



HOMI BHABHA: NATION IS NARRATION, NARRATION IS NATION

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Abstract

*This paper explores Homi Bhabha's thesis that the nation functions as a narrative construction, focusing on how Salman Rushdie's novels reflect this idea. Bhabha rejects the notion of a stable, homogeneous national identity, arguing instead for an open, ambivalent concept of the nation shaped by narration, hybridity, and liminality. Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* exemplifies these notions by representing India as a "heterogeneous site" of overlapping cultures, histories, and religions. The novel challenges dominant national narratives by intertwining personal and historical events and portraying minority perspectives. It emphasizes how migration and cosmopolitanism reveal the fragmented, hybrid nature of nationhood. Rushdie's narrative techniques destabilize linear, essentialist histories and highlight the contested process of nation-building. The study argues that the novel, as a literary form, offers a unique space for reimagining nationhood beyond nationalism. It critiques the reduction of nation to a fixed narrative and promotes understanding nationness as dynamic, constructed, and multiple.*

Keywords

*Nation as narrative, Hybridity, Liminal space, Postcolonialism, Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Identity formation, Cosmopolitanism, etc.*

Full Article

The present paper proposes to explore Bhabha's thesis that a nation could be taken for a narrative construction and the way how Rushdie devises idiosyncratic way of creating a fictional world that, in some ways, sees eye to eye with Bhabha's argument about the relationship between nation and narration. Nations have been extremely important in discussions of colonialism, specifically forms of nationalism involved in anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial reconstruction. They have enabled stable cultural identities, as well as grounding necessary political structure: oppressed people have been identified with clear national identities. Therefore, nations have seemed a vital organizing principle for many writers and postcolonial studies. However, Bhabha rejects the well-defined and stable identity associated with the national form. It is not that he rejects national identity entirely, but that he wants to keep such identity open. He achieves this by examining 'narration' of nations; indeed, he edited a collection entitled *Nation and Narration*. Nations have their own narratives, but very often a dominant or official narrative overpowers all other stories, including those of minority groups. Such minority or marginalized



groups have privileged perspectives on the rethinking of national identities, helping to make them more inclusive and realistic.

Bhabha, like many other thinkers, takes Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* (1991) as a starting point to think about nations. Anderson's book reminds that the nation itself has always been a virtual community. Anderson suggests that, although the nation-state is historically specific and relatively recent, nations themselves always have an air of a historical permanence:

If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical'; the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into limitless future (Bhabha, 11-12).

Nations, in other words, are forms of mythology. Bhabha rephrases this thought to emphasize the connection between nation and narration:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizon in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation - or narration - might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West (Bhabha, 1).

Bhabha defines the nation as formed by "textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts, and figurative stratagems" (Bhabha, 12). To confront the nation, then, is to encounter it "as it is written" (Ibid). Again, like his formulation of Colonialism as signifying system, the nation is fragmented. Bhabha must formulate the nation as made-up of "scraps, patches and rags of daily signs" (Bhabha, 297) in order for him to identify a resistance in the "language of metaphor" (Bhabha, 291), for example, that makes up post-colonial narratives, (especially the novel's 'double-writing') that counter the nation ("dissemi-nation") with their hybrid histories and "displacement of narratives" (Bhabha, 319) that promise the re-imagining of post-colonial "nation people" (Bhabha, 291). While Bhabha theorizes the form of the novel ("double-writing") as the site for contestatory acts of 'dissemination', other poststructuralist post-colonial theorists identify localized epistemological spaces as resistant sites. Unlike Anderson, Bhabha argues that nations do not have to be conceived in historical terms, and this is central point to grasp because for Bhabha nations are forms of narration:

The linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes, most commonly signifies a people, a nation, or a national culture as an empirical sociological category or a holistic cultural entity. However, the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the 'nation' as a narrative strategy. As an apparatus of symbolic power, it produces a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and the repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity (Bhabha, LC, 140).



The narrative of nationality is continually displaced by other identities, like sexuality, class, or race, and there can be no end to this displacement. Bhabha sees the nation as the most important symptom in ethnographic study of modernity. He argues for the replacement of the presumed homogeneous and 'pure' or 'authentic' national identity with liminal, split and ambivalent identity, and of the 'horizontal, homogeneous empty time of the nation's narrative' with the 'double' and 'disjunctive temporality' of the people.

