

National Identity and Cultural Representation in the Novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai

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By

Sonali Das

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Dedicated to my Parents
for their immense love & support

The loss of national identity is the greatest defeat a nation can know, and it is inevitable under the contemporary form of colonization.

—Slobodan Milosevic

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PREFACE

The Indian English novel came into existence in the 1930s with the pioneering efforts of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. At that time Gandhian thought and idealism permeated the whole country. It influenced the works of the novelists too. Hence we find Gandhi as a character or theme in many of the novels in the 1930s. For e.g., the character of Moorthy in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is modelled on Gandhi. Political history of India has been well delineated by Indian English novelists. Some such fiction include Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes* (1963), Mulk Raj Anand's *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953, 1970), Kamala Markandaya's *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), etc. Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) deal with Partition and its gory aftermath.

Globalization led to increased incidents of migration across continents. This gave rise to the concepts of immigrants, emigrants and diasporas, among others. Hence, the second part of the twentieth century saw a growth of novels dealing with identity of an individual and his position in a cosmopolitan world. Thus novels witnessed fiction-history interface. This new way of looking at reality is termed 'New History' which differs from older historians' concern only with politics, nation and governance. New History brings into its purview diverse and neglected groups of people. We realise that the hitherto marginalized section of the society like slaves, peasants, workers, women, children, etc came to occupy a substantial place in human consciousness through new history. They became the subject and agents of their own history and not the objects of some dominant group.

Indian English fiction expanded its territory to include the previously forgotten sections of society. Post 1980s Indian English fiction is preoccupied with the social-political-cultural history. History, "wrong footed" and "caught off guard", is "Sloughed off like an old snake-skin", says Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*. Roy thinks of history as a burden; it is unalterable and cannot be challenged and has its own cruel ways of dealing with those who refuse to fit into its pattern. A host of

novelists like Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mukul Kesavan, Kiran Desai and others have pursued this postcolonial postmodern narrative. Indian traditions, culture, myths and socio-political history have been revisited by these novelists. As Hasan Suroor says the new novelists are engaged in 'reworking old myths', 'portraying private griefs and dilemmas'.

This book seeks to analyse the position of the small and the neglected sections of the society vis-à-vis the social, cultural and political conditions of their nations, as portrayed in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's novels – *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and *The Inheritance of Loss*. Apart from the acts of transgression depicted differently in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, this book also deals with several contemporary issues like the identity of an individual in a multicultural world where cultures and natures converge into a melting pot. Both the Man Booker Prize winning authors – Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai – are cosmopolitan authors. They travel extensively all over the globe and portray their characters based on their personal experiences. Being writers of the Third World, they carry the burden of presenting the true picture of the Oriental world to the Occidental world. This book is divided into five chapters which basically deal with the above mentioned issues.

The concepts of 'national' and 'cultural' identity are the buzzwords in the present century due to the impact of globalization. Despite the enormous march of society due to globalization, the age old inequities still linger. Whereas the subalterns in *The Inheritance of Loss* are disempowered by the brunt of globalisation (mixed with the forces of neo-colonialism), the subalterns in *The God of Small Things* face the ire of the deep-seated divisions based on caste and gender bias in a postcolonial society. The character of Sampath Chawla, protagonist of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, shows the credulous nature of modern people and how unguarded they become before a foreseer. The "shadow class" (*The Inheritance of Loss*), the "Monkey Baba" (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*) and the "small things" (*The God of Small Things*) are symbols of the hypocrisies that a postcolonial society in a neo-colonial set up hide in its heart. This book contests these contemporary social issues as presented in the novels by the two Indian English women novelists, Roy and Desai, which transcend the limitation of time and space.

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Nearly 15 years of seminar participation experiences at the National and International level conferences and seminars organised by The Researchers' Association, Odisha; Dhvanyaloka, Mysore; Ravenshaw University, Cuttack; Osmania University Centre for International Programmes, Hyderabad; Association for English Studies of India, Visakhapatnam; NIT, Durgapur, where I got an opportunity to interact with eminent Professors, scholars and researchers of English Literature, helped me immensely in compiling this book. The keynote addresses by Professors of eminence at the seminars organised by The Researchers' Association, Odisha like Prof. Shiv K Kumar (who left for his holy abode on 28th February, 2017 – a personal loss), Prof. Rupin W Desai, Prof. C R Visweswara Rao, Prof. Rajnath, Prof. Prabhat K Singh, Prof. C.N. Srinath, Prof. B. Parvathi, Prof. K. Nirupa Rani, Prof. Avadesh Kumar Singh and Prof. Haldhar Panda among others, were rich sources of information and knowledge that guided me in writing this book.

