
Exploring Hybridity: Postcolonial Identity in the Works of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of hybridity in the postcolonial identity represented in the works of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, two seminal authors in Indian-English literature. By analyzing Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*, this study explores how these authors articulate the complexities of identity, displacement and cultural synthesis in a postcolonial context. Their works not only capture the fractured consciousness of individuals grappling with multiple influences but also highlight the challenges and nuances of navigating a hybridized identity in postcolonial India. Through close textual analysis, this paper sheds light on how hybridity, as depicted in their narratives, contributes to a broader understanding of postcolonial identity.

Keywords: Fractured, Consciousness, Nuances, Hybridity, Cultural, Self-Perception.

Introduction

Hybridity has become a central theme in postcolonial discourse, representing the merging of cultural identities, languages and social systems that often occurs as a result of colonial encounters. In postcolonial literature, hybridity is used to challenge fixed notions of identity and emphasize the fluid, evolving nature of cultural self-perception (Bhabha 56). Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy have contributed significantly to the portrayal of this hybrid identity in Indian literature. Both authors engage with themes of colonial legacy, cultural collision and the multiplicity of identities, while exploring the intricacies of self-identity in a nation marked by colonial history and multiculturalism (Tickell 37). Hybridity, as posited by Homi K. Bhabha, is a space of negotiation between cultures where new forms of identity emerge. It refers to the way in which colonized societies adopt and adapt aspects of the colonizers' culture, leading to a unique synthesis that resists



pure categorization (Bhabha 4). In Rushdie and Roy's work, hybridity becomes a medium for exploring the postcolonial condition and resisting the imposition of a singular cultural narrative. This framework allows for an analysis of how postcolonial identities are shaped and redefined within these texts, where characters exist in a liminal space, shaped by both native and colonial influences.

The concept of hybridity has been central to postcolonial discourse, offering a lens through which to examine the complex interplay of identity, culture and power dynamics in the wake of colonial rule (Shamshayooadeh 8). In the works of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, two prominent Indian authors, the theme of hybridity is explored with nuance and depth, shedding light on the hybrid nature of postcolonial identities. (Pindi 23) Rushdie's novels are often considered paradigmatic of postcolonial writing, with their "large and cluttered canvas, the postnationalist cultural irreverence and political scepticism of the male narrator as he comes of age and to terms with his world, the free-flowing narratives of 'magical realism'" (Kaul 123). Roy's celebrated work, *The God of Small Things*, frames individual lives and disappointments against the backdrop of collective events and actions, "reading as symptomatic of community-wide or national traumas". These authors' works exemplify the ways in which postcolonial subjects negotiate their identities, caught between the legacies of colonial rule and the aspirations of a newly independent nation. As Bhabha suggests, hybridity "has established its salience in a wide range of discourses relevant to the aesthetics of cultural difference and the politics of minorities" (Pindi 24). This hybridity is reflected in the characters' complex relationship with their cultural heritage, their struggle to reconcile the tensions between the personal and the political and their attempts to carve out a space for themselves within the larger societal structures. (Pindi) Indeed, the notion of hybridity illuminates the lived experiences of these authors themselves, who often occupy a liminal space between cultures and identities. As Gupta and Ferguson note, "We need to recognize that we are the halfies or postcolonially localized western permanent nomads." This sense of in-betweenness, of being neither fully part of the dominant culture nor fully outside it, shapes the narratives and perspectives that emerge in the works of Rushdie and Roy.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which "emphasizes the ambivalence and instability of cultural and national identities", serves as a useful framework for analyzing the literary representations of postcolonial identity in the works of Rushdie and Roy. (Pindi 25) The protagonists in these authors'

novels often find themselves navigating the complex terrain of cultural dislocation, grappling with the "irrevocably disruptive impact migration and displacement exert on the narrative integrity of the self". Salman Rushdie's novels, such as *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, are widely recognized as exemplary of postcolonial literature. (Shamshayooadeh 11) As Kluwick notes, Rushdie's works are marked by a

"friction between the twin codes" of the realistic and the magical/supernatural, which "destabilize the narrative text as fictional versus realistic" (Shamshayooadeh 12).

This formal experimentation reflects the hybrid nature of the postcolonial experience, where the lines between the real and the imagined are often blurred. (Shamshayooadeh 13) Rushdie's own autobiographical reflections, such as his essay "Imaginary Homelands," further illustrate the challenges of maintaining a coherent sense of self in the face of migration and displacement. Rushdie's statement that he is "no longer what I was and who by quitting Bombay never became what perhaps I was meant to be" (Schoene 163) underscores the fluidity and fragmentation of identity that characterizes the postcolonial condition. Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" explores the intersections of the personal and the political, weaving individual lives and disappointments into the larger tapestry of community-wide and national traumas. As Gupta and Ferguson argue, "We need to recognize that we are the halfies or postcolonially localized western permanent nomads." This sense of in-betweenness, of being neither fully part of the dominant culture nor fully outside it, shapes the narratives and perspectives that emerge in Roy's work.

