

Introduction

The long century of European political domination of the rest of the world being finally over, the time seems to have come to reckon with its civilizational aftermath, making it necessary to undertake a rigorous scrutiny of the continuities and ruptures in the decolonised societies.

(Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Interrogating" 3).

I

The thesis is guided by few pertinent, interrelated questions: How do the writers from the marginalized communities of the postcolonial societies fashion their narratives? What strategies of inclusion and exclusion do they employ as they recall their past: individual as well as collective? How do all these writers, who come under the rubric of postcolonial, place their tales on the larger narrative of the Nation? At what points these individual tales rupture that narrative and where do they strengthen it? The series of questions lead to a central concern as to how do individual narratives of community collude and collide with the larger narrative of the nation. It is hoped that discussion around these questions would contribute in expanding the framework within which the narratives of erstwhile colonies are presently analyzed and understood.

The immediate historical situation that informs and, to a large extent, shapes the present condition of the postcolonial societies is the experience of colonialism and imperialism. These western instances of aggressive nationalism and modernism have made a deep impact on colonized societies¹. The fissures in the grand narratives of modernism, however, could be seen conspicuously in the fiction and poetry written since the early years of the previous century. "The centre cannot hold," bemoaned a prophetic poet (Yeats 99). The loosening grip of the centre allowed the periphery to find its own voice. The emergence of postcolonial practices of reading and analyzing of literary texts – produced in western metropolitan "centres" as well as "peripheral third-world" – was welcomed as a desirable enterprise (M Mukherjee, "Interrogating" 4). But the way this development was theorised came with its own complexities. The once popular idea, in academia, of postcolonial writers "writing back" to the center has come under serious scrutiny in the recent past. In the wake of explosion of the postcolonial theory, one could safely say that the strength of a writer from an erstwhile colony comes from his ability to subvert the moral-intellectual foundations of hegemonic structures of Western colonial

powers. But it has increasingly become clear that what was hailed as coming of age of an oppositional idiom, was at best a partial envisioning since it reduces into an easy binary the complexity of colonial legacy. The theories corroborating “oppositional discourses” and “resistant polyphonies” as providing adequate framework for discussing postcolonial textual practices have been questioned. It has been contended that such an approach, though captures an important element of postcolonial writing, obliterates the heterogeneity that marks the multifaceted postcolonial space. The apparent heterogeneity one finds in this discourse is an effect of a selective procedure through which certain kinds of texts tend to become canonical and benchmarks for all textual-critical production². These texts support and perpetuate certain fixed modes of critical practices. And when the terms of discourse are predetermined we receive the pleasure of a coherent theorizing but at the cost of a vast corpus of work that goes unaccounted for. The contemporary texts written in the post independence period of the “postcolonial” history would not fit into such neat categories of the colonizer and the colonized. Even when hybrid identity of the postcolonial self is recognized the coordinates of the resultant third-space remain the binary opposites. One might also contend here that the old framework continues to inform the new fictional contents in a much subtler way. Colonial memory is not obliterated from the postcolonial psyche. Colonialism does not end with the achievement of independence, it has pervaded the consciousness of the two civilization units in such a way that one cannot theorize except by invoking the aforementioned *motifs* or themes. But one just has to look at the significant, even overwhelming fictional production that calls for fresher approaches to literature of the postcolonial.

Decolonization of the native culture is a contingent impulse in the cultural productions of the colonized societies (Ashcroft et al 29). The cultural hierarchy that came into place with the establishment of colonial order has been challenged and resisted in much of the fiction coming from the colonies. However, the process of decolonization is not merely a matter of “reconstitution of pre-colonial reality” and as Ashcroft et al recognize the novel written in a native tongue is “inevitably a cross-cultural hybrid,” there arises a need for constant revision of theoretical frame of reference *vis-à-vis* the textual production in postcolonial societies. This study explores the unequal relations that continue to exist in postcolonial societies even after independence. Community or race based oppression is not a characteristic exclusive to the colonial situation. The communities in a postcolonial society are often the victims of oppressive

gaze of the dominant social-political classes. The rupture in colonial narrative in the wake of political independence does not necessarily rupture the oppressive circumstances within which many communities live. Thus, Arun Mukherjee, points out that in spite of positing itself as the liberatory discourse, postcolonial theory “is of no use to those whose battle is against the homegrown oppressor” (“Interrogating” 17). The limits of postcolonial theory are far too many to be of much use to study the literary production within a heterogeneous society such as India. In fact, elsewhere³ she argues that India’s experience of colonialism is incommensurable with the other postcolonial societies, such as Africa or Latin America. She says:

The theory thematizes India’s literary texts only in terms of search for identity and resistance to the colonizer, entirely overlooking collaboration. It then carefully selects the texts that will fit these moulds (“Exclusions” 32).

