

Chapter 4

Literary Policy/Politics: Narrating the Nation

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

--Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 1

Homi Bhabha prefers to substitute the idiolect “nationness” for “nationality” or “nationhood”, for he argues that nationness is employed to designate the ambivalent formation of a nation. He edits and prefaces the book, *Nation and Narration*, which can be seen as an intervention in the isomorphic and essentialist reading of nationality/nationhood. His idea of nationness is also imbued with his other idea of “liminality” or “liminal space” insofar as he describes a nation as a “liminal image” (*Nation* 1). In other words, nationness could be regarded as a liminal space writ large on the traditional and stereotypical recognition of a nation. Yet once more, he asserts in his later book, *The Location of Culture*, that “collective experiences of nationness” can be negotiated in “the emergence of interstices”, which is parallel to the idea of

liminal space. Most of the time, the interstitial space denotes and connotes “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (*LC 2*). He further sheds more light upon the domains of difference by expounding hybridity and cultural difference. These key ideas are the couplings of his train of thought when he is elaborating on race, class, gender, culture, nationness, etc. Some of these key concepts have been discussed in previous chapters; this chapter is to explore Bhabha’s thesis that a nation could be taken for a narrative construction and the way how Rushdie devises idiosyncratic way of creating a fictional world that, in some ways, sees eye to eye with Bhabha’s argument about the relationship between nation and narration.

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

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

The above passage rings consistent with the way Bhabha hashes out the issues of “hybridity” and “cultural difference.” He is quite dubious about the fantasy of origin, authenticity, and identity in post-colonial or greatly globalized societies in a similar way he questions the origins of nation. He sees the transitional as the translational and replaces the idea of history with that of temporality. That divulges his fervent concerns that not merely culture but nationness is subject to change through colonial diaspora

and post-colonial mergence.

Bhabha associates nationness with narratives in the following argument:

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

The ambivalent image of nationness indeed invokes impossibly numerous dilemmatic oscillations. And also, here he suggests that nationness could be a narrative construction. When it comes down to the concept of ‘narrative’, it evokes Gérard Genette’s definition of the word in three different ways. He distinguishes different references to the word ‘narrative’; he assumes that it could refer to ‘story’, ‘narrative’, or ‘narrating’. “Story” means “the totality of the narrated events”; “narrative” means “the discourse, oral or written, that narrates them”; “narrating” means “the real or fictive act that produces that discourse—in other words, the very fact of recounting” (13). Bhabha’s use of ‘narrative’ often incorporates all the three categories. However, some would suggest that there are more than three definitions of the word.¹ However,

¹ As Jeremy Hawthorn observes:

On two points there is, however, agreement. First that a narrative must involve the recounting of an event or events, otherwise it is not a narrative but a description. And

Bhabha's use of the word seems to make sense under Genette's umbrella of definitions.

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

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

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

As to the question why Rushdie, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, chooses to write

second that these events can be either real or fictitious. The person telling the TV News what happened in an accident in which he or she was involved, is as much delivering a narrative as is the person telling a joke, or the Marlow of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. (129)

about Bombay in India, the answer can also be found in Bhabha's discussion of the relationship between nation and narration. As a cosmopolitan writer, Rushdie may well choose any cities in the world as the setting where to knit his fictional world. He picks up Bombay not just because it is his birthplace but also it serves well as Bhabha's idea of metaphoricity. Whether in the real world or in the fictional world, Bombay is, no doubt, a cosmopolitan metropolis. That is, over a long time Bombay has witnessed and absorbed innumerable foreign impacts. It certainly comes to be what Bhabha calls "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference." (*LC 2*) Bhabha doubts the fantasy of origin and identity, hence inevitable impurity. As a result, migrants and metropolitans are more like imagined communities, rather than a community of identical and pure origin. Bhabha especially spots that because he has been aware of the danger of viewing nation-people as isomorphous community. Please allow a detailed quotation, for only through the complete paragraph without the interruption with ellipses can we fully appreciate the logic Bhabha exerts to connect nation and narration:

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

memory and subjectivity' its appropriate narrative authority. We need another time of writing that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the Western nation. (*LC* 141)

Although Bhabha's foci are centered upon the Western nation, Rushdie dexterously proves Bhabha's above argument to hold water almost worldwide by palimpsesting Moorish Spain and modern India. The "ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and space" further unpuzzle Rushdie's superimposing India upon Moorish Spain. In turn, they are also reified by virtue of Rushdie's particular literary techniques. Juxtaposing the two multicultural countries readily lets loose, as it were, a torrent of eloquence in various aspects, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Rushdie's literary techniques serves as a policy, so to speak, which not just complicates the form of the novel but also conveys both what Rushdie means to disclose to his readers and what he unconsciously coincides with other events. This policy is, most of the time, concerned with politics both in the real world and in his fictional world, and *The Moor's Last Sigh* has no exception, especially when the setting is Bombay.² Also, writing on exile nuances this novel when we compare the novel with Rushdie's other works.³ All in all, as a narrative construction, or rather,

² When interviewed by Amrit Dhillon, Rushdie says, "[I]f you set a novel in Bombay and you set it in real history, then clearly it is difficult to avoid the events there and the political movements that exist there" (168).

³ In reply to David Sheff's question as to what it is like to write about India from exile, Rushdie says: There's no doubt that one of the great losses in my life was having to stay away. It's the only passage of seven years in my life in which I have not been in India. It feels like losing a limb. So writing the new book was a journey home, the only way of going . Writing from exile is emotionally charged, however. I was conscious of the trap, which is sentimentalization on the one hand, or exaggeration on the other. I was desperately anxious not to commit those crimes. The consequence of being removed from India allowed or released in me the flood of feelings that shapes this novel. There is also a sense of personal loss. And sadness, which I think is a constant of what happened. (194)

reconstruction of India, *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers a space where the readers can spectate competing forces, be they religious or political, are engaged with a multitude of events in India. It is worthwhile to explore how Rushdie narrates or writes the nation via his literary techniques, for that not only sheds more light upon the narrative but also represents the ambivalent nationness of India.

Robert Dixon employs Bhabha's theory to interpret the boundaries of Australian civility by saying, " 'Ripping yarns' centre the nation by narrating it from the limits of its territory and civility. Yet these limits, as Homi Bhabha argues, are a difficult and 'heterogeneous' site inscribed by many voices" (132). This explains a lot why Rushdie does not choose the majority group (Hindus) or the major minority group (Muslims) to be the focus of the novel. Instead, he chooses to let Moraes represent a variety of minority groups, including Moorish Arabs, Jews, Portuguese Catholics, Christians, and Indians with Mogul heritage. Therefore, India becomes a "heterogeneous site inscribed by many voices", as starkly contrasted with the India being ruined by ultranationalism and sectarian violence. It is not that India represents its heterogeneity only in the fictional world, but that the narrative is reminding people of India's intrinsic heterogeneity.

Quayson's laconic description of the chief character of Rushdie's work can expound some perplexing literary or fictional arrangements in *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

The point about Rushdie's work, then, is that he combines both proleptic and interstitial modes of postcoloniality. His writing is political precisely in the sense that it restlessly projects and confounds a sense of epochality whilst locating this labile sense within a hybrid and globalized form of postcolonial and postmodern address. (84)

The sense of the epochality, according to Quayson, is sometimes made viable through the catalyst of Rushdie's magical realist writing. Take Flory Zogoiby for example, when she is getting old, one day she looks at the Chinese tiles of the Mattancherri synagogue and claims that she can see the future in the Chinese blue tiles. She prophesies that before long a country not far from China will be eaten by giant and cannibal mushrooms. Later on, she is sent to a church that is said to cure madness. However, on the second day, a mad man commits suicide by pouring petrol over himself. "When he struck the fatal match the whoosh of flame had licked murderously at the hem of an old lady's floral-printed skirt, and she [Flory], too, had been engulfed" (*MLS* 118-19). This leads people, or rather, the readers, into believing that Flory, in fact, prophesies her death, not the demolition of the country. However, a few days later, "a giant mushroom cloud ate the Japanese city of Hiroshima" (*MLS* 119).