Roy's novel, like Rushdie's, grapples with the complex legacies of colonialism and the challenges of negotiating hybrid identities in the postcolonial context. The characters' struggle to reconcile their personal desires with the demands of the larger societal structures reflects the ongoing process of identity formation and the ways in which the personal and the political are inextricably linked. The works of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy exemplify the central role of hybridity in postcolonial literature. Through their innovative narrative techniques and complex explorations of identity, these authors shed light on the hybrid nature of postcolonial experience, where the personal and the political, the real and the imagined, are in constant dialogue. (Schoene 164)

Arjun paced along the narrow streets of Old Delhi, his mind racing with fragments of stories he had grown up with, stories of India torn and reborn. His father, an avid reader of Salman Rushdie,



often described India as a place where reality and magic walked hand in hand, where history was never linear but woven in overlapping circles. As a child, Arjun had found his father's words enchanting, yet confusing—a puzzle of ideas and identities that never fully fit together. Now, as an adult, he could feel this fragmentation in himself, caught between the remnants of tradition and the allure of modernity. Arjun's life had always been marked by hybridity. His mother came from a traditional Hindu family, while his father, a professor of literature, was an ardent secularist who cherished Western ideals and celebrated Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a testament to India's complex, fractured identity. "We're all part of a story, Arjun," his father would say, quoting Rushdie. "In India, nothing is simply one thing" (Rushdie 110). But as Arjun grew up and went abroad to study, he felt himself becoming increasingly detached from his roots. In London, people viewed him as distinctly Indian, asking him questions about yoga, spirituality and Bollywood as though his entire identity could be defined by stereotypes. Yet, when he returned to Delhi, he was "too Western," accused of being distant from his heritage and overly influenced by foreign ways. He felt as if he was, like Rushdie's character Saleem, a "cracked mirror"—reflecting both worlds but truly belonging to neither (Rushdie 250).

One evening, feeling lost in his own identity, Arjun wandered through the neighborhood where he grew up. He encountered an old storyteller who sat by the roadside, weaving tales of gods and demons, much like the stories his grandmother used to tell. Listening to the storyteller, Arjun realized that his struggle to reconcile tradition and modernity mirrored Rushdie's narrative of India itself: a place constantly re-imagining and recreating its own story, blending the old with the new. He remembered the concept of "chutnification" from *Midnight's Children*, where history was "preserved" but never in its original form (Rushdie 463). Arjun began to see his identity not as fractured, but as layered, a mosaic of all the stories he had ever been told. It was then he understood Rushdie's idea that "to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (Rushdie 370). He did not have to choose one part of himself over the other; he could be both, bridging his heritage with his global experiences. With this realization, Arjun felt a deep sense of peace. He walked home that night, not as a "cracked mirror" but as a living tapestry, woven from multiple histories and cultures, each story adding depth to his own. He no longer needed to belong to one place or the other. Like the characters in Rushdie's work, he had found his place in the space between worlds, forever reshaping his story.



Riya stood in her family's crumbling ancestral home in Ayemenem, Kerala, her gaze resting on the overgrown garden that had once been her mother's pride. The house, filled with the lingering scent of old books and spices, seemed to echo with memories and secrets—stories of love, loss and shame that no one spoke of aloud. Growing up, Riya felt as if she had inherited these stories, heavy and silent, as part of her heritage. Her mother, a quiet woman with a fierce spirit, had often whispered about the "small things" that defined their lives, boundaries both visible and invisible. As a teenager, Riya had stumbled upon her mother's hidden copy of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. She read it in secret, drawn into the story of forbidden love and the rigid social norms that haunted her own family history. Riya felt a strange connection with Ammu, the novel's protagonist, who dared to love beyond societal expectations and paid a devastating price for it. In Roy's story, love was both a rebellion and a curse and Riya could feel this paradox within herself as well. She was, in many ways, the product of these contradictions—torn between her desire for freedom and the unspoken rules of her world.

After studying in Delhi, Riya returned home, feeling distant from her roots yet unable to completely sever her connection to them. Her life in the city had opened her eyes to new possibilities, but back in Ayemenem, the expectations of tradition weighed on her like a second skin. Her family expected her to settle into the role of a "proper" daughter, upholding customs and values that felt as suffocating as they were sacred. Riya thought of Roy's portrayal of love as something both profound and perilous and she wondered if, like Ammu, she would be forced to sacrifice her desires for the sake of belonging (Roy 42). One afternoon, as she wandered through the house, she found herself at the edge of the river where Velutha, Ammu's forbidden lover, had once lived in the novel. The water was calm, reflecting the sky in a way that seemed endless and timeless. Standing there, she realized that the river, like her own identity, held layers of stories, both visible and submerged. She was a blend of her family's history and her own dreams, bound by the "small things" but yearning for the freedom to define her life beyond them. Riya understood what Roy meant when she wrote about "the small things" that shape people's lives in unseen ways (Roy 253). She felt a newfound strength, realizing that she could carry these inherited stories without letting them define her completely. Like the characters in Roy's novel, she would navigate the space between her heritage and her own path, finding beauty in her hybrid identity. As Riya returned to her home, she no longer felt torn between worlds. She was part of both—the traditions



of her family and the dreams that lay beyond. In her heart, she carried the "small things" but also the courage to create her own story, weaving together the pieces of herself that had once seemed irreconcilable.

