

Research Article

Post Colonial Fiction and the Evolving Idea of the Nation

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Abstract

The article endeavours to interrogate the category of post-colonial literature which is usually defined as that which deals with issues of diaspora, hybridity, resistance to colonial oppression, marginalization through Othering, migration, and integration of cultures. However, literature written by those who have not traveled/immigrated to other places is not given the name of post-colonial fiction. Literature emerging from within previously colonized countries which deals with issues of civil strife, identarian politics, class, caste, gender and a host of other problems that are crucial to constructing pluralistic national identities is thus not given primacy. In order to discuss the construction of national identity in post-colonial fiction it is crucial to interrogate the historical narrative created to legitimize the dominant identity of the nation which this fiction challenges, or re-imagines. What are the consequences of selectively remembering the past; of highlighting some events in the nation's memory of its history while consciously attempting to suppress others? John Berger writes that a people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or a class than one that has been able to situate itself in history, and Walter Benjamin, writing in 1940 under the direct threat of a Fascist regime, points to the importance of the historical materialism in the task of brushing history against the grain which does not simply involve an interrogation of the past but more importantly involves asking questions of the present. Writers of post-colonial fiction in India such as Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Mukul Kesavan attempt to address issues concerning the writing, and the role, of historiography in relation to the ways in which national identities are constructed. They try to uncover the silences and omissions of the dominant historiography and the influence of these suppressed memories on the commonly received notions about the nation and its past. The elusive idea of the homogenous nation which was supposed to free the people from servitude has become the battleground for conflicting narratives between seats of power and the communities they marginalize and attempt to silence. The construction of national identity has become far more complex than it was at the time of decolonization. Therefore, there is an urgent need to redefine the category of post-colonial literature to account for the changing idea of the nation.

Keywords

Post-colonial Literature, Idea of Nationhood, Indian English Literature, Historiography, Post-colonial Theory, Constructing National Identities

1. Introduction

Post-colonial literature is usually defined as that which deals with issues of diaspora, hybridity, resistance to colonial oppression, marginalization through Othering, migration, and

integration of cultures. In the period of the anti-colonial struggle and the immediate aftermath of decolonization writers such as Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Nadine Gordimer,

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Derek Walcott and many others wrote back to the Empire that had dehumanized them and asserted their identity [1]. A majority of this writing was targeted at a European audience and attempted to rewrite the colonizer's portrayal of the colonized peoples and cultures as inferior and uncivilized. However, towards the end of the twentieth century when it became clear that freedom from the stranglehold of colonization did not translate into equality between countries and communities, post-colonial literature turned inwards to explore the divisions within which were created primarily by the power structures put in place by the previous colonial regimes.

The biggest impact of European colonization that has been stamped on the globe for the foreseeable future is the drawing of national borders of colonies. The most obvious example of this is the division of Africa among the colonial countries in the Berlin conference of 1884; but the Radcliffe line determining the national borders of the Indian sub-continent, the division of Israel and Gaza, among many others have resulted in sustained conflict areas globally for over half a century. While Europe itself has united under the European Union, making its borders porous and adopting a common currency, the borders it has drawn at the time of decolonization everywhere else have divided people and communities artificially, and pushed these newly formed nations to construct their identities based on a nationalism that is defined by an exclusionary ideology, as pointed out by Benjamin Zachariah [2].

Post-colonial fiction negotiates the dominant discourses of nationhood in previously colonized countries. However, literature written by those who have not traveled/immigrated to other places is not given the name of post-colonial fiction. The question of defining post-colonial fiction involves a number of issues concerned with audiences, the metropolitan academy and the marketability of Otherness; print-capitalism and the way that texts circulate between publishers and audiences; and the political environment of the West and decolonized nations in relation to each other. These issues are crucial to explore because they function to privilege a certain kind of text as paradigmatically post-colonial, thus marginalizing a host of other writing. Literature emerging from within previously colonized countries which deals with issues of civil strife, identarian politics, class, caste, gender and a host of other problems that are crucial to constructing pluralistic national identities is thus not given primacy.