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As is customary, we place every novel venture at the feet of the Almighty. Hence, I lay this maiden venture of mine and my life at the lotus feet of God. Let His Will Prevail!

CHAPTER I

NARRATING A NATION AND DEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY

The concept of a Nation has become problematic in recent years. This is owed to its opposition to imperialism and colonial power, which ultimately brought freedom to colonized countries across the world. The term ‘Nation’ gave rise to the concepts of *Nationality* and *Nationalism*, which defy precise definition. In the process of writing a work on National Identity and Cultural Representation in the novels of two Indian Women Booker Laureates, it is imperative on my part to define the concept of ‘Nation’ as it is interpreted in our time. In the beginning there was the World, then came Nations. These Nations later on gave rise to Nation-States. In the world today, there are hundreds of nations if we go by the United Nations’ member states. Benedict Anderson’s influential book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Anthony D. Smith’s *Theories of Nationalism* (1971), and Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (1991) have conceptualized ‘Nation’ and ‘Home’ in our time. If Anderson emphasizes that, “nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (quoted in Trivedi *et al.* XI); Smith (1971) opines that, “the nation-state is the almost undisputed foundation of world order, the main object of individual loyalties, the chief definer of a man’s identity.” (3)

Nation has been conceptualized by different writers and critics according to their own perception of the term. A well-known scholar Seton-Watson (1977) has stated that, “Thus, I am driven to the conclusion that no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised, yet the phenomenon has existed and exists” (5). Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation gained widespread acceptance in the 20th century. He states:

In an anthropological spirit, then I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of

even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006, 124)

Anderson borrows the idea from Seton-Watson (1977), who affirms that, “All that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one” (5). Anderson translates ‘consider themselves’ to ‘imagine themselves.’ (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006, 125)

Anderson explains his concept of ‘nation’ as ‘limited’, ‘sovereign’ and ‘community’ in the passage that follows:

The nation is imagined as ‘limited’ because even largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. It is imagined as ‘sovereign’ because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006, 125)

When Anderson calls the ‘nation’ an imagined community, we can also describe it as an identifiable community. Nation is both a political, as well as a cultural concept. Even when a ‘nation’ is not a politically integrated as one, under one administration, it is still a ‘nation’ if it has cultural unity and affinity. The best example is ancient India. During the *Mahabharata* period, India was not under one rule; different parts of it were ruled by different kings, even then it was considered a single ‘nation’. The concept of India as a single nation has been rooted in the Indian consciousness since time immemorial. R.K. Gupta and Priyalakshmi Gupta in their paper titled, “Towards a Concept of Indian Literature” emphasize it in the following words:

It is seen, even earlier, in *The Mahabharata*, in the ninth chapter of “Bhishma Parwa”, where Dhritarashtra asks Sanjay: what is this Bharata-Varsha for whose possession the Kauravas and the Pandavas, though bound in close family ties, are yet ranged for combat. The country that Sanjay describes to Dhritarashtra is not an agglomerate of fragmented regions and warring tribes but a single, unified, integrated land. Ganga, Sindhu, Saraswati, Godavari, Narmada, Yamuna, Gomati, Kaveri and many other rivers flow through its territory. Its provinces include Kuru-

Panchal, Kalinga, Vidarbha, Kashmir, Gandhar, Dravida, Kerala, Karnataka, Chola, Konkan, and Andhra. In this country both Aryans and non-Aryans live.

When, therefore, Tagore speaks, in what has become the national anthem of India, of 'Punjab, Sindhu, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravid, Utkal, Banga', he is not introducing a new consciousness but merely expressing and reiterating one which has long existed. National consciousness was present in India in the ancient and medieval periods. It is by no means a product of the nineteenth century or an offshoot of the British occupation. Poets and writers from the days of *The Mahabharata* have recognized this unity, testified to its existence, and reaffirmed it, in their works. (Gupta and Gupta 1982, 29-30)

What Sanjay tells Dhritarashtra about the geography of the country is reinforced in our National Anthem, written by Rabindranath Tagore. The studies on 'nation' and 'nationalism' have been steadily rising for the last two centuries – the 19th and the 20th. The concept of the terms has been debated in the social sciences, but in fictional literature this concept is widely pronounced. Theoreticians have been working overtime to interpret these terms vis-à-vis literary texts. In a perceptive article titled, "The National longing for Form," Timothy Brennan states:

