

# NARRATIVES OF SECULAR NATIONALISM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN" AND "THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH"

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*Abstract:* Nationalism as a theoretical category is a widely disputed and elusive concept. This is due to the fact that the formulation of the nation-space across widely scattered geographies has now to take into account an altered dynamics of interaction and exchange. The relevance of literary language as an aesthetic register to corroborate the nation as "a powerful historical idea" and the need to formulate suitable analogies reveal the inadequacy of mapping the project through territorial credentials alone. The socio-cultural currency of the idea of the nation as a geographical continuum inserts itself into the pedagogical language of narration. The nation as an entity is not coterminous with its political cartography, in spite of the persistent efforts of all nationalist discourses to contain the narrative of the nation within an identifiable trajectory. To make a detour, to bypass and circumvent certain institutional codifications and create an audible register of displaced voices, is to interrupt the process of seamless narration and alter its constitutional chemistry. The nation as a barbed wire territory secured from the human contamination of the "other" – through paperwork, legal permits and manning of entry points – already hints at its fragile contours. The incongruent coupling of culture and polity, the increased involvement of armed forces along various corridors of cultural transaction, the enactment of geopolitics on a global scale, the susceptibility of culture to the tropes of power – all call into question the authenticity of the rhetoric of nationalism and its efficacy in healing differences and mending fractures. There is an increasing need to re-conceptualize the nation as a tentative space marked by an internal mobility of its constituents, where it is possible to articulate differences while dispensing with the abrasive rhetoric of fundamentalism. The nation thus becomes a fluid space of confluence and convergence, "a gestative political structure" gesturing towards a more inclusive space – perhaps exploring the possibilities that globalization has to offer in terms of pluralist cultural connotations.

*Keywords:* nation, culture, polity, fundamentalism, globalization.

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2019, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2019.2.5

Published online by "Globus et Locus" at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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## DEFINING THE NATION

Nationalism as a theoretical category is a widely disputed and elusive concept. This is due to the fact that the formulation of the nation-space across widely scattered geographies has now to take into account an altered dynamics of interaction and exchange. The relevance of literary language as an aesthetic register to corroborate the nation as “a powerful historical idea” (Bhaba 1990: 1) and the need to formulate suitable analogies reveal the inadequacy of mapping the project through territorial credentials alone. The socio-cultural currency of the idea of the nation as a geographical continuum inserts itself into the pedagogical language of narration. The nation as an entity is not coterminous with its political cartography, in spite of the persistent efforts of all nationalist discourses to contain the narrative of the nation within an identifiable trajectory. Homi K. Bhabha, in his book entitled *Nation and Narration*, defines the nation-space as fluid and ambivalent and speaks of a split consciousness arising from the ambivalent nature of identification itself, where assimilation is always partial and other voices lurk in the background posing a threat to the dominant narrative (Bhaba 1990: 1). To make a detour, to bypass and circumvent certain institutional codifications and create an audible register of displaced voices, is to interrupt the process of seamless narration and alter its constitutional chemistry. The nation as a barbed wire territory secured from the human contamination of the “other” – through paperwork and legal permits and manning of entry points – already hints at its fragile contours. The geographical definition of the nation has germinated (as Timothy Brennan puts it) from the “natio”, variously interpreted as “a local community, domicile, family, a condition of belonging”, to eventually recognize a more intricate placement of elements within a wider geography where identities proliferate and differences multiply, threatening to spill over erected walls (Bhaba 1990: 45). The incongruent coupling of culture and polity, the increased involvement of armed forces along various corridors of cultural transaction, the enactment of geopolitics on a global scale, the



susceptibility of culture to the tropes of power – all call into question the authenticity of the rhetoric of nationalism and its efficacy in healing differences and mending fractures. There is an increasing need to re-conceptualize the nation as a tentative space marked by an internal mobility of its constituents, where it is possible to articulate differences while dispensing with the abrasive rhetoric of fundamentalism. The nation thus becomes a fluid space of confluence and convergence, “a gestative political structure” (Bhaba 1990: 46) gesturing towards a more inclusive space – perhaps opening up to the possibilities of globalization with its pluralist cultural connotations.

## THE COLONIAL LEGACY

Given the “conditions” in which sub-continental nationalism made its appearance, there was little scope for genuine doctrinal innovation or philosophical defence. Or more precisely, the necessary philosophizing had already been done, in a different context – that of the rise of industrialism (Chatterjee 1999a: 5).

In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* Partha Chatterjee addresses the debatable theoretical premises of postcolonial nationalisms. “Eastern nationalism”, aspiring towards global standards of progress in the post-colonial era without impairing the fundamental texture of its culture and the matrix of values which informs its nationalist ethos, is faced with the complex task of translating the vernacular into the global without undergoing any transmutation. “Eastern nationalism” thus has to negotiate with a certain “anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973) derived from its affiliation with western nationalism. “It is both imitative and hostile to the models it imitates [...]” (Plamenatz in Chatterjee 1999a: 2). The very fact that nationalists of the “eastern” type accept and value the ideal of progress – and strive to transform their inherited cultures in order to make them better suited for the conditions of the modern world – means that archaic forms of authority are destroyed,



conditions are created for a certain degree of individual initiative and choice, and for the introduction of science and modern education (Chatterjee 1999a: 3). The process of recreating the interplay of socio-political and cultural forces thought to be inherently progressive, in a systematic and artificial manner under manipulated circumstances, accelerating the process of their assimilation and coercing it to a climax, results in an uneven, partial and disfigured reconstruction of nationalism that is riddled with patches of decay and deformation.

In Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* Francisco da Gama, "the modernist, his eyes fixed on the future, became a disciple first of Bertrand Russell – *Religion and Science* and *A free Man's Worship* were his ungodly Bibles – and then of the increasingly fervent politics of the theosophical society" (Rushdie 2006b: 17). He tries to inculcate in his younger son Camoens "the virtues of nationalism" and Enlightenment rationality, while his wife Epifania, as a staunch loyalist, rebukes her husband's anti-British stance: "Too many crooks and books have filled your ears [...]. What are we but Empire's children? British civilization, law, order, too much" (Rushdie 2006b: 17-20). Epifania's words underscore the legacy of the Empire, the colonial imprint which survived as a residue in the clauses of the legislature and in the more diffused realm of culture. Such a legacy was to forever haunt the national psyche as it took shape in the shadow of the departed raj. As an inheritance questioning the authenticity of the nationalist discourse, it was a legacy intermingled and enmeshed with anti-colonial nationalism, problematising the very concept of the postcolonial nation. As the founder of the Home Rule League in Cochin, Francisco tries to unite the masses and the more distinguished classes under the banner of nationalism (offending Epifania's elitist sensibilities) through a dissolution of class barriers – an egalitarian measure which, though crucial in mobilizing support for the nationalist cause, eventually withered away in the wake of an aggressive economic policy and the whirlwind rise of the private sector that defined the post-independence period.



In prison he [Francisco da Gama] found time for the work that undid him. Nobody ever worked out where, in what reject-goods discount store of the mind, Great Grandfather Francisco got hold of the scientific theory that turned him from emerging hero into national laughing stock, but in those years it came to preoccupy him more and more, eventually rivaling even the nationalist movement in his affections. Perhaps his old interest in theoretical physics had become confused with his newer passions, Mrs Besant's theosophy, the Mahatma's insistence on the oneness of all India's widely differing millions, the search among modernizing Indian intellectuals of the period of some secularist definition of the spiritual life, of that worn out word the soul [...] (Rushdie 2006b: 19, 20).

Francisco's research paper, entitled *Towards a Provisional Theory of the Transformational Fields of Conscience*, seeks to configure the spiritual energy of the nation through the application of the laws of physics. It aims to corroborate the invisible presence of "dynamic networks of spiritual energy which are similar to electromagnetic fields" and exist as repositories of moral wisdom. According to Francisco such conservatories of moral energy exist as accessible pockets of memory functioning as paradigms of righteous behaviour. Francisco's paper thus seeks to align the western discourse of rationality with an indigenous spirituality. However, its abstract philosophizing falls apart in the absence of concrete evidence. Its failure to endorse the Nehruvian notion of progress along utilitarian lines at the expense of Gandhi's spiritual syncretism and material simplicity makes it obsolete in the wake of extensive mechanization. The fact that the milestones of nationalism as a dynamic and self-renewing process are defined in terms of material and statistical data (as underscored in the Nehruvian ethos) sidelines the more complex issue of culture, the subtle nuances of which ask for a more sensitive engagement. Intellectuals spearheading the project of development, which is conditioned by the limited aspirations of "first-class citizenship" and "greater privileges" (Chatterjee 1999a: 4), devise a yardstick of progress that is purely material. Galvanized into motion by the "imperatives of industrialism", the third world



nation is thus pushed into a condensed simulation of progress emulating the western technocracy, and aggressively welding together incompatible cultural strands within the rhetorical tropes of science and technology. Its accelerated pace is meant to compensate for a “great historical lag” (Chatterjee 1999a: 6). The state or the political infrastructure thus precedes the formulation of a national consciousness which is multi-ethnic and multicultural in its aspirations, and the mechanistic principles of nation-formation take precedence over the emotional articulation of cultural holism deriving from a shared heritage. The emergent nation as a political entity thus prioritizes or assigns the quality of pre-eminence to “western nationalism”, and dispenses with certain signifiers, to arrive at a materially conceivable notion of progress in the model of western capitalism. It promotes certain modes of “apprehending the world” (Chatterjee 1999a: 19) the rhetoric of modernization replete with the terminology of industrialism, free-market liberalism and globalization – to arrive at a homogeneous national culture where the local and dialectical lose their currency and momentum. The process is not very different when Camoens da Gama, in emulation of Francisco’s act of theoretical transposition, tries to indigenize the discourse of communism by tailoring its ideals which were fuelling “great events in Russia” to suit the indigenous context of India. He creates counterfeit Lenins in the form of local dummies, who would rearticulate Lenin’s charged oratory translated into the various regional dialects, making Leninism accessible to the masses. But the scheme is derailed when Vladimir Ilyich, an agent of the authorizing committee, refuses to sanction the project on the ground that it is not “an adaptation but a satirical caricature” (Rushdie 2006b: 28-31) essentially reductive and demeaning – a poor replica of the original. Bhabha identifies the motives behind the tendency of colonial mimicry as

the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as the subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence: in order to be effective mimicry must produce its slippage, its excess, its difference



(Bhaba 1994: 122). This implies an excess valuation of other cultures, over and above residues of the indigenous, in the reformed colonized individual, which the colonizer interprets as a distorted mimesis (Bhaba 1994: 86).

My grandfather became increasingly obsessed with this question of counterfeit Lenins. With what zeal he scoured the locality to discover men with the necessary acting skill, memory capacity and interest in his plan! With what dedication he worked, getting copies of the latest statements of the illustrious leader, finding translators, acquiring the services of make-up artists and costumiers, and rehearsing his little troop of seven [...] (Rushdie 2006b: 29).

