

# From Pickles of Chutney to National Identity: The Fragmentation in *Midnight's Children*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The colonial culture often exerts a long-lasting impact on its colonized people, and their generations find it hard to negotiate their dual cultural identities. The protagonist in the novel and the Hindu mythological characters are related to each other in some degree. From the perspective of myth archetype, they are in the state of fragmented mixture. Facing the dilemma of fragmented identities, I argue that Rushdie reveals his determination of “pickling chutneys” to challenge the Indian historical orthodox through mythological archetype, and he tries to show Indian history with another version.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Midnight's Children; Fragmentation; Colonial Culture; National Identity; Myth Archetype*

## 1. Introduction

*Midnight's Children* (1981; *MC*) is a first-person narrative in which Saleem Sinai wrote his private history, which was inextricably connected with the history of his own country India. The novel has a series of episodes with heavy intertwining of past and present, and of fiction and reality. Cultivated from western and eastern traditions, combining high literature and popular literature, set in the east and the west, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is emblematic of generous welcoming and mixing of various cultures.

This essay will focus on Rushdie's complex relation with the Indian novel and the history of the subcontinent; his affinities with postcolonial fictionists; and his impression of Indian cultural scene paralleled with history. This will provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Rushdie's fragmentation of historical view in *Midnight's Children*, which is both engaging and thought-provoking. Facing the dilemma of fragmented identities, Rushdie reveals his determination of “pickling chutneys” to challenge the Indian historical orthodox through magical realism, and he tries to show Indian history with another version.

The fragmentation not only reflects that colonial Indians who lived under the rule of Britain suffering from varying loss of their national identity that was caused

by cultural hybridity, but also demonstrates the interactive relationship between a nation and its people. The history of a nation can affect on its people deeply and profoundly.

“History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish. And capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to read the world.” For the history of India, the country was fragmented, and its people were also fragmented. India attained its independence by a way of partition, which caused wars between Hindus and Muslims and inflicted pain on its people. The relation between India and its people shows that there is close connection between the fragmentation of an individual and that of a nation. An individual’s fragmentation can reflect the history of the country he lives in, and vice versa. In this respect, in *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem’s fragmentation is a mirror of the fragmented experience of the new-born India.

## **2. The Fragmented History Hidden in the Taste of Chutney**

### ***2.1 The Metaphor in Pickles of Chutney***

Chutney is a cold sauce made from fragmented fruit, vinegar, sugar, and spices. It is sold in jars and Indians often eat it with meat or cheese. In *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem Sinai learns the secret of pickling the best chutney from Mary, his erstwhile ayah. The secret is that “because she (Mary) puts her feelings inside them.” (1981; *MC*) The pickling process for the Indian chutney is the mixture of all sorts of fragmented sources. Saleem likes the way Mary makes the chutney because she puts her personal feelings into the chutney. “and then I had tasted it, and almost imitated the fainting act of Picture Singh, because it carried me back to a day when I emerged nine-fingered from a hospital and went into exile at the home of Hanif Aziz, and was given the best chutney in the world... the taste of the chutney was more than just an echo of that long-ago taste - it was the old taste itself, the very same, with the power of bringing back the past as if it had never been away...” (1981; *MC*) In Saleem’s mind, the chutney recalls his own feeling and memory of the past history, the ups and downs in his whole life.

Because Saleem was born at midnight on August 15 of 1947, the very instant that India attained independence. In this sense, Saleem’s individual life experience is a mirror of his nation’s post-independent history shadowed by post-colonial culture. Therefore, the chutney suggests the entire history of post-colonial India, the pickling process can be regarded as the state of Indian fragmentation and national hybridity. Thus, I argue it is the subtle metaphor which the author Rushdie wants to inject into pickles of chutney.

Saleem went through the pangs of birth, the tantrums of childhood, the traumas of adolescence and the anomie of adulthood as he grew up. What he went through in his nation suggested that his nation suffered the same fate like him - wars, poverty,

and riots. The Indian way of decolonization was much more complicated, and Indian people suffered a great deal of pains from the decolonization due to the religious disagreement. This process indicated that postcolonial India was a broken nation in which its people went through wars, poverty, and riots; yet desired peace, unity, and prosperity.

## **2.2 Rushdie's Neo-historical View of Fragmentation**

In *Midnight's Children*, the author Salman Rushdie provides a different version of Indian post-colonial history after its independence. He focuses on the personal and marginal anecdotes far from the authoritative and historical records which subtly reflect his neo-historical view.

