

**Constructions of Home and Nation in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora,
with Particular Reference to Selected Works
of Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry.**

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to grapple with the meaning of home and belonging, nation and identity, from the perspective of diaspora narratives. Recent theories of diaspora have produced profound epistemological shifts in the theoretical frameworks and modes of analysis informing intellectual and cultural production. It is within the context of these rearticulated notions of diaspora that I locate my own theoretical perspective in this thesis. My particular objective is to foreground the productive tensions of diaspora which can challenge the reductive processes of homogenization at work in the formation and consolidation of national and cultural identities. What lends particular urgency to my project is the frequency, and violence, with which 'Third World' ideologies of authenticity and cultural hegemony are now being articulated through the rhetoric of nationalism.

To this end, I will examine and analyse representations of national and cultural identity in a selection of literary texts by writers of the Indian diaspora. Positioned at the 'in-between' spaces of nations and identities, the product of several interconnecting histories and cultures, writers in diaspora, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry reject all appeals to an originary narrative of cultural identity in their attempt to dismantle and reconfigure the dominant narrative of the nation/state. In these texts, home and nation are renarrated, not in terms of a monolithic space, but as a historically constituted terrain, changing and contested, and cultural and national identity as a narrative-in-struggle, and therefore also always 'in process'.

For all four novelists under study, diaspora exposes deep fissures in the imagined unity of the nation.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	iv
Introduction: Imagining Home and Nation in Diaspora	1
Chapter One: Bharati Mukherjee	57
Chapter Two: Salman Rushdie	130
Chapter Three: Amitav Ghosh	202
Chapter Four: Rohinton Mistry	256
Conclusion	323
Bibliography	329

Introduction

IMAGINING HOME AND NATION IN DIASPORA

[T]he diasporic space [is] the quintessential late 20th-century space, a space in which the terms of modern immigration, exile, loss, nation, subject, and citizen are negotiated and reinvented for various uses.¹

In the last thirty years, we have witnessed fundamental challenges to and changes in nationalist movements. In large regions of the ‘Third World’,² such as India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Burma, for instance, the politically mobilizing category of ‘nationalism’ has taken on an insurgent, irredentist orientation on the basis of claims to an exclusionary national identity, one based on ethnic, religious or linguistic separatism. The divisive nature of these nationalisms is reflected in the very fact that these conflicts are going on within already established nations. Indeed, it would appear, as Eric Hobsbawm tells us, that the major difference between these

¹Okwui Enwezor, ‘A Question of Place: Revisions, Reassessments, Diaspora’, in *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian, and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966-1996*, ed. by Mora Beauchamp-Byrd and M. Franklin Sirmans (New York: Caribbean Cultural Centre, 1997), pp. 80-88 (p. 88).

²I am aware that terms like ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ are problematic for they do not account for the economic, historical, geographical and cultural specificities and diversities within countries in the same grouping. However, since they are the most viable terms we have for the moment to point to the unequal power relations in the world, I shall retain use of them. However, I will signal my self-consciousness about these terms through the use of quotation marks.

late twentieth-century nationalist movements and those that took place before the middle of the twentieth century is that the earlier ones rallied around revolution, imperialism and decolonization.³

While Hobsbawm is correct in drawing attention to the regressive and negative forms of nationalism that are today being staged in country after country in the post-colonial world, I would like to go even further and point out that the exclusionary, hegemonic orientation of nationalism is in some ways already inevitable. While the inherent specificities of these various movements, and even the very terms in which these 'Third World' nationalisms are being articulated, may differ, the underlying similarity is that they are assertions of identity which can trace their workings to the kinds of apparatuses and structures put in place by colonialism.

Thus, to understand why nationalism is viewed as being largely negative or hegemonic in the world today, we should perhaps first realize that the idea of the nation in the 'Third World' grew out of the resistant, anti-colonial nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In relation to this, while various writers and scholars have explored the forces and effects of anti-colonial nationalism, I wish to draw attention to what Edward Said, in particular, has to

³Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalisms Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), pp. 54-57.

say about the ethic of separatism that is inherent to the anti-colonial nationalist ideology. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said forcefully articulates the exclusions that were created in society by the formation of 'Third World' nation/states:

[I]t is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order... And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.⁴

I have quoted at some length from Said in order to capture the nuances of the particular kinds of alienation and displacements that were created by nationalist movements. As Said suggests, the movements that sought independence from the colonial powers were not wholly representative of the minority ethnic groups in their territories. Here, Said gestures to the movements and migrations of people from their homelands as a central historical fact of colonization which introduced dramatic changes in the composition of 'Third World' societies. In the colonial context of a 'Third World' country like Malaysia, for instance, the influx of large populations of poor

⁴Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 402.

agricultural labourers from population-rich areas like India and China under colonial policies of indenture had, by the early twentieth century, introduced dramatic changes to the content and composition of colonial society.⁵

This is not, of course, to suggest that early colonial or pre-colonial society was static or homogeneous. Amitav Ghosh's story, 'The Imam and the Indian',⁶ for example, reminds us that cross-cultural movements and exchanges fostered by the travel trajectories of wars, or trade and business circuits between India and the Mediterranean -- 'or perhaps simply because [people] got tired of living always in one place'⁷ -- were not uncommon practices even as far back as the twelfth century. My point, which is also the point that Ghosh makes in this story, is that, while movements and migrations have always taken place throughout history, these pre-colonial migrations did not give rise to the creation of racial, religious, cultural and political divisions that were imposed by imperialism. While these divisions were enforced ostensibly for the purposes of administration, the category of 'ethnicity' especially became a colonial strategy to divide and contain the colonized. This is where the exclusionary underpinnings of nationalism lie.

⁵See, for instance, Edmund Terence Gomez, 'Tracing the Ethnic Divide: Race, Rights and Redistribution in Malaysia' in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka et. al, *Ethnic Futures: The State and Identity Politics in Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 167-202 (p. 171).

⁶Amitav Ghosh, 'The Imam and the Indian' *Granta*, 20 (1986), pp. 135-46 (p. 135).

⁷Ibid., p. 140.

It is Frantz Fanon who was one of the earliest decolonization theorists to foreground the hegemonic orientation of the post-colonial state and I wish now to turn to what he has to say. In his essay, 'On National Culture', Fanon asserts that the anxiety to recover a pristine pre-colonial culture was what motivated native intellectuals in the decolonization project of anti-colonial nationalism.⁸ In this respect, the idea of the 'nation' as the imagined basis of this post-independence construction of culture and identity became an inextricable part of the rhetoric of nationalism. The 'nation' also became an integral and powerful vehicle for mobilizing anti-colonial sentiment at all levels. The resistant, anti-colonial trajectory of this nationalism sought to construct for colonized peoples a stable, unifying national culture through the forging of a common historical experience. The focus of the decolonization theorists can in general be said to valorize the notion of a 'national' culture.⁹ Timothy Brennan aptly draws attention to the aesthetic impulse of the anti-

⁸Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968, original French edition 1961), p. 227.

⁹The quality of resistance and challenge integral to anti-colonial nationalism is clearly epitomized in Ngugi wa Thiongo's decolonization project of reclaiming an 'authentic' Kikuyu culture, untouched by colonial 'contaminations', and also in the theory of Négritude propounded by African Francophone intellectuals. For instance, the Martiniquan theorist, Aimé Césaire, articulates 'Négritude' as the embodiment of an 'authentic' African cultural identity and asserts that the origins of this identity lie in the homeland of Africa, in 'the red flesh of the soil' and 'the blue sky' of the Congo. It is in this 'pure' space of 'blackness', both cultural and biological, where, according to Négritude, the roots of African identity are located. Central to Césaire's ideological position and that of the other proponents of Négritude, most notably the African decolonization theorist, Léopold Senghor, is the attempt to heal the wounds of discontinuity at the heart of the Caribbean experience of deracination and slavery, and

colonial nationalist movement when he writes that, for these decolonization theorists, 'culture itself is meaningless if not considered in its "national" aspect'.¹⁰

Fanon, however, points out that the newly created nation's crisis continues from the moment of independence. Starting from the premise that the anti-colonial liberation movement is basically an educated, bourgeois movement,¹¹ he argues, in the chapter entitled 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', that when the national middle class in the newly decolonized country takes over power they are actually replicating colonial hegemonies. After mobilizing the people with slogans of independence in the colonial era, this bourgeoisie effectively secures for itself the advantages that were previously enjoyed by the colonial rulers. More crucially, instead of committing itself to the process of nation-building by addressing the differences in society, the national elite reiterates the binary oppositions and hierarchies of colonial discourse to preserve its existence, as evidenced in its reintroduction of old ethnic conflicts and religious tensions. As Fanon reminds us, it is thus the replication of

to reverse colonial representations of black cultures that aim to distort and dehumanize. (Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. by Clayton Eshlemen and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 61.

¹⁰Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.54.

¹¹This is an argument that other theorists have extended, along with Fanon's formulation that nationalism is Western(ized) in origin. See for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); and Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

colonial hegemonies which is behind the construction of the new post-colonial nation. Thus, what this suggests is that the foundations of the post-colonial state were themselves far less radical than the early exponents of decolonization believed, and the degree to which these states incorporated models and institutions based on European models of nationalism and concepts of the nation created the continuing linkages that allowed neo-colonialist control of these states to operate so effectively.

The colonial strategy of division along ethnic or cultural lines is clearly one that the newly independent nation/state duplicates. Such a division is manifest even in the promulgation of official national policies on culture, art and literature. In the newly created nation/state of Malaysia, for instance, 'national culture' was defined in terms of the dominant culture of the nation. The Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia articulated his idea of a 'national culture' in the following terms: 'Culturally... the basis of integration is Malay -- not because of racial arguments but because of the fact that ... Malay culture is already the most Malaysian one that one can find in Malaysia'.¹² What is clearly discernible here is the Janus-faced language of the nation/state which elaborates ways of reaffirming the superiority of the dominant culture, even while

¹²Yong Mun Cheong (ed) *Trends in Malaysia* (Singapore, 1974), quoted in Loh Kok Wah, Phang Chung Nyap and J. Saravanamuttu, *The Chinese Community and Malaysia-China Ties: Elite Perspectives* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1981), p. 72. The Malays are the dominant ethnic grouping in Malaysia; the other major communities are the Chinese and the Indians.

conceding the importance of creating a 'national culture'. Indeed, the hegemonic underpinnings of the post-colonial construction of nation, as I had noted earlier, can be located in the arena of culture.

Paul Gilroy refers to the rhetorical strategies by which the nation/state seeks to preserve a sense of stability as 'cultural insiderism', the chief characteristic of which is an absolute sense of ethnic difference.¹³ This sense of difference distinguishes people from one another and acquires at the same time a priority over other areas of their social and historical experience, cultures and identities. The fundamental objective here is to construct the nation as an ethnically homogeneous entity. This notion of ethnicity itself, Gilroy argues, is founded upon the 'unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states'.¹⁴

However, the hegemonic bias of anti-colonial nationalism only becomes apparent after independence. For while the solidarities of anti-colonial nationalism presuppose a unity of differences -- in the coming together of the people, and in the suppression of their different histories and identities -- in the name of the authority of the new nation, the same trajectory of nationalism cannot unproblematically be carried into the post-independence phase.

¹³Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p.3.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 5.

In terms of the contemporary context of a nation/state like Malaysia, for instance, second and third-generation descendants of the diasporic movements -- the migrants and labourers and refugees that Said mentions -- generated by colonialism have given rise to new forms of identification, putting the whole issue of cultural identity in question. No longer do these generations of post-colonials see themselves as 'homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants'.¹⁵ In fact, a majority of these diasporic populations resist the imposition of the hegemonizing colonial construct of ethnicity. This ethnic label, while it divides the different minority communities against one another to facilitate the preservation of the interests of the ruling elite, also reinforces the assumption that ethnic communities do not belong 'here', that they belong 'elsewhere'. As Ien Ang notes, 'The very name with which the "ethnic" is referred to -- ... Chinese [or Indian] -- already transposes her or him to, and conjures up the received memory of, another site of symbolic belonging, a site which is not "here"'.¹⁶ The popular notion that ethnic communities live in exile from their homelands, and look forward to a return to that homeland,¹⁷ has reinforced within dominant communities in the nation that ethnicity is indeed a sign of lack, a confirmation that one belongs

¹⁵Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 402.

¹⁶Ien Ang, 'On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora', *New Formations*, 22-24 (1994), pp. 1-18 (p. 17).

¹⁷I deal with William Safran's theory of diaspora later in the chapter. Safran's formulation reiterates many of the popular perceptions about ethnic communities.

to 'another' homeland. The nation/state has reinforced the homeland myth entrenched in the popular imagination, to divide and ethnicise the cultural and political landscape.

However, the fact that many minority communities are beginning to reject exclusionary myths of national unity based on race, religion or ethnicity is an important sign that normative concepts of the nation have to be reformulated to address the needs of the people. These communities are problematizing the ideology of a unified 'natural' cultural norm, one that underpins the centre/margin model of colonial discourse. In fact, to return to Malaysia again as an example, many members of diasporic communities have already begun to speak of their cultural identity in terms of a *Malaysianness*, rather than in terms of an *Indianness* or a *Chineseness*.

This leads me to my point that internal heterogeneities and differences within the nation must be recognized if the nation/state has to have any definitive political or ideological value in the contemporary age. Quite clearly, we have arrived at a historical conjuncture where concepts of the nation have to be re-examined in ways that jettison monologic paradigms to take on board the constitutive 'differences' of the nation.

It is within the context of these changing social relations, political crises, ongoing histories of displacement and cross-border flows of people and ideas that I locate my project to investigate the complexities of home and nation. While 'home', as a set of material, communal, and emotional securities, was often projected as a space of pastoral stability in the discourse of anti-colonial nationalism, the increasingly diasporic context of the nation has fundamentally problematized that definition. Contemporary scholarship, in the fields of cultural and literary studies, anthropology and geography, has drawn attention to the instability of home as a signifier. Angelika Bammer, for instance, notes that 'this instability is manifesting itself on a staggering -- some believe, unprecedented -- scale both globally and locally. On all levels and in all places, it seems "home" in the traditional sense (whether taken to mean "family" or "community" or "homeland"/"nation") is either disintegrating or being radically redefined'.¹⁸

While traditional models of nationalism draw all articulations of home into a commonality of time and space, the potential of minority ethnic communities to intervene in such spatially and temporally bound, as well as homogeneous, constructions of home has had crucial implications on the narratives and discourses

¹⁸Angelika Bammer, 'Editorial: The Question of "Home"', *New Formations*, 17 (1992), pp. vii-xi (p. viii).

of the nation. What, then, is home? Indeed, in the cultural map of nationalism, that Said evoked in my earlier quotation, can home be that fixed point, that site of sameness, of origins, that one departs from and returns to? And if home can no longer be that normative point, that source of unproblematical identity, how then is it to be expressed or constructed? And in which specific ways does diaspora intervene in standard nationalist constructions of home?

These are some of the central questions that I will be investigating in this thesis. In this regard, I wish to reiterate that in linking nation and nationalism with national identity, I am thinking about the latter not simply as a form of political identity but as a cultural strategy or representation. For this reason, I will use the hyphenated term, 'national-cultural' identity, to convey the ideological tensions which I see as being implicated in the construction of national identity. My purpose here is to point out that national identity is never simply a matter of political or social affiliation. Thus, instead of being conceived, as it historically has been, as merely a label of political administration, the kind of national-cultural identity that I am gesturing towards is rooted in the *constitutive* meaning of national culture and identity. This reconceptualization of national identity offers the possibility of contesting the post-Enlightenment modernist ideology that structures the discourse of

national culture and identity. It offers a space, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, ‘to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of “tradition” that “modernity” creates’.¹⁹ In fact, the thrust of my thesis is to demonstrate the ways in which the normative narrative of the nation/state is continually problematized by the presence of these ‘other’ narratives of the minority ethnic communities that Chakrabarty alludes to. This also engages with the further task of showing how precisely diaspora can offer a resistant, more empowering, conception of the nation.

In the last decade, especially, rearticulated notions of diaspora have played an important role in cultural studies that not only charted the history of communities displaced in the post-independence era but also employed that history as a condition and a trope for cultural criticism itself. For instance, Khachig Tololian, in his editorial preface to the founding issue of the journal, *Diaspora*, writes that ‘diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment’ which interrogate the privileged homogeneity of the nation/state.²⁰ However, I wish to

¹⁹Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?’, *Representations*, 37 (1992), pp. 1-26 (p. 23).

²⁰Khachig Tololian, ‘The Nation State and its Others: In Lieu of a Preface’, *Diaspora*, 1.1 (1991), pp. 3-7 (p. 5).

emphasize that Tololian here refers to the potential of diasporic communities to subvert the nation/state through an articulation of their narrative of the homeland. In other words, what he gestures towards is the creation by minority ethnic communities of a separate-but-equal narrative which exists alongside the dominant cultural narrative of the nation. This is not the kind of resistant potential of diaspora that interests me in this thesis. Rather, my emphasis throughout the following chapters is to examine the ways in which diasporic communities reconfigure the very concept of national-cultural identity. That is, rather than privilege the construction of a separate cultural narrative, I wish to foreground the reconfiguration of all cultural identities as fluid and heterogeneous. In other words, national-cultural identity is subject to change from *within*.

