Chapter 1

Narrating the Nation

The concept of a “nation”, as is popularly understood, implies a large community of people whose singular identity comes with a commonly shared territory and government (not to speak of a collective set of goals and roughly similar destinies) even when apparent differences in language, race, descent, history and culture give it a composite appearance. Ernest Gellner in his book *Nations and Nationalism* says that “[n]ations are not inscribed into the nature of things, they do not constitute a political version of the doctrine of natural kinds” (47) but are deliberately constructed by people upon specific fundamentals. It is these fundamentals that forge the identity of a nation and simultaneously help to differentiate a nation from another. Gellner elaborates on these fundamentals

1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communication.
2. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. (6 - 7)

It may be difficult to be in complete agreement with the whole argument especially in his insistence on the sameness of culture but there is no denying that as concepts, nation and culture are inextricably intertwined as it is a common culture or a way of life that acts as a catalyst and brings people together and unites them. This also helps people to identify and form their own groups while simultaneously differentiating from the rest. Paul Gilroy in his work *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* reinforces this idea and says that although nations may appear natural and eternal, they have actually been constructed through “elaborate cultural, ideological, and political processes which culminate in feeling of connectedness to other national
subjects and the idea of a national interest that transcends the supposedly petty divisions of class, region, dialect or caste” (49). Thus national interest acts as a unifying force and binds the people of a nation together. Gellner aptly points out that “[n]ationalism is not a sentiment expressed by pre-existing nations; rather it creates nations where they did not previously exist” (xxv).

Nevertheless, in this global era there are theorists like Arjun Appadurai who discredit the notion of the nation and deem it important to think beyond the nation (“Patriotism and Its Futures” 411-429) and those like Donald Pease who consider the nation state an outdated liability “as a tolerated anachronism in a global economy requiring a borderless world for its effective operation” (“National Narratives, Postnational Narration” 1-23). Their arguments presuppose, consciously or otherwise, that a ‘nation’ is a unified entity that subsumes differences and projects an integrated front. As a counter narrative to this perspective, one may consider Homi Bhabha’s remarks on the nation in his essay “Art and National Identity: A Critic’s Symposium”:

I don’t think we can eliminate the concept of the nation altogether, at a time when in many parts of the world – in South Africa, in Eastern Europe – people are actually living and dying for that form of society. You can’t completely do away with the nation as an idea or as a political structure, but you can acknowledge its historical limitations for our time. (qtd. in Huddart 117)

From an academic point of view while clashing arguments such as these may problematize the modern day relevance and viability of the concept of nation, they do serve to reinforce the definition of the nation as a body.

While being primarily a subject of focal interest in the social sciences, the nation is an attractive and inevitable (overtly or otherwise) ingredient of literature as well, especially the novel. Interestingly, Timothy Brennan in his essay “The National Longing for Form” says that the novel “historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national
life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and style” (49). One will only be overstating the obvious with the observation that of all the literary forms that creative writers engage themselves in, the epic and the novel are the genres that lend themselves most unresistingly to the narration as well as description of its complex nature.

In an iconic work on Nation and Nationhood: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson opines that the novel is perhaps the most suitable apparatus to embody national imagination as it has the technical resources to conjure up an “imagined community that is the nation” (25). This is because novels, like nations, have space enough to gather together a variety of people into one collective body even when it is extremely unlikely that all the individuals will ever get to meet one another (26). Patrick Parrinder in his book *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* says that the rise of the novel goes hand-in-hand with the emergence of the modern nation-state. He also describes the novel as an exercise in nation-building as it helps to mould a shared national sensibility by holding a mirror to it. Novels depend on the presence of men and women who speak the same language and roughly share the same cultural assumptions. Such communities of people are generally known as nations, and fictions play a key role in their collective image of themselves.

Salman Rushdie in his essay “Notes on Writing and the Nation” compares the development of a story through the pages towards its culmination “to the self image of the nation moving through history towards its manifest destiny” (65). Thus novels by virtue of their spatial, temporal and social range along with psychological subtlety are suited to represent the nation.

