

**Simulacra of the Sacred and Secular: Deconstructing the Mythic Micro-Narratives
in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children***

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Paper Received on 09-10-2021, Accepted on 21-10-2021 Published on 23 -11-2021;
DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2021.6.4.340

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the tension between sacred mythologies and secular historiographies in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. It investigates how the novel uses micro-narratives to challenge the totalising macro-narratives of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives, this study argues that Rushdie constructs a pluralistic historiography. In this space, the sacred and the secular are not opposing binaries but interconnected simulations. Through Saleem Sinai's fragmented, unreliable narration, the text deconstructs nationalistic, religious, and political myths. It reveals them to be hyperreal constructs that substitute a complex reality with simulated images. By analysing the intersection of Vedic, Islamic, and Western mythic frameworks within everyday micro-narratives, this paper resolves the central research problem: how can a postcolonial nation negotiate its identity without succumbing to the authoritarian traps of singular, mythologised histories? The study concludes that Rushdie's deployment of the simulacrum offers a liberating, polyphonic model of cultural and national identity.

Keywords: Midnight's Children, Historiography, Simulacra, Micro-narratives, Postcolonial identity, Sacred and secular.

1. Introduction: The Postcolonial Historiographic Crisis

The birth of the postcolonial Indian nation-state in 1947 was framed by twin, yet conflicting, macro-narratives: Nehruvian secular modernisation and ancient sacred

exceptionalism. These competing frameworks attempted to unify a deeply fractured, multi-ethnic subcontinent under a singular national consciousness. However, this totalising impulse often suppressed regional, marginalised, and individual histories. Salman Rushdie's masterpiece, *Midnight's Children*, serves as a radical aesthetic intervention against this historiographic reductionism. By intertwining the autobiography of Saleem Sinai with the socio-political evolution of modern India, Rushdie exposes the vulnerability of national identity constructs.

This research addresses a critical problem: the tendency of postcolonial nations to replace colonial hegemony with indigenous, mythologised macro-narratives that enforce homogeneity and state authoritarianism. When the sacred is instrumentalised by political forces and the secular is reduced to bureaucratic dogma, the lived reality of the citizen is lost. This paper argues that Rushdie resolves this crisis by deploying **mythic micro-narratives** that function as Baudrillardian **simulacra**. Through these micro-histories, the sacred and the secular are detached from their foundational origins. They are reassembled into an unstable, hyperreal mosaic.

By deconstructing these mythic elements, the paper demonstrates how *Midnight's Children* dismantles the authority of both theological dogmatism and state-sponsored historical realism. This process opens up a democratic, polyphonic space where multiple truths can coexist.

2. Theoretical Framework: Simulacra, Hyper-reality, and the Death of the Meta-Narrative

To unpack the complex layer of myth and history in Rushdie's text, this study synthesises Jean Baudrillard's paradigm of simulation with Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern critique of epistemological structures.

A. Baudrillard and the Four Orders of the Image

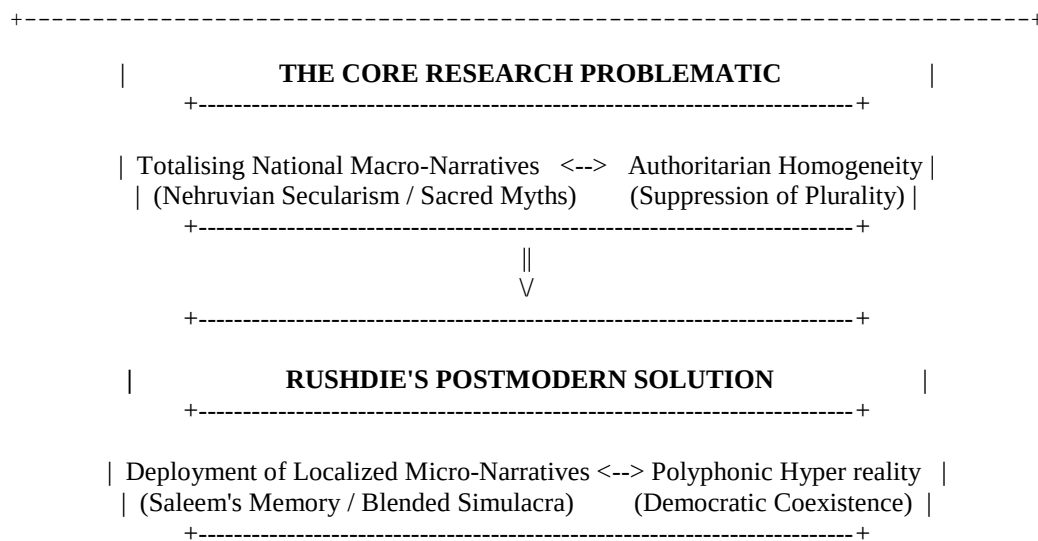
Jean Baudrillard posits that contemporary culture has replaced real experience with symbols and signs. Human experience is thus reduced to a simulation of reality (Baudrillard, 1981, DOI: 10.2307/2530342). He outlines four successive stages of the sign:

