

THE CONCEPTION OF NATION IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT

The term "nation" cannot have a general and universal definition. It is an overarching umbrella term. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is from the beginning doubtful of the view of the modern nation. The novel presents an alternative concept of the nation, the Islamic umma. Viewed from a broader perspective, a nation is like somewhat mixed both ethno-cultural and civic category. To come up with one definition under which all nationalities fit is impossible. A nation is a large community whose members are full members simply by virtue of their mutual respect of one another as sharing characteristics that are impossible or extremely difficult to change. The narrative of the modern nation imagines the abolition of margins and the closing of gaps in the creation of a community that arises at the end of history. Besides, cutting across nation making conceptions like region, class, race, language, religion, gender and other boundaries the notion of nation establishes the idea of all-inclusiveness of all sorts of nations. A national boundary, thus, draws differences that we can find in *Midnight's Children*.

Keywords: Nation, nationality, perspectives, narration, community, empirical.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

The objective of this article is to investigate the notion of nation, nationalism and nationality in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* mainly through the observation of some of the major characters. A nation is a cultural group no matter it is united by common descent or not. Modern and recent conceptions of nationalism is the feeling arising out of nationhood, belonging, or devotion to the interests or culture of one's nation. Joseph Stalin has given a definition: "A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture" (qtd. in Hobsbawm 5). National sentiment is considered as being rational and it is considered rational for individuals to become nationalists. Identification of the individual or group

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within an ethno-national group has to do with inter-group cooperation. This type of cooperation is easier for those who are part of the same ethno-national group. Ethnic ties like common language, customs, and expectations in a multiethnic state help him/her a lot in finding his/her ways in new surroundings. After the establishment of the ties, he/she becomes part of a network. It is rational to go on cooperating and ethnic sentiments to secure the trust and the bond needed for smooth cooperation. While welcoming a newcomer in a multiethnic state we should not forget a possible extreme of ethno-national conflict. In such a crisis of trust, both the sides will tend to see the other as being inimical. Walker Connor in *Ethno-Nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* says ethnicity represents, “a step in the process of nation-formation” (102). Connor tries to clarify this distinction by arguing, “While an ethnic group may . . . be other-defined, the nation must be self-defined” (103), which means that it has developed a nationalist ideology. A nation had come into being directing its own destiny and feeling responsible for it. Hans Kohn says that a nation sprang from a unique consciousness of the identity of divine, natural, and national law, based upon the dignity and liberty of every individual as God’s noblest creature, upon his individual conscience inspired by the inner light of God and reason alike (183). In Jefferson’s words, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be” (qtd. in Kohn 313).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULT

This article is based on secondary materials such as library, e-library, and internet. It explores notion of nation and applies the concept in *Midnight’s Children*. I discuss and verify the varieties of conceptions of nation in the novel. It does not use empirical method; nor does it conduct a field study, data collection, data analysis and interviews. It does not study technique/form and rhetoric of *Midnight’s Children*. Using the qualitative technique, the article provides an analytical study of nation. Using analytical approach, it studies the novel from the viewpoint of nation, nationalism and nationality.

This article integrates the ideas of theorists/writers like Salman Rushdie, A. D. Smith, Craig Calhoun, Walker Connor, and Josna Rege. It makes use of their various theoretical insights towards the concepts of nation, nationalism, and nationality. I have selected only a few characters who express the notion of nation as to describe all the characters and

perspectives in this paper is not possible. In a novel, character, like plot, is an important element. A novelist narrates his story; characters are made to speak in such a way that the situations desired by the writer is created.

From readings of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's devoted support to nationalism becomes clear. In the nineteenth-century description of modern nationalism and the rise of the nation is understood as the point of arrival for an "imagined community" (6), Benedict Anderson argues. He suggests that national narratives come to satisfy the desire for origins, continuity, and eternity (ibid.11). Josna Rege views, "despite its conceptual freshness and vitality, *Midnight's Children* remains very emotionally committed to the narrative of the nation" (366) and that the novel "romanticizes the Congress Party ideal of 'unity in diversity'" (360). It claims that Rushdie is dissatisfied not with the nation by itself but with the exploitation of the postcolonial nation, for the reason that those who came to lead it were, as Timothy Brennan opines, "sell-outs and power brokers" (27).

