

Representation of the Subaltern in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) remains one of the most significant postcolonial novels to interrogate the nation's fractured past and the politics of representation. Central to the narrative is the tension between dominant historical discourses and the silenced voices that lie beneath them—the subaltern. This paper examines how *Midnight's Children* represents the subaltern within the political, social, and cultural landscape of postcolonial India. Drawing on theories by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha, and Subaltern Studies scholars, the analysis explores how Rushdie highlights linguistic marginality, class inequality, cultural hybridity, and the erasure of minority histories. The novel's narrative method—fragmentation, magical realism, and metafiction—works as a counter-narrative to the dominant historiography of the nation-state. Through characters such as Saleem Sinai, Shiva, Parvati-the-Witch, and the countless unnamed masses, Rushdie dramatizes the struggles of marginalised communities whose stories remain excluded from official history. Ultimately, the novel becomes a literary site where subaltern voices are excavated, though not always successfully, raising larger questions about whether the subaltern can truly speak.

Keywords: subaltern, marginality, hybridity, historiography

Introduction

The question of the subaltern, its representation, and its capacity to speak has been central to postcolonial studies. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of the subaltern as a socially, politically, and economically marginalized group, Subaltern Studies scholars have examined how official histories silence the voices of the oppressed. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel that parallels the destiny of protagonist Saleem Sinai with the fate of the nation, engages deeply with such issues of silence, erasure, and representation. The novel's playful yet politically charged narrative challenges the authority of official historiography by foregrounding the lived experiences of those relegated to the margins.

This paper argues that *Midnight's Children* represents the subaltern in three major ways: (1) by revealing the limitations of elite nationalist narratives, (2) by foregrounding marginalized communities and their cultural expressions, and (3) by employing storytelling methods that resist hegemonic forms of history writing. In doing so, the novel both exposes and critiques the systemic mechanisms that suppress subaltern voices.

Theoretical Framework: The Subaltern and Representation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that the subaltern subject is structurally denied access to representation. Her claim that "the subaltern cannot speak" refers not to the literal absence of speech but to the lack of institutional mechanisms through which their voices may be recognized (Spivak 25). Similarly, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* asserts that colonial and nationalist historiographies ignore subaltern agency.

Midnight's Children becomes a narrative experiment that dramatizes these ideas. Saleem Sinai, though not himself a subaltern, attempts to narrate the history of India from a personal standpoint. Yet his elite positionality is always in tension with the experiences of the marginalized masses around him. Rushdie employs Saleem's unreliable narration to critique the very impossibility of representing subaltern histories through elite discourse.

Narrative Fragmentation and the Crisis of Representation

Rushdie structures the novel as a fragmented autobiographical history, blending magical realism with political commentary. The fragmentation mirrors India's ruptured historical and political landscape. Saleem openly acknowledges his inability to record history "truthfully," confessing that his storytelling is full of gaps, distortions, and contradictions (Rushdie 37). This narrative instability becomes a metaphor for the unstable position of the subaltern in historical discourse.

According to Homi K. Bhabha, postcolonial narratives often employ hybridity and ambivalence to resist dominance. *Midnight's Children* uses precisely such literary strategies to foreground the multiple, often conflicting voices within the nation. In this pluralistic narrative environment, the silenced and forgotten can partially emerge.

However, Saleem's narrative authority remains a limitation. As an elite narrator, his attempt to speak for the subaltern ultimately reproduces some of the representational problems that Spivak critiques. Rushdie seems aware of this tension, using Saleem's flawed narration as a critique of elitist attempts to appropriate subaltern speech.

Representation of Socially Marginalized Communities

1. The Poor and Working Class

Rushdie repeatedly juxtaposes the lives of wealthy characters with those living in extreme poverty. The slum of the magicians, where Parvati-the-Witch resides, becomes a symbolic space of subaltern life. The community is vibrant, culturally rich, yet structurally neglected. Saleem's descriptions reveal the everyday struggles of slum dwellers, their vulnerability, and their cultural resilience. The Emergency (1975–1977), in particular, becomes a moment when slum populations were violently displaced—a direct reflection of real-life events such as Sanjay Gandhi's demolition drives.

Through these scenes, Rushdie foregrounds the material realities of the subaltern, showing how state policies are imposed upon them rather than constructed through their participation.

