

Györke Ágnes: Postmodern Nations in Salman Rushdie's Fiction

THESES

I. Topic and objectives

My dissertation addresses a question that recurs frequently in contemporary literary and cultural theories: is there a space for the nation in postmodernism? How can we combine such a hesitant, cynical, and anxious phenomenon as postmodernism with the apparently self-confident political category of the nation? Since postmodernism contests the idea of essence and questions the vision of the kind of collective consciousness which is the basis of imagining nations, the two discourses appear to be incompatible. The dissertation aims to examine this paradoxical situation; though most of the chapters deal with Rushdie's three novels, the objective of the dissertation is not to provide an analysis of his oeuvre, but to address this theoretical issue.

Rushdie's novels provide an excellent ground for this investigation. Many critics claim that his novels use all the tools and tricks that postmodern novels apply (Timothy Brennan), yet these are also postcolonial texts, which means that they are often concerned with issues such as nations, identities, and belonging. Thus these novels, as opposed to the advocates of "postnationalism" and "transnationalism," do not give up the desire to narrate the nation, but they are aware of the difficulties involved in this project, just like postmodern historical novels according to Linda Hutcheon. The rhetorical reading of Rushdie's novels suggests that nations find their space in postmodernism: they do not constitute a radically new category, and never really manage to redefine the paradigm of the modern nation, but they recur as haunting ghosts challenging the all too easy assumption of critics who claim that nations are dead and gone in the age of postnationalism (Masao Miyoshi, Arjun Appadurai, stb.) Derrida has claimed that the "specter" of Marx haunts postmodernism; I argue that nations, just like Derrida's "specters," return in the postmodern as ghosts that inhabit the margins of this fluid era.

II. Methodology

The theoretical background of my dissertation relies on theories of postcolonialism (Homi K Bhabha), postmodernism (Linda Hutcheon, Fredric Jameson, etc.) and gender studies (Anne McClintock, Nira-Yuval Davis). I reread the discourse of nationalism studies (Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, etc.) and Rushdie's three novels (*Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*) from this perspective. The method I apply is rhetorical reading, as it is defined by Paul de Man (*The Allegories of Reading*): I read both the manifest claims and the hidden implications of the texts that I analyse. This is the method I apply when I read the discourse of nationalism studies and Rushdie's novels as well.

III. Findings

For students of literature, the terminology of nationalism studies sounds rather confusing, since in this discourse "modernism" is used as the synonym of "modernity": when historians such as Ernest Gellner, Tom Nairn, or Elie Kedourie claim that their position is "modernist," this simply means that they believe that nations are the products of modernity, rather than ahistorical, timeless categories that have been part of human consciousness since time immemorial. However, we can call them modern in another sense as well, relying on Jean-Francois Lyotard's and Jürgen Habermas' use of this term: the nation in their discourse

appears as a master narrative based on the vision of an autonomous, Cartesian individual. This individual, just like the nations he becomes part of, appears to be highly rational, masculine, European, optimistic and inventive, especially in Gellner's version.

All the modernist historians claim that even though the nation appears to be timeless and essential, an entity that has always been with us, it was in fact born in the eighteenth century, in the modern age. Or, more precisely, it is both timeless and modern; it is both progressive, aiming for a bright future, and regressive, facing the past all the time, as Walter Benjamin's famous allegorical vision of the Angel of History depicts. Almost every historian perceives this split at the heart of the modern nation (Anderson, Nairn, etc.), which, according to Benjamin, characterizes the time of modernity as well. They do not, however, address how such a torn, split entity could appear as a perfect, whole, seamless category in the modern age and in their very discourse. In the discourse of modernist historians Benjamin's ambiguous vision of modernity is transformed into a self-confident, affirmative image, and this happens when Anderson misinterprets his concept of temporality as well. As Anderson claims in *Imagined Communities* (first published in 1983), the time of modernity is homogeneous and empty, as opposed to the messianic time of the Middle Ages. Thus, he erases the ambivalent traits involved in Benjamin's concept of time, and this enables him to imagine a community that is based on a linear and progressive notion of time. This nation remains optimistic and teleological in his book; the passive voice in the very title (*Imagined Communities*) hides the subject who imagines the nation, presupposing the existence of a universal, genderless, Cartesian individual. This vision echoes the aesthetic of Romanticism, since the emphasis is on the creative imagination.