It is especially in Third World Fiction after the Second World War that the fictional uses of 'nation' and 'nationalism' are most pronounced. The 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation' – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of. 'Uses' here should be understood both in a personal, craftsman like sense, where nationalism is a trope for such things as 'belonging', 'bordering', and 'commitment'. (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006, 128)

Now the question is how the 'nation' and 'nationalism' are understood in the West, and again how a nation-state is formed in the post-World War II era. A nation-state is a republic with a flag, a constitution, a government, a territory and currency of its own. Contrastingly, a state has its own territory and government, but no flag or constitution of its own. India is a nation-state; Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and so on, are states, but not nation-states, as they have no national flag or a national anthem. States have political boundaries, but 'nation' defies such boundaries through an emphasis on culture.

Richard Allen writes:

Nation and nationalism can be part of decolonization in a quite straight forward way. By reclaiming its traditions and sense of community the colonized group reclaims its standing as a nation and uses this identity as a strength in its struggle against the colonizing power. (Allen and Trivedi 2000, 15)

Timothy Brennan makes an apt observation in the following lines:

Nations, then are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of culture fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature – the novel. . . . It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.... (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006, 130)

The concept of a ‘nation’ as an imaginary community has been questioned by some thinkers, such as Slavoj Zizek, who opines in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* that:

To emphasize in a ‘deconstructionist mode that Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is thus misleading: such an emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity effect to achieve its Ontological consistency. (quoted in Vijay Mishra) (Paranjape 2001, 27)

‘Nation’ and ‘nationality’ are essential factors in keeping patriotism alive. During the colonial period, when the colonized fought against the powers that be, and demanded freedom, the feeling of belonging to one nation brought people of different hues together. That is why, in India, some say that the concept of ‘nation’ is the result of our revolt against the British Raj in the 19th century. However, the fact remains that national identity issues out of belonging to a nation, which is rooted in history. Childs and Fowler (2006) in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* define ‘Nationalism’ as follows:

Contrary to the nationalists’ claims, it is observable that nations represent a historical innovation in the organization of human social life. All critical

studies of nationalism, beginning in the nineteenth century with the philosopher Ernest Renan and the historian Lord Acton, have sought to analyse and explain the emergence of nation *historically*, which is to say, as the product of historical forces that determined them, not as the expression of some ‘essence’. Renan, in fact, prefigures, albeit it hesitantly, some of the features of nationalism studies that have emerged in the wake of post-structuralism and other advances in cultural theory that propose nations to be cultural constructs that narrativize themselves into being. In particular, his notion of the nation being the product of a daily plebiscite which entails a selective organization of the community’s collective memory foreshadows, in some general respects, Benedict Anderson’s path breaking conceptualization of nations as ‘imagined communities.’ (152-153)

In our case ‘Nationalism’ may be taken as a political movement against colonizers in the 19th and 20th century, until India gained independence. It can also be taken as a cultural construct which brings different people together for a common cause. The concept of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ may be catachresis for us, but the idea of writing the nation remains firmly rooted in the culture of the land and in its literature. *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Puranas*, the tales of the lord like, *The Panchatantra*, *The Kathasarita Sagar* and *The Jataka Tales* successfully depict India as a ‘nation’, though the term in its current sense was not available then.

‘Nation’ as depicted in texts of writers of Third World countries is described as ‘National allegories’ by Jameson in the following words :

All Third World texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical and in a very specific way, they are to be read as what I call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (69)

The concept of the ‘nation’ is best illustrated in the light of colonialism and postcolonialism. Fredric Jameson’s description of Third World texts as ‘national allegories’ is beautifully explained by C.L. Innes in the following words:

Jameson’s argument that all Third World texts are to be read as national allegories assumes that characters and plot represent a whole nation’s values and history – in other words, the native writer and his or her characters become native informants who speak for the race or society as a whole. (Innes 2007, 206)

Indian consciousness is deeply rooted in the past, and the people of our country never forget it. In her introduction to Attia Hosain's *Sunlight On a Broken Column*, Anita Desai writes:

In India the past never disappears. It does not even become transformed into a ghost. Concrete, physical, palpable – it is present everywhere. Ruins, monuments, litter the streets, hold up the traffic, create strange islands in the modernity of the cities. No one fears or avoids them – goats and cows graze around them, the poor string up ropes and rags and turn them into dwellings, election campaigners and cinema distributors plaster them with pamphlets – and so they remain a part of the here and now, of today. (p. V). (in Allen and Trivedi 2000, 127)

The latter illustrates how in Third World texts there are references to native cultures, histories and characters which are more intelligible to the native readership than to foreign readers. How the nation can be written in fiction incorporating history, is best exemplified in the novels of Indian English writers and African writers in the colonial and post-colonial era. In Indian English literature, national history is depicted in a fictional form by Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Attia Hosain, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shiv K. Kumar, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai and a host of other writers. Aijaz Ahmad makes a valid point when arguing about the state of 'nation' in the context of Jameson's observations:

Jameson insists over and over again that the natural experience is central to the cognitive formation of the Third World intellectual, and that the narrativity of that experience takes the form exclusively of a 'national allegory'. But this emphatic insistence on the category 'nation' itself keeps slipping into much wider, far less demarcated vocabulary of 'culture', 'society', 'collectivity' and so on. (Ahmad 1999, 109)

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is a pioneering work in the field of fictionalizing history in Indian English literature. In his Foreword to *Kanthapura*, Rao (1963) writes:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *Sthala-Purana*, or a legendary history of its own . . . one such story from the contemporary annals of a village I have tried to tell. (VII)

C.L. Innes has rightly observed the significance of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* by quoting from the text and referring to the observations of critics like Robert Fraser and Elleke Boehmer, in the following passages:

Published in 1938, *Kanthapura* narrates, from the point of view of spirited and garrulous South Indian grandmother, the effect of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on the varied inhabitants of a small village in India. The voice of the narrator allows Rao to link transitional oral narrative, myths and legends, and social structures to create an impression of rural India which is also a microcosm of the nation as a whole, and the ways in which the Gandhi movement brings change. It is, as Robert Fraser remarks, 'an early attempt, in Homi Bhabha's words, to "write the nation": to depict in vivid outlines, the writings, the jostlings and the uneasy birth pangs of the Indian collective consciousness.' (Innes 2007, 53)

The following passage from an early section of *Kanthapura* demonstrates Rao's creation of an Indian voice in English, and a consciousness imbued with traditional stories, myths and beliefs:

Today, '[Jayaramachar] says, 'it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.' And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! 'Siva is the three-eyed,' he says, 'and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar'. And then he talks of Dmayanthi and Sakunthala and Yasodha and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj. Never had we heard *Harikathas* like this. And he can sing too, can Jayaramachar. He can keep us in tears for hours together. But the *Harikatha* he did, which I can never forget in this life and in all lives to come, is about the birth of Gandhiji. (Rao 1963, 10)

In appreciation of this passage, Innes (2007) writes:

Raja Rao has done a commendable job in *Kanthapura* by weaving different castes into the politics of the day. No wonder he mentions Brahmin quarters, Pariah quarters, Weavers' quarters and Potters's quarters to highlight caste ridden Indian society. But Moorthy, a Gandhi follower and non-believer in caste politics rejects the division of the people on caste lines and brings them under the banner of freedom movement so well led by Mahatma Gandhi. Moorthy succeeds in his effort to bring the whole village together cutting across caste lines to fight against the colonial forces (i.e. the Britishers). Nationalist forces have triumphed over the structure of the caste ridden society, which prompted Elleke Boehmer to say that, 'Rao has composed a narrative in which story line, generic structure and nationalist resistance politics mutually reflects upon one another.' (9)

If Raja Rao lays emphasis on his Indianness and nationality to write novels in English, and tells Indian English novelists to follow suit, Chinua Achebe expresses a comparable view through which he establishes his

African identity. In an interview with Kwame Anthony Appiah, Achebe states:

I'm an Ibo writer because this is my basic culture, Nigerian, African and a writer . . . no, black first, then a writer. Each of these identities does call for a certain kind of commitment on my part. I must see what it is to be black and this means being sufficiently intelligent to know how the world is moving and how the black people fare in the world. This is what it means to be black. Or an African – what does African mean to the world? When you see an African, what does it mean to a white man? (Appiah 1992, 73)