We know that Saleem was born at midnight on August 15 of 1947, the very instant that India seemingly appears independence. When Saleem was born, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: "Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest hearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own." (1981; *MC*) These words indicate that Saleem is the mirror of his country, so his tale represents not only his individual life story but also the entire history of postcolonial India. Moreover, his cracks in body were also the cracks in the mirror, so Saleem's physical cracks were also the ones of his nation.

But as I have mentioned before, Rushdie never wants to write an authoritative guide to the history of post-independent India, and what he wants to do is to present another different version of the nation's history from his own perspective through the novel *Midnight's Children*. From the view of neo-history, Rushdie admits that Saleem is never a reliable narrator and all the stupid errors depicted in the novel feel more and more like Saleem himself - a unique Saleem shadowed by the post-colonial Indian culture. The wrongness achieves the "right" feeling. As Rushdie overtly pointed out, "It is by now obvious, I hope, that Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and that *Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independent India." "So let me confess that the novel does contain a few mistakes that are mine as well as Saleem's. .... When I first found out my error I was upset and tried to have it corrected. Now I'm not sure. The mistake feels more and more like Saleem's; its wrongness feels right. Thereafter, as I wrote the novel, and whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favor the remembered version."

Therefore, all the illogical and fragmented parts of the narration in the novel, we cannot simply see as mistakes, but we can see them just as the metaphor of chutney from the view of new-historism. When the nation encountered the epidemic of optimism when it was born, the new-born nation, however, did not grow up happily and healthily as expected. Instead, the nation had a hard time to grow up. It was engaged in wars, which resulted in enormous economic losses and major casualties.

### **3. The Fragmented Mixture in Mythological Archetype**

In 1957, Northrop Frye stated the archetype theory in his essay “Archetypal Criticism: A Theory of Myths”. He thought that literature is an integral whole and the critics need to find a more macro pattern to carry on the research. And he said “more macro pattern” is the archetype. According to his archetype theory, myths are the most profound archetype influencing all ethnic cultures.

The prestigious Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung also claimed the importance of the archetypes when he constructed the theory of human collective unconsciousness: “Archetypes are typical modes of apprehension, and wherever we meet with uniform and regularly recurring modes of apprehension we are dealing with an archetype, no matter whether its mythological character is recognized or not.” He traced the term back to Philo, Irenaeus, and the *Corpus Hermetic*, which associate archetypes with divinity and the creation of the world. These archetypes dwell in a world beyond the chronology of a human lifespan, developing on an evolutionary timescale. Jung wrote that it is the mind of our unknown ancestors, their way of thinking and feeling, their way of experiencing life and the world, gods and men. The existence of these archaic strata is presumably the source of man’s belief in reincarnations and in memories of ‘previous experience’. Just as the human body is a museum, so to speak, of its phylogenetic history, so too is the psyche.”

Soren Frank also noticed the shadow of Northrop Frye in Rushdie’s novels but he discussed the encyclopaedic features in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children*. He tried to argue that the novelist’s ambition to incorporate the whole of life was simultaneously a serious and ironic enterprise carried out on the level of discourse. He thought that the manifold variations of life were made to resonate in meaningful patterns, whereas irony pertains primarily to metonymical modes of dispersion, fragmentation and fission. Frank’s paper represents his understanding towards Rushdie’s connection with the continuous revision of the real world.

But I think many metonymical metaphors in the novel are not only continuing questions, but also triggering more arduous dilemmas in the challenge of identities. To most Indians, The Hindu mythology has a profound and lasting impact on their norms and traditions as well as the mythological archetype and collective unconsciousness recall the past memory of all human beings. The Indian traditions form the core value of the Hindu Culture, influencing and confining people’s minds and values in different historical periods. In *Midnight’s Children*, the Hindu mythology is deeply rooted in the fragmented narration and magical realism of the whole story, showing the author’s dilemma on the dual cultural and national identities.