The *Midnight's Children's Club* brought together the five hundred and eighty one other children, who along with Saleem were born in the midnight hour of Indian independence. All these children, by virtue of the time of their birth, had also have a particular quality or feature with some special gift. The gifted children, sharing the moment of their birth with that of the nation, symbolized various different types of possibilities for the new nation. Saleem Sinai, growing up in the sixties and seventies, is also eyewitness to the several wars that the young Indian nation fought against its neighbors. National identity, like all identity, is strengthened by establishing its difference. Moreover, wars are the most effective means for validating national identity through a statement of difference. In the novel, Saleem Sinai -- a very important character in the novel--draws on the revolutionary birthright of nationalism as an obvious structure for his elucidation of India's fight for freedom: "I shall have to write the future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet" (462). Saleem, as the storyteller of the nation, claims on the idea of community as a "mixing of voices" in an enclosed space. He writes, "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (109). As Saleem uses the metaphor of 'swallowing' as inclusion, he meets the problems of boundaries, supremacy, and marginality that poison ideas of modern nation. Boundaries of nation and nationality are legitimated through the demand of destiny in the form of unceasing and holy past stories. Nationalism, Jawahar

Lal Nehru writes to Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, is simply "the newest bearer of that ancient face of India" (122). Although, India as a nation is both a modern and an imported conception. Nehru, long before he was leader of India had written an article entitled "The Psychology of Indian Nationalism," which endeavors to counter British control over there.

Saleem insists, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (9). As soon as he begins his history of the new nation, other histories obstruct. The conflict to control the center is violent, and Saleem finds himself competing with politicians, "Indira is India", and rich gurus, such as Lord Khusro Khusrovand, formerly known as Cyrus, a childhood friend of Saleem. "When set beside Cyrus's India," complains Saleem, "my own version seems almost mundane" (269). Saleem tries to change the tensions that arise from Shiva's comments--public versus private, community versus the individual, centrality versus marginality that destroys the modern nation. The narrow feeling of nation and nationalism is, sometimes, an obstacle in the unity and humanitarian feeling. Therefore, boundary of any sort can be crossed and should be crossed as per the need of time and place.

Rushdie's narrator Saleem must become conscious of new "nation that had never previously existed" (112); "Saleem must be India" (420). The pressures of unity lead Saleem to have faith in that he is in mechanism of the world. He thinks that there is nothing beyond his knowledge and there is no boundary that he cannot cross. However, he recognizes that this belief is self-justifying: "... an instinct for self-preservation" (175). In this modern world, "truth" has nothing to do with the fierce competition over opposing narratives of the nation. However, Saleem suggests, as he reveals on some of the "lost" prophets of Arabia, it never has: "Prophets are not always false simply because they are overtaken, and swallowed up, by history" (305).

Saleem is having a problem with the right ordering of the narrative. It is because of having no time for leavings due to the pressure of telling the dominant story, which presents the entire problem of origins and endings and centers and margins in the record of the history of the nation. It is imported, like the novel genre itself, from another place, time, and situation. Karl Marx claims that there is the split between the private and public self that is at the crux of the modern nation and its citizen/state divide. Saleem is trapped in the divide. Therefore, he tries to settle the sense of national

community with his particular life through a clear narrative of his private self that will reflect his community. We should turn to the possible cause of this divide. It is after all “Mountbatten’s tick tock . . . English-made” (106) that has fathered the children of midnight, “the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history” (118).

Both Saleem and India’s story, he claims are bound together, with his grandfather Aadam Aziz who is appropriately named, for a tale of origins. Aadam has studied medicine in Germany and returns to his village only to find his “new” knowledge and “modern” ways received with both doubt and dislike by the ancient boatman Tai, a historian who contempt the very idea of progress (21). Disappointed, Aziz departs from Kashmir for Amritsar, where, after seeing the butchery of peaceful demonstrators protesting British occupation, Aadam becomes an “Indian” (40). Thus, Saleem begins his tale of the birth of the nation. Aadam becomes conscious that he is “Indian,” a moment that is aroused by the cruelty of colonialism. The “beginning” is complicated by Saleem’s discovery that both his own and the nation’s origins lead him back to Britain. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that, as subjects of Britain, colonized Indians wanted to become “legal subjects” or “modern individuals” (7). The colonized Indian fantasized of being European.

