CHAPTER III

WORLDS WITHIN
This chapter explores the relationship between identity choices and location, especially with respect to delineation of particular character types in the respective texts. To be a subject is also to be subjected to various identifying units such as geographical-cultural, ethnic-racial, psycho-social, sexual, linguistic, and many more. Here the question of it being something ‘found’ or something ‘fashioned’, as well as its conception in singular or social terms is of great import. Literature provides rich material for nuancing accounts of the roles of such factors in the construction of self. Theoretical treatments of subjects may seem reductive in comparison with the subtle exploration of the problem of identity dealt with finesse in the novel form. Characters on the one hand emerge from their engagement with the world, but on the other hand seem to be posited as the resultant/cause of those very engagements. An exploration of characters deemed to be assuming multiple/hybrid loci opens up spaces for negotiating the slippages in a unitary idea of the construction of selves. At the same time the study of certain normative, even stereotypical constructions within these novels teases out the subtle diminution of certain groups.

In the capacity of these novels as challenging or reimagining the singular statist conceptions of selfhood, the representation of minority identities leads to interesting observations with regards to the extent of subversion of rigid and prescriptive ideas of belonging and identity attempted by these novels. Discussions about identity have moved beyond the essentialist views and shifted to multiple meanings intersecting each other on various planes such as caste, gender, religion, sexuality and ethnicity among other things. In order to understand the negotiation of these shifting identities it is important to explore the current discourses of subjectivity and representation; which
identities are negotiable and which spaces are they negotiable in; and how they are negotiated in these spaces, are some of the aspects that demand enquiry.

3.1 IDENTITY AND LITERATURE

There is no single definition of identity that is universally agreed upon mainly because there is no single rubric of identity, and it is an entity both complex and contradictory in nature. Depending on the context, personal identity has been understood as being a subjective experience or a personal ‘sense of self,’ a construct, an existential quest and an ongoing process. Moreover, it is generally understood that identity or a sense of self is constructed by and through narrative – through the stories we narrate about ourselves and about each other’s lives. The existence of complexity in relationships is due to the interplay of memory, nostalgia, writing and identity. Also, differentiation has been made between social identity, that part of a person’s identity or self-concept which derives from her being part of a particular social group, culture or society, and one’s personal identity, the person’s more or less conscious concept of themselves as a unique individual with singular attributes, defining characteristics, and a particular historical experience. “On the one hand, identity is a feature of the individual, reflecting an internal process of self-definition. On the other hand, identity emerges in a social context and is shaped by the immediate circumstances as well as the broader culture” (qtd. in Jørgensen 618). As Erik Erikson, the psychoanalyst most famous for coining the term identity crisis, has pointed out, the term ‘identity’ has several different, but
intimately connected meanings. Sometimes it refers to “a conscious sense of individual identity; at another to an unconscious striving for continuity of personal character” (p. 102). There are many different ways of understanding ‘identity’, from the simple ‘me’ that we all think or believe we are to the complex considerations found in domains such as philosophy, psychology and culture studies.

Identity is derived from the Latin ‘idem’ meaning ‘the same’. Based on the understanding of identity as a ‘being’ rather than a ‘becoming’, it can be looked upon as a single entity. The consciousness of being this single entity stems not just from self-knowledge, but also from the fact of being separated by distinct boundaries from other entities or unities. Recognition of the self in this sense is linked with the recognition of the other- ‘I am not you”. This in effect leads to a certain extent of depersonalizing in the process of recognition of an identity. In fact, more than recognition it is a creation/construction given to a human subject. The creation/construction of this depersonalized identity of the human subject is influenced by power politics, ideology and culture. Thus, Ernesto Laclau wrote that “the constitution of a social identity is an act of power (31).” This is one way of looking at identity; but beyond the simple unity, identity can be seen as a collective. One becomes a collection of separate identities- a different person at work, at play, at home; one is also a sum of one’s histories. And these collectives may not always be cohesive. The question of ‘is’ v/s ‘is not’ may be unclear at times. An individual is part of a society and of a culture, all of which have their singular identities and these reflect back to the individual. We connect with others in such a way that they become essential to our own identity. Collective consciousnesses have varying impacts, depending upon
the context they can come together or disperse; and in the process affecting selves in every which way.