The magical power of prophecy makes the post-colonial epochality viable and possible. On top of that, it enables the proleptic mode of postcoloniality through writing a fictional world that represents what has taken place in the real world. However, Flory's prophecy seems to be multi-layered because at first it seemingly refers to her death. Later, it proves to be a precise prediction of the atom bombs exploded in Japan. Thus, her prophecy is associated with a kind of proclamation that announces the end of World War II. As the readers reach to almost the end of the narrative, the explosions in Bombay would be associated with Flory's prophecy over again. This time Flory's prophecy points back to India; although Rushdie makes the bombers unknown both to all the characters in the narrative and to all the readers, Raman Fielding would be quickly associated with the bombing. It is not that Rushdie

wants to make the plot similar to that of detective story. In this case, he wishes to express that the explosions result from the internal evil of India without specifying the bombers. Fielding would be quickly associated with the bombing because he is one of the founders of Mumbai's Axis and "Axis" also alludes to "The Axis" in World War II. When Moraes concludes after the explosions by saying, "The explosions were our own evil—no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within" (*MLS* 372), Flory's prophecy seems to have beaded together all the events—the end of imperialism (WWII) but the beginning of ultranationalism (Hinduism).

These episodes altogether demonstrate one of the literary techniques that Rushdie often adopts in his novels, that is, intertextuality. Nevertheless, Flory's prophecy and the events hence connected with it, in the mean time, merge external intertextuality and internal intertextuality. The external intertextuality builds up the relation of the prophecy to the explosions in Japan. And yet, it is a historical text, not a literary text. The internal intertextuality is the relationship between the prophecy and the explosions in Bombay. I choose to take Flory's phrophecy for example because it demonstrates a few techniques at the same time Rushdie often employs. In addition to intertextuality, through the connection of the prophecy, the reader can see the parallel stories—the explosions in Japan and those in Bombay. It gives rise to some effects that are similar to the juxtaposition of Moorish Spain and India. In other words, it offers contrasts and comparisons. Also, it produces a satirical attack because the mad woman's (Flory) words at last prove to be much soberer and truer. Parody is also often employed by Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In one episode, Vasco Miranda decorates the guest toilet at Elephanta with a mural on which Kekoo Mody and Vasco

Miranda are both naked. Below is a description of the mural:

Kekoo was as thin and elongated as ever, but success and years of debauchery and carousing had plumped out Vasco, who was also much the shorter man. The interest of the painting lay in the obvious fact that the two men seemed to have exchanged penises. The cock on Vasco was astoundingly long and thin, like a pale pepperoni sausage, whereas tall Kekoo sported a squat dark organ of impressive diameter and circumference. (*MLS* 245)

This episode culminates in Aurora's naming the mural "Laurel and Hardon", which turns out to be a phallic pun on "Laurel and Hardy".

Fletcher says that "[a]nother type of [Rushdie's] device is the intertwining of historical events and domestic or personal activities, tying the trivial to the allegedly important and undermining the claims of "history" to neutrality and objectivity" (13). He makes the observation by evaluating Rushdie's earlier novels. It is evident that Rushdie utilizes this technique as well in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, from the relation of Aurora to Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to both Boabdil and Vasco da Gama as Moraes's ancestors.

Besides writing from a cosmopolitan point of view, Rushdie is also devoted to representing the nation itself in the narrative. The characters respectively work on behalf of different vocations so as to represent the nation India. When the British leave India, all the people at Elephanta celebrate their independence and incoming democracy, Vasco Miranda, however, imperviously defines the so-called democracy as "one man one bribe" (*MLS* 167). Rushdie reflects the chief failures in India—corruption and sociopolitical turbulences brought about by communitarianism and

ultranationalism. Brennan's remarks would finally footnote the relationship between novel and nation and resonate with Bhabha's argument and Rushdie's practices:

It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardise language, encourage literacy and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation. (8)