2. The Post Colonial Idea of the Nation

In order to discuss the construction of national identity in post-colonial fiction it is crucial to interrogate the historical narrative created to legitimize the dominant identity of the nation which this fiction challenges, or re-imagines. What are the consequences of selectively remembering the past; of highlighting some events in the nation's memory of its history while consciously attempting to suppress others? John

Berger says in *Ways of Seeing* that "A people or a class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or a class than one that has been able to situate itself in history" [3]. The question of revising history, and the political implications of this revisionism, is one that has been foregrounded in the present post-colonial period due to the emergence of histories written by previously disenfranchised peoples. Walter Benjamin, writing in 1940 under the direct threat of a Fascist regime, pointed to the importance of the historical materialist in regarding "it as his task to brush history against the grain" [3]. The task of brushing history against the grain is one that does not simply involve an interrogation of the past; more importantly, it involves asking questions of the present. The history of India written by the British colonizers was duly replaced with the history constructed by the national leaders of the decolonized country, one that focused on the importance of nationalism, secularism, patriotism and unity in a newly independent state. But this official history, which is structured around the narrative of nationalist struggle from oppressive tyrants to the idealized state of freedom, itself suppresses a myriad of other histories, an issue that a number of historians have raised in recent years.

Walter Benjamin points to the need for historical materialism to challenge 'historicism', and says that the task of the historical materialist can never be complete. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', he writes,

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history [4].

Benjamin marks the distinction between historicism and historical materialism: historicism constructs a narrative of continuous, accumulative history; historical materialism works against this idea of the continuum of history. A revision of history, too, as Benjamin suggests through his interpretation of historical materialism, requires not just a closer look at the past, but a process of changing the angle through which the past is perceived, as well as one of eliminating the distance between past and present in order to make a dynamic connection between contemporary circumstances and their history.

Suppressed memories form the foundations of the accepted historiography in the tacit agreement of historiographers to leave them uncovered. Their exclusion from the narrative of the nation's history, then, is essential to the production of knowledge about national identity. In his essay, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation" Homi Bhabha discusses the modern nation's *will* to nation-

hood. He writes,

Renan's will is itself the site of a strange forgetting of the history of the nation's past: the violence involved in establishing the nation's writ. It is this forgetting - a minus in the origin - that constitutes the *beginning* of the nation's narrative....It is through this syntax of forgetting - or being obliged to forget - that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible....To be obliged to forget - in the construction of the national present - is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that *performs* the problematic totalization of the national will [5].

For Bhabha, realizing that one has been obliged to forget becomes the basis for "imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification" [5]. But for many writers of post-colonial fiction this obligation to forget becomes the site of unacknowledged fears, the fear of oneself, that shapes the psyche of the people; this in turn prohibits them from realizing the complexities of their identities which have been fractured by the temporality and spatiality of their past. This national will to forget serves to proscribe the people and limit them to the parameters of a national identity produced by focusing on major events, or 'defining moments'. It does not allow them to confront the reality of their multi-layered present identity which is created as much by the continuities as by the disruptions between the past and the present.

Writers of post-colonial fiction in India such as Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Mukul Kesavan attempt to address issues concerning the writing, and the role, of historiography in relation to the ways in which national identities are constructed. Neelam Srivastava comments of the work of these writers that "These are novels published in the 1980s and 1990s that narrate the story of India as a nation" [6]. They try to uncover the silences and omissions of the dominant historiography and the influence of these suppressed memories on the commonly received notions about the nation and its past. The rewriting of history has acquired urgency in the last few decades due to its appropriation and dubious revision by political parties, and more significantly, its use in election campaigns and in inciting inter-religion hostilities. Mythology is instrumentalized to carry the weight of historical fact in order to give legitimacy to exclusionary constructs of nationhood where citizenship becomes fraught with religious identity. The danger of this revisionism lies in its ability to select and highlight certain historical 'facts' or events, and to arbitrarily align them with others, to create a narrative that succeeds in polarizing different sections of society through its simplistic construction of identities. It is against this dangerous appropriation of history and its foreclosing of syncretic possibilities that post-colonial writers attempt to represent a past, and a national identity, that is multi-layered, complex, and interwoven rather than binarized. It is significant that they use the fictional genre of the novel to represent historical events in their attempt to intervene in an area that gives

mythology and fiction the weight of history.