However, the relationship between the nation and the novel is not a simple one. Even in the most peaceful of times in the life of a nation, a serious novel is never a plain mirror that merely reflects the nation’s content and contours. In the hands of a serious and skilled literary artist a subtle critique may invariably be infolded into the fictional narrative, seeking either to
maintain the status quo or to bolster or wreck formative / fissiparous movements within its boundaries. It is perhaps this idea that is echoed, among others, by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes when he claims that the rise of European nationalism coincides with the boom of the novel (Delden 81) or by the Palestinian American social analyst Edward Said who considers the novelistic form ideal to incorporate the authority and structure necessary to mark the birth of nationalism. In Culture and Imperialism Said says: [w]ithout empire I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it” (69) and the Indian born critic Homi K. Bhabha defines the nation in Nation and Narration as formed by “textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, subtexts and figurative stratagems” (2). Thus the relationship between the nation and the novel is deep and complex.

The nation-novel relationship becomes even more complex when one considers the “nature” of the nation. Is the nation a real, solid and palpable unit as everyone likes to assume or a fragile, inchoate concept? Timothy Brennan considers nations as “imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (157). In Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Benedict Anderson offers a similar perspective when he defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). According to him the nation is imagined as a community because despite the prevalence of inequality and exploitation it is always conceived in popular imagination as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7), a relationship fostered through the abundance of national texts that bring together the members of a nation who will never know each other, yet maintain a national solidarity by imagining themselves and each other as co-nationals. He also claims that the nation is maintained through the processes of continual construction of common narratives and co-optation of critical or excluded narratives. Thus narratives and nations are caught in a mutually nourishing symbiotic relationship.
Literary narratives like the novel construct the nation either consciously or unconsciously. In varying degrees they exhibit the land, its people, its culture, the historical, the geographical, the political, the economic, the religious, the social and the intellectual milieus. The novelist captures these diverse and varied aspects using various techniques ranging from the concrete like the plot, characters and diction to the abstract like underlying thought and spectacle.

Nations get represented in literary narratives through the plot of the novel. This is made evident through the depiction of events that celebrate the nation or are critical of it; form the source of influential ideas and expression of national identity; contribute to its historiography and / or subvert the official version. Just like most nations, the worlds depicted in novels are often profoundly pluralistic and multivoiced and they fundamentally resist ideological synthesis or closure.

The characters in a novel present significant perspectives on the nation they are projected to be citizens of. This becomes evident through the choice of their names / caste / creed; suggesting, even in the most oblique way, the male-female ratio; how they negotiate space and identity for themselves; or how some of them virtually become the nation. The novel may focus on the lives of national leaders or common people or the marginalized; the creation or reinforcement of stereotypes, the portrayal of grotesque enemy figures, the presentation of certain women / men and the nation as iconic mother / father figures, and so on. In fact nations like novels bring together a variety of people into one collective body although it is highly unlikely that an individual will ever be able to meet all his fellow nationals. Thus novels like nations gather together many people who visualize their simultaneity with others.

The significance of language in the construction of a nation is underscored by Benedict Anderson’s observation that a defining feature of the nation is the standardization of a unitary language that all its members can understand (44). However, Ernest Renan in his essay “What is a Nation?”
differs from this view. He says that although language encourages people to unite, it does not force them to do so. He cites the instance of the United States and England where people speak the same language yet do not form single nations whereas Switzerland which has three or four languages forms a single nation (16). Nevertheless Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his book *Decolonizing the Mind* not only endorses Anderson’s view but goes a step ahead and says that “[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16). He adds that language goes a long way towards creating a community’s understanding of their world and enshrining the values which orient their lives. This however does not preclude the innovative use of the vernacular or experimentation within the languages; abrogation and appropriation of the different tongues; or even “the Janus-faced ambivalence of language” (3) that Bhabha discusses in his introduction to *Nation and Narration*.

Novels also assemble a nation through abstract entities like the underlying thought / bias / presupposition and so on. It may create binary divisions of the Self and the Other as between the Orient and the Occident, the developed and the underdeveloped; articulate hegemonic or counter hegemonic views; play up the superiority of one group over the other, for instance, by pitting the colonizer against the colonized or the elite against the poor; evoke patriotic feelings of national consciousness, tradition and culture; whip up nostalgia for a past concept of the same nation in order to point to certain lapses in the present; omit vital details, create areas of silence or conspicuous gaps; or betray hope and optimism or pessimism for the future and so on.