Erikson defines identity as “a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image (201).” Such a conceptualization is wrought with contradictions and as such defers any fixed or definitive understanding of the term. The pairing of subjectivity with a world image lends the mutability character to identity. To begin with identity can be looked at from two planes- the personal and the public. And it is not necessary that the two would always coincide. There are various factors that act as determinants of the identity of an individual- gender, religion, ethnicity/caste, and profession/occupation. Thus the identity of an individual can be explained only with either of these reference points, depending on the context in which it requires to be explained. Jonathan Rutherford defines identity as “the conjuncture of our past with the social, cultural and economic relations we live within. Each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations. He is a précis of the past (10).”

Literature is an important tool in the recognition as well as creation of identities of individuals, society or of the nation. Stuart Hall, even while acknowledging the ruptures in the understanding of identity as a continuum; and while looking at identity as ‘discontinuous points of identification’ stresses on the importance of the act of ‘imaginative rediscovery’ which the conception of an essential (one) identity entails. Literature, especially the novel form provides space for the expression of such an act. Raja Rao
created a unified India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in his novel *Kanthapura*, even though the extent of the fictive element in such a construction has to be acknowledged, the novel form lends a certain amount of tenability to such idealization. Vikram Seth, for e.g., has been accused of ideological identification with an elite readership in his novel *ASB*. His efforts at ‘Indianizing’ seem to contribute to the process of ‘othering’ and this process is effected through identity construction and semblance. Generalization leads to stereotyping. Most of colonialist literature is an example of such stereotyping. This of course is also attributed to the compulsive creation of the ‘Other’ as a foil to the ‘Self’ (Edward Said’s *Orientalism*). Such narratives of a dominant discourse that placed a set of people as the ‘Other’ also had the power to make them see and feel themselves as ‘Other’, thereby constructing the very fabric of their identity. An example of this can be seen in E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, set against the backdrop of the British Raj and the Indian independence movement in the 1920s. The initially promising friendship between an Indian, Dr. Aziz and the Englishman, Fielding falls apart due to mutual stereotyping in the aftermath of a conflict. Though Forster is sympathetic to India and Indians in the novel, his overwhelming depiction of India as a muddle matches the manner in which many Western writers of his day treated the East in their works.

### 3.2 PROBLEMATICS OF IDENTITY

The passage from an unproblematic conception of identity to the socially constructed, contested multiplicities of identity is closely bound to the
changing dynamics of place and space. The increasing contact with
difference, the unlike, or the other induces a raised awareness of self-
identity. In the Indian context this consciousness can perhaps be traced to
pre-colonial times of foreign conquests to begin with, through the colonial
contact, leading to the present era of global mobility and cross-cultural
interaction. Moreover, identity construction is inextricably linked to history,
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. In fact
both history and identity are positional and as Amartya Sen remarks in his
work *The Argumentative Indian-Writings on Indian Culture, History and
Identity*, multiple identities can be invoked in disparate contexts; warning
against the “presumption that we must have a single- or at least a principal
and dominant identity” (350). The essentialist notion of identity is derived
from the sense of being rooted to a specific place, culture and history.
Paradoxically though history can be distorted, manipulated or constructed to
establish a desired identity.

Analyzing the different conceptions of identity as developed by modern
philosophical thought, Jorge Larrain argues that:

> The modern philosophical conception of identity was based on the
belief in the existence of a self or inner core which emerges at birth,
like a soul or essence, and which, in spite of being able to develop
different potentialities in time, remains basically the same throughout
life, thus providing a sense of continuity and self-recognition. (1994:
144)
This idea of the *a priori* self, according to Larrain, was postulated by the Cartesian dictum: *cogito ergo sum* (‘I think, therefore I am’). Whereas, the structuralist conception of identity as a construction shaped by external social structures is highlighted by Claude Lévi-Strauss’ contention that the “...supposed totalizing conception of the self ...seems to me to be an illusion sustained by the demands of social life—and consequently a reflection of the external on the internal—rather than the object of an apodictic experience (1974: 256).” This view of identity as a malleable entity intensified doubts about the proposed consistency and unity of the self. Poststructuralists like Michel Foucault’s argument that the individual “...is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces...” (1980, 73-74) and Jean-François Lyotard’s postmodernist situation of the self as “always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be” (198, 15) further highlighted the crisis of identity, or the sense of the self as experienced by the postmodern individual. This idea is also reiterated in Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of the postmodern subject as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity.

Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self. ’ Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted.
about… The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. (1992, 277)

Hall’s notion of identity is anchored on the concept of ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘being’. Accordingly, positioning in the process of identification is what matters most rather than any grand binding concepts such as gender, culture, language, etc. This is a problematic conception of identity leading to extremely complex, contingent, fragmented and unstable existence. It is the interaction of being and becoming that can best negotiate the problem of identity played out in, what Ien Ang calls “the messiness of everyday life”. Ang believes that these interactions can contribute to:

The incremental and dialogic construction of lived identities which slowly dissolve the boundaries between the past and the future, between ‘where we come from’ and ‘what we might become’, between being and becoming: being is enhanced by becoming and becoming is never possible without a solid grounding in being. (2002, 11)

Identity as ‘being’ is premised on the acceptance as given and unchanging, the categories that surround one’s existence, such as gender, family, religion, class, ethnicity, homeland, history, language, culture, race or some such factors. When the givens however intersect with other factors that shape or influence the being such as upbringing, education, ideology, culture, historical and socio-economic circumstances, the outcome is a commingling of the two. Moreover, even categories such as ethnicity, tradition, homeland, culture, language are perceived differently as a result of phenomena like colonization, mass migrations and globalization. All these concepts are
relativized and contextualized and cannot be maintained as the sacrosanct center of reference of identity. Thus the being is predicated by the becoming and always in the process of transformation. What becomes important in this case then is the matter of choice, of positioning and identification. Thus one is an active subject in the construction of one’s identity.

Nayantara Sahgal writes in her essay 'Some Thoughts on the Puzzle of Identity':

Many of those who write in English live and write in the west. They are not affected by the raw winds assailing India ... they are not encumbered by the nitty gritty of carving out continuity ... in the on-going process of building a nation that has only in recent times become a nation ... they are reacting to the pressures and concerns of an environment that is not Indian, and are fashioning identities born of choice, not of history. (1997, 85)

What is highlighted here is not only the element of choice, but a distinction in the understanding of the essentialist idea of history versus its flexibility. According to Sahgal history is something which moulds identity, connecting the post-colonial subject with 'a piece of territory on the map'; it is inescapable and irreducible.

In a conspicuously nativist vein, Makarand Paranjape attributes the "inauthenticity" of Indo-Anglian writers to issues of location by claiming that:

They offer a certain kind of representation of India which is governed by the West's tastes, images, specifications and likings [....] Behind
such a compromise, infiltration and cooptation is the writer's location ideological, political, cultural and of course, geographical. (2000, 65) Paranjape's position exhibits signs of a nativist revivalist stance. Paranjape, in his study of the Indian English novel, claims that “Raja Rao is our best Indian English novelist because, ultimately, he helps us recover and revitalize our cultural, intellectual and spiritual traditions.” Thus, Paranjape is also being prescriptive about the type of literature that should be produced in India today, saying that an Indian literary text “ought to assist in the incomplete and unfinished task of nation building” by constructing “the institutions and traditions required for a healthy and vibrant Indian culture” (Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel, 17).

3.3 SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY

Identity is a matter of choice limited or set free by the cartographies of the mind as much as the geographic location. The idea of the self stands in close relation to the passion for place, or what has been termed as ‘Topophilia’ by Gaston Bachelard in his Poetics of Space. Place, however, is not an unchanging constant concept. The notion of place as a bordered territory or a narrowly defined point in space is obviously inadequate to describe the modern diaspora for whom place has been displaced and possibilities opened up to un-delimited spaces. Thus, place far from being a pinpointed spot in space has become a “non-limited locality” (Casey, 304). Given the patterns of movement and flows of people, culture and information a nation’s or community’s ‘natural limits’ are extended as it were beyond its geographical boundaries and there is a sense of cultural continuity across boundaries. However, this consciousness is also challenged by the limitations of the
everyday ‘local’ vicissitudes. Whether by choice or by compulsion, geographic dislocation necessitates major readjustments and transformations in the spatial poetics of an individual’s identity. The postcolonial period is witness to extensive dislocation of the human population induced directly or indirectly by colonialism that Ralph J Crane has defined the postcolonial condition as “one of dislocation and cultural expatriation (a sense of belonging to one place and simultaneous refusal to accept another)” (Crane 2000: 4). The experience of the disruption from a specific location constitutes the texture of human life in a postcolonial, migratory reality. Adapting and assimilating to the new culture along with an unavoidable degree of acculturation is the inevitable consequence of ‘dislocation’ and subsequent ‘relocation’. Crisis of identity at some point during this transition seems the fate of most diasporics. Thus much of this body of literature oscillates between a pursuit to ‘grasp’ the self and the dynamics of ‘escape’ and ‘nostalgia’. The identity constructs in these novels is deeply connected to the writers’ (cultural) location and affiliation, namely that of the diasporic entity- riven by two cultures and two nations - engaged in the ensuing tensions of dislocation and relocation. Thus, positionality provides them a way of understanding all knowledge, including that of the self, as dependent and contextual – where I am makes a whole lot of difference to who I am or what I experience. In the process of crossing and re-crossing multiple borders of language, history, nationality and culture, diasporas inadvertently challenge the totalitarianism of singular place affiliations, and reconfigure the trajectory of their identity in the multiplicity of plural belongings and interrelationships. The non-limited locality of their existence therefore, does not imply disappearance of borders. Rather, it suggests the complexity and changing meanings of place as experienced between and beyond borders that
exist both at the limits of and within demarcated spaces. Their dual experiences arising out of cultural mobility inhere a paradoxical attitude towards borders being both barriers and bridges. It is this paradox that both challenges and defines the diaspora identity and self-conception.

