CHAPTER IV

ROUTES TO ROOTS
Roots are important to human beings. People want to know where they and their forefathers came from. Sometimes people go to great lengths to defend their roots, causing grudges to be held for a very long time, even centuries. Sometimes this leads to the separation of people who would otherwise get on, causing wars to be waged for generations. There is a certain sense of pride that people have in their personal history and in the historical moments for the nation. Also there may be certain painful moments that they may wish to forget. That the present is qualified by and rooted in the past is why people spend so much time and energy in tracing genealogies. Programs that explore the past, such as the series *Who do you think you are?* (Broadcast in the UK, Australia, USA and a number of other countries), where celebrities trace their origins and homelands, remain very popular. Notably, the last episode of the hit 1977 television mini-series *Roots* (based on Alex Haley’s eponymous book) still remains the third highest rated episode in American TV history. In this story, a distinguished author traces the origins of his family back through their days of slavery in America to his African forefathers. However, roots are not always something easily available in the sense of it providing a secure anchoring into a particular social, cultural and geographical precinct. A sense of uprootedness is connected to alteration or destruction of ties with the past and the dissolution of community or non-acceptance within a community.

The reality of being ‘located’ in a particular culture, geographically and ideologically separate from the chosen home and citizenship problematizes identity. This diasporic dilemma is negotiated through various ‘routes’ in the creative process. Most often this route is a transnational aesthetic negotiation across borders, attempting to reach across and grapple with ground realities. This chapter traces the literary
techniques that the novels under discussion adopt in order to reflect their ideas pertaining to the notion of national identity and belonging. The ideological foregrounding of the authors vis-a-vis their being diaspora writers is discussed in order to provide the context for discussion of the aesthetics adopted. Diaspora writers are positioned at the 'in-between' spaces of nations and identities and are the product of several interlinked histories, cultures and societies. This leads to their rejection of originary narratives of identity; and to their efforts to deconstruct and reconfigure the dominant narratives of the nation. In these texts, home and nation are re-narrated, not necessarily in terms of a monolithic space, rather as conflicting and contested. Identity exists in tension and mediation between 'roots' and 'routes’.

Migrant writers stake a claim to objectivity owing to the productive tensions at play in their works — pitted against the homogenizing force of the national and cultural narratives— given their distanced yet acute vision of the ‘home’. The ‘native informant’ and their ‘native voice’, even if their geographical location is elsewhere, are considered to give a sense of authenticity to third world writing that non-native writers are assumed to lack (Spivak, 1990). Thus, home and nation are narrated, not in terms of a fixated terrain, but as a historically constituted space, always in flux and contested; and identity is a contextual narrative, not a given, rather always ‘in process’. In the editorial preface to the founding issue of the journal, Diaspora, Khachig Tololian writes that “diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” which interrogate the privileged homogeneity of the nation/state (5). Does this imply privileging a separate identity narrative or signal a change from within too? In the postcolonial scenario migration can be coerced or intended, literal or metaphoric. But what is symptomatic of the culture of survival
is the need to create a space through which new forms of belonging can be negotiated. A transnational cultural code can be discerned as attempting to perform the ideologically imperative function of dismantling monolithic identities, cultural immutability and territorial imperatives. The residual cultural imperatives interact with the unknown realms of the new world to create a story imbued with collaborations, choices and a coming-to-terms-with, which the story teller records. Here Amitav Ghosh’s argument in *The Diaspora in Indian Culture*, may be recalled that the Indian diaspora is not predisposed to an attachment to and desire for a literal or symbolic return to the homeland as much as it is to recreating a distinct culture in other locations (6). Even so the virtual holding-on to the originary home is conspicuous, in spite of the unintended return. In such a case the reality of existence is in the ‘routes’ without the desire or the possibility of culmination in ‘root’. The dislocated (diasporic) writer relates to two spaces simultaneously, one in physical terms, the other in emotional and imagined terms. Nayantara Sahgal describes the experience of the Indian writer as schizophrenic; a schizophrenic state being one in which the mind and feeling are “firmly rooted in a particular subsoil”, but above the ground there is a more “fluid identity that doesn’t fit comfortably into any single mould (104).”

Homi Bhabha suggests that the ‘partial’ culture symbolized in the figure of the migrant is an apt ideological tool with which to invoke the idea of the ambivalence of national space. In fact, Homi Bhabha’s understanding of the *Heim* of national culture is articulated not in terms of ‘unisonance’ but rather of dissonance -- the splits, ambivalences, and othernesses within the nation which are powerfully invoked by his coinage, ‘dissemiNation’ (1990: 291-322). This term conveys his idea that the ‘nation’ is always-already implicit in ‘dissemination’. It is to distance
himself from national representations that privilege cultural fixedness and ‘common origins’ to the exclusion of difference that the novelist Salman Rushdie, too, speaks of home as a ‘scattered’ concept (IH, 93). In marked contrast to Naipaul's chronicling of the ravages of rootlessness there is Rushdie, for whom the fact of diaspora and its syncretic cultural consequences are vibrantly harnessed as a potentially productive force. In fact, Rushdie uses the hybrid site of his location in diaspora to launch an attack on the ‘confining myth’ of cultural authenticity and purity. Vijay Mishra points out that “Large sections of the diaspora wish to retain [a] nostalgic definition of the self and cling to "millenarian" narratives of self-empowerment... through the technologies of mechanical reproduction (14).” This, according to him, results in “a heterogeneous, contradictory rendition of history by making memory and cultural fragments metonymic representations of the whole.”

In order to understand the privileging of memory narratives over history or the adoption of a certain form of fiction (realist versus magic realism) by the respective authors, it is necessary to enquire into the changing meaning(s) of home and nation.

4.1 HOME AND BELONGING

The concept of “home” in the discourse of nationalism was understood to be a space symbolizing stability, both material and emotional. However, this construct has been challenged and fundamentally problematized not only in the context of the diaspora but also in the face of increasing factionalism within the borders of the nation-state. Contemporary scholarship, in the fields of cultural and literary studies, anthropology and geography, has drawn attention to the instability of home as a signifier of identity. Angelika Barnmer, for instance, notes that, “this instability is
manifesting itself on a staggering -- some believe, unprecedented -- scale both globally and locally. On all levels and in all places, it seems "home" in the traditional sense (whether taken to mean "family" or "community" or “homeland”/ “nation”) is either disintegrating or being radically redefined (17).” While traditional models of nationalism draw all articulations of home into a commonality of space, culture and origin, the potential of variegate minority communities to challenge such spatially and temporally bound, as well as homogeneous, constructions of home crucially implicates the narratives and discourses of the nation.

