

The Nation as Palimpsest: History and Identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

*This paper reads Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as an extended meditation on the nation conceived not as a fixed origin but as a palimpsest: a surface repeatedly written, erased, and overwritten by successive histories, memories, and competing claims to identity. Through the figure of Saleem Sinai, whose life is 'handcuffed to history' and whose body bears the accumulated inscriptions of India's post-Independence decades, Rushdie stages the nation as an unstable text rather than a stable ground, in which official historiography is persistently layered over, contested, and cracked open by private memory, rumour, and fantasy. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's account of the nation as an imagined community, Homi K. Bhabha's theorisation of narrating the nation through the tension between the pedagogical and the performative, and postmodern historiographic metafiction as theorised by Linda Hutcheon, the paper argues that Rushdie's fragmented, self-consciously unreliable narration enacts palimpsestic nationhood at the level of form as well as content. The analysis proceeds through Saleem's telepathic *Midnight's Children's* Conference, his fracturing body and memory, the crisis years of the Emergency, and the novel's chutnification of history, arguing that Rushdie ultimately proposes identity, whether personal or national, as an ongoing act of narration rather than a fact to be recovered. The paper concludes that *Midnight's Children* models a distinctly postcolonial historiography, one that treats the instability of the archive not as a failure of memory but as the very condition of national identity in the aftermath of empire.*

Keywords: Palimpsest, nation, postcolonial identity, historiographic metafiction, magical realism, Partition

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I. Introduction

Few images capture the ambition of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) as precisely as the palimpsest: a manuscript surface scraped clean and reused, on which earlier writing nonetheless remains faintly visible beneath the new. Rushdie's narrator, Saleem Sinai, born at the exact midnight moment of India's Independence on 15 August 1947, repeatedly insists that his own life cannot be separated from the life of the nation, that he has been 'handcuffed to history' in a manner that is at once a gift and a curse. The novel that results is not a conventional historical novel in the realist mode, seeking to recover a settled past, but a self-consciously unstable text in which official history, private memory, rumour, myth, and outright fabrication are layered one over another, each new inscription failing fully to erase what came before.

This paper argues that the palimpsest is not merely a useful metaphor for reading *Midnight's Children* but the organising principle of the novel's entire treatment of nation and identity. Rushdie's India is never presented as a single, continuous story; it is instead a surface written and rewritten by competing constituencies — the departing British, the Congress nationalists, the Partition's refugees, the Emergency's authoritarian state, and the five hundred and eighty-one surviving children of midnight themselves, each endowed with a magical gift and each claiming some portion of the new nation's meaning. The paper proceeds in four stages: first, it establishes the theoretical vocabulary of nation, narration, and historiographic metafiction that frames the reading; second, it examines Saleem's fracturing body and memory as a personal palimpsest; third, it considers the *Midnight's Children's* Conference and the Emergency as the novel's two central stagings of national palimpsest; and fourth, it offers a concluding argument about what Rushdie's palimpsestic method suggests for postcolonial identity more broadly.

II. Theoretical Framework: Nation, Narration, and the Palimpsest

Benedict Anderson's influential account of the nation as an 'imagined community' provides a first point of orientation: for Anderson, the nation is not a natural or pre-given entity but a construct sustained through shared narrative technologies — print capitalism, the newspaper, the novel — that allow strangers to imagine themselves

as members of a single, continuous community. Rushdie's novel takes this insight and renders it self-conscious, showing the nation's narrative construction not as an invisible, naturalised process but as a visible, contested, and often absurd act of storytelling, performed in real time by Saleem himself as he writes his memoirs for Padma, his sceptical companion and first reader.

Homi K. Bhabha's essay on narrating the nation extends this line of thought by identifying a persistent tension between what he calls the pedagogical and the performative: the nation as an already constituted historical object to be taught and transmitted, and the nation as continually reproduced and reimagined through the everyday performative acts of its people. *Midnight's Children* dramatises this tension directly, setting the pedagogical certainties of official Indian historiography — dates, treaties, censuses, Five-Year Plans — against the performative, often unreliable narration of Saleem, whose memory repeatedly proves faulty on matters of public record even as it insists on its own deeper, more essential truth. Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction supplies the third and most directly formal frame: fiction that self-reflexively announces its own status as a construction of the past even while engaging seriously with real historical events, thereby refusing the reader any comfortable claim to unmediated historical truth. Rushdie's frequent authorial interruptions, his admitted errors of dating, and his narrator's own uncertainty about what he has and has not invented together mark *Midnight's Children* as a paradigmatic instance of this mode, one in which the nation's history is available to the reader only as text, always already palimpsestic, never as unmediated fact.