The specificity of historical experiences appearing in the Indian literary texts is, hence, glossed over by academic considerations⁴. Much polemic has passed in the name of questioning the colonial representation. The binary oppositions of postcolonial theory claim that the subjectivity of the postcolonial cultures is inextricably tied to their erstwhile occupiers. Politics of location looks more like a politics of blame⁵. A self-reflexivity is required which not only would account for the inner contradictions within the community but would also lead towards a more chiseled projection of its collective self.

II

The claims of the nation, however, inadvertently restrict and inform the exploration and expression of this collective self. Community and nation develop a reciprocal relationship which underlines the narratives coming from individual communities. Benedict Anderson distinguishes the emergence of national communities in the Western world from two earlier types of polities, religious empires and imperial dynasties. He concludes that “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 3). The collective imaginary in our age, his analysis suggests, has a tendency to reformulate common existence in form of a nation – an extended, imagined community. Nation, however, is not merely an “imaginative vision.” It is a political project, a discursive formation (Brennan 46). And, as Homi Bhabha observes, in-between nations or at the margins of nations is another kind of dissemiNation. There are communities living in these interstitial space, says Bhabha, whose counter-narratives

“continually evoke and erase” the totalizing boundaries of the modern nation-state (Bhabha149). These equivocal narratives are supplementary to those of the nation state: “We must always keep open a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical” (Bhabha163). The recognition of various subnational communities as supplements to the overarching national community keeps the debate around the nation open-ended. Nation is not an unproblematic category of collective existence that makes communities redundant. Community loyalty, as it has been experienced and expressed in the socio-political sphere of postcolonial nations, is not an inessential extra which could be dispensed with in the wake of emerging national consciousness. These communities, on the contrary, enter into a prolonged conversation with the nation.

III

Bhabha’s theoretical concern is the diaspora and this concern is symptomatic of the recent debates around the idea of Nation which have drawn considerably from the diasporic fiction as well as theory. The way the writers of the diaspora construct the homeland is almost inescapable in any discussion aimed at reexamining the necessity and sufficiency of nations. In many ways the diaspora are re-imagining the nation in the twenty first century. But what gives this privilege to the diaspora to refashion the nation. Beside their material prosperity, it is their diasporic vision, which reconfigures the nation. At this point the question emerges, Who are diaspora? What are the factors that constitute a diasporic community? Vijay Mishra deals with this need to propose a definition of diaspora that can be applicable to the migrants other than the Jews (“New Lamps” 72). Makarand Paranjape, feels that theorists of the diaspora like Mishra as well as Homi Bhabha, inadvertently romanticise the diasporic condition and thus one needs to achieve a consensus about whom does one call a diasporic or rather what is the necessary condition(s) of being a diasporic. He proposes a following working model:

The diaspora, [...] must involve a cross-cultural or cross-civilizational passage. It is only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic. In other words, there has to be a source country and target country, source culture and target culture, a source language and a target language, a source religion and a target religion, and so on. Also the crossing must be forced, not voluntary; otherwise, the passage will only amount to an enactment of desire fulfillment. Or, even if voluntary, the passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the

target culture. It is through this displacement and ambivalence that what we consider the diasporic is engendered. (Paranjape, In Diaspora 5-6)

Besides this, Makarand Paranjape wants us to consider that the diaspora is a direct result of colonialism. He, as a matter of fact, theorises diaspora as “the dialectical Other of colonialism.” Paranjape is concerned with the construction of the homeland by the diasporic writers. The literary credibility of the diasporic writer is grounded in his ability to write the nation, for the international consumption. And this seems to me to be the quality of diasporic writing which generates interest in Paranjape. But this ability to write the nation is fraught with its own limitations. For instance Paranjape’s estimation of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, brings out this complexity:

Midnight’s Children, then, is about the decomposition of India, about its disintegration and dispersal. I would argue that this deconstructive narrative is an outcome of the new diasporic consciousness which, because it lacks internal coherence, cannot see any cohesion in the object that it describes. (Paranjape, In Diaspora 11)

Diaspora emerges as a problematic category when it comes to imagining the nation. Not only because it inhabits the supplementary space as has Bhabha suggested. Diaspora is not a monolith. It is internally fissured entity. It neither recalls and reconstructs the homeland in a definable pattern nor does it predict the future mode of diasporic existence. The thesis suggests that the possibilities of diasporic studies are not exhausted by aligning them in a relationship with colonialism. Vassanji’s The Gunny Sack delves into the experience of the migrant community but in a tripartite relationship which is increasingly narrows down to exploring the relationship between two different colonized races; the Asians and the Africans. The colonial narrative is marginal to the issues that surround relationship of the Asian and Black communities. Moreover, while the diaspora has been received much critical attention the phenomenon of migration of the communities within India have not been sufficiently looked into especially when one comes across a novelist like Alka Saraogi. She would be difficult to be placed and discussed in the framework of the diaspora as suggested by Paranjape; but she is well suited to a study of nation from a migrant’s point of view. So while she may enlarge the definition of diaspora, she might as well provide some kind of respite from the anxiety that India has not been sincerely represented

in the writings of the postcolonial writers. Kalilatha: Via Bypass is a novel about immigrant Marwari community in Calcutta. The novel recounting the story of various generations of the protagonist exhibits the tripartite relationship that existed among the British, the Bengalis and the Marwaris. And as the narrative moves across three centuries, it highlights and responds to the changing socio-political circumstances. The novel seeks to ground the narrative of Marwari community in Calcutta and by the end the protagonist is not anxious about his outsider status – despite differences with the Bengali community – but is scripting a national, pan-Indian vision.

This brings us to a question: What categories does one devise for theorising the migration of “citizens” within the nation especially when they migrated before becoming the citizens in a modern sense. The questions that Saraogi’s novel raises are pertinent to understanding the notion of nationhood. Like the ‘other’ diaspora, subcultural migrants also are placed in an unfamiliar cultural psychology and geography. Displacement is an acutely felt reality and thus moulds the identity of a migrant who travels across ‘national’ cultures. Alka Saraogi’s Kali Katha: Via Bypass traces the movement of Marwari traders from Bhiwani in Haryana to Calcutta in West Bengal. She explores the multivalent responses of the host as well as of the migrant community to the national struggle of pre-independence era. It also captures the moments of confrontation between the two “native” communities and examines their ability to transcend the culture specific psychological moorings and biases.

Whereas the communities to which the first two novelists belong have considerable social and economic resourcefulness the third writer whose work is investigated in the course of this study belongs to the community that occupies the lowest rung in the society. Gaikwad’s The Branded is life-narrative of social activist committed to socio-economic transformation of his marginalized, native community. The articulation of his community experience is not just a supplementary discourse to the nation. The community experience incriminates the nation-state, decimates its pseudo-egalitarianism and reconstructs the national imaginary. The resultant reconstruction is, however, a collaborative exercise, where the opening up of community boundaries reinscribes the national narrative.

IV

The problematics of community are contingent on historical reconstruction of the collective existence and hence calls for recognition of historical trends affecting community narratives.

Towards the end of his book What is History? in the chapter entitled “Widening Horizons” E. H. Carr mentions that “the present age is the most historically minded of all ages” (Carr 134). He makes the comment in a context of declining Western influence in the world following the dissolution of imperialism and a parallel emergence of Asian and African countries. He thus implies that the scope of historical reflection as well as the discursive field of history writing is widening. Recounting of the past can no longer be exclusive domains of the few. Relying on the shifts that mark the differences between history writing in eighteenth, nineteenth and the twentieth century, he points towards “a revolution in our conception of history” (Carr 149). What has caused this revolution is due to what Carr calls the spread of reason in the last two hundred years. The “historical” shift that characterizes the present age has liberated not only the discipline of writing histories but also those people and communities who were kept out of that discipline. “The expansion of reason means, in essence, the emergence into history of groups and classes, of peoples and continents, that hitherto lay outside it,” says Carr. This observation is instructive in analyzing the writings of the “outsiders”; those groups and classes who inhabited the margins of both history and history writing. The spread of reason characterized by spread of “education and political consciousness” is of special significance when one attempts to study the narratives of the marginalized.