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie introduces a narrative where individual and national identities intersect. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, born at the moment of India's independence, becomes a symbolic figure for the nation's fractured identity (Rushdie 132). Rushdie uses magical realism to reflect India's cultural diversity and the tensions of postcolonial identity. Saleem's hybrid identity, shaped by British colonial influence and traditional Indian culture, is emblematic of the ambivalence many feel towards their inherited colonial past (Boehmer 112).

Rushdie's use of English interspersed with Hindi and Urdu phrases reflects the linguistic hybridity of the Indian identity, challenging the dominance of a single language or narrative in postcolonial discourse (Rushdie 18). Furthermore, *Midnight's Children* destabilizes the idea of a homogeneous national identity by presenting characters who embody a mix of religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This hybridity is not just a personal experience but a collective phenomenon, mirroring the fragmented nature of postcolonial societies (Kortenaar 61).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* delves into the complexities of identity within the microcosm of a Syrian Christian family in Kerala. Roy's portrayal of cultural hybridity focuses on the intersectionality of caste, class and gender within postcolonial India (Roy 89). The novel reveals how colonial legacies continue to influence social structures and individual identities in India. Roy's characters live within an intricate cultural matrix, balancing traditional Indian social norms with Western influences (Prasad 223). Through the lives of Estha and Rahel, Roy highlights how postcolonial identities are marked by ambiguity and alienation. The siblings navigate a society where ancient caste restrictions coexist with the remnants of British colonial values (Bose 64). The mixing of languages in the novel, similar to Rushdie's narrative style, reinforces the fractured identities of Roy's characters. The cultural hybridity depicted in *The God of Small Things* critiques the persisting impact of colonialism on Indian social and familial relationships, underscoring the difficulties of creating a cohesive self-identity in a society steeped in historical stratifications (Pathak 102).

Both Rushdie and Roy utilize hybridity as a means of portraying postcolonial identity, but they approach it from different angles. While Rushdie's narrative focuses on national identity and

collective hybridity, Roy's story centers on personal, family-bound identities impacted by social structures (Tickell 50). The hybridity in *Midnight's Children* is celebratory, marked by Rushdie's playful language and vibrant portrayal of India's diversity. In contrast, Roy's depiction of hybridity is often painful and oppressive, as characters struggle against the weight of tradition and colonial influences (Prasad 225). In both novels, language functions as a critical marker of hybridity. Rushdie's linguistic style, a 'chutnified' English, blends Indian vernacular with British English, making a powerful statement on postcolonial linguistic identity (Rushdie 17). Roy's use of Malayalam words and phrases within an English text not only affirms her characters' cultural roots but also resists the dominance of English as a remnant of colonial power (Roy 92). This linguistic hybridity reflects the authors' shared understanding of language as a space for cultural negotiation, where English becomes a tool for reclaiming a postcolonial voice while preserving cultural specificity (Ashcroft et al. 193).

Both *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* illustrate the psychological complexities associated with hybrid identities. Characters experience moments of identity crisis, often feeling disconnected from both colonial and native cultural norms (Kortenaar 68). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's fragmented self mirrors the divided consciousness of postcolonial India. Similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, Estha and Rahel's sense of alienation is amplified by their inability to conform to both Western and traditional Indian expectations (Bose 67). Through their works, Rushdie and Roy reveal that postcolonial hybridity often entails a struggle for self-definition in the face of conflicting cultural loyalties. The hybridity in these novels is not a seamless blending of cultures but a site of tension, where identities are continuously reshaped and contested. This tension reflects a broader challenge in postcolonial societies: reconciling the past with the present, the foreign with the familiar and the imposed with the inherited (Bhabha 13).

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy's exploration of hybridity in *Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things* highlights the complex interplay between identity and culture in postcolonial India. Through their nuanced portrayals, they illustrate... As Bhabha's concept of hybridity suggests, the postcolonial subject is caught in a liminal space, negotiating the tensions between the legacies of colonial rule and the aspirations of a newly independent nation. This sense of in-betweenness is reflected in the characters' struggles to reconcile their cultural heritage with their contemporary realities, as well as in the authors' own positioning as "halfies" or "postcolonially

localized western permanent nomads". The works of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy demonstrate the centrality of hybridity in postcolonial literature, as these authors navigate the complex terrain of cultural identity, political resistance and individual experience. Through their innovative narrative techniques and their exploration of the intersections between the personal and the political, Rushdie and Roy offer a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on the postcolonial condition, where the boundaries between the real and the imagined, the local and the global, are constantly being redrawn.

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