CHAPTER V
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Conclusion

In our exploration of the family-nation interface in Indian English Fiction, we have found in the preceding chapters various interesting facets of this interface as captured by different authors over the years. Family has often become the micro-narrative of the nation. Frederic Jameson was not wrong when he read the family stories of the Third World as allegories of the nation. But by restricting our reading of family only to its allegorical function we may miss many other interesting complexities in the family-nation interface, as the present study has endeavoured to show. Apart from its allegorical role, the family has often been placed in a binary position with the nation, helping the individual to resist the hegemonic onslaught of the nation by taking him/her under its own fold. Yet at some other times, family has taken up a more aggressive role, trying to take the helm of the nation in its own hand by imposing dynasty rule on the nation and consolidating it. Apart from the authors we have discussed in the preceding chapters, there are still many major and minor authors who have tried to capture these different interesting facets of the interface or to look at it from even more possible angles in their novels, particularly in the last thirty years or so. I. Allan Sealy (The Trotter-Nama 1988), Upamanyu Chatterjee (English, August 1988), Sashi Tharoor (The Great Indian Novel 1989), Mukul Kesavan (Looking Through Glass 1995), Manju Kapoor (The Difficult Daughters 1998), Rohinton Mistry (Family Matters 2002), to name only a few, have all thrown light on this interface from different possible angles, to show how this interface has been more and more problematised by gender, religious or minority issues. Whatever may be the
differences in their ways of approach to this interface, one common thing in these writers is their unanimous observation that neither the nation nor the family can any more hold the individual within its hegemonic hold. Individual identity is no more a given but a construct.

But this does not in any way suggest that the nation and the family, as sites, are on the verge of extinction. They of course exist, but as spaces, they are no more fixed and therefore, restrictive. Family, for example, surely exists as a basic constituent of a community. But as a result of the tension between the pedagogic and the performative roles of its members, it has lost its fixed address. Rather, it remains alive through its ability to be recreated across all other different forms of border that seek to differentiate and otherise one group of people from another. People now realize that fraternity can be constructed only through subjective enterprise. To a true liberal follower of constitutional democracy, therefore, fraternity or family is not a primordial given, but something that has to be attained by deliberate policies, as John Rawls says in *Theory of Justice* (1975) (105-06), and is constituted not of blood brothers but of citizens.

This is interesting, for traditional societies were governed by fixed, hierarchical principles which were generally in consonance with a closed natural economy. A person’s status was known in advance and there was little one could do but obey the rules of the family, and then the community, that one was born into. The question of choosing one’s profession, community or cultural lifestyle was largely non-existent. The family and the cultural and economic status that people were born into locked them in fixed structural locations from which there was little scope for escape. A modern society is completely different. Now, choice is the essence of life as citizens are imbued with the ethic of freedom. This makes
both horizontal and vertical mobility most commonplace. One of the major characteristics of a modern society is the existence of the public sphere where people with diverse familial and cultural backgrounds are thrown together under conditions of anonymity. So the rules of interactions have been re-negotiated, and families are constructed afresh and on different principles. The readiness in creation and the recreation of family is surely one of the most remarkable characteristics of postcolonial life as well as literature.

Similarly, the nation cannot hold either. In its preoccupation with what constitutes the nation, postcolonial literature has untiringly focused on the tentative nature of history, boundaries and relationships. Leela Gandhi succinctly comments, “far from producing the nation out of its fictional plenitude, the postcolonial novel endeavors, instead, to betray the fictionality of nationhood” (163). Nation is not constructed by religion and faith or any other monolithic concept, or through marginalization of the ‘other.’ It can, in no way, resist freedom, equality (not mere tolerance), space for self and its growth and a dismantling of boundaries. One may recollect Edward Said’s pronounced allergy to the hegemonic tendency of the nation:

Which country? I’ve never felt that I belonged exclusively to one country, nor have I been able to identify ‘patriotically’ with any other than losing causes. Patriotism is best thought of as an obscure dead language, learned prehistorically but almost forgotten and almost unused since. Nearly everything normally associated with it — wars, rituals of nationalistic loyalty, sentimentalized (or invented) traditions, parades, flags, etc. — is quite dreadful and full of
appalling claims of superiority and pre-eminence (George 200-201).  

This entire porosity in nation as well as in family has received a further dimension with the current diasporic movement, for diasporic experience, all over the world, involves a significant crossing of borders. These may be the borders of a region or languages, or various other borders such as the loss of homeland would suggest. But significantly, crossing of borders today does not end up merely in an unmitigated sense of loss at being uprooted from the homeland. As we have seen in the earlier chapters, man, out of material and emotional necessity, always desires to belong to a family created out of all diverse elements. This is one thing that man has been doing even from the prehistoric days. So, in the diasporic condition, too, man has learnt to transform his uprooted condition to a positive, productive one, by virtue of which he has been able to create family in all foreign conditions. Be it the old diaspora, consisting largely of subaltern and underprivileged girmitiyas, or the recent, consisting mainly of educated Indian elites who have gone to the West in the mid-1970s and afterwards, the creation of a family in the alien land, has always remained the basic desire. And this new familial space forging new bonds, new cultures, new communities, pose a serious challenge to the inviolability of all national and familial borders.

