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## **Metaphors of Malady and Contagion: Fictionalising Socio-Political Decay in *Midnight's Children***

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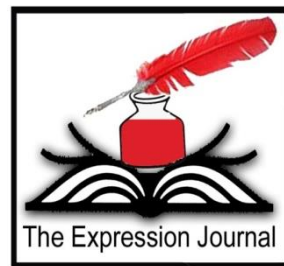
### **Abstract**

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* employs metaphors of malady and contagion to critique the socio-political decay of postcolonial India. This article explores how these metaphors function as narrative tools, reflecting the fragmentation and corruption of the nation's political and social fabric. Through the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, Rushdie allegorises the nation's struggles with identity, unity, and integrity, using physical ailments as symbols of moral and political disintegration. The article examines how contagion in the novel mirrors the spread of corruption, communal violence, and societal breakdown. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the paper highlights the interplay between personal crises and national decay, challenging the legitimacy of national narratives and the coherence of postcolonial identity. By situating *Midnight's Children* within historical and political contexts, the article underscores the relevance of Rushdie's metaphors in contemporary socio-political discourse, offering a profound commentary on the enduring complexities of postcolonialism.

### **Keywords**

Metaphorical Analysis, Socio-Political Fragmentation, Biopolitics, Contagion, Moral Decay, Historical Materialism, Allegory, Collective Memory, Post-Independence India.

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### **Introduction**

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* occupies a central position within the postcolonial literary canon, blending historical narrative with magical realism to present a nuanced portrayal of post-independence India. Published in 1981, the novel chronicles the life of Saleem Sinai, born precisely at the moment of India's independence from British rule, whose personal trajectory is inextricably linked with the nation's tumultuous history. The novel's profound exploration of socio-political decay is vividly conveyed through its adept use of metaphors of malady and contagion, which function as potent symbols of the nation's fragmentation and corruption. These intertwined metaphors transcend mere literary embellishment, serving instead as critical narrative devices that reflect the interconnectedness of individual suffering and collective crises within the evolving socio-political landscape of India.

This paper asserts that Rushdie strategically employs the concept of illness – both physical and social – to allegorise the postcolonial condition, where the promises of independence often give way to disillusionment and fractured identities. As the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, grapples with a myriad of physical ailments, his deteriorating body becomes a microcosm of the national body politic, offering a trenchant insight into the broader implications of India's postcolonial decay. The allegorical connection between Saleem's physical state and the nation's health allows Rushdie to critique the foundational myths of nation-building and expose the inherent vulnerabilities within a newly independent state grappling with its diverse, often conflicting, identities. Furthermore, the pervasive metaphor of contagion highlights how social ills, such as communal violence, political corruption, and ideological discord, spread through society like an infectious disease, eroding the very fabric of unity. This essay will delve into the multifaceted ways in which these metaphors operate, contributing to Rushdie's complex and often satirical reimagining of Indian history.

## Literature Review

The study of metaphor in literature reveals its crucial role in shaping both narrative structure and thematic content. As Lakoff and Johnson assert in *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but are fundamental to how we conceptualise and comprehend our world (Lakoff and Johnson 3). They are not just figures of speech but are deeply embedded in thought and action, influencing perception and understanding. In *Midnight's Children*, this conceptual power of metaphor is fully unleashed, as the metaphors of malady and contagion transcend physical illness to symbolise the moral, political, and social corruption that pervades postcolonial India. Rushdie's deployment of these metaphors moves beyond a simple allegorical equivalence; they become an intrinsic part of the narrative's fabric, reflecting a deeply ingrained dysfunction. To critically analyse the metaphors of malady and contagion in Rushdie's work, this paper employs seminal theoretical frameworks drawn from postcolonial theory and biopolitics. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, provides a foundational critique of the enduring impact of colonialism on national identities and cultural formations. Said argues that imperial power not only subjugated territories but also constructed elaborate systems of knowledge and representation that perpetuated colonial hierarchies, even after formal independence. His concept of 'Orientalism', though primarily focused on the Middle East, offers a template for understanding how colonised subjects internalise or resist imposed identities, leading to profound psychic and societal ruptures that can manifest as 'malady' within the postcolonial psyche. In *Midnight's Children*, the scars of British rule, though ostensibly removed, continue to shape India's post-independence trajectory, influencing political structures and social divisions that become ripe for metaphorical representation as illness.