At this point, it may be highlighted that Raja Rao, like Chinua Achebe, has paved the way for postcolonial criticism in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*. His assertion that “We Indians can’t write like the British, we need not write like them. We will write in our own way. Time alone will justify it” anticipates Rushdie’s phrase ‘The Empire Writes Back to the Centre’, from which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin borrowed the title of their most publicized book, *The Empire Writes Back*. It is worthwhile mentioning Rushdie’s magnum opus *Midnight’s Children*, alongside *Kanthapura* as additions to this repertoire. References to Indian histories, cultures and characters are numerous in Rushdie’s novel. In the words of Hutcheon (1989):

...a novel like *Midnight’s Children* works to foreground the totalizing impulse of western – imperialistic – modes of history-writing by confronting it with indigenous models of history’. Moreover, ‘his intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are doubled’, drawing on Indian legend, film and literature as well as European models such as *Tristram Shandy* (1759-69) and *The Tin Drum*. (1959) (65)

A close reading of *Midnight’s Children* reveals to the native readers the allusions and references to actual events and dates in Indian contemporary history. Sometimes dates have been changed to fictionalize them. This does not escape the attention of a perceptive foreign critic, C. L. Innes:

In many ways *Midnight’s Children* appears to have the ingredients of a conventional historical novel, covering the history of the Indian subcontinent from one seemingly trivial moment in 1915 when Saleem’s grandfather ‘hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray’, through the achievement of independence in 1947, the Partition of the subcontinent, and later of Bengal, the 1958 military coup in Pakistan, the war between Indian and Pakistan in 1971, Indira Gandhi’s suspension of civil rights during the 1975-7 State of Emergency, and the sterilization campaign led by Sanjay Gandhi. But it also includes

sometimes deliberately unreliable references to actual historical events, as for example the narrator's misremembering the date of Gandhi's assassination, and this should alert the reader to some of the many ways in which Rushdie questions conventional historical narrative and the truth of memory. (134)

Thieme is of the opinion that,

...works such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-candy Man* (1988), which foreground the extent to which they are operating as national allegory, support Jameson's contention, but it is debatable whether their self-consciousness in this respect is markedly different from, say . . . Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Kevi Hulme's *The Bone People* (1983) which invite similar interpretations. In short, national allegory, can be a useful term for describing particular 'third world' texts or the readings they promote, but it is dubious whether it is more specifically applicable to such texts than to works from Western Cultures. (181)

The identity of literature is hinged upon factors such as – language, nation, and culture. In Third World countries which were once part of British or French Colonies, moving from imperialism through colonialism and post-colonialism to neo-colonialism, literature is understood in terms of a binary opposition between colonialism and post-colonialism. However, no single factor is solely responsible for the identity or nomenclature of literature. For instance, in our own country Indian Literature signifies so many literatures – Bhasha Literatures (Odia literature, Bengali literature, Hindi literature, Gujarati literature, Telugu literature, Sanskrit literature and so on) as well as Indian English literature. Here, the factor which lends an identity to literature is not language, but nationality and culture. W.B. Yeats depicts the identity of the author in terms of the nation in the following lines:

Many times man lives and dies
 Between his two eternities,
 That of race and that of soul,
 And ancient Ireland knew it all.
 ("Under Ben Bulben")

'Nationalism' springs from cultural affinity, like the one existing in ancient India. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are the repository of Indian Culture and 'nationalism'. In the postcolonial era, anti-colonial nationalism highlighted the importance of the nation-state. Laura Chrisman makes a valid observation in the following passage:

Many postcolonial scholars – among them Partha Chatterjee (1986) and Anne McClintock (1995) – have followed Benedict Anderson's characterization of nationalism as a constitutively paradoxical formation. The paradox arises from the historical rupture of capitalist modernity. Nationalism is the product of modern, security consciousness; it views the emergence of nations as part of the forward march of history. At the same time, nationalism's imagined community stretches back to antiquity; the nation's identity and credibility depend upon the assertion of unbroken cultural tradition. Nationalism is thus the paradoxical expression of a historical and cultural rupture that must assert itself as a historical continuity. (Lazarus 2004, 186)

'Nationalism' is a centripetal force that attracts not only indigenous writers of the Third World, but diasporic writers as well. The Diaspora may refer to one of two eras: old and new. The old diaspora belonged to the colonial era, when the poor and underprivileged were forced to leave the country to work elsewhere as indentured labourers. The new diaspora refers to the educated upper classes that left the country on their own initiative from the 1970s onwards to earn name and fame abroad. Kiran Desai, an immigrant, belongs to the latter category; the new diaspora. Living in the USA, she harks back to her past in India and tries to recreate the Indian situation in the global context. *The Inheritance of Loss* (Booker Prize Award Winning novel for 2006) deals with the struggle of the unknown people of the lower social strata in troubled times. It is set in the 1980s, in Kalimpong, a Himalayan town in India's north-eastern corner. It moves to and fro between New York and London, recording racism, the plight of the Asian illegal immigrants in the West, to the insurgency spearheaded by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in Eastern India. The novel skilfully explores the events of contemporary history through the lives of the characters, Jemubhai Patel, Sai and Biju. This colourful assortment of elements makes for an absorbing read.

