



**A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF FORGOTTEN VOICES: SUBALTERN
MEMORY IN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN***

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Abstract

*This research study explores the silencing and erasure of marginalized and subaltern voices in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) through postcolonial lens, focusing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity and the politics of representation. The novel which is set against the backdrop of India's transition from colonial rule to independence and partition, explores how history is constructed and whose voices are remembered or erased. This study highlights the struggles of characters like Saleem Sinai, and other marginalized figures who symbolize unheard and forgotten. This study employs the qualitative approach, providing a close textual analysis to investigate how language, politics and history writing play a role in silencing subaltern voices. Spivak's theory reveals that even when the subaltern attempt to speak, they are misrepresented or completely ignored by hegemonic power. By deconstructing themes of memory, silence and forgotten histories, this research contributes to postcolonial studies and challenges the way that dominant discourses frame our perception of the past.*

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Subalternity, Memory, Silence, Representation

1. Introduction

This study explores the silencing of subaltern voices and the erasure of marginalized history in Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981). Strongly influenced by postcolonial literature, Rushdie blends personal and national narratives to explore multifaceted relationship between history, memory and power. The novel highlights how historical silence distorts the subaltern voices reinforcing the structures of colonial and postcolonial hegemony. In *Midnight's Children*, the hardships of marginalized and forgotten people whose stories contradict the official historical narratives are depicted against the backdrop of India's independence, partition and nation building process.

The concept of subalternity as proposed by postcolonial theorist Spivak offers a critical framework for examining how historical exclusion is portrayed in the book. Spivak argues that, because their voices are neglected or misunderstood by the prevailing systems of power, the subaltern without access to hegemonic discourse cannot really "speak". The novel demonstrates the way that historical memory is molded by those who are in power, silencing voices that do not fit in the great narrative of the nation state. While *Midnight's Children* tries to reclaim these silenced voices through its fractured narrative and magical realism, it also questions whether the subaltern can ever be represented in literature. This study attempts to contribute to postcolonial discourse by examining how the novel deals with the themes of memory, silence and historical erasure.



1.1 Research Objectives

- 1: To examine how Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* represents marginalized history and subaltern voices
- 2: To analyze the novel through Spivak's theory of subalternity, focusing on the silencing and misrepresentation of subaltern voices
- 3: To explore historical narratives in the novel which reflect the exclusion of subaltern perspectives in colonial and postcolonial discourse

1.2 Research Questions

- 1: How does Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* represent marginalized history and subaltern voices?
- 2: How does Spivak's theory of subalternity focus on the silence and misrepresentation of subaltern voices?
- 3: How do the historical narratives, as portrayed in the novel, reflect the exclusion of subaltern perspectives in colonial and postcolonial discourse?

1.3 Significance of the study

The study is significant as it provides a deep understanding of how subaltern voices are ignored and marginalized in historical discourse, especially in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. By applying Spivak's theory of subalternity, the research emphasizes the erasure of voices from dominant historical narratives and the difficulties faced by the downtrodden in reclaiming their narratives. The study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by analyzing the role of language, politics and history writing in shaping collective memory and identity.

2. Literature Review

This study deals with the internalization of Western hegemony in the novel subaltern memory in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). This literature review proposes to describe the works of those analysts who are particularly focused on the concept of postcolonial analysis and gave reviews about the novel in their research articles. This study investigates the growth and significance of postcolonial literature, focusing on how marginalized voices are represented by Spivak and reclaimed through literary forms.

The term Subaltern in postcolonial theory refers to people who are lower middle classes and are those groups who are marginalized and displaced in the administration of colonial states. Subaltern are described as who have little or no access at all to cultural imperialism. Antonio Gramsci used term Subaltern to identify groups that were deprived, displaced and marginalized by socio economic institution, so their political voices would be suppressed. Spivak defines Subaltern as those who are deprived from all social progress. (Spivak, 1988, p. 475).