There is, of course, a basic difference between the way the old and new diaspora create this family in the unfamiliar spaces. The difference comes from the spirit in which they leave their homeland. The old diaspora was mostly a product of forced immigration, of people running away from religious and other forms of persecution. So, in its case, the break with the motherland was not voluntary, but enforced by the distances between the motherland and the diasporic
settlement, much slower modes of travel, and above all, the lack of economic means to make frequent journeys. The distance, physical but more psychological, was so vast that the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination. Because physical return was virtually impossible, an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity. This was done through a process of replication, if not reproduction, as Vijay Mishra puts it, “the old Indian diaspora replicated the space of India and sacralized the stones and rivers of the new lands” (Diasporic Imaginary 442). The old diaspora carried with it a sort of ‘Hindu toolbox,’ as it were, to Indianise its new surroundings:

…their homeland is a series of objects, fragments of narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases. Like hawkers they can reconstitute their lives through the contents of their knapsacks: a Ganapati icon, a dog-eared copy of the Gita or the Quran, an old sari or other deshi outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage or, in modern times, a videocassette of the latest hit from the home country (Mishra “New Lamps for Old” 68).

The new diaspora is significantly different from the old in its unprecedented access to the motherland by virtue of its NRI status. It is not forced to leave the motherland. In most cases, these diasporic people (and this includes many of the prominent postcolonial writers including Amitav Ghosh) have definite gains. They have left their homeland not out of compulsion, but wilfully, in search of a better life, greater promise of prosperity. So, they seldom suffer from a sense of loss, and need not look at their homeland from a purely emotional and nostalgic viewpoint. This equips them with a readiness with which they
engage simultaneously with the home they left and the home they have entered. Like their old counterparts, they need not carry all those small titbits to construct an India outside India. Their new family thus becomes a site of ‘continuous incorporation and appropriation’, as Makarand Paranjape puts it in his essay “Displaced Relations: Diasporas, Empires, Homelands” (10). In a new global environment, therefore, diasporas and homelands have come much closer to each other than ever before, as assimilation and affirmation have become the order of the day. So, for this present day diaspora, family is no more spatially and temporally specific, but fluid and dynamic. It is actually a result of a complex process of confluence. Paranjape is extremely optimistic in his attitude to this diasporic existence of today’s world:

... I no longer believe that being diasporan is necessarily to be in an anguished state. It may actually be a form of bi-culturalism, a richer and a more complex way of being that is equally at home and abroad, in the des and pardes, sometimes reversing or inverting the one for other. Thus, we might actually be witnessing the birth of a new global Indian identity that is as comfortable in New Delhi as it is in New York. Certainly, one sees an astonishing cultural continuity when one crosses boundaries these days – one never has to leave India, so to speak, even as one leaves its shores (In Diaspora, vi).

In contemporary times, therefore, the exploration of family-nation interface opens up new horizons. The possibilities engendered by rethinking identity in terms of fluidity and hybridity (routes rather than routes) have the propensity to alter the ways in which identities are formed for all people in one
location. All oppositional divides – native and diaspora, majority and minority – are dissolved into this new family. (*Sea of Poppies* remains a classic example of this dissolution) Avtar Brah captures this idea in her concept of ‘diaspora space’ in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora*. Brah defines diaspora space as an intersection of borders where all subjects and identities become juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed; where the permitted and the proclaimed perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (208).

Though some critics like David Dabydeen (in his essay “On Cultural Diversity” in *Whose Cities?* Eds. Mark Fisher and Ursula Owen 1991) and R. Radhakrishnan (in *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* 1996) interrogate the significance of terms like ‘cultural diversity’, ‘pluralism’ and ‘multiculturalism’, the significance of the porosity of borders can hardly be overemphasized these days, for it is through these porous borders that crossings, interacting and hybridity take place.

It is important to remember at this point that this interaction is to be initiated not by eradicating the differences, but by initiating a meaningful dialogue among them, acknowledging the diversity, and keeping it intact. In other words, solidarity will have to be achieved through difference. Paul Gilroy, in his influential book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* explores this issue in the context of black people located in and moving between Africa, the Caribbean, America and Britain using the image of a ship, which symbolizes ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’ (4).
(reminding us of *Sea of Poppies*) Gilroy points not only to the history of black oppression but also the possibility of forging the ‘solidarity through difference’ through transnational communication, bringing together for a moment people from all disparate locations. For Gilroy, these transnational communications provide a better way of thinking about black identities in the present than notions of roots and rootedness, which merely recapitulate the absolutist principles common to colonialist, nationalist and racist discourses. To learn to achieve this solidarity through acknowledgement of diversity is therefore the need of the day.

