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LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The current paper employs corpus-based linguistic methodology to examine the manifestation of linguistic hybridity in Salman Rushdie's seminal postcolonial novel Midnight's Children, published in 1981. Using digital corpus analysis tools, more exactly, Voyant tools, we seek to investigate how Rushdie constructs his distinctive narrative voice through the strategic deployment of multilingual elements, code-switching patterns and lexical innovation. The research analyses a digitized corpus of the novel to identify and quantify instances of Hindi-Urdu lexical items and other hybrid lexical and grammatical structures embedded within the English narrative framework. Our corpus-based approach reveals systematic patterns in Rushdie's linguistic choices, demonstrating how hybridity functions not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as a fundamental narrative strategy. The analysis identifies three primary categories of linguistic hybridity: lexical borrowing, syntactic interference and pragmatic transfer, each serving distinct literary and cultural functions. Findings indicate that Rushdie's linguistic experimentation creates a "third space" of meaning that challenges monolingual literary conventions while asserting cultural authenticity. Accordingly, the paper contributes to pragmalinguistics, literary and functional stylistics, and digital humanities by showing how corpus methods can empirically illuminate qualitative aspects of postcolonial narrative voice and style.

Keywords:

Hybridity, Code-switching, Interference, Postcolonial Discourse

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his landmark essay “Imaginary Homelands”, Salman Rushdie (1992) articulates the ambivalent positionality of the postcolonial writer within the linguistic and cultural matrix of empire. For Rushdie, English operates not merely as an inherited instrument of expression but as a site of contestation—an arena in which the colonized subject enacts both resistance and reinvention. His revisiting of the etymology of translation, derived from the Latin *translatio* (“bearing across”), becomes a paradigmatic gesture through which diasporic subjectivity is refigured as a process of perpetual negotiation and transformation. As he writes:

“The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.” (Rushdie, 1991: 16).

To be a “translated man,” in Rushdie’s formulation, is to inhabit a condition of radical in-betweenness – a liminal space that both fractures and reconstitutes identity. Migration, in this sense, is not a completed act of relocation but an interminable process of self-translation, wherein cultural memory, linguistic practice, and affective belonging are continually rearticulated across disjunctive geographies. This condition recalls Homi Bhabha’s theorization of the “Third Space,” in which meaning and identity are produced through hybridity and dislocation rather than fixed origin. Rushdie’s aesthetic practice thus performs a Derridean *différance* – a deferral and dissemination of identity that simultaneously acknowledges the losses of displacement and the generative possibilities of translation. His hybrid idiom, oscillating between the local and the global, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, constitutes a textual enactment of postcolonial modernity: a linguistic space where fragmentation becomes the very medium of renewal.

2. TRANSLATION AS EPISTEMIC CROSSING: THEORIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL TURN

In their influential 1990 edited volume *Translation, History and Culture*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere famously initiated what has come to be known as the “Cultural Turn” in Translation Studies. Yet it was not until 1999 that Bo Pettersson advanced the notion of a corresponding “Postcolonial Turn,” seeking to (re)connect the domains of postcolonial literature and translation. Pettersson’s (1999) analysis underscores the extent to which the conceptual and disciplinary boundaries between postcolonial writing and translation have become increasingly porous, thereby necessitating a more systematic theoretical engagement with postcolonial translation as a critical field of inquiry. This convergence marks not only a growing recognition of translation as a culturally and ideologically mediated act, but also foregrounds the inherently translational nature of postcolonial discourse—an arena perpetually negotiating among languages, cultures, and competing historical narratives.