The observations one comes across in Carr can not unproblematically be applied to the way historical memory has been activated in Indian writers. They do, however, introduce the shift that characterises historiography in the modern era. The significance of the ‘history from below,’ advanced by E P Thompson, has added a new dimension to the historian’s task. In response to the colonial history writing in India there emerged a nationalist historiography. The latter fashioned a resistant discourse to the colonial historiography but has itself come under critical scrutiny of the subaltern historians.

The approach of these historians is to study history from below, focused more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite⁶. The Subaltern Studies Group, the pioneer group of historians in early 1980s attempted to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. Although they are, in a sense, on the left, they are very critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India

was colonized by the British, became politicized, and earned its independence. In particular, they are critical of the focus of this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who in turn inspire the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British. Instead, they focus on non-elites – subalterns – as agents of political and social change. They have had a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political and social movements, as against only highly visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings. Ranajit Guha contends that elitist i.e., national historiography was dependent on colonial as well as the pre-colonial semi-feudal institutions thus it could never satisfactorily explain the formation of nationalist community. The subaltern interjection in the political arena was instrumental in such a mass mobilization which helped the national consciousness to prevail. “Mobilization in the domain of elite politics was achieved vertically whereas in that of subaltern politics this was achieved horizontally” (Guha 4). By this he suggests that nationalist sentiment became all prevalent through its spontaneous spread within “traditional organization of kinship and territoriality.” Family and class associations were instrumental in strengthening nationalism. This is a view that confronts the colonial as well as the nationalist historiography.

The questions of recalling the past and recounting the history become fascinating not only because of above mentioned openings in the academic history writing but because they are among the fundamental functions of human mind. Robert E. Frykenberg considers history as memory, a primal necessity of individual human beings as well as of particular communities. It is in these sites that history “has actually been “produced” and “practiced,” in its most primordial and simple forms” (Frykenberg 38). As Sudipta Kaviraj observes that “to give itself a history is the most fundamental act of self-identification of a community,” (Kaviraj 16) the perceptions of people and individuals about their past becomes matter of historical and political contestations. Stories of families and communities possess, in elemental form, the histories of their times. The primordial form of historical understanding⁷ when codified in a written narrative becomes a contesting and even dissenting voice in the discourse of larger narratives of nation and national consciousness. The self-image of community that these particular, exclusive narratives transmit across generations collaborates with and confronts the official normative identities proposed by nationalist discourse.

The three writers, M G Vassanji, Alka Saraogi and Laxman Gaikwad, as they delve into the stories of their collective past and foreground it through their own as well as the experience of

their ancestors reimagine the nation. Through these stories they challenge the historical procedures of inclusion and exclusion that establish canonical histories. The stories of small, minority communities are neither aberrations nor mere appendages in historical narratives that constitute the text of nation. The nation not called into existence from the precolonial past or even mythical past. It emerges out of the experience that the communities have with one another. Communitarian as well as national identities enter into a reciprocal relationship and sustain one another. The dialogic relationship between the nation and the minority community become a site of fresher approaches to imagine the community. The writers that I have chosen for my research narrate the continuities and ruptures within their respective communities. They, however never really restrict themselves to the parochial interests of their community in isolation but comment upon the larger national issues. Nation becomes the framework within which the articulations to identity are negotiated. Anti-colonial struggles as the harbingers of cultural and political rejuvenation of colonized societies give birth to a cultural and political community narrativized as nation.