In contrast, Indian nationalists abandoned the desire to be “European,” and, assuming that the concept of “individual rights” was universal, wanted to be both Indians and citizens (7). Nevertheless, Saleem’s lineage suggests that the idea of individual rights, the basis of the modern nation, is clear. The Indian nationalists in *Midnight’s Children* raise the myth of public communities ensuring their own private interests. Revealing to the Indian businesspersons, who earned hugely from the first Five Year Plan, the plan to modernize, Saleem states:

Want to hire the wrong person for the job? It’s easy! Just repeat these common interview-technique errors. How did Chattanooga secure VW’s only U.S. plant, a two-billion-square-foot green operation with expansion plans? It tried harder, even when it seemed almost certain the company was going somewhere else. It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the color of their cheeks. . . The businessmen of India were turning white. (179)

The situation above echoes itself in the examples of the Pakistani nationalists. In his attempt to narrate the birth of an independent nation, Saleem finds at least one way insistently and openly forcing him to return to Britain.

Some argue that political fierceness occurs in a region where different and contradictory varieties of nationalism meet. The anti-colonial movements marked a division between the inner, spiritual world of national culture and the outer material empire that follows to the colonial model.

To make comparison, there is India's long and complex history that has many streams that conflict with the European nationalist model. Saleem appeals in prophetic current. Tai--the boatman--invokes a sense of community that is founded not on individualistic and private historical narratives of progress but on a sense of humanity as widespread, ahistorical, and eternal. A model he gives as an example: "Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes. . . forever" (14). Different to the idea of progress, Tai is "the living antithesis" of Adam's German friends' belief "in the inevitability of change" (15). The stories he tells the young Adam are not of national borders and private accounts but of the Mughal Emperors, such as Jehangir, the "Encompasser of the Earth." Tai expresses the Muslim sense of community and nation, the umma that has been read as revolutionary.

Ahmed Sinai--Saleem's father--one of the businesspersons suffers from the disease of turning white; he wants to figure out the proper order of the *Koran*. The hidden "disorder" marks the conflict of this sacred book to linear or chronological forms (82). According to Islam, Mohammed was sent to end the violence and corruption that ruled among the Arabs of the jahiliyya--the pre-Islamic era--and guarantee peace. This new civilization, the umma--the Islamic nation--is secured by the shari'a. Unlike the Declaration of Rights that serves to protect individual freedoms, the shari'a, as a legislative body, serves to unite the community and reduces the facts of position.

Moreover, Saleem offers a gloomy depiction of the surrender of the individual to the community. From its establishment, Pakistan has tried to resolve the logic of the rights of the private liberal citizen with its assurance to Islam. The popular ideological basis of the nation, Bernard Lewis in

The Multiple Identities of the Middle East, says: “in Muslim theory, church and state are not separate or separable institutions” (28). After suffering a rejection from a spittoon in the “Land of the Pure” (Pakistan), Saleem quits his private narrative, forgets his mothers, fathers, and midnight origins and, leaving his “lust-for-centrality” (356), attains purity.

Saleem’s newly accepted “philosophy of acceptance” in the army life, which requires the abandonment of self-interest in the service of the “greater good” of the nation, however, leads him to commit horrible acts in the name of a friendly community.

The metaphor of ‘swallowing the world’ that Saleem frequently invokes in his endeavor to describe the nation reveals the weakness of both the historical and ahistorical models. The speechmaking of democracy and individual rights leads him to the problem of the particular posing as the universal, while the speechmaking of community, the pressures of having to exceed place and time, truly leaves him confused.

Padma--a female character in the novel-- to whom Saleem tells his tale, rests on the periphery of Saleem’s story of nations. Her interpretations and ideas are available to the reader but are never incorporated into Saleem’s narrative. The fact that there is no sexual union suggests the abnormality of their relationship. Yet, although this is clearly a categorized relationship, Saleem is fully dependent that she sits at his feet and holds him together. When she leaves, his cracks widen and he cannot write (149). Padma’s marginal position reflects the actual position of women in nationalist struggles; they are at once essential and yet their voice is inaudible, particularly on matters of gender.

