

## **Nationalism and the Postcolonial Literatures**

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Late twentieth century English Pop icon John Lennon's utopian pipedream of a borderless ambrosial world openly links the absence of nations to freedom and peace. An innocent dream of a popular Western poet and musician evokes disturbing images of the violence and destruction in recent human history generated by one or the other notion of nation and nationalism. Almost immediately, the memories of unimaginable human suffering, pain and devastation implicit in the song disturb the listeners out of the smugness linked with the naturalness of living in nations. It also makes one conscious of the impossibility of escaping from the discourses of nations and nationalisms and of imagining life outside them. This is particularly so in the case of individuals and writers belonging to minority communities caught up in societies divided along racial, religious, cultural, linguistic or other sectarian lines.

One of the central thematic concerns of most of the 'postcolonial' literature is the history, memory and viability of the nation-state and the critical issues of nation and nationalism which get foregrounded and articulated in postcolonial spaces. The genocide, violence, persecution and humiliation of innocent individuals, families and communities on grounds of religion, race, caste or any other such criterion are often the issues that the fiction of authors like Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Tharoor tries to address. The birth of independent nations as a result of fervent forms of nationalism and mass movements gave rise to dreams of democracy, hope, equality and possibility of development for all. But, the euphoria of independence from the colonial rule yielded place to new hegemonies as well as conceptions of nations and nationalisms in which many sections and communities found themselves marginalized and exploited by the new dominant ideologies and groups. Political independence was often accompanied by genocides, social conflicts, violence and unprecedented human suffering symptomatic of a deficient political will and failure of administration and the constitutional machinery in the newly independent nation-states like India and Pakistan.

The postcolonial writer is acutely aware of the belied expectations and adheres to the imperative of critiquing various manifestations of nationalism in the post-independence nation-states. The failure of the nation-state to protect the rights and lives of individuals belonging to marginalised, minority or disadvantaged communities is the major discourse that is visible in much of the post-colonial writing in English.

The meaning and significance of nation/nationalism in this scenario becomes highly problematized. One has to accept the paradox of either celebrating them or denying the importance of boundaries and discourses built around them. Human life today is stuck in the dual imagination of either asserting national identities or the wish to transcend them for global and transnational alliances of economy and culture. The dream of seeing all human life, despite its immense variety, as one, and the planet earth as one open space, for nothing else but limitless personal liberty can

only belong to the third imagination - that of a poet. Liberalism's dream that nationalisms would gradually get diluted - which incidentally finds expression in one of Gellner's statements taken out of context, as "trade flows across frontiers: the life of the intellect ignores frontiers; and with the progress of learning, wealth and industry, the prejudices and superstitions and fears which engender frontiers would decline" (Gellner Thought 147) - too has remained unfulfilled. One strong voice of an artist and activist that probes and problematises the question of nation in the realm of prose is that of Arundhati Roy.

Nations have never been homogeneous, and it is impossible to write a universal grammar of nation and nationalism. Yet, as the only extant, viable and universally accepted system of political governance and social and economic organization in the world today, the nation is perhaps the most important determiner of life on earth. The lack of alternatives today finds a rather anguished expression in the epigraph of Arundhati Roy's *Listening to Grasshoppers* in which she quotes from Mahmoud Darwish's *The Earth is Closing on Us*. It reads:

Where should we go after the last frontiers?  
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?  
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?

In her role as a social and political critic, Roy enters into a harsh and unremitting critique of the violence and exploitation that she believes is integral to the character of the Indian state and to that of the global/neo-imperial superpowers. The basic fact that the condition of living in a nation-state - which is conceived to ensure individual liberty along with social, political and economic justice - should arouse consciousness of injustice necessitates a shift from idealism to historicism. Arundhati Roy's approach, taking the Indian example further, involves an analysis of the progress of national politics as the preservation of the economic interests of national bourgeoisie as well as Western economic powers. Roy's scepticism leads to a revelation which also challenges the representativeness of the nation-state. In the introduction to *Listening to Grasshoppers* titled "Democracy's Failing Light" she reveals that the 2009 UPA government's national government's claim to power rested on merely ten percent votes of the country's population. (xxiii)

The overused language of prose cannot perhaps provide the issue with an openness and radicalism that any discussion on the subject now craves. This is probably what Arundhati Roy means when she writes that the utopian dream of democratic living has never been realized and that the prosaic questions and prosaic answers about the perceived failure of the working models and variants of Western liberal democracies constitute an incomplete discourse. The inadequacies of the official registers, or of what she describes as the prevailing contest between repressions "through proper channels" and "resistance through proper channels" has, in her opinion, turned the writer inside her into a clerk. She goes on to say about her own writings that as "resistance goes this isn't enough. I know. But for now, it's all I have."

