

## **The Idea of Nation and Nationalism-A Postmodern Literary Critique**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The idea of Nationalism is a widely disputed and elusive concept in the genre of literary criticism. In the postmodern era of globalization, the nation-space across the boundaries has been offering an alternative crescendo of interaction and exchange. The notion of nation and nationalism along with its constituents are varied and diverse as per the different perspectives in literary criticism. Thus, it has stipulated the idea that the existence of a single or universal theory of nationalism is not possible in the ever-changing international world order. As a result, there is an increasing need to re-conceptualize the nation as a hybrid space characterized by the peripheral and internal kinesis of its constituents with a possibility of posing differences. In the era of globalization with its pluralist cultural connotations, the idea of a nation, thus, upholds the image of a fluid space of confluence and convergence opening up to a more inclusive world order. Hence, the postmodern literary critiques present an alternate view of the ideas of nation and nationalism and tend to present a deconstructive notion of the nation.

### **KEYWORDS**

Deconstructive; globalization; hybrid; nationalism; postmodern.

The term "nation" is an overlapping umbrella term. The postmodern literary critiques offer a critical view towards the ideas of nation and nationalism and tend to present a deconstructive notion of the nation. A nation is a large community whose members share some common characteristics and interests that are impossible or extremely difficult to change. The notions of nation and nationalism refer to the feeling arising out of nationhood, belonging, or devotion to the interests or culture of one's nation. According to Joseph Stalin: "A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of

language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture" (Hobsbawm 5). National sentiment is considered as being rational and it is considered rational for individuals to become nationalists. With the identification of an individual or group, coordination and cooperation become easy among the members who are part of the same ethno-cultural group. Ethnic ties such as common language, customs, and expectations to secure the trust and the bond in the community strengthen the ethnic sentiments. However, an entrance of a newcomer into a multi-ethnic state creates the possibility

of ethno-national conflict. It is definitely a crisis of trust where the indigenous and the newcomer tends to see each other as being hostile. Walker Connor in *Ethno-Nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* tries to clarify this ethnic tension by arguing, "While an ethnic group may . . . be other-defined, the nation must be self-defined" (Connor 103). A nation is a self-evolving entity that arises out of a unique consciousness of the identity of the law of Nature and the dignity and liberty of every individual as God's noblest creature. Hence, the postmodern critique of nation and narrative advocates the abolition of margins or boundaries and the creation of a global community hybrid in nature. However, the nation-making concepts such as religion, class, race, language, and gender broaden the gap across the nations and de-establishes the idea of all-inclusiveness of all sorts of nations.

The political unrest, intrigues, and violence that we come across in postmodern novels often emerge from the subconscious desire of belonging to a homogenous stable condition in a community or nation. It has been analyzed that every ethnic, racial and other types of political movement tend to justify itself and its efforts in nationalistic terms. As a result, nationalism has become one of the most powerful and recognized forces of global politics today. In the context of Rushdie's novels also what becomes crucial is the issue of nation and nationalism. There are multiple definitions and redefinitions of the terms "nation" and "nationalism" as thinkers, historians, political scientists and critical theorists have defined them in their own ways. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines nation as:

an extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history, as to form a distinct race or people, usually

organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory" (231) and 'nationalism' as "devotion to one's nation; national aspiration; a policy for national independence (234, Vol: X)

Broadly defined, nationalism is the assumption of an identity by a group of people primarily on the basis of territory, language, religion and culture. In the nineteenth century, which Walter Bagehot called the "century of nation building," this concept became one of the most powerful forces influencing history and caused the maps of the western world to be drawn and redrawn. Joseph Stalin, in *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (1936), defined nationalism as "... a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up, manifested in a community of culture" (Stalin 8). According to Max Hildebert Boehm, the element which is predominant in the idea of nationalism is the:

tendency to place a particularly excessive, exaggerated and exclusive emphasis on values, which leads to a vain and importunate overestimation of one's own nation and thus to a detraction of others" (Boehm 231).

Political theorist, Partha Chatterjee in his book, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, advocated the fact that the idea of nation or state:

has been the cause of the most destructive wars ever seen;....it has become the ideology of racial hatred in the colonies and has given birth to some of the most irrational revivalist movements as well as to the most oppressive political regimes in the contemporary world (Chatterjee 12)

In this connection, mention must be made of Benedict Anderson who defines nation as an "imagined political community"

(Anderson 26). In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Anderson distinctively describes nations as:

imagined political communities, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson 26).