It is precisely this complex, syncretic potential that Homi Bhabha's notion of diaspora offers me. For Bhabha, culture is always already, in a sense, diasporized. He writes:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World...The transnational dimension of cultural transformation --migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation -

- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification.²¹

According to Bhabha, culture is fundamentally transnational in its reach because, rooted in histories of displacement, it is constantly making connections between the here and there, the past and present. Such a 'transnational' conception of culture and identity has the potential to destabilize the natural(ized), unifying discourse of national culture and national traditions.

It is in this respect that Bhabha's construction of the interstitial aesthetic is of paramount significance. In his essay, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation',²² Bhabha argues that the interstitial space of the margins occupied by diasporic communities, in terms of both culture and history, is an empowered one. Such a space is empowered precisely because it allows the overlap and displacement of areas of difference from which nation and cultural identity are negotiated. As he reiterates elsewhere, '[i]t is at the level of the

²¹Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 172.

²²Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322.

interstices that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated'.²³

Further, in this interstitial space, the present is conceived not as constituting a break with the past, or with history, and the future. Rather, it is revealed in its discontinuities, as an ever-shifting terrain. Bhabha's point here is that national-cultural identity is always differential and relational, rather than fixed and essential.

Germane to Bhabha's argument is the idea that it is the hybrid interaction between the different cultures and histories in the interstices that makes both negotiation and revision possible, opening up possibilities for cultural meanings. In this sense, the interstices are a space of productivity -- what Bhabha calls the 'third space'²⁴ --for it allows the creation of new cultural forms out of the syncretic mediation between the here and there, the past and present.²⁵

²³Homi Bhabha, 'Frontlines/Borderposts', in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. by Angelika Bammer (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994), pp. 269-72, (p.269).

²⁴Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space', in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1990), pp. 207-21.

²⁵Although it is with Bhabha whom the use of hybridity is most recently associated, there is in fact a long tradition of theorizing on the subject. Robert Young, in the chapter 'Hybridity and Diaspora' from his book *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) points out that while in the nineteenth century the term 'hybridity' was used to refer to a biological phenomenon, in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one. However, the foundational use of the term was seen in the model of linguistic hybridity developed by Bakhtin. Young observes that for Bakhtin, 'hybridity describes the condition of language's fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same but different' (p. 6, 20). The idea of hybrid identity has also been discussed at length by Françoise Lionnet (she, however, employs the term 'métissage' after Edouard Glissant). Lionnet considers 'métissage' as a 'concept of solidarity which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual.

In calling attention to the hybrid space of the interstices, to the flexible and complex recesses of cultural production from where various oppositional analytic capacities can emerge, Bhabha's project informs my own concerns in this dissertation to foreground the potential of minority ethnic communities to resist the totalizing tendencies implicit in nationalist constructions of culture and identity.

It is against such retheorized formulations of diaspora²⁶ that I place my own theoretical perspective in this thesis. In order to demonstrate how my conception of diaspora not only interrogates but reconfigures the notion of bounded, homogeneous national cultures and identities, I shall begin by providing some working definitions for 'diaspora'.

Problematizing Diaspora

Given the complex discursive and historical field covered by diaspora, it becomes necessary at this point to specify the terms in which diaspora is constructed as a theoretical framework for this dissertation. Although originally linked to the

geographic, or cultural'. See Françoise Lionnet, 'Introduction: The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage*', in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, ed. by Françoise Lionnet (London: Cornell UP, 1989), p. 9.

²⁶See also, Vijay Mishra, 'Postcolonial Differend: Diasporic Narratives of Salman Rushdie', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26.3 (1995), pp. 7- 45, and 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora', *Textual Practice*, 10 (1996), pp. 421-27.

dispersal of Jews from their historic homeland, 'diaspora' has now entered a larger semantic domain and refers to any minority group identifying with a particular homeland. William Safran was the first scholar to undertake a definition of the term in the first issue of the journal, *Diaspora*, defining it in relation to six characteristics linked to two invariables -- homeland and exile. These characteristics are: the dispersal of a people or their ancestors from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral' places; the maintenance of a collective 'memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland'; a feeling of non-acceptance, alienation or insulation in the host society; a strong feeling that the ancestral homeland is the 'true, ideal home' and a place of eventual return, when the time is right; a collective responsibility for the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and a self-conscious definition of one's ethnicity in terms of the existence of this homeland.²⁷ While Safran's definition of diaspora does provide the basis for comparison and analysis, his formulation, like most other attempts at achieving clarity, emphasizes the cohesiveness of diaspora communities, rather than the differences which sometimes threatens their unity. Hence, one of the primary limitations of Safran's model of diaspora, underpinned as it is by the Jewish historical experience, is that it is both

²⁷William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1.1 (1991), pp. 83-99 (pp. 83-84).

dangerously abstract and unable to explain the full diversity of and ambivalence within diasporic communities. For instance, the Chinese diaspora extensively discussed by social scientists today, is providing scholars with a new model of cultural and economic identity which reframes and revises previous scholarship on the Chinese diaspora that identifies China as the sole or original homeland.²⁸ Similarly, the anthropologist and novelist, Amitav Ghosh, has argued that the Indian diaspora is not predisposed to an attachment to and desire for a literal or symbolic return to the homeland as much as it is to recreating a distinct culture in other locations.²⁹

Other academics have become aware of these issues in their own attempts at theorizing diaspora, calling for more grounded constructs that narrow the gap between theory, history and practice. James Clifford's 1994 overview of diaspora theories, for instance, points out many of the inconsistencies to be found therein. Referring to his own article, Clifford writes that 'there is sometimes a slippage in the text between invocations of diaspora theories, diasporic discourses and distinct historical experiences of diaspora'.³⁰ Clifford also argues that it is of limited use to attempt to define pure diaspora types. 'Whatever the working list of diasporic features', he asserts, 'no society

²⁸See, for example, *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. by Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (London: Routledge, 1997).

²⁹Amitav Ghosh, 'The Diaspora in Indian Culture', *Public Culture*, 2.1 (1989), pp. 73-78.

³⁰James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994), pp. 301-38 (p. 302).

can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history. And the discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and accepted'.³¹

While keeping in mind the modifications suggested above, my attempt to provide a (re)definition of 'diaspora' will, primarily be carried out through a problematization of the two coordinates which William Safran determines as being indispensable to all diaspora -- those of 'homeland' and 'exile'. I am enabled in this attempt by Clifford's own nuanced theorizing of the term. As a necessary first step, Clifford argues that, when taken literally as a dispersal from a centre and a desire to return to a homeland, the concept fails to explain the relations of many populations that have been described as diasporic, for instance, the African American, Caribbean and Black British communities. He points out that the teleology of origin/return, whether real or symbolic, inherent in theories like Safran's which presuppose a 'centre', serves only to foreground the dialectics of loss and estrangement. Calling for a more positive interpretation of diaspora, Clifford argues that 'the process [of diaspora identification] may not be as much about being African or Chinese [or Indian] as about being American or British, or wherever one has settled, *differently*.'³²

³¹Ibid., p. 306.

³²Ibid., p.312.

Clifford's re-theorized understanding of 'diaspora' is important because it signals an epistemological shift of focus from an 'originary' homeland to the existence of multiple homelands, an idea which also has resonances with Stuart Hall's definition of Black British cultural identity, which I will come to later. I want now to point out that, rather than looking for lateral connections between 'a real or symbolic homeland' and diasporic communities, what Clifford posits is a decentred analysis which employs the multiple subjectivities and discontinuous histories of diasporic peoples to redefine the new or adopted homeland. For Clifford, a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin.³³

Significantly, in this regard, Clifford's rejection of the teleology of origin/return is an empowering move as it lifts diaspora away from the regressive aspects of the ideology of the 'homeland' and the discourse of nativism, essentialism and exclusivism with which such an ideology has historically been associated. The dialectics of 'return to the homeland' and 'pure ethnicity' as reflected in the formulation by Safran, has, in Britain, for example, been co-opted by right-wing and reactionary national discourses. Enoch Powell's theory of the nation's racial

³³Ibid., p.306.

purity was predicated on his notion of a national space which was 'contaminated' by the infiltration of 'outsiders', the non-white (mainly Asian and West Indian) immigrants and their children. Calling for the repatriation of these migrants to their 'own' homelands (of Africa or India, for instance), Powell maintained that Englishness was an inheritance of race; the aim here was to keep English cultural identity within, or to correspond with, England's national boundaries. Powell's discourse was ultimately based on the notion that every race has a nation to which it belonged;³⁴ '[t]he discourses of race and nation', as Etienne Balibar warns, 'are never very far apart'.³⁵ It is precisely this sort of exclusionary nationalism that my rearticulated concept of diaspora seeks to work against. The increased visibility and presence of minority groups in Britain -- of political exiles, economic migrants, refugees, together with holders of dual citizenship and second and third-generation children of migrants -- have contributed to the creation, according to theorists like Bhabha, of a 'post-colonial space' within the Western metropolitan nation with the power to challenge essentialist readings of culture, nation and belonging. At the

³⁴In his book, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), Ian Baucom argues that by maintaining that Englishness strictly emanated from race, and not British space, Powell's discourse in fact betrays an anxiety that reveals that it is indeed place, not race, that might determine identity (p. 23).

³⁵Etienne Balibar, 'Racism and Nationalism', in *Race, Nation, Class*, ed. by E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p.37.

same time in many post-colonial states in the 'Third World', such as Malaysia, as I noted earlier, the second and third generation descendants of diasporic communities are increasingly rejecting the use of nationalist myths such as 'the homeland' to control, suppress and discriminate against minority ethnic groups.

I want now to turn to the other principal characteristic of diaspora identified by Safran -- the notion of exile upon which the concept of diaspora is closely predicated as diasporic communities are said to live a life of cultural estrangement away from their 'true, ideal' home. My attempt at redefining diaspora will primarily be carried out by foregrounding Edward Said's problematizing of exile in 'The Mind of Winter', an essay containing his personal reflections on the complex interdependency of exile and homeland. I will attempt to demonstrate how, far from being neutral structures, with clear-cut borders, homeland and exile are, in fact, highly ambiguous concepts, 'opposites informing and constituting each other'.³⁶

In this essay, Said defines exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'.³⁷ For Said, whose narrative of the homeland is centrally influenced by his identity as a Palestinian

³⁶Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile', *Harper's Magazine*, (September 1984), pp. 49-55 (p. 50).

³⁷Ibid., p. 49.

exile, the loss of stability, of geography and continuity of land created by the Palestinian's enforced separation from his 'true home' is fundamental to his conception of identity. Exiles, Said emphasizes, are 'cut off from their roots, their land, their past'.³⁸

In *After the Last Sky*, a book in which he chronicles the dispersed and dispossessed fate of the people of Palestine, Said again focuses on the dialectics of loss that shape the figure of the exile. 'Exile', he writes, 'is a series of portraits without names, without contexts'.³⁹ In both texts, the defining trait is the acute sense of loss and deprivation caused by, what Eavan Boland hauntingly describes as, the 'absence of destination'.⁴⁰ Indeed, for the exile, home is where one cannot be. 'Homecoming', Said emphasizes, 'is out of question'.⁴¹ Palestinian identity without a Palestinian homeland powerfully evokes for us the cultural, geographic and psychic homelessness experienced by the exile.

Crucially, however, while Said opens 'The Mind of Winter' by invoking exile in the same terms that Safran formulates diaspora, that is, as a 'condition of terminal loss' and separation from one's 'true' home, he ends by foregrounding its productive

³⁸Ibid., p. 51.

³⁹Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 12.

⁴⁰Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons* (London: Carcanet, 1995), p.47.

⁴¹Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter', p. 52.

tensions. This shift is significant for my purposes as it serves to undermine the facile, binary distinctions between exile and 'homeland'. According to Said, the exile's distance and separation from the 'homeland', although an issue which gives rise to considerable loss, allows, nevertheless, for the formation of a kind of critical perspective and detachment that can open up new ways of perceiving the self's relationship with the world. In fact, for Said, exile is a potentially productive position because exiles 'cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience'. Indeed, the very act of crossing borders, the experience of seeing 'the entire world [as] a foreign land', can be conceived as advancing a 'critical perspective' and an 'originality of vision' which is not available to the native individual.⁴² While the borders that are crossed do not refer only to national or geographical boundaries, but also involve the negotiation of the personal boundaries between the public and private, and past and present, Said's claim is that the negotiation of geographical boundaries is the first step towards the crossing of inner, more personal, boundaries.

More crucially, Said's definition of exiles as being located between cultures and nations, as belonging to 'both worlds without being completely *of* either one or the other',⁴³ points to the productive ambivalences of exile. For, in contrast to

⁴²Ibid., p.54-55.

⁴³Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.xxx.

the normal sense of belonging to 'one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two' which, in Said's formulation, results in a 'contrapuntal' inhabiting of cultures and identities since the experience of home is stretched across plural, 'simultaneous dimensions'.⁴⁴ The complex trajectory of affiliations, inter-connections and overlapping domains of experience, implicit to a 'contrapuntal' experience of culture and identity, has the power, Said suggests, to interrogate the unities of the nationalist homeland or 'habitus', a term coined by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, to refer to what Said describes as 'the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitance'.⁴⁵

Crucially also for my purposes, a 'contrapuntal' experience of cultures leads, as Said says, to the questioning of the binary divisions between 'us' and 'them' by 'accord[ing] neither the privilege of "objectivity" to "our side" nor the encumbrance of "subjectivity" to "theirs"'.⁴⁶ So, although it warns against a triumphant, one-sided view, of exile -- to regard exile simply as 'beneficial, as a spur to humanism or to creativity', Said cautions, 'is to belittle its mutilations'.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Said, 'The Mind of Winter', p.55.

⁴⁵Ibid., p.55.

⁴⁶Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.312.

⁴⁷Said, 'The Mind of Winter', p.50.

In this sense, 'The Mind of Winter' is to be seen as a text which foregrounds the productive ambivalences of the exile's location in-between cultures and identities.

Something of this dialectics of gain can be seen in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, where we get glimpses of Said, as academic, political activist, literary, music and cultural critic, working through his feelings of loss, alienation, and nostalgia for the homeland of his 'beginnings' to enter into new relationships and new affiliations with his adopted homeland of America. Thus, Said can talk about beginnings as 'something of a necessary fiction' since, as a starting point, beginnings are always left behind. It is not so much beginnings, or origins, but 'continuities' that matter to Said because 'continuities ... go cheerfully forward with their beginnings obediently affixed'.⁴⁸ In instances such as these, Said invokes in his hyphenated identity as a Palestinian-American that in-between space, the space of the hyphen, which allows for the existence of more than one homeland and the celebration of a heterogeneous cultural identity. 'No one today is purely one thing', he says. 'Labels like Indian ... or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind'.⁴⁹ Thus, in functioning as a text that serves as a kind of middle ground, a space of mediation,

⁴⁸Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.77.

⁴⁹Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 407.

Said's biography itself problematizes the binary relationship between the figure of exile and the 'originary' homeland.

Home and Diaspora

I want now to look at the idea of 'difference' that I had drawn attention to in James Clifford's (re)theorizing of diaspora. The presence of this difference is for me significant for it helps us to understand the specific ways in which it intervenes in the construction of an 'originary' home. But it is important to keep in mind, as Stuart Hall points out, that this difference is 'not pure "otherness"'.⁵⁰ Drawing on Derrida's concept of *differance*, I will later in the chapter attempt to gesture towards a more empowering understanding of difference. Such an egalitarian, non-hierarchical conception of difference, evident in diasporic articulations of home, opens up a space where multiplicity and diversity is affirmed, while at the same time problematizing the binary oppositions inherent to exclusionary narratives of home.

⁵⁰Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 392 - 403 (p. 397).

To capture the complexities of this sense of difference, which is not merely 'otherness', I have found Angelika Bammer's elaborations on the idea of cultural displacement extremely useful. Bammer uses the term 'displacement' with conceptual resonances borrowed from Jacques Derrida, for whom displacement in the interpretative, or meaning-making, process involves a 'pushing aside'. That is, meaning is never complete or arrived at, but keeps on shifting to include other additional or supplementary meanings. Meaning, then, possible only through *differance*, is 'infinitely dispersed, indefinitely deferred. In [Derrida], what is displaced -- dispersed, deferred, repressed, pushed aside -- is, significantly, still there: *Displaced* but not *replaced*, it remains a source of trouble, the shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble.'⁵¹

If, as Bammer helps us conceptualize it, difference lies at the heart of cultural identity, then I want to suggest that this space of difference, where the meaning of culture disseminates along endless chains of signifiers, is an enactment of diaspora. And it is this 'difference' that underlies diasporic narratives of cultural identity. From this perspective, cultural identity is never 'arrived at',

⁵¹ Angelika Bammer, 'Introduction', in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. by Angelika Bammer (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. xi-xx (p.xiii). Here, Bammer also refers to Freud, for whom also, she argues, 'displacement--*Verschiebung* (pushing aside)--of thoughts and processes on to representational symbols is central and similar to *Verdrangung* (repression)'.

never complete, but always deferred, to be pursued in ‘detours’ through other words whose meanings are similarly postponed in an endless circulation of meaning. Thus, it is the presence of difference that sets identity in motion to incorporate new, additional or ‘supplementary’ meanings, without erasing the trace of its previous meanings.