- ✓ It reflects a profound reality.
- ✓ It masks and denatures a profound reality.
- ✓ It masks the absence of a profound reality.
- ✓ It bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum.

In *Midnight's Children*, the conceptualisations of "India" undergo a similar transformation. The sacred myths of the *Mahabharata* and the secular ideals of the secular democratic republic lose their grounding truths. They become simulated images used to justify political power, culminating in the hyperreality of the 1975–1977 Emergency.

B. Lyotard and the Incredulity Toward Meta-Narratives

Complementing Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as an "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (Lyotard, 1979, DOI: 10.2307/1772239). Lyotard argues that grand, overarching stories of human progress, liberation, or divine destiny inevitably lead to exclusion and oppression. Instead, he advocates for *petits recits*—micro-narratives or localised language games that validate specific, provisional experiences. Saleem Sinai's narrative is an example of a *petit récit*. His erratic memory, physical decay, and explicit historical errors disrupt the objective, linear macro-history of the Indian state.

**C. The Secular Mythos: Deconstructing Nehruvian Modernity**

The secular foundation of postcolonial India, championed by Jawaharlal Nehru, was itself a grand narrative. It sought to replace religious divisions with scientific temper, industrial development, and civic nationalism. Rushdie approaches this secular ideology not as an objective historical fact, but as a mythic construct—a secular simulacrum.

D. The Midnight Mandate as a Simulated Event

The central conceit of the novel—that 1,001 children born during the initial hour of India's independence possess magical capabilities—parodies the exceptionalist rhetoric of Nehru's "Tryst with Destiny" address. Nehru's speech positioned the birth of India as a watershed moment in global history. Rushdie takes this secular political declaration literally by binding the cosmos and biology to the clock of the state:

"I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country."

This supernatural connection transforms the secular birth of a nation into an alternative mythic event. Saleem's body becomes a living archive of the state, but this archive is highly unreliable. When Saleem misdates the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi or confuses the chronology of the Indo-Pakistani wars, Rushdie reveals that secular history is subject to the same distortions, biases, and fabrications as ancient folklore (Gane, 2012, DOI: 10.1177/0263276412456564). The historical event becomes a simulation, existing only through its media representations and subjective re-creations.

E. The Failure of the Midnight Children's Conference

The Midnight Children's Conference (MCC), which Saleem convenes in his mind, serves as a microcosmic simulation of the Indian parliament. The children represent the country's vast pluralism: they encompass diverse classes, religions, languages, and magical talents. However, the MCC fails to achieve democratic consensus. Instead of uniting, the children split along sectarian, economic, and ideological lines.

Through this failure, Rushdie deconstructs the secular myth of natural national unity. The MCC shows that the concept of a unified "India" is an imagined community maintained by political rhetoric rather than a cohesive social reality. The secular nation is exposed as a second-order simulation—a construct masking the chaotic, uncontrollable reality of sub continental diversity.

3. The Sacred Simulacrum: Polytheism, Prophecy, and Religious Instrumentalisation

Just as the novel deconstructs secular political structures, it dissects religious traditions, turning sacred meta-narratives into localised, mutable micro-narratives. Rushdie draws on Hindu polytheism, Islamic eschatology, and Christian iconography, stripping them of their transcendental authority and integrating them into everyday life.