According to him, the nation is imagined as a community because despite the prevalence of inequality and exploitation it is always conceived in the popular imagination as "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7), a relationship fostered through the abundance of national texts that bring together the members of a nation who will never know each other, yet maintain national solidarity by imagining themselves and each other as co-nationals. He also claims that the nation is maintained through the processes of continual construction of common narratives and co-optation of critical or excluded narratives. Thus narratives and nations are caught in a mutually nourishing symbiotic relationship. Moreover, Anderson shows that the idea of a nation is strengthened with the decline of some crucial ancient authorities such as religious communities and dynastic realms. For example, at the advent of science and logic, religious communities and their sacred languages began to lose their monopoly on constructing "truth"; especially after the explorations of the non-European world which "widened the cultural and geographic horizon and hence also men's conception of possible forms of human life" (Anderson 16). According to him, the idea of nation as a political institution is the result of the European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. The entire Western Europe rises into nationalism when there was a decline in Western religious modes of thought in the wake of

rationalist secularism in the age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. If we look at the postcolonial literature we find that the postcolonial discourse tries desperately to erase their colonial pasts as nations of primitive, savage or ancient. In order to resist and reject the western constructions of the Orient, the postcolonial writers seek to strongly define their nation by retrieving the past glory and tradition. The idea of nation, thus, has been built to counterattack the Western construction of third-world nations as inferior.

The imaginary construct of nationalism was primarily created through language that helps to create symbols, history and values in such a way that these are inculcated in the entire community. Benedict Anderson argues that language is the most important constituent that helps to create a group consciousness about a nation. It is a language that tells the history, suggests images and produces social awareness. Language also demarcates who "historically" belong to the nations and who are outsiders and intruders. Language is also used as a tool to influence the attitudes of the people by figuring out common bonds among the vernacular people. Language serves not only as a medium of inculcating communal bonding but also is used in the transmission of ideas to the speakers of a certain language community. The system in power transmits its ideology to a large number of people through persuasive language and stimulating statements. According to Anderson, the economic factors also helped to spread universal and homogeneous notions of national space, territory and citizenship. Besides, economic changes promoted developments in social-scientific discoveries and rapid communication with the rise of capitalism and its continuous search for new markets. Anderson observed how systems of rapid

communication and popular literature helped to promote national languages, consciousness, and ideologies across the country, and helped to shape one's identity. Nationalism, thus, is a mode of thought that is capable of influencing millions of minds through its ideology and capitalist strategies. However, one cannot deny the fact that nationalism as a dominant mode of ideology has ruined inherent plurality and multiplicity in human societies. No doubt, Anderson's critique of nation has shrunk the myths about nationalism to a great extent.

When the role of language in shaping national identity and nationalism is being discussed, mention must be made of Timothy Brennan who examines the role of literature, especially the novel, in the formation of national consciousness. According to Timothy Brennan, the genre of the novel historically played a central role in the construction of nationality because out of all literary forms, the novel is the most profound exponent of projecting an objective and unified picture of national life. In *The National Longing for Form* (1992), he says:

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...But it did more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that the nation was (Brennan 173).

Benedict Anderson seems at one with Brennan when Anderson confirms that the novel is perhaps the most suitable apparatus to embody national imagination as it has the technical resources to conjure up an "imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 25). According to Anderson, novels, like nations, have enough space to include a variety of people into one collective body even when it is extremely unlikely that all the individuals will ever get to meet one

another. Novels depend on the presence of characters that speak the same language and roughly share the same cultural assumptions. Such communities of people are generally known as nations, and fictions play a key role in building this collective image. Salman Rushdie in his essay "Notes on Writing and the Nation" (1997) compares the development of a story through the pages towards its culmination "to the self-image of the nation moving through history towards its manifest destiny" (65). Thus novels by virtue of their spatial, temporal and social range along with the psychological are suited to represent the nation.

Unlike Anderson, Edward Said provides a more thorough and precise approach to the concept of nationalism by disbursing close attention to historically-specific, cultural particularities or discontinuities. Said's framework shows how in the name of "civilizing missions", the imperialistic powers spread their close, physical relationship to colonial provinces. Scientific surveys, maps and censuses etc. were carried out in the name of development and progress so that Europeans could authoritatively construct an Orient on their own terms and standards. History shows that the resistance to colonialism often takes the form of an "anti-colonial" nationalist movement that ultimately is caught in the power-game defined by the colonizers. In a very ironic way, Said points out to the fact that the nationalist movements occupy the same status in colonial discourse just as the Islamic movements occupy in a nationalist discourse. Said gave the example of Turkey in this connection where the authoritarian, secular, anti-Islamic movements for national consciousness explore the dark side of nationalism, especially in their attempts to exclude such religious identities.