My conceptualization of diaspora as a space of unsettling difference in which cultural meaning or identity is endlessly supplemented⁵² by new meanings gestures towards Stuart Hall's definition of cultural identity as always-already inscribed by difference. This is why Hall, although committed in principle to the decolonization project of cultural recovery integral to anti-colonial nationalist movements,⁵³ cautions that anti- or pre-colonial cultures were neither static nor pure in the first place. In his seminal essay, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, Hall asserts that cultural

⁵²My use of the term ‘supplement’ in this thesis, while it falls back on Derrida's concept of the term, also echoes Bhabha's definition of ‘supplement’, who himself uses the term with the resonances of Derrida. In his essay, ‘DissemiNation’ (*The Location of Culture*, pp. 139-170), Bhabha defines ‘supplement’ as a ‘strategy of intervention [that] is similar to what British parliamentary procedure recognizes as a supplementary question. It is a question that is supplementary to what is stated on the ‘order paper’ for the minister's response. Coming “after” the original, or in “addition” to it, gives the supplementary question the advantage of introducing a sense of “secondariness” or belatedness into the structure of the original demand. The supplementary strategy suggests that adding “to” need not “add up” but may disturb the calculation’ (p. 155). Bhabha also refers in this essay to Derrida's use of ‘supplement’ in his opinion that writing is the supplement to speech, in the sense that writing both re-presents the original narrative (speech) and points to its hollowness or lack.

⁵³Although Hall here specifically refers to the Négritude movement, his comments are equally valid and applicable to all other anti-colonial nationalist movements aimed at defining a national-cultural identity in terms of a common historical experience and a shared cultural past.

identities are always in process, never complete. It is this post-structuralist definition of cultural identity as always moving, as *displaced*, but not *replaced*, which exists behind Hall's conceptions of diasporic identity and experience. Here, Hall, like Bammer also, sees the significance of Derrida's theory of meaning, which defines meaning through difference. For Hall, identity is constantly narrated and renarrated in the discursive negotiation of complex alliances and relations within the heterogeneity of community, in discourse that is not based on unity or belonging, but on transformation and difference. Cultural identity is thus dynamic, responsive, contested and mediated as it is lived and articulated in relation to power, through everyday practices and experiences.⁵⁴ Thus conceived, cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, history and culture. This conception of cultural identity can be better apprehended, as Hall suggests, through Lacan's theory of enunciation. By highlighting the fact that the speaking and spoken subject do not coincide, this theory views 'identity', not as an essence, but as a positioning in

⁵⁴The following experience related by the postcolonial critic, Gayatri Spivak, exemplifies, on an immediate and literal level, the point that identity is a mobile construct, and thus that when people move, identities and definitions change. In an interview with Sneja Gunew (in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. by Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993, p. 201), Spivak talks about being denied entry into Toronto from London, when she had encountered no problem entering Toronto from New York just two days earlier, on the same travel documents. 'The same person, the same passport...but you become "different"', she muses. This anecdote exemplifies the notion that the same individual, in different contexts or locations, acquires different identities, thus pointing to Hall's conception of identity as contextual and relational.

discourse; this positioning, or representation, will itself be conditioned by the position spoken from.

Such a view of cultural identity is highly significant for my purposes for it rejects the authority and legitimacy with which the hegemonic nation/state lays claim to a fixed, self-evident or self-defining home. Here again, by rejecting essentialist, nationalist conceptions of home, Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity is infused with political meaning. For by rethinking culture not as a primordial or ontological home, Hall calls attention to the place of local and historical specificities in the construction of cultural identity. Implicitly rejecting the view of a cultural identity which can be fixed and secured by looking back to an originary homeland and pure ethnicity, Hall argues instead for the existence of at least three cultural and historical 'presences'⁵⁵ which constitute the complexity of Caribbean cultural identity: the 'African' (a history of slavery and a cultural legacy of customs, words, styles of expression); the 'European' (exposure to colonial discourse and representations of the Other); and the 'New World' (the Caribbean is an 'emptied' land where cultures from around the globe cross over and meet and where new, creolised and syncretic, cultures are negotiated). Hall argues that the 'New World' has to be understood as 'the place

⁵⁵Hall, however, adds that there are other, unacknowledged, 'presences' which 'constitute the complexity of Caribbean identity' ('Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 398).

of many, continuous displacements....[I]t is the signifier of migration itself'.⁵⁶ Thus, just as the originary homeland of Africa, which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, cannot be returned to, Europe too has been hybridized, was never 'pure', existing in mediation and dialogue with Africa. It is the complex processes of mediation and negotiation between the African and European 'presences' that give rise to the distinctive cultural identity of 'New World' diasporic communities. What Hall is attempting here is to demonstrate how these cultural 'presences' in the diaspora point to an awareness of cultures as deferred and disseminated, but not replaced, thus making space for discontinuities, difference, what I call 'routes', in and alongside continuity, 'roots'. Thus conceptualised, diaspora becomes a signifier of new imaginings of cultural identity. It is because of this that Hall can offer a critique of the unitary and linear model of diaspora formulated by Safran, arguing that '[d]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured by some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return.... The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 392 - 403 (p. 401).

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 401-02.

In this respect, Paul Gilroy's formulation of the spatio-temporal metaphor of the 'Black Atlantic' is particularly significant for my purposes for it offers me another way to think about the cultural indeterminacy of home. For Gilroy, the chronotope⁵⁸ of the 'Black Atlantic' refers to 'the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements that call into question the very desire to be centred',⁵⁹ thus problematizing essentialist conceptions of home. Gilroy's vision of the ship, the microcosm of a cultural system in motion, moving across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean is a central organizing symbol that signals analytical attention away from 'roots' and 'originary' homelands to what he terms the dynamic of 'routes', a transnational aesthetic, criss-crossing geographical and cultural

⁵⁸Mikhail Bakhtin, writing under the regime of Stalin, believed that novelistic discourse could offer resistance against authoritarian discourse. In particular, he believed in the capacity of the 'chronotope' or time-space of the novel to give voice to the marginalized and to other individuals who resisted the hegemony of the dominant system. Bakhtin has defined the 'chronotope' as the name given to 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically represented in literature... [it] is the primary means for materializing time in space...a centre for concretizing representation'. The chronotope elaborates a specific engagement with the nation as it signifies a more heterogeneous space marked by the relationship between the temporal and the spatial. This connection between time and space, Bakhtin emphasizes, is necessary for the narrative to be constructed. However, the time-space continuum does not precede the narrative. Rather, it is forged in the very telling of the story: every narrative must tell itself, must create the conditions for its own existence. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is, therefore, crucial for explaining the processes for the construction and maintenance of the nation. Like the novel, the nation must tell itself through making connections between indicators of space (often arbitrarily delineated borders) and indicators of time (stories, events, episodes, moments). It can be said that it is Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope that lies behind Bhabha's spatial and temporal reconfigurations of the nation. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 368.

⁵⁹Paul Gilroy, 'Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 187-98 (p. 190).

boundaries. Gilroy's conception of identity as a space of dynamic flux, as 'the space constituted through and between places and the space marked out by flows',⁶⁰ informs my own understanding of cultural identity as always shifting in meaning, under negotiation, and never 'complete'.

Such alternative constructions of diaspora and 'home' are empowering because they enable us to account for those ethnic communities whose historical roots or origins are constructed by the nation/state as lying outside of the time/space of the nation. In fact, Homi Bhabha's understanding of the *Heim* of national culture is articulated in terms not of 'unisonance' but dissonance -- the splits, ambivalences, and othernesses *within* the nation which are powerfully invoked by his coinage, 'dissemiNation'. This term conveys his idea that the 'nation' is always-already implicit in 'dissemination'. It is to distance himself from national representations that privilege cultural boundedness and 'common origins' to the exclusion of difference, that the novelist Salman Rushdie, too, speaks of home as a 'scattered' concept.⁶¹ The terminology of 'scatter' and 'dissemination' signal a shift in spatio-temporal focus from the fixity of 'roots' to the fluidity of 'routes', to the

⁶⁰Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 193.

⁶¹Salman Rushdie, *East, West* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 93.

chronotope of the passage itself. This is a significant move, for it takes into account the dispersed temporal and spatial contexts of the contemporary post-colonial nation. By incorporating the exclusions of nationalism into the nation space, diaspora ‘disturb[s] the ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities’.⁶² My formulation of diaspora, then, as a hybrid, transnational space offers a framework in and through which to view cultural identity as always moving, never arrived at, as existing in tension and mediation between ‘roots’ and ‘routes’.

To investigate the ways in which diaspora as a space of movement and multiplicity problematizes the monologic narrative and authority of the nation/state, my methodology is one that entails a close reading of literary texts of the Indian diaspora.⁶³ The last two decades have seen a proliferation of novels from the Indian

⁶²Homi Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’, in *Nation and Narration*, pp. 300-06.

⁶³The South Asian (‘Indian’) diaspora is estimated at nine million: Europe 1,500,000 (the majority of whom are in Britain); Africa 1,400,000 (especially in South Africa); Asia 2,000,000 (chiefly in Malaysia); the Middle East 1,400,000 (largely guest workers in the Gulf States); Latin America and the Caribbean 1,000,000 (chiefly in Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam); North America 1,200,000 (mostly in the US); and the Pacific 450,000 (concentrated in Fiji). These figures are taken from Benedict Anderson, ‘Exodus’, *Critical Inquiry*, 20.2 (1994), 326-27 (fn. 23).

diaspora that reject calls to imagine the nation in prescriptive terms and seek to conceptualize it instead as an empowering and liberating space.

With specific reference to India, the imported, universalist nationalism based on the Enlightenment ideals of industry, progress and democracy -- with its pressure on citizenship and its unifying discourse of nation based on the myth of common origins -- took root as the product of a *particular* historical moment, grounded in a popular, anti-colonial, liberation movement. Such a formulation of nationalism wilfully suppressed internal differences in its need to construct a unified and homogeneous Indian nation. While such a model is empowering at the time, it is, however, a nationalism that has proven increasingly inadequate to the needs of a subsequent historical period, one marked, by the contentious politics of pluralism. The rise, especially in the last two decades, of Hindu nationalist organizations and the fact that the Indian nation is today being led very largely by one such party raises important questions regarding the crisis of nationalism and national identity facing the country.⁶⁴ Even the official, post-independence nationalism of secularism, itself based on the Western Enlightenment teleology of progress and universalism, as I will show in Chapter Two, has come under criticism for its failure to address the needs of the

⁶⁴See, for instance, Ashis Nandy, 'Coping with the Politics of Faiths and Cultures: Between Secular State and Ecumenical Traditions in India', in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka et al., pp.135-166.

people. In an era, thus, where identity politics is being played out in an arena dangerously suspended between a dominant Eurocentric universalism and nativist claims that are separatist and atavistic in nature, I want to emphasize a point made earlier, that the diaspora aesthetic provides a multi-lateral, multi-historical basis from which to rearticulate home and nation.

Although there are several important voices of the Indian diaspora that are engaged in the task of constructing alternative narratives of national identity from their interstitial location between cultures and nations, I have decided to focus on four novelists, namely Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Rohinton Mistry. My selection of these novelists is broadly premised on the grounds that their texts articulate a new conception of the nation by problematizing the stable and unitary configurations of national-cultural identity. In this sense, then, they do not engage with the literary or political nationalism of the colony in the way envisioned in the early works of writers such as Chinua Achebe, for instance. In fact, experiencing identity as a plural and shifting site, these writers continually foreground the unstable and ambivalent nature of national and cultural identity by focusing on the instability of the signs of national identity. In this sense, their literary texts productively engage with, explore and extend several of the ideas central to the theorizing of diaspora.

Also, the fact that these writers are writing from outside India should not be construed as a sign that I valorize the migrant perspective; rather, I see the border crossings and displacements they have experienced in their lifetime as approximating the historical experience of cultural and geographical displacement that lies at the heart of all diasporas. For me, the experience of migrancy will be used as a trope to better convey my conceptions about the productive, in-between, potential of diaspora. In fact, as Bhabha conceives it, the culture that the migrant carries with him is intrinsically 'partial' since it is 'neither the *one* nor the *other* but *something else besides*'.⁶⁵ This 'partial culture' of the migrant, Bhabha elaborates in another essay, is the 'contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures -- at once the impossibility of culture's containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture's "in-between"', bafflingly both alike and different'.⁶⁶ Bhabha suggests that the 'partial' culture symbolized in the figure of the migrant is an ideological tool with which to invoke the idea of the ambivalence of national space, a point which each of the literary texts I examine addresses in the attempt to problematize essentialist readings of national and cultural identity.

⁶⁵Homi Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', *The Location of Culture*, p.25 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁶Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's In-Between', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 53-60 (p.54).

And because these writers of the diaspora whom I have selected are also migrants, the material implications of their ‘in-between’ location necessitates not only an interrogation of the unities of the Indian nation/state, but those also of the Western nations in which each of them has made their home. Thus, although the focal point of my investigation is the ways in which these writers problematize the dominant narrative of the Indian nation/state, brief attention will be paid to the way these writers position themselves in relation to, and interrogate the hegemonic underpinnings of, the host Western nation. This is a necessary strategy since in Western metropolitan nations such as Britain, Germany, France and Italy, nationalism has turned increasingly fascist and reactionary, largely a defensive reaction against the increased presence of various immigrant groups from formerly colonized spaces.

Bharati Mukherjee has explicitly formulated her migrant aesthetics in terms of her self-positioning within the national and cultural narrative of an American imaginary. For Ghosh, however, whose diasporic status is not as readily discernible as that of the others, it is the ‘transnational’ perspective to cultural production that is foregrounded. My use of the term ‘transnational’ in this thesis functions as a signifier of cross-cultural movement and mobility. A ‘*transnational*’ framework can be an

empowering framework for lifting the *nation* away from old, imperialist paradigms and their fixed boundaries of representation.

I also need to point out here, since it is a significant point that explains my inclusion of these writers and Naipaul's exclusion in this thesis, that both Mukherjee and Rushdie have consciously distanced themselves from V.S. Naipaul's stance of aesthetic and cultural homelessness. Naipaul's conception of diaspora, anchored in the circumstances of an earlier moment in the process of decolonization and the historical phase of the Indian diaspora,⁶⁷ induces in the author a 'homelessness' that arises from his feeling that he is estranged from his 'original' home. To Naipaul, the idea of belonging is, thus, an impossibility because the 'authentic' identity that he and his characters long for has been forever undermined by history. In its place is the 'deep disorder'⁶⁸ left behind by colonization and imperialism. So his characters live, estranged from their homeland, their dream of wholeness broken, in the absence of a

⁶⁷Vijay Mishra, 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora', *Textual Practice*, 10.3 (1996), pp. 421-47 (p. 421-22). Mishra draws a distinction between what he calls the 'old' and the 'new' Indian diasporas. The 'old' Indian diaspora, into which Mishra includes Naipaul, can be traced right back to the early and mid-nineteenth century as part of the British imperial movement of labour to the colonies. On the other hand, the 'new' Indian diaspora, Mishra asserts, refers to the mid- to late twentieth-century movements of people from the Indian subcontinent to 'the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World and the former settler colonies'. Mishra describes the 'old' Indian diaspora as a 'diaspora of exclusivism' since it created 'relatively self-contained "little Indias"'; in the colonies. He argues that the new Indian diaspora is a 'diaspora of the border' because its 'overriding characteristic is one of mobility' (p. 422). My perspective in this thesis, however, is to argue that it is the descendants of the 'old' diaspora that are problematizing 'rooted' conceptions of national identity.

⁶⁸V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p.32.

home which is primarily a psychological but also a physical condition as *A House for Mr. Biswas* so powerfully enacts. Since a fully autonomous identity remains impossible, his characters are condemned to empty and futile mimicry, with Naipaul fashioning the myth of himself as a writer who 'doesn't have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community'.⁶⁹ Thus critics like Michael Gorra describe Naipaul as 'a writer brilliant, but not whole, whose entire career is a mark of imperialism's deforming power'.⁷⁰ In marked contrast to Naipaul's forty-year dedication to chronicling the ravages of rootlessness, with the possible exception of his more recent work, *The Enigma of Arrival*, there is Rushdie, for whom the fact of diaspora and its syncretic cultural consequences are energetically cultivated as potentially productive forces. In fact, Rushdie uses the hybrid site of his location in diaspora to launch an attack on the 'confining myth'⁷¹ of cultural authenticity. Thus, as a counterpoint to what Naipaul calls his sense of 'out of placeness',⁷² Rushdie offers his idea of a productive 'in-betweenness'. Predominantly for this reason, but

⁶⁹Quoted from a 1971 interview in Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 23.

⁷⁰Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.71.

⁷¹Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 52.

⁷²V.S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 19.

also in light of the consideration that Naipaul has not written much fiction about India, I have not included him in this study.

Although less explicit than the other three writers of this study on the subject of thinking about ways of narrating nation and identity from a location in diaspora, Rohinton Mistry, nevertheless, engages with several key issues concerning the reconfiguration of the nation, and the re-presenting of the national imaginary from perspectives that defy nationalist interpretations of culture and history.

