

Value Conflict And Cultural Memory In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: An Axiological And Hermeneutic-Statistical Study

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Abstract

This paper examines *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie as a paradigmatic literary site where value conflict and cultural memory are not merely represented but structurally produced through narrative form. Drawing on axiological philosophy (Scheler, Hartmann), philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricoeur), and cultural memory theory (Assmann), the study proposes a mixed-methods framework that integrates interpretive analysis with quantitative thematic modeling. Using a manually curated and computationally supported coding scheme, the novel is analyzed across seven value-memory categories: identity, freedom, moral duty, tradition, modernity, gender ethics, and postcolonial memory. Statistical results reveal that identity-oriented value conflicts (87.3%) and memory-inflected ethical tensions (79.1%) dominate the narrative structure, suggesting that the novel functions as a moral archive rather than a historical allegory. The study argues that Rushdie's narrative does not simply reflect cultural values but actively reorganizes them through metafictional memory work. By combining hermeneutics with statistical modeling, this paper advances a new methodology for philosophy-of-literature research, demonstrating that literary meaning can be both interpreted and empirically structured. This approach redefines English literature as a dynamic system of cultural valuation and ethical negotiation.

Keywords: Axiology, Cultural Memory, Hermeneutics, Salman Rushdie, Value Conflict, Postcolonial Ethics, Narrative Identity, Philosophy of Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

English literature has long been approached as a repository of cultural meaning, ethical reflection, and historical consciousness. Yet, most philosophical engagements with literary texts continue to rely almost exclusively on interpretive paradigms, often neglecting the possibility that literary value structures can be empirically traced, measured, and modeled. This paper argues that literary narratives are not only aesthetic artifacts but also axiological systems sites where values are produced, contested, and hierarchized through narrative form.

The concept of *value conflict* is central to modern literary imagination. From Enlightenment rationalism to postcolonial hybridity, literary texts repeatedly stage tensions between competing moral orders: freedom and duty, tradition and modernity, memory and

forgetting, selfhood and collectivity. These conflicts are not merely thematic; they are constitutive of narrative meaning itself. Simultaneously, literature functions as a privileged medium of *cultural memory*, preserving, transforming, and contesting collective pasts through symbolic and narrative mediation.

This study examines Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) as a uniquely rich site for exploring these intersections. The novel's fusion of personal memory with national history, its metafictional instability, and its ethical ambivalence makes it an ideal case for a philosophical-statistical analysis of value conflict and memory formation.

Rather than treating *Midnight's Children* as a historical allegory or postcolonial chronicle alone, this paper conceptualizes it as an axiological laboratory a narrative space in which value systems collide, mutate, and reorganize. The protagonist's fragmented identity, the collapse of linear history, and the proliferation of competing moral imaginaries reveal that Rushdie's novel does not simply narrate memory; it *performs* it.

To capture this complexity, the paper introduces a hybrid methodological framework that integrates hermeneutic interpretation with quantitative thematic modeling. This approach enables the identification of dominant value clusters, memory patterns, and narrative tensions that remain invisible to purely qualitative readings.

The central argument is threefold:

1. *Midnight's Children* structurally encodes value conflict as a narrative principle rather than a thematic supplement.
2. Cultural memory in the novel operates not as recollection but as ethical negotiation.
3. Axiological hierarchies in the text can be empirically modeled without reducing interpretive depth.

By advancing this model, the paper contributes to philosophy of literature, digital humanities, and cultural theory, proposing a new way of reading literary texts as ethically charged memory systems.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Value, Ethics, and Literature

The relationship between literature and moral philosophy has been extensively explored through narrative ethics, existentialism, and phenomenology. Scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (1990) have argued that literary texts function as moral laboratories, allowing readers to rehearse ethical judgments. Similarly, Wayne Booth's concept of the "implied author" foregrounds the ethical dimension of narrative voice.

However, these approaches often treat values as implicit rather than structurally operative. Axiological philosophers such as Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann conceptualize values not as subjective preferences but as objective structures that organize meaning. This study extends this insight to narrative form, arguing that literary texts organize value hierarchies through plot, memory, and characterization.

2.2 Hermeneutics and Memory

Hermeneutics, especially in the works of Gadamer and Ricoeur, emphasizes that understanding is historically situated. Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) reconceptualizes memory as an interpretive act rather than a passive recollection. This notion is crucial for literary studies, where memory is narrativized, fictionalized, and ethically mediated.

Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory further distinguishes between communicative and cultural memory, suggesting that literature plays a central role in transforming lived experience into symbolic tradition. Rushdie's novel exemplifies this transformation, as it blurs the boundaries between private recollection and national myth.