### **4. The Fragmented National Identity Under the Shadow of Post-colonial Culture**

While the fragmented mixture of mythological archetype suggests a more magical view of the novel characters and the chutnification, the national identity refers to a person’s identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a

feeling one shares with a group of people, mainly originated from the universal emotions and values of the whole nation. In a fragmented nation like India, the three generations in *Midnight's Children* all witness the partition of their nation, and they are greatly influenced by the encounters of the colonial culture and the loss of national identity. Under this circumstance, they are neither "complete" nor "sensible" people. Aadam Aziz rebelled against God and tumbled into the violent and divided subcontinent - the Fallen World while the lives of Saleem's father Ahmed (with his djinns, anger and lust) and Saleem (with his incestuous and gutter loves) were strong indicators of lives living in the fallen world. This reveals that they, living in a nation where both local culture and colonial culture exist, all had a fragmented national identity.

The segmented cultural identity is reflected by the hole in a perforated sheet, to which the three generations are closely related. The hole of the perforated sheet is a symbol of lack of unity and completeness. "Above all the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segments, and which condemned me (Saleem) to see my own life - its meanings, its structures - in fragments also..." (1981; *MC*) The hole in the sheet represents the love lacking in unity, life in fragments, and even a person with a segmented identity. The three generations all interact with the world in this way, which means that they get to know this world in a fragmented manner.

As the narrator demonstrates, the obsession with beginnings is the one with identity. Saleem Sinai, yoked by his birth to the independence of India becomes the living embodiment of his nation, and also a mirror. He, along with other one thousand and one children born during the midnight and on the day of Indian independence, is gifted by virtue of his birth-hour with magical powers. But Saleem, born on the stroke of midnight, occupies a special position. His identity embodies the identity of his collective group and the one of his nation. He is a mirror of the fragmented history and identity of his nation, as he says, "mysteriously handcuffed to history, (his) destinies indissolubly chained to those of (his) country." (1981; *MC*)

Saleem seeks the identity of himself, his group, and his nation in their beginnings. To seek only chronological time as one's beginning and national identity is to seek chronological priority. Like Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, we can attempt to fasten national identity to the instant, to the first, the initial, to initiative priority. Saleem's gift is greatest of all the children's, and he is the most truly identical to the memory of India, because of the priority of his birth to theirs. But we can also seek beginning and identity in origins; that is, we can seek the cause and significance of beginning or becoming, rather than only chronology. And to seek origins, then, is also to seek the true intention of the author, and the realistic source of national identity.

## 5. Conclusion

To summarize: I have set out here to argue three points concerning fragmentation: 1) In *Midnight's Children*, frequently seen are the words like "hole", "segment", "crack", and the damage and loss of bodily function such as amnesia,

which is called “fragmentation” in this paper. Colonial culture exerts a long-lasting impact on its colonized people, under whose influence generations of colonized people find it hard to negotiate their dual cultural identities. 2) The protagonist and the Hindu mythological characters are related to each other in some degree. From the perspective of myth archetype, they are in the state of fragmented mixture. 3) Facing the dilemma of fragmented identities, Rushdie reveals his determination of “pickling chutneys” to challenge the Indian historical orthodox through magical realism, and he tries to show Indian history with another version.

The fragmentation in *Midnight's Children* reflects that Indians seek for their national identities because of the influence of cultural and colonial hybridity in their country. In a fragmented nation, postcolonial Indians desired peace, unity, and prosperity after long years of suffering caused by the lingering influence of colonization and decolonization. Furthermore, individuals and a nation are interdependent. An individual is influenced by the history he lives in, and individuals' growing up and existence can reflect a nation's history. A nation's prosperity shares some similar characteristics with an individual's, and a new-born nation's flourishing is often faced with challenges.

What is the taste of history in the end? Is it completely distorted, or is it still immortal and immutable? In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's “chutnification of history and pickling of time” actually contain three meanings. First of all, during the process of chutnification, distortions are inevitable. History itself is suffering and ironic, with a strong political ideology. However, the chemical process of pickling chutneys has changed the trajectory of history, giving the history one reasonable explanation which makes it look more tolerable. Secondly, the chutnification endows the power of immortality, “To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavor in degree, but not in kind.” (1981; *MC*) The pickling representative artificially endows the Indian history with the quality of perdurability. This preservative treatment for chutney suggests that Rushdie attempts to touch all the scars of India within more than a century under the shadow of post-colonial culture. To maintain freshness is to arouse everyone's retrospection and reflection on history in their hearts. Thirdly, the action of mixed pickling such as “put feelings into it (chutney)” (1981; *MC*) means a subjective imagination and construction. The ultimate goal of the chutnification and pickling orients to the sense of crisis and historical retrospection, which is exactly the marvelous taste of pickling history upon our taste buds.

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