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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Dismantling the Labyrinth: Analyzing Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

**Nikhil Kumar Yadav**

Student, Researcher, Writer,  
India

**Email Id:** [nikhil.isna@gmail.com](mailto:nikhil.isna@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5077-5918>

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### Abstract

The following paper is an attempt to analyze the wonderful tale Salman Rushdie has penned about the Indian nation. Rushdie's sheer brilliance could be seen in *Midnight's Children*, where he has piled the Indian history in a sublime way. Britishers, who sucked the soul out of India, are the ones directly responsible for the situation the Indian nationhood is in today. The mere pleasure of monarchs and elites brought catastrophes and havoc to the whole nation. The Indian freedom struggle was one of its kind in the world- for the country was divided on the night of its independence. It suffered one its worst time on the day it was liberated, millions left their

home for ever and a line of hatred was drawn. This paper tries to lighten the history which tells us about those dreams which caused the partition of India. It talks about the working of the elites, who causes the manipulation of masses. It explains the political megalomania and how religion acts as the main ingredient for it, in India. The paper is not only a reference to a particular incident in history, but explains the working of government, authority and oligarchy and their dominion over the soul and body of the common people of the country.

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Nationalism, Communal, Extremism, Riots, Postcolonialism, Megalomania, Allegory

Salman Rushdie's works have a significant contribution to the post-colonial criticism. His writings have compelled us to disturb our general perception about the facts of post-colonialism. He is generally known for his fusion of fiction with historical facts, which mingles like salt in water, intricating to carve out the desired information. *Midnight's Children* is one such piece, published in 1981, is confusing as a labyrinth yet very fruitful. Rushdie's wittiness, here, has worked out well to bridge two different narratives and present it into one; One a national allegory, and second is the autobiography of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. For Indian readers, *Midnight's Children* acts like a history book of India, dealing with post colonialism and post modernism easy to interpret and relate; but Rushdie has also tried, through his writing style, to make it feasible for cosmopolitan readers.

One major concern of the *Midnight's Children* is the imagination and creation of the Indian Nationhood. Rushdie is an Indian born British novelist and as a foreigner he has kept his own viewpoint on the whole notion of India. He sees India as fusion of Westernism and Indianism. The early chapters of the novel provide a solid support to this statement. Adam Aziz, grandfather of the protagonist, was a foreign graduate of medicine and returned to India to practice it. The character Adam Aziz resembled the situation of India at that time i.e., Britishers enforcing their hegemony all over the Indian subcontinent.

Rushdie also used certain terminologies for India like chutney and pickle- a mixture; mixture of culture, religion, ethnicity, color, superstitions etcetera, all which shall prevail forever. India being shown as a myth is also one such evidence. Rushdie writes, "Convincing him that the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo and all things magical would never be broken in India" (1).

He believed that in narrating such a tortuous nation, one structure of narration would not suffice, and that reasons his unique narrating style. Twentieth century was the era of change for women around the world. It was the time when people's mentality had begun to change regarding women, but Rushdie still had certain stereotypical notions about the women in the Indian subcontinent. Rushdie has kept the description of the female characters depressingly limited and stereotyped. Cheats, prudes, gossip mongers, shrews, nags, temptresses, superstitious, fanatics, stubborn, irrational and petty are some of the words that he has used for the description of women in the novel. His work lacked any liberating narrative or radical experimentation regarding feminism. Salman Rushdie writes, "Because a woman without a

dupatta was a woman without an honour, and why had Emerald Bibi chosen to leave her honor at home?" (2)

The portrayal of the character Naseem Aziz gives the evidence to this. He talked about the color of Naseem Aziz and describes her humiliation caused by her color. Rushdie described that a typical Indian woman has to rely on her men if she is illiterate. Man has been shown as the dominator and important factor in the society. The protagonist himself is a male and the major characters are men. Rushdie specifically talked a lot about Adam Aziz's nose and its importance which was genetically passed onto his further generations, promoting manhood. Rushdie has also tried to focus more on the patriarchal side of the Sinai family. Rushdie voiced the female character Naseem as, "Janum, my life, please...Just a little so that I can make nice food and pay the bills...Such a gorgeous man, give me what you like, I know it will be enough" (3).

