

Constructing the Nation: A Theme in Postcolonial Literature

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Abstract

Postcolonial writers have been very conscious of their role in the construction of the nation. They construct the nation by deconstructing the western constructs about the colonized countries. This game of construction and deconstruction between the colonized and the colonizer generates from the fact that the nation is a cultural construct, built out of and upon the artistic, folkloric, theoretical and philosophical discourses about the nation. Constructing the nation is a postcolonial project of great significance as postcolonial literature seeks to erase the image of their nations as primitive, savage, and fragmented. Postcolonial writers seek to retrieve a pre-colonial past that would help them in constructing or defining the nation or national identity.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Literature, political independence, cultural identity.*

Author's Idea

A central concern with the creation of nation links together the diverse literatures of Canada, Nigeria, India and other postcolonial nations. With political independence comes the task of nation building. Resistance and anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia have not been simply movements against imperialism only. They also seek to liberate the native culture from its own oppressive structures. These revolutionary struggles are also movements for social transformation and cultural regeneration. But it has not been an easy job because in most of the cases the country is made up of innumerable fragments. For instance at the time of independence India had about 562 local states or "Riyasats" and Nigeria had over 250 ethnic groups. Under such conditions, how a nation could be built? This is the question that concerns writers like Rushdie, Amitav Gosh, Achebe and Soyinka.

Some of the crucial aspects of constructing the nation in postcolonial writings can be enumerated as:

- (i) Locality,
- (ii) Community,
- (iii) Imagined - Nations,
- (iv) Cultural Identity,
- (v) Nativism.

The nation has a certain territorial imperative. Territorial boundaries, maps and routes are integral to the very idea of the nation. Most postcolonial works deal with space as it is intimately connected to issues of community, cultural identity and nationhood. Postcolonial writers locate the self firmly within communities and their spaces. For many of these writers space is the lived space as they tend to lend life to these through relationships, emotions, histories, and memories. In the case of Indian poets and novelist, the site of the family with its emotional bounds and personal relationships have been the chosen tropes always. For example in the case of expatriate poet A.K. Ramanujan it becomes quite explicit that his poetry is embedded in native milieu & native impulse. Ila's grandmother in Amitav Gosh's THE SHADOW LINES (1988) suggests that Ila has no right to live in England. Emphasizing this aspect the old woman says:

"She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build country; years of war and blood-shed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their blood and their father's blood and their son's blood war is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country" (77-78).

Here the nation is defined by the death of its own. It lives in its many memorials to its dead youth, men, and women. A nation is born through this process of its community's lives.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's socialistic and realistic fiction, written in the decades immediately after India's independence, provides a useful starting point to explore the ways in which space, community, identity, and the nation are dealt with in postcolonial writings. In SHADOW FROM LADAKH (1966) Satyajit's Gandhigram comes close to being the ideal rural community, imagined by Gandhi: self-sufficient, clean, happy in its small pleasures of handlooms and gardening. Located next to the steel plant of Lohapur, Gandhigram stands in

contrast to India's modernization programme of rural India. Bhattacharaya describes Gandhigram in the following words:

"The village lay spread to the left and right mud houses, each with a vegetable patch behind a hedge and a bamboo gate There were other values Gandhigram stood for The apparently insignificant village was building up a model for the whole of India. The new community of people was creating a social order in which all were truly equal. All land belonged to the cooperative. Food from the fields distributed according to needs". (25-26).

In each of these two instances, the individual, family, community, and nation is primarily imaged in terms of landscape and spaces. Thus postcolonial writers use space of nation and its location to map selfhood, individual identity, and community in almost Wordsworthian sense.

The notion of "Imagined Community" propounded by Benedict Anderson has gained an immediate and immense importance either through debate against it or its approval that comes to it through the channels such as In-betweenness, hybridity, diaspora as a way of life and above all, multiculturalism.

Anderson's controversial thesis that nations are "imagined" locates literature - specifically the novel - at the centre of "imagining". Anderson argues that the novel has been a technical form for 're-presenting' a kind of imagined community that becomes the nation.

Although the idea of imaginary / imagined nation highly irritates those who have the simplest form of patriotism, yet in the postcolonial context literary texts do indeed construct the nation through 'imagining' spaces' and 'territories'. Nations of the mind assume as much significance as 'real' ones, and Anderson is quite accurate in this formulation. A novel or a poem that provides a particular image of the nation is influential in shaping the public imagination of belonging, territory, and nationhood. While most postcolonial writers are keen on discovering the limits and extent of their 'nation' several of them are aware of the constructedness of the very idea of nation. Rushdie refers to this idea in his major essays, "Imaginary Homelands" to "India's of the Mind". And again in "The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987":

"After all, in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly "free". But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it, stand?"

In his much discussed text MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN Rushdie refuses any unitary and monolithic notion of India. Rushdie's polyphonic novel has two 'centres' (a) Saleem Sinai (who claims he is central to India) and India's national history. In the first case, Sinai's obviously subjective views cannot be taken to represent India. (b) In the second case, Rushdie's narrative refuses to privilege things like the national movement or even the events of great importance such as Gandhi's assassination. Thus there is no organizing myth around which the concept of India can be visualized. There is no one history, no central figure, no geographical certainty to rely on when speaking of India. Thus India is multiple, fluid, amorphous, and can only be imagined into existence through fragmented memories and histories.

