

POLITICS OF THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN SUBCONTINENTAL WRITING IN ENGLISH

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CHAPTER-6

CONCLUSION

This thesis proposed to address the lacuna in envisioning homogeneous narrative of nation through analyses of representative South Asian Anglophone fiction dealing with history. The attempt has been undertaken against a wider background of modular form of nation valorised by the western scholarly world. Written in an interventionist mode, the study made an attempt to interrogate the grand narrative of nation by exploring the contentious socio-political trajectory of nationalism in the Subcontinent. It further proposed to provide an alternative idea of nation by considering historical fiction as a repository of varied forms of national imaginings. The sheer brutalities of Partition and Civil War in the Indian subcontinent have left indelible marks upon the consciousness of its citizens there by engendering a substantial body of fiction with nation as its thematic preoccupation. The thesis therefore elaborately delves into the commonalities and differences in select Subcontinental historical fiction in order to offer a nuanced understanding of nation, nationalism and national identity. Through its thematically organised chapters this thesis has tried to provide a holistic picture of the dynamic interplay between nation and historical specificity, nation and gender dichotomy, nation and systematically marginally communities and nation and its narration. The South Asian novelists in their attempt to unveil the ideologically charged connotation of nationalism within a pluralistic Indian subcontinent have made use of varied sources like ethnicity, family, politicians, rebels and collective memories to foreground the differential experiences and intricacies of the historical events plaguing the region.

Poststructuralist school of thought with its emphasis on history as a discourse which comprises of myriad representations has served as the foundational base in questioning the monolithic idea of nation propagated by traditional historians. The juxtaposition of the novels taken up for the study with their socio-political and cultural context has helped to convey the porous boundary between ideology and national imaginings in South Asia. Taking cue from new historicists view regarding the fictive and ideological elements underlying historiography the thesis has made an attempt to bring forth a heterogeneous understanding of nation by engaging with the human values and emotions embedded in history. Through a politically engaged reading of the representative historical novels the study has endeavoured to contest Benedict

Anderson's envisioning of the origins of nation's "imagined community" and "national consciousness" in print-capitalism in the context South Asia.

The first chapter titled "Nation, Location and Ideology" has attempted to place the South Asian historical fiction within the rubrics of religious, linguistic, class and anti-colonial ideologies in order to elucidate how the vaunted ideal of nationalism in the subcontinent has been riddled with biases and political self-interests arising out of the imagined homogeneity of nation formation. This chapter dealt closely with the dynamic interplay of location, identity and personal experiences of the novelists in configuring their discourses on nationalism. Crucial insights on the relationship between nation and nationalism, novel and nationalism and ideology and nationalism provided by major theorists like Aijaz Ahmad, Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee and Hayden White have been used to deduce several interesting observations from the historical novels taken up for analyses.

The novels under consideration unveil the ideological underpinnings of nationalism in order to intervene into the homogeneous impulse of nationalist discourse. The writers offer competing and contradictory versions on similar historical events by emphasising upon religious, linguistic and class affiliations as crucial determinants of nationalist ideology. For instance, Khushwant Singh's Sikh perspective and Bapsi Sidhwa's Parsi perspective colour their perception of religious nationalism in the subcontinent. They dissociate themselves from the violence perpetuated by their rival communities in order to assert the supremacy of their own religion. It is observed that the historical novelists mostly emphasise violence committed by the common man not the privileged class. However, diasporic writers such as Salman Rushdie, Shyam Selvadurai and Ambalavaner Sivanandan project a broader view on nation. Their novels critique the agenda of essentialising identities in the forms of religious and linguistic nationalism. Probably their migrancy offers them the detachment required to develop an impartial and objective view of nation. Rushdie also expresses this view in his book *Imaginary Homelands* where he states that the physical alienation of the migrant writers enable them to speak more objectively and concretely on a subject of universal significance such as nation, nationalism and national identity. In a similar vein, Sri Lankan writer D.C.R.A Goonetilleke also states that "an insider's view is not necessarily superior to a migrant's" (Goonetilleke 67). Apart from ethno nationalism, the convoluted politics of

class ideology and anti-British ideology permeating the novels of Mohsin Hamid, Romesh Gunsekera, Attia Hosain and Selvadurai expose the pitfalls of official versions of history.