Camoens' preoccupation with the superficial details of the act of performance, largely reducing the project of disseminating the communist ideology into a presentational maneuver (complete with all the tropes of performance), belies the shallowness of his nationalist assimilation. His aping of the revolutionary gestures encoded in a foreign discourse merely turns communism into its parody. The relatively nascent phase of industrial development in which Camoens tries to implant his Marxist ideals also cannot provide any impetus to the material drive necessary to translate his ideas into a revolutionary project.

## A SUPERIMPOSITION OF WESTERN PREMISES OF NATIONALISM AND INDUSTRIALISM

According to Partha Chatterjee, the project of nationalism can be philosophically mapped along two axes, "the problematic" and "the thematic" (Chatterjee 199a: 36-52), where the former involves an outlining of the problem areas for the identification of possible targets on the basis of "practical realizability". It is a programmatic scheme yet to be implemented. The latter concept has to do with a schema in which the general matrix of values arises from "the epistemological principles" which inform the project as well as its moral



and ethical status. “The justificatory structures” that nationalism hinges on, its theoretical premise based on “objectifying” procedures of knowledge, were constructed in the post-Enlightenment age of western science. The Enlightenment doctrine, however, becomes functional only through a process of distancing the “other” who represents a lack and a void which Enlightenment theory seeks to bring within the purview of its knowledge through a process of ventriloquizing its presence. Latching onto such a representational model based on the negation of its intellectual autonomy, nationalist thought in the postcolonial world undermines its own presence. What can retrieve the concept of third world nationalism from this mire of negative connotations is an original amalgamation of the derived concepts, paving the way for “entirely new political possibilities” and arrived at through a dialectical exchange between the thematic and the problematic (Chatterjee 1999a: 38-40). Both Francisco and Camoens da Gama formulate their doctrine of nationalism along socialist lines, thus running counter to the Nehruvian ethos of progress which prioritized the “problematic” over the “thematic”, by mapping progress in periodic slots of five years along statistical lines. Progressive schemes were designed to artificially augment the performance of the economic sector, seeking leverage from borrowed capital. In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie assesses the nation’s progress in terms of accessibility to basic amenities at the close of the Second Five Year Plan in 1956.

The targets outlined in the plan failed to achieve a lasting effect owing to unfavourable weather conditions, transfixing the nation in an economic doldrum as it found itself steeped in debt, unable either to repay the developmental loans or seek further monetary assistance. The production of iron-ore was almost doubled: power capacity did double; coal production leaped from thirty-eight million to fifty-four million tons. Five billion yards of cotton textiles were produced each year. Also, large number of bicycles, machine tools, diesel engines, power pumps and ceiling fans (Rushdie 2006a: 285).





The moderate economic boost the Plan managed to effect nevertheless fell widely short, of the desired mark, and was further overshadowed by an increase in the number of “landless and unemployed masses”. Population growth and rampant illiteracy were factors which kept a significant section of the populace incapable of accessing the material amenities churned out by the newly constructed industrial sector. Both Francisco and Camoens, through their visionary idealism, sought to recreate, reinterpret and indigenize the legacy of the Enlightenment, but their failure to strategically negotiate with the dominant power bloc and introduce their ideas at the appropriate levels derail their respective schemes. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* speaks of “the ‘political’ power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence”, hinting at the aggression which underlies their economic schemes and welfare measures. In order to locate the anchorage of power within the nation it is important to identify the “national bourgeoisie” as a cluster of individuals who are able to strategically place themselves within the complex relations of production and diversify the field of statecraft to extend their influence in the realm of economic transactions. They thrive in a symbiotic relation with the entrepreneurial sector at the expense of the masses who are reduced to the status of cogs in the state machinery.

## THE PERPETUATION OF COLONIAL POLITICS IN THE GUISE OF INDIGENOUS SUPREMACY

Of the three models of nationalism proposed by Chatterjee – “the creole nationalism” of the Americas, the linguistic nationalisms of Europe and the official nationalism pioneered by Russia – the third model, with “its imposition of cultural homogeneity from the top”, aptly encapsulates the aspirations of the emerging nations of the third world. The “bilingualism” of the intelligentsia and their access to the “European language of the state”, in which the values of modern western culture are enshrined, enable them “to deploy



civil and military educational systems modeled on official nationalism” (Chatterjee 1999a: 21). The populist strands of the narration of this kind of nationalism are partially allowed to take shape through elections (with the contending parties often gaining leverage by employing ritual signifiers as party symbols) and through an official recognition of the diverse “cultural celebrations” and religious festivities appeasing the nation’s multi-lingual and multi-ethnic populace. Rushdie narrates the official nationalism of India in *Midnight’s Children* in terms of the manipulation of votes, the lack of clarity that defines the representational process itself, and the close scrutinizing of the entire event by hired hoodlums of the Congress party (as evident in the 1957 elections). All these factors expose the shallow roots of democracy and a deliberate disenfranchisement of the masses that is achieved through thinly disguised coercion.

On election day, 1957, the All-India Congress was badly shocked. Although it won the election, twelve million votes made the Communists the largest single opposition party; and in Bombay, despite the efforts of Boss Patil, large number of electors failed to place their crosses against the Congress symbol of sacred-cow-and-suckling-calf, preferring the less emotive pictograms of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and Maha Gujarat Parishad (Rushdie 2006a: 307).

On polling day he [Shiva] and his gang, who called themselves Cowboys were to be seen standing outside a polling station in the north of the city, some holding long stout sticks, others juggling with stones, still others picking their teeth with knives, all of them encouraging the electorate to use their vote with wisdom and care [...] and after the polls closed, were seals broken on ballot boxes? Did ballot-stuffing occur? At any rate, when the votes were counted, it was discovered that Qasim the Red had narrowly failed to win the seat; and my rival’s [Shiva’s] paymasters were well pleased (Rushdie 2006a: 308).

