MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature
ISSN *(Online) 3049-1444*
Vol-3, Iss-5 (May-2026)
Journal homepage: https://mrspublisher.com/journals

Magic Realism as Postcolonial Strategy in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Dr. Sanjiv Ranjan*

PhD (English) Vill. Chhawai Taki, Gopalganj, Bihar

Received: 21 / 03 / 2026	Accepted: 30 / 04 / 2026	Published: 14 / 05 / 2026

Abstract: Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), winner of the Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers, stands as one of the most celebrated and critically examined works of postcolonial literature in the English language. This paper examines how Rushdie employs magic realism not merely as an aesthetic device but as a deliberate postcolonial strategy — a mode of narration that challenges the epistemological authority of colonial historiography and asserts the validity of alternative, subaltern ways of knowing. Through the figure of Saleem Sinai, the telepathically gifted narrator whose personal history is inextricably bound to the history of independent India, Rushdie constructs a counter-narrative to the official discourses of nationalism, modernity, and progress. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Wendy Faris's scholarship on magic realism, this article argues that the novel's fantastical elements — the Midnight's Children's Conference, Saleem's permeable sinuses, and the Sundarbans episode — function as sites of epistemic resistance, enabling the recovery of marginalized histories and the destabilization of monolithic national identity. The paper further contends that Rushdie's self-reflexive narrative style enacts a politics of hybridity that exposes the fictionality of all grand narratives, colonial and nationalist alike, proposing instead a pluralistic, provisional, and embodied understanding of history and selfhood.

Keywords: *Magic Realism, Postcolonialism, Hybridity, Counter-narrative, Colonial Historiography, Indian English Literature, National Identity, Epistemic Resistance.*

Cite this article: Ranjan, S. (2026). Magic Realism as Postcolonial Strategy in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children. MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature, 3(5),7-9.*

Introduction

When Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children was published in 1981, it fundamentally altered the landscape of Indian English literature and, more broadly, of postcolonial writing in English. Its narrator, Saleem Sinai — born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the precise moment of India's independence from British rule — embodies the fraught, exhilarating, and ultimately tragic entanglement of personal and national history. The novel's central conceit, that the one thousand and one children born in the first hour of independence are endowed with supernatural gifts corresponding to the nature of the new nation, is characteristic of magic realism: the seamless integration of the fantastical into an otherwise realistic narrative framework, presented without apology or rationalization.

Yet to read magic realism in Rushdie's novel merely as a stylistic flourish, a debt to Gabriel García Márquez or the Latin American Boom, would be to impoverish its significance. As scholars including Wendy Faris, Brenda Cooper, and Stephen Slemon have argued, magic realism in postcolonial contexts functions as a mode of cultural and political resistance — a literary strategy for challenging the representational monopoly of Western rationalism and the historiographical frameworks that supported colonial domination. In Midnight's Children, magic realism is a politically urgent choice. It allows Rushdie to interrogate the official narratives of Indian nationalism, to recover the heterogeneous and suppressed histories of ordinary people, and to assert the epistemological legitimacy of myth, rumor, and embodied experience alongside the rationalist discourses of the postcolonial state.

This paper traces the functions of magic realism in Midnight's Children across three primary dimensions: as a counter-historiographical strategy that challenges colonial and nationalist grand narratives; as a vehicle for representing hybrid, plural, and contested identities; and as a mode of embodied knowledge that locates history in the vulnerable, transforming body of the narrator. Through close reading and theoretical engagement, it argues that magic realism in Rushdie's novel is inseparable from its postcolonial politics — a formal enactment of the novel's deepest ideological commitments.

Magic Realism and the Counter-Historiographical Impulse

At its most fundamental level, Midnight's Children is a novel about who has the right to tell history and how. Colonial historiography, as scholars from Edward Said to Dipesh Chakrabarty have demonstrated, was a powerful instrument of imperial domination. By constructing narratives of Indian history that emphasized European agency, rationality, and progress — and by dismissing indigenous modes of historical understanding as myth, superstition, or backwardness — colonial historiography served to legitimize the civilizing mission and render colonial subjects passive objects rather than active agents of their own histories.

Rushdie's response to this historiographical violence is to write a novel in which the magical is not the antithesis of the real

but its necessary supplement. Saleem's telepathic ability to inhabit the minds of the other midnight's children, and through them to access a plurality of Indian experiences and memories, functions as a figure for the kind of history that official accounts suppress: fragmented, polyphonic, contradictory, and irreducible to any single narrative line. The Midnight's Children's Conference — the telepathic parliament convened in the depths of Saleem's mind — is a utopian figure for a democratic, pluralistic India that the actual political history of the nation has repeatedly betrayed. When Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975 results in the forced sterilization of the midnight's children, thereby silencing this inner parliament, Rushdie makes explicit the political stakes of his magical conceit: the suppression of magic is the suppression of dissent, of diversity, of the heterogeneous voices that the nation-state cannot assimilate.

