

Article

Absence, Communication and Bloodstains: The Triple Symbolism of the Perforated Sheet in *Midnight's Children*

Xin Ding^{1,*} and Youming Hu¹
¹ School of Foreign Languages, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, China

* Correspondence: Xin Ding, School of Foreign Languages, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, China

Abstract: As a landmark work of postcolonial literature, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* adopts magical realism to construct an interwoven narrative of individual fate and Indian history. From the perspective of imagery analysis, this paper interprets the profound symbolic connotations of the perforated sheet in the novel. By analyzing the correspondence between the hole in the sheet and the existential void of the family, the parallel between the sheet's dual nature of covering yet exposing and the family's distorted modes of communication, and the correlation between the three marks of violence on the sheet and the intergenerational traumas of three family generations, this paper reveals how absence, estrangement and trauma jointly shape the inescapable fate of the family. This study argues that the perforated sheet serves as a tangible incarnation of the Saleem family, and the destiny of the family maintains an intimate isomorphic relationship with the physical features of the sheet. Through close textual reading and systematic symbolic analysis, the paper demonstrates that the perforated sheet operates on three interconnected levels: as a metaphor for absence and loss, as a medium of fractured communication, and as a repository of inherited violence. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Rushdie's narrative technique and the broader thematic concerns of postcolonial fiction, particularly the ways in which material objects can encode complex histories of displacement, silence, and suffering across generations.

Keywords: *midnight's children*; perforated sheet; imagery analysis; postcolonial literature; magical realism; salman rushdie

1. Introduction

Salman Rushdie, a representative writer of postcolonial literature, integrates individual fates with national history through magical realism in *Midnight's Children*, depicting the destinies of three generations of the Saleem Sinai family. The opening chapter titled "The Perforated Sheet" functions as a core imagery running through the entire novel. Grandfather Aadam Aziz must peer through the hole in the sheet to examine patients during medical consultations; Amina Sinai, the mother, embraces her current husband through the magical power of the sheet; in Saleem's generation, when his sister Jamila sings, the public can only catch glimpses of her shadow through the sheet's perforation [1].

Existing scholarship has predominantly analyzed this imagery through frameworks emphasizing cultural hybridity and gendered experience, yet systematic examination of its layered symbolic meanings remains limited. This paper holds that the perforated sheet carries three tiers of significance in the novel: first, on the literal level, the central hole of the sheet symbolizes absence, emptiness, and inner spiritual void; second, on the functional level, the sheet acts as a channel enabling limited contact, mirroring the alienated yet unbroken bonds between characters; third, residual marks imprinted on the sheet embody the emotional traumas endured by all family members.

2. Irreparable Absence

Received: 09 May 2026

Revised: 30 June 2026

Accepted: 12 July 2026

Published: 16 July 2026



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

The sheet's defining feature lies in its central perforation, distinguishing it from ordinary linen [2]. Fundamentally, the "hole" represents a negative form of existence. An intact sheet is fully woven with cotton fabric, while the central hole constitutes blank space within the textile plane—a physical absence of the original material. Meanwhile, the void is not absolute nothingness; it is an opening waiting to be accessed and filled, carrying the potential for occupation. In this sense, the hole materializes absence. Trapped in such incompleteness across three generations, the family members constantly attempt to piece together wholeness, yet all their efforts end in futility.

The hollow perforation of the sheet shapes characters defined by perpetual lack. Doctor Aadam indulges in desire yet lacks a complete beloved to reciprocate his affection [3]. He believes himself deeply in love with Naseem, but in truth, he only adores a fragmented version of her, pieced together by his own fantasies after being filtered through the sheet's hole. At the core of Aadam's emotional world lies an unbridgeable void: the space meant for a full, unbroken lover can never be truly filled under the condition imposed by the perforation. The hole fragments Naseem's image, and this absence continuously fuels Aadam's imagination. The more thoroughly his fantasies fill the void, the clearer it becomes that the real woman can never satisfy his idealized vision. This logically explains the emotional disillusionment following their marriage. When Naseem reveals her complete, authentic self without the fragmented framing of the hole, Aadam realizes the stark disparity between reality and his fantasy, and their relationship gradually grows cold and distant. Later, Aadam discovers that "the hole had grown larger, surrounded by smaller holes." His anger stems not merely from moth damage to the linen, but from the unavoidable realization that the void in his heart has never healed, and post-marital estrangement only widens this emptiness.