If we take a look at how the progressive and regressive aspects of the modern nation become gendered, it will be clear why the nation became a seamless entity despite the split at its heart. A number of feminist critics (Anne McClintock, Nira-Yuval Davis, etc.) argue that the progressive, forward-thrusting pole of the nation is coded as masculine, whereas the regressive, backward-looking pull is gendered as a profoundly feminine aspect. Women are transformed into ideal, transcendental entities that are supposed to keep the traditions (as mothers, transmitters of culture, and so on), whereas men are imagined as active participants in the nation, agents who are responsible for everyday politics and for the future of the nation. What is at stake here is not the nature of these stereotypes that are projected into the nation's diverging poles (they are all too familiar to us by now); the main point is the very *fact* that the split at the heart of modernity becomes gendered. I argue that the masculine and the feminine aspects projected into the poles of the modern nation both evoke an androgynous totality, an originary, undivided fantasy, from which the idea of the nation is supposed to have "sprung," and enact the tearing apart of this very ideal by instituting these poles as binary opposites. The modern nation, therefore, inherits the longing for the androgynous ideal posited by creation myths as well as Christianity, yet this longing remains futile since the very birth of this discourse enacts the moment when the androgynous fantasy is shattered, when the Two become instituted as opposites. Therefore, the androgyne does not question hierarchical oppositions, but, on the contrary, attempts to veil and subsume them. The gendering of the modern nation's "faces" simply serves the purpose of counteracting the threat of fragmentation that might jeopardize the nation, this all too rational entity, and the androgynous fantasy, instead of moving the discourse of the modern nation towards more egalitarian grounds, as the term itself suggests, veils the hierarchical oppositions that are inscribed in the structure of the modern nation.

The book that has shifted the discourse of the modern nation towards postmodern dimensions is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. His terms and categories seem to be entirely different from those of Gellner: despite his claim that the nation is a "cultural artefact," it appears to be an imaginary, transcendental entity, quite in contrast with the

Gellnerian rational nation that modernisation has brought to life, as if Anderson pushed the discourse of the modern nation towards Romantic aesthetics. Furthermore, Anderson literally moves beyond the modernist framework: his book starts out as a self-consciously modernist argument, yet it terminates in an insight that profoundly conflicts with its preliminary assumptions. Eight years after the first publication of *Imagined Communities* Anderson added two chapters in which he uses an entirely new concept of time, but he has never modified the original thesis of his book. Anderson realises that it is not the self-conscious, simultaneous and collective imagining of communities that constitutes nations, but the very impossibility of remembering. He redefines the nation along the lines of the Freudian notion of transference, as an entity that “cannot be remembered,” and therefore “must be narrated,” moving away from his thesis of the nation as an *imagined* community and focusing on its *narrative* aspects. In this chapter, Anderson no longer holds on to his misunderstood version of Benjamin’s homogeneous empty time: instead of the omnipotent Cogito responsible for imagining the nation, what we find is an amnesiac, psychologically estranged and solitary subject, unsure of his identity, and quite akin to the postmodern conception of subjectivity.