Multiplicity of home is a reality for a number of Indian writers. Some writers’ primary locations are in India, but within India these authors live in multiple geographical paradigms where regional ethnic identities might be emphasized such as Malayali, Bengali, and Punjabi; or sometimes their national association is emphasized. Indian writers are also defined by labels created in the west such as ‘postcolonial’ or ‘global’. Thus, Indian writers may be at once both ‘globalized’ and ‘localized’. The problematized notion of home and belonging in the Indian context has to be understood from the center-point of the history of partition and post-partition displacement within the sub-continent. The partition of India into India and Pakistan made many Muslims and Hindus homeless as if they were living in the 'wrong' place. Such people became refugees traumatized by the violence, the loss of their ancestral homes and their culture and identity; the effects of which still reverberate. In Culture and Imperialism, Said forcefully articulates the exclusions that were created in society by the formation of 'Third World' nation/states:

[I]t is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to
and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order... And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. (402)

Salman Rushdie in the title essay of his collection *IH* begins by talking about being a diasporic Indian writer and the problems he, and other similarly diasporic authors, have of trying to recreate a sense of home in their writings, he says:

Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

What Rushdie evokes here, is a sense of nostalgia for home and that the separation from home evokes feelings of loss that is resolved through the creation of imaginary homes. Rushdie goes on to say that because of his physical distance from home (that is India) his version of India as an imaginary home is only a partial representation amongst many other representations by both migrant and home writers. Using the situation of Indian writers in England as a case in point, Rushdie argues that these writers are not just negatively marked as either 'English' or 'Indian', but “have access to a second tradition”, which he goes on to describe as “the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration,
displacement, life in a minority group (IH, 20).” This position allows the writers to conceive an aesthetics of identity that is built on the idea of ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’, that is, on cross-cultural or transnational connections instead of primeval origins. Rushdie's aesthetics in MC likewise, displays an intermingling of cultural tropes from western, Asian and other influences suggesting a resistance to rootedness in a particular place or culture; and attempting to destabilize nationalist discourses by parodying rather than revering the creation of an Independent India from the British Empire. Accordingly then, home is more than just the location where one is dwelling, for those who are exiles or diasporic. Home represents a longing for something unobtainable. Thus, home becomes a concept that is fluid and slipping at different levels and can be evaluated both materially and symbolically.

In SL the narrator is forced to reflect on the traits of ‘home’ amidst the many comings and goings on in the course of the novel; whether it is an entity by itself, discrete and untouched by experiences away and afar from it. James Clifford, in his essay The Transit Lounge of Culture, takes the example of Ghosh’s demonstration of unexpectedly mixed kinship patterns in a small village in The Imam and the Indian, to explicate the mistaken supposition of stasis and authentic culture of any given place no matter how autonomous they may appear. As Clifford views it, Ghosh's commingling of a traditional, rural village with the bustling urgency of an airport transit lounge is a metaphor that profoundly exemplifies the complex, intersecting trajectory of ‘routes’, of practices of crossing, movement and displacement, that penetrates and disturbs the static metaphor of ‘roots’, of stabilities of cultural anchorage, continuity and authenticity. In SL the boundaries between home and non-home are seen to be blurring in the face of movements back and forth both in time and
space for Thamma, a victim of forced immigration following the partition of Bengal. Tha'mma visits her original home Dhaka to bring back Jethamoshai, but is completely taken aback by the alien feeling that overwhelms her nostalgic ‘home coming’. Her nephew Tridib is killed in the riots there and she leaves seething in anger and disillusionment. She has been othered in the place that was once home. Tormented by memories of Tridib’s violent death at the hands of the Dhaka rioters, she becomes obsessed with revenge that can be satiated only by the blood of the Muslim other. Her nationalist frenzy turns her into a highly unstable woman in her last years. When we see her for the last time, the Indian-Pakistani War of 1965 has just been declared and Thamma hysterically articulates a fiery language of official nationalism. The divisive forces of nation formation are allegorized in the novel through the partitioning of the Bose family house in Dhaka. The house becomes an extended metaphor for the nation, identity and culture.

Through the goings on and vicissitudes in the Bose household Amitav Ghosh reflects on the political developments in the subcontinent in an overlapping spatio-temporal frame. The narrator, being the repository of stories told him by his grandmother and the other characters, describes the pre-partition Bose family house as having “evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships (SL, 119).” The description of the house before it was divided – its parenthetical character and multiple layers, its pullulating abundance and confusing meanings – is also resonant with A. K. Ramanujan's poignant rendition of twentieth-century India through the metaphor of the family
The pre-divided Bose house, like the one in Ramanujan's poem, is a teeming multitude of differences. Both writers portray these structures as contingent; adapting and negotiating themselves into vast yet fluid beings in the face of diversity and change. The troubled politics of the subcontinent is enacted through the partition of the family home. The foundation of the new houses is laid in violence, symbolized by the mutual mistrust and animosity, everyday bickerings, vicious legal battles and hostile domestic politics. After the wall is put up dividing the house into two, Thamma, for the benefit of her younger sister, Mayadebi, invents stories about her Jethamoshai's house on the other side of the wall. The unseen other half of the house becomes a source of endless fascination and amusement for the two girls and gradually becomes known as the “upside-down house” (SL, 123). This naming of the other house typifies the fundamental principle of binary division; while Thamma's house represents normalcy, her Jethamoshai's house across the partition represents its opposite. However, despite all the make-belief assumptions of weirdness about the other house, Thamma later discovers that her uncle's house is in fact not all different or alien.

The divided house is thus a trope to deconstruct dichotomous assumptions underpinning nationalist discourse -- the political logic that borders mark out actual and unambiguous differences, that “across the border there existed another reality” (SL, 214). Ghosh employs an extended metaphor of the Bose home and its division to demonstrate the pointlessness of erecting boundaries to separate people as a solution for dealing with conflicts and incompatibility. Ghosh challenges and disrupts the belief that lines on a map are natural and immutable. He demonstrates the naively simplistic deduction offered to a complex problem and the
ultimately counter-productivity of such an approach. For him, the view that national boundaries are concrete, tenacious spaces merely instils anxiety, anger, and even aversion for difference. Such feelings only lead to mistrust, anarchy and violence on both personal and national levels. Home consequently can be understood to be a discourse in process that contests the dichotomies of self and other.