Complementing Said's perspective is Homi Bhabha, whose concept of hybridity, as articulated in *The Location of Culture*, challenges fixed notions of identity in the postcolonial context. Bhabha posits that postcolonial identity is not a pure, singular entity, but a hybrid space – a 'third space' – formed through the intersection and negotiation of colonial and indigenous cultures. This liminality, while offering potential for resistance and new forms of expression, can also be a source of fragmentation and instability. The 'malady' in Rushdie's novel can be interpreted as the pathological manifestation of this unresolved hybridity, where the amalgamation of disparate elements fails to coalesce into a harmonious whole, leading instead to internal contradictions and societal ailments. The fragmentation of Saleem's body, for instance, reflects a national body unable to fully reconcile its diverse constituent parts.

Furthermore, Gayatri Spivak's seminal examination of subaltern voices, particularly in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", provides a crucial lens through which to analyse the marginalisation and silencing inherent in Rushdie's portrayal of India's fractured society. Spivak's work highlights the difficulty, if not impossibility, of the subaltern – the colonised and oppressed without agency – to represent themselves within dominant discourses. In *Midnight's Children*, the cacophony of voices, particularly those of the *Midnight's Children* themselves, struggling to assert their narratives amidst the overwhelming force of national history, can be seen as a metaphorical 'illness' of communication and recognition, where authentic voices are suppressed or distorted, leading to further societal 'contagion' of misunderstanding and conflict. The novel's narrative, though told by Saleem, is replete with silenced histories and perspectives, underscoring the limitations of grand national narratives.

Finally, Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, notably from *The Birth of Biopolitics*, proves invaluable in understanding how disease functions as a metaphor for the mechanisms

of power and control within society. Foucault argues that modern power operates not merely through repression but through the management of life itself, regulating populations through concepts like public health and demography. In *Midnight's Children*, the state's intervention in the lives of individuals, particularly during the Emergency, and the literal and metaphorical 'sterilisation' campaigns, exemplify biopolitical control. The 'contagion' of political oppression and communal violence can be understood as an outcome of these biopolitical manoeuvres, where the state's efforts to control and define the national body inadvertently lead to its pathological breakdown. Through these interconnected theoretical lenses – Said's critique of postcolonial identity, Bhabha's hybridity, Spivak's subalternity, and Foucault's biopolitics – the metaphors of malady and contagion in *Midnight's Children* emerge as powerful tools for critiquing the complex socio-political dynamics of postcolonial India.

## Objectives

The primary objectives of this academic article are as follows:

1. To meticulously explore the narrative function of the metaphors of malady and contagion in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.
2. To analyse how these metaphors serve as allegorical representations of socio-political decay, fragmentation, and corruption within post-independence India.
3. To investigate the portrayal of Saleem Sinai's physical ailments as a microcosmic reflection of the broader national body politics, struggles with identity, unity, and integrity.
4. To examine the ways in which the metaphor of contagion illustrates the insidious spread of social ills, including corruption, communal violence, and societal breakdown, throughout the nation.
5. To apply established postcolonial theoretical frameworks (Said, Bhabha, Spivak) and Foucault's concept of biopolitics to deepen the understanding of these metaphors and their critique of national narratives.
6. To highlight the enduring relevance of Rushdie's metaphorical framework in contemporary discussions concerning socio-political decay and national identity in postcolonial contexts.

## Methodology

This article employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, drawing primarily from postcolonial critical theory and the philosophical insights of Michel Foucault, to interpret and deconstruct the metaphorical landscape of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The approach is specifically rooted in metaphorical analysis, which, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrate, reveals how conceptual metaphors shape our understanding of complex phenomena. By meticulously examining key passages and narrative motifs within the novel, this study identifies the explicit and implicit manifestations of malady and contagion. The selection of *Midnight's Children* as the primary text is justified by its prominent status as a foundational work of postcolonial literature that self-consciously engages with the complexities of nation-building and historical narrative in post-independence India. The use of magical realism in the novel, furthermore, provides a fertile ground for exploring how abstract concepts like political decay can be embodied through physical and social pathologies.

