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## Scattered identity of self in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's children*

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### Abstract

The present paper studies the scattered identity of self in the novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. The concept of identity is perhaps the most misused in contemporary times. There has been a complex trajectory of identity studies from psychology to anthropology, individual to collective, and self to communal. Identity is a collaborative aspect of a set of characteristics that defines a person or a group. Identity is an essential aspect of life in contemporary times for every individual, and it affects everyone in one way or another. All individuals are concerned about their identity from a collective to a personal level. Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* presents the issue of displaced identity through the various characters and their struggle for survival.

**Keywords:** Identity, nation, self, collective, scattered

### Introduction

Ahmed Salman Rushdie is one of the foremost contemporary writers, popularly known for his bold statements, politics and identity. As a modern writer Rushdie belongs to the group of Indo-British authors. His second novel, *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, shows the identity diffusion across the border after India's partition and

Pakistan's socio-political condition. His other book, *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1988, deals with the violent issues in the Muslim world.

Rushdie mingles the two worlds- British and Indian in his writing. So he covers the different shades of Indian and western tradition in his writing. His novel also incorporates the protagonist's isolation, Indian culture and political condition. In the words of Nayantara Sahgal, Rushdie is a "Schizophrenic author". (Sahgal 200) She further explains the word Schizophrenia as "a state of mind and feeling that is firmly rooted in particular subsoil but above ground has a more fluid identity that does not fit comfortably into any single mould." (Sahgal 200) Although he likes his birthplace India, he is satisfied in a foreign environment. Sometimes Sahgal feels that Rushdie's identity changes from time to time. He is not fit for a single frame of mind, so he has different identities.

Identity disturbance or scattered identity is a term that shows a lack of coherence, unevenness, or inconsistency in an individual's sense of identity. It can be said that a person's goals, beliefs, and actions are ever-changing. Every person takes on personality traits from the people around them as they struggle to have and maintain their own identity.

**Identity is a complex phenomenon that includes various aspects of the self. Identity includes the following aspects in general:**

- Beliefs and attitudes
- Perception of our abilities
- Ways of behaving (even as these change)
- Personality and temperament
- Our opinions
- The social roles one play

Identity disturbance is sometimes called identity diffusion. This refers to difficulties determining whom you concern other people. Sometimes they report that they feel non-existent. Others even say they are almost like a "chameleon" in terms of identity; they change whom they depend on their circumstances and what they think others want from them.

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Those experiencing identity disturbance likely experience inconsistent beliefs and behaviours; they may also over-identify with groups or roles over their identity.

The present paper discusses the shattered lives of the individual character who longs for their identical self or faces a dilemma of identity throughout the novel. The novel reveals the different aspects of identity with its autobiographical touch. Rushdie is the victim of scattered identity due to migration and cultural displacement.

The various characters in the novel face the question of identity.

### Fragmented Self Identities in the novel

Rushdie as diasporic writer, has experienced the feeling of displacement. The novel *Midnight's Children* is a story of the three generations of the Sinai family. The birth of Saleem is an exciting event in the novel which creates a modern history of the nation on the one hand and the feeling of revolt on the other. He feels delighted to utter the fact that he was born at the exact moment when India gained its independence: "I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting' away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15, 1947. And the time?" The moment Saleem Sinai is born on the evening of India's independence, he becomes the embodiment of his country. Saleem's identity metaphorically represents the identity of an entire nation; however, Saleem's identity is complicated and conflicted. Saleem is one of many characters within *Midnight's Children* struggling with identity diffusion. It is why Rushdie ultimately argues against creating a single collective transnational identity for a newly independent India.

