



Language, Power, and Ideology in *Midnight's Children*: A Critical Stylistic Study

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Abstract

This study explores the energetic interaction between language, power, and ideology in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) using the systematic framework of Critical Stylistics. Drawing on Lesley Jeffries' model of textual-conceptual functions, the paper investigates how ideological meanings are produced and converted through linguistic form rather than remaining confined to thematic expression. Adopting a qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis, the study examines stylistic strategies such as naming and describing, transitivity, modality, negation, and the representation of speech and thought. The analysis reveals that Rushdie's narrative discourse consistently interrogates dominant political and historical narratives, disrupts stable notions of identity, and foregrounds plurality, subjectivity, and uncertainty as modes of ideological resistance. The findings demonstrate that ideology in *Midnight's Children* is embedded within grammatical choices, narrative perspective, and linguistic patterning, positioning language itself as a site of power and contestation. By foregrounding the intersection of linguistic structure and postcolonial ideology, the paper establishes Critical Stylistics as a productive and systematic approach for the analysis of postcolonial literary texts.

Keywords: Critical Stylistics; ideology; power; language; Salman Rushdie; *Midnight's Children*

1. Introduction

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping how power and ideology are constructed, communicated, and sustained within society. In literary discourse, linguistic choices do more than embellish meaning; they actively influence how readers perceive history, identity, and authority. Literary texts therefore function as sites where ideological positions are articulated and contested through language.



Stylistics, positioned at the intersection of linguistics and literary criticism, offers systematic tools for analysing the relationship between linguistic form and meaning. While traditional stylistic approaches have often focused on aesthetic effects, more recent developments have foregrounded the social and ideological implications of language use. Within this context, Critical Stylistics emerges as a particularly relevant framework, as it is explicitly concerned with uncovering how ideology operates through routine grammatical and lexical choices.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* occupies a central place in postcolonial literature due to its experimental narrative form and its reconfiguration of Indian national history. The novel recounts the story of post-independence India through a fragmented and self-conscious narrative voice, thereby questioning the authority of official historiography and linear historical representation. Rushdie's extensive linguistic experimentation renders the novel especially suitable for critical stylistic analysis.

Although *Midnight's Children* has attracted substantial critical attention within postcolonial and postmodern studies, comparatively little emphasis has been placed on systematic linguistic investigation of ideology in the text. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how language functions as a medium of power and ideological construction in *Midnight's Children* through the framework of Critical Stylistics.

2. Theoretical Framework: Critical Stylistics

Critical Stylistics, as formulated by Jeffries (2010), is concerned with the ways in which texts linguistically construct particular versions of reality. The approach rests on the premise that texts are ideologically motivated and that ideology is embedded within grammatical structure rather than merely expressed through overt political content.

Jeffries identifies a set of textual–conceptual functions through which ideology operates, including naming and describing, the representation of actions and events (transitivity), modality, negation, and the representation of speech and thought. These analytical tools enable researchers to examine how texts position readers by foregrounding certain interpretations while marginalising others.



Applied to *Midnight's Children*, Critical Stylistics provides a systematic means of linking Rushdie's linguistic choices to his ideological critique of history, power, and identity, revealing how language itself becomes a medium of resistance.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in close textual analysis. Selected passages from *Midnight's Children* serve as the primary data and are chosen for their relevance to historical representation, narrative authority, and identity formation. The analysis employs key tools from Critical Stylistics, with particular attention to naming practices, transitivity patterns, modality, negation, and speech and thought representation. Linguistic findings are interpreted within the broader socio-political context of post-independence India to ensure analytical depth and contextual relevance.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Naming, Identity, and Ideological Construction

In *Midnight's Children*, naming functions as a crucial linguistic mechanism through which identity and ideology are constructed and questioned. Saleem Sinai introduces himself with the statement:

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? (3)

The phrase “*once upon a time*”, conventionally associated with fairy tales, is juxtaposed with the precise historical reference to Bombay. This stylistic fusion disrupts expectations of historical realism and foregrounds the subjective nature of narration. Linguistically, the opening signals that the narrative will not conform to the conventions of factual historiography but will instead reconstruct history through memory and imagination.

A further example of ideological naming appears when Saleem declares that his body is

We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.' (121)

Through metaphorical naming, the individual body is linguistically transformed into a symbolic site where national history is reflected. This construction collapses the boundary



between personal identity and collective experience, reinforcing the ideological link between the narrator and the nation while simultaneously exposing that link as discursively produced rather than natural.

