



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

NATION AND NARRATIVE: THE QUEST FOR FORM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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Abstract: This research article delves into the theme of the "national longing for form" in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, exploring its significance within the context of India's post-colonial nation-building. By employing literary analysis and critical perspectives, the article examines the protagonist's journey and its parallels with the process of nation formation in India. Furthermore, it delves into the intricate interplay between heterogeneity and homogeneity, highlighting the role of language and narrative in shaping the concept of the nation. Drawing upon the notion of the "imagined community", the article also explores the tension between form and content within the novel. Ultimately, the conclusion emphasizes the novel's portrayal of India's pluralistic reality and its rejection of a monolithic national identity, adding depth to the narrative and enriching the understanding of the nation-building process.

Keywords: post-colonial narrative, imagined community, language, nation

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a novel that addresses this national longing for form in the backdrop of India's independence. The issue that lies at the centre of this work, as John J. Su points out, is: Do literary productions contain the element of accountability to satiate the "National Longing for Form?" The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, articulates this longing when he remarks, "As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences... It is a sort of national longing for form." (359) This longing becomes a central issue in the novel, as it raises the question of whether literary productions bear the responsibility to fulfill the nation's yearning for a cohesive identity. The idea of Saleem's life mirroring the history of India adds depth to the exploration of the national longing for form.

Saleem's physical appearance, with his face resembling the map of post-partition India, symbolically connects him to the nation itself. "Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own", Nehru writes to Saleem Sinai in the novel. (143) Saleem's life mirrors the history of India. This correspondence reinforces the notion that Saleem's personal story intertwines with the larger narrative of the nation. He becomes a microcosm of India, embodying its struggles, triumphs, and complexities. This blurring of boundaries between individual and nation underscores the intense desire to find coherence and unity within the collective consciousness. "These birth-mark on the right ear is the East Wing, and these horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!", describes his schoolmaster Zagallo in the novel. His birthmarks, representing the East and West wings of the divided country, evoke the painful history of India's partition. With a parallel drawn between the idea of the nation and the protagonist, there is a movement towards finding a

monolithic truth or idea of the nation, which is not merely the protagonist's desire but a collective need of the hour." (359) Saleem's story demonstrates the existence of national desire in excess. The narrator's history, linked with the nation's history, is only a personalization of history. This parallel between Saleem and the nation suggests a search for a monolithic truth or idea of the nation, which extends beyond Saleem's desires and becomes a collective necessity.

The narrator's history, intimately linked to the nation's history, serves as a personalized account of the broader historical narrative. Saleem's story exemplifies the national longing for form, as his experiences become intricately entwined with the nation's journey towards independence. The narrator's constant search for similarities and connections between seemingly unrelated things reflects the pervasive desire to uncover a cohesive national identity. The discovery of these correspondences elicits a sense of delight as if confirming the existence of a shared collective consciousness.

The author juxtaposes the idea of nation-ness inherent in identity formation in the nascent independent stage with heterogeneity in the nation space. *Midnight's Children* defines this heterogeneity as what Benedict Anderson called "imagined communities" instead of the homogeneity its protagonist previously believed in. Salman Rushdie, like Benedict Anderson, describes the idea of a nation "as a social construct, as a product of a collective imagination ... as an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (ibid). Rushdie recognizes that the nation is not a monolithic entity but a complex tapestry of diverse experiences, cultures, and histories. Therefore, the novel concludes, "There are as many versions of India as Indians." (308) It highlights the diversity of identities and perspectives within the nation. The novel challenges the protagonist's belief in homogeneity and presents a nuanced understanding of the Indian nation as a community based on imagination. This recognition of diversity disrupts the notion of a singular national identity and challenges the homogenizing tendencies often associated with the formation of a nation-state. The notion of an "imagined community" enables a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the construction of national identity. Rushdie's narrative encompasses various regions, languages, religions, and ethnicities, reflecting the rich and multifaceted nature of India. The characters in the novel embody these diverse identities, their stories interwoven with the larger historical narrative. Through their experiences, *Midnight's Children* highlights the constant negotiation and redefinition of the nation's identity.