The theoretical framework integrates the contributions of Edward Said for his insights into the lingering effects of colonial discourse on national identity, Homi Bhabha for his exploration of hybridity and its potential for fragmentation, and Gayatri Spivak for her emphasis on the marginalisation of subaltern voices. These postcolonial theories provide the



critical lens through which to interpret the novel's depiction of a fragmented, postcolonial identity. Concurrently, Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics is instrumental in analysing how the metaphors of disease and public health become intertwined with mechanisms of power, control, and state-sanctioned violence, particularly in the context of the Emergency period depicted in the novel. The methodology involves close reading of selected excerpts, thematic categorisation of metaphorical instances, and the subsequent interpretation of these instances through the chosen theoretical prisms to reveal their socio-political significance.

## Analysis

The socio-political landscape of post-independence India forms the vibrant, yet often volatile, backdrop of *Midnight's Children*. The novel commences with the momentous birth of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, a moment that symbolically aligns his destiny with that of the newly independent Indian nation from British colonial rule. However, this auspicious moment of national birth is immediately complicated by the brutal and violent partition of India and Pakistan, an event that unleashed mass migration, widespread communal violence, and profound human suffering across the subcontinent. Saleem's opening reflection, a poignant blend of the historical and the mythical, "I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time," encapsulates the inherent tension between the empirical reality of history and the subjective, often embellished, nature of national myth-making (Rushdie 3). This immediate juxtaposition sets the tone for a narrative that constantly questions the coherence and integrity of India's post-independence journey.

A crucial historical period woven into the narrative fabric is the Emergency (1975-1977), unilaterally imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This period starkly highlighted the fragility of democratic ideals in India, witnessing the implementation of authoritarian measures to suppress political opposition, leading to widespread censorship, egregious human rights abuses, and simmering social unrest. Rushdie masterfully intertwines the personal and political histories of his characters, allowing the novel to reflect the chaotic, often contradictory, realities of postcolonial India, where nascent hopes for progress and prosperity often coexist precariously with profound despair and disillusionment. The novel's magical realism further accentuates this reality, where historical events are imbued with a fantastical quality, mirroring the often-unbelievable nature of lived experience.

In *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, transcends mere character status to serve as a powerful allegorical figure for the nation itself. His numerous physical ailments – from persistent nasal congestion and acute stomach upsets to his eventual, grotesque physical disintegration – serve as direct mirrors to the broader socio-political fractures that afflict India. The motif of illness is subtly yet profoundly introduced early in the novel, with Saleem's evocative lament, "My body, once whole, has become a perforated sheet," a potent symbol of the fragmentation that plagues both individual identity and the nascent national unity (Rushdie 47). This image of the perforated sheet is central to the novel's overarching critique of the postcolonial condition, effectively conveying a pervasive sense of disintegration, incompleteness, and profound loss that undermines any simplistic notion of triumphal independence. This directly resonates with Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where the amalgamation of disparate elements can lead to a sense of rupture rather than cohesion.

Saleem's recurring loss of smell, a particularly significant motif throughout the narrative, functions as a powerful representation of a deeper moral and political blindness. In the turbulent context of post-independence India, this sensory deprivation can be seen as a metaphor for the nation's inability to discern a clear and unified path forward, often stumbling

into ethical quandaries and political missteps. As Saleem's physical ailments progressively worse, a parallel deterioration occurs in the nation's political and social order, suggesting an intrinsic lack of coherence and integrity that afflicts both the individual and the collective. This embodies Foucault's ideas on biopolitics, where the health of the individual is inextricably linked to the mechanisms of state control and the broader societal body.