There is a change in perception between the old and new generations of Third World writers, including diasporic writers. Innes writes:

...one might contrast the Hindu-oriented fiction of R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao with the multicultural worlds given presence and validity by later such as, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie and Bapsi Sidhwa. And whereas early works by Achebe, Narayan, Ngugi and Rao often focus on a self-contained rural village, and perhaps its encounter with and opposition to British colonial power and culture, later postcolonial fiction is frequently set in an urban context, where different peoples and cultures mingle and interact. In these later novels, typically, the narrator or central character is a member of a minority or marginalized group, not identified

with the majority – a Parsi child in Lahore (*Ice-Candy-Man* (1988)), a Jewish/Muslim mother and son in Bombay (*The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)), a Syrian Christian family in Kerala (*The God of Small Things* (1977)) (165).

Contemporary society and politics have been major themes in fiction in recent years. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an amalgam of history, politics and sexuality. The novel has a complex plot that swings both ways – forward and retrospectively. The story revolves around Ammu; her two children – Rahel and Esthappen; her parents; her brother, Chacko and his wife, Margaret, and their daughter, Sophie Mol; and Ammu's paravan lover, Velutha.

As B.K. Das observes:

Ammu's love for Velutha forms the core of the novel and makes the novelist's preference crystal clear. The traditional society was not only conservative but authoritarian for it laid down who should love whom. It happened long ago and it is against this concept that the novelist protests vehemently. The right to love a man of her choice, is a woman's birthright and it should not be scuttled in the name of religion, caste, colour and class. It is in this sense that the novel could be read as a feminist novel or a post-colonial novel for both feminism and post-colonialism aim at destroying the old power structure. Roy wants to break this age old tradition to uphold the right of a woman to marry a man of her choice. (Das 2007, 73)

B.K. Das cites a paragraph from *The God of Small Things* to establish how Arundhati Roy historicizes the text:

...it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian Bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled sea serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a tea bag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (qtd. in Das 2007, 73)

Innes (2007) views Roy's novel in the light of Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*. She writes:

Roy's *The God of Small Things* also introduces a diverse society in Kerala, and focuses on the children of modern Syrian Christian ancestry married to a Bengali Hindu. But the novel ends in desolation, after retracing the deaths of the twin's Anglo-Indian cousin and the murder of their mother's lover because he belongs to the wrong caste; only those who are almost the same (the twins) can communicate with one another. As in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), one of the central metaphors in Roy's novel is a pickle factory, started as a local kitchen enterprise by the children's grandmother Mammachi, and it is difficult not to read Roy's use of this trope as a commentary on Rushdie's earlier use of this metaphor. But whereas the metaphor of pickles as signifying the preservation and mingling of diverse histories and memories, 'the chutneyfication of history', works relatively positively and playfully in Rushdie's novel, Mammachi's independent pickling shop is taken over, turned into a factory and renamed by her son as 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves'. Here, as in Gurnah's novel, paradise connotes an Ideal that has become corrupted. By the end of the novel, the factory has been abandoned and Mammachi's son has emigrated to Canada. And the dilapidated house is ruled not by a grandmother or mother figure, but by the children's aunt, Baby Kochamma, single-minded in her prejudices, largely responsible for the ruin of their mother, spending her days dreaming of romance with the Christian priest Father Mulligan, and filling in coupons which might win her unneeded goods from those who advertise them. In Roy's novel, as in *Ice-Candy-Man*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Paradise* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, we are shown both the desirability of coexistence between diverse people and cultures, and at the same time the difficulty of sustaining a community which accommodates difference. (175-176)

An identification of 'nation' is linked with the portrayal of women in literature in general, and post-colonial literature in particular. If in some sense female characters become the 'signifiers of the nation' (Innes 141), the "identification of the nation as women, and of men as her saviours, frequently influences the portrayal of women in anti-colonial and postcolonial literature" (Innes 140). Such examples from postcolonial literature support the point that women are presented as symbolic of the 'nation' in Third World Literature. Postcolonial women writers historicize fiction and fictionalize history to strengthen the idea of the nation in their novel. Her love of Lord Krishna is the epitome of divine love, and the woman attained (Nirvana) salvation. In another way, women portrayed in Githa Hariharan's novels, *A Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999) allude to Indian mythic women, Devi and Sita, in order to prove that puranic women can inspire women of our time. National myths have a powerful effect on the minds of contemporary fiction writers.