Gurpreet Mahajan, in her essay “Reinventing Democratic Citizenship in a Plural Society” has rightly suggested that “nation-states [will] have to learn to live with diversity; they have to innovate and think of ways in which different communities may co-exist as equals” (Mahajan, 115). Ila in *The Shadow Lines* is a glaring example of what may happen when one tries to achieve solidarity without accepting the difference. Ila wanted to do away with her own distinct Indian identity totally, and desired to be incorporated in the story of the west. That is why she utterly failed to consolidate any bond and create any family.

Postcolonialism and Postcolonial literature therefore lead to a state of enlightened postnationalism which facilitates this living with diversity. This condition alone can promote ‘a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world,’ as Edward Said envisages in *Culture and Imperialism* (*Culture and Imperialism*, 277). Leela Gandhi, too, in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* has stressed on the importance of a larger and more expensive solidarity. In the face of the economic and electronic homogenization of the globe, where national borders are no longer sustainable, Gandhi focuses more and more on the interactive, dialogic two-way transaction across the borders.
But how to expedite this dialogue among the diverse elements, between
the global and the local, across the borders? Bill Ashcroft, in his essay
"Postcolonial Transformation and Global Culture" stresses the necessity of
horizontality as a precondition of this trans-border and transcultural interaction.
'Horizontality,' according to Ashcroft, is a strategy that assumes profound
importance in today’s postcolonial studies, because it is a strategy built on
disruption, dislocation and displacement. According to Ashcroft,

…it is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes
realized, for whereas the boundary is about constriction, history,
the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension,
possibility, fulfillment, the imagining of post-colonial place. The
horizon is a way of conceiving home, and with it, identity, which
escapes the inevitability of the imperial boundary. … The diasporic
writer enters the potentiality of the global with a formidable power
that comes from a fluid and horizontal conception of subjectivity.
This power is not without its cost, not without the lingering pull of
nostalgia and loss, but it has global implications. … Horizontality is
not the abandonment of the local, of the cultural, but its
reconception, its reinscription. Place, like subjectivity, is not
subsumed, but located more clearly in the horizon. In that horizon
every subject is luminal, every subject is global (Biswas 13).

Rushdie, in his novels, has recorded various dimensions of the family-nation
interface. But in his fictional world, the family remains for ever a claustrophobic
space and hence lacks this horizontality. On the other hand, this horizontality is best
manifest in the writings of Ghosh, because all his writings is centred on this need
to oppose restrictive and closed spheres, preserve overlapping, syncretic pasts and the need to enable a dialogic space. His writings present cultures not as taxonomical but interactive and refractive, contesting the views those hold culture as discrete, static and homogenous. Ghosh demonstrates unfailingly that cultural expressions are necessarily hybrid and historically interdependent.

In conclusion, therefore, I would once again like to fall back on Amitav Ghosh as he, among all postcolonial practitioners of fiction in English, has been able to situate the entire postcolonial situation in a state of constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization and thereby opening up for it newer possibilities of thriving and expansion, making them real cosmopolitans. Of course, the new space thus created, may be problematised further in future, opening up even newer possibilities, but at the end of the day, it is this postnational promise of a genuine cosmopolitanism that remains most appealing. This quality alone may make our dream of a postnational Utopia real. In an interview to Debasish Lahiri, Bill Ashcroft reiterates his trust on Postcolonial Utopia:

We live in an age in which hope is ever more necessary to social existence. Utopia is by definition impossible, an unachievable ideal, a fanciful dream, unrealistic and naïve. Yet utopian theory has undergone a vigorous renaissance during the post-cold war period of global empire. The concept of the Utopian remains a conceptual anchor to any theory of a better world, any hope for social change and amenity. So I am determined to continue to talk about Utopia (Lahiri 404).
With Ghosh, we have almost ensured our membership in a new family in this
Utopia. At the end of *Sea of Poppies*, we have seen a motley group of ‘displaced’
people creating a new family as they set off to survive against all odds. Let us now
eagerly wait to see how in the next part of his proposed trilogy, this family is
reterritorialised into an even larger one. After all, it is in this expansion that the
mystery of human survival against all odds can be explained.

Notes

1. This quote is from George, Rosemary Marangoly: *The Politics of Home*,
200-201, where she refers to this observation by Edward Said in a special

2. Brinda Bose discusses these concepts of deterritorialization and
reterritorialization in detail in her essay “Footnoting History: The Diasporic
Imagination of Amitav Ghosh” (in Paranjape ed. *In Diaspora*). However,
none of the terms is Bose’s own coinage. ‘Deterritorialization’ has been
used by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1997), while Homi Bhabha uses the term
‘Reterritorialization’ in his essay “In a Spirit of Calm Violence” in Gyan
Prakash ed. *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial
shows in the essay how these two concepts can be used profitably to discuss
Ghosh’s novels.