This kind of tampering which violates the privacy of the ballot system, the presentation of false statistics, and the nation’s perpetuation of the myth of progress ignoring the tangled web of cross-

purposes which continually contradict the doctrine of progress (corruption being the only cohesive that holds together the tenuous alliances formed for personal gain), are labeled by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* as symptoms of “the optimism epidemic” (Rushdie 2006a: 46). It is a state of mass hysteria, an illusion on a grand scale, a conjuring feat that holds the populace in tranquilized submission as they mouth the rhetoric of patriotic clichés. The failure to adequately cleanse the system and guard against a possible distortion of its defining concepts reflects the inertia of the national elite towards ensuring the percolation of theoretical precepts of governance to the ground level, and amounts to a stubborn refusal to engage with the ethical dimension of democracy. Behind the façade of an overall statistical growth, the national elite indirectly subscribes to a culture of appropriation, of which they alone emerge as significant beneficiaries. The nationalist movement makes its presence felt as a tentative alliance between and amongst diverse cross-sections of people striving towards official recognition. Both Anderson and Gellner, in their critique of 20th century nationalisms, identify the same trend of “a vanguard intelligentsia coming to state power by ‘mobilizing’ popular nationalism and using the Machiavellian instruments of official nationalism”. The alignment of “thought”, “culture” and “power”, confining the participation of the masses within a circumscribed area, translates into a sort of “self-gratification” without “social responsibility” (Chatterjee 1999a: 21). The superficial mapping of alien concepts onto a primitive economy, the violation involved in the abrupt overhauling of the economic apparatus, and the sustained erosion of human rights – all point towards a reinstatement of the power ratio between the colonizer and the colonized, albeit in a new format. This brings us to the two modes of assessing the postcolonial nation as outlined by Partha Chatterjee: figuring out on the one hand “the relationship between colonialism and nationalism”, and examining “the specific structure of domination which is built under the aegis of the postcolonial state” on the other (Chatterjee 1999a: 28). The workings of such structures of domination can be explained in

terms of Gramsci’s concept of the “passive revolution” (Gramsci in Chatterjee 1999a: 50). In this “war of position” the slow infiltration of the bureaucracy saturates the system and takes control of certain strategic points. The intelligentsia, having thus imbibed colonial models of discourse, is initially content with a partial exercise of agency and subscribes to a scheme of reformation under the colonial rule. However, at an opportune moment, when the revolutionary content of the independence struggle has sufficiently matured, it turns to seize power. Driven by the desire for absolute authority, these individuals part ways with the colonizer and appropriate the discourse of nationalism to realize their private goals. Having mastered the operational intricacies of the colonial prototype, after the acquisition of the state machinery they perpetuate a rule of difference in alliance with a corrupt bureaucracy under the pretext of indigenous supremacy. In *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Rushdie represents the corruption of the bureaucracy through a fictional land reclamation project and the fabricated tetrapod scheme. The tetrapod experiment (apparently an innovative entrepreneurial venture) designed to promote the expanding cityscape, transforms into an opportunity for the deflection of funds through underhand business deals:

It comes out of his [Dr Narlikar] pocket a little plaster-of-paris model two inches high: the tetrapod! Like a three-dimensional Mercedes-Benz sign, three legs standing on his palm, a fourth rearing lingam-fashion into the evening air, it transfixes my father. “What is it?” he asks; and now Narlikar tells him: “This is the baby that will make us richer than Hyderabad, bhai! The little gimmick that will make you, you and me, the masters of that!”. He points outwards to where sea is rushing over a deserted cement pathway [...] “The land beneath the sea, my friend! We must manufacture these by the thousands – by tens of thousands! We must tender for reclamation contracts; a fortune is waiting; don’t miss it brother, this is the chance of a life-time!” (Rushdie 2006a: 183).

Behind the façade of the legal contracts sanctioning the project [...] letters were written, doors knocked upon, black money changed hands (Rushdie 2006a: 184).

During the first twenty or so years of my life, new tracts of land – “something out of nothing” – were reclaimed from the Arabian sea to the southern end of the Bombay peninsula’s Back Bay, and Abraham [Zogoiby] invested heavily in this reverse Atlantis rising from the waves (Rushdie 2006b: 185).

Zogoiby deliberately regulates the momentum of the project, prolonging its span to facilitate the diversion of funds so as to ensure a significant profit for the intermediaries involved. Having monopolized the scheme, he allows it to partially take shape – limiting the number of construction sites to maintain the price of property – and deliberately slackens the pace of the project to rope in more collaborators whose investments would ensure a sustained inflow of funds, thereby raising the stakes of profit.

He [Abraham Zogoiby] found an ally when Kiran [K.K. or Keke] Kolatkar, a little pop-eyed black cannonball of a politico from Aurangabad, and the toughest of all the hard men to have bossed Bombay over the years, rose to dominate the Municipal Corporation. Kolatkar was a man to whom Abraham Zogoiby could explain the principles of invisibility, those hidden laws of nature that could not be overturned by the visible laws of men. Abraham explained how invisible funds could find their way through a series of invisible bank accounts and end up, visible and clean as a whistle, in the account of a friend. He demonstrated how the continued invisibility of the dream-city across the water would benefit those friends who might have, or by chance acquire, a stake in what had until recently been invisible but had risen up like a Bombay Venus from the sea (Rushdie 2006b: 185-86).

The city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white: when the whole of life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantom wise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how then could Abraham’s career have been any different? How could any of us escape that deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per-cent fakery of the real, in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How



could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (Rushdie 2006b:184, 85).

