

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



Research Article/ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v8i2.98647>

The Strategic Third-Person: Narrative Distance and Agency in Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*

Laxman Bhatta



Central Department of English, TU, Nepal

Article History: Received: 15 May 2026; Reviewed: 28 May–27 July 2026; Accepted: 28 July 2026

Email: bhattalaxman2@gmail.com

Copyright 2026 © The Author(s). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s). The work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). www.cdetu.edu.np



Abstract

This article explores the purpose and significance of the third-person narrative approach in Salman Rushdie's memoir *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012). It argues that the third-person strategy allows the author to maintain objectivity and create narrative distance while retaining authorial agency. A memoir is conventionally narrated in the first person, but Rushdie creates Joseph Anton as the narrator and articulates a decade of his life in hiding after the fatwa was declared against him. By drawing on theoretical insights into the autobiographical pact and third-person autobiography proposed by Philippe Lejeune, and on the concept of narrative identity developed by Paul Ricoeur, this article scrutinizes how Rushdie has constructed the 'autobiographical subject' and created narrative authority in the memoir. The article concludes that the third-person narrative point of view in the memoir is not just a stylistic choice but an indispensable rhetorical strategy for creating a vantage point through which he observes and critiques crucial moments of his life and asserts authorial agency in the narrative. Furthermore, this narrative distance allows him to take ownership of the 'Rushdie Affair' and redefine the notion of truth in life writing.

Keywords: Agency, autobiographical pact, *fatwa*, ipse identity, narrative voice, strategic third-person Memoir, Self-Representation, and *Joseph Anton*

Memoir as a form of life writing narrates a significant moment or a turning point in the author's life. As a convention of the genre, the narrator in a memoir is identified with the author, and s/he is expected to reveal truths about one's life events. For Gillian Whitlock, memoir is "a form of self-reflective writing that is personal, often controversial, and a meditation about the place of self in history" (20). This definition implies that the writing of the self in a memoir intersects with historical and cultural circumstances. Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* (2012) chronicles the author's decade-long life in hiding following the declaration of the *fatwa* after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and highlights how threats, censorship, and exile restricted Rushdie's personal freedom and challenged the notion of free expression.

The memoir is generally considered to be relational. The authors of memoirs inherently represent other people alongside themselves. G. Thomas Couser observes, “Memoir is very different; in memoir, authors necessarily portray others, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceal their identities” (10). This definition implies that complete anonymity is difficult in a memoir. But, in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie uses the pseudonym Joseph Anton throughout the memoir and reflects on how he was compelled to shift his residence frequently and live under the protection of the London Police to avoid possible assassination. Against this backdrop, this article tries to probe whether Rushdie’s abandonment of ‘I,’ opting for ‘he’ as the narrator, undermines the memoir’s conventional pact or whether this rhetorical strategy allows Rushdie a vantage point to observe, critique, and reclaim narrative agency.

Joseph Anton has received extensive critical attention since its publication. Examining Rushdie’s use of a pseudonym as the narrator of the memoir, Geetha Ganapathy-Dore writes, “Rushdie resorts to a third-person singular narrative voice and presents it as the memoir of a fictive character, Joseph Anton” (12). Ganapathy-Dore further remarks, “[h]is memoir constitutes a fuzzy, hybrid and postmodern variety of writing that combines elements of autobiography, autofiction, detective fiction and metafiction and blurs the borderline between fact and fiction” (13). She reads the novel as a hybrid, postmodern text highlighting how the narrative form plays a pivotal role in the formation and interpretation of identity.

Aligning with Ganapathy-Dore, Celia Wallhead calls *Joseph Anton* a generically hybrid text, arguing that “Rushdie is able to combine strict factual description, autobiographical detail and tell the story of a victim all as if they were stories” (102). She particularly highlights how Rushdie blurs the demarcation between fact and fiction and transforms political trauma into aestheticized work. John Paul Riquelme, on the other hand, connects the memoir with the literary tradition of modernism. He writes, “In its name and its narration, the book aligns itself with modernism” (476). He contends that the title of the memoir foregrounds the construction of identity and the narrative reflects memory, subjective nature of identity. He further writes, “Rushdie chooses as his title the alias that he used while in hiding, in a tense state of waiting, under police protection for nearly a decade in London because of the *fatwa* that ordered him to be killed” (476). Riquelme’s observation reflects how a survival strategy born out of necessity turns into a framework for self-representation in *Joseph Anton*.