2. Women as Subaltern Subjects

Women occupy an ambivalent position in *Midnight's Children*, often embodying subalternity due to patriarchal control. Characters like Amina, Naseem ("Reverend Mother"), and Parvati-the-Witch experience systemic silencing. Parvati's story is particularly significant—she is a powerful magician, yet ultimately "disappears" both figuratively and literally. Her forced sterilization during the Emergency reveals how female bodies become sites of state violence.

Spivak's argument that the "subaltern woman is the most deeply silenced" (Spivak 28) resonates strongly here.

3. Religious Minorities

The representation of Muslims in post-Partition India is fraught with stereotypes, violence, and political marginalization. Saleem's family itself becomes a symbol of the Muslim minority struggling to belong in the postcolonial nation-state. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, riots, and political suspicion heighten this vulnerability. Rushdie portrays how minority identities are repeatedly erased or rewritten by dominant nationalist narratives, marking them as perpetual outsiders.

4. Ethnic and Linguistic Minorities

Rushdie also highlights regional tensions—Kashmiris, Bangladeshis, and linguistic minorities struggle against the homogenizing tendencies of the postcolonial state. Saleem's connection to Kashmir symbolizes not just personal origins but the contested histories of a region marginalized in both Indian and Pakistani national narratives.

Magical Realism as a Tool for Subaltern Expression

Magical realism in *Midnight's Children* is not mere fantasy but a political tool. Amit Chaudhuri notes that magical realism allows Rushdie to "stretch the boundaries of the nation's narrative" and include voices otherwise excluded (Chaudhuri 112). The *Midnight Children's* Conference itself is a metaphor for India's plurality—children from diverse castes, linguistic groups, religions, and classes come together telepathically.

Yet internal hierarchies persist: Shiva, born in the slums, is marginalized within the group despite his power. His violent personality reflects the anger of the oppressed, shaped by deprivation and state neglect. Shiva becomes both a subaltern figure and a critique of how oppression breeds destructive forms of resistance.

The Emergency: State Violence and Subaltern Erasure

The Emergency forms the novel's central political critique. The period's suspension of democracy, mass sterilizations, and slum demolitions expose how the state violently disciplines the bodies of the poor. Saleem describes "the Widow" (a caricature of Indira Gandhi) as orchestrating these acts, transforming citizens into voiceless subjects.

The sterilization scenes directly address subaltern erasure: the *Midnight Children* are literally stripped of their powers—symbolizing the removal of agency from the nation's marginalized populations. Rushdie represents this as both historical trauma and symbolic loss.

In Rushdie's telling, the Emergency becomes a moment when the subaltern not only cannot speak but is forcibly prevented from existing.

Representation, Appropriation, and the Limits of Speaking for the Subaltern

A key question remains: Does Rushdie successfully represent subaltern voices, or does the novel reinscribe their marginalization?

Critics disagree. On one hand, the novel foregrounds silenced communities and critiques the elitism of historical narratives. On the other hand, Saleem—an upper-class narrator—controls the narrative and interprets subaltern lives through his perspective.

Spivak's warning that the subaltern's voice is inevitably mediated through elite discourse becomes central here. Saleem frequently misrepresents or misinterprets marginalized characters. Shiva's anger is dismissed as brutality; Parvati's struggles are filtered through Saleem's romantic and moral anxieties.

Rushdie seems aware of this limitation. Saleem's narrative unreliability exposes his inability to fully capture subaltern realities. His frequent "cracks and errors" (Rushdie 412) symbolize the inevitable distortions of elite historiography.

This self-reflexive critique is *Midnight's Children's* most significant contribution to subaltern representation. The novel demonstrates not only the importance of recovering marginalized histories but also the inherent difficulty of doing so.

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a groundbreaking novel for its attempt to rethink national history from a perspective attentive to the marginalized and the silenced. Through narrative fragmentation, magical realism, and political allegory, Rushdie exposes the mechanisms by which dominant histories suppress subaltern voices. Characters such as Shiva, Parvati, slum dwellers, women, religious minorities, and linguistic groups reveal the uneven terrain of postcolonial India.

Yet the novel also acknowledges the limitations of representation. Saleem Sinai's elite positionality, narrative control, and interpretive bias reveal how subaltern voices can be appropriated even in well-intentioned efforts to recover them. In this way, *Midnight's Children* becomes both a narrative of subaltern expression and a critique of its impossibility.

The novel ultimately suggests that while literature can offer spaces where marginalized voices emerge, it must also recognize the limitations imposed by narrative authority, historical erasure, and social inequality. Rushdie's work thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the representation of the subaltern in postcolonial discourse.

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