While I link the various writers together under the collective banner of diaspora to reflect the shared assumptions and ideologies of this body of writing, I am, nevertheless, aware that the Indian diaspora is internally marked by differentiation, a point that sometimes gets lost in more general or theoretical discussions on the subject. In her introduction to a collection of essays on writers of the Indian diaspora, Nalini Natarajan, quite rightly, insists that 'because the circumstances surrounding diasporic movements from the Indian subcontinent are so various, generalizations can only be made with caution'.⁷³ Keeping this in mind, I want to emphasize that while the texts assembled by this study collectively set out to

⁷³ Nalini Natarajan, 'Introduction: Reading Diaspora', in *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. i-xix (p.xiv).

interrogate the unities and homogeneities of national-cultural identity from a perspective in diaspora, for each of the authors under study, diaspora holds different resonances, whether as a literary or cultural aesthetic or as lived experience. I will, therefore, in the case of each writer, situate and reference diaspora within ideological, social, cultural and political contexts, histories and experiences.

Furthermore, although the separate chapters are joined by an argument grounded in the shared concerns of these novelists, their individual strengths and emphases have compelled me to examine each of them from a slightly different angle. With Mukherjee and Rushdie, for instance, who have been more explicit than either Mistry or Ghosh in the formulation of an 'in-between' migrant aesthetics, some attention will be drawn to the ways in which they formulate their migrant poetics. This, in a way, explains my underlying reasons for selecting these writers; for the particular dynamics of Mukherjee and Rushdie's migrant aesthetics participates in the anti-hegemonic trajectory of my own conceptualization of diaspora.

Collectively, however, this group of writers allows me to investigate the ways in which their texts represent national and cultural identity from the specificities of their plural and partial location in diaspora. In the case of each writer, it will be seen that diaspora, whether as a cultural and political aesthetic or a textual

strategy, creates a new space for negotiating a more egalitarian conception and representation of national and cultural identity. Perhaps I should also point out, at the outset, that in rejecting the homogeneities of standard nationalist paradigms, diaspora is not offered as another totalizing paradigm from which to view aesthetic or cultural productions.

Having said that, I have worked towards the need for maintaining some form of coherence by selecting writers who have all been born in India and therefore have, in a general sense, a shared historical, cultural, geographical and linguistic experience.

My readings of these literary texts situate themselves in the midst of, and have been influenced by, current debates about issues of national and cultural identity in the fields of cultural and post-colonial studies. My analysis has particularly been enabled by the works of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, James Clifford and Paul Gilroy whose conception of cultural identity as an unfinished series of paths and negotiations, in permanent transition and incompleteness, offers a multiplicity of routes, a rich and endless repertoire of histories and cultures, through which new, more generous, paradigms for national culture and identity can be constructed. What I have found to be particularly empowering about the shared

theoretical position of these critics is their concern with recognizing divergent cultural histories, and with conceptualizing ways of sustaining the 'difference' of those histories in contexts of domination and globalization.

I am equally indebted to the writings of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, whose theoretical statements and ideological contemplations of diaspora have shaped my dissertation in pervasive and very conscious ways. Said's and Bhabha's most important contribution to post-colonial studies lies, for me, in their attempts to articulate diaspora in the enabling language of personal, and national, empowerment and transformation. While both have spoken about and theorized diaspora into a process of gain, this achievement is perhaps, in a personal sense, more conspicuous in Said's predicament as a Palestinian exile who has reconfigured the traumas and losses attendant on that identity into new hope, new 'beginnings' and affiliations.

I am also greatly indebted to Bhabha's revisioning of the postcolonial project. His foregrounding of minority discourse into the agency of anti-hegemonic discourse constitutes a crucial intervention into modernity, both as an epistemological and a political enterprise. In interviews, Bhabha has located his own history as that of someone from a 'border position' -- a part of the Bombay middle-class, Gujarati-speaking Parsi minority community that has been alienated 'for not being authentically

Indian'.⁷⁴ It is such a marginal position that Bhabha uses as a performative space from which to destabilize the essentialist, homogenizing basis of hegemonic national traditions.

I am indebted to Bhabha especially for his construction and privileging of the interstitial aesthetic. I am aware, however, of the criticisms attendant on this position. For one, Bhabha's valorizing of liminal subjectivity as a third term that negates the colonizer and the colonized at the same time, amounts, his critics charge, to declaring that the world has moved beyond colonialism, while in fact it is still struggling with hegemonic systems of colonialism and neo-colonialism.⁷⁵ While this is a serious indictment of Bhabha's work given the radical orientation of postcolonial practice, I contend that in renaming colonial discourse in terms of the 'in-between', Bhabha's elaboration marks a valuable moment in postcolonial scholarship for opening a space for thinking about the ambivalence of national culture. For in reconceptualizing national space as 'a dialectic of various temporalities -- modern, colonial, postcolonial, "native"'-- which constitutes 'a knowledge' that 'cannot be

⁷⁴David Bennet and Terry Collits, 'The Postcolonial Critic: Homi Bhabha' (An Interview), in *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism and Culture*, ed. by Patrick Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 237-53 (p. 245).

⁷⁵See especially, Arif Dirlik, 'The Post-Colonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1994), pp. 329-56; and Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

stabilized in its enunciation',⁷⁶ he foregrounds 'the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force [in spite of] the attempt by nationalist discourses to persistently produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress'.⁷⁷ By contemplating the 'conceptual indeterminacy' of the nation in terms of the assumptions, hopes and interests of ordinary citizens, Bhabha's project allows for a space wherein forms of displacement and marginalization can be translated into strategies for the survival of our different histories and identities. While Bhabha's conceptualization has in mind the interrogation of the exclusionary narratives of the Western metropolitan nation, I contend that his theorizing is equally valid and applicable to the 'Third World' post-colonial nation.

It must be said, however, that it is from the literary texts that I have drawn the most benefit and satisfaction. As Simon During reminds us, literature can 'function as a signifier of national identity'.⁷⁸ Thus, my methodology in the following chapters will entail a detailed and close reading of literary texts as enactments of lived experience that can be used to qualify the oppositional practices, alternative

⁷⁶Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322 (p. 303).

⁷⁷Homi Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-7 (p.1).

⁷⁸Simon During, 'Literature -- Nationalism's other? The case for revision', in Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, pp. 138-53 (p. 138).

epistemologies and strategies foregrounded by theoretical discourse. Working along the grain of recent developments in literary studies which stress that the nation can only emerge through its narration, I hope to show how these diasporic narratives narrate home and the experience of national belonging through 'textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, subtexts and figurative strategems'.⁷⁹

I wish to reiterate that my use of diaspora as a conceptual and analytical category is implicitly marked by the presence of a 'post-colonial' discourse. That is, I employ diaspora as a politics of resistance that reflects the anti-colonial ethical imperative committed to deconstructing the cultural, linguistic and racial categories which enabled the formulation and subsequent propagation of imperialist ideologies during European colonial expansion. My preference for the term 'diaspora' over 'post-colonial', however, is in light of the fact that 'post-colonial' has been the target of a number of recent critiques which makes it difficult for me to use the term unselfconsciously or without qualification. This lack of consensus is inscribed, for example, in the debate over the use of the term 'post-colonial' itself, in so far as it falsely posits a teleological movement somehow 'beyond' or 'after' any problematics of colonial

⁷⁹Bhabha, 'Introduction' to *Nation and Narration*, p. 2.

domination -- and therefore fails to describe a global system which might be more accurately qualified as 'neocolonial'.

Furthermore, keeping in mind that the term 'post-colonial' erases differences between distinct geographical regions, historical moments and ideologies of nation and nationalism, my use of 'diaspora' resists such homogenizing tendencies by moving towards, what Anne McClintock calls, a 'proliferation of historically nuanced theories and strategies'.⁸⁰ In fact, in so far as these diasporic texts enclose an interstitial perspective to the formation of national culture and subjectivity, they seek to move beyond the ideological impasses of colonialism -- 'beyond a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations between colonizer/colonized and centre/periphery'.⁸¹ More significantly, my use of 'diaspora' in this thesis serves to re-orientate the term 'post-colonial' towards the contingencies of the present world phase. In their introduction to *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, the editors Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, argue for a more specific usage of the term 'post-colonial' that connects the older colonial period to the new global world system. According to them, the term becomes particularly useful and

⁸⁰Anne McClintock, "'The Angel of Progress': Pitfalls of the term 'Post-Colonialism'", *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 84-98 (p. 97). McClintock also argues that 'post-colonial' 'rehearses the Enlightenment trope of sequential, "linear" progress' and 're-orient the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colonial/postcolonial' (p. 85).

⁸¹Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the Post-Colonial', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 99-113 (p. 108).

subversive when it 'positions cultural productions in the fields of transnational economic relations and diasporic identity constructions'.⁸² The editors also argue that the old essentialist paradigms in this era of transnational practices often overlook 'complex, multiply-constituted identities that cannot be accounted for by binary oppositions'.⁸³ The term 'diaspora' in all these ways is able to encompass the discursive practices and strategies inherent in the post-colonial trajectory while still focusing on the ways in which grossly imbalanced relations of power -- inherited from the colonial period -- continue to circumvent the social, cultural, economic and political conditions prevailing in many formerly colonized spaces.

By way of a conclusion, I wish to say a few words about the relevance of this thesis to the specificities of my personal, and also political, circumstances, a general idea of which I have sought to convey in the opening pages of this chapter. As the third-generation descendant of indentured workers who were transported from the province of Tamil Nadu, South India, to service the rubber plantations of British

⁸²Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 'Introduction', in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp.1-33 (p.15).

⁸³Ibid., p. 10.

colonial Malaya in the late nineteenth-century, I wear the emblem of my diaspora in my ethnic identity as a Malaysian Indian. While my forefathers may have lived their lives in much the same way as Naipaul's characters, marooned on alien shores and holding on to the purity of their memory of India, I see Malaysia as my home; it is not for me the place of 'familiar temporariness'⁸⁴ that colonial Malaya was for my ancestors. Comprising about one-tenth of the total population, alongside the numerically dominant and hegemonic 'indigenous', or *Bumiputera* (literally, 'sons of the soil'), Malay community, the diasporic communities of Indians and Chinese (together with several other minority populations), stake our right to participate fully, and as co-equals, as members of the imagined community of Malaysia.

In a multi-diasporic nation like Malaysia, whose culture and character has been shaped by the experience of successive colonizations, the presence of various indigenous groups, the migrations of whole peoples from China and India in the last century, and the co-existence of other ethnic groups, languages, religions and traditions -- general characteristics that include the great majority of present nations -- the difficulty of forming a national and cultural identity from such heterogeneity is

⁸⁴ V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969), p. 194.

an issue of complex and increasing urgency. However, such a project is further and considerably hampered by the fact that more than forty years after independence from the British colonial rulers, the Malaysian nation/state is still obsessed with the 'national' project of resisting 'foreign' cultural inscriptions through the construction of a common culture and identity with its roots in a shared past and history. Such a conception of national culture and identity not only has failed to lift itself out of the anti-colonial psychological impasse, but has given rise to exclusionary narratives of the nation along lines that favour the dominant community. Such a model of national identity has failed to orientate itself to the reality of the multiple histories and cultures that make up the Malaysian nation. Although the Malaysian state practises the discourse of multiculturalism, another colonial apparatus, the terms of this system of cultural differentiation simply become another way of discriminating against those who do not belong to the dominant community. This is further reflected by the fact that although the state has committed itself to the modernization project of creating a 'united Malaysian nation' by the year 2020, the hollowness of this rhetoric is sounded in times of national crisis when the ruling party in government unfailingly raises the spectre of the 1969 ethnic riots⁸⁵ in

⁸⁵ On 13 May 1969, communal violence erupted between Malays (the dominant community) and non-Malays (mostly Chinese) as a result of Malay political insecurity over the electoral success of non-Malay

order to suppress and control its people. This was seen most clearly in the recent general elections of November 1999, when the Prime Minister, fearful of losing his party's hegemonic position in government, invoked the memory of the riots in the name of the national interest. However, it was all too clear to right-minded Malaysians that this was yet another strategy of the state to curb dissent by perpetrating fear and dividing the people against themselves.

As a corollary to this position, I see my cultural history not as a sign of loss or of nostalgia, but as intervening in active ways to construct a more egalitarian national imaginary. In fact, as a political gesture, I have realised the ideological necessity of problematizing my Indianness; I no longer view it in terms of ethnicity, a colonial construct which is complicit with the nation/state's strategy of dividing to contain and control its peoples. Instead I view my Indianness as a signifier of the heterogeneity of Malaysian national-cultural identity. Such a 'postmodernist'⁸⁶ (as opposed to a modernist) idea of ethnicity is not tantamount to an erasure of my

opposition parties, culminating in an orgy of killing by Malays, which went on for five days. The riots proved to be the most significant event in the history of the Malaysian nation: parliamentary democracy was suspended until January 1971; the format of politics was modified to ensure that the constitutional position of the Malays was entrenched as one of dominance; and a New Economic Policy (NEP) was instituted to shift the balance of material advantage more equitably in the Malay interest. The hegemonic position of the Malays and the NEP remain in force till today.

⁸⁶I owe the use of this term to Ien Ang, 'On Not Speaking Chinese', p. 18. See also, Vijay Mishra, 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora', *Textual Practice*, 10.3 (1996), pp. 421-47 (p. 441).

cultural difference but a necessary positioning within the Malaysian imaginary which problematizes home and nation as sites of continual invention, negotiation and interaction. Such an idea of ethnicity is no longer based on notions of pure ancestry which emanate from a belief in the existence of an originary homeland. Instead it works to reconfigure the homogeneous space-time of the present home. It offers the possibility of creating a 'Malaysian' cultural identity, by thinking of culture 'not as a primordial home but rather as a conjunctural alignment of needs and claims, forged in an inclusionary history of oppositional struggles'.⁸⁷ These dialectics which inform my understanding of national-cultural identity perhaps explain why I have chosen to look at cultural productions from the Indian diaspora.⁸⁸

Perhaps these texts speak, at some fundamental, cultural, level, of some kind of connection with the narratives of my past, my history. But it is no longer a 'factual' past, since the relationship that diasporic communities have with their past, as Stuart Hall tells us, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'.⁸⁹ Thus, in a sense, being narrated into existence *after the break*,

⁸⁷Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat and Anne McClintock, eds, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 8.

⁸⁸Literary writing in English in Malaysia is still a relatively recent phenomenon. At present, the leading novelist of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia is K.S. Maniam, who has been writing from the 1980s. He is the author of several collections of short stories, plays and novels.

⁸⁹Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 395.

diasporic people like me perhaps live in some kind of mediation between the homeland and the home. And it is from this sense of my in-betweenness, of that hyphen which exists in the interval from homeland to home, that I myself have sought answers for my problematic identification as a Malaysian-Indian.

I therefore read in the hybrid texts examined in my study both a critique of such essentialist, hegemonic constructions of home and nation, and a space in which to begin imagining how those histories that fall outside of the dominant culture's construction of itself within the nation/state may provide us with more flexible and generous paradigms through which to consider the conflict and creativity emerging from the diasporas of our contemporary world.

Chapter One

BHARATI MUKHERJEE

The traveller feels at home everywhere, because she is never at home anywhere.¹

As a significant voice of the Indian diaspora in North America, Bharati Mukherjee is perhaps deserving of inclusion in any discussion to ascertain if the fixed and 'rooted' paradigm for the construction of national and cultural identity has been supplanted by new, more fluid forces. In this regard, perhaps what is most striking about Mukherjee's literary and critical project is not so much that it has spanned thirty years, with the more recent writings taking her into new and uncharted literary topography, but that it offers an extensive and varied body of material with which to examine many of the central concerns raised by this thesis, particularly with regard to the complexities surrounding issues of identity construction, cultural difference, nation formation and marginalization in the increasingly diasporic contexts of the contemporary world.

Mukherjee has so far produced five novels -- *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), and *Leave it to*

¹Bharati Mukherjee, 'The Lady from Lucknow', in *Darkness* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), p. 25.

Me (1997) -- and two collections of short fiction -- *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) -- all of which reinvent home and nation from a geographical, cultural and ideological location in diaspora. Mukherjee is also a writer of non-fiction,² which includes scholarly articles, essays and sociopolitical commentaries. Indeed it is impossible to read Mukherjee's fiction without recognizing that it engages with and extends many of the central questions raised by her other prose works. Accumulatively, her writings attest to her ideological envisioning of herself as a pioneer of new territories, experiences and literatures.

Before I go on, I perhaps should point out the discrepancy that exists between what Mukherjee says in her interviews and her other articulations in the public forum and what is actually a sensitive, questioning and ambivalent response to migrancy in her writings. Thus, I want to argue that, in her critical writing and interviews as well as in her fictional works, Mukherjee is continually engaged in redefining the idea of migrant space and, if America is often celebrated as her migrant space, she is not uncritical in her imagining of this space.

²Mukherjee's two non-fiction texts are: *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), a book of memoirs inspired by and written mostly during an extended visit to India (most of which was spent in Calcutta) in the early seventies. It is in this work that Mukherjee describes the difficulties of being an Indian writer in Canada and discusses the search for a viable home for herself and her writing. Many of the concerns outlined here are condensed in her introduction to her first collection of short fiction, *Darkness* (1985); her second book of non-fiction, *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (Markham, Ontario: Viking, 1987), is based on the 1985 terrorist bombing of an Air India jet which killed more than 300 Canadians of Indian origin. Both books of non-fiction were written in collaboration with her husband, the Canadian-born novelist, Clark Blaise.