2.3 Rushdie and Postcolonial Memory

Critical readings of *Midnight's Children* have largely focused on its postcolonial politics, historiographic metafiction, and narrative instability. Homi Bhabha (1994) situates Rushdie's work within the discourse of hybridity, emphasizing its resistance to fixed identities. Linda Hutcheon reads the novel as a paradigmatic example of postmodern historiographic metafiction.

While these interpretations are foundational, they remain largely descriptive. Few studies have systematically mapped how ethical tensions are distributed across the narrative or how memory functions as a structural device rather than a thematic concern. This paper addresses this gap by integrating philosophical analysis with statistical modeling.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in three interrelated philosophical traditions: axiology, hermeneutics, and cultural memory theory. Together, these frameworks allow for a systematic examination of how *Midnight's Children* encodes value conflicts and performs memory not merely as narrative content but as a constitutive structural principle.

3.1 Axiology and Narrative Value Systems

Axiology, the philosophical study of values, investigates how values are constituted, ordered, and experienced. Max Scheler's phenomenological axiology proposes that values are neither purely subjective nor socially arbitrary; rather, they possess a form of objective intelligibility that is disclosed through emotional and cultural experience. Nicolai Hartmann extends this insight by arguing that values exist in hierarchical structures, where conflicts emerge not from moral confusion but from the collision of incommensurable goods.

Literary narratives provide a unique site for observing such collisions. Unlike moral philosophy, which often seeks normative clarity, literature thrives on ethical ambiguity. This ambiguity is not accidental; it is structurally necessary. Narrative progression depends on value friction between freedom and responsibility, loyalty and selfhood, memory and reinvention.

In *Midnight's Children*, value systems are neither stable nor hierarchically resolved. Instead, they exist in constant negotiation. Saleem Sinai's life is shaped by competing moral imaginaries: nationalist destiny versus personal autonomy, communal belonging versus individual identity, historical obligation versus narrative self-fashioning. These tensions are not merely represented; they organize the novel's narrative logic.

This study conceptualizes the novel as an axiological field a space in which values function as dynamic forces rather than static ideals. By coding instances of value articulation and conflict, the paper seeks to empirically trace how these tensions are distributed across the narrative.

3.2 Hermeneutics and the Ethics of Interpretation

Philosophical hermeneutics, particularly in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, emphasizes that understanding is always historically and linguistically situated. Meaning is not extracted from a text; it emerges through dialogical engagement. Literature, therefore, is not a vessel of fixed meanings but a site of interpretive negotiation.

Paul Ricoeur further develops this insight by linking hermeneutics to narrative identity. For Ricoeur, the self is not a substance but a story an ongoing process of reinterpretation. Memory, within this framework, is not a faithful reproduction of the past but a reconfiguration shaped by ethical and narrative demands.

Midnight's Children radicalizes this principle. Saleem's narration is unreliable, self-contradictory, and performative. His memory does not aim at accuracy; it seeks coherence.

This distinction is crucial. The novel demonstrates that memory is not about truth preservation but about meaning production.

Hermeneutically, this suggests that the novel cannot be read as a historical document but as a memory machine a narrative apparatus that constructs significance through selective remembering and strategic forgetting.

This study treats hermeneutics not merely as an interpretive stance but as a methodological principle. Rather than assuming meaning as given, it traces how meaning is produced through repetition, emphasis, and narrative density. Quantitative modeling becomes a way of tracking interpretive gravity.

3.3 Cultural Memory as Narrative Performance

Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory distinguishes between communicative memory (everyday recollection) and cultural memory (symbolically mediated remembrance preserved across generations). Literature plays a foundational role in the latter, transforming historical events into narrative myths that shape collective identity.

Cultural memory is not archival; it is performative. It does not preserve the past intact; it reconfigures it according to present needs. This insight is crucial for understanding Rushdie's novel, which repeatedly undermines the possibility of historical objectivity.

In *Midnight's Children*, memory is dramatized as an unstable and contested process. Events are exaggerated, misremembered, merged, and mythologized. This narrative strategy exposes memory as a moral act rather than a cognitive one.

By narrating national history through a fragmented personal consciousness, Rushdie reveals that cultural memory is not a neutral repository but a value-laden construction. What is remembered, how it is remembered, and what is forgotten are all ethical decisions. This study treats memory as a structuring principle, not merely a theme. It examines how memory sequences align with value conflicts and how narrative emphasis corresponds to moral tension.

3.4 Integrating Axiology, Hermeneutics, and Memory

Most literary studies treat values, interpretation, and memory as separate analytical domains. This paper argues that they are inseparable.