Although ethnic identity, language, religion and common culture have now become the basis on which a state can be said to exist, paradoxically, the number of modern states with a homogeneous national identity that includes almost all the people is small. In contrast, in nearly most of the modern states, the identity on which the state is ostensibly built sometimes covers only less
than half the total population. In some of the modern nations, religion becomes the cornerstone while most others prefer to uphold secular credentials. Ernest Rennan says that “religion cannot supply an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality” (“What is a Nation”17). Religion is an individual matter and concerns the conscience of each person (18). Such states that are ostensibly theocratic in character become fertile ground for civil war. However others hold together because some potent but actually artificial idea of nation comes into play. Benedict Anderson describes this process as “imagined communities” (6) while E. J. Hobsbawm in an equally important contribution to the debate in *The Invention of Tradition* writes of states / nations inventing traditions (9).

Eric Hobsbawm in his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* argues that the existence of a nation depends upon the invention of national traditions which are made manifest through the repetition of specific symbols or icons. Nations often make use of highly revered symbols that help forge a sense of its particular idiosyncratic identity in which the nation’s people emotionally invest (1-14). An example for this could be the concept of India as Bharat Mata which provides an iconographic and emotional unity to India’s diverse communities within a Hindu matrix: Mother as Protector. Bhabha conveys a similar idea when he says that “[t]he scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture” (*Nation and Narration* 297). A sense of mutual national belonging is manufactured by the performance of various narratives, rituals and symbols which stimulate an individual’s sense of being a member of a select group. Or, certain forms and symbols of national sentiment, iconography, collective rituals and places and objects of national significance are projected in order to construct a nation. Bhabha also says that nationalist discourses are performative. Hence, nationalist icons and popular signs must be continuously rehearsed by the people in order to maintain a sense of deep horizontal comradeship (297).
While these are the essential ingredients in the creation of a “setting” in a fictional narrative, certain critics invest them and the writer with a greater role. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* stresses the need for writers and intellectuals to create national consciousness through their works (182). They should, he argues, consciously contribute to the forging of national consciousness by narrating the challenges that accompany the creation of a new nation and the dangers of neo-colonialism. Viewed from this perspective, creating a work of fiction is not for aesthetic pleasure alone or for an intelligent arm-chair critiquing of an existing situation. It has a greater and more serious role to play. Writers have to seek new narrative strategies to express their response to the changing nation.

Bhabha goes further and argues in *The Location of Culture* that there can never be one coherent common narrative through which a nation and its people can be satisfactorily represented. The nation is a site of heterogeneity and divergence. Narratives with claims to the contrary can do so only by marginalizing certain groups. Bhabha adds that “[i]ncreasingly, ‘national’ cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (8). This viewpoint does not go uncontested either. There are writers who refuse to be hemmed in by such artificial boundaries and parochial considerations. They take on the responsibility of assuming larger roles and shouldering more serious burdens. For instance, Salman Rushdie opines in *Step Across this Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002* that “[g]ood writing assumes a frontierless nation. Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards” (67).

One of the most intricate and subtle ways in which a nation seeks to differentiate itself from others is through its culture. Culture is a term that is difficult to define, as it has a huge range of meanings, a diversity which can contribute to imprecision and inconsistency. Terry Eagleton begins his book *The Idea of Culture* by emphasizing this view: “[c]ulture is one of the two or three most complex words in the English language and the term which is
sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all (1). Despite the complexity associated with the term, it must be agreed upon that culture makes a nation and hence cannot be ignored.

Culture is one of the basic building stones of a nation and the two share a symbiotic relationship. Culture simply put, is an accepted way of life; a habit of a people, in any group, community or a country. In fact, a nation is often considered as a tightly-knit group of people who share a common language, religion, historical experience and set of institutions. Thus nations are often considered to be culturally homogeneous groups. Edward Said in his work *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* opposes this rather simplistic view.