However, the myth of nationalism is not only criticised by Western thinkers

but the Indian thinkers also. Partha Chatterjee, an eminent political theorist and critic, sees ethnic nationalism as the sole cause of third world wars, corruption, and violence. Chatterjee goes against Anderson's concept of nationalism when he observes that Anderson looks at a totalizing, "universal history of the modern world"(Anderson 215) but fails to consider the dynamics of anti-colonial nationalism. He writes:

If nationalists in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already available to them by Europe and America, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized (*The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 216).

In this article, Chatterjee demonstrates how anti-colonial nationalist movements share the same epistemological-discursive field as their colonial oppressors. According to Chatterjee, Anderson fails to consider these historically, and culturally specific dynamics in the postcolonial world.

In the third essay of the book, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986), Partha Chatterjee specifically looks "at the ways in which [Bankim Chandra's] thought relates culture to power in the context of a colonial country" (Chatterjee 54). He tries to examine the thought of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, a leading

Bengali intellectual and one of India's first nationalist thinkers, to unveil different aspects of nationalism. At the very outset of the essay, Chatterjee says,

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), a novelist, satirist, and easily the most acclaimed man of letters in the Calcutta of his day, was one of the first systematic expounders in India of the principles of nationalism. He was widely read in European literature, particularly in 19<sup>th</sup> century sociology and political economy, and was greatly influenced, according to his own admission, by positivism as well as utilitarianism. He wrote a great deal on social and political questions, using several literary forms (Chatterjee 54).

Chatterjee tries to explore Bankim Chandra's notion about the two great reasons for the subjugation of India. In the very first place, Bankim Chandra believed that Indians lack a national desire for liberty. Some Indians probably nurse a vague feeling that independence is better than subjugation, "but never has this feeling become a compelling desire; never have the majority of Indians fought for their liberty" (Chatterjee 55). This leads directly to the second great reason for the subjection of India, i.e., the lack of harmony in Hindu society.

National solidarity, Bankim says, is crucially dependent on two kinds of attitudes. One is the conviction that what is good for every Hindu is good for me; that my opinions, my belief, my actions must be combined and consistent with those of every other Hindu. The other attitude is a single minded devotion to the interests of my nation, if necessary even at the cost of the interests of other nations (Chatterjee 55).

However, Bankim Chandra accepts that it is because of the contact with the English

that Indians have discovered for the first time the true basis of liberty and national solidarity. Chatterjee observes that Bankim Chandra's explanation of the subjection of India is not based on material or physical strength. It is an explanation in terms of culture. Chatterjee observes that Bankim Chandra posits a rationalist view against the Orientalists in their assessment of Indian history. With this rationalistic perception, Bankim Chandra accuses his adversaries of ethnocentric bias and racial prejudices which resist them from a strictly rational examination of the evidence.

In the book, *The Nation and its Fragment: Colonial and Post colonial History*, Partha Chatterjee looks at the creative and powerful results of nationalism and observes how anti-colonialist nationalists produced their own domain of sovereignty within colonial society much before beginning their political battle with the imperial power. These nationalists divided their culture into material and spiritual domains and staked an early claim to the spiritual sphere represented by religion, caste, women and the family, and peasants. Chatterjee shows how middle-class elites first imagined the nation into being in this spiritual dimension and then readied it for political contest, all the while "normalizing" the aspirations of the various marginal groups that typify the spiritual sphere. No doubt, with Chatterjee's specific examples drawn from various Indian sources, especially Bengali, the book becomes a valuable contribution to the general theoretical discussion on nationalism and the nation-state. The purpose of Chatterjee's book aims at thoroughly exploring the idea of nationalism, apart from political nationalism, especially in terms of India's history. The concept of nationalism seems so deeply entrenched in European thought that Chatterjee's perspective brings the reader into a dialogue with one's own

misconceptions and prejudices regarding the nation. Chatterjee leads the reader to confront the idea that all people within a country are the same. He discusses the nationalism of India in terms of the elite and the common person with a separation between political nationalism and spiritual nationalism.

Chatterjee's strong point is the idea that nationalism, as it is commonly understood by the western person, includes various deep-rooted beliefs about nation, modernism, history, and identity that are not necessarily true for other groups around the world. Chatterjee explains that such a traditional notion of "paternalistic colonialism" is of an imperialistic nature; and it is important for the educated, informed person to realize this less comfortable, less romantic aspect of western history. Chatterjee tries to emphasize here that nationalism can exist within a conflicting political ideology, enabling the oppressed to develop distinct beliefs in the civil and spiritual realms and to gather strength and solidarity while forming strategies to break off the yokes of oppression. The author makes it clear that India's history cannot be completely understood from a stereotyped western perspective. He asserts, "This history, when submitted to a sophisticated sociological analysis, cannot but converge with Anderson's formulations" (Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 217).