Community formation is, thus, a more fruitful framework to study this relationship. Nation as imagined community is reinvigorated in the narratives of these writers. The writers exhibit what Ashis Nandy calls a “stream of critical consciousness: the tradition of reinterpretation of tradition to create new tradition” (Nandy xiv). The writer work within the recent narrative tradition of national as well as their inherited communities. The narratives do not privilege one collective mode of existence against the other. Claims of the native community are foregrounded to critique homogeneity that the national discourse assumes and imposes. On the other hand the egalitarian and democratic space that nation aspires for is upheld against the parochialism and ethnocentrism of the community. These texts thus insistently explore the possibilities of collective existence – communitarian as well as national.

Endnotes

1. Edward Said's Orientalism and, more specifically, Culture and Imperialism delineate the procedures that disoriented the cultural self-image of the colonized societies. In Masks of Conquest Gauri Vishwanath explores the institutional practices that displaced the native forms of knowledge in colonial India. However, the magnitude of the colonial impact multiplies when one takes into account the subtle and even unconscious dissemination of culture of the colonizer. In the nineteenth century as Indian shores were inundated by the novels from England for the nostalgic British expatriates educated Indians were exposed to the contemporary British fiction as well. In the wake of this dissemination Meenakshi Mukherjee asks a searching question: "But what effect did this spate of imported fiction have on its unintended readers – Indians who were now hungry for English books? ... His college curriculum exposed him simultaneously to several centuries of European classical texts and canonical literature from Britain, and 'colonial editions' of popular fiction of the time also became available to him outside the classroom. He responded to both enthusiastically and without much fastidiousness about literary status or chronology..." ("Interrogating" 5).
2. "I believe that a theory of postcolonial literature whose central idea is the "common experience" shared by colonized people is really the product of teaching under circumstances that have allocated a very small space for an amazing amount of heterogeneous material ... Colonialism serves as the all-encompassing, all-explaining principle in this theory and produces certain themes and approaches that are then expounded by the critic by giving textual readings from postcolonial texts ... the problem is that the theory highlights only those texts where these themes (of breakdown of indigenous cultures under the onslaught of colonialism, the loss of history, the alienated individual who searches for his or her authentic self, the struggle against the colonizer, all themes encapsulated in Salman Rushdie's famous phrase, to "write back") occur, thereby ignoring a vast quantity of work that would call the theory into question" (A Mukherjee, My Living 4).
3. "Indianness is ... flattened in favour of ... homogeneous postcolonial consciousness." (A Mukherjee, "Exclusions" 31-32).

4. Meenakshi Mukherjee warns that the emancipatory project can enslave unless “the terms of discourse are indeed being generated by the needs of the culture to which one belongs, rather than by the imperatives set elsewhere” (“Interrogating” 4).
5. Arun Mukherjee contends: “The formulations of postcolonial critics suggest that the members of the postcolonial societies do nothing but search for or mourn the loss of our pristine pre-colonial identities or continuously resist the pronouncements of the colonizers about them. These critics insist that “the empire writes back to the centre” (Rushdie, Ashcroft), implying that we do not write out of our own needs emerging from our own peculiar space and time but rather out of our obsession with an absent other, in whose scheme of things we, assigned the margin, play only a bit part” (“Exclusions” 33).
6. The term "subaltern" in this context is an implied reference to an essay by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Literally, it refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion.
7. “Primal and primordial forms of historical understanding – as ways of retaining, regaining, or simply gaining some knowledge about the past – have always been with us. And they remain with us still. Primal history is still practiced by everyone. Not only is this so, but it is being practiced virtually all of the time. It is the only kind of historical understanding that most people possess. Every individual, as a person, practices it. Every family holds on to it, preserves it, and circulates it, in one form or another. That it may be done very well, that it may also be done badly or clumsily by most people does not alter this fundamental fact. Moreover, most of the history that has ever been (or is still being) practiced and most of the understandings of the past that have ever been held, in any given generation, have been of this sort and have been confined to “related” kindreds and lineages (“families”). Virtually all such history soon disappears and is gone. It falls into oblivion and is lost forever. This fact, however, does not change the basic reality of its common if superficial practice as a primal form of historical understanding by virtually all human beings. The essential question, therefore, has to do with how and why it is that *some* kinds of historical knowledge are acquired, preserved, and transmitted, both more accurately and over longer periods of time. This question is of crucial importance” (Frykenberg 40-41).