Chapter two titled “Nation and Gender” elaborately explored the politics of gender implicated in the nationalist discourses which govern the everyday life of women in the Subcontinental nations. An attempt has been undertaken to locate family as a crucial site of male centric nationalism that go into the making of national life. The chapter underscored the androcentric theorisations of domestic and public sphere which turn women into archetypal victims of atrocities perpetuated during upheaval of Partition and Civil War in the Indian subcontinent. The analyses sought to highlight how the symbolic representation of women as bearers of religious values and culture rendered them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence perpetrated by men belonging to other ethnic communities. The chapter also delineated the idea of “new woman” embodied by some of the women characters to defy the nexus between patriarchy and nationalism. Frederic Jameson’s holistic view of Third World texts as national allegories, Antoinette Burton and Nira Yuval Davis’ critique of public/private dichotomy, Partha Chatterjee’s reading of the history of nationalism served as a foundational base of the analyses of historical novels taken up for the purpose.

Critical engagement with women characters like Ayah and Hamida in *Ice-Candy Man*, Sundari and Haseena in *Train to Pakistan*, Radha Aunty in *Funny Boy*, Lali and Sellamma in *When Memory Dies* foreground how history was played out on women’s bodies by codifying them on the basis of their religious identity. The novels also portray male characters as well as homosexual adolescents belonging to ethnic minorities as victims of hegemonic articulation of nationalism. The writers critique the culturally sanctioned discourse of mardana and zenana that ensures effacement of women in public sphere by confining them to domestic chores. Characters like Laila and Zahra in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Sufiya Zinobia in *Shame*, Lenny, Ayah and Hamida in *Ice-Candy Man*, Arjie in *Funny Boy* are seen embroiled in the pervading ideas of *izzat* and *sharam* characterising the subcontinent. From the close study of the selected novels it emerges that characters like Sufiya, Rani Harappa, Mumtaz, Laila, Godmother and a few others who try to assert their subjectivity to disrupt the gendered paradigm of nation ultimately

occupy a liminal space owing to the looming presence of repressive normative codes structured by patriarchy.

The third chapter titled “Nation and its Discontents” has attempted to offer an alternate reality of South Asian nation states by focussing upon communities which continue to be ignored by nationalist historiography in order to perpetuate its homogeneous idea of national identity. The chapter has dealt closely with varied responses of the marginalised communities in the form of assimilation, resistance, emigration in order to redefine their identity in relation to the nation. The chapter unravelled the limitations of national imagination which do not take into consideration the complexities arising out of the intersection of the idea of nation with political, social and ecological configuration. Bhabha, Gyanendra Pandey and Partha Chatterjee’s emphasis on a holistic view of nation and Sanjib Baruah’s views on subnationalism informed the analysis of the representative novels taken up for the study.

An interesting observation that emerges from the analysis is that the relentless subnationalist assertions of the minority community at once estranged by historical upheavals characterising the nation reflect the fragile sovereignty of postcolonial nations. The desire to challenge mainstream nationalism which fails to accommodate their ethnically informed identities within the framework of nationalist historiography trigger subnationalist tendencies among Sikh community in *Ice- Candy Man*, Tamil community in *Funny Boy* and *When Memory Dies* and Khasi community in *The Point of Return*. The discontentment generated out of the constant strife between democrats and fundamentalists in *Shame*, conservation and profit driven capitalism in *Reef*, migrants and majoritarian community in *The Point of Return*, *Shame* and *Burgher Trilogy* raises scepticism about seamless imaginings of nationalism.