Mustapha (2023) explores the concept of identity, history and subaltern memory in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* from a postcolonial perspective. He emphasizes on how Rushdie merges personal and national identity through the character of Saleem Sinai, who was born at the exact time of India's independence. This study analyzes how Rushdie has interwoven Saleem's life with the history of Indian independence using a postmodern historiography which challenges traditional historical narratives. Postmodern historiography encourages diverse voices and perspectives particularly the ones that have been marginalized or neglected in traditional history. Memory plays a major role in shaping Saleem's personal identity. This creates a blurred line between fact and fiction. This novel blends Saleem's



identity with postcolonial India, highlighting the challenges of historical and cultural memory.

Hamza (2022) examines the complex issues of personal and national identity in *Midnight's Children*. This study explores how colonialism influenced both individual and national identities, especially in the postcolonial context. This study explains personal and national identity from philosophical perspective, emphasizing the formation of identity through colonial rule. This research also highlights how postcolonial literature, addresses these issues, including Rushdie's work. This study highlights that postcolonial literature describes these issues through the character of Saleem Sinai who is related to Indian history. Saleem's life reflects his country and his identity is intertwined with the nation's identity, reflecting the identity crises of both the individuals and the nation using magical realism.

Schröttner (2009) highlights the issues caused by colonial rule, particularly when the people migrate or are displaced. Edward Said (1978) also exposes colonial rule's interruption of the identities of both the individuals and the nations. The novel portrays the main character, Saleem Sinai, trying to find his place in a multitude of identities he is caught between. Saleem's life relates with Spivak's argument that colonized people often encounter challenges.

Frantz Fanon in 1961 wrote about how colonialism leads to a confused sense of identity, echoing in Saleem's personality, rambling through his real self. In the same way, Dipesh Chakrabarty in 2000 criticized history's Eurocentric portrayal. In contrast *Midnight's Children* emphasizes on the lives of common people rather than the colonial leaders. Identity formation and education are significant aspects of *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's novel gives importance to the common people who are excluded in mainstream history. This study shows that migration brings freedom and how affective education shapes people's identities. It focuses on how people regain their power from once colonized countries.

Buchholz (2013) investigates the idea of unnatural narrative in *Midnight's Children* through the life of Saleem Sinai who is born at the exact time of India's independence. He relates his personal story to the nation's history. Saleem's story blends personal and historical events. As Saleem tells his tale, he feels a sense of disintegration, ultimately depicting his own demise.

Another research by Rhine (2024) addresses the complexities of representing subaltern groups in literary works. It explores the definition and understanding of subaltern by western and nonwestern Academicians. This study concentrates on the opinion of Spivak that the subaltern "cannot speak", which means that their voices are ignored or misunderstood. This research explores the lives of people in the Sundarbans and their cultural narratives, including the legend of Bon Bibi through the analysis of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Amitav Gosh's *The Hungry Tide*. These narratives assert the notion that subaltern groups are unheard. This study argues that rather than depicting subaltern people, let them speak for themselves. This article ensures that their voices have a great impact on modern discussions about their lives.

Barad, (2024) explores *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie through postcolonial theories. It contrasts the novel's themes with the prominent theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Aimé Césaire. This study explores concepts like decolonization, Orientalism, hybridity, subalternity and cultural alienation in the novel. This paper explores how *Midnight's Children* represents the complexities of postcolonial identity and history by examining narrative



technique, vocabulary and portrayal of mixed identities. The research article adds to the understanding of how literature not only depicts postcolonial issues but shapes discussion on them.

Chander and Bagerwan (2023) investigate the relationship between colonial history and India's socio political conditions. Through postcolonial lens, the research examines the themes of colonial legacies, national identity and the difficulties of nation building after independence. It sheds lights on the historical background of India's independence, partition and communal issues and explores how characters negotiate the complexities of hybridity, identity and colonial impact. This article also emphasizes the impact on India's socio political landscape and representation of political leaders. Furthermore, Rushdie employs magical realism as a tool to counter prevailing historical narratives and provides alternative perspectives on postcolonial realities. Through this analysis, this study adds to the broader spectrum of postcolonial literature by highlighting the role of individual stories and their relation to the construction of postcolonial society.