Over the past four decades, Salman Rushdie’s oeuvre has evolved into a crucial nexus for both postmodern and postcolonial debates. His fiction—translated into over forty languages – has been variously mobilized to affirm and to contest the coherence of postcolonial

paradigms. Through the recurring metaphors of the “translated man” and “postcolonial literature as translation,” Rushdie’s work enacts a sustained negotiation of identity, language, and power. Drawing upon both postcolonial and translation theoretical frameworks, he may be regarded as what Crăciun (2019: 89) aptly terms a “protean figure of translation.” His creative practice can thus be read as a continuous act of (self-)translation: a dynamic strategy for recalibrating asymmetrical structures within hybridized cultural spaces. The present analysis will examine the multiple modalities of translation at work in Rushdie’s texts, as well as the complex challenges they pose to translators seeking to render his layered narratives within new linguistic and cultural horizons.

Over roughly the same period, Translation Studies—emerging as a discipline in its own right – has increasingly emphasized the pivotal role of translation within postcolonial contexts. In their seminal collection *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) advance the argument that postcolonial literature and culture are not merely subject to translation but are themselves constitutive acts of translation. Rather than viewing postcolonial texts simply as works rendered interlingually, they propose understanding them as sites where cultural and linguistic negotiation is foundational to the production of meaning. As Bassnett and Trivedi observe in their introduction, “to speak of postcolonial translation is little short of a tautology,” insofar as “the word translation seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrupture; translation itself seems to have been translated back to its origins” (1999: 12–13). This conceptual return resonates profoundly with Rushdie’s reflections in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992), where the diasporic writer’s task is figured as one of reconstructing fragmented histories and identities through language—understood, in turn, as a medium of perpetual translation across cultures, memories, and geographies.

The “Postcolonial Turn” in Translation Studies, therefore, signifies more than an academic realignment; it marks a paradigm shift in how translation is theorized as a mode of cultural production and resistance. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), Tejaswini Niranjana (1992), and Maria Tymoczko (1999) have since extended this trajectory by interrogating the power relations inherent in translation, particularly as they intersect with gender, empire, and epistemic violence. Spivak’s call for the “ethical responsibility” of the translator, Niranjana’s critique of translation as a colonial instrument of representation, and Tymoczko’s redefinition of translation as a plural, decentred practice collectively underscores the political stakes of translation in the postcolonial world. Within this expanded framework, translation emerges not merely as a linguistic transaction but as a performative space of rewriting and reinscription – what Bhabha might call a “third space” of articulation – where meaning is continually deferred, negotiated, and transformed. In this light, Rushdie’s work exemplifies the postcolonial condition as an ongoing act of translation: an aesthetic and ethical process through which histories of displacement are rewritten into new, hybrid forms of belonging.

3. THE UNTRANSLATABLE NATION: DECODING AND TRANSFERRING HYBRID LANGUAGE IN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

Upon its publication in 1981, *Midnight's Children* disrupted established literary conventions with its bold narrative form and stylistic innovation. Garnering critical acclaim, it received the Booker Prize and was later distinguished as the most outstanding novel to win the award in its first quarter-century. Beyond its accolades, the novel marked a turning point in Anglophone fiction, particularly for its inventive manipulation of the English language in the postcolonial narrative. More than a singular achievement, it gave rise to a new literary lineage – a work that echoes its fusion of historical consciousness, linguistic hybridity and narrative daring. Bhabha (1984) praises the distinctive brilliance and the unsettling excess of Rushdie's work, which stems from the fact that he embraces English as a language that has been decentred and redefined. To Bhabha (1984), Rushdie exemplifies a *postcolonial aesthetics* in which English no longer belongs exclusively to its colonial origins, but is (re)appropriated, hybridized and made to speak in new, subversive registers (Bhabha, 1984:108)

Within the polyphonic architecture of *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist Saleem Sinai deploys an intricate web of linguistic metaphors to mediate the ontological dissonance engendered by his temporal coincidence with India's de-colonial birth. His self-construction is filtered through a semiotic lens, wherein grammatical constructs – such as “adverbs and hyphens” or “dualistically combined configurations” (Rushdie, 1991:285) – become vehicles for articulating a fractured, hybrid subjectivity suspended between historical rupture and personal contingency. Counterbalancing this semiotic density is Padma, his corporeal and narratological foil, whose portrayal may be viewed as unlettered and it pragmatically foregrounds the disjunction between elite epistemologies and vernacular reception. Her bewilderment in the face of Saleem's abstract discourses functions not merely as comic relief, but as a metatextual commentary on the limitations of linguistic excess in rendering lived experience intelligible to the subaltern. Accordingly, Saleem confesses: “this is why hyphens are necessary: actively literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*: 286).