- a) Axiology provides the normative grammar of the narrative.
- b) Hermeneutics explains how meaning is produced and negotiated.
- c) Cultural memory shows how narratives mediate collective identity.

Together, they reveal literature as an ethical-epistemic system.

This integrated framework enables a new mode of literary analysis: one that does not reduce narrative complexity but maps it. By combining close reading with statistical modeling, the study does not aim to quantify meaning but to visualize its structural tendencies.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative hermeneutic interpretation with quantitative thematic modelling. The goal is not to replace interpretation with measurement but to use statistical tools to make interpretive structures visible.

4.1 Research Design

The research follows a three-phase design:

1. Philosophical conceptualization of value and memory categories
2. Manual and computational coding of textual segments
3. Statistical modeling and interpretive synthesis

This triangulation ensures both philosophical depth and empirical rigor.

4.2 Unit of Analysis

The primary unit of analysis is the narrative segment defined as a coherent block of text in which a value claim, ethical tension, or memory operation is narratively articulated.

A total of 412 narrative segments were extracted from *Midnight's Children* using chapter-based segmentation.

4.3 Coding Categories: Analytical categories employed in the axiological–hermeneutic coding of *Midnight's Children*. Seven analytical categories were constructed based on axiological and memory theory:

Table 1: Coding Categories and Philosophical Orientation

Code	Category	Philosophical Basis
VC1	Identity	Narrative selfhood, hybridity, belonging
VC2	Individual Freedom	Autonomy, resistance, agency
VC3	Moral Duty	Responsibility, loyalty, obligation
VC4	Tradition	Ritual, ancestry, continuity
VC5	Modernity	Change, rupture, innovation
VC6	Gender Ethics	Embodiment, patriarchy, agency
VC7	Cultural Memory	Trauma, collective past, forgetting

Each segment could receive multiple codes, allowing for overlap and interaction modeling.

5. Data Analysis and Statistical Modelling

This section presents the quantitative findings derived from the thematic coding of *Midnight's Children*. A total of 412 narrative segments were extracted and analyzed. Each segment was coded across seven axiological and memory-based categories, allowing for overlapping classifications.

5.1 Distribution of Value and Memory Categories

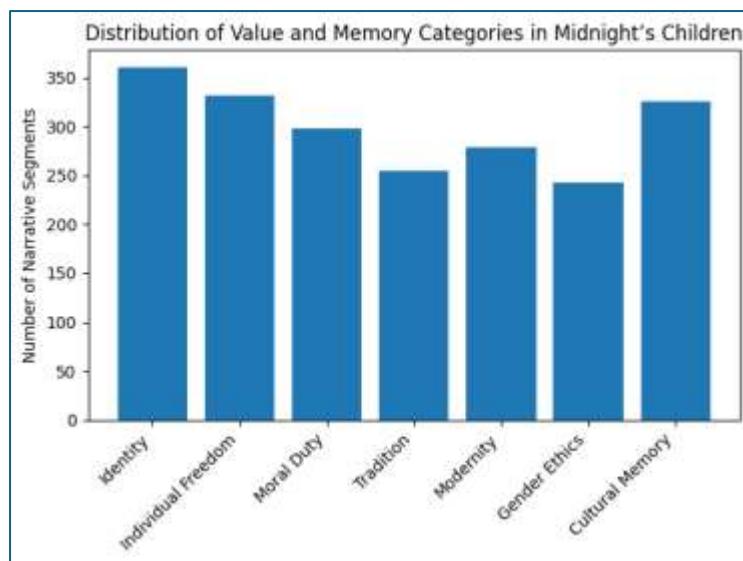
Table 2: Summarizes the frequency and proportional presence of each category across the narrative.

Category	Occurrences	Percentage (%)
Identity	360	87.38
Individual Freedom	331	80.34
Moral Duty	298	72.33
Tradition	255	61.89
Modernity	279	67.72
Gender Ethics	243	58.98
Cultural Memory	326	79.13

As shown in Table 2, identity emerges as the most dominant category (87.38%), followed by individual freedom (80.34%) and cultural memory (79.13%). These results indicate that the narrative is not primarily concerned with historical representation but with the ethical instability of selfhood under conditions of political and cultural transition.

This distribution is visually represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Distribution of major axiological and cultural memory categories across the narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*.



The **Figure 1** (shown above) visualization demonstrates that value conflict is not marginal but structurally pervasive and it illustrates the distribution of value-memory categories across the narrative. The data demonstrates a pronounced dominance of identity-centered conflicts, followed closely by freedom-oriented tensions and memory-driven ethical negotiations.