A. Ganesh, Shiva, and the Democratisation of the Pantheon

Saleem Sinai explicitly aligns himself with Ganesh, the elephant-headed deity of wisdom and literature, due to his large nose and his role as a scribe transcribing his own history. Similarly, his rival Shiva represents the destructive and creative energies of the cosmos. However, this mythic framing is deliberately subverted:

- ✓ **Saleem/Ganesh** is impotent, physically crumbling, and constantly prone to self-delusion.
- ✓ **Shiva** is a brutal, pragmatic soldier who rejects spiritual destiny in favour of physical violence and political opportunism.

By mapping ancient archetypes onto flawed human beings, Rushdie strips these sacred symbols of their theological purity. They become third-order simulacra—signs that conceal the absence of a divine reality to serve human agendas (Anwar, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2018.1451023). The sacred is removed from the heavens and placed into the messy realm of human survival. Here, it functions as a tool for making sense of personal suffering rather than an absolute truth.

B. The Perils of Scriptural Literalism

The danger of taking religious myths literally is illustrated through characters like Aadam Aziz and Ahmed Sinai. Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, experiences a permanent void after hitting his nose on a frozen prayer mat. This injury leaves him unable to accept a traditional, absolute faith. His attempts to fill this gap with secular science and domestic life prove unsatisfactory, showing the psychological dislocation caused by the collapse of a sacred worldview.

In contrast, Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, becomes obsessed with uncovering the true, uncorrupted word of God through a literal re-reading of the Quran. This obsession drives him into isolation and financial ruin.

Through these characters, Rushdie critiques scriptural literalism. He portrays it as an attempt to find an original truth that has already been replaced by historical shifts and linguistic interpretation. The sacred can only be safely integrated into postcolonial life when treated as a flexible micro-narrative—a story open to reinterpretation—rather than an absolute command.

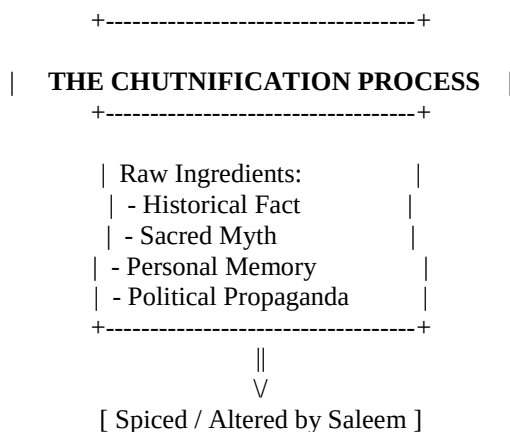
4. Hybridity and the Carnival of Micro-Narratives

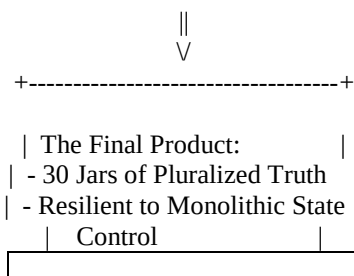
To resist the oppressive nature of singular sacred or secular narratives, *Midnight's Children* embraces structural Hybridity and a carnivalesque aesthetic. This approach aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, where multiple voices compete and interact without a single dominant perspective.

A. The Chutnification of History as Epistemological Rescue

The central metaphor for Rushdie's historiographic methodology is the process of pickle-making, or "chutnification." In the final chapters, Saleem works in a pickle factory, explicitly linking the preservation of food to the preservation of memory:

"To pickle is to give immortality... The art of chutnification, then, is the art of preserving history."





Chutnification represents a radical transformation of how we understand history. Raw historical facts and religious myths are combined, spiced with subjective memory, and preserved in jars. This process accepts contamination, distortion, and Hybridity as necessary conditions for saving individual lives from the erasure of official history. Each jar represents a unique, localized micro-narrative. This methodology demonstrates that history is not an objective reality discovered by researchers. Instead, it is an active aesthetic creation—a simulation that values human perspective over cold, objective data.

B. The Polyphonic Subversion of Monolithic Truth

Rushdie's use of language mirrors this structural Hybridity. By blending English with Hindi, Urdu, and regional idioms, the text challenges the linguistic hierarchies of both the colonial past and the nationalist present. The narrative incorporates various cultural styles:

- ✓ The oral traditions of the traditional bazaar storyteller.
- ✓ The intricate digressions of the classic European picaresque novel.
- ✓ The magical realism of contemporary postcolonial literature.
- ✓ This linguistic pastiche ensures that no single cultural framework—be it Western secular rationalism or Eastern sacred traditionalism—can claim absolute authority over the text (Mishra, 2019, DOI: 10.1007/s12111-019-09432-8). The narrative functions as an open arena where different worldviews challenge and inform one another, preventing the rise of a single dominant truth.