The magic of the novel thus operates as what Slemon has called 'a site of struggle' between two orders of reality — the dominant, rationalist order of colonial and postcolonial modernity, and the submerged, heterogeneous order of subaltern experience and indigenous epistemology. By presenting both orders as equally real within the world of the narrative, Rushdie refuses to adjudicate between them and instead insists on their coexistence — a formal choice with profound political implications for the project of writing postcolonial history.

Hybridity, the Third Space, and the Politics of Identity

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity — the condition of cultural in-betweenness produced by the colonial encounter — is particularly illuminating for understanding Rushdie's project in Midnight's Children. Saleem Sinai is the embodiment of hybridity: born into a Muslim family with roots in Kashmir, raised in Bombay's cosmopolitan middle class, educated in the traditions of both English literature and Urdu poetry, and possessed of a supernatural gift that makes him simultaneously singular and plural. His identity is not a stable synthesis of these elements but a perpetual negotiation among them — marked by contradictions, displacements, and the impossibility of any final resolution.

Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' — the liminal zone between cultures where hybrid identities are negotiated and new forms of cultural meaning are produced — finds its narrative correlate in the formal structure of Midnight's Children. The novel's narrative present is always located in a third space between memory and history, between the personal and the national, between the real and the magical. Rushdie's self-reflexive narrator constantly draws attention to the unreliability of his own account, reminding the reader that all histories are constructions, all narratives are provisional, and all identities are performances rather than essences.

This destabilization of identity has significant postcolonial implications. The colonial project was premised on the construction of fixed, hierarchical identities — colonizer and colonized, civilized and primitive, rational and superstitious — that naturalized relations of domination. By presenting Saleem's identity as irreducibly hybrid and his narrative as constitutively unreliable, Rushdie dismantles the epistemological foundations on which such hierarchies rest. Magic realism is central to this project: the magical elements of the novel resist any single interpretive framework, demanding instead a readerly openness to ambiguity, contradiction, and the coexistence of incommensurable realities that is itself a postcolonial epistemological virtue.

The novel's engagement with national identity is equally complex. Saleem's conviction that his personal history mirrors India's national history — that, as he declares, 'I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history' — is presented as both a truth and a delusion. The midnight's children collectively represent the multiple, diverse, and often antagonistic populations that Indian nationalism attempted to unify under a single national identity. The impossibility of sustaining the Midnight's Children's Conference — its collapse into disagreement, rivalry, and ultimately violent suppression — is Rushdie's allegory for the failure of Indian nationalism to honor its founding pluralism. Magic realism enables Rushdie to hold this critique and this elegy simultaneously, mourning what was lost while refusing nostalgia for what was never fully achieved.

The Body as Archive: Embodied History and Epistemic Resistance

One of the most distinctive features of magic realism in Midnight's Children is its insistence on locating history in the body. Saleem's enormous, permeable nose — his portal to the telepathic network of the midnight's children — is the most obvious figure for this embodied historicity, but the novel is saturated with bodies that bear the marks of history: Aadam Aziz's nose that bleeds whenever he prostrates himself in prayer, signaling his ambivalent relationship to faith and tradition; Parvati-the-Witch's pregnant body, which produces the son who will be Saleem's heir and avatar; and ultimately Saleem's own body, which at the novel's close is literally crumbling, disintegrating into fragments that mirror the fragmentation of the national body.

This insistence on embodied history is a response to the abstracting tendency of colonial historiography, which routinely denied the embodied humanity of colonized subjects in order to render them interchangeable, manageable, and disposable. By writing history through the body — specifically through a body that is marked, extraordinary, and ultimately mortal — Rushdie asserts the irreducible particularity of individual historical experience against the homogenizing force of official historical narrative.

Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonial body is instructive here. In The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon examines how colonialism inscribes itself on the bodies of the colonized, producing psychic and physical damage that must be worked through in the process of decolonization. Saleem's body can be read as a figure for this colonial legacy: damaged, contaminated, bearing the accumulation of historical traumas in its very tissue. His disintegration at the novel's end is simultaneously a personal death and an allegorical reckoning with the costs of a history of colonialism, partition, and national betrayal.

