

“After Hiroshima and Nagasaki”: Changing Trends of Nation-Nationalism since the Atom Bomb

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Abstract

The main fallacy of the modern man was the invention of the Atom Bomb. With its invention a new type of political scenario has ruled about in world politics where one's power lies on the report of atom- bombs owned by the particular nation. In a way it has brought about a new course in political and diplomatic relations. The dropping of the atom bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a way has marked a symbolic explosion in the course for the thought process of the concept of the nation- state. The paper seeks to look at the various strands of changing concepts of motherly love for the nation in Indian literary discourses ranging from the earliest texts of the Indian poets writing in English comparing the nation to the role of the mother with her pride at stake from Western onslaughts. For simplicity purpose the changing notions of nationalism has been highlighted in the works of Rabindranath Tagore who wrote of nationalism in his essays as well as his novels “Gora” and “The Home and The World”. The same Indian nationalism is again looked at by the post-modernist Rushdie in its changed avatar covering facets of nationalism as nothing but another discourse of hegemonic ideologies in the whole politics of power-relations.

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“All war is a symptom of man’s failure as a thinking animal.”--- John Steinbeck

War is an “intentional, cultural and widespread armed conflict” between political communities. *All warfare is precisely, and ultimately, about governance.* War is a violent way for determining who gets to say what goes on in a given territory, for example, regarding: who gets power, who gets wealth and resources, whose ideals prevail, who is a member and who is not, which laws get made, what gets taught in schools, where the border rests, how much tax is levied, and so on. War is the ultimate means for deciding these issues if a peaceful process or resolution can't be agreed upon. But, the question that creeps up in our mind while regarding the philosophy of “War” is the concept of “state” i.e. what statehood is?

Most people follow Max Weber's distinction between nation and state. A

nation is a group which thinks of itself as “a people,” usually because they share many things in common, such as ethnicity, language, culture, historical experience, a set of ideals and values, habitat, cuisine, fashion and so on. The state, by contrast, refers much more narrowly to the machinery of government which organizes life in a given territory. “Nation” and “Nationalism” as contested categories are notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze. There have been vigorous debates about them all over the world with perhaps no conclusions or half conclusions reached. As Hugh Seton-Watson maintains, “no scientific definition” of nation can be devised (5). According to Mariateugi, “The nation... is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined” (187-88). Anthony D. Smith maintains 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. It is far more significant for the individual and for world security than any previous type of political and social organization. It permeates our outlook so much that we hardly question its legitimacy today. We tend to regard nation like skin-color – a natural attribute of man" (2-3). Indeed, the communities that are imagined by the nationalists often invoke a shared past or a cultural essence that is regarded as synonymous with a religious or racial identity. It obviously makes out that nations are in a sense "natural" or even "essential," for the world order to exist. Ernest Renan in his essay "What is a Nation?" (1882) had stressed a similar position that "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle" (Renan 19).

For Benedict Anderson, before nationalism, there existed the "great religiously imagined communities", such as Christendom, based on shared languages such as Latin. With the rise of exploration, Europeans came to realize the insularity of

their conceptions of existence. Furthermore, the shared language of Latin was beginning to decline, and was replaced by the vernacular.

Whilst Europe existed as the great religiously imagined communities, the conception of time was one in which history was fused together. The past, present and future were not linked causally, but through the will of the divine. Within such a conception of time, the word "meanwhile" can have no meaning. With the dissolution of such communities, it became possible to imagine a state in which there was now no longer "*simultaneity along time*" but "*homogenous, empty time*". This type of time could be marked by clock and calendar, and was amenable to theoretically incidental coincidence. Then came print capitalism. After a while, the monopoly on print was lost by Latin, and new works were published in the vernacular. (Protestantism and its emphasis on internal salvation were particularly

important here.) Books, newspapers and novels in vernacular languages gave the idea to their readers that there existed, simultaneously in time, a group of readers like them consuming the same cultural manufactures.

These manufactures gave the readers a sense of national consciousness in three ways:

- They created unified fields of exchange below Latin and above the vernaculars
- They gave a new fixity to the language and thus helped give an idea of permanence to the nation
- They created languages of power different to the pre-existing language of Latin.

Nationalism was thus, Anderson argues, the result of the fusion between the decline of religion, human diversity, the development of capitalism and the technology of print. Thus, for Anderson nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time and the nation is an “imagined

community,” born with the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism.

Rabindranath Tagore, in his book “Nationalism”, firmly held the view that India never had nationalism:

“India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity”. (Nationalism 83)

Nationalism, for him, is not “a spontaneous self expression of man as social being,” but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people formed to advance their material benefits. It is based on the organized self-interest and not altruism, which, therefore detracts from humanity and the spiritual nature of man. When the self-serving pursuit becomes the be-all and

end-all of political and economic organization, the personal and moral is sacrificed, the living bonds of society break up and the relationships of men become utilitarian.