3. Indian Writing in English

In the 1980s India there was an explosion of writing by Indians in English, a period which coincides with the development of the theoretical debate around post-colonialism. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, [7] opened up the field of post-colonial analysis and the next two decades saw the emergence of powerful post-colonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak [8], Homi Bhabha [9], Anne McClintock [10] and others who tried to define the field with greater nuance. Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory; Classes, Nations, Literature* [11] particularly focused on the post-colonial construct of, what he considers erroneously termed, 'Third World' nations. The novel written in English by Indian authors of the 1980s occupies the role of constructing a national identity which is targeted at both national and international readerships. This generation of Indians writing in English shaped their novels around materials emanating from issues of contemporary social, political and cultural conflicts such as the state of secularism, the dangers of patriotic nationalism and fundamentalism, problems of caste and class, of communalism and corruption. But while they address these issues from within, they are proficient in the current idiom of the metropolitan meta-language of narrative and thus attempt to address a multiple readership both within India and abroad. In these circumstances, the project of the novel of nation-building becomes multi-layered. In her article 'The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English' Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that Indian novelists who write in English - a category in which she includes immigrant as well as 'native' writers - and strives for a favorable reception in global centers of publication and criticism find themselves pressured by the implicit expectation to highlight the theme of colonialism as theme or metaphor. She gives the example of Rushdie's Methwold section in *Midnight's Children*, but she contrasts this aspect to novels written in other Indian languages:

Yet we know that in very few of the major works of fiction in the Indian languages is colonialism any longer an important concern...Many other forms of internal dissension, dislocation and oppression engage the attention of bhasha writers today relegating the trauma of colonial experience to the background [12].

Mukherjee makes the argument that multinational publishing corporations work in complicity with metropolitan institutions to determine fictional standards. Thus, the 'anxiety of Indianness', or the "burden of India if you want to write in English," can be attributed to the pressures of the global market place. As support she cites the emphasis on the national allegory in the titles of the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee and Shashi Tharoor which are titled *English, August: An Indian Tale* and *The Great Indian Novel* respectively [12].

Although these novels were not categorized as post-colonial at the time of their publication since they do not deal

with issues of diaspora, exile, alienation and hybridity, they are structured around recognizable features of post-colonial concerns linked to constructing identities of nation and nationalisms. The focus of the interrogation in these texts is that of the concept of the nation and nationalism in all its implications; that is, not just in its role in the struggle for independence through decolonization and the formation of a nation, but also in the creation of a nation in material terms through its institutions, as well as imaginatively in constructing/structuring myths, symbols, community, and in its contemporary destructive role in fracturing society through communal strife. Much of the writing by Indians in English in the 1980s has, therefore, now become part of the accepted corpus of post-colonial literature and often gets represented in syllabi in different parts of the world in courses on post-colonial fiction.

4. Conclusion

The elusive idea of the homogenous nation which was supposed to free the people from servitude has become the battleground for conflicting narratives between seats of power and the communities they marginalize and attempt to silence. The construction of national identity has become far more complex than it was at the time of decolonization. Post-colonial literature continues to grapple with issues emerging from this shifting terrain as neo-imperialism takes the place of colonization. It is roughly eighty years since the process of decolonization began under differing circumstances across the three continents and the birth of nations, defining their nationhood within different ideological parameters, took place. At the stroke of midnight on the eve of India's independence Jawahar Lal Nehru, in his now famous speech, declared, "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. ... A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance..." [13]. The narrativization of the rare moment in history when countries threw off their colonial bondage formed the dominant discourse of nationhood which was reproduced in all spaces from school textbooks to mainstream media. However, with the passing years the idea of the "soul of [the] nation" and its pledge of what it meant to be independent has been challenged and redefined repeatedly. It is therefore important to study the rapidly evolving ideas of nationhood and national identity in a post-colonial world which is still shaped by the balance of power that colonisation instituted. Post-colonial literature, which has emerged as the most dynamic category of writing in the last two decades needs to be situated in this new thrust of constructing national identity.

Author Contributions

Vinita Chandra is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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Research Field

Vinita Chandra: Post Colonial Theory and Fiction, Feminism, Women's Writing.