While Saleem Sinai predominantly articulates his narrative in what may be identified as standardised English, his speech consistently slips into an array of divergent linguistic registers, having as effect a radical *detritorialisation* of language (Pilapitiya, 2008: 8). This linguistic fluidity mirrors and reinforces the inherently disjunctive and episodic structure of his tale. The much cited (and debated) metaphor of *chutnification* not only encapsulates the chaotic sedimentation of historical memory within the text, but it also gestures towards the novel's stylistic heterogeneity. It signifies a deliberate amalgamation of idioms, tonalities and vernacular inflections – a semiotic bricolage through which Rushdie constructs an idiom that is at once disruptive, generative, and resistant to formal categorisation. Salman Rushdie has also proven, in a creative and original way, how far English can be Indianised. Indianisation, as well as hybridisation, represent traits in his works functioning as an integral part of his own linguistic experiments. The achieved popularity may derive from the use of English as an innovative language, the unique representation of history the use of magic realism (as opposed to Euro-

centrism of master discourses), or his desire to capture and render the spirit of Indian culture, altogether with its diversity and multiplicity.

The features listed and exemplified below may serve as an evidence-based mechanism, considering the original text and its Romanian counterpart.

Example 1:

Source text:

*And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little **dia-lamps** burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest **dias** in the world. (Midnight's Children:82)*

Target text:

*În toate orașele, comunele și satele **lămpile** mici luminează de pe pervazul ferestrelor, din pridvoare și de pe verande, pe când trenurile ard în Punjab, cu flăcările verzi ale vopselei scorojite și cu șofranul orbitor al combustibilului incendiat, de parcă ar fi cele mai mari **torțe** din lume. (Copiii din miez de noapte, 2007:114)*

This passage marks a crucial narrative juncture in *Midnight's Children*, where the synchronous emergence of Saleem and Shiva parallels the declaration of Indian independence, a moment that intertwines the personal with the national in an act of symbolic overdetermination. The chromatic evocation of saffron and green overtly references the Indian tricolour, anchoring the scene in the iconography of statehood. Yet, it is the recurrence of the term *dia* – designating a modest oil lamp - that most effectively encapsulates Rushdie's layered semiotic strategy. Initially, *dia* is introduced in tandem with its English gloss ("the little dia-lamps"), a gesture that reflects the novel ongoing oscillation between vernacular authenticity and Anglophone intelligibility. In its subsequent appearance, *dia* adopts an English plural inflection, standing autonomously to signify the burning trains in Punjab – "the biggest dias in the world" (*Midnight's Children*: 82, 128, 306). In Romanian, this culture-specific item is neutralised, and, therefore, loses its cultural impact upon the readers. This syntactic mutation enacts a moment of linguistic hybridity wherein the term is both preserved and transformed. Through such transformations, Rushdie's language resists closure, operating instead within a fluid space of cultural translation and semantic instability.

Example 2:

Source text:

*"Tomorrow I'll have a bath and shave: I am going to put on a brand new kurta, shining and starched, and **pajamas** to match. I'll wear mirror-worked slippers curling up at the toes, my hair will be neatly brushed (though not parted in the centre), my teeth gleaming... in a phrase, I'll look my best. ('Thank God' from pouting Padma.)". (Midnight's Children: 75)*

Target text:

*Mâine o să fac baie, o să mă bărbieresc și o să-mi pun o hurta nou-nouță, strălucitoare și scrobită, precum și o **pijama** asortată. O să port papuci cu modele*

simetrice și răsuciți la vârf, o să mă pieptăn cu grijă (dar fără cărare pe mijloc), dinții or să- mi sclipească... bref, o să arăt cât se poate de bine. („Slavă Domnului”, mormăie Padma cea ursuză.) (Copiii din miez de noapte, 2007 :104)

The syntactic and narrative contexts surrounding the term *pajamas* in the source text clearly suggest its reference to the traditional loose-fitting linen or cotton trousers commonly worn by men in North India. As such, the term operates within a culturally specific semantic field that is misaligned with the interpretation imposed by the Romanian translator, whose rendering fails to capture the regional and gendered nuances embedded in the original usage.