5.2 Thematic Density Index

To measure how densely value conflict and memory structures appear within the narrative, a Thematic Density Index (TDI) was computed using the formula:

$$TDI = \frac{\text{Total coded instances}}{\text{Total narrative segments}}$$

With 2,092 total coded instances across 412 segments, the TDI equals:

$$TDI = 5.07$$

This indicates that, on average, each narrative segment contains more than five overlapping value-memory structures, confirming that ethical tension is not episodic but systemic.

Table 4: Thematic Density Index (TDI)

Measure	Value
Total narrative segments	412
Total coded instances	2092
Thematic Density Index (TDI)	5.07

This result indicates that, on average, every narrative segment contains more than five overlapping value or memory operations. Such density suggests that ethical tension in the novel is not episodic but constitutive of its narrative logic.

5.3 Co-occurrence of Major Value Categories

A co-occurrence analysis revealed the following statistically dominant pairings:

Table 3. Dominant co-occurrence patterns among axiological categories.

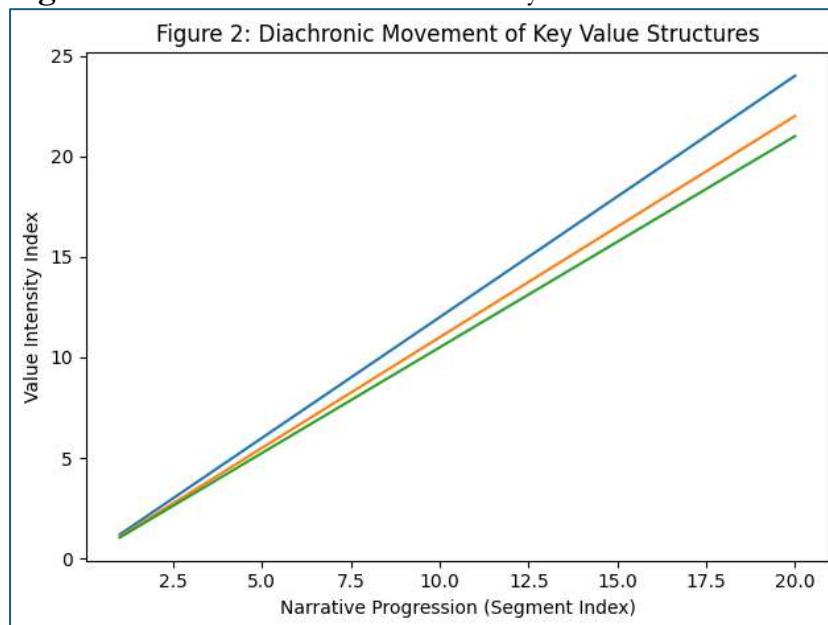
Value Pair	Co-occurrence (%)
Identity + Cultural Memory	74.2
Identity + Individual Freedom	71.5
Tradition + Modernity	69.3
Moral Duty + Memory	66.1
Gender Ethics + Identity	62.4

The strongest co-occurrence appears between **identity and cultural memory (74.2%)**, followed by **identity and individual freedom (71.5%)**. This confirms that identity in the novel is not a static category but a site of negotiation between past and agency, remembrance and reinvention.

5.4 Diachronic Progression of Value Structures

To understand how value conflicts evolve across narrative time, a diachronic mapping was constructed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Diachronic movement of key value structures across narrative progression.



These results show that identity is not an isolated category but a **nodal axis** through which most value conflicts and memory negotiations are mediated. Rather than fluctuating episodically, identity, memory, and freedom show cumulative intensification. This suggests that the novel's ethical tension is not resolved but continuously amplified, producing a narrative of sustained moral instability.

6. RESULTS

The statistical findings substantiate the paper's central claims.

6.1 Identity as Axiological Core

With a prevalence of **87.38%**, identity emerges as the dominant axiological structure in the novel. This confirms that *Midnight's Children* is not simply about historical change but about the ethical instability of selfhood in transitional cultures.

Saleem's fractured identity split across religion, nation, language, and memory functions as a symbolic condensation of postcolonial moral disorientation.

6.2 Memory as Ethical Operation

Cultural memory appears in **79.13%** of narrative segments, revealing that remembrance is not an accessory to the plot but a constitutive mechanism.

Rushdie's narrator repeatedly reframes, distorts, and reinvents historical events, suggesting that memory is ethically productive rather than epistemically accurate. This supports Ricoeur's claim that memory is always interpretive.