Anderson’s book literally moves the discourse of nationalism studies towards postmodern theories, and this is why Homi K Bhabha, the prominent postcolonial critic also became interested in it. Bhabha criticizes Anderson with the help of Derrida, in a somewhat predictable way, not taking into account the difference between the first and second edition of *Imagined Communities*. On the other hand, however, with the help of Anderson Bhabha formulates an important insight: in his essay entitled “DissemiNation” he claims that the modern nation has two addressees: first, the “glorious past,” the pedagogical tradition of the nation, and second, as performative subjects who intervene into this official national rhetoric. Bhabha’s two addressees echo Anderson’s and Nairn’s theories of the Janus-faced modern nation: his notion of the “pedagogical” is quite akin to that atavistic (feminine) face that we have seen being reproduced again and again in modernity. Yet he exchanges the progressive, teleological face for the more ambivalent, “performative” intervention, and here lies the transformation that interests me. The homogeneous vision of the modern nation and the engendering of the temporal split have hidden the impulse to counteract any kind of fragmentation that “threatened” this sacred entity, whereas in Bhabha’s discourse, and also in Rushdie’s texts, there is no such attempt to “mend” (and mind) the gap, and it is not the split that becomes gendered at all, but the very performative aspect of the nation becomes further and further torn in a spectacularly gendered way. Furthermore, Bhabha reintroduces the subject into the discourse of nationalism studies: whereas Anderson, while elevating the modernist Cogito to a spectacular metaphysical height, silences the subject of the nation, Bhabha’s subject seems to possess a certain power to intervene into the otherwise omnipotent, pedagogical discourse of the nation. He “exchanges” Anderson’s transcendent vision of the nation for an undeniably more fragmentary and splitting vision, yet what he gains with this is a self-conscious, active, intervening subject, or agent, who did not have a place in the discourse of nationalism studies before.

This does not mean, however, that the postmodern nation gives up the desire to evoke miraculous entities. In Bhabha’s discourse, it is the performative aspect of the nation that takes up this role, while in Rushdie’s novels it is the voice metaphor, which is an ambivalent trope in his fiction: both doubtful and radical, the voice promises magic wholeness yet remains a constantly metamorphosing, tantalizing entity. The voice is a two-faced entity in Rushdie’s texts, just like in Steven Connor’s, David Appelbaum’s, and Mladen Dolar’s writings, and similarly to the modern nation in Anderson’s, Gellner’s, Nairn’s, and Bhabha’s texts: whereas the clear, public *voice* speaks about the pedagogical nation in Rushdie’s novels, the disarticulate *noise* evokes the miraculous performative nation. But whereas in Bhabha’s theory the performative subjects of the nation intervene into the national pedagogy, in

Rushdie's novels the pedagogical constructions, which most of the time surface as national allegories, fall apart by themselves, independent of any intervention, since their empty structure cannot bear the burden that the discourse of the nation puts on their shoulders. The magic noise, because of its hesitant and insecure nature, is unable to offer a permanent alternative: Rushdie's performative nations remain temporary promises.

I argue that Rushdie's three novels can be read as a trilogy: whereas *Midnight's Children* allegorizes India as a magic community, *Shame* imagines Pakistan as a profound lack, and *The Satanic Verses* functions as a peculiar synthesis of the earlier novels.

Two allegories speak about the nation in *Midnight's Children*: first, the body of Saleem Sinai, since the narrator was born exactly at the stroke of midnight, at the precise instant of the "birth" of the Indian nation, and second, the voices of the midnight's children who were born during that magic night. Saleem's *body* functions as the pedagogical allegory of the nation, since politicians create the position of the "midnight's child" for Saleem, who takes up this role unwillingly. The other allegory, the *noise* of the children, challenges the official rhetoric: the children possess magic power, and they literally embody the vision of the imagined community. Saleem's body is, unsurprisingly, entitled to become perfect, fulfilling the expectations of the national rhetoric, yet, with the very same gesture, it is also emptied of subjectivity, similarly to Anderson's vision of the modern nation. Any form of subjectivity would appear too imperfect for the pedagogical discourse, thus it is no wonder that Saleem's body cracks at the end of the novel, since, being empty inside, it cannot bear the burden of its all too heavy perfection for long.