3. Methodology

This chapter deals with Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework. It will explore the subaltern voices in the novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. The theory of postcolonialism by Spivak, is applied on this study. The methodology used in this study is qualitative research to collect data to conduct this research by consulting libraries, books, journals and magazines. The data is collected from books, journals and libraries to support this thesis.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The idea of subalternity was introduced by Antonio Gramsci's in his studies of power relations, later developed within postcolonial studies by scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak. The subaltern stands for marginalized groups whose voices are suppressed by hegemonic power institutions and dominant discourse. This theoretical framework addresses the difficulties of subaltern speech, concentrating on the limitations imposed by social, political and epistemological frameworks that prevent authentic subaltern voices from being articulated and acknowledged.

Spivak gained a measure of misplaced fame for her 1985 article "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice" (1985). It is about the conditions that surround the self-sacrificing suicide of a young Bengali woman and reveals a process of failed attempt at self-representation. Spivak concluded that "the subaltern cannot speak" since her attempt to speak outside of traditional patriarchal channels was not understood or accepted. Some gullible readers accused her of phallogocentric participation, claiming that she failed to recognize or even let the subaltern to speak, despite her incredibly sophisticated argument, which was admittedly complicated by her somewhat ambiguous language. This research is based on following assumptions:

- The subaltern attempt to speak is often unheard or misinterpreted by hegemonic discourse
- Subalternity is maintained through violence and imperialism

Some critics, missing the point, supported their arguments with anecdotal evidence of messages cried out by burning widows. According to Landry and Maclean's (1996) interview, she made the argument that speaking is "a transaction between speaker and listener, "not that the subaltern does not cry out in other ways. The dialogic level of expression is not attained by subaltern discourse.



"Subaltern" is not "just a classy word for the oppressed, for other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie," according to Spivak (2023). She notes that in Gramsci's initial clandestine use (he had to encrypt his work in order to get it past prison censors), it denoted a "proletarian" whose voice was muffled by the structural exclusion of the capitalist bourgeois narrative. Anything that has little or no access to cultural imperialism is subaltern, or a place of difference, according to postcolonial terminology. Beyond this particular misconception (an indication that Gayatri Spivak is mute, perhaps?) the careless usage of the term and its adoption by various marginalized groups not only "subaltern" ones are other issues that Spivak disputes.

Another misconception of the idea is that the subaltern requires special regulatory protection, affirmative action, or an advocate to speak for her since she is mute. Spivak protests, "Who the hell wants to protect subalternity?" Only highly conservative, questionable museumizers of anthropology. No activist wants to keep the subaltern in the area of difference. As stated in *Museum and Colonial Exhibition*, "You fight against the subalternity. You work for the bloody subaltern" (ibid). She uses the subaltern Studies group's work as an illustration of how this critical work might be done, not to give subaltern a voice, but to make space so that it might be heard.

Spivak is especially wary of the phrase being misused by people who only wish to deny themselves a voice in the hegemonic discourse i.e. people who are able to speak but feel that their turn is not being granted. A lot of individuals like to identify as subaltern. They are the most hazardous and least interesting. They don't even need the term "subaltern" because they are a minority that faces discrimination on college campuses. They ought to observe the mechanisms underlying the distinction. They are on the inside of the hegemonic discourse seeking slice of the pie and not being permitted, so let them speak, employ the hegemonic discourse. They do not need to call themselves subaltern (ibid).

4. Discussion

This study examines a complex narrative interwoven with national history, personal memory and the politics of representation. The novel presents the recorded history of subaltern voices that are amplified or erased in postcolonial discourse. Through the protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai, Rushdie engages with Spivak's concept of subalternity revealing limitations imposed on marginalized voices. Spivak, in her essay, *Can the subaltern speak?* Argues that the subaltern are those who exist outside of power dynamics that cannot articulate the experiences by dominant discourse. The study examines how *Midnight's Children* represents the silencing and misrepresentation of the subaltern voices that question whether they can be truly heard or understood.