4.2 NATION AND NARRATION

The only certainty that attaches itself to the understanding of a nation is its uncertainty. To say the least the idea is fraught and full of contradictions. On the one hand it is deemed as a myth, imagined, allegorized; while on the other there is contestation, even bloodshed for its sake. The nation in its multiple and divergent forms has been much discussed, debated, and theorized in the fictional genre of the novel. The inherently dialogical form of the novel as laid down by Bakhtin allows for multiple, dynamic and fluid discourses to unfold simultaneously. Thus, the ‘narration’ of nation is ineluctably connected to the novel genre in general and the Indian English novel more specifically. Benedict Anderson’s tracing of the relation between ‘print capitalism’ and the rise of nationalism in his *Imagined Communities* too stresses the connection between the written word and the formation of the nation. Critiques of Anderson notwithstanding, it can definitely be said that any work of fiction be it a novel or a poem while presenting a certain image of the nation plays a significant role in shaping or influencing the public imagination in terms of community, nationhood and culture. The relationship seems to be a symbiotic one- both thriving to a great extent on each other. Timothy Brennan in his essay, *The National Longing for Form* writes:
Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role.... It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life.... (130)

In the case of the Indian English novel, as Priyamvada Gopal points out, “the narration of the nation gave the Anglophone novel in India its earliest and most persistent thematic preoccupation, indeed, its raison d’etre, as it attempted to carve out a legitimate space for itself (6).” The cultural, political, social conundrum that is India repeatedly posits itself as the leitmotif in a vast number of novels written in English. This of course does not in any way imply that this is the only preoccupation of all novels written in English or that other Indian language novels do not engage in this particular debate. At the same time there is a definite link between the evolution of the Indian English novel genre and that of the Indian nation.

The various views and theories about nation are as diverse as they are numerous. There seems to be no consensus regarding either its origin or meaning. Satish Deshpande, in his book Contemporary India: A Sociological View, writes that a nation “can only be defined retrospectively and tautologically: a nation is a nation when it becomes one and till it remains one” since as he elaborates there are no “objective conditions” that sufficiently fulfill the criteria of being a nation. As opposed to the primal view of nation that holds it as being ancient and a natural phenomenon, modernists consider nations to be a relatively new construct. The word ‘nation’ though is etymologically derived from the Old French nacion, which in turn originates from the Latin word natio (nātīō) literally meaning "that which has been born". Anthony D. Smith
in his book *National Identity* relates nation to ethnicity, providing an elaborate definition of an ethnic group as “a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories and cultural elements, a link with an historic territory or homeland and a measure of solidarity” (94). There is a major difference from the primordial understanding of ethnic groups in his definition in that it inverts the importance of territorial location, stressing that ethnicity may persist even when “long divorced from its homeland, through an intense nostalgia and spiritual attachment” (23). The essence of solidarity and spiritual attachment necessitated in the cognition of a nation is reiterated in Ernest Renan’s idea of a nation as ‘a daily referendum’ and ‘a soul, a spiritual principle’. Though the modernist notions of nation acknowledge the factor of ‘social cohesion’ as being foregrounded, most of the debates surrounding issues of nation arise from the interplay-sometimes conflicting- between its political (state) and socio-cultural components. In his book *Nation and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner, while explaining the origin of nations, argues that nations are completely modern constructions borne of nationalism which is "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (1). According to him nations were formed as a result of pressures created by industrialization and capitalism. Yet the nation’s social and political units far from cohering are sometimes seen to be antagonistic. While on the one hand a sense of community can exist prior to the achievement of political autonomy, on the other hand political sovereignty may not inevitably be followed by the birth of the ‘nation’ or the awakening of a consciousness amongst the people regarding national identity.
In the Indian context, it is in the anti-colonial movement and rise of nationalism that the genesis of the nation is seen to have taken place. However, Partha Chatterjee differentiates between political nationalism and spiritual nationalism. In a significant departure from the European understanding of a nation, Partha Chatterjee problematizes the relation between the nation (an imagined community) and the nation-state (a political entity). He contends that the Indian nation was conceptualized much before the formal formation of the postcolonial nation-state, showing how anticolonial nationalists conceived of their own domain of sovereignty within the colonial establishment much before they embarked on the struggle for political freedom from the imperialist power. These nationalists sought to divide 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 the middle-classes conceptualized the nation in terms of the spiritual dimension and then prepared it for political contestation, all the while "normalizing" the aspirations of the various marginal groups that constitute the spiritual dimension. The thrust of Chatterjee’s argument is that nationalism should not be understood only in political terms where the nation and state are inter-changeable concepts. He vouches for a novel cultural nationalism that had women at the helm; discounting only for the European model in the political sphere, which had to be put in place in order to achieve independence. At the same time he asserts that there was a prior development of the cultural consciousness of ‘nationness’. Here he points out “lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state” (p. 11). Acceptance of the European model of a modern state according to him limited the future vision and shaping of the post-independence nation. This notion is re-iterated by the
subaltern studies group led by Ranajit Guha that considers nationalism as failing to address the politics of subalternity due to its preoccupation with the West and with elitism. Though nation formation is intimately connected to the rise of nationalism, it is differently construed across countries depending on the social cultural history, the prevalent political economic conditions as well as the psychological make of the society. Thus each nation is developed in its own unique manner. The trajectory of the rise and growth of Indian nationalism is quite complex and multifarious. During colonial domination nationalism was consolidated in most colonized countries mainly because of a fiercely anti-colonial stand which was both political and social in nature. Early nationalism in India was a mainstay of the educated elite who conceived of it in keeping with the European ideals of statism led by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress Party. Another kind of nationalism that took shape under the leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was that of Swaraj with the village and its agrarian system being the organizing principle. Although the nationalist ideology proved beneficial in the early stages of the political struggle by bringing disparate groups under its unifying aegis; the faulty premises on which it was built led to the cracks in the fabric of the nation—still in its formative stages—being revealed almost immediately in the apocalyptic call for partitioning of the nation at the time of independence.

