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Private Lives and Public Histories: The Ordinary, Memory, and Narrative Responsibility in *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract

This paper examines Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children through the interrelated lenses of memory, ordinary life, and narrative responsibility, arguing that the novel reconfigures national history as an ethical and lived experience rather than a monumental or authoritative discourse. Moving away from grand historical spectacle, Rushdie foregrounds fragmented personal memories, domestic spaces, bodily routines, and everyday practices as crucial sites through which historical meaning is constructed and transmitted. Saleem Sinai's unreliable and self-reflexive narration draws attention to the ethical burden of storytelling, where acts of remembering, forgetting, and revising become central to the representation of the nation. The novel demonstrates how private recollection is inseparable from public history, revealing history itself as provisional, contested, and deeply subjective. By privileging the ordinary over the spectacular, Midnight's Children reimagines nationhood as an intimate, processual, and ethically complex formation sustained through memory, care, and the rhythms of everyday life.

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* occupies a central position in postcolonial English literature for its innovative narrative form and its reimagining of Indian history. Much critical attention has been paid to its use of magical realism, its political allegory, and its historiographic metafictional strategies. However, this emphasis on spectacle often obscures another crucial aspect of the novel: its sustained engagement with ordinary life. The narrative repeatedly returns to domestic spaces, bodily experiences, family histories, and personal memories, suggesting that history is not merely made through public events but lived through private moments.

This paper argues that *Midnight's Children* constructs history through the ethics of narration grounded in everyday experience. Saleem Sinai's attempt to record his life story becomes an act of narrative responsibility, where remembering is both a personal necessity and a public obligation. The

novel thus challenges grand historical narratives by foregrounding the ordinary as a legitimate and ethical site of historical meaning.

Memory, Narrative, and Ethical Responsibility

At the centre of *Midnight's Children* lies the problem of memory. Saleem's narrative is explicitly fragmented, nonlinear, and self-confessedly unreliable. Rather than presenting this unreliability as a flaw, Rushdie transforms it into an ethical stance. Saleem frequently acknowledges his errors, anticipates future corrections, and openly questions the accuracy of his recollections. This self-reflexivity foregrounds the moral responsibility inherent in storytelling.

Memory in the novel functions not as a stable archive but as a lived process shaped by emotion, trauma, and desire. Saleem's memories blur personal and national timelines, reflecting the impossibility of separating individual experience from collective history. By refusing authoritative certainty, the novel suggests that ethical narration lies not in factual perfection but in honest engagement with one's limitations as a narrator.

Ordinary Days in Sequence: Daily Life and the Flow of History

Rather than unfolding history through spectacular public events alone, *Midnight's Children* arranges its narrative around sequences of ordinary days whose cumulative effects shape the novel's course. From the opening prophecy to Saleem's eventual recovery of memory, Rushdie anchors historical transformation in routine activities, habits, and lived experiences.

The novel begins with the ordinary routines of Aadam Aziz in Kashmir: his medical practice, daily prayers, and regular movements through the landscape. These everyday acts are disrupted not by immediate political catastrophe but by Naseem's gradual unveiling during medical examinations, an intimate, repetitive routine that quietly alters familial and social structures. The early prophecy that Aadam will be "struck down by fate" is delivered not as a grand oracle but within the rhythms of daily life, establishing a pattern in which the extraordinary is embedded in the ordinary.

Following Independence, Saleem's infancy unfolds through domestic rituals feeding, bathing, listening to adult conversations, and attending school. His celebrated birth at midnight is followed not by heroic action but by childhood routines marked by confusion and bodily discomfort. His constantly dripping nose, a minor daily inconvenience, becomes central to his telepathic abilities, allowing him to hear the voices of the other midnight's children. This connection emerges not from conscious heroism but from a physical condition embedded in everyday life.

The daily meetings of the Midnight's Children's Conference further reinforce this pattern. These gatherings resemble ordinary social assemblies rather than epic councils: children argue, feel jealous, misunderstand one another, and slowly drift apart. The collapse of these meetings mirrors the fragmentation of the nation, suggesting that historical disillusionment occurs gradually through repeated minor failures rather than sudden catastrophe.

Saleem's later loss of memory during the Bangladesh war marks a profound rupture not only in his personal life but also in the novel's representation of national consciousness. Stripped of memory, Saleem is reduced to routine military existence following orders, performing tasks, and surviving without reflection. This condition mirrors India's post-Independence disillusionment, where the nation continues to function administratively and militarily while remaining increasingly detached from the ethical ideals that once defined its founding moment.

Saleem's amnesia thus operates as a metaphor for national amnesia. The ideals of unity, plurality, and hope that accompanied Independence gradually fade, replaced by bureaucratic efficiency and coercive power. History persists, but without moral recollection. Saleem's identity, emptied of memory, becomes purely mechanical, much like a state that prioritises control over ethical self-awareness.

The recovery of Saleem's memory does not occur through official discourse or ideological awakening but through sensory experience smell, habit, and familiarity. This mode of remembering suggests that history cannot be reclaimed through imposed narratives but must be reassembled through lived experience and everyday engagement. Rushdie thus proposes that national identity, like personal identity, is sustained through the ordinary rhythms of life rather than through monumental proclamations.

This contrast is further sharpened through the parallel figure of Shiva. While Saleem forgets, Shiva ascends through discipline, violence, and militarised routine. Shiva represents power without memory, authority unburdened by ethical reflection. Together, these trajectories dramatise a nation torn between remembrance and force, revealing how the erosion of memory enables the rise of unreflective power.

Through this intertwining of personal amnesia and national condition, *Midnight's Children* demonstrates that historical rupture is experienced most acutely not in public declarations but in the quiet loss and gradual recovery of memory embedded in ordinary life.

Conclusion

Midnight's Children offers a nuanced and ethically grounded reimagining of history by locating its meaning within the fabric of ordinary life. Rather than presenting national history as a sequence of monumental events or authoritative declarations, the novel insists that history is lived, remembered, and negotiated through everyday routines, domestic spaces, and personal relationships. By privileging memory, bodily experience, and habitual life, Rushdie dismantles the illusion of a stable, singular historical narrative and replaces it with one that is fragile, contested, and deeply human.

Saleem Sinai's fragmented and self-conscious narration exemplifies this approach to history. His frequent admissions of error, lapses in memory, and reliance on sensory recollection foreground the ethical responsibility inherent in storytelling. History, the novel suggests, is not a matter of factual completeness but of moral engagement of acknowledging gaps, silences, and subjective limitations. Saleem's narrative becomes an act of care, preserving what might otherwise be erased by official histories or ideological simplifications.

The novel's sustained attention to ordinary experiences family rituals, bodily discomforts, daily conversations, and domestic labour further reinforces its critique of monumental historiography. These moments, though seemingly insignificant, accumulate to shape both individual identity and national consciousness. Even moments of rupture, such as Saleem's loss and recovery of memory, are framed through routine existence, underscoring how historical dislocation is felt most acutely in the disruption of everyday life.

By foregrounding the ordinary as an ethical and historical category, *Midnight's Children* invites readers to reconsider how histories are formed and sustained. Rushdie's narrative ultimately affirms that the nation is not merely imagined through grand political events but continuously produced through lived experience. In this sense, the novel offers a profound meditation on history as a living process, one that endures through memory, care, and the quiet persistence of ordinary human lives.

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