The Sundarbans episode — in which Saleem and his companions are lost in the primordial forests of the Bengal delta, encountering ghosts, illusions, and the accumulated sufferings of the dead — is perhaps the novel's most sustained exercise in magical realism as epistemic intervention. The Sundarbans exist outside the rationalized space of the modern nation-state, and in that liminal zone, suppressed histories rise to the surface: the dead of partition, the victims of war, the forgotten casualties of national projects. Magic realism here becomes a mode of bearing witness to what official history cannot or will not accommodate — the ghostly remainder of unprocessed trauma that haunts the present.

Narrative Self-Reflexivity and the Fictionality of Grand Narratives

Rushdie's narrative strategy in Midnight's Children is deeply self-reflexive: Saleem is an unreliable narrator who frequently acknowledges his own errors, contradictions, and fabrications. He confuses dates, misremembers conversations, and admits to 'rearranging' historical events for narrative convenience. This self-reflexivity is not a failure of the novel's realism but a deliberate formal strategy that constitutes one of its most powerful postcolonial gestures.

By exposing the constructedness of his own narrative, Saleem — and through him, Rushdie — extends the critique to all narratives that claim historical authority. Colonial historiography presented itself as objective, empirical, and authoritative; nationalist historiography made similar claims for its own counter-narratives. Rushdie's novel insists that all history is narration, and all narration is shaped by the position, interests, and blind spots of the narrator. This is not a counsel of nihilism or relativism but a call for what might be termed 'situated knowledge' — the recognition that historical truth is always partial, perspectival, and provisional, and that the acknowledgment of this partiality is a condition of intellectual honesty and political responsibility.

Magic realism serves this epistemological project by rendering the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, memory and imagination productively unstable. In a novel where a boy's sinuses can access the minds of a thousand other people, where a woman's beauty literally blinds those who look at her, and where a character can make himself invisible, the reader cannot take any narrative claim at face value — but neither can she dismiss any narrative claim as mere fantasy. The result is a mode of readerly engagement that models the critical, provisional, open-ended relationship to historical knowledge that the novel advocates.

Conclusion

Midnight's Children remains, more than four decades after its publication, one of the richest and most demanding explorations of the relationship between narrative, history, and identity in the postcolonial world. Rushdie's deployment of magic realism in the novel is not an ornamental choice or a borrowing from a fashionable Latin American mode, but a deeply considered postcolonial strategy that is integral to the novel's political and epistemological commitments.

By integrating the magical and the real without subordinating one to the other, Rushdie constructs a narrative form adequate to the complexity of postcolonial experience — an experience defined by the coexistence of radically different epistemological frameworks, the persistence of colonial trauma alongside the aspirations of independence, and the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of unified national identity. Magic realism enables the novel to honor this complexity without resolving it prematurely, to mourn what has been lost without abandoning hope for what might yet be achieved.

In its engagement with colonial historiography, hybrid identity, embodied knowledge, and the fictionality of grand narratives, Midnight's Children articulates a vision of postcolonial culture that is pluralistic, self-critical, and resolutely anti-authoritarian. Rushdie's magic realism is, in the deepest sense, a democratic literary practice — one that insists on the multiplicity of human experience and the irreducibility of individual lives to the master narratives of nation, race, or empire. In this insistence lies both its aesthetic power and its enduring political significance.

References

1. Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. Jonathan Cape, 1981.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2000.
4. Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*. Routledge, 1998.
5. Dugaje, Manohar. Re-mapping Colonial Violence: A Postcolonial Study of Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*. Issue-12 Volume-2 2025. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17879881
6. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
7. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.
8. Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.
9. Krishnan, Divya., Dugaje, Manohar. Allegorical Dissections of Capitalism: A Post-Modern Reading of José Saramago's The Cave. English Language, Literature & Culture. Volume 8, Issue 4, Dec. 2023. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ellc.20230804.15
10. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* Pantheon Books, 1978.
11. Slemon, Stephen. *'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse.' Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 407–426.
12. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
13. Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, editors. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press, 1995.
14. Anno, E. F. (2026). Resource Scarcity and Insecurity: Barriers to Livestock Productivity and Trade Efficiency in Pastoral Regions. IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(5), 19-28.
15. Yeboah, K. K., Yeboah, J. A., Mensah, I. M., Opong, N. A. O. & Bonsu, L B. (2026). LEADERSHIP STYLES OF UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENT–STAFF RELATIONS: CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION. IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(5), 1-10.
16. Yeboah, K. K., Yeboah, J. A., Mensah, I. M., Opong, N. A. O. & Bonsu, L. B. (2026). TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP, MENTORING, AND STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA: PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS. IRASS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 3(5), 11-18.