Taking off from Gramsci’s attribution of the propagation of the ahistorical myth of the nation to the power of ‘rhetorical prejudice’, Aijaz Ahmad blames ‘intellectual conceit’ for the continued (mis)belief in the otherwise essentially functional and constructed nature of the nation. Thus, for Ahmad the Indian nation is:
…not a *thing* which, once made, simply endures” in fact it is “a *process*, which is made and remade, a thousand times over… a *terrain of struggle* which condenses all social struggles, so that every organized force in society attempts to endow it with specific meanings and attributes. (2002: 145)

It is nowhere more than in the Indian novel in English that this ‘*terrain of struggle*’ has been mapped out. The shifting and evolving nation-space through the various phases of nationalism has been extensively constructed/recreated in the fictional genre of the novel by the use of various strategies such as the use of myth, importance of memory, rendering of historicity, etc. Indian English writers of all eras have while criticizing the polity, tried to project their preferred ‘version’ of the nation— diverse/hybrid/multicultural/secular/cosmopolitan etc.— drawing inevitably from the epochal moment of their existence as well as experience. One way or the other their works can be read as a response to the social-political-economic dimensions of the space of their existence. The construction of the preliminary idea of a ‘nation’ during the anti-colonial struggle; semblance of a nation under the leadership of Gandhi; changing role of women during the early-nationalist struggle; Independence and Partition; post-Independence phase of transition; disillusionment ensuing the Emergency period and the critiques of a postcolonial/post-independence nation are some of the important issues and debates surrounding them that emerge from a reading of certain symptomatic texts of these times. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) fictionalizes fully well the shape that the nationalist movement was acquiring under the leadership of Gandhi. It recreates the Gandhian era wherein a small village in the southern part of India becomes representative of the nation in its avowal for independence while
chronicling the formation of a national identity. Partha Chatterjee states in his *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*: “Gandhism provided for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the whole people within the political nation” (110). Thus providing for the first time a common platform for the coming together of commoners and elites, lower as well as upper castes, Hindus and Muslims, etc. Raja Rao goes to the extent of deifying the figure of Gandhi in his novel by lending him mythic qualities. However, as Priyamvada Gopal writes, much as Gandhi’s “idioms drew on Sanskritic Hindu concepts such as Ram-Rajya” (49), Rao’s extensive usage of the ‘high Brahminical tradition’ in his novel alienates those outside that tradition. Another instance of marginalization is provided by “the sole Muslim character in the novel, Khan [being] depicted in unremittingly negative terms, bordering on caricature, somewhat surprisingly given Gandhi’s own fostering of multi-faith tolerance” (48).

A stringent criticism of Gandhi’s ideology and that of nationalism in general can be seen in Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore was vehemently against the nationalist ideology and a strong critique of it. As Mohammad Quayum writes, the very fact that nation is a social institution, a mechanical organization, modeled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore (20-40). Tagore can be seen almost as a precursor of the postmodern questioning of both the constructed aspect of nationalism and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects. In his book *Nationalism* he explicates:

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. (17-18)

Tagore argued against nationalism per se citing the example of British colonialist ambitions that found refuge in the ideology of nationalism, as the colonizer came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nation. In his short story, *Purification*, he exposes the absurdity and hypocrisy of the Indian nationalists by showing how selfish and superficial the nationalists were in their quest for freedom; they were fervently opposed to the British oppression, but in their bid towards homogenization the voices of the poor were stifled and they were oppressed. Even while demanding dignity and respect from the colonial masters they overlooked the provision of these postulates in the post-independence scenario.

Ashis Nandy, while pointing to the fine distinction between nationalism and anti-colonialism, writes that “Tagore rejected the idea of nationalism but practiced anti-imperialist politics all his life… at a time when nationalism, patriotism, and anti-imperialism were a single concept for most Indians” (80). In his novel *Gora* (1910), for example, Tagore takes issue with the idea of a “pure” national identity. In *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire* in Bengali) he dramatizes how exploitation, violence and killing become ritual acts when the individual sacrifices his self to an abstraction, and nationalism is glorified, and righteousness and conscience are sacrificed in turn. The novel demonstrates how the pedantic forces of nationalism and ethnocentrism stifle the reasonable and principled voice of humanistic universalism. Tagore analyses how nationalism in fact coalesces with ethnocentrism to ultimately subvert the
very values that hold a nation together by subsuming the universal values of justice and equality.

Broadly speaking three lines of thinking emerge regarding the nature and origin of nation— the first considers nation to be a given, an absolute that was always already; the second considers nations to be born out of (anti-imperialist/ anti-colonialist) nationalism; the third line of thinking considers nations to be constructs, primarily built upon a collective imagination. It is the latter conception of the idea of a nation that is most pertinent to the context of imaginative literature taken into consideration here with regard to questions of nationality and identity. The birth of the Indian nation, writes Rushdie, is “a new myth to celebrate… a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will except in a dream we all agreed to dream…”(1982, 111). The territorial imperative of a nation has been subverted within the postcolonial paradigm, and if not replaced altogether has at least been partially taken up by that of ‘lived space’ sustained by memory and imagination as much as by experience. This is connected largely to the rapid increase in mass migrations to begin with during the colonial encounter (in the case of India, mostly as indentured labourers) from the native land to foreign places and cultures. These groups of transported people created their own culture and literature to narrativize the ‘original’ culture in various ways and from different perspectives, thereby creating their own version of the nation. Increased modes of communication led to further migrations and ensuing cultural reconfiguration that came to be expressed in numerous and divergent articulations. The relationship of these migrant communities with the nation of origin is fraught; subsequently the articulations too are nuanced. The nation reconfigures itself in various ways within the paradigm of the writers’ experiences of
migration and its tensions and conflicts. The earlier restrictiveness of ‘belonging’ defined in terms of the territorial imperative deemed the ‘outsider’ authorial voice inauthentic and ‘mere objective speculation’ so far as writing the nation was concerned. Spatialization of the nation is inhered in and through the site of the family, personal relationships and the portrayal of community lives and kinship. Mapping of certain spaces such as urban-rural, public-private, mythic-historic unravel the construct of the nation.

Rushdie's critique of the rigidity of the nation-space and its borders is suggested in his novels *Shame* and *MC*. In *Shame*, Omar Khayyam, who inhabits the border town of Q, finds himself in the grip of a terrifying experience each time he approaches the check post. Omar is terrified of the dizzy spells and vertigo that awaits him every time he nears the border, ‘the crossing of the frontier’ is ‘the worst of all his nightmares’ (268). The genesis of *MC* is in a familiar joke: two months after Rushdie was born, the British ran away from India. As Rushdie revived his faint memory:

This joke was almost told to embarrass me at awkward moments, which gave me the idea to take a child and a country, and to join them comically. From that there was a short step to having the idea of a child that was born exactly at the moment of independence, and who believed himself to be connected to the country. Then there was the story of the child growing up and the country growing up, so to say, in parallel, it began with that. (Pandit 1996: 44)

Thus at the very beginning of the story its link with the nation and its history is firmly established. However, paradoxically enough the agenda
of the writer in the course of the novel is to undermine this very paradigm. It is by presenting multifarious narratives of the nation and creating “Indias of the mind” that Rushdie attempts to vilify a homogeneous and entrenched idea of the nation and its identity. *MC* is the story of the emerging nation of India. Rushdie successfully draws a parallel between the private destiny of Saleem and the public destiny of India. Saleem sometimes thinks that: “From the moment of my conception, it seems, I have been public property” (p. 77). Both *MC* and *ASB* present allegories of the nation, but of differing kinds. Whereas in *MC* the story of Saleem is explicitly an allegory of the nation, in *ASB* the allegory is subtle or hidden. *ASB* constructs a realistic or naturalized account of a "strong" idea of India, based in part on liberal progressivism that aims to project a cultural interpretation of 1950s nationhood and on the Nehruvian conception of the nation.