... cultures are always made up of mixed, heterogeneous and even contradictory discourses, never more themselves in a sense than when they are not just being themselves, in other words not being in that state of unattractive and aggressive affirmativeness into which they are twisted by authoritarian figures who, like so many Pharisees or mullahs, pretend to speak for the whole culture. (xv)

India reflects this idea as it is a land of diversity: religious, anthropological and linguistic. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* mentions how it is more appropriate to talk about the hybridity of cultures. He refers to it as the mixed-ness, or even ‘impurity’ of cultures. Hybridity refers to the fact that cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to a cultural fusion. Bhabha insists on hybridization of cultures; in other words, hybridity for him is an ongoing and continual process. Instead of beginning with an idea of the interaction of pure cultures, Bhabha directs his attention to what happens on the borderlines of cultures, to see what happens inside in-between cultures or the liminal, meaning that which is on the border or the threshold. The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes *In a New Time for Mexico* reinforces this belief "[c]ultures
perish in isolation and bear fruit only through contact with one another. Let us not fear cultural contamination” (210). Thus both these novelists endorse assimilation of cultures while simultaneously rejecting exclusivist tendencies. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* describes culture as the expression of a nation’s “preferences of its taboos and of its patterns” (196). He further adds:

The nation is not only the condition of culture, its fruitfulness, its continuous renewal, and its deepening. It is also a necessity. It is the fight for national existence which sets culture moving and opens it to the door of creation. Later on it is the nation which will ensure the conditions and framework necessary to culture. The nation gathers together the various indispensable elements necessary for the creation of a culture, those elements which alone can give it credibility, validity, life and creative power. (197)

Thus a national culture is formulated by the people of the nation. Fanon defines national culture as the efforts made by the people “in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (188) and adds that “nationalism is the most fervent and efficient means of defending national culture” (196).

A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in under-developed countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on. (189)

He also believes that glorifying the cultural traditions of the past is not enough. Rather a new way of mobilizing inherited culture is required; one that puts it actively to work rather than passively on display. Thus culture formulates a nation’s identity. Geeti Sen in *India: A National Culture* reflects a
similar view. She defines culture as the formulation of national identity: the ways in which people perceive themselves in relation to the country. She cites the example of Mahatma Gandhi who retrieved the use of the charka: an innately Indian technique of spinning yarn by the Indian people as he perceived that cultural values could go a long way in establishing national identity (22). Thus culture defines a nation. Terry Eagleton aptly comments in Literary Theory: An Introduction that we “owe our modern notions of culture in large part to nationalism and colonialism along with the growth of an anthropology in the service of imperial power” (26).

Bakhtin in “Discourse in the Novel” asserts that the novel form comes into being as an effect of cultural hybridization. It begins by presuming that fundamentally differentiated social groups can exist only through an intense and vital interaction with other social groups. He further adds that closed castes or class groups existing within an internally unitary and unchanging core of its own cannot serve as socially productive soil for the development of the novel. Bakhtin concludes that the novel, in order to emerge as a vital literary form, must have the logic that will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages (368-370). In the works of most postcolonial authors one finds the energizing collusion of cultural accents – the meeting of cultures in the colonial act of expropriation having created further contexts within which the novel can find newer ways to mean.

Like all nations in the world, India too has been subjected to creative treatment and presented through various genres, the most preferred medium being long fiction. Aijaz Ahmed describes the Indian nation as a “terrain of struggles which condenses all social struggles so that every organized force in society attempts to endow it with specific meanings and attributes” (241). India has been continuously reimagined by native writers (R.K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh), expatriates (V. S. Naipaul, Chitra Divakaruni, Indu Sundaresan, Jhumpa Lahiri) and even foreigners (E. M.
Forster, Paul Scott). Two writers who have habitually turned to India in most of their fictional works are Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry despite their having settled down in the United States of America and Canada respectively. This thesis compares the depiction of India in the novels of these two expatriate authors as most of their fiction is based in India during crucial periods of her history. It would be interesting to note how similar / different these two authors are and also to understand how they visualize India and what techniques they employ to present the nation. It therefore becomes imperative to outline the literary profiles of these two authors.