Indian novelists do not lag behind their postcolonial counterparts in historicizing the text. Women novelists have been very successful in depicting the nation by reconfiguring history and the text. Innes (2007) writes:

The revisioning and retelling of India's history from a woman's point of view has been undertaken by other writers from the subcontinent, among them Manju Kapur, Githa Hariharan, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal. Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), parallels the broken relationships and disillusionment involved in the nation's move towards independence with its heroine Virmati's struggle for autonomy, her battle to achieve an education, her partial fulfillment as a teacher and her disastrous marriage as a second wife to 'the Professor' she idolizes. Her story is told sympathetically by her unmarried and less restricted daughter, and is also contrasted with the stories of other women who joined in the independence movement and retained some autonomy and control over their lives. Hariharan's *A Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) and *When Dreams Travel* (1999) both allude to Scheherazade as well as other portrayals of women in Indian myth (such as Devi and Sita, for whom two of the main women characters are named in *A Thousand Faces of Night*) to suggest the ways in which representations of women in the past can act to subdue or inspire women. (155-156)

Here we are reminded of Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*, in which the novelist depicts the trauma of partition against the backdrop of human love. Anupama Chowdhury makes an apt observation on Kumar's novel when pointing out the plight of women during the struggle for independence and the period following it. Chowdhury writes:

The needs of women have been sacrificed both during nationalist struggle and after independence. During the period of National movement the land and woman got constantly equated for the convenience of the male discourse of the Nation building process. Social and historic constructions, gender and nation intimately participated in the formation of one another. The nation along with its topography was and still is always imagined in gendered terms. Nations are therefore, always gendered. . . . Since the nationalist narrative is filled with images of the nation as mother, wife, and the female body, women represent the nation both physically and symbolically. Therefore, it becomes the duty of men to protect, defend, and avenge the nation. Women's bodies thus attaining the symbol of the nation's fertility, power and honour, become the properties of the nation. As per this ideology, the nation is either adored and worshipped or detested, raped and sullied, its limbs torn apart, its womb assaulted. Since women symbolize the spatial borders they become vulnerable during national unrest. While the bodies of "our" women are defended as borders,

“their” women are violated as the other’s borders/territories. The grand narrative of nationalism recorded in the history books never articulates these experiences. Shiv K. Kumar’s novel re-evaluates the official history in terms of all these meta-narratives as well. (*The Journal of the Department of English*, Burdwan University 45-46)

With regard to postcolonial literature, even in ancient Indian epics like *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Puranas*, women have been identified with the nation as mother figures. Sita, in *The Ramayana*, has passed into the public consciousness as the mother and is worshipped as such. Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* becomes the epitome of woman’s struggle against men and patriarchal society. Goddesses from myths of the nation like Durga, Laxmi and Saraswati are taken as symbols of strength, wealth and learning, respectively. They are integral to the Indian mindset and worshipped with devotion. The concept of woman as mother is so dear to the Indian sensibility that we call our country *motherland* and our country’s biggest river, the Ganges, is adored as a mother. The tradition of linking woman with the nation has been in vogue in our country since time immemorial, and has been maintained all through the colonial and postcolonial period.

“A nation gets defined often by the twin processes of obliterating the differences within its boundary and by emphasizing differences with whatever lies outside the border” (168) says Mukherjee, and rightly so. The history of the nation can be perceived in fiction writing, as seen in England, beginning with Henry Fielding, through to Jane Austen in the 18th and 19th centuries. In our country, Bhasha literature novels like Tagore’s *Gora*, Fakir Mohan Senapati’s *Chhamana Atha Guntha (Three Acres and a Third)*, Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*, U.R. Annathamurthy’s *Samskara*, and Indian English novels like Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* and *Untouchable*, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Amitav Ghosh’s *Shadow Lines*, Kiran Nagarkar’s *Cuckold*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, are attempts to write the nation.