Example 3:

Source text:

“Finally, he returns to his hotel room, his clothes soaked in red stains, and Naseem commences a panic. ‘Let me help, let me help, Allah what a man I’ve married, who goes into gullies to fight with goondas!’ She is all over him with water on wads of cotton wool. (Midnight’s Children: 22)

Target text:

Într-un târziu, se întoarce în camera de hotel, cu hainele pline de pete roșii, iar Naseem intră imediat în panică. — Stai să te-ajut, stai să te-ajut, Allah prea milostiv, pe cine-am luat de bărbat, pe unul care se duce te miri unde, să se încaiere cu golanii! Se aferează în jurul lui, cu apă și tampoane de vată. (Copiii din miez de noapte, 2007 :34-35)

In this example, the ideal reader of the English text instantly perceives two borrowings (*gullies* and *goondas*), whereas, in the Romanian version, the reader finds none of them. The narrative context makes it evident that the linguistic origin of the term in question is not English, but rather Hindi-Urdu, where *gālī* (f.) – phonetically anglicised in the text – signifies a narrow lane or alley. This localised meaning, distinct from any potential English homonym, is deeply embedded within the socio-historical fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Crucially, its invocation here is not arbitrary but symbolically loaded, gesturing toward the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919, which occurred during the Baisakhi festival in Amritsar, following the British colonial ban on public gatherings (Collett, 2005). In this context, the term *gālī* functions not merely as a spatial descriptor but as a conduit of historical memory, embedding the topography of colonial brutality within the novel’s linguistic texture.

Rushdie’s use of slang – especially Indian, is also to be noticed in the table below (Table 1), which was preserved in Romanian as well (Table 1).

Table 1. The use of slang preserved in translation

Source text	Target text
<i>In which the viceroy, Wavell, understood that he was finished, washed-up, or in our own expressive word, funtoosh, ... (p.44)</i>	<i>și...) în care Wavell, viceregele, a înțeles că era terminat, la pământ sau, ca să folosim un cuvânt expresiv de-al nostru, funtoosh. (p.65)</i>

<i>And also, 'Eleven years, my Madam, see if I haven't loved you all, I Madam, and that boy with his face like the moon; but now I am killed, I am no-good woman, I shall burn in hell! Funtoosh!' cried Mary, and again, 'It's finished; funloosh!' (p.203)</i>	<i>— De unsprezece ani, domniță, vă slujesc și vă iubesc pe toți, domniță, și pe băiatul cu fața ca o lună. Dar acum s-a zis cu mine, nu mai sunt bună de nimic și o să ard în focurile iadului! Funtoosh! S-a terminat; funtoosh! (p.272)</i>
<i>'Wife,' he intoned gravely, while Jamila and I shook with fear, 'Begum Sahiba, this country is finished. Bankrupt. Funtoosh. (p.219)</i>	<i>„Nevastă”, a intonat el grav, pe când Jamila și cu mine tremuram de frică, „begum sahiba, țara asta e la pământ. Pe ducă. Funtoosh” (p.293)</i>

This innovative use of slang is meant to function as a bond between the narrative texture and national ideology/identity, asserting thus the legitimacy of non-standard Englishes and emphasizing the novel's central concern with all those fractured identities altogether with the complexities of a new-born nation.

4. CORPUS ANALYSIS

The table below (Table 2) illustrates the distribution of recurrent hybrid lexical items in *Midnight's Children*, revealing how Rushdie's multilingual choices shape the texture of the narrative.