Another version of the meaning of nation and nationalism is presented in *SL*. Thamma has firm faith in the impenetrable reality of borders that separate nations. She is startled when confronted with a different situation. There are no distinct dividing lines, like the ones she expected to see from her plane, between India and the then East Pakistan. “Where's the difference then”, she asks, “And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before .... What was it all for then -- Partition and all the killing and everything -- if there isn't something in between (SL, 148-49).” For her and others of similar beliefs to Tha'mma’s, who have invested complete faith in the reality of divided existence, following Partition and divisive nationalist discourses it becomes hard to accept the fuzziness of borders. The lack of even a symbolic marker of these ‘separate realities’ is so destabilizing for her that she gradually becomes mentally deranged. Her grandson, the
narrator, however, who too “grew up believing ... in the reality of borders” (SL, 214), has learnt the lesson that boundaries are only a constructed reality, not “a corporeal substance” (SL, 214). Tha'mma's faith in the “special enchantment in lines” (SL, 228), the text suggests, itself derives from her memory of the partitioning of her family house in Dhaka. The capriciousness of such a partition is brought out when the wall that is erected to divide the Bose house cuts a lavatory in half, “bisecting an old commode”, so that the house is equally divided, 'down to the minutest detail’ (SL, 121), between Tha'mma's Jethamoshai and his younger brother. The absurdity and comicality of the portrayal conceals more seriously debilitating after-effects that culminate in the murder of Tridib. Thamma’s confusion over what a fraternal relationship means – “What does [being brothers] mean? Does that mean you're friends” (SL, 121) – poignantly underscores the personal trauma, insecurity and damage experienced by the family that suffered Partition.

4.3 LOCATING THE SELF

A creative work is tied to a vast web of economic, social and political factors. Its conception is influenced by such elements as that of literary production-confluence of cultural appropriation and communication- and authorial aesthetics as well as authorial ideology. The cultural-geographical location of the writer influences, even shapes the aesthetics of the work. Thus, it is necessary to establish the ‘location’ of the authors in order to arrive at a holistic understanding of the texts.

More than just providing a geographical, cultural and historical location, migrancy lends itself to epistemological habitation for Rushdie. In The Location of Brazil, Rushdie writes that the migrant is one “who is rooted in ideas and memories rather than places and material objects, and
therefore has a profound mistrust of what constitutes reality (IH, 125).” What becomes apparent here is his sense of a migrant’s affiliation to ideas rather than to concrete places. “Having experienced several ways of being”, Rushdie argues, “the migrant suspects reality” (IH, 125). Rushdie (re)constructs the nation in the light of an acute consciousness about the multiplicity and provisionality of his own location within what constitutes home. Saleem Sinai, the anti-hero and narrator of MC, details the hour and circumstances of his birth, revealing the cultural miscegenation and comical misrecognition thereof. A crazed midwife named Mary Pereira switches two new-borns – Amina Sinai’s and a poor woman called Vanita’s. Amina’s child is the unexpected consequence of an affair with an Englishman, William Methwold, who boasts of being a direct descendent of a particularly imperialistic East India Company officer. Thus, Saleem Sinai, hailed by Nehru himself as the child of independent India, is in reality the offspring of a reluctantly departing colonizer. But this accident, as the adult Saleem insists, is the allegorical condition of all those who inherit the colonial aftermath: “In fact, all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children were being born who were only partially the offspring of their parents (MC 118).” Saleem refuses to acknowledge the inauthenticity of his digressive narration, as also the attempts to reveal his flawed genealogy. The Sinais eventually reconcile themselves to the fact of Methwold’s bloodline, namely, as Leela Gandhi points out, “to the hybrid inadequacies of their own Postcoloniality (8).” Saleem explains:

    When we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found that it made no difference! I was still their son: they remained my parents. In a kind of collective failure of imagination,
we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts.

(119)

Aijaz Ahmad, in his seminal book *In Theory*, contends that Rushdie’s elitist class orientation prevents him from engaging effectively with a resistive postcolonial practice in his writings that lack political praxis. He fails to deploy the concept of cultural difference to interrogate the nationalist narrative. Kumkum Sangari’s criticism of Rushdie is also on similar lines. In her reading of *MC* in *The Politics of the Possible*, Sangari points to Rushdie’s insufficient confrontation with domestic politics in India. She argues that Rushdie “appears at times to grasp Indianness as if it were a torrent of religious, class, and regional diversity rather than a complex articulation of cultural difference, contradiction, and political use that can scarcely be idealized (239).”

Rushdie proclaims himself to be a ‘fantasist’ by virtue of his migrant status. The accoutrements of mimetic realism are no longer available to him as a migrant subject. “Having experienced several ways of being”, the migrant, says Rushdie, “suspects, and thus resists, reality”; to be a migrant is to be forced to formulate “a new relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats (*IH*, 124-25).” The ‘home’ can be metaphorized only from an ‘away’ location. In fact in his next novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Rushdie reconstructs his entire narrative of the nation from a position outside the limits of the geographical boundaries, reflecting chiefly on the aspects of homelessness and of loss of roots. He laments for Bombay, “no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy (*MLS*, 376).”