Chapter four titled “Nation and Narrative Techniques” argued that narrative techniques serve as powerful vehicles in visualising the idea of nation. It examined narrative techniques in conjunction with national narratives to bring to light the relationship between structural paradigm and thematic preoccupation of the historical novels taken up for analyses. The literary techniques of polyphony, national allegory, child narrator and memory revealed the gaps in nationalist historiography thereby encouraging the readers to develop a more nuanced idea of nation. Taking cues from Benedict Anderson, Homi K. Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee’s views on the correlation

between novel and nationalism, Mikhail Bakhtin's and Hayden White's emphasis on the inseparability of form and content, the chapter sought to augment the understanding of nation.

The novels under consideration have effectively captured the multiple realities and interpretations of national sensibilities through the spectrum of varying responses to mounting politics of ethno nationalism. It is observed that writers like Khushwant Singh, Attia Hosain, Bapsi Sidhwa and Shyam Selvadurai have foregrounded the contradictory and competing voices on the issues of nationalism through snippets of interactions among the villagers, family members and various religious communities. Rushdie's *Shame*, Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*, Gunesekera's *Reef*, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* have also delved into the undeniable link between memory and migrants, memory and food, memory and culture in order to consolidate collective identity ruptured by hegemonic forces of colonialism and ethnicity. The fusion of momentous historical instances with everyday experiences has lent credence to the narratives on nation. For instance, Ahmed Ali's elaborate portrayal of the history of Old Delhi, Attia Hosain's juxtaposition of Laila's family history with complex political history of North India, Sivanandan's focus on working class solidarity, Ceylon National Congress' struggle for Sri Lanka's independence, Sinhala Only Act and many other momentous events reflect the cultural and political crisis that gripped the postcolonial nations. Child narrators like Arjie, Laila, Lenny and Babu through their naïve perspectives draw attention to the ideologies implicit in homogeneous paradigm of nation.

In the light of the above conclusions drawn from individual chapterisation, the South Asian historical novels selected for the thesis present several interesting observations. The differential responses of the South Asian writers to similar historical events repudiate Benedict Anderson's hypothesis that novels and newspapers play influential role in development of a modular form of national imagination. The spatial dimension and subjective intentions of the novelists based on their ethnic, gender, race and economic status seem to be integral to their interpretation of historical events. These novels will generate varied responses from the readers based on their location, ethnic affiliations and political allegiance. The dissimilar responses to the discourse on nationalism by writers like Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Attia Hosain, Selvadurai, Sivanandan renders untenable Anderson's universalisation of national imagination in the

context of pluralistic South Asia. The unbridgeable gap between subnationalist aspiration and pan nationalism depicted in the South Asian novels problematises Benedict Anderson postulation of modular form of nation capable of being transplanted across different nations. The thesis' argument after analysing the historical novels is that probably rethinking of the rhetoric of non-western nationalism as nuanced, fragmentary, diverse and dynamic as conceived by Partha Chatterjee might help to promote a composite strand of nationalism.

Benedict Anderson's location of the genesis of imagined community of the nation in print-capitalism is premised upon monolingualism and universalism. Anderson believes that print-capitalism generates the cognitive structure required for imagining the homogeneous idea of nation. His hypothesis conceives of readers as monoglot masses united by their national print language. Critical reflection on the novels taken up for the study reveals that postcolonial nations draw their sustenance from collective memories and ethnic identities. The historical trauma of colonialism and distortion of their identities by the colonisers infuse in them the desire to articulate their multiple forms of identities in post-independence era. Their collective memories rather than national imaginings proliferated by print capitalism help them to argue for the antiquity of their community in relation to the nation. Anderson's vision of print capitalism might create a language of power which is detrimental to the interest of pluralistic South Asian nations. Analysis of the novels exposes the varied imaginations of South Asian nations in spite of being connected by the common medium of English language taken up by the novelists to represent national history.