People have subjective feelings about places and this plays a great role in their individual identity as well as group identities. The thoughts and feelings people have towards places are every bit as real and material as those places themselves, thereby impacting their self-perception. Also, just as people are unique in terms of looks and personalities (and yet share the same biological makeup); places are unique too in spite of their growing interconnectedness and interdependency. Even though there are increasing interconnections between places and they are becoming ‘spaces of flow’ rather than fixed spaces, they are not somehow becoming more alike, thereby underscoring the importance of human-land relationship. In fact after Oxford University’s first professional geography appointment in 1887 – Halford Mackinder – had famously defined geography as a ‘bridging subject’ between the human and natural sciences. A sense of place validates the subjective interpretation of places irrespective of the global interdependency, after all most people live their entire lives within just a few square kilometers. So, place is a crucial locus for daily experience. People have a highly personal sense of place that is bound up with specific events in one’s life, involving not just perceptions of the place but more importantly feelings about the place; and one of them most certainly will be the home place(s). Places also have formative impacts on people’s sense of self. Additionally, place is written into the very character of people; for example in the stereotyping of people on the basis of their place of origin. Bloody
struggles over places reveal the extent of local attachments and differences as the fundamental aspect of the human condition. This is why Doreen Massey, a British social scientist and geographer, argues for the acknowledgement of the importance of a place concept that stresses on how ‘outside’ processes impact on the ‘inside’ of places only to respect differences while celebrating connections-

The geography of social relations forces us to recognize our interconnectedness, and underscores the fact that both personal identity and the identity of those envelopes of space-time in which and between which we live and move (and have our 'Being') are constructed precisely through that interconnectedness. (131)

Simultaneously, the distinctive character of a particular place while being a product of its positioning in relation to wider forces (social and economic processes), in turn left its own imprint on those wider processes. This further emphasizes the importance of the specificities of places and of people. Postmodernism recognizes the complexity of cultures and places, thereby highlighting the significance of both the local and the diverse. Places have a significant role in the construction of identities through their use, as pointed out by Tim Cresswell, in the construction of ideas. Identities that are ‘deviant’ or outside of ‘normal’ are so determined by delimiting who or what belongs where and when. Given that identity over and above a question of personal experience and perception is also shaped by the social context; sometimes the meanings attached to a place are so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them. Though senses of place may have very personal connotations, they are not just the product of one individual’s experiences and perceptions; rather such perceptions and
meanings are shaped to a great extent by the social, cultural and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves. Moreover feelings about places are caught up in the power relations that structure the lives of people (Rose, 88-9).

What has been termed as ‘Topophilia’ (Tuan 1974: 4) and ‘Topophobia’ (Relph 1996: 912) is due in part to the social, cultural, political contexts the individual/group is subject to. Yet this is a mutual interaction, impacting both the subject’s sense of place and sense of self; sometimes leading to spatial uncertainty, as maybe seen in the case of diasporas. Then again this dilemma is not a permanent or constant one. Since places are contingent upon socioeconomic and political historical circumstances, feelings and meanings attached to the place or sense of place may also alter. By implication, the relative strengths of attachment to place may wax and wane in response to the shifting global, national and local forces social formations. Also feelings of longing and belonging do not always coincide, leading to struggles surrounding national and local cultural identity. Multiple issues arise such as those of nationalism, patriotism, citizenship, ethnicity, cultural assimilation and loyalty. Seen in this context, the question of identity is fundamentally the question of identifying with one or more places. Sometimes a sense of identity is established by the rejection of a place. Gillian Rose points out a clear example of this in Said’s *Orientalism*. Said shows how,

> Over a long historical period many Western European and North American visitors have painted the landscape of what they call the *Orient*, photographed its people, translated its languages, interpreted its cultural practices, and written about the area in academic texts, novels, poems and travelogues. This accumulated body of knowledge
about the place gradually developed a series of assumptions about how to approach the ‘East’. (92-3)

There is also a significant connection between social inequality and sense of place. Questions like whose sense of place acquires priority in a particularly conflicting set of portrayals; and whose sense of place struggles for expression recognition and validation arise. Sensing of places, then, can be seen as in the case of *Orientalism* as a result of underlying structures of power such as colonialism and imperialism.