The parallel growth of a criminal economy parasitically thriving on the resources of sanctioned projects, the multiple nodes of transaction which escape the scanner, the vague terms which provide room for manipulation and improvisation – all imply a sustained erosion of the ethical core of nationalism. Corruption undercuts the discourse of nationalism, undermining its progressive claims and taunting its authenticity.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF SECULARISM AS AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Chatterjee, in his essay *Secularism and Tolerance* (Chatterjee 1999c) traces the genealogy of the word “secularism”, discussing its contextual transposition and pointing to the paucity of terms which adequately signify the concept in the indigenous cultural heritage. Secularism, though diametrically opposed to the model of a theocracy and its ritualistic orientation in the running of state affairs, does not necessarily embrace the notion of cultural pluralism in the ideology of nationalism. Thus, Hindu extremist parties are seen as tenaciously clinging to a campaign of cultural homogenization, through the systematic eviction of cultural minorities (who are conveniently labeled as fundamentalists disrupting the equilibrium of state affairs), even as they uphold the ideal of a secular state with its modernizing imperatives. In Rushdie’s novels communal violence within the national space is triggered off with the mobilization and exploitation of certain affective dimensions of religion by demagogic ideologues. Such communalism spirals into mass hysteria, with religious sentiments swiftly gaining in pitch and momentum. The petty circuits of crime sustained in the name of religion, or a more serious political development concealed within the verbiage



of religion, speak of certain distortions in the principles of secularism which arise from a failure to internalize the values of liberal nationalism. As such, they are inevitably usurped by dark fantasies of money and power. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie explores this lethal conjugation of commerce and hard-lined sentiments in the following lines:

What is known about the Ravana gang? That it posed as a fanatical anti-Muslim movement [...] that it sent men out, at dead of night, to paint slogans on the walls of both old and new cities: “NO PARTITION OR ELSE PERDITION! MUSLIMS ARE THE JEWS OF ASIA!” and so forth. And it burned down Muslim-owned factories, shops, godowns. But there’s more, and this is not commonly known: behind the façade of racial hatred, the Ravana gang was a brilliantly conceived commercial enterprise (Rushdie 2006a: 92-93).

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* the celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi becomes: “the occasion for fist-clenched saffron-Head banded young thugs to put on a show of Hindu fundamentalist triumphalism, egged on by bellowing ‘Mumbai’s Axis’ party politicians and demagogues such as Raman Fielding, a.k.a Mainduck [‘Frog’]” (Rushdie 2006b: 124). The M.A party’s success lies in its ability to trace out “power’s secret source” beyond the ambit of “the civil norm”, in a deliberately calculated combination of religion and violence, in “the outrageous, the outsize, the out-of-bounds” gaining leverage from the “wild potency” of deviant energies. MA’s hoodlums enforce submission, celebrate the virility of violence, and revel in the nakedness of its perpetration. When the principle of secularism finally takes roots, as Rushdie suggests, it is in the context of gang rivalry in “the inter-community league of cynical self-interest”. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, it is spearheaded by Abraham Zogoiby, whose alliance with the Muslim gang leader, Scar, in shaping a rival gang “gave the lie to Mainduck’s vision of a theocracy in which one particular variation of Hinduism would rule, while all India’s other peoples bowed their beaten heads”. This alliance is



justified on the ground that “[...] corruption was the only force we had that could defeat fanaticism” (Rushdie 2006b: 332).

Chatterjee writes about the need to re-problematize, or gain a fresh perspective on, the issue of secularism rather than addressing it within the framework of such absolutes as right and sovereignty – which form the bedrock of policy formulation and implementation. In his opinion there is an increasing need to address the inadequacy of the political lexicon in mapping “the constantly shifting strategic location of the politics of identity and difference”, or in other words, to identify the duplicitous stance of the political rhetoric itself in its refusal to recognize “the strategic context of power in which identity or difference is often asserted” (Chatterjee 1999c: 254).

## DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION

Imagining the nation into being involves a sustained generation of centripetal energies circulating around the affect of nationalism. This requires a relegation of differences of “race, language, religion, class, caste and so forth” (Chatterjee 1999b: 10) to the peripheries of the national psyche. Lapses in such a strained alignment of affiliations are inevitable. The nationalist project negotiates with the issues of demarcation and difference in two spheres – questioning on the one hand the “rule of colonial difference” (Chatterjee 1999b: 10) as meticulously cultivated by the colonizers, to be implemented and made functional through the architectonics of state politics; and addressing, on the other hand, the differences ingrained within the cultural weave of the indigenous people, which were not purely a matter of policy but enmeshed within the cultural fabric. While it is relatively simpler to expose the manipulated core of colonial politics and reveal its racist discourse as subterfuge for economic exploitation, internal differences reified over a period of time (permeating sites of interaction at various junctures and informing the cultural history of a people) require a more minute investigation for

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2019, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2019.2.5

Published online by “Globus et Locus” at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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negotiating and transforming the sensitive interstitial spaces. The project of “cultural normalization” (Anderson in Chatterjee 1999b: 11), as Partha Chatterjee states in *Whose Imagined Community?* (Chatterjee 1999b: 11), has to fall back on the “universalist justificatory resources of post Enlightenment social thought” – thus tainting its conception with the intellectual markers of the colonizer. The cultural coalition arrived at, or the tentative consensus on which the “imagined community” then rests, has to be stabilized through legal formalities which sustain “the modern liberal democratic state”. Chatterjee, however, feels that the theoretical register of the postcolonial state (largely comprising of “the institutional terms of modern European civic and political life”) has in a manner invalidated the project of cultural authenticity which preceded the institutional status of the nation-state: “If the nation is an imagined community and if nations must also take the form of states, then our theoretical language must allow us to talk about community and state at the same time. I do not think our present theoretical language allows us to do this” (Chatterjee 1999b: 11). The post-independence venture of national reconstruction and social planning manifested itself in a spate of industrial projects implemented by the National Planning Committee. It was largely a technical exercise of policy formulation along rational and categorical lines under the supervision of a professional intelligentsia, and justified by Nehru in the following words: “We are trying to catch up as far as we can with the industrial revolution that occurred long ago in western countries” (Chatterjee 1999b: 202). As the procedural intricacies of planning were kept outside the purview of politics, planning was identified as an objective action – a scientific cartography devoid of political motives – which was capable of envisioning the national destiny from an impartial standpoint. An effective developmental program as drafted by the planning commission could allow no room for grey areas and should function on the assumption that “the objects of planning” “consisting of both physical resources and human economic agents” would move along pre-