It can perhaps be said that like the migrant themes she explores in her writing, Mukherjee's biography itself, in terms of her multiple movements across national boundaries, testifies to what Timothy Brennan, referring to the new literary aesthetic created by the forces of migration and movement, calls 'a kind of perennial immigration'.³ Indeed, Mukherjee's life, like her writings, can be read as a text that exemplifies a state of perpetual journeying from a fixed and bounded narrative of home and belonging. Born into a Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta in 1940, Mukherjee left India to pursue postgraduate studies at Iowa in 1962, moved to Canada in 1966, where she lived, first in Toronto and then Montreal, as a citizen until 1980. In 1981, she left Canada for New York, where she has continued to reside, now as a naturalized US citizen.

Like her characters 'with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return',⁴ Mukherjee has worked towards fusing her many backgrounds and selves to create what she calls a new 'immigrant' literature that embodies her sense of what it means to be a writer of the Indian diaspora, in her case one who was born in India and has lived in, and been indelibly marked by, both Canada and the United States. 'In this age of diasporas', she

³Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 142.

⁴Bharati Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness* (New York: Fawcett Cress, 1985), p. xv.

argues, 'one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration'.⁵

But while Mukherjee's professed affiliations, and the ideological contours of the type of writing she is engaged in, may be heavily invested in her adopted home of America where they have helped her gain a measure of success,⁶ her texts continue to demonstrate a strong preoccupation with India and Indian contexts.

Lying at the heart of her identity politics is Mukherjee's wholehearted espousal of the 'immigrant' aesthetic. While I will later explain the specific ideological tensions and dialectics that underpin her characterization of her writing as 'immigrant' literature, I wish now to state that Mukherjee's migrations and displacements have fundamentally contributed to the evolution of her cultural and political critique. Like her characters who 'grow and change with the change in citizenships',⁷ Mukherjee has honed her multiple (dis)locations into a poetics of

⁵Bharati Mukherjee, 'American Dreamer', in *Race: An Anthology in the First Person*, ed. by Bart Schneider (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1997), p. 64.

⁶Mukherjee's second collection of short fiction, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, won the coveted National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1988, and her novel, *Jasmine*, was chosen as one of the best books of 1989 by the *New York Times Book Review*. In his review of *The Holder of the World*, K. Anthony Appiah observes that the novel has earned its kinship with *The Scarlet Letter* and that 'Nathaniel Hawthorne is a relative of [Mukherjee's]' (*New York Times Book Review*, 10 October 1993, p.7). Assertions like these have not only established Mukherjee's reputation as one of the leading voices in contemporary American literature, but have acknowledged her claim to a place in the mainstream of American fiction. Mukherjee is currently Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

⁷Geoffrey Hancock, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 59 (1987), pp. 30-44 (p. 32).

migrancy, integral to which is a conception of home as one that is highly unstable and ambivalent. The epigraph to this chapter is precisely significant for it points to a view of home as 'not home', where home is constructed on the site of cultural indeterminacy. This conception of home, terrifying in its indeterminacy yet empowering precisely because of this instability, has the potential to interrogate the static borders of national and cultural identity, and the binary opposition of 'us' and 'them' that such a formulation presupposes, to instead construct home as 'a constantly re-forming, transmogrifying "we"'.⁸

To this end, all her fictions construct as their central narrative the drama of transformation brought about by the crossing into North America (US, for the most part) of characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds and national origins. They are also from 'up and down the social ladder':⁹ economic and political refugees from Afghanistan, Uganda, Iraq and Bangladesh; illegal stowaways from Ludhiana; professionals from Bombay and Calcutta; mail-order brides from Nepal and domestic caregivers from Trinidad.

Despite the diversity of the cultural histories and experiences they bring with them, Mukherjee's characters all share the condition of migrancy as they explore new ways of belonging and becoming in America. They are America's new

⁸Bharati Mukherjee, 'American Dreamer', in *Race: An Anthology in the First Person*, ed. by Bart Schneider (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1997), p. 60.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 29.

'middlemen', as epitomized in the title of Mukherjee's 1988 collection of short fiction, the 'not quites',¹⁰ those caught in an uncompleted journey between the homes they have left and the new home in which they hope to arrive. Wanderers all, they live on the margins of the American nation and in the gaps of its memory. It is the epistemological tension of negotiating 'between two modes of knowledge',¹¹ of making and redefining home out of 'the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds',¹² that sustains all of Mukherjee's fictions. In this regard, it must be pointed out that the value of her writings depends not on her representation of migrancy as an emancipatory narrative of self-transformation, but on her ability to mine the tension that holds in balance her awareness of migrancy as a condition of loss on the one hand, and her acknowledgement of it as a space of productive ambivalence on the other. It is the innovation and energy with which Mukherjee's fictions chart resilient and enabling responses to diaspora in the face of its temporal and spatial dislocations that invests her identity as a writer and her writing with charged significance.

In this regard, it must be emphasized that while Mukherjee's texts examine the intricacies of constructing home across national and cultural boundaries,

¹⁰Bharati Mukherjee, 'The Lady from Lucknow', in *Darkness* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985), p. 19

¹¹Bharati Mukherjee, 'The Management of Grief', in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (Canada: Penguin, 1989), p. 189.

¹²Bharati Mukherjee, *The Holder of the World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 26.

it is re-formulations of identity involving female subjectivity that are emphasized in her writing. In other words, it is the idea of female subjectivity as a *transnational* construct that is foregrounded within the larger narrative of migrant experience.¹³

While Mukherjee performs an ideologically imperative function in foregrounding the experiences of America's marginal minority communities, one of the more controversial aspects of her representation of her India-born migrants stems from her deployment of the trajectory of self-empowerment from a home culture that Mukherjee herself, in interviews, has characterized as being 'oppressive, traditional, so caste-bound, class bound [and] genderist', to the promise of 'romantic reincarnation'¹⁴ held out by America.

It is such rhetoric that has invited hostile responses from Indian literary critics based in India to what they see as Mukherjee's 'total rejection or a ruthless questioning of [Indian] tradition' as a betrayal of her homeland and as providing the pretext for her full and unapologetic embracing of American citizenship.¹⁵ She has also drawn adverse criticism from post-colonial scholars in

¹³One reason that women are given prominence in her migrant narratives is Mukherjee's belief that Indian women are trained to be 'adaptable' wives and daughters. Their adaptability, says Mukherjee, works to their advantage when they come over to the US as migrants. (Interview with Michael Connell, p. 19).

¹⁴Connell, p. 11.

¹⁵Jasbir Jain, 'Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels', *Journal of Indian Writing in English* 13.2 (July 1985), pp. 12-19 (p. 13). See also, M. Sivaramakrishna, 'Bharati Mukherjee', in *Indian English Novelists*, ed. by Madhusudan Prasad (New Delhi: Sterling, 1982) pp. 71-86.

the US, many of whom sharing Mukherjee's middle-class background and her diasporic status are mindful of the ways in which the material bases -- of class, gender and ethnicity -- of the transformations she celebrates are elided in her narrativization of the migrant experience in America.¹⁶ Furthermore, Mukherjee's privileging of America as the geographical and ideological locus for personal and cultural metamorphosis has intensified the anxieties of other critics, who argue that her valorization of the US is either naive or complicit with neocolonialist values and practices, given the threat posed by American hegemony at this specific world historical juncture.¹⁷

While several of these criticisms of Mukherjee's work continue to give rise to discussion and debate, I suggest that her representations of Indian culture cannot be read as being wholly oppressive or inimical to the empowerment of her characters. In this respect, I would agree with Carmen Wickramagamage who argues that Mukherjee's novels gesture to the discovery that identities assumed in the

¹⁶ See, for example, the volume of essays edited by Nelson (1993), especially the articles by Anindyo Roy, Alpana Knippling, Debjani Banerjee and Gurleen Grewal. A common assertion of these critics is that the reinvention of Mukherjee's characters (as especially epitomized by the novel *Jasmine*) is inscribed through their cooptation by the dominant ideology of the American Dream -- 'the dream of an urban, cosmopolitan freedom' (p. 129) -- which, as these critics point out, is a 'white male myth' (p. xvi) not available to all 'Third World' subjects in the new world location. Also, these critics claim that Mukherjee's professed elitism -- she has herself proclaimed her 'top family, top school, top caste, top city' status in India ('Immigrant Writing', p. 28) -- pre-empts her ability to effectively represent the experiences of ordinary South Asian immigrants in America.

¹⁷In addition to Nelson (1993), see also, Anne Brewster, 'A Critique of Bharati Mukherjee's Neo-Nationalism', *SPAN*, 34-35 (1993), pp. 50-59; and Anu Aneja, '*Jasmine*, The Sweet Scent of Exile', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 28.1 (1993), pp. 72-80.

old homeland are provisional, and that a range of disabling or enabling responses to that discovery is made in diaspora. Wickramagamage further argues that Mukherjee's fictions demonstrate that both responses are enabled not so much by the new homeland of America but by the act of migration which makes possible the recovery of the suppressed heterogeneous models of identity already present in Hindu culture. In other words, it is the experience of migration that provides the context for unleashing the productive potential of Hindu conceptions of identity.¹⁸ If I may give a few, brief examples: it is the collective traditions behind Vedic ritual and Indian ways of 'managing grief' that provide the much needed anchor for the Canadian migrant, Shaila Bhave, who loses her husband and two young sons in a plane crash, in 'The Management of Grief'. Although her experiences in India suggest to Shaila that she cannot belong there, they have, nevertheless, been necessary to show her the way ahead. Similarly, the young widow of *Jasmine*, newly arrived as an illegal immigrant, draws upon the Hindu concepts of sati and reincarnation, and linking it with the coordinates of self-will and resilience, recasts herself as Kali, the Hindu image of the goddess as destroyer, to avenge herself of rape in America.

It becomes necessary at this juncture to briefly explicate Mukherjee's cultural politics in order to understand the changing configurations of her

¹⁸Carmen Wickramagamage, 'Relocation as a Positive Act: The Immigrant Experience in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels', *Diaspora*, 2.2 (1992), pp. 171-200 (p. 172).

negotiations with home from her location in diaspora. As Mukherjee's literary and political aesthetics cannot be characterized by broad generalizations, in light of the fact that they have evolved in the course of her career, the best way to chart this development is through her writings.

Her fiction, both on the internal evidence of her narratives and on her interviews and other public articulations at the time of their writing, can be divided into two distinct - the 'expatriate' and the 'immigrant' -- phases. Mukherjee attributes her representations of South Asian migrants in Canada to the workings of an 'expatriate' sensibility, in contrast to the 'immigrant' imagination at work in her later fiction.¹⁹

It is on this basis that her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975), can be separated from the rest of her work. Her first volume of short stories, *Darkness* (1985), negotiates the ideological divide between these periods; the four stories ('The World According to Hsu', 'Isolated Incidents', 'Courtly Vision' and 'Hindus') can be described as belonging to the early phase. These pieces, written while Mukherjee lived in Canada, are, in the words of the author, 'uneasy stories about expatriation' which depict her migrants as 'lost souls, put upon and pathetic', set 'adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong'.²⁰ In articulating the experience of deracination and alienation of her characters, as well as their

¹⁹Bharati Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness*, p. xiii.

²⁰Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness*, p. xiii, xiv.

homelessness which is as much psychological as it is physical, these stories employ 'a mordant and self-protective irony' that assured Mukherjee of 'detachment from, and superiority over'²¹ her characters. 'Everywhere in [these stories]', as one reviewer aptly remarks, 'are echoes of V.S. Naipaul'.²² Indeed, Mukherjee herself identifies Naipaul as a model for this phase of her literary life. From him, she says, she learned the benefits of irony in 'explor[ing] state-of-the-art expatriation'.²³

According to Mukherjee, it is her experience of racism in Canada that is primarily responsible for her cultivation of an attitude of 'expatriate aloofness' in her early fiction. In 'An Invisible Woman', Mukherjee writes about the victimization and harassment she was subjected to as a member of a 'visible minority' community in Toronto and Montreal. In the same essay, she describes her feeling of entrapment by the invisibility that was foisted on her by her visibility as a dark-skinned migrant in white-majority Canada.²⁴ Treated with neglect or condescension, in Canada, she asserts, she could never be a Canadian, only 'a smelly, dark, alien other'²⁵ who threatened the purity of white Canada. In describing

²¹Ibid., p. xiv.

²²Anita Desai, "'Outcasts': A Review of *Darkness*", in *London Magazine*, 25.9 & 10 (Dec. 1985-Jan. 1986), pp. 143-46 (p. 143).

²³Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness*, p. xiv.

²⁴Mukherjee, 'An Invisible Woman', *Saturday Night*, 96 (March 1981), pp. 36-40.

²⁵Connell et al, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', p. 12.

this 'expatriate' Canadian phase of her life in her memoirs, she talks of 'the absolute impossibility of ever having a home'.²⁶

In particular, Mukherjee identifies the racist configurations behind the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism²⁷ as having obstructed the attempts of 'visible' migrants, 'born in hot, moist continents like Asia',²⁸ from staking a claim to a home in the open, mainstream spaces of the Canadian nation. Mukherjee's rejection of multiculturalism is based on her argument that the terms of liberal multiculturalism are simply another way of marginalizing those not recognized as part of the dominant culture's discourse.²⁹

In 'The World According to Hsu', one of the stories written during her 'expatriate' phase, Mukherjee draws on her own lived experience of Canadian racism in the attempt to explore and record new ways of perceiving the problematic of cultural difference in the construction of a Canadian national imaginary. One of the story's two central characters is Ratna Clayton, a Calcutta-born

²⁶Bharati Mukherjee, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p. 287.

²⁷The policy of multiculturalism was officially introduced in Canada in 1971, under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau, as a necessary acknowledgement of the cultural and ethnic diversity of Canada: its aboriginal peoples, the anglophone and francophone heritage groups, the influx of other European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century, and the more recent arrivals of the 'visible minority' immigrants from non-European, mostly Asian, countries. For a further discussion of multiculturalism, see my chapter on Rohinton Mistry.

²⁸Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness*, p. xiv.

²⁹The crash of the Indian airliner, which killed all 300 of its passengers, mostly Canadians of South Asian ancestry, documented in Mukherjee's non-fiction text, *The Sorrow and the Terror*, stands as a chilling reminder, for Mukherjee, of Canada's failure at multiculturalism. What was pertinent to Mukherjee about the crash was that the Canadian government treated the event as an 'Indian tragedy'; the underlying assumption here being that Canadians of Indian origin are not 'real' Canadians.

journalist of Indian-Czech origins, whose perceptions about national and cultural identity are modelled quite closely on Mukherjee's own cultural thematics. Although Ratna considers herself a Canadian, not only in terms of her legal citizenship but as a 'cultural citizen',³⁰ she is aware that she will always be constructed as the racial and cultural other on account of her 'being half -- the dominant half -- Indian' (*D*, 36). Ratna knows that the colour of her skin, the 'visible' marker of her Indianness, will be enough to fix her identity as the national other: 'In Toronto, she was not Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was hell' (*D*, 33).

Ratna's husband, Graeme, the story's other central character, appears to have little or no insight into the complexities of the national and cultural dynamics that impinge on the life of his wife. Graeme, an English-Canadian professor of psychology at a Montreal university, is more concerned that Ratna will be persuaded to change her mind and agree to their relocation to Toronto, where he has been offered a promotion. The Claytons' holiday on an island, a former colony, off the coast of Africa creates the context for Mukherjee's exploration of new perspectives to cultural integration. The island itself, which is in the middle of a

³⁰I owe the use of this term to Katharyne Mitchell's essay, 'Transnational Subjects: Constituting the Cultural Citizen in the Era of Pacific Rim Capital', in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* ed. by Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 229). Here, Mitchell asserts that 'although immigrants may become legal citizens through a prescribed, state-regulated path, immigrants become *cultural* citizens only through a reflexive set of formative and locally constructed processes' (emphasis in original, p. 229).

coup and curfew, becomes the locus for her alternative conception of the Canadian national imaginary. More specifically, in the story Mukherjee falls back on the geological metaphor of plate tectonics to provoke an interrogation of paradigms of cultural integration that stress boundedness, continuity and fixity.³¹ 'Now', says Graeme, reading the article written by the story's eponymous plate tectonics theorist, 'Africa and Asia are colliding. India got smashed into Asia.... [T]his island is just part of the debris' (*D*, 46). The fact that the title of her story alludes to this new geological concept can be read as an indication of the extent of the significance that Mukherjee attaches to it.

Gillian Beer, in her article, 'Discourses of the Island', points out that 'the emphasis in plate tectonics is on fracture, drift, the lateral slide of plates against or alongside each other'. Beer suggests that 'the earth, rather than being thought of as one rigid, stable body with fixed continents and permanent ocean basins, is now considered to be broken into several large plates and a few smaller ones, which move very slowly and then collide with or jostle one another'.³² What I found to be highly significant about Beer's article is the link she makes between the theory of plate tectonics and Derrida's concept of epistemological 'ungrounding', or differance,

³¹Susan Spearey, 'Translating Worlds: A Study of Post-Colonial Migrant Writing, with Particular Reference to V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 1993), p. 45.