For Ashish Nandy in his essay "The Illegitimacy of Nationalism", though nationalism was opposed to colonialism, was nothing but a product of colonial duplicity. It too would corrupt the androgynous innocence of colonial subjects - nationalism was a cure that was also a poison. But Nandy's archaeology also reveals "ambivalence towards the idea of a monocultural nation-state and towards nationalism itself" among its early Indian proponents - preeminently in the later works of Tagore that so interest Nandy.

Literary trends do not emerge full blown, like Minerva from Jupiter's head nor do they vanish suddenly and completely, leaving no trace behind. Rather, while some old trends continue unabated, others out sheer exhaustion or

else in response to the changing social or literary situation lose their energy, sometimes dying a natural death but more often continuing in a muted form, leading a subterranean existence, or the appearing under new guises, or disguises. New trends, earlier anticipated, gradually gather strength, become vigorous, and occupy the centre of the stage for a while, until they are pushed into the background. In literature it is thus a matter more of links and continuities with the past than of making a clean break with it.

It is only in this limited sense, without dogmatism---and one might add with considerable trepidation----that one can venture to speak of trends in modern Indian fiction. It is not by any means as if in modern Indian fiction earlier concerns and pre-occupations have been abruptly and completely replaced by new ones. In fact, many old trends continue to lead a vigorous life: exploration of the experience of love in all its richness, complexity and

variety; delicate play of individual sensibility; pre-occupation with the self and with one's moods and emotions; and above all, a brooding concern with historical, legendary and mythical themes--these have remained strong and effective as in the past. Still even as these trends have continued, others, making a tentative appearance at first, have acquired a new energy, a new shape and form, sometimes a new context and have become dominant, more articulate, asserting themselves more strenuously. In fact, one of the basic characteristics of new Indian writing in the post-modern era is the diversification of conflicting ideas and themes which appears within a particular work of fiction.

In a poem entitled, "The Sunset of the Century," written on the last day of the nineteenth century, India's messianic poet and Asia's first Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), launched a fierce diatribe on nationalism.

In a mood of outrage and disenchantment, tempered with intermittent hope, he wrote:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding.

For it has made the world its food.

And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels,

It swells and swells

Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness.

This anti-nationalitarian sentiment—that nationalism is a source of war and carnage; death, destruction and divisiveness, rather than international

solidarity, that induces a larger and more expansive vision of the world—remains at the heart of Tagore’s imagination in most of his writings: his letters, essays, lectures, poems, plays and fiction. He was always opposed to the nationalism of *Realpolitik* and hyper-nationalism that breathed meaning into Thucydides’s ancient maxim that “large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must” (qtd. in Chomsky 16) and that in which, as Radhakrishnan said, “self-interest is the end; brute force, the means; conscience is taboo” (163). Radical nationalism that acted as opiate of the people, making them irrational and fanatical, blind to the senses of truth and justice, and willing to both kill and die for it, perpetuating a logic of “lunacy” and war, instead of a cycle of freedom and peace, was an anathema to Tagore. He spurned it as “a cruel epidemic of evil . . . sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral fibre” (*Nationalism* 9); a terrible absurdity that is seeking to engulf humanity in a

suicidal conflagration. Coming to the point of Nationalism, Prof. Namwar Singh (1927), a veteran writer and literary critic of Hindi literature, in the essay “Decolonizing the Indian Mind”(Translated from Hindi by Harish Trivedi), Singh compares Tagore’s “Gora” with Anantha Murthy’s “Samskara” and draws references to the components of nationalism in both the stories, one serving as an example of pre-independence Indian Literature and the other as a post-modern sample.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) may loosely be termed as a novel of memory and of history conflating biography, history and fantasy in the fabulist mode of magic realism together with the oral narrative tradition of India. This novel teems with characters from all walks of life in India with incidents bewilderingly shuffled in chronology. This Magnus opus on its canvas of nation and nationality paints a diversified picture featuring various

cannons. Resonating between a number of conflicting themes like fact vs. fiction, subjective vs. objective truth, magic vs. real, creation and destruction, body politics, phallacious impotency, the unreliability of memory and narrative etc., this novel is said to be an epic of failure in which disappointment is seen as an utopian fantasy. “To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world,” says Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight’s Children*. Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the day of India’s independence from British rule, Saleem’s life is a microcosm of post-Independent India. In order to make meaning out of his life, Saleem must first “swallow the world”, he must understand his country’s colonial past; make sense out of its burgeoning independent present; and come to terms with his [and India’s] postcolonial identity. Rushdie, like his autobiographical protagonist Saleem, is also a product of postcolonial India. Rushdie’s literature, although heavily

Anglicized due to his migration to England at the age of twenty-seven, is dominated by themes of identity that break down colonial constructs of Western dominance over Eastern culture, hence his position as a prominent Anglo-Indian postcolonial writer.