The collective designation “*Midnight’s children*” itself functions as an ideologically loaded label. While the term appears to unify those born at the moment of India’s independence, the novel repeatedly highlights differences in language, religion, region, and political allegiance among them. Naming here does not stabilise identity but reveals its fragmentation, thereby undermining essentialist and homogeneous models of nationalism.

Through strategic acts of naming and metaphorical identification, Rushdie uses language to construct identity as fluid and unstable, exposing nationalism as an ideologically constructed rather than inherent category.

4.2 Transitivity and the Distribution of Agency

Transitivity patterns in *Midnight’s Children* reveal how linguistic choices shape perceptions of agency and responsibility. Historical events are frequently represented through abstract agents, as in the statement “*History arrived with a scream.*” In this construction, “*history*” functions as the grammatical actor, while human agents responsible for violence and political decisions are erased from the clause. This grammatical choice naturalises historical upheaval and presents it as an autonomous, almost inevitable force.

A similar pattern can be observed when Saleem describes large-scale political changes as forces that “*claimed lives*” or “*reshaped destinies.*” Such constructions assign agency to abstract nouns rather than to identifiable political actors, thereby diffusing responsibility. Linguistically, this aligns with ideological discourses that present national trauma as unavoidable rather than the result of specific human actions.

In contrast, Saleem’s personal narrative frequently foregrounds individual agency through first-person material processes. For instance

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning-yes, meaning-something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. (3)

the pronoun “*I*” occupies the actor position, emphasising the narrator’s active role in meaning-making. This contrast between abstract historical agency and personal narrative agency highlights the ideological tension between official history and lived experience.



By manipulating transitivity patterns, Rushdie redistributes agency in the narrative, challenging institutional histories that obscure responsibility while privileging personal memory as a counter-ideological force.

4.3 Modality, Negation, and Ideological Uncertainty

Modality plays a significant role in *Midnight's Children* by expressing uncertainty and resisting authoritative truth claims. Saleem frequently qualifies his statements using modal verbs and evaluative expressions, as when he admits that

"Memory's truth... has its own special kind."(211)

The modal structure of this sentence acknowledges the instability of memory while simultaneously legitimising it as a valid form of historical knowledge.

Reality is a question of perspective (164)

he assertion that "reality is a question of perspective" functions as an implicit negation of positivist historiography. By locating reality within perception rather than objective fact, Rushdie foregrounds plurality, subjectivity, and ideological contingency, thereby resisting claims of historical neutrality and narrative closure.

Negation further destabilises fixed meanings. Statements that deny certainty or completeness reject the possibility of a single, authoritative interpretation of history. Through negation, the text constructs alternative ideological worlds in which contradiction and multiplicity are not weaknesses but fundamental principles.

Through modality and negation, Rushdie constructs an ideological framework that privileges uncertainty and plurality, directly challenging dominant narratives that claim historical objectivity and closure.

4.4 Representation of Speech and Thought

The representation of speech and thought in *Midnight's Children* plays a crucial role in destabilising narrative authority. The novel's extensive use of first-person narration foregrounds the subjective nature of historical representation. Saleem's assertion that

the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. (380)



A further example can be seen in Saleem's frequent interruptions and revisions of his own narrative. He repeatedly corrects himself, questions earlier statements, and addresses the reader directly. These moments of self-reflexive commentary foreground the process of narration itself, exposing storytelling as provisional and constructed rather than transparent. Such representations of speech and thought align with postmodern and postcolonial scepticism toward grand narratives. By refusing narrative omniscience, Rushdie exposes the ideological foundations of historical discourse and reveals how power operates through claims of narrative authority.

Through reflexive speech and thought representation, Rushdie dismantles narrative authority and foregrounds storytelling as an ideological act shaped by language, memory, and power.

5. Findings

The analysis demonstrates that ideology in *Midnight's Children* is embedded within linguistic structure. Naming practices construct unstable identities, transitivity patterns manipulate agency, and modality and negation undermine claims to absolute truth. Narrative techniques further reinforce ideological critique by challenging dominant political and historical discourses. Language thus emerges not merely as a medium of representation but as a site of ideological struggle.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that Critical Stylistics offers a systematic and productive framework for analysing ideology in literary texts. Through a detailed examination of *Midnight's Children*, the paper reveals how Rushdie's linguistic choices construct, contest, and destabilise ideological meanings. Language functions as a powerful instrument through which history is reimagined, authority is questioned, and plurality is affirmed. By demonstrating how ideology operates through everyday grammatical and narrative choices, the study contributes to stylistic and postcolonial scholarship and reinforces the relevance of Critical Stylistics in contemporary literary analysis.



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