The text contains the aspiration for a national form and, as Homi Bhabha says in *Nation and Narration*, the predicament of negotiation with the cultural plurality in India. The protagonist claims he fears absurdity and must work faster "if he is to end up meaning- yes, meaning—something". (4) In this process, as Bhabha points out: the "overlap of different domains, in other words, the in-between spaces." work to form new perspectives of personal and national representation, particularly in a post-colonial nation. The characters in *Midnight's Children*, like Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai, inhabit the "in-between spaces" and, thereby, dialogue with and reject the idea of a homogenized Indian nation. The final "moment of failure" in the novel is what Georg Lukacs calls "the moment of value."

In Timothy Brennan's essay "The National Longing for Form," he argues that the structure of Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children* equates the formation of the nation with its linguistic incoherence and the disjuncture between form and content. Brennan's analysis explores how the novel addresses the nation's yearning for form and challenges dominant cultural narratives by presenting India as a diverse and heterogeneous nation with multiple versions of its identity. This essay expands upon Brennan's arguments, delving deeper into the implications of the novel's narrative form in relation to the nation's longing for form.

Midnight's Children captures the complexities of nation-building in a post-colonial context by adopting a fragmented and multi-layered narrative structure. The novel intertwines personal and collective histories, blending myth and reality, and spanning different temporal and spatial dimensions. By doing so, Rushdie challenges the idea of a linear and cohesive national narrative. The fragmented form mirrors the fragmented nature of post-colonial societies, where multiple histories, languages, and cultural traditions coexist and intersect.

Language plays a crucial role in *Midnight's Children* as a tool for narrating the nation and negotiating cultural plurality. Rushdie employs a diverse range of linguistic registers, reflecting the heterogeneity of India's cultural landscape. The novel incorporates various languages, dialects, and registers, giving voice to different communities and regions within the nation. This linguistic diversity not only reflects the rich tapestry of Indian society but also serves as a means to subvert dominant cultural norms and challenge the hegemony of the English language, which was imposed during the colonial era.

The novel's fragmented form and linguistic diversity serve to highlight the multiplicity of Indian identities. Rushdie rejects the notion of a singular and homogenized national identity, recognizing that there are numerous versions of India and countless stories waiting to be told. Through the diverse voices and narratives in the novel, Rushdie celebrates the cultural, religious, and linguistic differences that make up the fabric of the nation. He embraces the idea that India is a nation of nations, encompassing various ethnicities, religions, and social classes, each with distinct experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the novel challenges the notion of a fixed and stable national identity. The characters in the novel embody the complexities of identity formation in a post-colonial society. They navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, and past and present. Rushdie's characters, such as Saleem Sinai, represent the hybrid nature of Indian identity, reflecting the influence of both indigenous and colonial cultures.

The novel's narrative form becomes symbolic of the nation itself—a nation in constant negotiation, redefinition, and self-discovery. Rushdie intentionally disrupts traditional narrative conventions to mirror the upheavals and contradictions inherent in the nation's journey. The fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of the nation's history and the ongoing struggles to reconcile its diverse components. By embracing a non-linear narrative, Rushdie emphasizes the importance of plurality and contestation in the formation of the nation. *Midnight's Children* rejects a simplistic and singular narrative of national identity, acknowledging the complexities and contradictions that arise from the diverse cultural, linguistic, and historical experiences within India. The novel invites readers to engage with the multiplicity of perspectives and narratives, recognizing that the nation's identity is not fixed but continually evolving.

In conclusion, *Midnight's Children* serves as a powerful exploration of the national longing for form in India's post-colonial context. The novel's fragmented narrative structure, linguistic diversity, and emphasis on plurality challenge dominant cultural narratives and celebrate the complexity of India's national identity. Rushdie's work underscores the importance of recognizing and embracing the diverse voices and narratives that contribute to the nation's rich tapestry. By rejecting a singular narrative, *Midnight's Children* invites readers to engage with the multiplicity and fluidity of India's national identity, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances that shape the nation's history and culture.

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