This thesis will attempt to analyze five of the nine novels written by Rushdie – *Midnight’s Children, The Satanic Verses, The Moor’s Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Shalimar the Clown* as these have India as the setting and elaborately represent her. The novels excluded from this study are *Grimus* as it is a work of science fiction; *Shame* as it is based in Pakistan and talks about the people who ruled this nation; *Haroun and the Sea of Stories and Luka and the Fire of Life* as they are children’s novels; and *Fury* because it is based in the United States of America. All three novels of Rohinton Mistry – *Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance, and Family Matters* are based in India during crucial moments in her history and hence fall within the purview of this thesis. *The Scream* is a monologue delivered by an aged, nameless character living in Bombay. In this text India gets reduced to a mere setting and does not impinge on the narrative. The description of Bombay lacks both vividness and depth of description. Consequently it has been excluded from this study.

This treatise will probe whether Rushdie’s fictional construct of India, built in the course of his canon from *Midnight’s Children* to *Shalimar the Clown*, consciously or otherwise, succeeds in showcasing, celebrating or even propagating a culture of assimilation and whether Rohinton Mistry’s narrowing thematic focus from *Such A Long Journey* to *Family Matters* presents a contrasting perception and reflects a shift of attention from a nation to a small community and thus to a culture of exclusivism.

Assimilation is a process by which distinct and separate groups come together to share a common culture and accept the porosity of the artificial borders that keep them apart. As a society undergoes assimilation, differences among groups decrease and pave the way for mutual accommodation and the emergence of a national culture. At its most extreme, this may even result in the loss of a subaltern / marginalized group's native language and culture. This kind of cultural assimilation happens either spontaneously or forcibly and is usually referred to as acculturation. Thus, acculturation is the process when a culture spontaneously adopts a different culture or older and richer cultures
forcibly integrate other weak cultures. The term assimilation is often used with regard to immigrants and various ethnic groups who settle in a new land. A new culture and new attitudes towards the original culture is obtained through contact, communication and subsequent accommodation. Cultural assimilation happens all over the world and is not limited to specific areas. In fact people from different countries contribute to the formation of a global culture which is the culture combined by the elements from different countries. This global culture can be seen as a part of assimilation that causes cultures from different areas to affect or influence without losing any feature of its core identity. A more intense form of assimilation that is commonly observed is expressed in the metaphor of the “melting pot,” a process in which different groups come together and contribute to create a common culture and a new unique society. This view stresses the ways in which people from diverse backgrounds help to construct the U.S. society and to make contributions to American culture while getting altered themselves. The melting-pot metaphor presupposes a benign and egalitarian phenomenon, a process that emphasizes diffusion and inclusion. Assimilation also implies integration but insists on the absence of the element of subjugation, submission under duress or genuflection of one before the other. It underscores an atmosphere of mutual respect of differences but also a willingness to adopt alien features, art of idealism or considerations of expediency.

Exclusivism on the other hand is the practice of total disregard for the culture, language, opinions and ideas of others. It means keeping aside people or ideas that are divergent from ones own. Exclusivism proclaims ones own identity and culture and considers it superior to the rest. It is a form of segregation and consequently implies isolation, separation and divergence. In fact it tries to showcase homogeneity by considering all those who are different off limits.

The dominant note of Assimilation and Exclusivism is evident in the writings of Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry respectively. This thesis is an
attempt to reveal this difference in the construction of India. What is interesting is that both creative writers work on the same material – India in her pre- and mostly post- Independence days – but view it from the prism of vastly different perspectives. The final impression they leave in the minds of the readers is that of two painters in a studio equipped with a huge canvas each, a vast assortment of brushes and a wide range of colours. While Salman Rushdie uses all the colours, additionally mixes them in varying proportions and produces new hues – from the palest of pastel shades to the most violent of the deepest – employs different sorts of brushes, from the thinnest to the broadest, tries out all forms of strokes, from the meticulously crafted pencil lines to the most sweeping swishes and fills out every square inch of his canvas, Rohinton Mistry restricts himself to a very small segment of his canvas, employs the traditional set of given colours and permits himself only a limited repertoire of brush strokes. The result is the creation of two Indias, one resplendent and riotous; the other muted and monochromatic.