Joseph Anton is rooted in Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*. Rather than recollecting his life experiences, Rushdie in this memoir recounts the consequences that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. In the memoir, Rushdie reflects how Madhu Jain, the journalist of *India Today* remarked *The Satanic Verses* as “an uncompromising, unequivocal attack on religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, which in this book is largely Islamic” (Jain). The article concludes: “*The Satanic Verses* is bound to trigger an avalanche of protests” (*Joseph Anton* 112). For Andrew Teverson, the novel “offends against the sacred orthodoxies of religious creeds” (155). These assessments highlight how Rushdie’s novel challenges religious orthodoxy and exposes the tension between artistic freedom and religious authority.

For Rushdie, Jain’s initial review helped ignite the public controversy around the novel. After reading the article, an Indian Parliamentarian named Syed Shahabuddin, responded to it by writing an open letter titled “You Did This with Satanic Fore thought, Mr. Rushdie” (112). Reflecting on such harsh criticism, Rushdie writes, “The most powerful way to attack a book is to demonize its author, to turn him into a creature of base motives and evil intentions” (112). In an interview with Gauri Viswanathan, Rushdie comments on the way his novel was politicized by the people. He remarks it as a “radical misreading of the book . . . the reading was highly politicized and affected by inputs from politicians and priests and so on” (34). But in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie pronounces himself as the one without any malice and “a man without religion” (194).

Prakash Chandra Pradhan observes that the memoir depicts Rushdie’s defense of artistic freedom, emphasizing that freedom of speech is inevitable for critical interrogation and creative expression. Pradhan writes, “Rushdie’s trauma during the underground life has certainly dampened his spirit to a large extent. However, he struggled hard, and came out of the trauma to engage himself in his mission of writing to express his ideas and viewpoints in his new works” (16). Rushdie is often

criticized for producing his writings to make his fortune and to please the Western audience. Illustrating such allegations in relation to *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie writes, “He did it for money. He did it for fame. The Jews made him do it. Nobody would have bought his unreadable book if he hadn’t vilified Islam” (115). Rushdie argues that such baseless attacks robbed the book of its ordinary life as a novel.

Beatriz Penas-Ibanenz studies *Joseph Anton* through narratological, cognitivist and hermeneutic theoretical concepts and argues that “the defense of free speech becomes a central empathic strategy deployed in Rushdie’s memoir” (273). Her contention is that *Joseph Anton* advocates freedom of speech and critiques any kind of fanaticism. The narrator in the memoir also asserts, “He wanted to speak, too, for the idea that liberty was everyone’s heritage and not, as Samuel Huntington argued, a Western notion alien to the cultures of the East” (357). Rushdie, through his narrator, implies that freedom of speech is not confined to a specific creed or culture; rather, it is a universal heritage. Instead, he positions freedom of expression as a universal heritage and a rightful stand for intellectual liberty worldwide.

Existing scholarship on *Joseph Anton* reveals that the memoir has been studied from diverse perspectives. Although critics agree that the memoir is experimental in its narrative pattern and hybrid texture, inadequate attention has been paid to third-person narrative representation, narrative identity, and agency. This article addresses that gap by drawing on contemporary theories of autobiography and emplotment.

Autobiography in the Third Person and Narrative Identity

This article uses textual and thematic analysis as the study design to analyze and interpret Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*. By taking the primary text as a source of data, this article relies on in-depth textual analysis drawing on theoretical concepts of autobiographical pact, autobiography in the third person, and narrative identity.

Philippe Lejeune argues that the split between narrating voice and subject is uncommon in autobiographical narratives, but some autobiographers present their narratives in the third person to “express their problems of identity and at the same time to captivate their readers” (*On Autobiography* 33). For Lejeune, the explication of the third person leads to the eclipsing of the real narrator, who now becomes implicit. In “Autobiography in the Third Person,” Lejeune writes, “The first person, then, always conceals a hidden third person, and in this sense every autobiography is by definition indirect. But in the third-person autobiographies . . . this indirectness is admitted, is boldly proclaimed” (31). Lejeune’s insights help explain the use of third-person in Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*. By openly creating distance between the narrating self and the narrated self, Rushdie inspects, reshapes, and presents his identity from a more reflective perspective. Thus, this strategy allows Rushdie to transform into a character who can be observed and analyzed, thereby creating a critical distance from overwhelming experiences of his life.

