturing under the brand name "Amina Brand." Amina's daughter, Brass Monkey, rises to fame as a singer, earning the titles "Pakistan's Angel" and "Bulbul-of-the-Faith" for her patriotic voice. Under the stage name Jamila Singer, she falls in love with three men: Mutasim, the son of a Nawab; Zafar, her cousin; and Saleem Sinai, her brother. She deliberately rejects marriage to Mutasim, and the first two men eventually give up their pursuit. However, Saleem continues to pursue her, despite his advances being rebuffed and criticized.

Saleem undergoes a process of purification, during which he loses the ability to recall his own name and is referred to as Buddha. However, he gains the ability of "Sniffing," which leads him to be enlisted in the task of tracking Muj-ur-Rehman, a mission he successfully completes. He is then acci-

dentally led into the Sundarbans Forest, where, along with three companions—Shaheed Dar, Ayooba Baloch, and Farooq Rashid—they experience an extraordinary encounter with women who appear as powerful creatures. After this, they manage to escape the forest. Saleem is later identified during a military march by Parvati, the witch and ally, who calls him by his real name, helping him regain his memory. As the leader of the Midnight's Children, Saleem, Parvati, and Picture Singh are transported to India through Parvati's magical abilities.

Shiva, a close confidant of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, is depicted as a physically strong man who uses his political connections to manipulate and exploit women. Many high-class women are shown to bear his child, but Shiva abandons them when they become pregnant. Parvati is also a victim of Shiva's power and gets pregnant, but she is left alone. She develops a unique disorder after being abandoned.

Picture Singh is convinced that marriage is the key to Parvati's recovery from her illness and persuades Saleem to marry her. On the same day that Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency, Parvati gave birth but tragically died during labor. Following this, Saleem, along with the other Midnight's Children, is taken and subjected to mutilation as part of the government's family planning initiative. Saleem's health worsens, his body weakening, and his face begins to crack, symbolizing both his physical and emotional deterioration. Uma Parameswaran notes that these cracks are metaphorical of the cracks in India's unity, stating: "the metaphor, by extension, applies to India's strength and creativity, just as the cracks that Saleem claims to have are symbolic of the many cracks in the edifice of national unity" (1988, p. 8).

The Midnight's Children delves into human emotions and the theme of freedom in modern India. It serves not only as a depiction of contemporary India but also as a reflection on the era of the freedom struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. The narrative stretches from India's independence to the Emergency, highlighting the disillusionment that followed the country's newfound freedom. As such, *Midnight's Children* is both a political novel and a meditation on the notion of freedom, exploring the profound effects of the freedom movement.

Unlike earlier Indian writers such as G.V. Desani, Raja Rao, and Sudhin Ghose, who focused on experimentation, Indian English literature was traditionally more concerned with conventional narrative forms. *Midnight's Children* breaks many of the traditional rules associated with older fiction: the unities of time, place, and character are often unstable; the narrative shifts between first and third person; and elements of magical realism disrupt the portrayal of ordinary human emotions, though the novel is not explicitly religious or spiritual.

Midnight's Children offers a complex counter-narrative to the myths surrounding the political figures of Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It represents a significant shift from previous works in Indian English literature, particularly in its portrayal of the emotions associated with national identity. Rushdie's unique portrayal of events in post-1947 India is shaped by his distinctive understanding of the country's developments. Similarly, his depiction of Pakistan is influenced by his perception of what Pakistan meant to him. Rushdie is a master at creating this mode of narration, where myth becomes the medium through which the individual and history engage in a dialogue. His creativity and experimental approach are evident throughout the novel, with every page showcasing his inge-

nuity. As it is said, "*Midnight's Children* goes beyond the realm of legends, attempting to present a multi-dimensional portrait of India that needs to be wholly engaged with in its totality (Gangwar, 2024, p. 70)." *Midnight's Children* thus serves as a treatise on contemporary history, blending the personal with the historical and the mythical.

4. Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* presents a powerful synthesis of ecocriticism and postcolonial memory, illustrating the intricate relationship between human emotion, historical trauma, and the natural world. Through the journey of Saleem Sinai and the symbolic collective of the Midnight's Children, the novel captures the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural transformation in post-independence India. Rushdie portrays the struggles of people living in post-independence India. These struggles include questions of identity, belonging, and cultural change. The novel illustrates how significant historical events, such as colonial rule and the partition of India, have profound impacts on both individuals and the environment. It also illustrates how trauma, loss, and the quest for meaning shape the minds and emotions of individuals and the nation as a whole. Rushdie employs magical realism, a blend of magic and reality, to tell the story creatively and powerfully. This method enables him to view history from a new perspective and critique the effects of colonialism. By blending personal stories with political history, Rushdie prompts readers to reflect more deeply on the concepts of freedom, identity, and the significance of belonging to a nation. The novel also illustrates the profound impact of strong human emotions, even during times of profound change. In *Midnight's Children*, the blend of ecocriticism and postcolonial memory creates a rich and complex narrative that speaks to India's true history while also exploring the universal human experience.

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