If Aadam's inner life is hollowed out by the perforation, Naseem's self-perception is equally fractured by it. She is forever perceived by others as a disjointed collection of body parts—her nose, knees and private regions—erasing her unified individual identity from the start. Though Naseem carefully orchestrates the order in which parts of her body are exposed, she tacitly accepts being viewed in fragments, merely striving for limited agency within the established framework rather than breaking free entirely [4]. This demonstrates that the hole fundamentally molds the trajectory of her life; all her choices and actions are confined to the conditions set by the perforation. She eventually evolves into the formidable, highly disciplined "Reverend Mother." She wraps herself in an unblemished facade through strict dietary customs and religious rituals, yet this wholeness is nothing more than a deliberate disguise. Her commanding temperament and persistent attention to her children's personal boundaries are external expressions of her inner void. She attempts to regulate her family and its members to compensate for the fragmented selfhood imposed by the sheet's hole in her youth.

This void is passed down through female descendants to Saleem's generation, turning individual emptiness into an inherited family pattern. Naseem's daughter Mumtaz, renamed Amina after marrying Ahmed, tries to fill the emotional void left by her first husband by "loving in segments", assembling a complete emotional bond piece by piece, yet she never succeeds. With no confidant to share her sorrows or offer emotional comfort, Amina develops a habit of quiet reserve shaped by prolonged emotional restraint.

Amina's daughter Jamila also inherits the family's pattern of emptiness. Her voice emanates from behind the sheet, earning her renown as the "Bulbul-of-the-Faith", whose singing soothes listeners and addresses a shared spiritual need. Yet she is guided by a simplified moral framework emphasizing loyalty and devotion. This process of ideological formation transforms her singing from individual artistic expression into a medium for broader cultural resonance. To public figures, her voice becomes a means of fostering communal harmony. When the public's conception of Jamila reduces her to a disembodied voice drifting through a hole, she ceases to be an autonomous artistic subject and functions instead as a conduit for collective meaning. Her vocal gift fails to redeem her own spirit, instead serving primarily to address the shared need for connection and continuity.

As the novel's narrator, Saleem cannot escape the family's legacy of emptiness either. He repeatedly exposes the "holes" within himself: nine fingers, a vasectomy, and persistent gaps in his memory. He describes the inevitable fissures and fallacies of memory and continues to reimagine events to assign them meaning [5]. Even as he attempts to stitch together historical developments with fragments of his own life through a chronicle, contradictions, distortions and internal revisions within his narration reveal that the central void inside him remains unfilled. Saleem does not merely recount the story of Aadam and the sheet; he internalizes the quality of "emptiness" embodied by the perforation as the very form of his existence. His narration of personal experience and historical change is essentially a continuous weaving of stories around his inner core void, an attempt to mend the rifts of history and his own fragmented self.

The sheet as a whole symbolizes the collective identity of the Saleem family, enveloping all its members, bearing their shared memories and emotions, and embodying their longing for unity and stability. Its central perforation, by contrast, stands for absence: an irreparable blank within the family unit that mirrors the profound impact of historical transition on kinship [6]. This void predates every family member, who are born into it and forced to endure its weight in their unique ways. Each generation becomes a vessel for this emptiness, while simultaneously being shaped by it.

3. Limited Communication Amid Isolation

A thin, penetrable textile, the sheet functions as a soft boundary. The novel deliberately selects linen rather than rigid barriers such as walls, for its lightweight texture implies it can be lifted or pierced, inherently allowing a degree of passage. It thus cannot constitute an absolute, unbroken barrier. The sheet divides two separate spaces, yet its central perforation creates openings for interaction and exchange. Disrupting total seclusion, the hole connects the divided realms, granting the imagery of the perforated sheet its dual attributes: covering yet exposing, separating yet linking [7].