Postcolonial literatures are an attempt to undo the discourse of Europe about native cultures, and to decolonize one's own self. Postcolonial writings can be treated as literatures of transformation - cultural, psychological, social, and political. Social and political transformations are self-evident in the fact that with the political independence nation-states achieve a measure of sovereignty. Psychological transformation is about the change in attitude - from slave to master, from dependence to independence. But perhaps the most important transformation of all is in the realm of culture. Decolonization is marked by a re-affirmation of one's cultural values and systems. While the colonial master rejected and destroyed native culture and superimposed the European one, decolonization seeks a retrieval of the forgotten and rejected and pre-colonial native culture. Postcolonial literatures are characterized by a common concern with native cultural identity. The central issues and questions in this theme can be enumerated as follow:

- (i) How can one reclaim native cultural identity?
- (ii) Is it possible to achieve a return to an unauthentic pre-colonial past?
- (iii) Is such a return desirable?
- (iv) Can traditional culture be adapted to suit new contexts?

- (v) Can cultural identity mix - and - match native and colonial forms?

Postcolonial literatures function as a counter-discourse, providing alternative representations to European ones. The first body of postcolonial writing in 1950s and 1960s, explicitly decolonizing, deals with the new concepts of national identity. The writers of this generation seek to retrieve their past and look forward to future with hope and enthusiasm. Franz Fanon defines "national culture" as "the whole body of efforts by a people in the sphere of thought". It harnesses folklore, myth, intellectual debates in combating the colonizer's culture.

While talking about cultural identity it I also quite pertinent to discuss the term NEGRITUDE coined by Martiniquan writer Aime Cesaire. Aime Cesaire has been one of the earliest 'theorists' of the postcolonial condition. Writing in 1930s and 40s, Cesaire proposes a common heritage for the Caribbean and African people. He coins the term 'negritude' to describe the politicized cultural identity of these people. Eventually with Leopold Senghor and others, negritude becomes a major programme, especially in French colonies of Africa. Cesaire argues that colonialism has destroyed the identity of the colonized. The colonized have been presented, by the Europeans, as people with no history prior to their 'discovery' by the European. This follows that the history of the people of Africa or Asia begins with the Europeans' arrival on their land. Cesaire argues that the only way to battle this erasure of history is to retrieve black history and civilization. Retrieving black cultural identity and past - negritude means that Africa is seen as the binary opposite to Europe. In the binary relationship Europe becomes the decadent 'Other' of Africa. Thus negritude relies on an essentialist's view of African identity. It assumes that there is a 'core' African culture that can be relied on and used. Cesaire is also emphatic in his view that colonialism has reduced the colonized to a savage, but it equally has reduced the colonizer to a beast. Thus Cesarie has been one of the first to argue that colonialism transformed not only the native but also the European into something barbaric. In Cesaire's view the European, during colonial period learns to be an army sergeant, acquires race hatred and develops a propensity for violence.

To illustrate the fact that postcolonial literatures seek to construct the cultural identity one may also quote WOLE SOYINKA's play THE LION AND THE JEWEL. In this play Sidi, a young girl, is

wooed by the school teacher Lakunte. Lakunte is a Christian and does not accept tradition of the village. Sidi's photographs appear in a Lagos magazine and she begins to act pompously. The chief, Baroka, wishes to make Sidi his wife. Eventually Sidi opts for tradition in the form of Baroka rather than Christian/ modern Lakunte. This becomes symbolic of the victory of tradition.

So far as Nativism as the basis of constructing a nation is concerned, today, under the influence of Globalization, many people tend to think that it is wrong to romanticize the idea of Nativism as it leads us nowhere. However, there is no denying the fact that a revival of native cultural forms has been very essential to the anticolonial struggle. Nativism has united people from various, diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the pursuit of a 'national' goal. Emphasizing the power and need of nativist feelings Lokamanya Tilak states - "No country can become a nation by producing a race of imitators" (Young India, 27.04.1921). In the similar way Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been true nativist as he prefers Budha to Karl Marx. He believes that the immenseness of India's contribution to the idea of nation as a cultural identity is really unique. Ram Manohar Lohia also rejects western canons and emphasizes the significance of Indian tradition of spiritualism.

In a different context, both the violence of colonialism and postcolonial rule in Kenya are imaged in terms of landscape. The nation, region, or state of affairs of culture are symbolized in the land. In Ngugi's novel WEEP NOT, CHILD (1964) the difference in colonial and native is presented through the description of their respective approaches to the land:

"They went from place to place, a white man and a black man. Now and then they would stop here and there, examine a luxuriant green tea plant, or pull out a weed. Both men admired this shamba. For Ngotto felt responsible for whatever happened to this land. He owed it to the dead, the living and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this shamba. Mr. Howlands always felt a certain amount of victory whenever he worked through it all. He alone was responsible for taming this unoccupied wildness". (35)

Here Ngugi points out that the land has its own history, legend, and life. It has seen community and identity engraved upon it through local rituals and prayers.

Ngugi's return to his native tongue, Gikuyu from English is clearly an attempt to retrieve and romanticize the native language in particular and culture in general. In his work *DECOLONISING THE MIND* (1986) Ngugi argues that English language, literature, and university departments are responsible for the ruin of African language and culture. Language, especially in schools, becomes the means of subjugation in the colonial context. The child begins to see himself or herself only through European eyes, text books, and images. Eventually, the child assumes that this biased image is true and accepts that s/he is inferior to the European. Therefore, according to Ngugi there is an urgent need of "decolonizing the mind". In fact Ngugi's return to Gukuyu is an attempt to achieve this decolonization.

Final Words

The construction of Havelis in form of hotels on highways (e.g.; Karnal Haveli), the use of sugar-cane fields as the setting for advertising Cocacola, inscriptions like "Pure Punjabi Lassi available here" on hotels and local dhabas, and advertising through slogans like Hero Honda "Des ki Dhadkan" and so on and so forth are explicit examples of itemization of the native culture and native flavour. Although the commodification of native culture deserves a strong critique yet the very idea of using these elements and practices by market forces reveals a huge amount of their significance even in the age of globalization and construction of a national identity.

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