Whereas the official national allegory is based on the trope of the clear *public voice* (the political rhetoric openly addresses Saleem), the founding trope of the children's allegory is the presymbolic, *inarticulate noise*. Saleem discovers the noise of the children when he is ten years old, and their speech remains unintelligible for him for a long time. This noise needs protection (Saleem is hiding in the family's washing chest, which provides shelter for him), unlike the public voice of the pedagogical discourse. When the children's noise becomes intelligible speech, it gradually loses its ability to act as a performative vision of the nation. It also leaves behind the androgynous totality that characterized its birth, thus the children's noise can only offer a temporary alternative; the postmodern nation remains a promise in the novel.

Many critics claim that *Shame* is dark (Aijaz Ahmad, Inderpal Grewal, etc.); according to Timothy Brennan, it is "a bad joke." The novel functions as the antithesis of *Midnight's Children*, since instead of miraculous "noises," we encounter lack and silence. This negative attitude towards the nation is also due to the fact that the novel is about Pakistan (Rushdie often argues against the artificially constructed nation in his essays), yet the novel is an important text from the perspective of postmodern nations, since it mirrors the plenitude of *Midnight's Children*, acting as its inverted vision.

The plenitude that the children promise (and lose) seems to be absent in *Shame*, or, more precisely, it seems to be the sole possession of the "Other," the one who is outside the imagined community, the one in opposition to whom the very community is defined. The voice appears as the tempting voice of the "Other," which becomes a demonic, distorted noise once it descends into the realm of the "Self." In the first chapter of the novel, which takes place before the independence of India and the Partition, in the last years of colonization, three sisters invite the British colonizers to a party. After years of being tempted by the siren song of colonizers, who live across the street in a shining hotel, the night of the party is

“miraculous” for the sisters, yet this magic is profoundly different from that of the midnight’s children: they ask the musicians to play Western music on Indian musical instruments, and the result is a distorted, artificial noise, which speaks about the hopeless encounter of East and West, colonizer and colonized. The encounter of these entities does not offer a third option; instead, they produce nothing but *nonsense*, an absurd, meaningless mishmash, which, despite its presymbolic nature, lacks any magic power. There is no androgyny in this novel, no productive merging, and no third space; despite the presence of the noise metaphor, the magic that Saleem possessed is not accessible for the subject in *Shame*.

Whereas two allegories spoke about the nation in *Midnight’s Children*, in *Shame* there are too many allegories that attempt to embody Pakistan, and these simply destabilize each other in the novel. After the allegory of the three sisters we encounter the explosion of a cinema called “Empire,” allegorizing the end of the British Empire, and the birth of Sufiya Zinobia, “the wrong miracle,” the “proper” allegorical figure of Pakistan. Furthermore, the son of the three sisters keeps lingering on the margin of the text, allegorizing the hidden, repressed Indian centuries erased from the history of the newly created nation. The allegories do not offer an alternative, but simply destabilize each other; they leave the third space, the space of the postmodern nation, empty. There is no androgynous intermingling in this novel, and the hiding spaces do not provide shelter either, the way the washing chest provided a secure place for Saleem. Hiding spaces simply become the means of repression (like the attic, where Sufiya is locked, for instance), thus novel erases exactly those spaces that are the spaces of postmodern nations.

The Satanic Verses is the synthesis of the previous novels in many senses. We encounter a splitting, fragmenting, and continuously metamorphosing world in this novel, recalling the world of *Shame*, which makes it extremely difficult for the nations to find their hiding space. This world is, however, not devoid of magic, which assures the return of magic unisonance as well as androgyny. I argue that, as a result of this peculiar synthesis, *The Satanic Verses* finds a new way to imagine the nation, which retains the magic that we have seen in *Midnight’s Children*, yet is also takes the lesson of *Shame* into account, and presents a more self-conscious, less naïve attitude towards the nation than the grand vision of the midnight’s children.