This mode of partial communication originates from Aadam and Naseem's dynamic [5]. A cultural practice requiring gender separation is materialized through the sheet, with Naseem concealed behind the linen while Doctor Aziz observes her only through the central hole. This arrangement avoids complete isolation: though Aadam cannot view her entire body, he sees tangible parts such as her stomach, establishing a genuine physical connection between the two. Their partial sightline across the perforation fosters emotional resonance, forming the foundation of their romantic bond and linking two otherwise isolated individuals.

Yet this communication is inherently limited, passive and one-sided, denying both parties equal, holistic exchange. The sheet's separation restricts Aadam to fragmented glimpses of Naseem, barring him from seeing her full self or grasping her inner perspective. As the observed party, Naseem can only project disjointed fragments of herself through this narrow channel. The sheet is not a one-sided instrument of constraint; the perforation creates a two-way field of negotiation, yet power remains asymmetric on either side of the hole.

In the second generation, the logic of the sheet is internalized by Amina as a self-protective mechanism against emotional distress. Emulating her parents' fragmented interaction through the perforation, she dissects her husband Ahmed into isolated traits—his lips, verbal tics, prejudices—and selectively accepts only these disjointed fragments to sustain a functional marital relationship [8]. Amina neither fully withdraws nor abandons emotional connection entirely; by relying on partial perceptions of her husband, she maintains relational stability. Nevertheless, their bond is permanently circumscribed: she avoids confronting the reality that she cannot offer wholehearted affection, and refrains from deep emotional engagement. Though their marriage maintains outward harmony, an uncrossable rift persists beneath the surface. Amina's heart remains tied to her first husband Nadir Khan, leaving her and Ahmed sharing a bed yet inhabiting separate emotional worlds, forever blocked from genuine mutual understanding.

Aunt Alia, consumed by resentment after Amina marries her intended partner, lives a life of spinsterhood [9]. Her interactions with the rest of the family represent a distorted alternative to the perforated sheet's channel of connection. Fueled by bitter resentment, she infuses the food she prepares with symbolic negativity, using meals as a medium to express dissatisfaction. Anyone who eats her meals absorbs the emotional weight of her grievance, transforming nourishment into an expression of estrangement. The channel, originally meant for limited emotional connection, is twisted into a vehicle for indirect expression of pain—replacing compassionate care with a strained, emotionally charged bond.

Jamila's experience extends the perforated sheet's logic of partial connection. After rising to fame, she is required to remain hidden behind a gold-and-white sheet, its perforation the sole medium mediating her relationship with the public. Barred from appearing before audiences in her full personhood, she can only engage with the world through the hole. The public catches fragmented glimpses of her silhouette but never grasps her authentic identity or inner life. Jamila transmits her song through the channel yet remains perpetually concealed behind the linen. What was once a two-way exchange becomes a one-directional presentation and passive reception [5]. The audience engages in imaginative interpretation through the perforation, while Jamila is denied the reciprocal right to observe them, reducing her to an object of attention. Though the channel creates contact, it intensifies profound alienation.

For Saleem, such estrangement defines his entire life. Mary Pereira's baby swap severs Saleem's biological ties to his family, filling his existence with absurdity and fragmentation. After the truth is revealed, his parents grow distant, and rifts permeate all kinship bonds. Desperate for connection and acceptance, he forges a bond with the other *Midnight's Children* bound by shared fate, yet their alliance weakens amid suspicion and betrayal.

Saleem's narrative practice itself embodies the logic of the perforated sheet. Indian society is depicted as a pluralistic whole composed of diverse linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds. These distinctions limit comprehensive understanding and integration among different groups, mirroring the sheet's state of partial separation without absolute closure. Saleem attempts to build a narrative channel bridging the gaps separating family and nation, individual and community, to mitigate societal fragmentation. Yet his efforts are constrained by the rule of limited contact: just as the perforated sheet cannot achieve total unity, his chronicle fails to erase all divides between people and communities, leaving him situated in a condition of incomplete connection.

Ultimately, the perforated sheet symbolizes limited communication amid isolation. It offers a fragile reprieve from total seclusion while simultaneously generating estrangement. As an embodiment of the Saleem family, it encapsulates the essence of partial connection: relationships marked by contact without comprehension, proximity without emotional fusion, situating the family in a continuous tension between fragile bond and enduring alienation, even as its members coexist and converse.