Rumina Sethi makes a valid point on the creation of national identity, in the following passages:

The Indian village, nevertheless, continued to be regarded as the idealized antithesis of western civilization in terms of its spirituality and religious norms which were eternal. Beginning in the early nineteenth century from

Rammohun Roy's recognition of India as a Land of the spirit to Swami Vivekananda's advocacy of the Indian instruction in matters of the spirit later on in the century, the assumption of the spiritual potential of Indian embodied in its villages became a fundamental feature in representation of Indian identity. Other thinkers and writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Madanmohan Malaviya, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee stressed the values imbibed from the family: the village and its castes. Gandhi, of course, was the later fountainhead of Indian Cultural identity which he believed was rooted in its villages. (Sethi 1999, 25-26)

In the case of people directly affected by partition, where those concerned were compelled to choose one country over another, the question of 'nationality' becomes difficult to define. Salman Rushdie comments as follows:

As a writer, I have always thought myself lucky that, because of the accidents of my family life, I've grown up knowing something of both India and Pakistan. I have frequently found myself explaining Pakistan attitudes to Indians and vice versa, arguing against the prejudices that have grown more deeply ingrained on both sides as Pakistan has drifted further and further across the sea. I can't say my efforts have been blessed with much success, or indeed that I have been an entirely impartial arbiter. I hate the way, we, Indians and Pakistanis, have become each other's others, each seeing the other as it were through a glass, darkly, each ascribing to the other the worst motives and the sneakiest natures. I hate it, but in the last analysis, I'm on the Indian side. (Rushdie 2002, 371)

If a nation is an 'imagined community' for Anderson, the nation-state becomes 'imaginary homelands' for Rushdie and other diasporic writers. Rushdie says,

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are hunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even as the risk of being mutated into pillars to salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind. (*Imaginary Homelands* 10)

Having defined the 'nation', let us turn to national identity. A writer may define myth in one of the three ways: archetypal myth, national myth and personal myth. It is through national myth that the national identity is established. For instance, when we say this is 'Laxman Rekha', it is taken

as a warning, a danger signal derived from *The Ramayana* which is intelligible to all Indians, educated and uneducated alike. The characters from *The Mahabharata* have been mythologized by writers. Well-known Indian English novelist, Shashi Tharoor in his *The Great Indian Novel* makes a parody of contemporary political personalities by likening them to the characters of *The Mahabharata*.

If the novels reflect the society and the nation, Indian English fiction has nothing to fear. National identity in terms of socio-politico-economic conditions has been defined from the beginning by pioneers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Social-political realism in the colonial era is the hallmark of the fiction of the post-independence era. Partition novels in the hands of Khushwant Singh, Attia Hosain, Manohar Malgonkar, B. Rajan, Raj Gill, and a few others, show the trauma of partition and seek to establish national identity. These novelists paved the way for women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal, who establish national identity in their fiction in the post-independence period. Mention may be made of Chaman Nahal, Shiv K. Kumar, or Kiran Nagarkar, who wrote to establish Indian identity by taking recourse to history. Nahal's *Azadi*, Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* and *Two Mirrors at the Ashram*, and Nagarkar's *Cuckold*, embody national identity in terms of myth, history and contemporaneity. Novelists in the 1980s follow Salman Rushdie in seeking to furnish Indian English fiction with an identity that would distinguish it from Third World fiction – particularly African, Caribbean and Australian fiction. This list of novelists boasts the names of Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri and a host of others. Women novelists of the post-1980 period include Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Githa Hariharan and a host of others. All these writers bear the imprint of the Indian sensibility, and therefore establish national identity by evoking Indian history, the landscape and the contemporary scene in their fiction.

Indian English writers, whether living in our country, living abroad or dividing their time between the west and the homeland, write about the country and society for the benefit of a double audience – both at home and abroad. In the colonial era we used to read British literature in our country, and now our writers have a foreign readership abroad. In some of the novels, characters move through both worlds – India and abroad. That establishes our national identity, and makes it intelligible to outsiders. What was an early attempt to write the 'nation' in *Kanthapura* has been

firmly established by the fiction writers of the post-1980 period. From Salman Rushdie to Kiran Desai, we have travelled a long way to establish our national identity in fiction. Man Booker Prizes to Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga helped advance the establishment of national identity in fiction abroad. Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Anita Desai, Amit Chaudhuri and a host of other new writers have defined in no uncertain terms the concept of ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ through their works.

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