In *Midnight's Children*, characters face a crisis of identity that suggests personal identity on a larger scale; national identity is multilayered and cannot be defined on specific lines. Saleem goes through a series of identity dilemmas reflecting his scattered identity. After an accident, he goes through blood tests and comes to know that he is not his parents' biological son. Saleem learns that Mary Pereira, in "her private revolutionary act," switched infant Saleem with infant Shiva, another child born on independence eve at the same time. Saleem's identity is further get strangled when Shiva's father turns out not to be Wee Willie Winkie but William Methwold, the British coloniser. Finally, Saleem's parents accept him as their son. However, as a *Midnight's Children*, Saleem must reconcile to be the "mirror of India" as the reality of being half-British parentage will remain forever with him. While living in Pakistan with his family, Salim is hit in an air-raid during the Indo-Pakistan clash. Saleem "suffers a merely partial erasure" and eventually forgets his name. The fight of Saleem against India on behalf of the Pakistanis is essentially a fight for himself. Saleem finally regains his memory and true identity, reflecting his inner self. The people fighting each other because of their politico-religious differences were once considered the same, living together in one country and fighting to get freedom from British rule.

Saleem's identity is multifaceted, and he states, "Despite my Muslim background, I'm enough of a Bombayite to be well up in Hindu stories, and actually I'm very fond of the image of trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh." Here Rushdie compares identity with nationality as the character of Aadam Aziz best represents it. Irrespective of religion, Aadam considers his

identity with his Kashmiri homeland and his associated historical past. In a reflection of Aadam's ambivalence, Kashmir always remains a disputed territory under the partitioning of India, where millions of people live with divided identities, one belonging to India and the other with Pakistan.

Aadam Aziz reflects on his identity dilemma when he says the following lines; "I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian. I'm still not much of a Muslim, but I'm all for Abdullah. He's fighting my fight." Here it can be seen that his identical self is torn into various strata of association with Muslims, Kashmir and being an Indian. Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, can affect India supernaturally only because of his fragmented identity as an Indian, Anglo-Indian, post-colonised Indian, and post-colonised British subject. Saleem's quest for identity with the Indian psyche is unsettled in its ultimate meaning. Saleem wants to establish his identity with the entire Indian subcontinent. His quest is not nationally limited to India or Pakistan but essentially universal. "The fatalism which had overcome me of late had taken on an even more terrible form; drowning in the disintegration of family, of both countries to which I had belonged, of everything which can sanely be called real." The occasion is the further bruising of the sub-continental psyche with its partition into Bangladesh. The causes for such amnesia in his mind cannot be resolved because of the irretrievable forces of history. Thus, his reconciliation and sanity are to be sought in fantasy and dreams. After his listless drifting in Pakistan, his roots continue to be tenuous and insubstantial in India.

Salman Rushdie's writings express the fragmented vision of identity reflected through his writing. He presents the scattered lives of the migrant people. He explores their universal mystery of being born with a unified identity before being scattered into different places only to experience a bitter unidentical self. Rushdie, himself, has gone through such experiences in his life. He focuses on the theme of 'double identity', 'fragmented vision of life', 'divided selves' and 'shadow figures'. He is a migrant who has gained a unique perspective from an extraordinary life. Rushdie was born in India, schooled in England, forced by his parent to move to Pakistan and finally exiled back to England. He has never get accepted in his entire life wherever he lived. In England, due to his Asian origin, he was considered very foreign and exotic at Rugby Public School and subsequently at Cambridge. In India, his peers often criticised him for his perfect British accent. He has been considered brainwashed and corrupted even by the materialist West.

Many critics feel that in *Midnight's Children*, the narration of the protagonist Saleem is unreliable. He gets numerous historical events and dates muddled up as he tries desperately to convince his readers that he is at the centre of India's history. He claims to have chosen to insert 'remembered truths' rather than literal truths. The theme of blurred remembrance builds upon that of a perforated sheet.

### Conclusion

The theme of the fragmented vision recurred throughout the novel and is represented best by major characters who long to discover their inner selves. In *Midnight's Children*, the psychic conferences contain one thousand children with a

plurality of languages, cultures and beliefs. Rushdie's double identity helps him look at his life more dispassionately than others. Rushdie is a master craftsman who uses language to his purpose successfully and efficiently recreates the historical background of the characters in the novel. Rushdie presents duality in his migrant protagonists. The protagonist's identity is torn into two opposing directions where they lose their original identity because of its duality, but he can connect different characters in meaningful ways.

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