4. Three Bloodstains

The novel precisely specifies "three marks" upon the sheet. Evoking symbolic associations with origin and continuity found in certain religious traditions, these marks become resonant symbols of life's beginnings, elevating the linen from ordinary household fabric to an emblem of intergenerational familial continuity. The three marks correspond to inherited experiences endured by three successive generations: the first generation leaves the initial impression, the second internalizes its symbolic resonance and expresses it in distinct psychological forms, and the third generation bears the cumulative weight of these impressions through narration [10]. Permanently embedded onto the perforated sheet, the marks remain unchanged over time, just as the family's enduring emotional burdens persist as quiet, lasting imprints.

Aadam and Naseem give rise to the first mark. In certain traditional marital customs, the physical evidence on their wedding night serves as a cultural indicator of Naseem's

prior unmarried status, reflecting societal expectations surrounding marriage. Simultaneously, it signifies the culmination of her fragmented representation behind the sheet. She is not merely observed, but permanently inscribed by the act of observation. This experience is not transient; preserved as faded reddish traces on the linen, it endures as an indelible residue of emotional strain. Though the vivid hue softens, the marks remain visible, paralleling the persistent distance within their marriage—a testament to the enduring emotional consequences accompanying relationships mediated through the perforated channel.

While Naseem's experience crystallizes into visible marks, Amina's inner transformation leaves no external trace. She undergoes a gradual redefinition of identity, renamed from Mumtaz to Amina, and over time loses connection with her earlier sense of self. If Naseem's mark represents an experience that manifests visibly, Amina's journey embodies a quiet, unmarked transition. Unbroken by overt disruption, she is gradually reshaped by domestic routines, prescribed role expectations, and long-standing social positioning, receding silently over time. To align with marital and communal norms, she suppresses authentic expression and develops internal divisions: outwardly fulfilling expectations of dutiful conduct while experiencing insomnia, reflective melancholy, and spiritual questioning. Unable to pursue personal aspirations or live fully aligned with her inner convictions within her marriage, the sheet's physical perforation becomes metaphorically linked to an inner sense of absence. She moves through life with diminished self-recognition and spiritual disconnection, lacking a grounded emotional center, enduring solitude and isolation with quiet endurance. In middle age, she relocates to Pakistan with her husband, adjusting to new surroundings before passing away unexpectedly during wartime conditions.

Saleem's younger sister Jamila begins life as a spirited young woman who questions conventional expectations and resists predetermined roles. After relocating to Pakistan, however, she is gradually guided toward embodying a revered public persona, framed within national and cultural narratives. Encouraged by prevailing social discourse, Jamila sets aside her earlier expressive vitality, restrains personal yearnings and romantic inclinations, and assumes a ceremonial role affirming shared cultural ideals. Living within a structured environment devoid of personal fulfillment and emotional resonance, she experiences a slow diminishment of inner vitality. Unlike Amina, whose experience unfolds primarily within private life, Jamila's transformation carries broader cultural significance: she is shaped not only by familial patterns and social conventions, but also by national narratives that emphasize unity and continuity across generations.

Saleem inherits the layered emotional legacy encoded in the marks left by his forebears, and he alone undertakes the work of identifying and articulating these impressions. His medical procedure eliminates his capacity to father children, interrupting the line of biological inheritance within the family. The prior two generations live through these experiences without explicitly examining the sheet itself; only Saleem recounts their story through an unconventional narrative framework. He transforms the marks into a historiographical device, adopting an interpretive approach that documents personal memory as a complementary perspective to official historical records. His use of imaginative narrative strategies—blending realism with symbolic representation—serves to foreground individual experience alongside broader historical developments. Though Saleem cannot restore the original intensity of the wedding-night impression, he renders the softened, aged traces perceptible to readers through his writing. Narration brings memory into focus yet does not alter its substance; the marks remain softened impressions, both evidence of remembrance and a reflection of its inherent limitations. Dimmed but enduring, they mirror the evolving nature of shared historical memory—experiences softened by time yet retaining their foundational significance. Against the backdrop of regional realignment, division, and fragmentation form part of the shared historical consciousness, and the three marks on the sheet personalize this broader context. The softened quality of the impressions symbolizes the gradual evolution of historical understanding. Permanently embedded upon the linen, they stand for the quietly

persistent emotional imprints of the family, and the enduring resonance of historical transitions, preserved as lasting features within individual and shared human experience.