Postcolonial discourse was born in response to the imperial expansion of Western colonial empires during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Postcolonial writers like Rushdie, therefore, emerged out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by writing in response to the authority wielded by the imperial powers, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centers. The desire to reclaim the India of his past was the driving force behind his decision to write *Midnight’s Children* – the novel was born when Rushdie realized how much he wanted to restore his past identity to himself. *Midnight’s Children* was his first

literary attempt to recapture Bombay, India. The novel explores the ways in which history is given meaning through the retelling of individual experience. History is seen subjectively through the eyes of the protagonist Saleem Sinai, therefore the retelling of history is fragmented and, at times, erroneous. For Saleem, born at the instance of India's independence from Britain, life becomes inextricably linked with the political, national, and religious events of his time; his life parallels that of postcolonial India. Due to the coincidental hour of his birth, Saleem is able to telepathically communicate with other gifted children born during the same hour of India's Independence. Rushdie is relating Saleem's generation of "midnight's children" to the generation of Indians with whom he was born and raised. As a product of postcolonial India, Saleem must piece together the multifarious fragments of his identity, just as India must begin anew in rebuilding her identity in the wake of colonialism. His story represents

the plural identities of India and the fragmented search for self through memory.

Coming to the question of fact vs fiction, we see in the novel the role of ancient myths, fantasy and orality in explaining contemporary history. Notwithstanding their absolute involvement in history, their individuality, the narrator in a Rushdie text are, more often than not, fantastic and yet are real. In this novel, Rushdie re-affirms and seeks to re-create, in a post-modernist way, the lost nationalistic democratic ideals for the underdog and the under-privileged. Post-colonial history thus reproduced is fictionalized and mythicized. Saleem's and Shiva's battle reflects the ancient, mythological battle between creation and destruction. Saleem represents Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. He creates a story where we, as readers, are engaged in. By delivering Saleem into the hands of the widow, Shiva is responsible for the destruction of the midnight's children, and

yet, by fathering Aadam and others, he ensures the continuation of their legacy. Salman Rushdie in this novel employs the metaphor of the body politics to illustrate the conflict, diversity, and division within the nation. This portrayal of the national body as fragmented and disjointed “undermine[s] not only the colonialist paradigm of the silent, atemporal, and natural primitive, but also the nationalist conception of the new country as an essential totality” (Kane 95). In the novel, we have also seen how factual errors and dubious claims become essential aspects of Saleem’s fantastic narrative. Saleem’s historical version comes filtered through his perspective, just as every other versions of history come filtered through some alternative perspective. The entire narrative is clothed in fantasy where myth and reality overlap boundaries. Fantasy may be seen as seriously narrating political reality when the readers and the authors share certain reality.

Ideological conflicts are played out in literature, and literary scholars keep returning to *Midnight’s Children* because it defies efforts to determine what might be the most appropriate form to depict the history of post-independence India. The problem lies in the essential ambiguity of *Midnight’s Children*: Should literature even try to satisfy the “national longing for form”? This epic longing, for Rushdie, represents a dangerous desire for consistency, coherence, and meaning that can efface the cultural diversity of the Indian people and lead readers to be complacent in the face of a history of sectarian violence and governmental betrayal. Yet Rushdie himself composes a work that self-consciously asserts its own epic status. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, reconciles this apparent contradiction by conceding that the “national longing for form” is inescapable: “Form-once again, recurrence and shape!-no escape from it” (524). At the same time, he composes a history that he foresees to be a threat as

much as a comfort, a story "waiting to be unleashed upon the amnesiac nation" (549). The story of the intertwined destinies of Saleem and India asserts that the failures of Indian nationalism are the appropriate subject material for a true epic of nation. To the extent that Rushdie answers the national longing for form, then, he does so by creating an epic of failure. Although Rushdie scholarship has frequently condemned him for his pessimism, there are theories that associate failure with insight and discovery. George Lukacs, for example, asserts that the moment of failure in the novel is "the moment of value" (126). By drawing attention to its own inability to achieve the aesthetic totality of epic, the novel can convey "a true totality of life." Bakhtin makes a similar case, arguing that the novel's failure to maintain the monologic and authoritative voice of epic makes it possible to convey the heteroglossia that characterizes everyday life. Thus, the novel's supposed failure of representation

makes it possible to perceive the world in terms of its multiplicity, not homogeneity. Lukacs and Bakhtin both claim that this formal or generic failure is the novel's defining feature and the key to understanding its potential contribution to politics.

In *Midnight's Children* the Nehruvian dream of secular democratic nation comes a full circle and post-emergency period sees the dethronement of the fascist god, end of one party rule and installation of a Janata Coalition government which, henceforth, becomes the shape of Indian politics. Democracy depends a plural society as opposed to unitary one. However, despite the sense of despair, the journey from wholeness to fragments, the novel ends on a note of hope, rather political one; that is the intensification of the struggle of polarised political forces in opposition in Congress model of nationalism. As the narrative progresses the disintegration becomes quicker and quicker. Saleem mentions

crack in his body. 'My poor body, singular, unloving, buffeted by too much history, has started coming apart at the seams. In short I am literally disintegrating slowly for the moment... I shall eventually crumble into six hundred and thirty million

particles of anonymous and oblivious dust' (37). With his final words the disintegrating Saleem prophesies his fate and articulates the post-colonial condition of the generation of midnight's children.

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