### 3.4 Delineating Identity/ Representation

Discursive practices and semantic representations are an established and normative means of negotiating as well as delineating identities. However, within the realm of these practices spatialization or literary cartography as a heuristic for discussing and critiquing novelistic representations is unrecognized. Writing is a form of spatialization, that is, narrative mapping the real and/or imagined spaces in a way that readers can connect to it and make sense of their own social spaces. Robert Tally explains this through the example of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as “a cognitive mapping that unfolds as a guided tour through mythical, religious and political histories now spatialized within a spiritual cartography which is the poem itself (2013, 6). According to him Dante creates an allegorical map of the otherworld and provides for the readers an opportunity to come to terms with the real or imagined spaces of their own existence via the literary cartography of the text. He likens *Commedia* to a map in multiple senses of the term, but
primarily in the sense of providing coordinates by means of which the subjects are able to locate themselves in relation to their surroundings.

D.H. Lawrence writes in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* about “The Spirit of Place,” that the literary and cultural products of a given people may be said to derive from their geographic conditions of possibility. “Each continent,” says Lawrence, “has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like, but the spirit of place is a great reality” (5–6). The narratives crafted in a certain point in time help to map the spatial coordinates of a changing society, and to give shape to a conceptual or imaginary geography that would allow individuals and communities to orient themselves with respect to this changing socio-cultural arena. Narratives help to make sense of and give a recognizable form to the impalpably changing world. Thus, a critical framework that focuses on the spatial representations within the texts would explore the overlapping territories of actual, physical geography and an author’s cognitive mapping of spaces in the literary text. The representation of the world in fiction also has the effect of transforming that world, for writers as well as for readers. The (literary) map not only helps us understand and navigate the spaces it purports to represent, but actively creates the space that it is. Literature has the ability to not only reflect the world around us, but also to shape our understanding of it and modulate the very fabric of the place in a somewhat reciprocal sense. Cultural presence too is evoked through spatial forms such as in the process of naming of spaces; what Paul Carter in his seminal 1988
essay *The Road to Botany Bay*, calls ‘spatial history’. He argues, in the context of colonial Australia, that “discoverers, explorers, settlers were making spatial history. They were choosing directions, applying names, imagining goals, inhabiting the country.” He describes this process as spatial imagining where the landscape is a purported blank text waiting to be inscribed upon by the colonial process.

Identity is a paradigmatic issue as well as a subject of inquiry in a number of Indian English novels. Pertinent questions surrounding the constructions of subjectivity and identity have been raised by these novels both implicitly and explicitly. Strategies of representation and empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities even though they share histories of deprivation and discrimination. Discourses situate subject positions within spaces of power/knowledge. In this regard Bill Ashcroft suggests positioning to be above all a matter of representation, of giving concrete forms to ideological concepts. Representation is a space in which identity is constructed and it is also the site of struggle over identity formation. He further elaborates that “the imaginative and the creative are integral aspects of that process by which identity itself has come into being (2001, 4). Thus identity cannot exist outside of representation. Some of the major concepts that silhouette the notion of identity in Indian English fiction are history, culture, caste, religion, place, language, nation and nationalism. It is the interplay of these concepts that construct a notion of identity. Significantly, it is through the creative reconstruction of lived space that identity transformation can be effected, especially in the context of a postcolonial environment. Ashcroft writes, “All constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question: Where do I belong?” Then in the
answer to this question lies the essence of the self in more than one way. Change in the feelings of belonging is reflected in the representation of self too. This is amply demonstrated in the literature written by and about diasporas. In the last two decades there has been a drastic shift in the way discourses about dispersion/migration with its negative connotations such as loss of homeland, a collective memory of oppression and the gnawing desire for return have been suppressed and transformed into exhilarating and positive representations of diaspora with their hypermobility and flexible identities. At the same time investigation into constructions of individual or group identities in the works deemed to belong to this category whether by virtue of the author’s location or the textual affiliation, reveal multiple and varied levels of representation. This plurality takes up the forms of competing perspectives.