Extending Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, Paul Ricoeur shifts the focus from the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist towards how the identity is constructed and negotiated through emplotment. Ricoeur simultaneously emphasizes the temporal distance between lived experience and its narration, revealing autobiography as a selective and interpretive reconstruction of the self. This tension reflects Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, according to which personal identity is maintained not through an unchanging essence but through the ongoing narrative configuration of a life.

Ricoeur categorizes identity as *idem* and *ipse*. The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is “nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity” (*Time and Narrative* 246). *Idem* denotes a notion of identity based on ‘Sameness’ whereas *ipse* is “analogous to narrative identity and involves the telling and reading of a life-story, whether factual or fictional, such that the figure of identity that emerges offers a new insight into the self” (Crowley 2). For Ricoeur, “one cannot think the *idem* of the person through without considering the *ipse*” (*Oneself as Another* 121). Ricoeur’s distinction between *idem* and *ipse* reveals that identity is shaped not only by what remains the same but also by how a life is narrated and understood. Ricoeur argues,

“Narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity . . . it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives” (*Time and Narrative* 248). The narrative identity thus incorporates the transitions of life by allowing a person to act simultaneously as the author and interpreter of one’s own lived experience. Thus, Lejeune’s theory explains the use of the third-person as a narrative strategy to distance oneself from the narrative, while Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity explains how this distance enables the reinterpretation and reconstruction of identity through narrative.

In light of the aforementioned theoretical framework, this article examines the purpose and significance of using the third-person narrative point of view in Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton* and reveals how this point of view is not just a stylistic choice but a means to cope with the odds of his life and reclaim narrative agency.

Narrating the Self as Other in *Joseph Anton*

Joseph Anton portrays the distressing consequences of the *fatwa* issued after the publication of Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The novel caused great controversy, particularly related to the treatment of Islam and the Prophet Mohamed. This controversy, also known as the ‘Rushdie affair’, created havoc in Rushdie’s private and professional life. He was charged with blasphemy and was sentenced to death under a 1989 *fatwā* issued by the Iranian government. In the memoir, Rushdie records Ayatollah Khomeini’s words as, “I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the “Satanic Verses” book, which is against Islam, the Prophet, and the Quran, and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death” (5). This was not actually a court verdict, but a violent incident that tore apart Rushdie’s serene and composed life as an individual and a litterateur.

Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (*On Autobiography* 5). This definition implies that autobiography is a reflective narrative in which the author and the narrator are identical. Taking this definition into account, Geetha Ganapathy-Dore assesses, “*Joseph Anton* cannot be strictly identified as an autobiography” (12). But the disclosure of his parents as “his father, Anis . . . his mother, Negin” (19), Rushdie connects the protagonist to the historical author. Despite the use of the third person ‘he’ as the narrator, Rushdie assures the reader that the third-person narrator is none other than the author himself.

Memoir as a genre of Life Writing is expected to depict the lives of real, not fictive, individuals. However, in contemporary times, it also depicts “invented or enhanced materials, and . . . often use novelistic techniques” (Couser 15). In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie blurs the demarcation between lived experiences and invented narrative by framing his story through an alias. Rushdie was given security by the British government after the death threat. The police advised him to change his name so that the people would not identify him as the author of *The Satanic Verses*. One of the police officers told him, “Probably better not to make it an Asian name” (163). Rushdie reflects, “To be asked to give up your name was not a small thing. . . . He would be an invisible man in a whiteface mask” (163). He then invented his name as Joseph Anton, taking the first name Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov, two of his favorite writers. By adopting a pseudonym, Rushdie orchestrates his identity as a fictional character. This narrative stance lets Rushdie step out of his true identity and recount his traumatic experiences more objectively.

For Ben Yagoda, “Memoir has become the central form of the culture: not only the way stories are told, but the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged” (7). Yagoda’s contention is that rather than representing the actual record of lived experiences, memoir constructs and reinterprets the author’s identity in response to historical circumstances. Aligning with Yagoda’s argument, Rushdie presents himself as an anonymous ‘he’ from the prologue of the memoir but later connects this protagonist to the historical author, thereby establishing the memoir’s central tension between narrative distance and self-identification.