Benedict Anderson in *The Spectres of Comparisons* considers nationalism and ethnicity as distinct and contrary ideologies by classifying it under the categories of "unbound serialities" and "bound serialities" respectively. He believes that unbound serialities comprising the ideas of nation, nationalism, citizens and bureaucrats are universally imagined by means of print capitalism and bound serialities of governmentality in the form of modern census and electoral systems seem to be constricting in nature thereby solidifying differences pervading the society. Anderson's postulation that politics of nationalism and ethnicity arise on different sites and mobilise on different sentiments and fight for different causes (Chatterjee 130) does not apply to

South Asian context as nationalism in postcolonial world came to be identified with ethnic categories of inclusion and exclusion upheld by homogeneous discourse of nation.

To endorse Anderson's view in postcolonial context is to imagine nationalism without politics of ethnicity among discrete groups pervading the Subcontinental nations. A close study of South Asian historical novels persuasively exposes the contamination of the glorified idea of nationalism by politics of ethnicity. For instance, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (1983) portray religion as centripetal force of nationalism in India and Pakistan. Likewise, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* (1994) and Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997) portray language as a reinforcing element of nationalist politics in Sri Lanka. These novels establish the claim that compartmentalisation of nationalism and ethnicity might be a utopian vision in the context of South Asia.

Frederic Jameson's view of third-world texts as national allegories" (Jameson 69) has been criticised by a number of critics on the ground that it is a reductionist view overlooking the rich literary heritage of South Asia and reducing the writings of the Third World to a one dimensional aesthetics. This study's point of departure after analysing the corpus of South Asian Anglophone historical fiction is that these novels project a political dimension where the story of private individual and family destiny is intertwined with the embattled situation of the nation state. Jameson's categorisation of third world literature as "national allegories" probably provided an opportunity for the historical novelists to enunciate their heterogeneous non-western model of nation within the framework of this definitional category. The allegorical spirit of the novels taken up for the thesis is replete with fragmentary narratives, polyphonic voices, collective memories that contest homogeneous representation of nation. So, politics remain embedded either overtly or implicitly in most of these historical novels.

Sri Lankan Anglophone literature is relatively nascent as compared to their Indian and Pakistani counterparts. So the position espoused by the novelist is the means by which knowledge is established regarding the historical and political issues. These writers have critiqued the reification of ethno religious identities and homogeneous national identity. In comparison to their Indian and Pakistani counterparts, the Sri

Lankan novelists have narrated the idea of a nation in all its complexity without eliminating the differences amongst the people in the interest of a totalising or univocal vision of a nation. The novels engage in a poignant criticism of schools, history books and government which undermine the plurality and diversity of Sri Lankan history and culture in order to appease the majority Sinhala Buddhist community.

Novels such as Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* and Carl Muller's *Burgher Trilogy* question the purported essentialist agenda of nation by foregrounding the hybridity that exists across aspects as diverse as religion, language, class, gender, caste. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* is sensitive to the varied and alternate dynamics of coexistence to be found in Sri Lanka during the Civil War. The malleability of ethnic categories in the form of close friendship and intermarriages between Sinhalese and Tamils and unity of the working class irrespective of their religion reinforce the heterogeneity of Sri Lankan nationhood. In Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Arjie's struggle for queer identity in the face of competing nationalism between Sinhalese and Tamils invading the familial and institutional space lend credence to the fact that majority, minority as well as homosexual communities jostle for space in the area of national representation. Again preservation of enduring legacies of the Burghers in Sri Lanka through their varied cultural and social performativity reflects the gaps in homogeneous narratives of nation.

Partha Chatterjee in the chapter titled "The Nation and its Women" delves into the nationalist construct of "new woman" in nineteenth century Bengal which was predicated upon selective appropriation of Western modernity for the emancipation of women. The idea of "new woman" emerged as a nationalist response to the critique of Indian tradition as uncivilised and degenerate by colonial powers. The colonisers believed that the scriptural canons and cultural practices rationalised the oppression and subjugation of Indian woman. They sympathised with the oppressed women in order to seep into the cultural sphere of the nation. On the contrary, in order to avert such encroachment by the colonisers in the inner sanctum, the nationalist segregated the domain of culture into two material (outer) sphere and spiritual (inner) sphere, where the inner domain or home served as a crucial site for retaining the distinctiveness of Indian culture. The new nationalist project advocated education for woman to ensure cultural refinement through development of womanly virtues such as self-sacrifice, shame,

devotion, patience etc. Women may venture out of the inner domain as long as they do not violate the feminine codes set by the patriarchy.