Rabindranath Tagore also has a considerable share in exposing the strategies towards the ideologies of nation and nationhood. Tagore, an upholder of multiplicity and originality, reacts against the very nature and purpose of such institutions. In his book *Nationalism* (1917), Tagore dismisses the concept of nationalism as "the organized self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual" (8). The book is a compilation of three lectures delivered by Rabindranath Tagore on "Nationalism in

Japan", "Nationalism in the West" and "Nationalism in India". According to Tagore, nationalism is nothing but an "organisation of politics and commerce" (*Nationalism* 7) which emerged from the laboratory of industrial capitalism. This type of nationalism brings "harvests of wealth" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 5) by involving people in greed, selfishness, competition for power and prosperity. The futility of such nationalism is expressed in Tagore's voice when he says "the moral man, the complete man ...to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 9). Tagore goes on to say that nationalism corrupts the human spirit and human emotion and it also upsets man's moral balance by "obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organisation" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 9). Hence, Tagore does not hesitate to call nationalism a threat to humanity when he says that nationalism is "a great menace", stating that he was "not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 73). Although Tagore's critique of nationalism seems a little aggressive, his ideas are parallel to contemporary postcolonial criticism.

Unlike Gandhi and Nehru, Tagore believed that political freedom and attainment of a nationalist identity by driving the British out was not the right solution for India's problems. An essence of optimism can be sensed when Tagore says: "I am not for thrusting off Western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have a deep association" (Soares 106). Much before Tagore realised that India's inherent problems were social and cultural and not political. India is a land of extensive diversity where several races, religions, and cultures meet with each other; therefore, the land must constantly strive to resolve her "burden of heterogeneity,"

by evolving out of "these warring contradictions a great synthesis" (Dutta 239). For Tagore, mere political freedom is of secondary importance as he says "political freedom does not give us freedom when our mind is not free" (Tagore 80). Tagore valued "Dharma", the inner strength of man independent of any outside agency, as something highly superior to political freedom. India, according to him, ought to come out of so many social evils such as caste system, superstitions etc. and this is possible only when people will come out of their stagnation through education. Mere political freedom is of no use when the people in power continue to exploit the oppressed. Tagore exposes the absurdity of Gandhi's Satyagraha movement and the hypocrisy of the Indian nationalists in one of his short stories, "Purification", by showing how selfish and superficial the nationalists were in their quest for freedom. Although they were opposed to British oppression, they themselves suppressed the poor as well as the untouchables themselves.

Tagore speaks on Lacanian terms and points out that the discourse of nationalism fulfils its imperial ego by contrasting it with colonising. A nation can truly construct itself only when it constructs and confirms its own reality. Every national discourse is modelled on the self-other dichotomy; each trying to build its identity by placing itself against the other evoking an ambience of animosity. Tagore describes:

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its

mind by the dread of a new peril  
(*Nationalism* 17-18).

However, Tagore's disillusionment towards the myth of nationalism should not make one think that he was not patriotic. In many of his writings and compositions, he expressed his profound love for India. The love and intensity for his country transcended the bounds of a narrow, selfish and self-aggrandising nationalism and carried such depth, generosity and broadness that it gained a sense of universality. The love for his country never stands in the way of his love for truth, justice and humanity. The words of Nikhil from *The Home and the World* are very relevant here,

I am willing to serve my country;  
but my worship I reserve for Right  
which is far greater than my  
country. To worship my country as  
a god is to bring a curse upon it “.  
(29).

No doubt, Tagore's vision is idealistic and humanitarian as opposed to selfish and aggressive nationalism. Tagore's vision requires unveiling the true democratic spirit that respects human dignity and sees every individual and nation as equal.

Postmodern literary criticism also highlights imperial power politics in an

era of globalization. The aspects of globalization have been deeply criticised in postcolonial theories. From a postcolonial perspective, globalization has been projected as a new form of imperialism. According to Edward Said, the occident uses various means including culture to dominate over the orient. In this regard, the theoretical paradigm of cultural materialism by Raymond Williams can be traced to where every aspect of culture is viewed as a product or commodity. According to Raymond Williams, capitalist culture creates an ideology of life in such a way that the subject consciously or unconsciously participates in it. Thus, it is seen that culture is always affected by economic and political processes. This perspective throws new light on the contemporary issue of global power politics and uneven development of capitalization. In a global era, by analysing the ways of cultural exchanges outside the nation or state and by examining discourses such as modernity and nationalism, postmodern novels gain the status of a valuable critique of the postmodern representation of history and politics in literature.

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