3.4.1 Hyphenated/Multiple Identities

Hybridity and diaspora are celebrated as spaces of subversion. This is mainly due to its disruption of stability of modernist teleology and binary frameworks of distinction. Gilroy roots diaspora in its effective dislocations between ‘locations of residence’ and ‘locations of belonging’ (2000: 124). These dislocations are expressed through creation of hyphenated identities or characters with multiple place affiliations- ‘at home in the world’. Just like his creator Salman Rushdie, Saleem Sinai moves from one place to another both in the spiritual sense and physical sense, without being able to take root in any particular space. The multiple identities that the boy hides within himself is signaled by the many names given to him in the story – Snotnose,
Stainface, Sniffer, Baldy, or Piece-of-the-Moon. Though only a little boy, Saleem starts to ask himself a lot of questions about self-identity. Born at the exact moment of India’s birth, his identity is switched at the hour of birth. He is the offspring of a lower-class Hindu woman and her English lover, brought up by a Muslim family. Saleem Sinai is raised by a Goan Catholic ayah and in the course of the novel switches nationalities, from Indian to Pakistani. He even participates in a battle for religious identity, as opposed to his national identity. In Saleem’s own words, “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.” The identification of the author to his composite creation – Saleem Sinai is quite obvious. Rushdie equates migrants to ‘metaphorical beings’ (metaphor having its roots in the Greek words of bearing across) and as ‘borne-across humans’ (Grass, ix-x). The self-identity of such an entity is not necessarily concurrent with national identity, and in fact goes a step ahead in challenging the very ideas of identity and home. Several identities jostle with one another in Saleem; one being prioritized over the other as per the circumstances. Thus, as Amartya Sen writes, it is “not just a matter of ‘discovery’ or ‘recognition’ but ‘inescapably decisional’” (350). In the process of writing his autobiography, Saleem challenges the narrative of
the history of India. 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 accounts of the historical events depicted in Rushdie’s novels contradict their already known ‘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. In a paper entitled ‘Historical Truth in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children: A Question of Perspective’ Jennifer Santos analyses the final disintegration of Saleem –

In response to his declared search for meaning against absurdity, Saleem actively and admittedly attempts to link himself with the nation. Doing so results in cracking: an ultimate unity remains impossible. … By searching for one unified meaning rather than accepting a multiplicity of meanings, Saleem physically “cracks” as Rushdie portrays the disintegration of one unified historical viewpoint with a unity of meaning. (4)
The narrative in *TSL* takes one across national and cultural borders with an intriguing ease, challenging the traditional notions of temporality and spatiality. The borders between nations and cultures become blurred and ‘shadowy’ even as the unnamed narrator uses his imagination to transcend and traverse through time and space “to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror”(29). Nick Price, a Londoner, thus becomes the “spectral presence” beside the narrator at all times— “I would look into the glass and there he would be, growing, always faster, always a head taller than me…” (50). Thus, he is able to articulate his own identity as suggested by Sartre’s theory of the Self, by engaging the very ‘othering’ force as the ideal Other. Ghosh not only attempts to demonstrate the fluidity and heterogeneity of cultural identity but also disowns the theory of cultural centrality namely, that culture is rooted in a single place. Both the narrator and Tridib, his father’s cousin ‘belong’ not just in their native Calcutta milieu but are ‘at home’ in the world itself.

### 3.4.2 Normative/Stereotypical Identities

The question of personal identity is connected to the freedom of choice, of acting in accordance with one’s wishes as opposed to societal norms. This is illustrated very well in the contrasting freedoms of Tha’mma and Ila in *SL*. While Tha’mma will do anything to free her country, Ila will do anything to free herself. Both are vehement in their proclamation to go to great lengths in order to attain ‘their’ freedom. During her school days Tha’mma wanted to be the member of a student organization and kill an Englishman as part of her contribution to the movement to free the nation from British rule. Ila
takes the route of dancing, drinking and abandoned merrymaking in a nightclub in Calcutta much to her uncle Robi’s chagrin, in order to assert her independence. When Robi tries to stop her from mingling with strangers in the club, offering the explanation that she could act like that in England but not ‘here’, she leaves the club exclaiming infuriatedly: “Do you see now why I have chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free … free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.”