In contrast to *MC* there is *ASB* which has been considered as a traditional novel in many ways, and therefore positing Seth in a different, almost
antagonistic realm from that of other diasporic writers of the postcolonial era. Since the publication of the novel, Seth has displayed an anti-writerly attitude, stating his ignorance of literary theory, and claiming that there is no need for it either. He stated in an interview with Jose Sanchez:

The kinds of books I like reading most, modern books or old books, are books which don't make me too conscious about what exactly it is to be a writer. I'm not really interested in writers, I'm interested in the general world, if it includes writers, fine, but I'm not interested in the writer examining his own navel…. (50)

Seth rejects the aesthetics commonly associated with Postmodernism, and an initial reading of ASB confirms that there is no explicitly perceptible presence of the author in the narrative; no authorial voice interrupting the flow of dialogues between characters. He does not seem to directly address the reader or to question the complexities of the novel. No mention is made in the book of the constructed quality of the fiction; no overt emphasis is made on the artifice of narration. As Vikram Seth said during his stay in Spain promoting his novel, he was against writers who became the protagonists of their work. What mattered to him was the telling of the story and the building up of characters (Sanchez, 50). Despite Seth's emphasis on not being included in the narrative, on certain occasions the presence of an omniscient narrator can be seen displaying something like authorial comment in the form of cold and bitter irony. During a riot in the city of Brahmpur, when a Muslim mob roams around old streets looking for its Hindu counterpart, the author reflects on the fate of three Muslim drummers, innocent victims of fear and hatred, who “lay murdered by the wall of the temple, their drums smashed in, their heads half hacked off, their bodies doused in kerosene and set alight - all,
doubtless, to the greater glory of God (1058).” Seth’s idea of culture and belonging can be understood in the analogy that he himself draws with the banyan tree. He comments:

A banyan tree has lots of roots, you can't even tell sometimes what the original trunk is, how do you say ‘the trunk is rooted here, or is it rooted there, or is it unrooted?’ People think if you can understand more than one kind of culture you must necessarily be some kind of rootless cosmopolitan. I don't think so at all…. One should not feel a stranger in one's own country, definitely not, but one should not try to be like a complete stranger in the world as well. (Sanchez, 52)

Thus Seth’s idea of India, based on liberal progressive thinking, is portrayed and endorsed by and in ASB. His conception of secularism is articulated from within the firmly established boundaries of the nation-state compared to Salman Rushdie’s MC, which questions the viability of the very concept of nation. Seth’s articulation is premised on an already consolidated and accepted idea of the nation. He then moves on to the problem of making this idea work in the face of issues such as communal clashes and economic instability.

Robert Dixon says of Amitav Ghosh that even though he is travelling in the west, he is not travelling with the west. Ghosh however builds up his critique of nationalism around “the idea of utopian universal humanity” and postulating a “global theory of the colonial subject” (34). The conflation of history and memory, and the provisionality of identity are popular devices employed by the writer to achieve his objective of ‘glimps[ing] the final redemptive mystery’. The destabilizing of spatial and temporal boundaries border as A.N. Kaul puts it on an “irresponsible
retreat from the real world as constituted in and through history (308).” Rather than negotiate cultural cross-borders there is a desire to get beyond and above them that the authorial sensitivity betrays in his echoing of English Romanticism of Wordsworth and Keats (Mee, 98).

“A novel” according to Amitav Ghosh, “… must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves” (Ghosh 2002: 361). Most of his novels have had South Asia as one of the major axis of the setting whereas the other axes have been located in some other part of the globe. Ghosh’s exploration of different landscapes in his fiction prompts Anita Desai to describe him at par with Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass and Milan Kundera as “belonging to this international school of writing which successfully deals with the post-colonial ethos of the modern world without sacrificing the ancient histories of their separate lands” (Desai 1986).

While Rushdie in his novel frequently underscores the religious syncretism that underlies the culture and religion of the sub-continent, Seth never comments on the artificiality of the national borders created by Partition. Considerations of Ghosh’s recuperation of the syncretic tradition as a different form of conceiving identity highlights the differences between Rushdie and Seth. Whereas both MC and SL question the ‘naturalized’ status of national identity, and reveal its unfinished nature, ASB works within a comfortably defined and delimited secular nation-state where religion is relegated to the personal sphere.
4.4 PATHS OF RECOVERY

Rather than an opposition between aesthetics and politics; between formalism and historicism, this study warrants a reading of form in conjunction with political and historical questions.

4.4.1 Memory versus History

Postmodernism does not see history as an ‘innocent’ representation of facts or events and brings to the fore questions of agency and ideology. History is narrativizing of the past, but the past can only be reconstructed from memory and not be relived to exactitude. Thus, the reality of the past is contingent on the historian. The objectivity of historical ‘truth’ can be called into question at all times. In his seminal work on historiography called What is History? E. H. Carr writes: “The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate” (12). He argued for the subjective nature of the historians’ materials, and militated against the idea of history as it was being written as purely objective. The historian, he countered was not a passive observer who "lets the facts speak for themselves". Carr argued that history was "an unending dialogue between the past and present" (18-19). Likewise, he argued that historians are necessarily impacted by the present while writing about the past. Moreover, history is inextricably linked to identity construction, be it national history and the formation of national identity or the reflection of one’s history/ancestry in an individual/group identity thereby leading to the institutionalization of history. The assumption being made here of course is that both ‘history’ and ‘identity’ are essentialist and substantive. The subaltern studies historians challenge the existence of any single authentic ‘History’ by
retelling it from the perspective of the hitherto unheard peoples. Thus the idea of history as a “directly accessible, unitary past” is substituted by the conception of ‘histories’, as an “ongoing series of human constructions” (Cox and Reynolds 4). In the process of writing his autobiography, Saleem challenges the narrative of the history of India in MC. What Saleem purports to present is, as pointed out by Anna Guttman, “a halal version of history” rather than an authentic one. She further contends that the novel “argues for a strategic integrity” in national identity as opposed to a naturalized and unproblematic one (62). Thus, Saleem’s unreliable narration in the novel is a deliberate artifice as pointed out by Rushdie in ‘Errata’: or, Unreliable Narration in Midnight’s Children- “The mistake feels more and more like Saleem’s; its wrongness feels right” (23). The historical events depicted in Rushdie’s novels stand in contradiction to their established ‘official’ versions. Saleem gets the date of Gandhi’s assassination wrong; Lata Mangeshkar is on the radio in 1946, which is a factual error; Picture Singh and Saleem go on a train from Delhi to Bombay which is said to pass through Kurla, this is impossible as Kurla is on a different line. Such bloopers abound in Midnight’s Children. Saleem is writing (his)story in the novel and by distorting historical facts Rushdie brings our attention to the distorting process of memory which is inescapably unreliable. By prioritizing ‘memory’s truth’ over literal truth he simultaneously valorizes the measure of self-perception over received notions of identity.