Table 2. Key words in the text

Keyword	Occurrences	Category	Occurrences	Category	Keyword	Occurrences
aziz	230	Urdu	1214	Hindi	amma	13
padma	218	Hindi	490	Hindi	arre	15
saleem	206	Indian	109	Hindi	baap	8
aadam	150	Pakistani	42	Hindi	baba	48
picture singh	93	Uncatego- rized	31	Hindi	deshmukh	3
ayooba	91			Hindi	dilli- dekho	3
shaheed	80			Hindi	ganesh	14
hanif	66			Hindi	guru mandir	7
sahib	64			Hindi	indra	3
farooq	59			Hindi	jai bangla	1
alia	58			Hindi	jamuna	2
emerald	58			Hindi	krishna	6
naseem	53			Hindi	laddoo	2
baba	48			Hindi	mata	2

begum	42			Hindi	nibu	1
mustapha	39			Hindi	paan	20
rashid	29			Hindi	padma	218
ayah	27			Hindi	picture singh	93

The high frequency of Hindi- and Urdu-derived forms – particularly proper names, kinship terms, and culturally loaded expressions – demonstrates that linguistic hybridity operates as a sustained and meaningful pattern rather than isolated borrowing. These quantitative trends underscore the role of multilingual lexis in constructing a culturally embedded narrative voice and in negotiating identity, memory, and history within the postcolonial context.