III. Saleem's Body and Memory as Personal Palimpsest

Saleem's own body offers the novel's most literal image of the palimpsest. Disfigured by an oversized nose, marked by a birthmark-stained face, and progressively cracking apart under the pressure of his own narration, Saleem describes himself as a kind of overwritten manuscript, a surface on which the nation's traumas have been inscribed almost against his will. His telepathic gift, discovered in childhood, allows him to receive the voices of the other *Midnight's Children* directly into his mind, so that his own consciousness becomes host to a multiplicity of other lives and histories layered one over another. This telepathic faculty operationalises the palimpsest at the level of consciousness itself: Saleem's mind is not a single, coherent interior but a crowded surface on which a thousand other narratives are constantly being inscribed, contested, and partially erased.

Saleem's admitted unreliability as a narrator compounds this effect. He confesses at several points to errors of chronology, most famously misplacing the date of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, and he acknowledges that Padma's scepticism functions within the novel as a check on his more grandiose claims. Rather than undermining the novel's historical seriousness, these admissions perform Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction directly: Saleem's memory, like the nation's official record, is shown to be a layered, revisable text rather than a transparent window onto a settled past. His famous claim that he contains 'multitudes' inside himself, and that the whole of India's population might in some sense be said to have been pouring into him, extends this personal palimpsest outward, suggesting that individual identity and national identity are structured by the same process of accumulation, overwriting, and partial legibility.

IV. The Midnight's Children's Conference: The Nation as Contested Text

The *Midnight's Children's Conference*, in which Saleem convenes the five hundred and eighty-one other children born in the first hour of Independence, each gifted with a distinct magical power, offers the novel's clearest allegory of the newly independent nation as a text still being written and fought over. The Conference quickly reveals itself not as a harmonious symbol of national unity but as a site of internal division, ideological disagreement, and eventual fracture along lines of class, religion, and region that mirror the tensions of the actual nation outside the telepathic meeting-space. Shiva, Saleem's rival and, in a further twist of overwritten identity, the child with whom he was switched at birth, embodies a rival claim to the nation's meaning grounded in force and pragmatism rather than Saleem's more idealistic, pluralist vision.

This switch at birth is itself a further instance of palimpsestic identity: Saleem, the biological son of a poor street performer, is raised as the son of a wealthy Muslim family, while Shiva, born to privilege, is raised in poverty — an exchange performed by the nurse Mary Pereira in a moment of private, individual agency that nonetheless permanently overwrites both children's inherited social identities. The nation's official narrative of who belongs where, structured by class and birth, is thus shown from the novel's outset to rest on an error, or perhaps a deliberate erasure, that can never be fully corrected, only further written over. The eventual dissolution of the *Midnight's Children's Conference* under the pressures of adolescence, ideological quarrel, and the encroaching authoritarianism of the Emergency suggests that the utopian promise of the new nation, imagined at the moment of midnight as a shared and equal inheritance, could not survive contact with the accumulating layers of history that followed.

V. The Emergency and the Erasure of Memory

If the Midnight's Children's Conference represents the nation's plural, contested writing, the Indira Gandhi-led Emergency of 1975 to 1977 represents the novel's most direct staging of the state's attempt to erase and rewrite the nation's text by force. Rushdie figures this period through the Widow, a thinly veiled allegorical rendering of Indira Gandhi, whose government in the novel conducts a programme of forced sterilisation targeting the surviving Midnight's Children, understood in the text as a literal attempt to excise an entire generation's capacity to inscribe the future. Saleem's own eventual sterilisation operates as the novel's starkest image of authoritarian palimpsest: an attempt not merely to overwrite a rival text but to prevent any further writing from occurring at all.