Bhabha emphasizes 'liminality' or 'liminal space' when he describes a nation as a "liminal image" (Bhabha, 1). He again asserts in *The Location of Culture* that "collective experiences of nationness" can be negotiated in "the emergence of interstices", which is parallel to the idea of liminal space. Most of the time, the interstitial space denotes and connotes "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (Bhabha, LC, 2).

In the liminal space, nations are also, for Bhabha, bound to go through an ambivalent process:

What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality (Bhabha, 1).

The above passage is consistent with the way Bhabha hashes out the issues of "hybridity" and "cultural differences". Hybridity is, like mimicry, an indispensable concept in Bhabha's thinking. In colonial discourse, the term 'hybrid' was used abusively to refer to a person of 'mixbreed' and such it was part of nineteenth-century racist ideology. However, Bhabha re-enunciates the concept of hybridity in a positive way, emphasizing the advantages of this state of in-betweenness. From the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and the colonized there emerges a new hybrid subject-position that challenges the validity and possibility of an essentialist cultural identity. Closely connected with Bhabha's idea on hybridity is his concept of 'Third Space'. The third space is the site where the hybrid identity is positioned: an enunciative, ambivalent space where new cultural meaning is produced. He sees the transitional as this translational and replaces the idea of history with that of temporality. That divulges his fervent concerns that not merely culture but nationness is subject to change through colonial diaspora and post-colonial emergence.

Bhabha associates nationness with narrative in the following argument:

If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness': the heimlich pleasures of the hearth, the unheimlich terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the strait insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the language of the law and the parole of the people (Bhabha, 2).



The ambivalent image of nationness indeed invokes impossibly numerous dilemmatic oscillations. And also, here he suggests that nationness could be a narrative construction. When it comes down to the concept of 'narrative', it evokes Gerard Genette's definition of the word in three different ways. He distinguishes different references to the word 'narrative'; he assumes that it could refer to 'story', 'narrative', or 'narrating'. "Story" means "the totality of the narrated events"; "narrative" means "the discourse, oral or written, that narrates them"; "narrating" means "the real or fictive act that produces that discourse - in other words, the very fact of recounting" (13). Bhabha's use of narrative often incorporates all the three categories. However, Bhabha's use of the word seems to make sense under Genette's umbrella of definitions.

For Bhabha, 'nationness' is not only a narrative construction but also a narrative strategy:

[T]he narrative and psychological force that nationally springs to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the 'nation' as a narrative strategy. As an apparatus of symbolic power, it produces a continual slippage of categories like, sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and the repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity (Bhabha, LC, 140).

The above observation is made by Bhabha particularly from a migratory perspective. He contends that writing as a migratory or a refugee may be more likely to explore the ambivalence of nationness because of the experience of migration. This is because a migrator always easily experiences a sense of in-betweenness. Like Rushdie, as a post-colonial intellect, he can always write about his homeland from different angles. For example, in *The Satanic Verses*, he writes as a liberalist so as to anthropomorphize Mohammed. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, he writes as a multiculturalist so as to lament the lack of multicultural spurs for post-independence India owing to Hindu fundamentalists' myopia.

As to the question why Rushdie, in *The Moore's Last Sigh*, chooses to write about Bombay in India, the answer can also be found in Bhabha's discussion of the relationship between nation and narration. As a cosmopolitan writer, Rushdie may well choose any cities in the world as the setting where to knit his fictional world. He picks up Bombay not just because it is his birthplace but also it serves well as Bhabha's idea of metaphoricity. Whether in the real world or in the fictional world, Bombay is, no doubt, a cosmopolitan metropolis. That is, over a long time Bombay has witnessed and absorbed innumerable foreign impacts. It certainly comes to be what Bhabha calls "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (Bhabha, LC, 2).

Bhabha doubts the fantasy of the origin and identity, hence inevitable impurity. As a result, migrants and metropolitans are more like imagined communities, rather than a community of identical and pure origin. Bhabha especially spots that because he has been aware of the danger of viewing nation-people as isomorphous community. Bhabha connects nation and narration thus:

[W]e are alive to the metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities - migrant or metropolitan - then we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal. Their metaphoric movement requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formation and social processes without a centred causal logic. And such cultural movements disperse the homogeneous, visual time of the horizontal society. The secular language



of interpretation need to go beyond the horizontal critical gaze if we are to give 'the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity' its appropriate narrative authority. We need another time of writing that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the Western nation (Bhabha, LC, 141).