³²Gillian Beer, 'Discourses of the Island', in *Literature and Science as Modes of Expression*, ed. by Frederick Amrine (Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), pp. 1-27 (p. 8).

which I have defined in the introduction as the basis of a new form of cultural hermeneutics that calls attention to the intrinsic instability, the constantly-deferred and ever-shifting configurations of national and cultural identity.

In this sense, I see Mukherjee's use of the geological concept of plate tectonics in her story as an attempt to formulate a new way of talking about the construction of social reality that undermines the fixed and static borders of the Canadian multicultural mosaic. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that her text shares resonances with Derrida's argument that cultural meaning is intrinsically unstable, contingent and relational.

Significantly, how her characters respond to the island's heterogeneous composition distinguishes them from each other. Graeme, a white Canadian who embodies the liberal rhetoric of multiculturalism and its idea of tolerance toward racial and cultural diversity, busies himself on his vacation by 'training his Nikon on [the island's] chaotic greenery to extract from it some definitive order' (*D*, 30). Ordering and cataloguing the differences he sees around him, Graeme regards the island's exotic tropical beauty, its 'Ektachrome transparency', as 'command[ing] a commentary, every slide a mini-lecture' by which he would 'entertain and instruct' (*D*, 30) his friends back home about the world's diversity, its different 'genus and species' (*D*, 31). Graeme's idea of 'difference' here is one that is akin to 'pure otherness'. The fact that Graeme is attempting through his photography to fashion harmony out of the

'tropical confusion' is a metaphor, the text suggests, for his conception of cultures as totalities in themselves, as objects subject to order and control. This conception of culture undergirds the hegemonic underpinning of multiculturalism as a discourse that is based on an understanding of culture as a hermetically sealed and homogeneous whole. This perception of culture denies hybridity through its assertion of simple plurality and the existence of pre-given cultural forms.

While Graeme devotes himself 'to shap[ing] and reshap[ing] the tropical confusion' (*D*, 30) of the island's physical and cultural terrain, Ratna, in contrast, revels in the mixed, indeterminate, ethos of the island's cultural composition: the 'Peruvian-looking Africans' who to her appear more Gallic than the Montrealers back home (*D*, 38)); the 'gaudy paratroopers' patrolling the island; the 'black faces from the coast, ubiquitous sentinels among the copper-skinned, straw-hatted natives of the capital' (*D*, 37). Ratna discerns in what appears to her as the creolized cultural community of the island -- along with the Indian shops, the nineteenth-century Lutheran churches built by Swedish missionaries, the mission school run by Quebec priests, and the colonial relics of the King's palace and Band -- the signs of heterogeneity and difference that are not suppressed in the interests of forming the political and cultural community of the new nation. It is this intermittent, scattered and fragmented space of an island caught in the reflexive and formative processes of nation-making that offers Ratna the possibility, however 'momentary' and transitory,

of discovering the feeling of 'at-homeness' (*D*, 48), of belonging which eludes her in white-hegemonic Toronto.

It is this fluid and unstable configuration of the imagined national space posited in 'The World According to Hsu' that Mukherjee says she discovered in the US, to which she migrated in 1981, a crossing of borders which marked a change to her own personal perspective to immigration, and to her strategies in depicting the migrant condition in her fiction. This shift was possible, Mukherjee argues, on account of the US 'melting pot' model of cultural assimilation. Such a model moved her away from 'the aloofness of expatriation', fostered by the Canadian model of multiculturalism towards the 'exuberance of immigration'.³³ The 'melting pot', unlike the 'cultural mosaic', Mukherjee suggests, has the power both to dismantle 'Old World concepts of a fixed, exclusivist national identity'³⁴ and to transform alienation and victimization into productive ambivalences. In other words, while Canada was simply a white-majority nation, the US was for her a multi-ethnic nation of minorities. The US, thus, in terms of what Jonathan Raban, in accordance with Mukherjee's own vision, calls the

³³Bharati Mukherjee, 'Introduction' to *Darkness*, p. xv.

³⁴Bharati Mukherjee, 'American Dreamer', in *Race: An Anthology in the First Person*, ed. by Bart Schneider (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1997), p. 67. By 'Old World', Mukherjee refers us not only to Canada but also to the rigid and stratified societies of India and England.

‘restlessness and fluidity’³⁵ at the heart of its landscape, was able to offer the ‘metaphors and symbolic location’³⁶ for thinking about identity and migrancy.

Setting out her revised political and literary aesthetics in the introduction to *Darkness*, Mukherjee describes her new ‘immigrant’ fictions as ‘stories of broken identities and discarded languages’ that, nevertheless, represent her migrants as characters fired by the ‘will to bond [themselves] to a new community’.³⁷ Significantly, it is this ‘will to bond’ to a new home that distinguishes Mukherjee’s ‘immigrant’ from her ‘expatriate’. While both sets of figures have to face the ‘ever-present fear of failure and betrayal’, there is a crucial difference in the cultural response of each of these groups as they struggle to survive the trauma of their displacement. In resisting the new in the interests of ‘maintaining the old order of values in a new locale’, Mukherjee’s ‘expatriate’ displays what Edouard Glissant terms the impulse toward ‘reversion’, that is, ‘the obsession with a single origin’. According to Glissant, the expatriate does not wish to alter the absolute state of being. To ‘revert’, thus, is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact. ‘Reversion’, argues Glissant, ‘will be recommended by those who favour single origins’.³⁸ Owing to his or her separation from the ‘single’ home of

³⁵Jonathan Raban, ‘A Review of *The Middleman and Other Stories*’, *New York Times Book Review*, 19 June 1988, pp. 1 + 22-23 (p. 23).

³⁶Connell et al, ‘Interview with Bharati Mukherjee’, p. 19.

³⁷Bharati Mukherjee, ‘Introduction’ to *Darkness*, p. xv.

³⁸Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), p. 16.

identification, Mukherjee's 'expatriate' is largely a creature of loss, living a life of cultural depletion and estrangement.

On the other hand, Mukherjee's 'immigrant' is willing to be changed 'into something new, into a new set of possibilities'.³⁹ If, as Glissant argues, 'assimilation' is the opposite of 'reversion', then Mukherjee's 'immigrant' is open to assimilation. However, as I will attempt to demonstrate later, the understanding of assimilation as a cultural strategy that compensates for the loss of one home by the adoption of another is not pursued by Mukherjee as a trajectory that leaves unproblematized the meaning of home itself. Drawn to the narrative of assimilation, her 'immigrant' is thus prepared to discard nostalgia, which William Safran and Vijay Mishra, the latter with specific reference to the Indian diaspora, have identified as being a salient feature of the old diaspora. As Mukherjee's 'immigrant' heroine, Jasmine, asserts: 'I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest, was to be a coward'.⁴⁰ The 'immigrant', thus, is ready to embrace the challenge of constructing alternative narratives of home and with it the consequences, both the gains as well as the risks and losses, that accompany the breaking of old patterns and ways. Another character describes this transition in status from 'expatriate' to 'immigrant' in these terms: 'He had chosen to settle in the US. He was not one for

³⁹Edouard Glissant, p. 14.

⁴⁰Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1989), p. 165.

nostalgia; he was not an expatriate but a patriot',⁴¹ with the word 'patriot' itself, in this context, attesting to the immigrant's active engagement with the space and temporality he now inhabits. Crucially, as I will show later, Mukherjee encodes the immigrant's discarding of nostalgia as a revolt not against India or the past, but as a rejection of the cultural narratives that fix him or her against that past.

It is this ideological refusal to write the narrative of exile and expatriation, this intense preoccupation with creating new certainties out of loss, that constitutes the psychology of Mukherjee's 'immigrant' and her own reworked cultural poetics. Distancing herself from Naipaul's stance of aesthetic and personal homelessness, she indicates that she is more concerned with opening up the migrant's location between cultures and nations to creative possibilities.

In a front-page article written in 1988 for the *New York Times Book Review*, Mukherjee systematically articulates for the first time the features of the new America that her writings have helped to inaugurate. This new America, she argues, is constructed out of the narratives of a group of people never before written about in American literature, namely 'the new Americans from non-traditional immigrant countries',⁴² who, in the words of one of her characters, are 'a new breed testing new feelings in new battlegrounds'.⁴³ The use of the word

⁴¹Bharati Mukherjee, 'Nostalgia', in *Darkness*, p. 83.

⁴²Bharati Mukherjee, 'Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!', *New York Times Book Review*, 28 August 1988, pp. 1 + 28-29.

⁴³ Bharati Mukherjee, 'Visitors', in *Darkness*, p. 149.

'battleground' is here significant for it points to Mukherjee's acknowledgement of the difficulties of constructing a national and cultural identity within the context of the all-inclusive 'melting pot'.⁴⁴

In this sense, Mukherjee is only too aware of the dangers lurking behind the received idea of the American 'melting pot' in which different nationalities and ethnicities are conceived as pulling together to create a single, homogeneous, American identity. Hence, hers is not an uncritical acceptance of the ideology of the white-dominant American nation/state. This refusal to acquiesce to the hegemonic white nation is reflected in her description of herself as 'an American writer, in the American mainstream trying to extend it'.⁴⁵ In this sense, Mukherjee's project of reconfiguring an American national identity is founded on the very processes that motivate her interrogation of the concept of a fixed and homogeneous Indian national and cultural identity. Thus, it needs to be pointed out that in claiming an American national identity, and in refusing a hyphenated designation as an Asian-American, Mukherjee has not allowed herself to be co-opted by the US melting-pot, but is instead participating in a political and ideological move that refuses to categorize the political and cultural landscape of America in Manichean terms, that is, in terms of dominant and

⁴⁴The word 'melting' goes as far back as the eighteenth century when St. Jean de Crevecour wrote about the American as 'the new man', being 'melted into a new race of men'. The metaphor of the 'melting pot' is probably best known from the play, 'The Melting Pot', by the Jewish writer Israel Zangwill, who described America as a 'melting pot' in which nationalities and ethnic groups would fuse into one. National features and ethnic distinctions should disappear and the intention was to create a new, American, one.

⁴⁵Ameena Meer, 'Bharati Mukherjee', *BOMB* 29 (1989), pp. 18 - 29 (p.26).

minority cultures, of centre and periphery. To resist the workings of this binary and the marginalizing strategies of the dominant culture, Mukherjee reconceptualizes melting-pot assimilation as something 'genetic' rather than 'hyphenated'.⁴⁶ More significantly, such a view also demands constant renegotiations with diversity and difference in order to enable the formulation of a heterogeneous American national-cultural identity. Thus, far from being a simple cataloguing of difference or diversity, Mukherjee's reconceptualization of the melting pot shares resonances with what Homi Bhabha has called a 'third space' within which other elements encounter and transform one another. 'Such negotiation', as Bhabha clarifies, 'is neither assimilation nor collaboration',⁴⁷ but offers the possibility of the movement of meaning within the dominant culture. Here, 'the analytic of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation -- not simply to disturb the rationale of discrimination'.⁴⁸

In reconceptualizing the dialectics of national and cultural identity production, Mukherjee implies that while America changes all those who make their home in it, America itself is being transformed: 'I'm saying we haven't come to accommodate or to mimic; we have changed ourselves, but we have also come to

⁴⁶Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 222.

⁴⁷Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's In-Between', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 53-60 (p.58).

⁴⁸Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 292-320 (p. 312).

change you'.⁴⁹ In this way, just as America's 'melting pot' transforms her 'non-traditional' migrants culturally, Mukherjee maintains that dominant white American culture, too, is being reconfigured by the different cultures and histories that enter it. As a way of describing the space of hybrid discourse created by this two-way cultural and ideological interaction, Mukherjee says she prefers the use of the term 'fusion'⁵⁰ over that of 'assimilation'.

Accordingly, in a 1991 essay which reiterates many of the principal preoccupations of the 1988 article, Mukherjee emphasizes that her literary agenda is to redefine the meaning of America through cultural and ideological 'mongrelization' (a term she borrows from Rushdie), an aesthetic which is aimed at foregrounding the 'sense of the interpenetration of all things'.⁵¹ Thus, the form of American national and cultural identification that Mukherjee proposes is not uncritically celebrated as the merely pluralistic 'politics of difference' that structures, for instance, the Canadian discourse of national and cultural identity. Instead, Mukherjee's reconceptualized 'melting pot' offers a paradigm in which the different cultures that enter it are engaged in a dialectical relationship that blurs and blends the boundaries between nations and cultures.

⁴⁹Maya Jaggi, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', *Bazaar: South Asian Arts Magazine*, 13.8 (1990), p. 9.

⁵⁰Maya Jaggi, p. 9.

⁵¹Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman', in *The Writer in Her Work* (Vol. 2), ed. by Janet Sternburg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), pp. 33-38 (p. 34).

Mukherjee's formulation of a 'mongrelized' melting pot is articulated powerfully in the story 'Orbiting',⁵² in which she uses a quintessentially 'American' event like Thanksgiving 'to redefine the nature of *American* and what makes an American'.⁵³ A yearly ritual that brings together all members of the deMarco family, this year's Thanksgiving gives rise to added anxiety for Renata as she is unsure if her family, whom she considers 'very American' (*M*, 58) in their cultural values and attitudes, is going to approve of her new boyfriend Roashan, a political refugee from the civil war in Afghanistan who has been in the US for only three months. Of the members of the protagonist's family who congregate in her New York apartment, there is Renata herself, a third-generation American of mixed Italian-Spanish ancestry; her sister, Carla, and her husband, Brent Schwartzendruber, from an Amish community in Iowa; Renata's father is a second-generation American of North Italian origins; her mother is a Spanish migrant, a 'Calabrian born and raised there' (*M*, 58).

By bringing together these characters and their confusing collage of voices, accents, histories and experiences, the text constructs a linguistic and cultural space in which polyphony is privileged over homogeneity. Significantly, it is Roashan, the newest arrival to this 'very American' family, who is put in charge of carving the turkey, signalling his acceptance into the family and, by extension,

⁵²This story is from the collection, *The Middleman and other Stories*. Page references are cited in the text.

⁵³Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman', p. 35 (emphasis in original).

into the national space. The fact that it is Roashan who carves the turkey, 'swiftly, confidently' (*M*, 74), with his Afghan dagger, suggests the symbolic power and potential of the non-white migrant to reconfigure the dominant narrative of the nation/state. Watching him rise to the challenge of carving the turkey and surprised at the manner in which Roashan, despite his vulnerability as the only stranger in their midst, impresses her family by remaining true to himself, his history and his sense of his own difference, Renata's understanding of what constitutes Americanness undergoes a reformulation; her adoption of the more acceptable-sounding name of Rindi is only one of several ways in which she adheres to the dominant narrative of American culture. Indeed, this text, like Mukherjee's oeuvre as a whole, generates a reading that the migrant is the figure through which the nation's cultural identity continues to be written. But it is not an assimilation, as I pointed out earlier, that entails an erasure of the migrant's cultural history. The point made by the text, that the process of 'Americanization' is not tantamount to full assimilation into the American centre, ties in with my paraphrasing of Bhabha's assertion that 'to be Americanized is *emphatically* not to be American'.⁵⁴ In other words, being Americanized is, as James Clifford argues, to be American *differently*.⁵⁵ By so doing, Mukherjee positions the migrant in a dialogic space that

⁵⁴Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), pp.125-33.

⁵⁵James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994), pp. 301-38 (p. 312).

is not framed within a mutually exclusive, binary opposition between assimilation within or exclusion from the discourse of national identity. Instead, it is a space that undoes the 'stable' boundaries between the dominant narrative of Americanness and the other other cultural narratives that enter it.

Crucially, Mukherjee also demonstrates the indelibility of Roashan's history by inscribing it on his body; 'the scars that bubble against his dark skin, scars like lightning flashes under his thick black hair' (*M*, 72) function as a sign of his origins in another space, of his formation by another history. These lumps and scars, the violent repercussions of colonial and post-colonial histories, testify to Mukherjee's construction of the migrant's body as a palimpsest of histories that forces a reconfiguration of the dominant narrative of American cultural and national identity. '[I]nstead of melting and blending', the scars, like Ro's arms and legs, 'stick out in the Afghan way' (*M*, 75) to pose a challenge to the linear and homogeneous narrative inherent to the discourse of national identity. Crucially, these scars, the text suggests, cannot be erased, even by the power and 'romance' of the American dream of self-reinvention.

In the short story, 'Angela', Mukherjee similarly politicizes the dismembered body of her eponymous protagonist as the locus of interrogation of a stable and continuous American national and cultural identity. As a child, Angela was left for dead, her nipples cut off by bayonet-wielding soldiers during the Bangladeshi war of

independence from Pakistan in 1971. Now a high school student, renamed and raised as a Catholic by her white American foster family in Iowa, the former Muslim orphan from Dhaka must negotiate between her various temporal and spatial dislocations to construct a viable narrative of home in America. 'the name that I was born with is lost to me, the past is lost to me... I can't remember any of it. The rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies, the soldiers. Nothing' (*D*, 8), she says, willing herself to forget the violence and atrocities of her past in the bid to reinvent a new narrative of belonging in America. This explains why, although Angela is drawn to the promise of security -- 'domesticity...[p]hantom duplexes, babies tucked tight into cribs, dogs running playfully off with the barbecued steak' (*D*, 14) -- contained in the proposal of marriage by 'her old-fashioned suitor', the Goan immigrant Dr Menezies, she is compelled to reject him in so far as he is a reminder of her own origins in 'the same subcontinent of hunger and misery' (*D*, 2). However, while Angela is 'forced to assimilate' (*D*, 12), drawn towards the dominant narrative of Americanness as a resolution to the painful disruptions in her life, the 'lumpy scars' (*D*, 13) inscribed on her body as a signifier of her cultural identity exist as a reminder, the text suggests, of the fact that the 'American' body politic, like the migrant's own body, is a palimpsestic construction, and not built upon a transcendence or obliteration of other national and cultural histories.