dictable lines (Chatterjee 1999b: 206). Operating within certain parameters which did not take into account the variables involved or the contingency of circumstances, it was a maneuver which Partha Chatterjee rightly identifies as self-deceptive. The scheme of mechanization and its concomitant segmentation of the nation-space cannot be put into effect without trespassing on human rights: the lines of segmentation are also lines of infringement, and a “universalist framework of reason” (Chatterjee 1999c: 254), justifying the scheme as an abstract, objective agenda of surveillance, falls apart in the face of tangible differences. The totalizing egalitarianism of that scheme, founded on principles of cultural homogenization, fails to contain deviations or significant departures which may question the applicability of the doctrines of growth and progress to the entire population. The deviant bodies thus have to be sublated through brute force. The state, in order to keep its sovereign status intact, curtails idiosyncrasies and files down differences. It makes no “concession to cultural relativism” (Chatterjee 1999c: 254) as any recognition of cultural incongruity may encourage secessionist tendencies and result in a scission in the body politic.

## THE NATION AND ITS MYTHS

I have earlier discussed the limitations of official documentation in mapping the project of nationalism and the inefficacy of legislative clauses to ensure a more integral participation from its subscribers. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie tries to capture the riotous energy which characterizes the internal dynamics of the nation space poised on the threshold of independence:

the city was poised, with a new myth glinting in the corners of its eyes. August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna's birthday and Coconut Day; and this year fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve – there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand



years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with the Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by two other mighty fantasies money and God (Rushdie 2006a: 150).

The event of independence becomes just another “new myth” – an addition to the long catalogue of festivities, the multitudinous realities of a variegated folk culture embedded in the idiosyncrasies of the local and the temporal – and not an overarching ideology capable of assimilating these diverse vignettes of identity. The “varying degrees” of participation to which Rushdie refers also emphasize the fact that at any juncture of its existence the equilibrium of the nation-space remains fragile and vulnerable. In the absence of even participation – where one or the other of the cultural communities that the nation seeks to collate under its banner remain alienated from the psychic core of the national community, or only partially offers its consent to the discourse of nationalism – the myth of the nation is liable to disintegrate. “The rituals of blood” – enacted to contain any threat to the sovereignty of the nation-space – sanctify a new discourse of patriotism and legitimize violence perpetrated under the banners of religion and polity. In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie, through the metaphor of the celluloid, illustrates how the passage of time accords coherence to a disjointed narration. As the past recedes from view it seems to gain in plausibility:

Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems – but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the



stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality (Rushdie 1981: 229).

What gives any semblance of coherence to the discourse of nationalism is the act of retrospection which chooses to focus on certain fragments of collective memory, that can be stitched together into a logical narrative while dispensing with the incongruent strands or incompatible excerpts from a conflicted history. The need to overlook the details of fractured identities accumulating within the nation-space, and their history of continual friction, necessitates the activation of “a phenomenal collective will” which can neatly sweep away the disparate elements “Under the Carpet”. Transforming illusion into reality, it thus imagines the nation into existence through an act of ellipsis.

## THE NATION AND ITS METAPHORS

The moment of midnight, which finally accords the status of nation to an amorphous cultural space like India, is described by Rushdie as “that hour which is reserved for miracles, which is somehow outside time” – thus locating the moment of engendering the nation outside the flow of chronological time, as an imaginatively retrievable monad. It is perpetuated and made eternal through an act of continual recollection, investing authenticity to the discourse of nationalism. But the moment of midnight is also the moment when through “some freak of biology” under the influence of “the preternatural power of the moment”, the midnight’s children endowed with various biological and psychic eccentricities – “with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous” – made their presence felt, posing a significant challenge to the project of homogenization and compelling a polyvocal and polygenetic narration of the nation.



Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present in one place at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. *Midnight's Children* can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing twentieth century economy; or as the true hope of freedom (Rushdie 2006a: 278).

The *Midnight's Children* thus metaphorically embody a gargantuan myth replete with passionate excess, impeding the nation's progress by its delirious rhetoric. Or they may be envisioned as a plurality of cultural spaces, an imbrication of cultural discourses, a complex of voices whose simultaneous existence makes possible the transcendence of cultural fundamentalism – through an imaginative broadening of the tenet of secularism into a truly multicultural space of tolerance.

[...] in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight the thing that never existed was suddenly “free”. But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it stand? (Bhabha 1994: 208-209)<sup>1</sup>.