The study's argument is that the nationalist icon of "new woman" itself is somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, they emphasise self-emancipation of women through education and, on the other hand, they consider education as a means to inculcate womanly virtues of orderliness, cleanliness, chastity, self-sacrifice and others along with a few practical skills of literacy. Their primary aim is to deny autonomy to women. Herein lies the inherent contradictions of the nationalist movement which was committed to civil liberty for all its citizens but in reality it stalled the development of women. Critical reflections on the women characters reveal that some of them do not submit to the masculinist paradigm rather they reconfigure the gender discourse through their performances. They are active agents of social change. They are "new woman" but not in a way as defined by Chatterjee. They want to assert their self-identity rather than limiting themselves to the fulfilment of patriarchal expectations. Another point of departure from Chatterjee is that considering nineteenth century "new women" predicated upon women from Bengal as a model for "new woman" might be misleading because the political and cultural landscape varies across the Indian subcontinent.

Sufiya's violent outbursts generated by constant feelings of repression and inadequacy defy the gendered role of female modesty. Similarly Rani Harappa's intricate embroidery exposing the crimes and betrayal committed by her husband Iskander Harappa; Shakil sisters' engagement in a clandestine relationship; and Arjumand Harappa's act of cross dressing and her revolt against oppressive zamindars are all emblematic of the subversive potential of the deep resentment of women against patriarchy. Mumtaz's aversion to predetermined gendered roles of wifhood and motherhood and her role as an investigative journalist; Miss Nili's live in relationship with Mr Salgado, the marine biologist rupture the gendered discourses of nation. Active participation of women characters like Lenny's godmother and mother in rescuing and rehabilitating the abducted and raped women during Partition and involvement of characters like Prema, Lali and Damayanti in rebuilding the civil society in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Civil War redefine women's role as active agents in national politics.

Homi K. Bhabha in his influential book *The Location of Culture* states that the counter-narratives of nation emerging from the perspective of culturally displaced

migrants contend the essentialist idea of nation. The liminal position of the migrants empowers them to split the idea of nation into pedagogic and performative aspects thereby evoking the ambivalence underlying the homogeneous discourse of nation. Bhabha's statement "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision" (Bhabha 5) affirms his belief in vantage position and enabling vision of the migrants. However, a closer engagement with South Asian historical novels unsettles Bhabha's idealised representation of the migrant's position. For instance, Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and Siddhartha Deb's *Point of Return* expose the predicament of the migrants where they fall victims to discriminatory politics perpetuated by the local populace. Their efforts to detach themselves from national politics turn out to be futile. Characters like Sufiya Zinobia in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Dr Dam and his family in India's north-eastern state lead vulnerable lives in their new hostland owing to their original identity. It might be claimed that the position of the migrants depend upon their spatio temporal context.

This thesis hopes that it will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the history of South Asian nations. The historical novels emerge as a credible miniature frame of reference for close study of trajectories and manifestations of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent. The study is pertinent in the light of nationalism emerging as a core political expression in the wake of anti-colonial movements in India. There is a kind of unitary approach discerned in terms of themes and narrative techniques employed in literary constructions of the idea of nation. However, it must be admitted that the present study remains confined to representative texts only from three South Asian nations namely India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. There are further possibilities to expand the corpus of the study by incorporating historical novels from other South Asian regions like Bangladesh and Afghanistan. A comparative study of South Asian Anglophone historical novels and translated historical novels in English dealing with the idea of nation could be a productive area of research.