Historically speaking, however, it is with Marx and later Gellner that attempts at breaching the naturalness of nations and nationalism begin to be made. Gellner clearly recognizes the selective use of pre-existing past and goes on to see in the necessity of nationalisms aspects of modernization and of industrial society. Gellner understands nationalism as a direct consequence of the requirements of industrialism. The rise of nationalisms coincided with the specific needs of a specialized and universal educational system that could supply individuals according to the needs of a complex division of labor in industrialized societies. Gellner almost denies any individual identity to the subjects of a nation by saying that, "for most of these men, however, the limits of

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their culture are the limits, not perhaps of the world, but of their own employability and hence dignity.” (Nations 110) Gellner thus gives a functional role to education and to the individual in the service of an industrial system by believing that “[t]he state is above all, the protector, not of a faith, but of a culture, and the maintainer of the inescapable homogeneous and standardizing education system.” (Nations 110) Among the early theorists, Karl Marx opens up new ways of thinking about nation and nationalism and there are many theories in contemporary times that still take their cue from his ideas. Marx reads the history of human society in terms of class struggle between the bourgeois and the proletariat. He attempts to subsume the emergence and progress of nations and nationalisms under class struggle conceived on a global scale. For Marx, unless there is incidence of nationalism as a facilitator of revolutionary struggle, it remains an expression of bourgeois interests. Many recent theorists among them Tom Nairn, Gellner, Aijaz Ahmad and to some extent even Anderson modify or adopt Marx’s ideas in order to formulate theirs. But there is no dearth of those who openly refute Marx’s ideas as reductive. Guibernau expresses open disagreement with Marx and quotes Bloom’s aptly worded argument against the limitedness of Marx’s approach to nationalism. Bloom writes that “the bourgeois ‘fatherland’ did not refer to the country’s potentialities for progress or to the nation regarded democratically, but to the aggregate of institutions, customs, laws, and ideas which sanctified the right to property on a considerable scale.” (Guibernau Nationalisms 13)

Today, in the twenty-first century, the world is undergoing massive changes and the category of nation is being rethought under the impact of new intellectual currents being prompted by the cultural project of globalization as well as by the reorganization of capital at a global scale. This has given rise to renewed interrogation of the legitimacy and relevance of nations and nationalisms. There is a perceived crisis at the heart of nations and nationalisms both as a result of a climate of intense probing of their intrinsic credentials and of the inexorable growth of transnationalism, internationalism and globalization. Mistry’s work is one example of the need to probe these socio-cultural and political principles of collective organisation for both the reasons mentioned above. For Mistry, whose own location is in the West, the nation-state in its postcolonial form is completely non-accommodative of human freedom.

Postcolonial writers like Naipaul, Rushdie or Mistry, challenge the authority and legality of the homogenising and dictatorial nationalist ideologies used to regulate and control the lives of people on the basis of colour, religion, caste or language. They appear to assert that states are not universal, nor is nationalism itself as universal and natural as it poses to be. They also attempt to expose the heavy burden of the state on the nation. Gellner also questions the naturalness of the nation in the following words: “It simply is not the case that, at all times and in all places, men wanted the boundaries of social units and of cultures to converge, or to put it in a manner closer to their own style, that they wanted to be among their own kind, excluding ‘others’. On the contrary: men very, very often lived in units which violated this principle, and most of the time, this violation was accepted without protest or opposition, indeed without any awareness that a vital, alleged universal principle was being violated.” (Nationalism 6-7)

Perhaps someday it will become the underpinning for poetry and for the feral howl.” (Roy ix-xii) This is evidence that in the midst of a climate of suspicion and distrust, theorists, thinkers and writers have been endeavouring to stretch the limits of the discourses on nation and nationalism. The project of defining nation and nationalism has always been a very ambitious one, as it is almost impossible to arrive at any single and universal way of defining them. The conceptual parameters of nations and nationalisms have always been elusive and hard to capture. It would be appropriate to begin with one of the standard definitions: “The nation is a territorial relation of

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collective self-consciousness of actual and imagined duration.” (Grosby 11-12) However, there are innumerable other ways in which discourses and practices related to the notions of nation and nationalism can be experienced, perceived and defined. Preference for one particular definition over others will largely depend on factors like one’s location, or one’s religious, racial, cultural and linguistic identity and background. In addition to this local short term and long term memories, histories and divisions, political contexts, social and economic issues and ideological predilections at conscious as well as unconscious levels determine how an individual is likely to respond to, conceive or imagine him/herself as a member of a particular nation-state.

As postcolonial theory evolves and develops new concerns after the end of colonial rule it revises and renews its perspectives on the questions of nation and nationalism. Important expressions of these revisions are to be found in postcolonial fiction, non-fiction and contemporary theory. Contemporary postcolonial accounts and estimates dealing with the idea of nation have become more self-reflexive and endoscopic. The postcolonial Indian novel in English has been obsessively concerned with the problems or what can be perceived as the failures and problems of postcolonial India. Novels like those of Mistry, Naipaul and Rushdie have in their own specific ways and from their respective critical stances critiqued postcolonial India. The representation of the postcolonial nation in the pages of fiction opens up new possibilities of exploring the question. Novel of the diaspora, as will be discussed below, with its remote, memory-based depictions, or, the novel written from the socio-cultural and economic margins of postcolonial India have in their distinct ways reflected upon the political and social reality of postcolonial India.

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