Fellowship of the umma finds expression in *Midnight’s Children*. In the struggles of the patriarch Picture Singh in the den of blind women and in the Hummingbird’s powerful voice that calls male “members” to attention. In Pakistan, fellowship takes on a more misleading type, dependent as it is on the absence of the female. The Brass Monkey starts out as a thoughtless, rude child, irritated by gender inequity, mainly by her brother’s favored position in the household (152). However, in her rebirth she becomes Jamila Singer, “Pakistan’s Angel,” the “Nation’s Voice,” obedient and pure. President Ayud tells her, “your voice will be a sword for purity; it will be a weapon with which we shall cleanse men’s souls” (315).

Jamila Singer, who is hidden away behind her “famous, all-concealing, white silk chadar,” secures fellowship and serves the state by her hiddenness. The umma or nation realizes unity only when sexual difference is hidden away behind a veil. Fatima Mernissi-- a Koranic scholar--writes, women’s “invisibility made it possible to forget difference and create the fiction that the umma was unified because it was homogenous” (127). The blank sheet or veil reflects back the unity of the nation.

When Aadam positions his wife abandon purdah, she protests not on behalf of modesty but because “they will see my deepest shame!” Aadam is not interested in the wishes of his wife. His act of liberation is also an act of violation as he “drags all his wife’s purdah-veils from her suitcase . . . and sets fire to them” (34). Naseem’s “deepest shame” is thus the double violation, by colonialism and patriarchy that leaves her literally without a place, “for all her presence and bulk . . . adrift in the universe” (41). Aadam, half-hooked with western narratives of citizenship, releases Naseem only to conserve that she be “modern” and submit to the sexual/social contract that guarantees the European model of nationalism: “move a little, I mean, like a woman” (34). Aadam demands of his newly “liberated” bride. In this model, women are also “veiled” or cut off from the public sphere, as the social contract of modern nations is also a “sexual contract” that divides genders in public and private spaces. The public sphere of individuals, who make the pact ensuring rights, equality, and freedom, belongs to men. They also rule in the private sphere of blood ties and passion, the world of women. Aadam actively involved in the freedom struggle against the paternal imposing order.

The narrative of origins that occurs in the public domain and that provides a foundation to the modern nation, outside the “disorder of women,” gives rise to the illusion that supports the notion that rule can explain what humanity is. Suppressing narratives of historical origin, in order to guarantee a sense of community, does not lead us out of the problem of the patriarchal structure of nation. Nazir observes, “There is not and there cannot be, a general definition or universal definition or a general theory of nation, nationality or nationalism” (qtd. in Sharma, xvii).

CONCLUSION

The concept of nation and its constituents and nationalism are different as per the different perspectives to different scholars. From the

term "nation", we can get various different conceptions. The notion of theory of nationalism is problematic. Craig Calhoun, says that no single, universal theory of nationalism is possible: "Nationalism is too diverse to allow a single theory to explain it all . . . and contingent situations within the international world order" (123).

In *Midnight's Children* Saleem makes one last attempt to continue thin hope that might preserve some possibilities for the future of his nation. He confesses early in his life that his greatest fear is of absurdity, and it is thus that he tremendously attempts to make some sense of it. The one way out of absurdity for him is to tell his own story, which is also the story of his nation and above all, it is his own version of history. It is this very act of narration and the outstanding viewpoint of the narrator that indicates the presence of possibility and alternative. The text itself shows that not all has been lost in the damages of history made upon the nation. To conclude, through the analysis of the major characters of *Midnight's Children* it becomes clear that there is strong feeling of nation to them, which I have shown in this article. As far as my judgment to the text that I have analyzed is concerned, Rushdie is successful in presenting the notion of nation through various major characters in the text. For further research, I recommend two deserving theoretical areas such as 'the notion of globalism,' and 'the notion of cosmopolitanism' in *Midnight's Children*.

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