Rushdie's deliberate use of Saleem's body as a site of fragmentation also powerfully reflects India's broader political instability. The nation, much like Saleem, struggles desperately to reconcile its multitude of diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic identities within the ambitious framework of a unified state. This profound fragmentation is not merely a residual consequence of colonial legacies, but also a result of deep-seated internal divisions that have plagued the nation since its very inception. As Saleem's ailments become more pronounced and debilitating, so too does the decay of the national body politic, strongly implying an inseparable link between the health of the individual citizen and the overall well-being and stability of the nation. This allegorical connection serves as a bitter indictment of the often-idealised narratives of national unity.

In addition to the pervasive metaphor of malady, Rushdie effectively employs the metaphor of contagion to depict the relentless spread of corruption and societal breakdown throughout *Midnight's Children*. The 'disease' in the novel is not confined to individual bodies; it is powerfully depicted as a pervasive social and political contagion that infects and spreads throughout the entire nation. Saleem's sardonic reflection, "The disease of optimism had been replaced by a pestilence of despair," starkly encapsulates the profound collective disillusionment that increasingly characterises post-independence India (Rushdie 193). This devastating shift from the initial euphoria of optimism to a pervasive sense of despair mirrors the broader societal changes that transpired in the tumultuous years following independence, as the lofty initial hopes for a prosperous, unified, and democratic nation gradually succumbed to the harsh realities of rampant political corruption, escalating communal violence, and widening economic disparity.

The collective fate of the *Midnight's Children*, those uniquely born at the precise moment of India's independence, serves as a poignant symbol of the nation's deeply fractured identity. These children, initially endowed with extraordinary magical abilities, are at first perceived as powerful emblems of hope for the future, representing the boundless potential for a new, better, and more equitable India. However, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that these gifted children, much like the nation itself, are tragically destined to suffer from the relentless forces of division, conflict, and decay. Rushdie's particularly poignant use of disease as a metaphor for communal violence powerfully illustrates how deeply ingrained hatred, prejudice, and intolerance can spread like an insidious epidemic, systematically eroding the fragile social fabric and tragically exacerbating the already dangerous divisions between disparate religious and ethnic groups. The literal and metaphorical 'sickness' of the *Midnight's Children* mirrors the societal illness caused by sectarianism and political opportunism, reflecting Spivak's concerns about suppressed narratives and the inability of marginalised groups to articulate their suffering.

## Findings

Through the rigorous analysis, several key findings regarding Rushdie's use of malady and contagion metaphors in *Midnight's Children* emerge. Firstly, Saleem Sinai's deteriorating physical health functions as a consistent and powerful allegory for the postcolonial Indian state's fragmentation and moral decay. Each of his specific ailments mirrors a corresponding

national failing, from a loss of direction (smell) to pervasive disintegration (perforated sheet). Secondly, the concept of contagion extends beyond individual illness to represent societal ills, particularly the spread of political corruption and communal violence that undermines national unity. This highlights a shift from post-independence optimism to a collective 'pestilence of despair'. Thirdly, these metaphors are instrumental in deconstructing the simplistic notion of a unified national identity, challenging grand nationalist narratives by exposing inherent contradictions and divisions within India's diverse population. Fourthly, the interconnectedness of individual suffering and collective political crises is powerfully underscored, demonstrating how personal maladies reflect broader societal pathologies. Finally, the novel's magical realism amplifies the critical potency of these metaphors, blurring the lines between the literal and the symbolic to create a layered critique of postcolonial identity and power dynamics.

## Discussion on Findings

The findings confirm that Rushdie's employment of malady and contagion is far more than a stylistic choice; it constitutes a profound and multi-layered critique of postcolonial nation-building in India. The allegorical connection between Saleem's body and the nation's body politic is central to this critique. As Said (1993) argues, postcolonial nations often inherit fragmented identities from their colonial pasts. Rushdie's novel shows this fragmentation not just through political events, but through the very physical manifestation of his protagonist. Saleem's illnesses, such as his acute nasal congestion which enhances his telepathic abilities but also symbolises an inability to 'smell' corruption, or his eventual physical "perforation," represent the moral, social, and political fissures that plague India post-independence. This is a deliberate narrative strategy to illustrate that the body, whether individual or national, cannot be truly 'whole' when fundamental societal structures are diseased.