India Today published a provocative review after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, stating that it was “an unequivocal attack on religious fundamentalism” (*Joseph Anton* 112), which Rushdie regards as an inaccurate description of the book’s contents and believes that it helped trigger the protests. A few weeks in the autumn of 1988, the book was ‘only a novel, and Rushdie was still himself. But “On 6 October 1988, the cloud covered the sun. . . . *The Satanic Verses* had been banned in India” (116). The protest in relation to his book spread in India, Pakistan, Iran, South Africa, and many other Middle east countries. A copy of his novel had been burnt down in Bradford, England by the Muslim demonstrators. He then remarks “the furor over his book was created from the top down, not from the bottom up” (61). Rushdie argues that the controversy related to his novel was not a grassroots outrage but a politicized phenomenon.

When a BBC reporter asked Rushdie how he felt after the *fatwa* declaration, he outwardly responded, “It doesn’t feel good” but he was inwardly feeling “I am a dead man” (3). Reflecting on the demonstrations that took place in different parts of the Islamic world, Rushdie writes, “He was their satanic author, ‘Satan Rushdie,’ the horned creature on the placards” (5). He also felt that “his old self’s habits were of no use anymore” (5). This abrupt disruption of the old self and the beginning of the new narrative align with Ricoeur’s notion of emplotment. For Ricoeur, the narrative synthesis functions by “grasping together” discordant events into a meaningful unified whole ((*Time and Narrative* 66)). The *fatwa* in Rushdie’s life was a sudden blow that shattered his normal existence. By weaving the horror events of the post-*fatwa* period together, he exercises emplotment and proclaims agency over the chaos.

For Ricoeur, the plot in the narrative is “always to some extent a synthesis of the heterogeneous” (216). Such heterogeneities also prevail in *Joseph Anton*. Rushdie, as a migrant intellectual, was a drifter. Instead of articulating a fixed and stable identity, his writings often project swerving and shifting identity. But the abrupt ceasing of movement caused by the *fatwa* and his confinement in hiding begins a new trajectory of his identity. Rushdie writes, “He was a Bombay boy who had made his life in London among the English, but often he felt cursed by a double belonging” (54). The angst of unbelonging keeps surfacing now and then to the migrant drifters like him. The hiding triggers this psyche and Rushdie ponders, “The migrated self became, inevitably, heterogenous instead of homogenous, belonging to more than one place, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being, more than averagely mixed up” (54). He further writes, “This unhoused, exiled Satan was perhaps the heavenly patron of all exiles, all unhoused people, all those who were torn from their places and left floating, half this, half that. . .” (73). But the forced hiding caused by threats and censorship restricted his fluid, *ipse* identity and trapped himself within fixed, *idem* identity.

The memoir also presents Rushdie’s struggle as a broader defense of artistic freedom, emphasizing that freedom of speech is essential for intellectual inquiry and creativity. He was deeply anguished when he noticed his book being burned at Bradford. He writes, “A copy of the novel had been nailed to a piece of wood and then set on fire: crucified and then immolated” (128). He further adds, “How fragile civilization is . . . how easily, how merrily a book burns!” (129). Rushdie feels that the burning of the book is an attempt to restrict freedom of speech and threaten intellectual inquiry.

Although isolation in hiding and the attack on the novel eroded Rushdie’s self-respect, the solidarity of American Literary Organizations offered hope and a sense of optimism. Rushdie records his agony as, “To hide in this way was to be stripped of all self-respect. To be told to hide was humiliation. Maybe he thought, to live like this would be worse than death” (147). In this bleak circumstance, the Association of American Publishers, the American Booksellers’ Association, and the American Library Association defended freedom of expression and publication. Their advertisement published in the *New York Times* showed powerful support for Rushdie: “Free people publish books. Free people sell books. Free people buy books. Free people read books” (149). This solidarity assured him that he was not alone in the fight against artistic freedom.