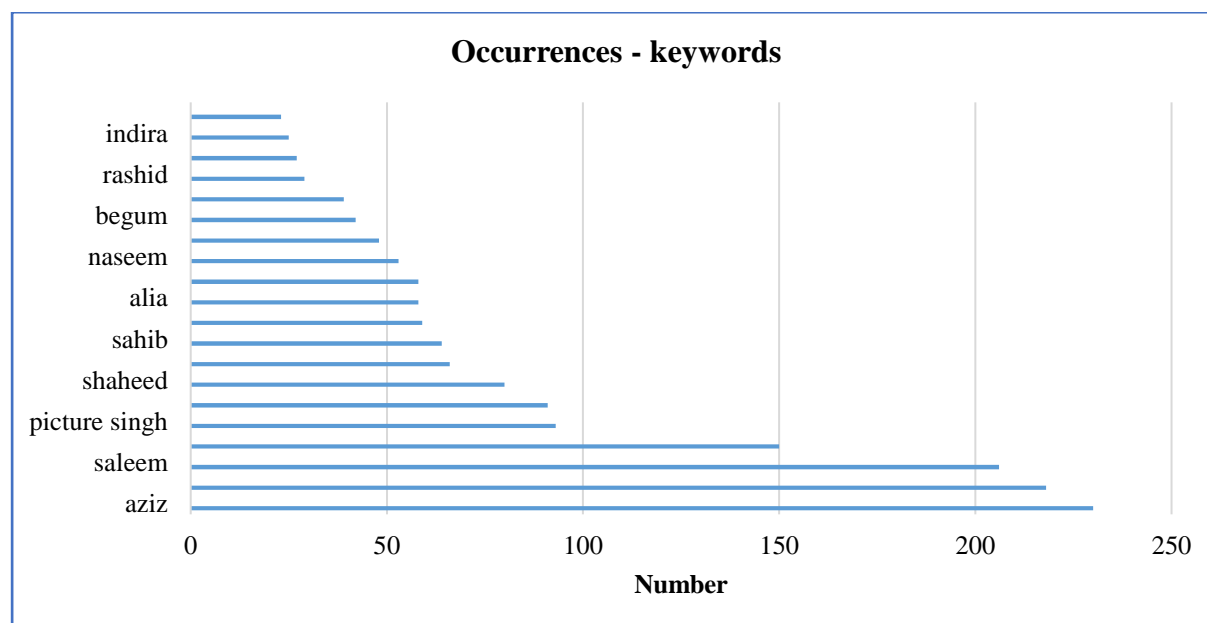


Figure 1. Keywords by the number of occurrences

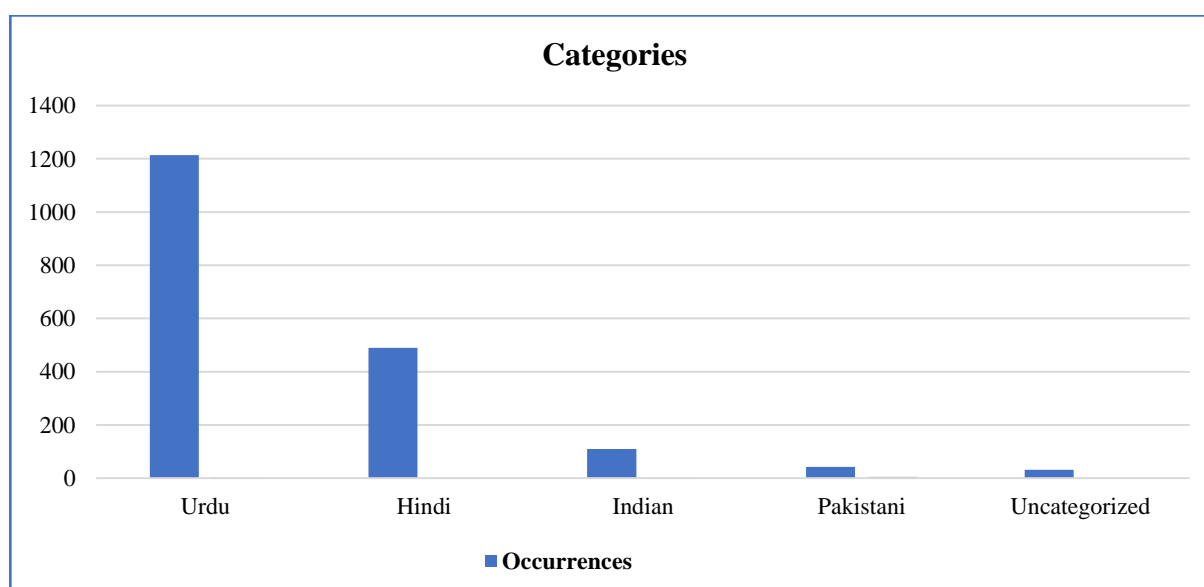


Figure 2. Keywords by category

A dataset of keywords extracted from the novel was categorized into five primary cultural-linguistic categories: *Urdu*, *Hindi*, *Indian*, *Pakistani*, and *Uncategorized*. The most frequent 20 keywords were visualized, along with their categorical distributions. The corpus includes names of major characters (*Saleem*, *Padma*, *Aziz*, *Aadam*), terms with religious or political significance (*shaheed*, *guru mandir*, *jai bangla*), and others with metaphorical connotations (*picture singh*). These were then subjected to close reading and thematic interpretation.

- **Names as Narrative and Allegorical Devices**

***Saleem* (Occurrences: 206, Category: Indian)**

Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist, is the personification of modern India, born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. The name *Saleem*, common in Muslim cultures, immediately marks him as a character of hybrid lineage—culturally Muslim, historically Indian. His fragmented identity—marked by telepathy, disintegration, and narrative unreliability—mirrors India's fractured political landscape. His name functions as a **central cipher** through which the novel's allegorical project unfolds.

***Aadam* (Occurrences: 150, Category: Pakistani)**

Dr. Aadam Aziz, Saleem's grandfather, represents a generation shaped by colonial education and scientific rationalism but also haunted by spiritual and cultural ambiguity. The biblical resonance of *Aadam* (Adam) suggests origins, exile, and the burden of legacy. In both religious and political senses, Aadam is an ancestral figure, evoking the fall from innocence and the inevitable clash between tradition and modernity. His name carries Pan-Abrahamic connotations, tying personal lineage to broader civilizational narratives.

