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Literary Theories

Embodied Nationhood: Body Politics and Postcolonial Power in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* tells the story of Saleem Sinai, a boy born at the exact moment India gained independence. In this novel, Rushdie shows how the personal and the political are closely connected, using Saleem's body to reflect the history and struggles of the nation. Saleem's physical traits, like his asthma and changing appearance, as well as his psychic abilities, show how the events of the country affect individuals directly. His body becomes a record of India's joys, conflicts, and failures, showing that history is written not only in books but also in human experience. This paper explores how Rushdie uses the body as a way to understand power, identity, and nationhood. It looks at how Saleem's physical and mental experiences show both the control of political systems and the possibility of personal resistance. The study also examines how the novel mixes reality and imagination to show that the body can hold both physical and symbolic meanings. By focusing on Saleem's experiences, the paper highlights how literature can connect individual lives with larger social and political issues. Overall, *Midnight's Children* shows that the body is not separate from history or politics; it is a place where power, memory, and identity meet. Saleem Sinai's story demonstrates that understanding a nation also means understanding how its history is lived through the bodies of its people. This paper argues that Rushdie's novel makes the connection between flesh, spirit, and nation clear in a way that is both personal and political.

Keywords: *Midnight's Children*; Salman Rushdie; Corporeality; Postcolonial Nationhood; Body Politics; History and Memory; Magical Realism.



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Introduction

Postcolonial nationhood is often expressed using spiritual terms like unity, destiny, shared consciousness, and historical goals. This kind of talk makes the nation seem like a moral and cultural idea that is separate from real-life situations. *Midnight's Children* change this idealized view by placing the nation within the imperfect human body. Saleem Sinai, who was born when India gained independence, is closely tied to the nation's political path. But his life isn't a story of triumphant freedom. Instead, his body shows the violence, disagreements, and failures of postcolonial government. Through Saleem, Rushdie changes the focus of political thought from ideas to the physical body, implying that power works by controlling people's bodies. The book constantly focuses on the body as the way history becomes real. Saleem's sicknesses, deformities, and physical decay mirror national problems, turning his body into a record of political events. Rather than showing independence as a unified national feeling, Rushdie presents it as the start of new controls placed on people's bodies. This focus questions celebratory national stories and shows the real costs of independence. In *Midnight's Children*, the body isn't just a neutral biological thing but a politically charged place where power shows itself. This paper argues that *Midnight's Children* shows the postcolonial nation as a body marked by power. By tracking how political power appears through birth, monitoring, body breakdown, and reproductive control, the book shows the bodily basis of postcolonial independence. In doing so, Rushdie questions the usual separation between body and spirit, showing that the nation's supposed spirit is kept alive by controlling people's bodies. Also, the book's broken-up story structure mirrors bodily decay, turning storytelling into a physical act that goes against official history. Through this combination of body, story, and power, *Midnight's Children* rethinks the nation as a challenged and weak physical thing instead of a unified spiritual whole.

Birth, Body, And National Destiny

Saleem Sinai's birth, coinciding with Indian independence, initially suggests he is meant to represent the nation's fate. But Rushdie quickly dismantles any direct connection between his birth and the nation's success. Saleem's body isn't shown as heroic; instead, it has flaws and weaknesses. His body becomes the place where the new nation's problems start to show. The link between Saleem's body and the nation means that history isn't detached; it's formed by human experience. Political events leave real marks on people's bodies, affecting how they grow and decline. Saleem's ongoing sicknesses reflect the instability of the new country, implying that independence doesn't bring health but begins a long period of difficulty. The idea of national rebirth is therefore made complex by physical weakness.

It is key to note that Saleem doesn't decide to represent the nation; this role is forced on him. His body becomes a container for shared meaning without his permission, showing how people are absorbed into national plans. This lack of choice underlines the forceful side of national symbols. The nation takes control of people's bodies, turning them into tools for political ideas.

Rushdie adds complexity to the idea of fate by focusing on chance. Saleem's life is shaped by accident, errors, and interference, not by any divine plan. These things challenge the idea of a clear national spirit guiding history. Instead, the nation appears as a result of unsteady forces that cause inconsistent and often harmful results. The body, affected by these forces, becomes the clearest sign of political instability.

Through Saleem's birth and early life, *Midnight's Children* sets up a situation where the nation can't be separated from bodily experience. The body doesn't stand for national superiority; it reveals national weakness. This change from celebratory symbol to bodily analysis creates the base for Rushdie's wider questioning of power after colonialism.

The Body as Political Archive

As Saleem matures, his body gathers layers of historical meaning. Every change in his physical being goes with a shift in politics, implying that the body acts as a living record of the nation's past. Different from formal documents, which offer simple and clean stories, the body keeps history in broken and painful pieces. Memory, here, is not just mental but physical. Saleem's strong senses show how the body turns into a tool for noting social truths. His awareness brings him into contact with many voices and events, mirroring the variety within the nation. This variety does not make peace but creates too much information, confusion, and emotional stress. The body finds it hard to hold all the historical experience, which mirrors how the nation cannot fix its internal conflicts.