Ironically, Tha’mma sees no virtue in Ila’s assertion of her sense of independence. She condemns her calling her a whore who wants to be left to do things she pleases. Her definition of freedom is widely different from that of Ila’s. The difference between the two stances here are also the differences in the circumstances and historical spaces in which the two women lived. Tha’mma lived in times of nationalistic fervor; consequently she is a zealot when it comes to questions of patriotism and social confirmation. Ila, on the other hand is clearly a post-national citizen-traveler living out of suitcases and always in-transit. For Tha’mma freedom has a wider connotation because she has lived in a time that has witnessed people in large scales plunging to sacrifice their lives for the freedom of the nation. She therefore sees little merit in Ila’s individualistic definition of freedom. Tha’mma’s identity has been shaped by the ideas of nationhood and nationalism. Commenting on the difference between the East and the West in the understanding of the concept of freedom, Dipesh Chakraborty writes in his article, *Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?:*  

‘Freedom’ in the West several authors argue, meant *jathechhachar*, to do as one pleased, the right to self-indulgence. In India, it was said,
freedom meant freedom from the ego, the capacity to serve and obey voluntarily. (6)

However, in both the cases, of Tha’mma as well as Ila, freedom comes to mean the choice to exert one’s identity. What is interesting in Robi’s response to Ila’s assertion of her identity is his compromise in spite of his personal convictions and their coming to a mutual co-existence. He does not outright reject or oppose Ila’s behavior, insisting on the fact that she cannot here behave the way she does outside, in London. His outrage against her is due to the impropriety of the space rather than the act itself. In his imagined role as the custodian of the culture of the place Robi reprimands Ila directing her to restrict her deviant behavior to elsewhere not home. Ila on the other hand caught in the identity dialectics of an individual and the so-called national culture wants to be free of all this.

The character of Padma in MC to some extent challenges class distinctions but not those of gender. She remains the loyal, faithful devotee to Saleem till the very end, only spurring the grand narrative of Saleem’s life with her penchant for sensationalism and what happened nextism. Her role is mostly relegated to domestic chores such as cooking, making the bed, etc. and she is even derided by Saleem for her illiteracy. Saleem is blasé in his deception of Padma even considering it to be a male prerogative and taking her loyalty for granted. He masks his own emasculation by deeming Padma a sensual raven whose carnal cravings he cannot satisfy. Saleem’s failure to respond to her longing for love and compassion is the stereotypical setup of Indian couples of the time as confessed by Saleem himself:

Our Padma bibi, long suffering, tolerant consoling, is beginning to behave exactly like a traditional Indian wife. (And I with my distances
and self-absorption, like a husband?) …. She is waiting for me to make an honest woman of her. (384-5)

She remains an absence in most part of the novel, her story either lost or excluded. The only redeeming quality lies in perhaps her not altogether uncritical reception of Saleem’s narrative and the fact that without her Saleem could not have gone on with his grand tale.

Saturated with the ideology of the family, Vikram Seth’s delineation of the female protagonist of his novel *ASB* remains normative and unexciting especially in the context of her responses to the vagaries of life and situations. The novel’s concerns with marriage and domesticity cannot be overstated; it’s opening and closing scenes being that of a wedding. However, Seth’s representation of the general mindset surrounding the idea of marriage is conventional even with respect to the concurrent Indian milieu. The power to choose a husband for herself is not vested in the girl irrespective of education. In this sense comparisons with Jane Austen’s portrayal of the limitations and restrictions on women when it came to issues of marriage and choosing a husband (especially in *Pride and Prejudice*) with that of Seth’s, only serves to highlight the latter’s failure to nuance the problems faced by women in the context of financial and/or societal restrictions. Lata gives in too easily to her mother’s desire and prefers to stick with the norm, than risk being anything heroic. Seth’s Lata would pale before Austen’s creation of formidable characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma who decide on the fate of their lives in spite of their difficult circumstances.
3.4.3 Minority Identities

In the Indian context, the citizen subject invoked by the nation is the upper-caste Hindu male, leading to a marginalization of Muslims (Tharu and Niranjana, 1994). One of the prominent discursive strategies in Indian nationalism was the setting up of a reformulated Hinduism as constituting an ‘authentic Indian-ness’ or as the ‘Indian tradition’. This national identity was forged with an implicit ‘othering’ of Islam (Tharu and Lalitha 1993, 72). With time the upper-caste Hindu centrality got consolidated and increasingly gained powerful currency as it edged all other identities to the margins and began to operate as a national and often secular identity (ibid., 77).

MC cannot endorse the idea of a single national identity, because it is narrated from a minoritarian perspective, that of the Muslim Saleem Sinai (though in the course of the novel he reveals his multiple parentage, Hindu and British as well). His narrative of India is reacting against an authoritarian state; hence his anti-statism, and his writing of a defiantly pluralist and centrifugal history of India, where the trajectory of Muslim identity figures prominently.