Nationalism is a riddle, a paradox that is forever teasing us to unravel its duality and to envision its many contradictions within an assimilative framework. Any attempt to straighten out its complications, by abandoning the language of metaphors, is to slide into recalcitrant chauvinism. Rushdie explains: “To my mind the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd by its very nature is superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once” (Pecora 2001: 323). To accommodate the superabundance of narrations held in a precarious balance requires a sustained expenditure of imaginative energy. The nation resides in the mindscape of the people, where its disparate realities are given coherence and shaped into a whole. The paraphernalia of the nation-space or its temporal

heterogeneity is transmuted by a psychic or affective register. It is the dialectic of the local and the epochal that ensures the perpetuation of the affect of nationalism beyond the spatial finitude of the local, conveying it to the realm of the immemorial through a continual infusion of the imaginative energy of nationalism into the material flux. To withhold sedimentation through a process of deferral of signification is to resist the stability of the signified. The epochal is manifest in various vignettes of the local, encompassing the local and the contingent to invest the material contemporaneity of existence with its presence, but it never allows itself to be circumscribed by the local. Just as a migrant individual may get acclimatized to the local and the contingent without losing the fluidity of his presence and the momentum of his being, so the narration of the nation involves a process of resisting any closure of meaning. The contemporary becomes the animating principle; it becomes a catalyst which sets into motion the dynamics of interaction between the people and the “epochal”, acting as the medium of transference. When the pedagogical circulates between a finite number of signifiers it loses its longevity and ceases to be epochal.

## THE THIRD-WORLD NATION AND THE COLONIAL TONGUE

Brennan, in his essay *The National Longing for Form* (Bhaba 1990: 44), quotes Rushdie who refers to the appropriation of the English tongue by the English-speaking cultures of the third world. In his novels Rushdie, through his verbal acrobatics, uncovers the mutations induced by power politics and the ethical ambivalence of language itself – its protean nature enabling it to voice the discourse of the usurper. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem comments on his own narrative strategy which engages in: “Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday – these techniques,



which are also attitudes of the mind, I have lifted – or perhaps absorbed” (Rushdie 2006a: 303). Saleem identifies the voices in his head as amoral and “as profane, and as multitudinous as dust” (Rushdie 2006a: 232). He mediates his narrative through the distorting lens of “fantasy, irrationality and lust”, preferring in his arrangement of details to emulate:

[...] the messier type, whose thoughts, spilling constantly into one another so that anticipatory images of food interfered with the serious business of earning a living and sexual fantasies were superimposed upon their political musings, bore a closer relationship to [his] “pell-mell tumble of a brain, in which everything ran into everything else and the white dot of consciousness jumped about like a wild flea from one thing to the next” (Rushdie 2006a: 297).

English which is “no longer an English language, now grows from many roots; and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language themselves” (Bhaba 1990: 48). Rushdie’s writing soaks up the aura of the polyvocal subcontinent through its vernacular inflections and allows conscious distortions induced by “the tropical heat haze” to mirror the devious schemes that undercut the rhetoric of secular nationalism, thus exposing the absurdity that informs its idealism and defeats its narrow logic. Bhabha underscores this malleability of language through the dop-pelgänger motif – the aberrant parasitic trajectory which saps the original concept of its nuances:

It is the project of *Nation and Narration* to explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation. This turns the familiar two-faced god into a figure of prodigious doubling that investigates the nation-space in the process of the articulation of elements: where meanings may be partial because they are in medias res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may, be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of “composing” its powerful image. Without such an understanding of the performativity of language in the narratives of the nation, it would be difficult to understand why



Edward Said prescribes a kind of “analytic pluralism” as the form of critical attention appropriate to the cultural effects of the nation. For the nation as a form of cultural elaboration (in the Gramscian sense), is an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for “subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing guiding” (Bhaba 1990: 3).

If the secular nationalism that was forged in the receptacle of a demythologized mind purged language of an affective register, the proliferating myths of the subcontinent, which were contiguous with the mindscape of its people, needed a more capacious tongue – rich in ambiguity, generative and open-ended, rather than inviting a closure. In the realm of folk-exchange made audible in the novels of Salman Rushdie, debates over a national character acquire the vitality of language that becomes an energetic verbal enactment of negotiating cultural differences through pointy retorts, generative of a healthy friction. Conceptualizing the nation, for Rushdie, involves an endless rhetorical play, an enduring engagement with language, a re-assemblage of the colonial tongue splintered with folk-inflections, a sensitizing of an alien import to the nuances of the local culture, a celebration of the fluidity of language and the range of resonances which give it depth and dimension. If the mimetic aspirations of “mimicry” (Bhaba 1994: 127-131) are defeated by its caricatured translation through which the colonized is reduced to a gimmick, in the postcolonial context the very process of mimicry is transformed into a subversive tool which alienates “the modality and normality” of the dominant discourse and disrupts its essence. The reverse “gaze” (Bhaba 1994: 127) of the colonized inverts the imperial imperatives into “a scandalous theatricalization of language” (Bhaba 1994: 130) by loosening its terse fabric into a garrulous multiplicity of utterance, a verbosity of presence which becomes “an insurgent counter-appeal” (Bhaba 1994: 129, 130) against the scanty logic of colonization: Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish is a part object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it de-

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2019, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2019.2.5

Published online by “Globus et Locus” at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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authorizes them (Bhaba 1994: 130). Mimicry thus becomes a re-articulation of “presence”. The theoretical clauses of nationalism, employed to chalk out the modes of operation in the public-sphere, carry the legacy of European Enlightenment. They are designed not to represent the cultural texture of the nation-space, but to organize the allocation of resources – a project dubiously labeled as “development” – gaining leverage from patriotic clichés now and then. Brennan notes how the emergent Anglophone fiction of the erstwhile colonies, such as the works of Marquez and Rushdie, becomes: a pointed exposure of the “empires old clothes” worn by a comprador elite who “[...] take on the nationalist mantle only to cloak their people more fully with the old dependency” (Bhaba 1990: 57). Industrialization in Europe implied a consolidation of isolated agrarian units or self-sufficient rural communities enmeshed in a web of social rituals, by a process of reconfiguring them around “a centralizing polity” (Pecora 2001: 295). The “passive revolution”, a transmission of this ethos of nationalism to colonized cultures was, as Gellner states, “a diffusion of the economic and technological superiority” of the departed colonizers among a class of nationals capable of running the complex state apparatus:

Nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does present itself. It is in reality the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state. It uses some of the pre-existent cultures, generally transforming them in the process, but it cannot possibly use them all (Pecora 2001: 300).