Amitav Ghosh, as much as Rushdie, challenges any definitive claims to ‘authentic’ history by pointing out its dependency on (unreliable) memory. His fiction while drawing heavily from the historiography of India acts as a lens or a filter to understanding the far-reaching consequences of human strife. More often than not Ghosh’s works are an
attempt at exorcizing the colonial ghost by revisiting the past in search of that “final redemptive mystery” that makes the present sufferable. Brinda Bose points out, “Diasporic identity in its inherent fracturedness clearly intrigues him; he analyzes this “space” with reference to its historians” (237). At the same time however Ghosh distances himself from the kind of history historians write, pointing out the ‘human history’ that fiction writers engage with and that he is interested in. In his novel TSL by privileging imagination over recollection Ghosh disrupts the rigidity of cultural identification. The unnamed narrator is warned by his uncle Tridib that he should learn to imagine precisely in order to “be free of other people’s invention” (31). In her book Worlds Within: National Narratives and Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing Vilashini Cooppan writes:

> It is indeed to mental maps, to the psychic terrain of memory, trauma, desire, and identification that the novel [The Shadow Lines] repeatedly turns in its efforts to chronicle the improbable logic and violent consequences of the other, more physical maps of nations and states. (261)

There are ‘shadowy’ lines between fact and fiction; history and reality; between countries and cultures; everything seems to be a mirror image of the ‘Other’. Thus for Ghosh a much wider humanity replaces history as the marker of identity. The cogency of historical ‘reality’ is brought to the fore in the novel as pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay entitled ‘Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines’-

> The public chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by highlighting on the one hand the reality of the fictions people
create around their lives (‘stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose’) and on the other by recording the verifiable and graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. (134-5)

The delineation of multiple narrations or silenced narrations by such works of fiction restructures the identity of a nation by establishing its amorphous nature; and in fact stress on the necessity of such recognition on the part of the state for the fulfillment of its existence.

**4.4.2 Languages of the Nation**

English on the one hand has been accused of objectifying the representation of India to suit a transnational audience, while simultaneously being projected as a suitable vehicle because of being vernacularized to become a pan-Indian language. Whereas both *MC* and *ASB* incorporate a linguistic mixture, the former is extremely stylized while the latter quite orderly, even statist. This language mixture forms an integral part of their differing representations of the nation. Appropriation of the English language- ‘chutnification’- is another of Rushdie’s experimentation within the novel form. Language is an important signifier of identity and plays a pivotal role in the determination of the nation’s identity, especially in a multi-lingual country like India. Benedict Anderson connects the origin of nationalism to the rise of ‘print-capitalism’, thereby linking the proclamation of a nation to the enunciation of particular languages. The Indian nation, however, lacks a unitary linguistic identification and the question of the language best suited to represent the Indian nation has always been contended in the social as well as literary spheres. In a stinging
critique of the task of subverting or transmuting the English language that writers like Rushdie undertake in their works, Amit Chaudhuri delineates that the “questioning of authenticity has nothing to do with countries like India” and is in fact a wholly western engagement. He cites examples of earlier writers like A.K. Ramanujan, Arvind Mehrotra and Dom Moraes who did not ‘appropriate’ language for their own postcolonial ends. The English language had already been accepted as a normative part of their inheritance (120). The elaborate, in fact painstaking verbal pyrotechnic that Rushdie engages with in MC can be seen as the effect of grappling with a language in which to reconstruct a disjointed and disjunctive self, trying to make sense of his own existence. The galore of compound words used by Rushdie in the novel only serves to confuse the readers, branding him as ‘modish’ and ‘faddist’, to the extent that his writing has been accused of ‘artificiality and appropriation’ by critics like O. P. Dwivedi. Hence, Tabish Khair points out:

The only Englishes which could be dubbed ‘not artificial’ and ‘unproblematically Indian’ would probably be the types used by Narayan or by Ghosh in The Calcutta Chromosome, who more or less write their minimally stylized version of the English grapholect. (110)

Seth Indianizes English in more subtle ways in comparison to Rushdie’s pyrotechnic linguistic experiment. Neelam Srivastava points out that both Rushdie and Seth draw from “an already established notion of English as a pan-Indian secular language” in order to project their pluralist conception of India. Even though very different from each other both
novels “present code-switching and code-mixing from other bhashas (266).” These processes are more obvious in Rushdie than in Seth. The very title of Seth’s novel can be read as a code. The use of the word ‘suitable boy’ derived from the search of Mrs Rupa Mehra for a groom for her daughter would in the Indian context denote a whole gamut of cultural factors ranging from her search for a boy of her own caste to her underlying anxiety for her daughter’s marriage within her own community and that she may not go unwed. It is immediately grasped in the entirety of its cultural-symbolic meaning as opposed to the way in which it would be used in a culture where English is the first language. Harish Trivedi praises ASB for its translatability to Hindi, positing it as more Indian than MC for that very reason (30). Both novels deal with the issue of the ‘familiarizing’ versus the ‘foreignizing’ approach. In the former there is a focus on bringing the author to the audience. Maria Tymoczko refers to this approach as "an assimilative presentation in which likeness or ‘universality’ is stressed and cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work.” In the foreignizing approach, on the other hand, there is a deliberate foregrounding of the unfamiliar cultural elements, some lexical items are left untranslated, in the effort to bring the audience towards the text, rather than the opposite. Throughout MC, characters constantly use Hindi-Urdu words; in some cases they are translated for the non-Indian reader, in other cases they are not. Harish Trivedi claims that most of the Hindi words have been translated into English, for “instant intelligibility”. He calls Rushdie’s bilingualism superficial, stating that Hindi words are scattered here and there as a mark of authenticity, but which is not followed by a deeper mediation between the two cultures, Western and Indian. In contrast, Trivedi holds that of all the recent Indian English novels, ASB is the most deeply embedded in the theme and the
context which it depicts, and the most intimately complicit in a local language (78-9).

ASB and MC show two different aspects of the debates raging around language in the young nation. In ASB the Legislative Assembly is the battleground of Indian identity of which language is a fundamental part, whereas in MC it is represented through the language riots which threaten to break up territorial integrity. More importantly these representations also point to the question of English as a pan-Indian language versus a reflection of an elite socio-economic identity. Saleem Sinai is a member of the English-speaking upper-middle class strata of society. He has no knowledge of Marathi, the language of the state where he lives; thus for him, the language marches are merely an onlooker’s sport. The upper class, secure in its knowledge of English, is unconcerned with the struggles between vernaculars against each other for attention and supremacy; since English, is effectively, the language of authority and prosperity. Saleem finds himself suddenly thrust in the midst of these alien struggles; and narrowly escapes with his life.