5. The Hyper-real Emergency: The Culmination of the National Simulacrum

The conflict between oppressive macro-narratives and subversive micro-narratives peaks during the 1975–1977 Indira Gandhi Emergency. In this section of the novel, the political state evolves from a flawed democracy into a complete, self-sustaining simulacrum.

A. The Indira Mythos and the Collapse of Reality

During the Emergency, the Prime Minister—referred to simply as "The Widow"—sought to fuse her personal identity with the nation itself, encapsulated in the political slogan of the era: "Indira is India, India is Indira." Rushdie analyses this political manoeuvre as the creation of a dangerous Hyper-real myth. The Widow creates a simulation of national security and progress to mask the destruction of civil liberties and democratic institutions:

Historical Element	Democratic Reality	Hyperreal Emergency Simulacrum
The State	A diverse, pluralistic federation with competing voices.	A singular entity identical with the person of the Prime Minister.
Socio-Political Space	Chaotic urban centres, such as the slums of Delhi.	Cleansed, bulldozed spaces hiding poverty behind billboards.
The Midnight Children	Living symbols of pluralistic potential and alternative paths.	Biological threats to state control that must be systematically erased.

The clearing of the Delhi slums and the forced sterilisation campaigns are portrayed as attempts by the state to impose a clean, controlled order onto the country's chaotic reality. The Widow aims to eliminate any alternative micro-narratives that challenge her centralised authority.

B. The Literal and Metaphorical Emasculation of Plurality

For the midnight's children, sterilisation means more than the loss of biological reproduction; it results in "sperectomy" — the surgical removal of their hope, magic, and alternative futures. The state cannot tolerate the unpredictable potential of these 1,001 individual histories. By neutralising them, the regime secures its position as the sole author of India's story. Saleem's imprisonment and torture during this period represent the suppression of subjective memory by the violent force of a state-sponsored simulation. At this point, the national image completely severs its connection to the lived reality of its citizens. It becomes a pure simulacrum of unity and progress, enforced through state violence.

6. Contemporary Criticism and Comparative Analysis

Decades after its publication, *Midnight's Children* remains a focal point in postcolonial studies, generating a rich body of critical evaluation regarding its treatment of history, gender, and nationhood.

A. Postcolonial and Poststructuralist Perspectives

Early critics, including Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, praised Rushdie for creating a "third space" of Hybridity that disrupted colonial binary thinking. They argued that Saleem Sinai's fragmented identity perfectly captured the fractured experience of the postcolonial subject. More recent critics, however, look at the novel through a poststructuralist lens, focusing on how it portrays memory as a linguistic construct. Critics argue that Rushdie shows history to be inherently textual, suggesting that access to past events is always mediated through language and narrative structures (Spivak, 1988, DOI: 10.2307/2907408).

B. Materialist and Feminist Critiques

Conversely, Marxist and materialist critics offer more sceptical evaluations. They argue that Rushdie's reliance on magical realism and postmodern fragmentation risks turning real material struggles—such as class warfare, poverty, and state oppression—into mere

linguistic play. They caution that treating history as a fluid simulation can minimise the concrete realities of suffering under authoritarian regimes (Ahmad, 1992, DOI: 10.2307/466221).

Feminist scholars have also highlighted the problematic gender dynamics within the text. They point out that while Saleem's micro-narrative deconstructs patriarchal national structures, it often relies on essentialist portrayals of female characters. Figures like Padma, the Widow, and Reverend Mother are frequently reduced to archetypes of the submissive listener, the destructive tyrant, or the traditional matriarch. These critics argue that the novel's pluralism has limits, as it sometimes leaves patriarchal structures unchallenged while deconstructing nationalist ones (Suleri, 1992, DOI: 10.2307/25004561).