The spread of 'contagion' in the novel, exemplified by the rapid proliferation of communal violence and political corruption, reinforces Foucault's theories of biopolitics. Foucault argues that power operates by regulating life, including public health and population control. In *Midnight's Children*, the state, particularly during the Emergency, attempts to exert biopolitical control over its citizens, including forced sterilisation campaigns. However, instead of fostering health and order, these biopolitical interventions paradoxically lead to a more profound 'contagion' of fear, despair, and civil unrest, proving that authoritarian measures can be more detrimental than the 'diseases' they purport to cure. The mass sterilisation program, allegorised as a collective act of violation, is a literal manifestation of the state's attempt to control the future, yet it only breeds further resentment and moral decay. This suggests that the imposition of power, without genuine concern for individual liberty and diverse identities, inevitably leads to a pathological state of being.

Furthermore, the novel's deconstruction of a unified national identity through these metaphors is particularly resonant. The initial optimism surrounding independence, symbolised by the birth of the *Midnight's Children*, gradually succumbs to a 'pestilence of despair'. This mirrors the disillusionment that often follows revolutionary moments when the practicalities of governance clash with utopian ideals. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is crucial here; while hybridity can be a source of strength and cultural richness, Rushdie suggests that when the hybrid national identity is forced or suppressed, it can become a source of profound internal conflict, leading to a metaphorical 'illness' of identity. The *Midnight's Children*, despite their shared birth moment and magical connections, are ultimately dispersed and fragmented, mirroring the failure of the nationalist project to homogenise India's vast diversity. Their



collective fate underscores the impossibility of a singular, monolithic Indian identity in a nation as complex and diverse as India, echoing Saleem's observation, "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (Rushdie 217).

The relevance of these metaphors extends beyond the historical context of post-independence India. As Saleem keenly observes, "History is always in the making" (Rushdie 298), suggesting that the challenges faced by postcolonial nations—political instability, corruption, communal strife, and identity crises—are cyclical and part of a broader global pattern. The metaphors of malady and contagion thus offer a timeless critique of power, governance, and the often-fragile nature of national narratives. They compel readers to reflect on how political systems can either foster health and cohesion or, through corruption and authoritarianism, propagate disease and disintegration within a society. Rushdie's use of magical realism, blurring the lines between reality and imagination, further enhances this critique, allowing for a more profound and unsettling exploration of the complexities of postcolonial identity and the enduring legacies of history.

## Conclusion

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie masterfully employs the intricate metaphors of malady and contagion to craft a compelling narrative that profoundly critiques the socio-political decay of postcolonial India. Through the lens of Saleem Sinai's evolving physical ailments and the collective, often tragic, fate of the *Midnight's Children*, the novel vividly reveals the deep-seated fragmentation and pervasive corruption inherent in the nation's tumultuous history. These powerful metaphors not only enrich the narrative's texture but also offer a profound and enduring commentary on the complexities of national identity and the persistent challenges of postcolonialism that continue to resonate today. By allegorising the nation's struggles through Saleem's body and depicting the insidious spread of societal ills as a form of contagion, Rushdie challenges simplistic notions of progress and unity post-independence. The insights drawn from postcolonial theory – particularly the works of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak – alongside Foucault's concept of biopolitics, illuminate the sophisticated ways in which these metaphors expose the interplay between individual suffering and national decline, and how power dynamics can contribute to a pathological societal state. The novel serves as a powerful reminder that the health of a nation is inextricably linked to the integrity of its governance and the inclusivity of its identity. Future research could further explore the use of metaphorical frameworks in other significant works of postcolonial literature, examining how diverse authors from various postcolonial contexts utilise similar narrative strategies to engage with questions of nationhood, identity, and historical trauma. Such comparative studies could broaden our understanding of their role in shaping cultural and political discourse across different literary traditions, reinforcing the enduring relevance of metaphor as a tool for socio-political critique.

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