The sheet is synonymous with the family, materializing its shared trajectory. The three marks transcend mere physiological and cultural symbolism to embody the enduring relational bonds connecting every member of the Saleem family, and the lasting imprints of connection shaped by the perforated channel. The marks underscore the poignant reality of mediated communication: relationships that are neither fully closed nor fully unified yield connections marked by partial understanding, and the marks crystallize this dynamic into a sustained emotional resonance [11].

5. Conclusion

The perforated sheet functions as a tangible embodiment of the Saleem family's inescapable fate. The central hole embedded within the linen signifies an enduring void within every family member—a primordial absence that shapes all human interaction as inherently limited. Partial communication cannot achieve full mutual understanding, and persistent estrangement and misunderstanding inevitably give rise to personal emotional distress and attenuated kinship bonds, reflected in discolorations absorbed into the sheet's fabric. As a constant familial totem throughout the novel, the sheet witnesses the evolution of the Saleem lineage, the convergence and separation of its members, and each generation's experiences and challenges. The family is positioned within a condition of permanent incompleteness, denied wholeness or fulfillment.

Yet rather than rejecting this linen vessel of familial continuity, Saleem treasures it as a protective talisman and the foundational instrument of his memoiristic storytelling. The sheet marks the origin of his family's narrative, without which Saleem's own existence would lack contextual grounding. More importantly, for Saleem, the perforated sheet becomes the foundation of his self-identity and the lens through which he perceives the world. It renders him acutely aware of life's inherent imperfection; the pursuit of artificially constructed, socially prescribed ideals would entail disavowing his authentic self. For this reason, Saleem voluntarily embraces his inherited condition of fragmentation, affirming his incompleteness to consolidate identity and safeguard unmediated personal memory.

The sheet grants Saleem the fundamental authority to narrate a discontinuous national history through the lens of his own fragmented life. The narrative of *Midnight's Children* is itself structured like a perforated sheet. Through the narrator Saleem, the text presents a fragmented composition marked by deliberate narrative gaps. The author refrains from idealizing fate's consequences or smoothing over the complexities of historical experience, declining to impose coherence or logical sequencing upon Saleem's unstable, evolving recollections. Instead, the work engages with the discontinuities of its era through the unrefined, fragmented reality of Saleem's existence, resisting synthetic narratives of unity that obscure the lived texture of individual and collective experience.

References

1. A. R. Brockman, "'Don't Stop Believin' in a pair of socks: How The Sopranos shapes our understanding of mental illness," Illinois State University, 2020.
2. S. Maglajlija, *Human Downfall at the End of Imperialism: In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude**, 2009.
3. N. K. Gupta, "Broken Mirrors and Headless Nations: Diasporic Schizophrenia in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," pp. 1454–1465.
4. N. Natarajan, "Woman, nation and narration in *Midnight's Children*," in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 399–409.
5. S. Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 1986.
6. R. Lohani-Chase, "Political (w)holes: post-colonial identity, contingency of meaning and history in Salman Rushdie's *midnight's children*," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 10, p. 32, 2009.
7. K. Wilson, "Midnight's Children and reader responsibility," *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1984.

8. C. Mueller-Greene, "The concept of liminality as a theoretical tool in literary memory studies: Liminal aspects of memory in Salman Rushdie's midnight's children," *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 264–288, 2022.
9. A. D. Bhatta, "Subaltern Silence and the Politics of Agency in Midnight's Children," *Siddhajyoti Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 1–13, 2026.
10. N. Forsyth and M. Hennard, "Mr Mustapha Aziz and Fly": Defamiliarization of "family" in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children," *SPELL-TUBINGEN*, pp. 197–206, 1996.
11. A. R. Kanak, *India in English Literature: Reading Kim (1901), A Passage to India (1924) and Midnight's Children (1981)*, doctoral dissertation, BRAC University, 2014.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.