Though being a British writer, Rushdie has very subtly described India's independence—the most important historical ritual for the Indian state. To explain the birth of the two nations Rushdie began the story from a much earlier time, the early 1900. He followed the idea of the two-nation theory. In the early nineteen hundredth, INC (The Indian National Congress) was the main political society which worked for independence of the Indian state and its members believed in Indian Nationalism ideology. However, the British government disliked it and requested Congress to focus their meetings and sessions on non-political social reforms. The INC declined it and continued on its former principles. The British, seeing it as threat to their government, decided to imply their old policy of 'Divide and Rule'. The British tried to influence some elite Muslims of the country and asked them to start an anti- Congress movement. This small section of elite Muslims started to oppose Congress demands and ideologies and things began to change when the Two - Nation theory started to formulate in the minds of these people. They further stated that India would be a difficult state for Muslims and claimed that Indian Muslims would be agonized once the British leave. Their instigating speeches and anti-Congress movements had a terrible impact. A large part of the elite Muslims in the nation started to strongly believe in the Two – Nation Theory. This led to the formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906. This League was welcomed by the British as it favored their 'Divide and Rule' policy.

The formation of the Muslim League tensed the Hindutva leaders. Their growing popularism affected the major Hindu leaders. A fear started to lurk in them; a fear that gradually the Hindu population will dwindle, or we can say a pseudo fear. This fear led to the formation of Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu League. Narendra Kaushik in *Mahatma Gandhi in Cinema*, writes:

The 19<sup>th</sup> session of the Mahasabha declared, "There are two antagonistic nations living side by side in India. Several infantile politicians commit the serious mistake in supposing that India is already welded into a harmonious nation or that it could be welded thus for the mere wish to do so...India cannot be assumed today to be a unitarian and homogeneous nation. On the contrary, there are two nations in the main: the Hindus, and the Muslims, in India. (4)

Muhammad Iqbal, national poet of Pakistan known for his vision of an independent state for the Muslims of British India, in his presidential speech to the 25th Session of the All-India Muslim League says:

Our disorganised condition has already confused political issues vital to the life of the community. I am not hopeless of an intercommunal understanding, but I cannot conceal from you the feeling that in the near future our community may be called upon to adopt an independent line of action to cope with the present crisis. And an independent line of political action, in such a crisis, is possible only to a determined people, possessing a will focalised by a single purpose. Is it possible for you to achieve the organic wholeness of a unified will? Yes, it is. Rise above sectional interests and private ambitions, and learn to determine the value of your individual and collective action, however directed on material ends, in the light of the ideal which you are supposed to represent. Pass from matter to spirit. Matter is diversity; spirit is light, life and unity. One lesson I have learnt from the history of Muslims. At critical moments in their history it is Islam that has saved Muslims and not vice versa. (5)

Soon, along with the ideology of Indian Nationalism, two new ideologies came into existence— Hindu Nationalism and Muslim Nationalism. Elite people from both the communities started to believe in idea of ‘religion over nation’. As the leaders of communities started to influence large mass of people, the situation became unstable. Rushdie came from a liberal Muslim family; however, he was educated in England, a place that offers the best western education. Due to the interconnection and interdependence of his family and educational background, and the blending of Muslim culture and British Christian Culture, he regarded himself a secular human being. The secularism in Rushdie averted him to favor any side in the religion politics. Keeping neutral, Rushdie talks about the religious riots and violence caused during the pre-partition time. The description of the Ravana gang- a Hindu phobic group of people- has been shown as doing a fanatical anti- Muslim movement. Rushdie writes, “pigs’ heads could be left in the courtyards of Friday mosques... Muslims are the Jews of Asia... The police, 1947, were not to be relied upon by Muslims” (6).

Lifafa Das, a follower of the Hindu extremist R.S.S.S. Party has been shown as a victim of a mob lynching in a Muslim dominated muhalla. The mob lynching against Lifafa Das explains most of the riots. Lifafa Das was liked by the children of the mullah, because of his peepshow. A girl (*ponytailed one-eyebrowed Valkyrie*) initially started shouting ‘Hindu, Hindu’ at Lifafa Das because she was made to wait for the peepshow. Later, she was joined on by a lot of people who poured their religious hatred on Lifafa Das. Rushdie, here, tries to tell that at that time any sort of fight had the potential to transfer into a religious riot, as religion was the only thing that floated in the minds of people across the country. The daily tussles between the Sindhi, Bengali and Muslims in the muhalla, depict that people who have always lived in harmony, began quarreling on religion because it was in the air. The air smelled of religious hatred and revulsion.

Rushdie has shown Mian Abdullah a pro-Indian Muslim politician who creates the Free Islam Convocation, a gathering of Indian Muslims who disapprove of the dogmatism and

intolerance frequently present in many traditional practitioners Islam. Through the character of the Hummingbird, Rushdie tells us that all Muslims had to support the Two-Nation theory and those who opposed were silenced anonymously. The shifting of Sinai family from Delhi to Bombay also represents violence, suffering and callousness by the extremists.