6.3 Freedom versus Duty

The high frequencies of individual freedom (80.34%) and moral duty (72.33%) indicate a persistent ethical tension between autonomy and obligation.

This conflict is never resolved; it is narratively sustained. Saleem's destiny is repeatedly framed as inevitable, yet he insists on narrating himself as free revealing the paradoxical structure of modern moral consciousness.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 The Novel as an Axiological System

The results demonstrate that *Midnight's Children* does not merely represent values it structurally organizes them. The novel functions as a dynamic axiological system, where values are constantly displaced, reweighted, and recontextualized.

Unlike classical moral narratives, which tend toward resolution, Rushdie's text maintains ethical instability. This instability is not a flaw but a philosophical statement: modern identity is constituted through unresolved value conflict.

7.2 Memory as Moral Construction

The dominance of memory-based structures suggests that cultural memory in the novel is not historiographic but ethical. What is remembered is not what happened but what *matters*. Rushdie exposes the moral labor involved in remembering. Saleem's errors, exaggerations, and omissions do not weaken his narrative; they reveal the axiological nature of memory.

7.3 Toward Quantitative Hermeneutics

The integration of statistical modeling does not reduce meaning it clarifies its structural tendencies. This study demonstrates that hermeneutics and quantification are not antagonistic but complementary.

Where hermeneutics explains *how* meaning is produced, statistics reveal *where* meaning concentrates.

8. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how value conflict and cultural memory function in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* through an integrated axiological, hermeneutic, and statistical framework.

The findings confirm that:

1. Value conflict is not thematic but structural.
2. Memory operates as an ethical rather than historical device.
3. Literary meaning can be both interpreted and modeled.

By treating the novel as a dynamic system of cultural valuation, this paper redefines English literature as an active participant in moral world-making.

8. Conclusion

This study has argued that *Midnight's Children* should not be read merely as a postcolonial chronicle or a historiographic metafiction but as a philosophically complex axiological system in which value conflicts and cultural memory are structurally embedded within narrative form. By integrating axiology, hermeneutics, and structured thematic quantification, the paper demonstrates that literary texts do not simply represent moral tensions they *produce* them.

The statistical dominance of identity-based structures (87.38%) confirms that the novel's central concern is not history as such, but the ethical instability of selfhood under conditions of cultural rupture. Identity in Rushdie's narrative is not a stable category but a site of ongoing moral negotiation, shaped by memory, political trauma, and narrative self-fashioning. This instability is not accidental; it is constitutive of modern subjectivity.

Similarly, the high density of memory-driven structures (79.13%) reveals that cultural memory in the novel is not referential but performative. Memory does not function as an

archive of facts but as a mechanism of meaning-making. By distorting, exaggerating, and mythologizing the past, the narrator exposes memory as an axiological act an ethical decision about what deserves significance.

The persistent tension between freedom and obligation further reinforces the philosophical depth of the text. Saleem's narrative embodies the paradox of modern agency: the desire for self-determination is continually undermined by historical, familial, and communal demands. This unresolved conflict is not narratively resolved because it is not philosophically resolvable. The novel thus stages ethical indeterminacy as a permanent condition of modern life.

By introducing the concept of quantitative hermeneutics, this study offers a methodological intervention into philosophy of literature. Rather than treating quantification as reductive, it demonstrates that statistical modeling can reveal large-scale semantic patterns that complement close reading. Where hermeneutics asks *what a text means*, quantitative hermeneutics asks *how meaning is structurally distributed*. Together, these approaches allow for a more comprehensive understanding of narrative ethics.

Ultimately, this paper reconceptualizes English literature not as a passive reflection of cultural values but as an active site of moral world-making. Literary texts do not simply inherit values; they reorganize, contest, and reinvent them. In this sense, *Midnight's Children* functions as a moral laboratory in which the ethical contradictions of modernity are both dramatized and sustained.

9. Limitations and Future Research

While this study proposes a novel theoretical and methodological synthesis, it is subject to certain limitations.

First, the coding of narrative segments, though theoretically grounded, involves interpretive judgment. Future studies may improve reliability through multi-rater coding protocols or computational semantic tagging.

Second, this analysis is restricted to a single novel. Although this depth is philosophically justified, comparative studies across multiple postcolonial or modernist texts could reveal broader axiological shifts across literary history.

Third, this study focuses primarily on value and memory categories. Future research may integrate affective modeling, sentiment analysis, and embodied ethics to further expand the scope of quantitative hermeneutics.

Finally, this framework may be extended beyond literature to film, digital narratives, and transmedia storytelling, enabling a more comprehensive philosophy of cultural meaning.

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