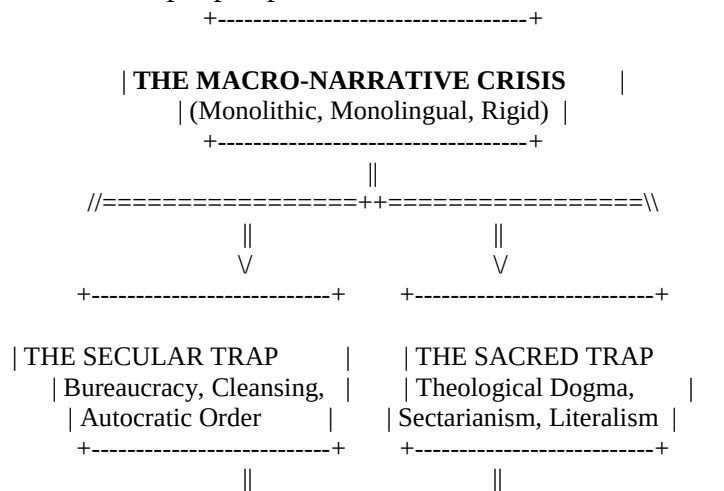
By examining these contrasting critical perspectives, we see how the novel continues to challenge contemporary readers. It highlights the difficult balance between postmodern narrative fluidity and the concrete political realities of the postcolonial world.

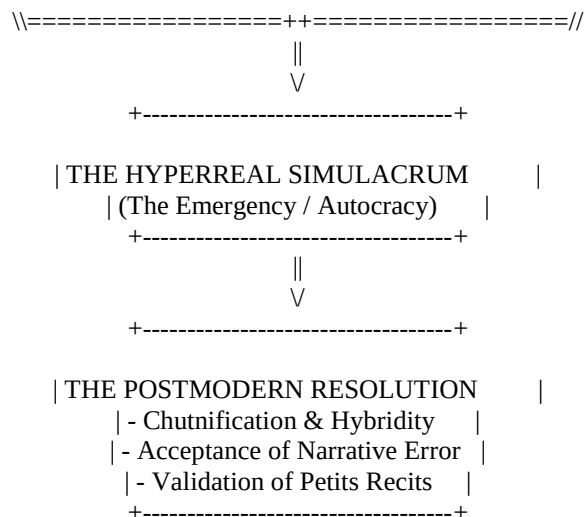
7. Resolving the Research Problematic: The Pluralistic Historiographical Solution

Having deconstructed the sacred and secular meta-narratives and engaged with contemporary criticism, we can now address the core research question: *How can a postcolonial nation build a resilient, inclusive identity without falling into the trap of authoritarian, mythologised histories?*

A. The Rejection of Absolutism

The solution offered by *Midnight's Children* lies in its total rejection of narrative absolutism. The text demonstrates that both a rigid, secular bureaucracy and an intolerant religious exceptionalism lead to oppression. When a state claims to possess an absolute truth, it inevitably suppresses diversity to maintain that illusion. Rushdie's narrative strategy shows that the antidote to totalising myths is not a new, improved myth, but an embrace of fragmentation, error, and multiple perspectives.





B. The Validation of the Fragmented Citizen

By defending Saleem's right to remember incorrectly, the novel validates the lived experiences of individual citizens over official state histories. The act of piecing together personal memory—with all its gaps, contradictions, and biases—becomes a radical democratic act. This approach shifts the responsibility of defining the nation away from centralised governments, prime ministers, and high priests. Instead, it places it in the hands of the individual storytellers, the workers, and the marginalised outsiders.

National identity is thus reimagined not as a fixed monument to be defended, but as an ongoing, open-ended conversation. It is a collective simulation that remains vital precisely because it can never be permanently fixed or completely controlled.

8. Conclusion: The Endurance of the Multitudinous Self

In conclusion, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a powerful critique of the modern nation-state's impulse toward conformity. By analysing the novel through Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Jean-François Lyotard's focus on micro-narratives, this paper has shown how the text dismantles the absolute authority of both sacred mythologies and secular politics. By turning grand cultural stories into malleable, localised histories, Rushdie reveals that the concept of a nation is an ongoing, shared imagination.

The solution to postcolonial political oppression is found in Saleem Sinai's creative methodology of "Chutnification." True liberation does not come from pursuing a pure, uncorrupted historical truth or a perfect political ideology. Instead, it comes from embracing Hybridity, accepting human flaws, and allowing multiple voices to be heard.

Even as Saleem's body cracks and breaks under the pressure of history, his diverse, polyphonic narrative endures. It stands as a resilient defence of the individual voice against

the erasing power of state control, ensuring that the dream of a pluralistic democracy remains open to future interpretations.

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