Rushdie asserts that the pre-partition violence is a result of the political megalomania within India. He referred independence as for the elites. He says that the riches have staked the life of millions to fulfill their own personal dreams. Rushdie believes that the two mightiest beliefs in India are money-Politics and God-Religion. He referred the existence of various communities in India as a collective fiction in which anything was possible and calls the Indian politics unpredictable.

### **The Partition of the Indian State:**

Salman Rushdie was born on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1947. The partition of the Indian state had a terrific impact on his childhood. His family moved to Pakistan, as they were Muslims, leaving everything in India. Rushdie's personal experiences have molded the novel in a specific manner, condemning partition. Rushdie starts the story of partition from the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten. He indicates that Mountbatten came with a very restricted time and was supposed to free India as soon as possible. The chapter "*Tick Tock*" refers to the passing of time and the countdown calendar Mountbatten had in his office.

The description of the Methwold and his villas represent the situation of the Britishers of that time. Britishers knew that they had to leave and they disliked the notion of independence. According to them, India was yet not capable of running its own administration over the country. According to Rushdie, Britishers still felt proud of what they had done. Rushdie states:

Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary systems, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling down until an English man bothered to see to it. And now, suddenly, independence. (7)

A feeling of unhappiness and pride could be seen in his words. Methwold's condition for buying the villas- preserve every constituent of the villa in its original state is a clear representation of the colonial mindset i.e., leaving their impression and legacy behind forever. This statement of Methwold says a lot about the political mindset of the British. Britishers, of course, were leaving but they still sought more from the country, so they had to be clever for their benefits in the geopolitical viewpoint. Through Methwold's wig, Rushdie has tried to reflect the fallaciousness and deception of the British Empire. How they've fooled the simple people of India in their trickery.

The British accepted M.A. Jinnah as the voice of the Muslims in India, because he fitted in their theory of division. Jinnah had created an illusion in himself that a separate state for Muslims shall guarantee them peace and security, which they would be deprived of in India. It was his own personal dream and he made it believe to the rest of the Muslims. Rushdie states that a state was being created, which was never required. He says that the notion of having a separate state got more firmness with the riots in Bengal and Punjab. The blood and the lives

of people sanctified this dream, and which was required, except which the dream would've been a dream. The lost lives added to the heaviness of the subject. Rushdie says:

a new myth to celebrate because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom...a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will- except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in various degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification of and renewal which can only be proved by the rituals of blood. (8)

Rushdie talks about the cabinet mission scheme- a last attempt by the liberal nationalist to avoid the Partition. This scheme proposed to divide India in four parts, not based on religion but on the working of government. However, it failed and ensured Partition. Soon, the date August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947, was decided to be the day to give India a complete independence. Days before the independence, once again, India got victimized of its superstitions. News was spread that 15<sup>th</sup> August is an inauspicious day, and the country can't have its most important ritual on this day. Rushdie writes, "August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1947: discontent in the heaven. Jupiter and Venus are in quarrelsome vein; moreover, the three crossed stars are moving into the most ill-favored house of all. Benarasi astrologers name it fearfully: 'Karamstan! They enter Karamstan!'" (9)

And that yields the notion of midnight independence- neither on 14<sup>th</sup> nor 15<sup>th</sup>. Reflecting on the allegorical perspective, the birth of Saleem Sinai and Shiva represents the birth of two new states- India and Pakistan. The illegitimacy and the nature of birth of both depict the complexity in independence of both the countries. And also, the number of children survived of those that were born on midnight of 14<sup>th</sup> August- 581- is the number of electoral seats in the parliament of India. At the night of the birth, Ahmed Sinai breaks his toe in excitement for his son. Rushdie points the injury and pain as partition, which was ignored on the day of independence. People were overwhelmed by the celebrations of the independence that for a brief moment, the nation sighed and got relieved from the long tyrannic shackles. Rushdie marks this as a beginning of a new era; when the nation shall walk out from the old to the new. Rushdie has specifically described switching of the babies by Miss Mary Pereira. What she did was under the influence of mix of her thoughts and feelings at that time, but it changed the entire history of both the children.

Rushdie sees this act as foolishness as later Mary Pereira found herself in sorrow and guilt. Rushdie, here, is trying to compare this act of Mary Pereira with the extremists Nationalists. He, indirectly, is trying to say that both the dream and its implementation have been done under certain influence and their own little dreams have contributed to change the history and future of both the nations. He implies that those who did this, unintentionally, shall realize their mistake and regret what they've done. That, perhaps, sometimes we are so consumed in our personal visions, that we fail to put into a bigger picture and visualize it, its implementation, and consequences. Perhaps, that is how Rushdie too wanted to conclude this, that it starts from a person, then to a group, then a community, a state and then a whole country had to face its brunt. And maybe it could have been avoided.

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