Like Roashan's 'nicked, scarred, burned body' (*M*, 74) that symbolically challenges Renata's idea of what constitutes a 'very American' identity, the indelible 'lumps' on Angela's body that Angela cannot deny or suppress as part of a previous history, suggest that the migrant's sense of temporal and spatial difference is always present as a trace, in the Derridean sense, to force a problematizing of the hegemonic notion of American national and cultural identity as homogeneous or pre-given. I will later extend these observations on Mukherjee's deployment of the materiality of the body as the transnational site for the inscription and representation of cultural identity, one in which hegemonic discourses of American and Indian identity collide and coalesce through the body of her Indian migrant woman.

I have argued above that Mukherjee's embrace of the 'immigrant' aesthetic has a direct bearing on how she defines herself and her writings. In relation to this, while Mukherjee's writings and complicated poetics as a result of her multiple (dis)locations are almost invariably described by critics as revealing a complex perspective that is 'simultaneously shaped by her ethnicity, postcoloniality, gender and migrancy',⁵⁶ Mukherjee has resisted the classification of herself or her writings as 'post-colonial'. The term 'post-colonial', she argues, maintains the Eurocentric configurations of the centre/periphery paradigm, reinforcing the notion of the 'post-colonial' writer as a 'person stranded on the outer shores of the collapsed British

⁵⁶Emmanuel Nelson, 'Introduction', in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. x.

Empire'.⁵⁷ Mukherjee insists that she is not writing as the post-colonial or postindependence subject displaced in Britain as, for instance, Rushdie is, who she says is 'fueled primarily by the desire to create a new mythology of Indian nationhood after the Raj's brutalization of Indian culture'.⁵⁸ Instead, she insists that she is writing as an American 'immigrant' attempting to challenge and displace the dominant narrative of the nation. In another important essay, she reinforces her assertion that she is 'not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate', but 'an immigrant writer whose investment is in the American reality, not the Indian'.⁵⁹

What Mukherjee's position sets out to underscore by eschewing the post-colonial label, I contend, is not so much the rejection of the anti-colonialist imperative -- for it cannot be disputed that Mukherjee's writings are committed to deconstructing the cultural, linguistic and racial categories which enabled the formulation and subsequent propagation of imperialist ideologies -- but to gesture towards the need to provide new contexts for post-colonial writing and identities. For central to Mukherjee's rejection of the 'post-colonial' label is the view that her alternative narratives of national identity are driven not by the trajectory of anti-imperial nationalism, but by the need to create a national mythology for her new

⁵⁷Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie, 'Holders of the World: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', in *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 1.1 (1997), <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v1i1/bharat.htm>, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁹Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman', p. 24.

home of America; and by ‘mythology’, she means opening up the narrative of national and cultural identity to its ‘potential for fluidity’.⁶⁰

While Mukherjee's discomfort over the use of the term ‘post-colonial’ is understandable in the light of the dialectics of loss which she associates with that term, her argument, vis-a-vis Rushdie's literary preoccupations, inadvertently sets up a binary between the narratives of culture and history of the new and the old homelands, implying the existence of stable boundaries between national and cultural narratives. For instance, Rushdie, as I will go on to elaborate in the next chapter, although centrally concerned with constructing a new narrative of Indian nationhood, as rightfully acknowledged by Mukherjee, is *also* committed to reconfiguring the dominant national and cultural narrative for Britain. Furthermore, even in the British context, the writer's relationship to Britain might well be first a relationship to a nation/state, and not necessarily, as Mukherjee implies, always to an imperial presence.

However, although Mukherjee's justification of the label ‘post-colonial’ in considering Rushdie's position misjudges the overall emphasis of his literary project, she is right in pointing to the potential divergence between the primary concerns of the ‘post-colonial’ writer and the ‘immigrant’ writer. For, it must be pointed out that while the discursive and epistemological structures of imperialism and the colonizing gaze shape the writing of both, there are important differences in the way they

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 3.

negotiate their writings in relation to empire and nation. Simon Gikandi, writing in the chapter entitled 'Beyond Empire and Nation: Writing Identity After Colonialism' of his book *Maps of Englishness*, suggests that the space of the nation and the space of the empire, while difficult to differentiate, cannot be characterized as being identical. Gikandi suggests that post-colonial writers and intellectuals who have experienced the disenchantments of nationalism have sought empowerment, both for themselves and the nation, by endorsing the ideology of the migrant and rejecting the dogmatic focus on discrete *national* dynamics and cartography through locating themselves and their writing in a liminal space between nations that 'comes against the weight of imperial history and its institutions, including the idea of the nation itself'.⁶¹ This 'ideal place' beyond given (national) time and space that Gikandi formulates ties in with my own conception of diaspora as a heterogeneous, transnational, space between cultures and histories that opens up new possibilities of narratives and identities. My positioning of Mukherjee, and the other writers under examination in this study, is premised on my contention that writers in diaspora experience and envision the nation differently from 'post-colonial' writers engaged in the literary or political nationalism of the former colony

⁶¹Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia, 1996), pp. 195-96.

and who call for the construction of anti-colonial identities from within the boundaries of a stable conception of national culture.⁶²

It is in this light that one must read Mukherjee's resistance to being categorized as a 'post-colonial'. By electing instead to adopt the immigrant aesthetic, Mukherjee is signalling her rejection of the traditional narratives of the modern nation/state. More specifically, the figure of the migrant performs an ideologically imperative function by destabilizing established boundaries and creating a space through/in which new forms of belonging can be elaborated. In this sense, the figure of the 'immigrant' occupies a space of paradigmatic significance in her oeuvre. By disrupting America's sense of its secure borders and its apprehension of itself as unified and homogeneous, the immigrant resists hegemony and reconfigures the very concept of home and nation.

Accordingly, Mukherjee articulates her migrant aesthetics in terms of the dynamics of 'unhousement' and 'rehousement':

I write about what obsesses me -- the re-housement of individuals and of whole peoples....Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured. Re-housement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self.⁶³

⁶²I have here in mind the early work of writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa' Thiongo.

⁶³Geoff Hancock, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 59 (1987), pp. 30-44 (pp. 38-39).

Mukherjee's choice of terminology in elucidating her poetics of migrancy is crucial. Here, she describes migration as the process of being 'unhoused' from one narrative of cultural identity and being 'rehoused' in another. Her choice of the term 'house' is significant, for it points to a dismantling of the whole framework of national culture and identity traditionally erected on and sustained by the naturalizing tendencies of the word 'home' (as also operative in the terms 'homeland' and 'home-country'). The term 'home' reinforces the idea of culture as a rooted body that grows, lives and dies in its native soil and territory, thereby implicating the individual in an ostensibly natural relationship with itself. In contrast, the semantics of 'house' lends itself more readily to highlighting the constructed and shifting nature of cultural identities. Unlike fixed and 'rooted' entities, cultural identities can -- in the manner of 'houses' -- be 'rehoused', rerouted, constructed anew. Mukherjee's aim in rejecting 'roots' as the grounding principle of cultural identity-construction is to destabilize the settled basis for national identity formation and to stage the 'routes' of culture across stable geopolitical and cultural boundaries. The fact that India continues to feature predominantly in her writings suggests that Mukherjee's expressed allegiance to an American identity is not simply an issue with personal implications but also a strategic and political one. For the presence of the Indian homeland always exists in a dialogic and supplementary relationship with the new home of America, opening up alternative

ways of thinking about an American national and cultural identity that resist stable, 'nation-centred', dominant identities.

Crucially, the very same processes that construct the American nation as a space marked by heterogeneity and difference, also inform Mukherjee's perception of national and cultural identity construction in India, as I will shortly demonstrate with particular reference to her novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*. Thus, neither the nations of India nor America exist as unchanging ontological entities, but as categories subject to change and reinvention.

* * *

Having attempted in the foregoing section to provide a context to position and approach Mukherjee's writings in accordance with the parameters set by this thesis, I wish now to briefly explain my choice of texts for fuller examination in the following pages. My intention to discuss Mukherjee's first work of fiction, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), is premised on the grounds that it is the only text in Mukherjee's oeuvre where attention is drawn to the processes of nation construction in India. What to me is of specifically significant interest about this novel is that it explores ideas about national and cultural identity construction against the backdrop of the returning migrant.

Mukherjee's location in the hybrid, transnational, space of diaspora has clearly influenced the ideological content of this first novel. Written in Canada in the late sixties, and published in the early seventies when Canada was experiencing the first 'visible effects of racism'⁶⁴ and when India was still feeling the immediate after-effects of the Naxalite uprising, the text reveals the author's heightened awareness of the need to formulate new, more fluid, paradigms for the definition of national and cultural identity. While if what the Indian migrant in Canada considers 'home' is unwilling to accept her as an embodiment of its culture because of the way in which the dominant culture is constructed as white, 'the decolonized nation as the place of ultimate refuge and gratification, the destination of a narrative retour'⁶⁵ is represented as another myth of origins to which the migrant can never belong.

By deploying such a framework for narrativizing national identity, the text also destabilizes the binary distinction between home and exile built on the nostalgia and remembered unity so often invoked by the first generation of post-colonial nationalists.⁶⁶ Instead of representing home as a space that can counter deracination, Mukherjee conjures the violent contradictions of nation-making in

⁶⁴Connell et al, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', *Iowa Review*, 20.3 (1990), pp. 7-32 (p. 11). Mukherjee goes on, in the same interview, to attribute this to the fact that 'five thousand Ugandan Asians, with British passports, were allowed into Canada as a favor...to the British government. Immediately, there was a backlash against what they called the 'visible minority'. Even though these people were not on welfare, were in fact professionals and businesspeople, their presence created an atmosphere of hostility into which the person on the street was drawn....Then it ballooned into very vicious physical harassment by 1977, 1978' (pp. 11-12).

⁶⁵Gikandi, p. 196.

⁶⁶The texts of the Négritude movement provide one good example.

order to debunk the pervasive myths of homogeneity, continuity and unified history traditionally associated with the discourse of home. In so doing, the novel asks if the return 'home' after the crossing of boundaries -- 'after seven years in another country, a husband, a new blue passport'⁶⁷ -- can ever be simple, or if it is even tenable in the first place, given that home, as a mental construct, is often always-already subverted by the choice to leave.

Furthermore, one gets the impression that the text also aims to dismantle a dominant image that prevailed in representations of the subcontinent through the sixties and early seventies -- the stereotypical image of India as a timeless and unchanging essence and a site of spirituality that was propagated through celebrities like the Beatles and groups like the Hari Rama Hare Krishna in Britain and the US. In addition, Mukherjee's choice of a nation in the nightmare grip of social, economic and political unrest, that is, in the very processes of its (re)constitution, stands in marked contrast to representations of India repeatedly evoked in the literature of imperialism where order and stability prevail in a unified and cohesive spatio-temporal dimension. Mukherjee herself has stated that her novel was consciously intended as a 'native' rewriting of the imperialist philosophy underlying the 'Anglo-Indian literary conventions' of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.⁶⁸ However,

⁶⁷Bharati Mukherjee, *The Tiger's Daughter* (Australia: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 25. First published by Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1971. All further references to this edition will be cited in the text after the abbreviated title, *TD*.

⁶⁸Hancock, 'An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee', p. 38.

The Tiger's Daughter reveals, under scrutiny, the difficulties of characterizing 'native' itself as an unproblematic category, written over as it is, in the case of this author, by an Anglicized upbringing in British-ruled India, early schooling in England and Switzerland and a colonial education in a missionary school in Calcutta.

While my examination of *The Tiger's Daughter* is based on the ways in which Mukherjee's unique position as an insider-outsider provides a privileged vantage point through which to engage with issues of homeland and nation, my analysis of 'A Wife's Story' is based on the contention that Mukherjee's challenge to normative understandings of national and cultural identity-construction is launched primarily through the figure of the migrant. For this reason, I have pinpointed 'A Wife's Story' as a text which foregrounds the ways in which normative definitions of the Indian woman, inscribed by Indian nationalist and cultural narratives, collide with dominant constructions of the Indian woman in America. The power of these narratives, whether Indian or American, to retain the homogeneity of their discourse is continually undermined by the migrant in her complex negotiations with her culture and her history. As Mukherjee's protagonist struggles to reconcile her Indian ethnicity within the matrix of an American national and cultural identity, she interrogates, in the process, the hegemonic content of both American and Indian cultural narratives.

Mukherjee is undoubtedly more experimental with the form and structure of the novel in her later works. *The Holder of the World* (1993) constructs national history as a complex network of narratives that criss-cross various spatial and temporal zones. Here, 17th century Puritan New England, Old World England, Mughal India, and present-day America conjoin and coalesce to resist the stable and linear narrative for assuming a national identity. While the text is complex enough to be amenable to multiple readings, I nevertheless contend that here, as in her most recent work, there is a distinct valorization of the American geo-political space over the Indian nation, in terms of the more American narrative voice and the use of white American protagonists.

Mukherjee herself has described her writing as ‘moving in degrees of acculturation’.⁶⁹ Her most recent work of fiction, *Leave It To Me* (1997), is centrally concerned with refracting the social, cultural and political space of the America nation through the memories of the ‘flower-power’ generation of hippies and the scarred inheritors of the Vietnam War. Its focus on American street culture of the nineties, its confident use of a more American idiom and prose, all serve to ideologically signal Mukherjee's intense engagement with issues concerning the American nation. Although she remains committed in this work to the ideological task of foregrounding the catachrestic nature of American identity, her latest novel is

⁶⁹Michael Connell, *et al*, ‘An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee’, p.28.

predominantly concerned with plotting a relationship between her characters as subjects within an American nation. Thus, the novel loses the sort of tensions and ambivalences that her early narratives reveal in the attempt to grapple with the meaning of home and belonging.

The Tiger's Daughter

In her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), Mukherjee uses the return to India of her nostalgic and 'homesick' Bengali Brahmin heroine as the context for undermining national myths of origins and foundations. In other words, the migrant's return 'to recover her roots'⁷⁰ and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian is not equated uncritically with an unexamined sense of what being 'Indian' means. Instead, Mukherjee uses the migrant's moment of return to elaborate a much more complex and mediated understanding of national and cultural identity. The intention to fracture any notion of a homogeneous or unified India is intensified by using as the novel's setting a particularly volatile juncture of Indian history, a point to which I will return shortly.

⁷⁰Maya Manju Sharma, 'The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant', in *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Emmanuel Nelson (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 3-23 (p.15).

Twenty-two-year-old Tara Banerjee Cartwright, an observant, vulnerable and ‘sensitive person, sensitive especially to places’ (*TD*, 12),⁷¹ returns to India for a much-anticipated reunion with her family ‘after seven years abroad...that had swept her from Calcutta to Poughkeepsie, and Madison, and finally to...Columbia’ (*TD*, 33). If to ward off the ‘despair’ and ‘homesickness’ (*TD*, 13) of her expatriation in America, she had eaten ‘curried hamburger’, ‘burned incense sent from home’ and hung colourful silk scarves ‘to make [her] apartment more “Indian”’ (*TD*, 34), Tara discovers that the return to her ‘longed-for Camac Street, where she had grown up’ (*TD*, 10) fails to engender the envisioned sense of familiarity and belonging. No sooner has she returned to what used to be her habitus than she is struck by its strangeness and her feeling of estrangement from it. In fact, as the narrative unfolds, home as the destination of a narrative retour not only fails to correspond with the idyllic memory of childhood and adolescent wholeness that had sustained her in her ‘lonely room at Vassar’ (*TD*, 13); home has turned menacing enough to ‘desecrate her shrine of nostalgia’ (*TD*, 26). Indeed, Tara discovers that she is no more ‘at home’ in the home of her birth than she was in a malevolent and racist New York, where ‘girls like her...were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings’ (*TD*, 34).

⁷¹Mukherjee has said that Tara had to be sensitive, ‘porous and passive in order to record the slightest tremors in her culture. She had to react rather than act’ (Hancock, ‘An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee’, p.41).

In keeping with the text's intention to destabilize Tara's nostalgia which is built around an image of India which preserves an unaltered existence, images of dereliction, change and decay dominate the landscape of *The Tiger's Daughter*. The use of these images to narrativize home as the place of return and refuge takes the form of Tara's response to India from the very outset of her arrival. Greeted by her 'Bombay relatives', who have come to meet her with 'garlands and sweetmeats to put her at ease' (*TD*, 17), Tara is assailed instead by a feeling of unease. As her relatives fuss over her in Bengali and call her by her childhood nickname, Tara's feeling of disquiet intensifies: 'She had not remembered the Bombay relatives' nickname for her. No one had called her Tultul in years.... It was difficult to listen to these strangers' (*TD*, 17). Anxious to spend as little time with them as possible, she insists on taking the train alone to Calcutta, disrupting earlier plans. Left with no choice but to give in to her stubborn demand, the relatives 'attributed Tara's improprieties to her seven years in America' (*TD*, 19).