Rushdie criticizes the ways in which history is constructed by highlighting the struggles of those who exist outside the hegemonic discourse. The novel attempts to reclaim these voices, it acknowledges limitations of effort, ultimately reinforcing Spivak's arguments that the subaltern speech is often misinterpreted or unheard. Rushdie's work serves as postcolonial intervention and a tale reminding the history and the voices of marginalised societies. The protagonist serves as an unreliable historian whose personal account of history both amplifies and distorts the realities of marginalized figures. Spivak's concept of subalternity particularly the arguments in her essay underscore how these voices remain unheard despite attempt at self-representation. The novel exemplifies the erasure through characters like Saleem's nurse, Mary Pereira, the nameless masses affected by political upheavals.



Saleem's fragmented story telling mirrors the fragmented history of subaltern voices that are co-opted or lost in dominant discourse. His trouble to assert control over history reflects the broader struggle of marginalised groups to reclaim their narratives. This highlights the limits of postcolonial literature fully recovering marginalised voices, reinforcing Spivak's assumption that the subaltern, trapped within the structures of power, ultimately cannot speak.

4.1 The Erasure of Subaltern Histories

The novel, *Midnight's Children* portrays Saleem Sinai building a parallel between his personal memories and the history of postcolonial India. However, this history is fractured, untrustworthy and replete with distortions, reflecting the nature of historical memory itself. Saleem acknowledges his role in creating this story when he states:

I told you the truth...Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in end the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events... (Rushdie, 1981, p. 242)

This passage emphasizes how history is not an objective documentation of events but a selective one under the control of powerful people. The novel repeatedly asks whose history gets to be told and whose voices are silenced. The subaltern embodied in different marginalized characters in the novel, have their voices erased or distorted in dominant histories. Spivak argues that the subaltern are unable to speak because their language is either silent or interpreted using the perspective of the ruling elite. This can be seen in *Midnight's Children*, in which history is controlled by political leaders and dominant elite. Saleem's efforts to recount his story, though intensely personal images, are inseparable from national myths and propaganda and separating personal memory and ideological manipulation proves challenging.

The idea of subalternity in *Midnight's Children* is also explored through the Identity crisis of its characters. Saleem being a child born at the exact moment of India's independence, is supposed to represent the nation's fate. But he is always rendered helpless, controlled by powers that are beyond his control, reflecting the predicament of the postcolonial subaltern. His identity is tenuous, formed by other narratives and not by his own volition, confessing, "I had many names: Saleem, Snotnose, Baldy, Buddha and even after that I kept being renamed. The names were not of my choosing". (p. 87).

Saleem's inability to control his own name is a metaphor for the larger problem of representation in postcolonial society, where identities are assigned rather than chosen. The same can be said of other marginalized characters in the novel, including Parvati the witch, Picture Singh and the numerous beggars and lower class people who live on the margins of history. Their lives are rarely documented, they are filtered through elite voices, distorting or overshadowing their own real experiences and strengthens prevailing hierarchies of power.

.Conclusion

In *Midnight's Children*, the hardships of marginalized and forgotten people whose stories contradict the official historical narratives are depicted against the backdrop of India's independence, partition and nation building process. The concept of subalternity as proposed by postcolonial theorist Spivak offers a critical framework for examining how historical exclusion is portrayed in the book. Spivak argues that, because their voices are neglected or misunderstood by the prevailing systems of power, the subaltern without access to hegemonic discourse cannot really "speak". Spivak's theory reveals that even when subaltern



attempt to speak, they are misrepresented or completely Ignored by hegemonic power. By deconstructing themes of memory, silence and forgotten histories, this research contributes to postcolonial studies and challenges how dominant discourses frame our perception of the past. Through the protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai, Rushdie engages with Spivak's concept of subalternity revealing limitations imposed on marginalized voices. *Midnight's Children*, in which history is controlled by political leaders and dominant elite, Saleem's efforts to recount his story, though intensely personal, are inseparable from national myths and propaganda and separating personal memory and ideological manipulation proves challenging. Spivak, in her essay, *Can the subaltern speak?* Argues that the subaltern are those who exist outside of power dynamics that cannot articulate the experiences by dominant discourse.

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