The reception of *The Satanic Verses* had robbed Rushdie of his joys. Despite all the havoc that occurred in his life, he was committed to moving ahead in his intellectual journey. Rushdie writes, “Joseph Anton, you must live until you die” (165). The use of the third person as evident in

Rushdie's narrative allows him to release his stress and foreground his commitment to aesthetic critique. Considering the adoption of such narrative alibi, Jacklyn Partyka regards Rushdie as "an effective doppelgänger-author" (215) since Rushdie employs the elements of fictional representation within a nonfictional memoir. For Partyka, the third person allowed him "the freedom and distance to consider objectively the years he was in hiding (Kenny)" (218). He further argues, "... split between narrating voice and subject is one of the most jarring and problematic qualities of the memoir" (217) but Philippe Lejeune claims that this form of narrative works as a "*figure of enunciation* within a text that [the reader] continue[s] to read as discourse in the first person" (*On Autobiography* 32). Thus, the split between the narrator and the autobiographical subject in *Joseph Anton* allows self-representation without undermining autobiographical selfhood.

The close textual analysis of the memoir reveals that Rushdie's use of third-person narrative functions as a mechanism to distance the author from the traumatic experiences of his life in hiding. Although Rushdie employs 'he' as the narrator, the autobiographical pact between the author and the reader remains intact. Through this narrative emplotment, Rushdie articulates how self-representation during the moment of crisis is not just the record of past events but an ongoing construction of narrative identity.

Narrative Distance as Authorial Agency

This article concludes that the third-person narration adopted by Rushdie in *Joseph Anton* serves as the memoir's overarching purpose and significance. The third-person narrative initially nullifies Rushdie's personal and public identity, but he gradually turns this identity into a means of introspection and authorial agency. Using Lejeune's perspectives on autobiographical pact and autobiographical point of view and Ricœur's concept of narrative identity, the article scrutinizes the way the narrator in the memoir grapples with the adversities surrounding his life. Rushdie's personal, familial, and professional life was paralyzed in the post-*fatwa* era, but he tried to create order in chaos through the memoir. It is through story-telling, Rushdie reclaims agency over his life that had been affected by external circumstances. The article also reveals that the use of the third person in *Joseph Anton* is not just a stylistic choice but Rushdie's subtle narrative strategy to masquerade his self and navigate distressing experiences in hiding. Going beyond the conventions of memoir writing, this narrative strategy creates distance between the author and the narrator and provides the author with a standpoint to reflect on one's life events more objectively. In this way, this article brings to light how narrative distance offers a more inclusive and broader perspective on narrative identity, enables the author to assert authorial agency, and exemplifies the dynamics of the third-person narrative approach in life writing.

Works Cited

- Couser, S. Thomas. *Memoir: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Crowley, Patrick. "Paul Ricœur: The Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography." *Paragraph*, vol. 26, no. 3, Nov. 2003, pp. 1–12. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26508930>.
- Ganapathy-Doré, Geetha. "Playing Hide and Seek with Names and Selves in Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*." *Atlantis*, vol. 35, no. 2, Dec. 2013, pp. 11–25. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486056>.
- Jain, Madhu. "Satanic Verses: Sifting between Islamic Folklore and Fact." *India Today*, 15 Sept. 1988. *India Today Archives*, 19 Nov. 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/from-the-india-today-archives-1988-satanic-verses-sifting-between-islamic-folklore-and-fact-2635703-2024-11-19>. Accessed 19 May 2026.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Autobiography in the Third Person." *New Literary History*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1977, pp. 27–50. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468435>.
- . *On Autobiography*. Translated by Katherine M. Leary, U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Partyka, Jacklyn. "Joseph Anton's Digital Doppelgänger." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 2, summer 2017, pp. 204–32.

- Penas-Ibañez, Beatriz. "Empathy as Migration in *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* by Salman Rushdie." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 273-98. doi:10.6240/concentric.lit.2017.43.1.13.
- Pradhan, Prakash Chandra. "Salman Rushdie's Tryst with Freedom of Speech: A Reading of *Joseph Anton*." *Teresian Journal of English Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan.-Mar. 2022, pp. 6-16.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 3, Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Riquelme, John Paul. "Modernist Transformations of Life Narrative: From Wilde and Woolf to Bechdel and Rushdie." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3, Fall 2013, pp. 461-79. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26287317>.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Satanic Verses*. Consortium, 1992.
- . *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*. Jonathan Cape, 2012.
- Teverson, Andrew. *Salman Rushdie: Contemporary World Writers*. Viva Books, 2010.
- Wallhead, Celia. "Meditations on Genre in Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton*." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 70, May 2015, pp. 89-104.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Yagoda, Ben. *Memoir: A History*. Riverhead Books, 2009.