4.4.3 Form and Rhetoric

The deployment of particular narrative strategies is another essential element that writers resort to in order to facilitate their particular agenda of imaging/imagining the nation. Questions of form and rhetoric are intimately connected to intent because of postcolonial literature’s specific concern with subversion and critique of master narratives. Recourse to traditional native forms of narrative such as myth, legends, folk and oral narratives is espoused by the writer in the attempt to counter canonical forms of narrative, as also to revive the native tradition. Increasingly
experimental forms of narrative like magic realism have come to be favoured by a number of writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, etc. The technique allows for multiple planes of reality to exist. As Slemon points out, the method is instrumental in marking a “sustained opposition” between “two opposing discursive systems” that “forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (12). At the same time, as Pramod Nayar points out, it “runs the risk of perpetuating the (colonial) divide: progressive, modern West and pre-modern, ‘magical’ East” (236). Anna Guttman is dismissive of any necessities of form asserting that “there is no reason to assume that realist narrative is necessarily hegemonic and incapable of incorporating diverse perspectives” since the novel genre is inherently dialogical (12).

*MC* and *ASB* are two novels that provide an interesting contrast in their choice of narrative mode which has been variously ascribed to the divergent ways in which they portray the life of the nation and vice versa. Seth follows all the formal characteristics of a traditional realist novel—omniscient narrator, linear chronology, coherency in characterization—while the story unfolds in a ‘universe of ordered significance’. The choice of form for Rushdie in *MC* was self-consciously anti-Western:

> I found that I was writing within a literature that for a long time had shaped [the] view… [that] a novel had to be mimetic, to imitate the world, the rules of naturalism and realism. *(Conversations 75)*

Saleem is an unreliable almost paranoid narrator who does not narrate his story in a proper chronological order and continuously digresses only to fear the loss of ‘meaning’ and purpose. Rushdie’s use of magic realism primarily serves the function of blurring the boundary between reality and
fiction, and by implication between history and memory. As Saleem confers in the course of the novel:

Reality can have a metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before …. Midnight’s children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view; they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. (278)

The element of fantasy serves the purpose of redefining the limits of reality by positing ‘fantasy’ in its realm and conflating it with ‘facts’. Moreover the choice of form is ever so often linked with the political intent of the writer. The novel makes no distinction between the public and the private; enmeshing the personal and national. The division of the state of Bombay takes place because Saleem loses control of his bicycle. The implication of such a blurring therefore in Saleem’s words is that “to understand just one life, you have to swallow the world”. As Anna Guttman points out, this would only imply that “in order to describe the nation one need look beyond its borders” (63). Through his half-mythic, half-historic narration (magic-realism) Saleem endeavors to recall not only his story but that of a multifarious nation; challenging any possibilities of a pure
and authentic recount, in the wake of what Homi Bhabha calls “continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or ‘cultural difference’ in the act of writing the nation” (201). Thus for Rushdie the articulation of national unity poses a problem that is exemplified in his choice of an unreliable ‘hybrid’ narrator.

At the same time the dependency of multiculturalist constructions on choices of form has been overstretched. Dominic Head, in the chapter entitled "Multicultural Personae" in The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000, addresses the question of the troubled relationship of postcolonialism and realism in a subsection titled "Ethnic Identity and Literary Form.” He argues:

[A] productive cultural hybridity is commonly (and erroneously) perceived to go hand-in-glove with overtly experimental forms. In such a view, you either have a startlingly innovative style and rapturous presentation of multicultural energies, or you have neither. Rushdie's exuberant magic realism is thus sometimes seen to exemplify the kind of formal reinvigoration of the novel in Britain that the postcolonial era makes possible....However, such an easy equation between experiment and cultural hybridity can imply a simple opposition between experiment and tradition that is inappropriate, with traditional realism coming to embody a reactionary conservatism. (172)

Such reservations can be counterpointed by citing the inclusion of multifarious voices portrayed within the realist tradition. In her book entitled Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel, Neelam Srivastava studies the secular-religious debate in Indian English Novels premising
that the novel “emerges as the most versatile form for a staging of the conflict … [allowing] for a heteroglot representation of conflicting worldviews and differing conceptualizations of the ‘national’ past” (1). According to her in *ASB* Vikram Seth “aspires to provide an idea of India through a realistic approach that has an almost photographic quality. Furthermore she adds, it “displays a rare belief in the possibility of representational ‘authenticity’, which it seeks to achieve through an impressively detailed and documented reconstruction” of the Indian society.

However, Alistair Cormack points out that “Realism … bar[s] a more radical conception of subjectivity—a conception that is crucial for postcolonial critiques of epistemology.” In this sense *MC* functions as a metafiction that critiques the novel form continuous with its critique of established notions about the nation, to convey, as Srivastava writes, “the impossibility of a powerful structure of meaning which can connect all the fragments into a single system” (91). Thus, Rushdie attempts to “delimit the boundaries” in his novel by parodying the received state sponsored history of the nation and “provide content” for his conception of the modern Indian nation. He depicts India as a hybrid space (is this the same as Nehru’s ‘unity in diversity?’) by linking the fates of the nation to a ‘hybrid’ entity. A hybridity that challenges all attempts at fixities of national identity. In his collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie declares in a disclaimer of sorts that he has created ‘a version’ of India based on the fragmented yet evocative memories of a physically alienated homeland. The recreation of Bombay as a diverse city of mixed cultural and religious traditions becomes a microcosmic representation of India. Saleem’s self as much as his narrative is instrumental in constructing the disjunctive
Indian nation. Therefore, by ending the novel in a celebratory dissolution of Saleem into 600 million constitutive entities Rushdie leaves open several possibilities of imagining ‘India’. In juxtaposition to this idea Seth posits in ASB that for the nation to be viable prioritizing of the collective identity over and above the individual needs to be embraced, especially with regard to religion. The example of Mahesh Kapur is notable in its parallel to Nehru’s idea of secularism and the need for the relegation of religion to the private sphere. This echoes Partha Chatterjee’s division of the public and private spheres of nationalism. The subsumption of individual choice by the general consensus and ‘common good’ is exemplified by Lata’s choice of the pragmatic Haresh over the romantic Kabir.

The absence of an omniscient voice in MC serves to subsume “the clamour of the voices” (IH, 393) in the novel, and is a tool to resist the totalizing and absolute consciousness and aesthetics of the traditional realist narrative. By centering traditional realist narrative forms and by replacing such forms and reader expectation of such modes of representation Rushdie forges the relation between form and content. The embedded depiction of the nation in the polyglot text brings attention to the narrative structure as being self-reflexive.