Thus, its grasp over the cultural terrain of precolonial tradition is tenuous and fragmentary, owing to an Enlightenment mimicry of the discourse of equality that is evident in such rhetorical tropes as the “half-starved populations” who have been rooted out of their “cultural ghettos into the melting pot of shanty-towns” (Pecora 2001: 298).



## THE RHETORIC OF STATECRAFT

The very fact that the demand for statehood emanating from minority forums is articulated through such terms as “autonomy”, “rights” and “freedom” – garnered from the repertoire of the existing political ideology – speaks of a lack of adequate profiling of such terms in the prevailing political arrangement. In Foucault’s analysis of state power as interpreted by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1999c: 255), “government technology” gains preponderance over “juridical sovereignty” and becomes a determinant of it. In other words, the concept of sovereignty cannot be sustained independent of state intervention taking the form of “the monopoly of legitimate violence”. However, as Chatterjee puts it, coercion may not always succeed in extracting consensus and curbing the growth of contrary political developments; minority cultural forums, which bypass the discourse of rationality as forged by the state, mobilize support by claiming to be better placed for defining the currency of the dominant discourse more authentically. They seem to address such issues as “rights” and “freedom” from a more holistic space, although “a blueprint of the form of representative institutions” they seek to create as an alternative is as yet unavailable. If secularism is an aspect of statecraft, its rhetorical currency, i.e. the concept of tolerance, requires us to look beyond the restrictive scope of the political register by interrogating its watertight classifications. It urges us to engage in a more intimate manner with such political lexicon, to rearticulate its terms from a personal, psychic and affective space – not by discounting the principles of the liberal secular state, but by expanding their ambit beyond the limited implications of its legislative diction. In *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie describes the flaring up of patriotism during the Indo-Chinese war in the following passage:

The disease of optimism, in those days, once again attained epidemic proportions; Curiously triggered off by the defeat of Thag-La ridge, public optimism about the war grew as fat (and as dangerous) as an overfilled



balloon; Parliamentarians poured out speeches about “Chinese aggression” and “the blood of our martyred jawans” [...] the nation puffed itself up, convincing itself that the annihilation of the little yellow men was at hand [...]. In the clutches of the optimism disease students burned Mao Tsetung and Chou-En lai in effigy; with optimism fever on their brows, mobs attacked Chinese shoe-makers, curio dealers and restaurateurs. Burning with optimism the Government even interned Indian citizens of Chinese descent – now “enemy aliens” – in camps in Rajasthan. Birla industries donated a miniature rifle range to the nation; school girls began to go on a military parade (Rushdie 2006a: 416).

Such a preoccupation with territorial geopolitics, to reaffirm the nationalist discourse, demonstrates a xenophobic need to trace out the contours of the nation by locating the other. The failure to substantiate the discourse of nationalism through an introspective involvement with its internal dynamics results in a volatile patriotism being generated through the manipulation of mass-sentiments, which are turned to the subversion of Enlightenment reason.

As a people we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form<sup>2</sup> – or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens (Rushdie 2006a: 417).

These words encapsulate the strained rhetoric of nationalism and the random assemblage of cultural totems which it seeks to in-grain in the minds of the people. The limited life-span of all such fabricated discourses requires a continual resuscitation of the myth of the independent nation. The nation can be mapped along two axes – as a spatial or temporal layout, and as a phantom presence made visible in the realm of the imagination through a concentrated effort of the psyche. As the nation is constantly grappling with the divergent realities within its contours, the scattered points of its narration, it often lapses into a solipsistic act of elaboration. Beyond the act of reconnaissance and political mapping the nation emerges



as an unstable realm of affects where discourses may diverge, converge or re-emerge, reshaping and reformulating their content in the process. If we locate the point of narration in *medias res*, making possible both the acts of retrospection and projection, we can arrive at an intermediate point of surveillance. From such a point it is possible to hint at origins and predict possible ends with no definite closure or neat rounding-offs, with the clincher forever remaining elusive in its refusal to be absorbed in the rhetorical tropes of a grand-narrative.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* describes Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* as: a brilliant work based on the liberating imagination of independence itself, with all its anomalies and contradictions working themselves out. The conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, to transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories is of particular interest in Rushdie's work (Pecora 2001: 365) Said sees it as a voyaging into the territory of the dominant narrative, through perceptible gaps or faintly discernible lines of rupture, shuffling and rearranging the hierarchic pattern of discourses in the process and modulating the dynamics of articulation to make way for significant shifts in the distribution of accents.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I interpret Bhabha's concept of the "pedagogical" as the theoretical configuration of the nation space – an articulation of its defining principles through a select coterie of signifiers, garnered from the temporal dimension. The "epochal" and the "temporal" thus define the dialectics of the nation space, which while using "the prodigious, living principles of the people" (Bhabha 1994: 208) as metaphors to communicate its affect, must at the same time outstrip them in terms of longevity. I quote from Bhabha, to illustrate this point: "[T]he concept of the 'people' emerges within a range of discourses as a doublenarrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is



based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process" (Bhabha 1994: 208-209).

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Brennan's essay *National Longing for Form* anthologized in Homi K. Bhabha edited *Nation and Narration*, perhaps alludes to Rushdie's use of the same phrase in *Midnight's Children* – encapsulating the hoariness that envelops the concept of nationalism.

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