Although Bhabha's foci are centered upon the Western nation, Rushdie dexterously proves Bhabha's above argument to hold water almost worldwide by palimpsesting Moorish Spain and modern India. The "ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and space" further unpuzzle Rushdie's superimposing India upon Moorish Spain. In turn, they are also reified by virtue of Rushdie's particular literary techniques which serve as policy, so to speak, which not just complicates the form of the novel but also conveys both what Rushdie means to disclose to his readers and what he unconsciously coincides with other events. The policy is, most of the time, concerned with politics both in the real world and in his fictional world, and *The Moor's Last Sigh* has no exception, especially when the setting is Bombay. Also writing on exile nuances this novel when we compare the novel with Rushdie's other works. All in all, as a narrative construction or rather reconstruction of India, *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers a space where the readers can spectate competing forces, be they religious or political, are engaged with a multitude of events in India. It is worthwhile to explore how Rushdie narrates or writes the nation via his literary techniques for that not only sheds more light upon the narrative but also represent the ambivalent nationness of India.

If one employs Bhabha's theory to interpret the boundaries of nation's civility by narrating it from the limits of its territory and civility, then these limits, as Homi Bhabha argues, are a difficult and 'heterogeneous' site inscribed by many voices. This explains a lot why Rushdie does not choose the majority group (Hindus) or the major minority group (Muslims) to be the focus of the novel. Instead, he chooses to let Moraes represent a variety of minority groups, including Moorish Arabs, Jews, Portuguese Catholics, Christians, and Indians with Mogul heritage. Therefore, India becomes a "heterogeneous site inscribed by many voices", as starkly contrasted with the India being ruined by ultranationalism and sectarian violence. It is not that India represents its heterogeneity only in the fictional world, but that the narrative is reminding people of India's intrinsic heterogeneity.

Another type of Rushdie's device is the intertwining of historical events and domestic or personal activities, combining the trivial and the important and undermining the claims of 'history' to neutrality and objectivity. On evaluating Rushdie's novels, it becomes evident that he utilizes this technique as well in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, from the relation of Aurora to Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to both Boabdil and Vasco da Gama as Moraes's ancestors.

Besides writing from a cosmopolitan point of view, Rushdie is also devoted to representing the nation itself in the narrative. The characters respectively work on behalf of different vocations as so as represent the nation India. When the British leave India, all the people of Elephanta celebrate their independence and incoming democracy, Vasco Miranda, however, imperviously defines the so-called democracy as "one man on bribe" (MLS, 167). Rushdie reflects the chief failures in India - corruption and sociopolitical turbulences brought about by communalism and ultranationalism. Brennan's remarks would finally footnote the relationship between novel and nation and resonate with Bhabha's argument and Rushdie's practices:

It was the novel that 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 styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation (Bhabha, 8).

However, Bhabha has come in for his own share of criticism by commentators who feel that he has sacrificed material factors and politics for textual complexities. For instance, Salman Rushdie, in his essay *Notes on Writing and the Nation*, writes, “Beware of the writer who sets himself or herself up as the voice of nation” (Rushdie, 60). Such reductively predetermined writing will ultimately lead, he concludes, “to the murder of thought” (Rushdie, 60). To this Rufel Ramos adds: “beware of the critic who sets up the nation as narration, for it flattens out those grand cartographies of the imaginations; it cuts short the life of narrative fiction’s ability to map possible worlds”. Reading a novel then, for example, *The Glass Palace*, not as a document of nation but as a narrative fiction that employs a complex helical narrative structure to richly texture its many characters’ identities and experiences, allows us to see how the novel is able to revitalize the power to of the romance genre and of the historical novel as told from a new, postcolonial point of view. To read *The Glass Palace* thus is to enlarge the narrative contact zones between those genres and to shatter the interpretive lens that systematically confuses aesthetics with ontological facts - to the shatter the wish - fulfillment fantasies of certain critics who choose to conflate- narration with nation and nation with narration.

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