***Aziz* (Occurrences: 230, Category: Urdu)**

The name *Aziz* is linguistically Arabic/Urdu and means "beloved" or "precious." It emphasizes the emotional and familial intimacy that Rushdie weaves into his characters, but also the cultural prestige and vulnerability of the Muslim community in post-independence India. That *Aziz* is the most frequently occurring word in the corpus underlines the prominence of Muslim heritage in the novel, especially as a site of historical memory and marginalization.

***Padma* (Occurrences: 218, Category: Hindi)**

Padma, Saleem's "listener" and companion, serves multiple symbolic functions. She is earthy, physical, grounded—a sharp contrast to Saleem's fragmented, cerebral narrative. Her name, derived from Sanskrit and associated with the lotus flower, suggests fertility, rebirth, and continuity. She also invokes the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, reinforcing her role as a nurturing, maternal force. Padma anchors the metafictional structure of the novel, embodying the oral tradition and challenging the authority of written history.

***Picture Singh* (Occurrences: 93, Uncategorized)**

A circus strongman and populist figure, *Picture Singh* symbolizes spectacle, performance, and the theatricality of nationalism. His name is deliberately ironic—"Picture" evokes cinema, illusion, and manipulated identity. He stands in for the common man's resilience and embodies Rushdie's critique of political myth-making, especially during the

Emergency period. His "uncategorized" status in the corpus reflects his liminal role: neither bound by nation nor religion, but still essential to its narrative drama.

- **Cultural Keywords and Collective Memory**

***Shaheed* (Occurrences: 80, Category: Urdu/Hindi)**

Meaning "martyr," *shaheed* is a powerful term within Islamic, Sikh, and Indian nationalist vocabularies. Its presence invokes sacrifice, ideological purity, and violence—key motifs in the novel's portrayal of partition, war, and religious conflict. The term also complicates notions of heroism and victimhood, highlighting the **ambiguity of historical memory**.

***Guru Mandir, Krishna, Jai Bangla, Jamuna* (Low Occurrences, Hindi)**

These keywords evoke religious-nationalist imagery:

- *Guru Mandir* situates the narrative in Hindu religious space, potentially alluding to community identity and faith.
- *Krishna*, a god of mischief, love, and divine politics, mirrors Saleem's contradictory role as both a seer and unreliable narrator.
- *Jai Bangla* ("Victory to Bengal") connects to the Bangladesh Liberation War, reinforcing the novel's geopolitical scope.
- *Jamuna*, a sacred river, underscores the fluid and mythological dimensions of Indian history.

These words, though less frequent, carry dense symbolic weight and reflect Rushdie's use of intertextual and interreligious references.

- **Language and the Construction of Hybridity**

The corpus data show a marked dominance of Urdu (1214 occurrences), followed by Hindi (490). This reflects not just linguistic plurality but also Rushdie's project of stylistic hybridity – what he famously described as "chutnification". His use of Indian vernaculars within English prose subverts colonial linguistic authority and affirms a postcolonial aesthetic of fusion, fragmentation, and fluidity.

Rushdie's deliberate incorporation of culturally specific terms destabilizes the boundaries between colonizer and colonized language, making the novel a space of translation and negotiation. In this way, language becomes a site of resistance as well as recovery.

5. CONCLUSION

The corpus analysis of keywords in *Midnight's Children* reveals that Rushdie's lexical choices are profoundly intentional, operating at the intersection of narrative, symbolism, and cultural politics. The frequent recurrence of names and culturally resonant terms – particularly those drawn from Urdu and Hindi – illustrates Rushdie's broader postcolonial critique. He

destabilizes monolithic narratives of nation and history, instead offering a polyphonic text rooted in personal memory, linguistic hybridity, and mythic allegory.

Through names like *Saleem*, *Padma*, and *Aadam*, and terms like *shaheed* and *jai bangla*, the novel constructs a layered identity for India: not unified but diverse, not coherent but powerfully imagined. This corpus study affirms the novel's status as a linguistic tapestry, a narrative of many tongues, echoing the voices of a divided and yet narratively whole subcontinent.

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