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## **Writing Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

Nation is the most essential part of human identity. Literature plays a vital role in recognizing the identity of self as well as in relation to the larger community--the nation. This research paper tends to emulate and identify the idea of writing nation in Postcolonial Indian English Fiction, with special reference to Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism/Nation/Identity/Salman Rushdie/*Midnight's Children*.

### **Article**

Each and every human being, in addition to having their own personal identity, has a sense of who they are in relation to the larger community--the nation. But what is a nation? Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was an important French theorist who wrote about a variety of topics. His famous essay "What is a Nation?" (*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*), first delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882, continues to be an important influence on scholars. In the essay, he defined the concept of nation as,

“A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present- day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion.”

He adds further,

“A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life. That, I know full well, is less metaphysical than divine right and less brutal than so called historical right. According to the ideas that I am outlining to you, a nation has no more right than a king does to say to a province: "You belong to me, I am seizing you." A province, as far as I am concerned, is its inhabitants; if anyone has the right to be consulted in such an affair, it is the inhabitant. A nation never has any real interest in annexing or holding on to a country against its will. The wish of nations is, all in all, the sole legitimate criterion, the one to which one must always return.”<sup>1</sup>

The thrust of Renan's argument is that 'the most perfect national unity' is achieved when an entire people not only remember shared experiences, but also when they forget particular diversities. Clearly at work here is the erasure of personal history in the movement towards creating a cohesive and unitary history for the nation.

Postcolonial studies tend to strip away the hackneyed outlook and probe what that national identity might be for a postcolonial subject. To decipher literature from the perspective of postcolonial studies is to seek out--to listen for, that

aboriginal, representative voice which can inform the world of the essence of existence as a subject which is colonial, or as a postcolonial citizen. The postcolonial authors utilize their writings to fossilize, through criticism and celebration, an emerging national identity, which they have taken on the responsibility of representing. Assuredly, the re-evaluation of national identity is an eventual and imperative result of a country gaining independence from a colonial subjugation, or a country emerging from a fledgling settler colony. However, to proclaim to be representative of that entire identity is a huge undertaking for an author trying to convey a postcolonial message. Each nation, province, island, state, neighborhood and individual is an amalgamation of history, culture, language and tradition in its own unique way. Only through proper understanding and embracing the idea of cultural hybridity when attempting to explore the concept of national identity can any individual, or nation, possibly hope to infer or interface the lasting effects of the colonial process.

Post colonialism is the intermittent shedding of the old covering of Western notion and colloquy as well as the advent of avant-garde self-awareness, celebration and critique. This self-awareness leads forth self-expression. But what is the way in which the inhabitants of a colonial world see themselves, after achieving their long waited independence? What will be their identity? Prior to 1947, in a country like India, most people recognized themselves as Indians, opposed to the identity of their British oppressors. They carried a robust presentiment of communal, national identity, stimulated by a shared animosity of the British colonial powers. However, after being granted autonomy after 1947, the population of India began to disintegrate into more and more bifurcated clique, as the "national" identity shrunk, and people encountered other, closer groups to identify with. Thus, the ambiguous and shifting nature of national identity becomes requisite to a discussion of postcolonial theory, as recognition with one group certainly leads to distinction with others.

Benedict Anderson, in his conclusive book defines the concept of "nation" and "nationalism," *Imagined Communities*, "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". His work refers to anthropological data, as he maintains that the concept of "nation" is truly a cultural construct, a man-made artifice. Thus, for Anderson, it is "imagined." Nation, and identity, begins with one's family and closest friends, and slowly moves out from this center. In our contemporary example, two residents of the same country may live in completely different geographical climates, having very little in common with each other. In such a case, one may have a personal identity, and identify with a more local "nation," yet be part of a political nation as defined by demarcated boundary lines, drawn on a map. As Anderson says, "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined".<sup>2</sup>

The upbringing of children is fostered to affiliate with a nation as representing government and union. The long-running Western colonialist outlook of nation pretends to be: that a cohesive political entity can be constructed, merely by rendering lines on a piece of paper and establishing a government within those lines. An absolute example of this lies in the emergence of modern India. Before the British colonization of India, there existed one of the most diverse and heterogeneous populations on the planet. People achieved their identity through communities and culture. By the time India attained its independence, the British had formulated a bureaucracy, peripheries and centralized government, resembling to the prototypical Western nation-state.

For the inhabitants of India, embracing a national identity was not a difficult task, during the years of colonization and the time leading to their independence for various reasons. The first is that it is simplest for people to recognize themselves in terms of disparity with another, beyond identity. People living in India prior to 1947 were striving for independence from shared oppression by the British. Hence, no issue what their cultural backdrop may have been, or their geographical orientation within the emerging nation of India, anyone who was not a member of the colonial affiliation could regard themselves as being persecuted by that institution, and could identify with every other "Indian" in that persecution. Another

possible paradigm could be a participant in the Negritude movement in Africa, who could celebrate being black only if s/he contrasts black with white. And yet another instance reclines with any country, any nation, which is at conflict with another. Nationalist sentiment approaches an outburst during war by differentiating one's own country from that of the adversary.