The destruction of the Midnight's Children's Conference under the Emergency thus dramatises a hazard implicit in the palimpsest metaphor throughout the novel: overwriting is not always a benign, pluralist process of accumulation, but can also be violently monopolistic, an attempt by a single authority to scrape the surface fully clean and inscribe only its own version of the nation's history. Rushdie's decision to have Saleem survive this erasure only in damaged, fragmentary form, his telepathic gift destroyed alongside his fertility, suggests that the optimistic, plural nationhood imagined at midnight cannot be recovered intact once such an erasure has occurred; it can only be narrated afterward, belatedly, and always incompletely, in the very form the novel itself adopts.

VI. Chutnification: Form as Palimpsest

Rushdie's recurring trope of 'chutnification,' in which Saleem preserves memory the way his family preserves fruit and vegetables in pickle jars, offers a final and self-consciously literary image of the palimpsest at work. Each jar of chutney, Saleem explains, is a chapter of his story, condensed, flavoured, and imperfectly preserved, so that the finished memoir is presented to the reader less as a transparent historical record than as a series of preparations, each one a further processing and layering of the raw material of memory. This metaphor extends the novel's engagement with historiographic metafiction into the register of craft itself: writing history, Rushdie suggests, is always a form of chutnification, a selective, flavoured, and irreversibly transformative act performed upon a past that cannot be recovered in its raw state.

The novel's famous hybrid language, mixing English with Hindi, Urdu, and Bombay slang, performs a linguistic version of the same palimpsestic logic, refusing the colonial language's claim to transparency and instead layering it with vernacular residue that the English cannot fully absorb or erase. This linguistic hybridity, read alongside Bhabha's account of the performative nation, suggests that Rushdie's method of narrating India is inseparable from his method of narrating in English: both operate by writing over an inherited form while allowing the marks of what came before to remain visible beneath the surface.

VII. Critical Reception and the Politics of Palimpsestic History

The palimpsestic method that this paper traces through Saleem's body, the Midnight's Children's Conference, and the trope of chutnification has also been central to the novel's critical reception and to the controversies that have surrounded it since publication. Indira Gandhi's family famously objected to the novel's portrayal of the Emergency, and Rushdie's publishers were compelled to remove a sentence alleging that Sanjay Gandhi held his mother responsible for his father's death, an episode that in retrospect confirms the novel's own thesis about the vulnerability of any historical text to further overwriting by those with the power to demand it. Critics such as Timothy Brennan and Aijaz Ahmad have debated whether Rushdie's cosmopolitan, English-language remaking of Indian history constitutes an authentic postcolonial voice or a further layer of elite, diasporic mediation imposed over the very subaltern histories the novel claims to recover, a debate that itself performs the palimpsest's central problem: every act of historical narration, however well intentioned, writes over what it claims only to reveal.

This critical controversy usefully sharpens the paper's argument rather than undermining it. If Midnight's Children were simply a transparent recovery of a suppressed national history, the charge that Rushdie's own cosmopolitan position distorts that history would indeed be damaging. But because the novel repeatedly stages its own narration as partial, error-prone, and overwritten, the presence of Rushdie's particular class position and diasporic vantage within the text becomes one more layer of the palimpsest rather than a fatal contamination of it. Saleem's memoir, after all, is addressed to Padma, a working-class woman whose scepticism repeatedly punctures his more self-aggrandising claims, suggesting that Rushdie builds an awareness of his own narrative's limits and blind spots directly into the novel's structure. Read in this light, the debate among Brennan, Ahmad, and their interlocutors extends the palimpsest beyond the novel's covers into its critical afterlife, confirming that the nation, once imagined as text, continues to be written and rewritten by every generation of readers and critics who take it up.

VIII. Conclusion

Midnight's Children ultimately proposes that neither personal nor national identity can be understood as a fixed origin to be recovered through faithful historical reconstruction; both are better understood as palimpsests, surfaces continually written, contested, partially erased, and written over again. Saleem's fracturing body and unreliable memory model this process at the individual level, while the *Midnight's Children's* Conference and its violent dissolution under the Emergency model it at the level of the nation, showing both the plural promise and the authoritarian hazard latent in any act of collective self-narration. Read through Anderson's account of imagined community, Bhabha's tension between pedagogical and performative nationhood, and Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, Rushdie's novel emerges not as a failed or unreliable history but as a deliberate demonstration that postcolonial identity, forged in the aftermath of empire and Partition, can only ever be narrated as a layered, provisional text — one that, like Saleem himself, must ultimately crack under the weight of everything it has been asked to contain, while nonetheless leaving its trace legible beneath whatever is written next.

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