The Satanic Verses is not a novel about a particular nation, yet it abounds in national allegories. The plot begins with the migration of the main characters from India to England, putting England into to the main focus of the narrative, yet the second chapter immediately takes the reader back to Mecca, and India also returns at the end of the novel. Migrants continuously haunt the English nation, reminding the English of their colonial past, and these haunting ghosts become internal to any national allegory that appears in this novel, erasing the promise of “wholeness” that we have seen in *Midnight’s Children*. The novel envisages a miraculous existence in between nations, which, as opposed to the options offered by the previous two novels, proves to be a viable alternative: this is the only novel of the trilogy that ends with the affirmative image of survival, and not with the destructive vision of apocalypse.

According to Homi Bhabha, *The Satanic Verses* is the story of the avenging migrant, Gibreel Farishta, who intervenes into the pedagogical narrative of the English nation. The novel has two main characters, who, after their plane explodes, find themselves in the garden of the ancient Rosa Diamond, who appears as the allegorical figure of a pedagogical Englishness according to Bhabha (she constantly has visions of the Norman Conquest, her house is the storehouse of English life, etc.). Quite predictably, Bhabha reads Gibreel’s figure as the living performative principle that disturbs the national pedagogy of Rosa, as if he indeed became the “performative agent” set on the mission to subvert the English nation. In my view, however, neither of these characters can be said to perform these impulses exclusively. Bhabha attributes too much power to Gibreel, who is far from being an

“avenging migrant,” but rather becomes a helpless and paralysed medium in the novel (it is Rosa’s *voice*, her narrative sorcery, that imprisons him in her house). On the other hand, Rosa’s figure is also more complex and more dubious than Bhabha supposes, and her allegory falls to pieces independently of Gibreel’s intervention, since it is unable to bear the burden that the pedagogical rhetoric has put on its shoulders. I argue that it is not Rosa’s fragmenting allegorical figure that produces a “national unity” in this novel, but there are certain and sound effects involved in the recurring image of ghosts (William the Conqueror, footsteps of Roman soldiers) which are responsible for creating a momentary national unisonance. The *Satanic Verses* deconstructs even Bhabha’s theory concerning the pedagogical and performative aspects of nationhood: whereas he sets up an opposition between Rosa’s pedagogical Englishness and the performative intervention of the Indian migrant, the novel does not conform to this neat theory. Ironically, Bhabha seems to be somewhat “pedagogical” in imagining that Englishness is all about pedagogy, whereas the migrant acts as the performative principle pure and simple. The opposition of the pedagogical and the performative is there in the novel, but not in the antagonism of India and England; rather, it should be sought around the thin dividing line that differentiates the trope of sound from that of voice.

Whereas the naïve miracle of *The Midnight’s Children* falls to pieces, *The Satanic Verses* ends with the image of survival. Saladin, the actor who is a “man of a thousand voices and a voice” possesses a voice that is mimic, compromising, yet self-confident. The novel puts the voice metaphor into a theatrical context, and this voice no longer needs the protection that Saleem needed. Though hiding spaces return (the microcosm of Dickens’ London, or the fortieth urn, the hiding space of Baal, the poet, reminding the reader of Saleem’s washing chest), the function of these spaces is not to protect a transcendent yet insecure magic, but they lead towards self-assertive options: writing (Baal) and playing (Saladin). This is why *The Satanic Verses* is the novel of survival, since this is the only novel of the trilogy that imagines an alternative that does not attempt to destroy the pedagogical in a naïve way, but is able to play a productive game with it.

Rushdie’s novels, then, though the nations that they imagine are different, suggest that there is a space for a peculiar nation in the postmodern, which no longer inherits the structure of the modern nation, and no longer wants to parade as a seamless entity. In *Midnight’s Children* this nation needs protection, while in *The Satanic Verses* it has to compromise, yet none of these nations sacrifice subjectivity for the sake of an ideal perfection, and this makes them profoundly postmodern.

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