The second reason that it is comparatively easy for colonized subjects to adopt and inhabit a national identity reclines in the verity that the very identity adopted by the oppressed has been most probably invigorated by the oppressor. This traces on the proposition of "hegemony," as posited by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was inquisitive about the subject of subordination as it survived within a colony or nation. He proposed that colonial powers would not have been able to sustain their rule over colonized people without the absolute, if comatose permission of the colonized subjects. He considered that subordination over extensive periods involved the participation of those subordinated. As Ania Loomba states in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, "Gramsci argued that the ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled".<sup>3</sup>

Colonial supremacy desired a subject to perceive a sense of national ethos. The British coveted the natives of their newly-constructed India to espouse the idea of their being "Indian," although in a form laid out by the British. Hitherto the British amalgamated their supremacy into an enclave they called India; it was an exceedingly diverse, multifarious mass of disparate religions, political and cultural faiths. Having drawn lines on the land which defined India, and building a central government, the British anticipated Parsi, Kashmiri, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, upper and lower-class/caste, to surmise themselves as Indian and to regard the British-established government. The British gave the Indian people a version of "Indian," of being a British subject, and expected the population to envelop it, which, in most instances, they did. This is what Anderson considers to as "mental miscegenation."

Once a country like India acquired its independence from the mechanism of British colonialism, how were these people then considered to identify themselves? They were a prodigious nation of a substantially assorted cultural history, tagged "Indian' by the forces they had striven to oust from their country. The only way to understand this phenomenon is by exploring the idea of "cultural nationalism". This line of contemplation imputes national identity not so much to frontiers and political machinations, but, relatively, to more rudimentary cultural and community-oriented aspects of one's persona.

We need to remember that Anderson has defined "nation" as an "imagined political community." We have already discussed why it is "imagined," but the question arises, why he considers the nation a "community?" He says, "Finally, it [the nation] 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"<sup>4</sup>. But, as an American, does one feel "a deep, horizontal comradeship" for a fellow citizen living in Alaska? Or is there more fraternity to be found with someone of similar religious belief or ethnic background? This is where the ambiguity surrounding the concept of "national identity" emerges. As Ania Loomba states, "Perhaps the connection between postcolonial writing and the nation can be better comprehended by understanding that the 'nation' itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests"<sup>5</sup>. I believe that this "dispute and debate" can be successfully joined and undertaken only with knowledge of the work of Homi K. Bhabha, as it relates to the concept of "cultural hybridity."

Bhabha presents his idea of hybridity to elucidate the very idiosyncratic sense of identity shared and adept independently by members of a pre colonized people. He continues that members of a postcolonial society have an identity which has been carved conjoining their own unique cultural and history of community, entwined with that of the colonial power. Hence, to elucidate, a Parsi in Mumbai will have incorporated into his or her personal and national identity the traditions inherent in being Parsi, being Muslim, and being an "Indian"--a member of a formerly oppressed society. Bhabha pens, "These

hyphenated, hybridized cultural conditions are also forms of a vernacular cosmopolitanism that emerges in multicultural societies and explicitly exceeds a particular national location"<sup>6</sup>

Having illustrated the problems inherent in the postcolonial subject's endeavor to devise a new personal and national identity, we revert to the preliminary, cardinal point of this colloquy: How does a postcolonial writer, playwright or poet cater a reader with a faithful rendition of a certain postcolonial setup? Who does the author profess to represent? If an author is of Indian origin, does his/her writing represent the state of affairs for all Indians residing in postcolonial India? Answer to this rearmost interrogation is clearly "no." The standard of life and historical contexts differ extensively from town to neighborhood to family and, ultimately, from individual to individual. A question lingers then: is there any possible way for the postcolonial authors to ferry their appropriate messages about the colonial condition without assuming a definitive "voice," without presuming that they vocalize for all members of their respective "nation?" Salman Rushdie is such an author who has incorporated Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity into his works, and therefore is able to communicate the postcolonial condition to the remaining world.

*Midnight's Children*, a novel by Rushdie should be contemplated the exemplary fictive novel for embellishing the near invincible struggles ingrained in creating a national identity amidst an enormously assorted postcolonial society. Employing magical realism masterfully and weaving metaphors on every page, Rushdie in an impactful way describes problematic endeavor of postcolonial India at fashioning a national consciousness just after achieving their independence from Great Britain. He illustrates the shared anticipation and nationalist sentiments discerned by the population of India as the day of their independence grew imminent:

There was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will--except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood.<sup>7</sup>

As the narrative proceeds further and the populace of India analyze their newly developed identities, people begin to slender those identities, restraining more and more their respective notions of "nation." Identification as "Indian" gives way to identification with religious faiths, ethnic backdrops and political stances. And with each new phase of emerging identity, a new demarcation occurs between one member of Indian society and another. As these demarcations are further recognized and legitimized, a mold of hegemony and violence ensues which threatens to tear the new nation of India apart.

Each member of a postcolonial population would assuredly crave to accost at least one distinct voice which could utter their prominent suffering and despotism within the colonial foundation--one expression which would enunciate their own sensibility of national identity. Although, expedition of these societies, and the literature generated by postcolonial writers and poets embellishes that there is an authentic never ending number of unlikely contexts immanent in each postcolonial society, and, therefore, in each piece of literature churned by postcolonial writers. If one tends to read this literature in a way which will impart some illumine on the postcolonial condition, one must perceive the theory that we are all strolling synthesis of our own idiosyncratic cultures and traditions. Everyone is always struggling with their own identities, be it national or personal. One must understand that there exists no "one true voice" representing an effortlessly recognizable postcolonial condition, rather, each author is his or her own voice and must be interpreted as such.

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