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The idea of the body as a record questions standard history writing. Rather than favoring formal papers and political talks, Rushdie puts bodily experience forward as a real source of historical info. Pain, tiredness, and decline become types of proof that show parts of history left out of state stories. This view fits with the book's wider doubt toward official versions of the past.

The recording job of the body also shows the close link between power and memory. Political power tries to control not just land and people but also how history is remembered. By showing memory as part of the body, Rushdie fights back against such control. The body keeps signs of force even when official talk tries to remove them. This physical memory shakes up the idea of body and spirit being separate. Memory is not just in the mind or just in the body; it comes from how the body and mind work together. In *Midnight's Children*, this working together shows how the material and the ideas are linked. The body turns into the place where abstract political ideas take real shape.

Discipline, Surveillance, And Bodily Control

In “*Midnight's Children*” the strengthening of state power comes with greater intrusion into personal and physical areas. Authority asserts itself mainly through observation. Saleem's life, marked by constant watching, tracking, and sorting, shows a wider culture of political checking. This observation covers not just beliefs but also physical control. The state's focus on reproduction, health, and physical ability shows how control works at the level of living. Bodies are judged, sorted, and handled based on how useful they seem to be to the country.

The Emergency shows this idea most clearly. Claiming national stability, the state puts in place rules that directly target bodies, mainly through forced sterilization. These actions reveal how much power depends on being able to control life. Political authority becomes the same as biological handling. Sterilization, especially, shows how empty nationalist talk is. While the country says it protects its people, it also goes against their physical freedom. The supposed spirit of the country is kept going through actions that deny personal worth. This difference emphasizes Rushdie's criticism of postcolonial control.

Saleem's physical decline during this time reflects the moral fall of the state. His body, already weak, gets even worse, suggesting that being exposed to authoritarian power for a long time causes lasting harm. So, the body shows not just political events but also their ethical results.

Fragmentation, Decay and The Crisis of Wholeness

Regarding *Midnight's Children*, fragmentation is not just a writing style; it mirrors the political state. Saleem's deteriorating body reflects the nation's failure to unite. Physical motifs like cracks and disintegration suggest the postcolonial body is naturally unstable. This instability questions nationalist ideas of completeness and shows how artificial claims to coherence are.

Bodily fragmentation shows that a nation can't be contained in one story or identity. Saleem's body becomes a site of conflict, where different histories, languages, and political hopes clash. The body doesn't combine these elements smoothly; it absorbs their conflicts, resulting in rupture. This focus on bodily decay destabilizes models of national progress.

Instead of becoming more unified, the nation seems to move toward exhaustion. Saleem's decline suggests that independence doesn't always mean progress. The body reveals a history of loss, betrayal, and broken promises. Fragmentation shapes the narrative form as well. Saleem's storytelling is nonlinear and repetitive. This narrative instability reflects bodily disintegration, linking the body and its representation.

Storytelling becomes a physical act, prone to fatigue and error. By linking narrative fragmentation with bodily decay, Rushdie challenges official histories. National narratives are shown as artificial constructs that hide violence. Fragmented storytelling acknowledges the painful nature of history. The broken body becomes a truer record than any history.

Rethinking Flesh and Spirit

Nationalist thought usually favors spirit over body, portraying the nation as something beyond physical concerns. "Midnight's Children" changes this. The book suggests the spirit of a nation is linked to how people are treated physically. Nationalist spirituality is not about moral improvement but relies on controlling and sacrificing bodies.

Saleem's story shows that talking about a shared destiny often excuses individual pain. The nation's spiritual talk hides the real problems of hunger, disease, and violence. The body is not below the spirit; it is what spiritual ideas are built on.

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The story does not dismiss spirituality but sees it as coming from physical experiences. Memory, stories, and survival become different kinds of spirit that resist government control. These are based on the body, not separate from it. This change disrupts the idea of body versus spirit. They are not opposites but connected parts of political life. How bodies are managed affects thinking, and thinking affects how bodies are viewed and treated.

Rushdie's story argues that studying national identity must start with physical realities. By focusing on spirit as part of the body, rather than something abstract, *Midnight's Children* critiques nationalist idealism. The book reveals how talking about higher goals hides the daily violence of the government. It calls for politics that recognizes the physical costs of being a nation.

Conclusion

In "Midnight's Children" Rushdie sees the postcolonial nation as a body shaped by authority. Saleem Sinai's weakening body shows how political power works through rules and damage to the flesh. Birth, sickness, watchfulness, and sterilization are ways the state marks itself on individuals, turning the body into a political record. The book breaks down the idea of national unity by showing it relies on bodily sacrifice. Instead of showing independence as a group coming together, *Midnight's Children* shows it as the start of new controls. The nation isn't a perfect idea but a changing, argued-over body. By linking story pieces with a failing body, Rushdie questions official stories and says storytelling is a form of resistance. Memory, mistakes, and variety become ways to keep experiences alive that the state wants to hide. So, the story itself becomes a political body, holding signs of violence, loss, and disagreement. *Midnight's Children* shakes up the idea of body versus spirit by showing spirit comes from material realities. The book says that to understand postcolonial nationhood, we must start with the body—its weak points, pain, and ability to remember. By doing this, Rushdie gives a strong criticism of postcolonial power and confirms books can show the bodily roots of political power.

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