The representation of Kachru in ASB is vexingly incapacitated. Kachru is the underdog peasant who becomes emblematic of the suppressed group of subalterns without a voice (literally!). He stands alone in his field slogging over the years for a meager living, and with the passing of the legislation even that bare minimum is snatched away from him, yet he refuses to voice his protest, or so the author brings us to believe. It is true that a large number of farmers far from being benefitted by the land reform legislation were
actually robbed of their livelihoods after the legislation was enacted. Yet it is the passive acceptance of the injustice on the part of the farmer that is unconvincing. In a comparative study on “Land as Legislative Space in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* and Phanishwarnath Renu’s *Maila Ânchal*” Angela Atkins points out- 

Indeed, in the city the land-story begins with events that invite sympathy for the beleaguered zamindars, then enacts the pro-zamindari abolition arguments and ends in a limited compromise with some of the excesses of the zamindars curbed but parts of their culture intact (5).

In the village where the legislation matters most such a compromise is far from being considered, more so because of the lack of any voice of protest on the part of the afflicted and his total lack of autonomy, in this case Kachru-

He is unique amongst the principal characters of *A Suitable Boy* in having no friends, only a wife and an absent son. He is described as a Chamar but he is never portrayed with any others of his caste. This is reflected in the description of the village geography that is likewise individualistic and sparse (7).

Whereas the annals of history reveal that various caste groups organized themselves to fight against exploitation. One such example would be that under the leadership of Ram Manohar Lohia. He was instrumental in leading the exploited castes to group themselves and carry out peaceful agitation against large scale unequal distribution of land among the people (*Economic Ideas of Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia*, 2009). In the Bhoomi Harpo (grab the
land) Satyagraha lakhs of middle castes took part, and their awareness increased greatly.

While analyzing the “less optimistic rural space” of *TSB* Atkins points out the readability of the novel with regard to a western audience which may find the “purely descriptive” sections dealing with a defamiliarized agrarian space as quite moving. Apart from the scant and pathetic depiction of Kachru, a member of a minority community, the Jatavs and Muslims are another minority group that the novel attempts to write. However, in this case also the representation is either sketchy or clichéd. Reformers are typecast as upstarts through the length of the story. Towards the beginning of the novel the jatav rebellion by lower-castes is insidiously portrayed as riots.

In a radically enlightening examination of the novel vis-à-vis the delineation of Muslims, Ian Almond in the article entitled “*The Imbalance of Islam: Muslims and Unhappiness in Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy*” writes:

…Muslims and their faith seem to acquire a subtle sense of the tragic, seem to be implicitly involved in the darker world of gloom, disappointment, suicide and madness which underpins Seth’s essentially happy novel; as if Islam itself were the dark sub-text within *A Suitable Boy*, a morose vocabulary half-hidden in the text, brooding threateningly over the happy bustling of the Mehras, Kapoors and Chatterjis (44).

Rasheed, the fixated Urdu teacher, who in the course of the novel is alienated both from family and society finally to commit suicide, is
emblematic of such depiction. His rigidity, moroseness, lack of sociability is also typical of other Muslim characters as Dr. Durrani and the Nawab of Baitar. Almond examines Seth’s keen pairing of Hindu and Muslim characters as opposed in their traits—Kabir and Haresh, Maan and Rasheed, Kapoor and the Nawab.

Muslims are somehow different from their Hindu neighbours in *ASB*—they are … somehow more repressed, unhappy, and more replete with possibilities for the tragic. All of which explains why characters such as Rasheed, Durrani and the Nawab are so visibly represented as being “outside” the human world of *A Suitable Boy*, even nurturing resentment towards human beings as an unwelcome distraction from the world of mathematics or Urdu poetry. Throughout the novel the portrayal of Muslims (paranoiac and communal) and of Islam (evidenced by the Koranic verses Seth chooses to quote in the course of the novel) is in a negative light. Almond goes to the extent of concluding that:

> For all the novel’s good intentions, Islam, more than any notion of class conflict, caste unrest, social injustice or political corruption, is the real source of “unsuitability” in *A Suitable Boy*, the transparent obstacle to any development, the unspoken problem of the entire novel. (5)

Thus, it is only with the removal of these misbalancing factors (for e.g. the suicide of Rasheed, the disappearance of Kabir, etc.) that a congenial and happy atmosphere is restored.