While being driven through the streets of Bombay, Tara observes the near-decrepit surroundings, the 'run-down and crowded' apartment blocks that she passes by. Yet, seven years earlier, she had 'admired the houses on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable ... now their shabbiness appalled her' (*TD*, 18). Everywhere, the inventory of decay bears witness, the text suggests, to the flux and change taking

place in the heart of a country in which Tara had expected to find life at its most constant, as the stable embodiment of her identity.

The two-day train journey across the subcontinent, from Bombay to Calcutta, provides another occasion for Tara to assess, with steadily increasing horror, both the corrosive squalor and decay of her home country, and her own failed expectations of this return home to suture over the gaps and dislocations of her American experience:

For years she had dreamed of this return to India. She had believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could just return home to Calcutta. But so far the return had brought only wounds. First the corrosive hours on Marine Drive, then the deformed beggars in the railway station, and now the inexorable train ride steadily undid what strength she had held in reserve. (*TD*, 25)

The two male passengers with whom she shares her compartment -- the Marwari and the Nepali -- further set the stage for undermining Tara's confidence in her identity. For now though, Tara regards them in a way that underscores her own assurance about the solidity and strength of her Indian identity on account of her Bengali origins: 'Her Bombay aunt would have said all Marwaris are ugly, frugal and vulgar, and all Nepalis are lecherous. Tara hoped she had a greater sense of justice toward non-Bengalis. But the gentlemen in the compartment simply did not interest her. The Marwari was indeed very ugly and tiny and insolent...Both men, Tara decided, could effortlessly ruin her journey to Calcutta' (*TD*, 20). The undercurrent of hostility

between the two men as they vie for the attentions of their 'foreign-returned' (*TD*, 23) travelling companion foreshadows the competing claims that will be made later on in the narrative on Tara's confidence in the unassailability of Calcutta as a place in which she can locate and secure her identity as an 'Indian', more specifically as 'a Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin, the great-granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee' (*TD*, 10).

Arriving in Calcutta, Tara is shocked by her failure to recognize the birth city she had imagined she knew so well. If Bombay station had looked 'more like a hospital...[with] its so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks' (*TD*, 19), the 'squalor' of Calcutta's Howrah Station, dense with the noise and presence of coolies and vendors and beggars, first '[takes] Tara by surprise', then fills her with 'outrage' and 'confusion' (*TD*, 27). Surrounded by the crowds and her throng of relatives, 'who had come to the railway station in two small delivery trucks' (*TD*, 28), Tara is overcome by fear and a sense of feeling 'completely alone'. Nothing seems familiar to her: 'For a moment she thought she was going mad...Calcutta had already begun to exert its darkness over her, she thought' (*TD*, 28, 30). The only person who seems 'real' to her is her father, the 'Bengal Tiger', and even then the text's ironic undercurrent calls attention to the illusionary nature of Tara's quest to seek order in the face of change and confusion: 'In its ceaseless effort to escape the present, [Tara's] familiar part of Calcutta had created of the Bengal Tiger its key to a more peaceful world' (*TD*, 29).

In Calcutta, Tara finds that the image of the city she had preserved in her memory no longer corresponds to the city she now experiences. This disjuncture takes on literal significance, for instance, when Tara is taken to tea at Kapoor's Restaurant, only to find out that this 'symbol of modern India' had replaced the tea-shops she used to frequent before, 'tea shops like Arioli's and Chandler's where straw-hatted European ladies discussed the natives and the beastly weather over tea and cakes' (*TD*, 83).

In the presence of family and friends, Tara finds herself 'quite cut off', unable to connect with those around her. Although she had often reminisced in America about performing prayers with her mother, she finds, back home, that she cannot remember the next step of the ritual in the prayers she performs: 'It was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre' (*TD*, 51).

Furthermore, what she considers sensible, seems silly, or foreign, to others. It is this 'foreignness', of which Tara is made acutely conscious, that makes a wreckage of local customs and offends local sensibilities. Her well-intentioned attempts to offer advice are met with a violent rebuke from her aunt Jharna, who interprets Tara's suggestion that her handicapped daughter try special shoes as being both supercilious and disdainful of Indian ways. Stunned by the hostile responses to her overtures, Tara tries to make sense of her predicament by seeing herself as the

cultural other through the perspective of her American husband, David Cartwright, who was, after all, 'a foreigner' (*TD*, 48). She constantly assesses her own reactions to situations by using David as the 'foreign' yardstick. In the American visitor Antonia Whitehead, who elicits similar responses from the local community, Tara recognizes a sense of her own foreignness, 'a faint rubbing of herself as she had been her first weeks in Calcutta, when her responses too had been impatient, menacing and equally innocent' (*TD*, 166).

She senses her alienation even in the company of her close circle of 'Camac Street friends' (*TD*, 10), the Westernized and liberal elite of Calcutta with whom she shares her caste and class affiliations. Like Tara's husband David, they appear to Tara to possess the assurance of people who live in a 'world that was more stable, more predictable than hers' (*TD*, 109). Untroubled by the sort of contradictions and pluralities that plague her, they are, Tara realises, not the people she can confide in or communicate with about her feelings of being 'outraged by Calcutta' (*TD*, 105). In fact, it is in their company, in her increasing awareness of 'their tone, their omissions, their aristocratic oneness' (*TD*, 43), that Tara's alienation is intensified. It is they who make it clear that Tara's being away in America had indeed 'eroded all that was fine and sensitive in her Bengali nature' (*TD*, 55); her friend Reena tells Tara that she has 'changed too much' (*TD*, 22), that she had 'forgotten so many Indian-English words she had once used with her friends' (*TD*,

107). In fact, Tara's sense of being 'an alien and outcaste' among family and friends assumes 'monstrous' proportions when her friends accuse her of abandoning her Brahmin caste by marrying an American, a *mleccha* or outcaste. Also, it must be pointed out in this context that Tara's friends automatically perceive an American to be a white American. This stereotypical response is evidenced when the American student, Washington McDowell, visits Calcutta on an exchange programme. The excitement of Reena's family turns to shock when they find out that they will be hosting a black student. In fact, Reena's mother gets hysterical at the thought that her daughter might be having an affair with an 'African' (*TD*, 138).

Suffering under the burden of this estrangement from the city of her birth, Tara, compelled to introspection, discovers that her seven years abroad are not the sole source of her alienation. In fact, she traces her alienation not to America, 'as she watched the New York snow settle over new architecture, blonde girls, Protestant matrons, and Johnny Mathis' (*TD*, 37), but here, in the heartland of her 'native' home:

How does the foreignness of the spirit begin? Tara wondered. Does it begin right in the centre of Calcutta, with forty ruddy Belgian women, fat foreheads swelling under starched white headdresses, long black habits intensifying the hostility of the Indian sun? The nuns had taught her to inject the right degree of venom into words like 'common' and 'vulgar'. They had taught her *The Pirates of Penzance* in singing class, and 'If I should die, think only this of me--' for elocution. (*TD*, 37)

Thus, Tara's rejection by her native land, which itself, as the passage above makes clear, has been underwritten by the history and culture of colonialism, and her own sense of 'the foreignness of the spirit' in both New York and Calcutta, powerfully underscores for her the 'gap between the desire for a home and the reality of homelessness'.⁷² Crucially, Mukherjee also sets her narrative at a particularly significant and ideologically-charged moment in Indian history -- Calcutta in the early 1970s. The Naxalite movement which rocked the eastern and south eastern sections of India entered its most intense phase between 1967 and 1972. The movement takes its name after the Naxalbari region in Northern West Bengal, which is where it originated. The Naxalites were the militant dissidents from the Marxist Community Party of India whose ideological beliefs centered around the need for armed revolution in order to resist the neocolonial exploitation of the state. Their main grievance was the unequal distribution of state resources, which continued through the food shortage of the mid 1960s and the prohibitive increase in prices. A spontaneous peasant uprising in Naxalbari sparked off a number of peasant struggles all over West Bengal and other states, including Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In Calcutta, the movement took the form of a largely youth and student uprising, which challenged all institutional forms of

⁷²Gikandi, p.197.

power. The Naxalite uprising marked an important crossroad in the history of West Bengal and was viewed as a major threat to the national government.⁷³

The significance of the Naxalite movement in the history of political struggles in India is that it marks a highly unstable nodal point in the history of the Indian nation. Listening to radio announcements about the bomb blasts rocking the city, Tara can feel herself 'in the presence of history' (*TD*, 46). This is a significant detail in the text for if the text has thus far gestured to the idea that the construction of national identity can no longer be structured by the myth of return to origins, its next step is to stage the migrant's return at a particularly vexed moment in Indian history. The returning migrant Tara, for instance, as we have seen, is riddled by the contradictions and pluralities that arise from the histories that migrancy seeks to leave behind. As Rushdie formulates it, the migrant, by going away from home, 'has floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time'.⁷⁴ However, the migrant's choice to stage his or her agency by claiming an affiliation above and beyond the national does not alter the agency or the constitutive force of the nation.⁷⁵ Thus, Tara returns only to confront the nation at the moment when, as Homi Bhabha has described it, 'history is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural

⁷³For a fuller account of the Naxalite movement, see Sumanta Banerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1980); and Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and their Ideology* (New Delhi: Oxford, 1988).

⁷⁴Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Pan Books, 1983), p.87.

⁷⁵Gikandi, p.199.

authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of “composing” its powerful image’.⁷⁶ Keeping in mind Bhabha's point in this essay about the ambivalence of the nation as a cultural and historical formation and, more significantly, that the nation is constructed by the performance of its narration, what we discern in Mukherjee's text is precisely the mechanism through which to eschew the teleology of ‘origin’ and ‘totality’ in order to represent the nation as a temporal *process*, in the very act of composing itself.

Mukherjee's novel further captures the chief resonances of Bhabha's argument by staging the migrant's return at a particularly visible intersection of history. The anarchy and chaos unleashed by the Naxalite rebellion disrupts the nation's temporal and cultural coherence by bringing to the fore the differences between ruler and ruled, minorities and majorities, empowered and disempowered, past and present. More specifically, Mukherjee deploys the minority discourse that this movement represents to contest the appeal to ‘origins’ that authorize and legitimize dominant identities by claiming authenticity and unity. In this case, the hegemonic upper-class, Bengali Brahmin identity that Tara upholds is challenged by the diverse discourses and different kinds of address and knowledges that the Naxalite uprising uncovers within the nation space.

⁷⁶Homi Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’ in *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-7 (pp.3-4).

In relation to this, it must be emphasized that it is through the ambivalent spaces of Calcutta city that the narrative of the nation is rewritten. Thus, Tara is confronted by a multiplicity of Calcuttas that confound any notion of the existence of a single or unchanging India. These multiple narratives of Calcutta are criss-crossed by various temporal and spatial narratives on the basis of the ethnic, religious, caste and class differences in the city. Indeed, it is a Calcutta 'too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one' (*TD*, 131).

First, there is the Calcutta of the once plush and fashionable but now decaying Catelli-Continental Hotel, a disturbing obsolescence of British culture which towers over the stench and decay of busy Chowringhee Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Once the 'navel of the universe', when Calcutta was the imperial city of British India and also its centre of commerce and political power, the Catelli is now a symbol of Calcutta's decline; its 'entrance is small, almost shabby', its 'walls and woodwork are patterned with mold and rust', the 'sidewalks along the hotel front are painted with obscenities and political slogans'. On them 'a colony of beggars' jostle for space with 'shrivelled women' and vendors selling their wares (*TD*, 3). Frequented in the past by people in positions of power and influence who would come together and talk, it is now the haunt of the Calcutta elite, people without passion and conviction, who come to take 'their daily ritual of espresso or tea' (*TD*, 4) while flicking through old issues of *The New Yorker*. Then, there is the capitalist

Calcutta of moral bankruptcy evoked by Tara's coterie of upper-caste, upper class Bengali friends -- Sanjay, Pronob, Reena and Nilima -- which disdains the vulgarity and insurgence of the working class while lamenting the loss of an earlier Calcutta, 'one they longed to return to, more stable, less bitter' (*TD*, 98). Juxtaposed with this is the revolutionary Calcutta of class equality espoused by the Marxist vision of the Naxalite movement. And there is also the 'Third World' Calcutta of economic underdevelopment, poverty, disease and overpopulation that is the target of the American visitor Antonia Whitehead's zealous prescriptions of 'democratization' and socio-economic reform. There is also the agricultural and feudal Calcutta symbolised by Pachapara, the old Bengal of order and stability represented by Tara's great-grandfather, the zamindar Hari Lal Banerjee. And then there is the graceful and stately Calcutta, representative of the high culture associated with the Bengal renaissance past, which is now both mourned and kept alive by the elegiac poetry and nostalgia of Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, a once wealthy tea-magnate whose failing fortunes is another metaphor for Calcutta's own crumbling social order. Through him, Tara is exposed to another, tubercular, Calcutta symbolised by the *bustees* of Tollygunge with their squatters, beggars, lepers and 'open dustbins, warm and dark where carcasses were sometimes discarded' (*TD*, 41). There is also the Calcutta of industry and progress symbolised by the new township of Nayapur which is associated with the rising prominence of a new class of Marwari businessmen,

represented by Tuntunwalla, who have accumulated their riches in contrast to the old wealth of the Bengali Zamindars and businessmen like Tara's father, the 'Bengal Tiger'.

The text thus constructs the Indian nation not as a simplistic and polarized space, but as a configuration of diverse spatial and temporal determinants. In fact, Mukherjee's fictional technique to fracture the space of the nation into its multiple spatio-temporal indicators can be traced to her espousal of what she calls the 'Mughal aesthetic', named after the style of the Mughal miniature painting, which she describes as a cultural form that is crammed with narratives and sub-narratives, taut with detail and dramatic function, with its insistence that everything happens simultaneously, 'bound only by shape and colour'.⁷⁷ Central to Mukherjee's embrace of the Mughal aesthetic is its ability to bring into sharper focus the time-space continuum of the novel in order to problematize the linear and unified narrative of national culture and identity.

Crucially, because it is primarily through Tara's consciousness that the dissonances within the nation are registered,⁷⁸ she becomes a passive repository of confusing cultural signs. Unable to steer a course through the contradictory Calcuttas that compete for her attention, Tara feels she is going mad. Thinking

⁷⁷Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman', p. 36. In fact, 'Courtly Vision', the concluding story in the *Darkness* collection, is presented as an exegesis of a miniature Mughal painting.

⁷⁸Although the novel uses an omniscient third-person narration, it is from Tara's point of view that most of the action is recorded.

she can only feel 'at home' in her family house at Camac Street -- 'except for Camac street', she says, 'Calcutta had changed greatly' (*TD*, 199) -- she retreats to the 'restful' space of her home, in the hope that she can 'recover' the stability and 'purity' of her Indianness:

Her parents' house on Camac street was designed to be restful. All anxiety and unpleasantness was prevented from entering the premises by ... an elaborate system of coir blinds, rose water sprays, *durwans*, bearers, heavy doors, locks, chains and hooks. She was home in a class that lived by Victorian rules, changed decisively by the exuberance of the Hindu imagination.... She was among the ordinary and she felt rested. (*TD*, 30, 34)

The house at Camac Street, it is clear from the passage above, offers Tara a space of anchorage and retreat from the chaos and confusion of the contradictory scripts of the city that vie for her attention outside. However, even as Tara gathers together an apparent sense of coherence within its protective and seemingly insulating walls, the narrative points to the untenability of Tara's notion of the 'pure' space of home. The 'restful house' (*TD*, 33) that Tara calls 'home', the text suggests, is not in any sense an 'authentically' Indian, indisputably 'pure' space, but one that is already a heterogeneous construct, shaped by the confluence of imported ways of life in colonial contexts. The imported furniture in the living room -- 'heavy, dark, incongruous pieces whose foreignness had been only slightly mitigated by brilliantly coloured Indian upholstery' (*TD*, 31-32), the 'Sears and Roebuck garden swing, sold to the Banerjees by

a departing librarian of the local USIS' (*TD*, 33), and the canvas easy chairs in the verandah, 'reminiscent of the order and ease of the British days' (*TD*, 33), are all textual signs that attest to the always-already heterogeneous space of home.

Furthermore, Tara is a native of Bengal, one of the first regions in India to experience the impact of British colonial rule. Also, as a descendant of zamindars, she is a member of the Bengali upper caste community that had worked to better accommodate the sociocultural and political changes wrought by the British presence. With this, Mukherjee emphasizes the processes of cultural intermixing and interaction from which no retreat is possible.

In fact, as events draw her closer to the dark heart of a Calcutta changing beyond all recognition, Tara, by the concluding pages of the text and her last days home, is finally made to confront the terrifying 'vision' (*TD*, 210) that she had all along tried to evade; she is forced to concede that the city to which she returns is not the utopian space which can counter her deracination and render her identity whole again. Indeed, her safe and predictable native metropolis had now become 'the deadliest city in the world' (*TD*, 168). Tara's rape by Tuntunwalla is precisely owing to the fact that she is unable to negotiate a viable response to the competing and confusing demands made on her. Unable to reconcile herself to the changing face of Calcutta, a disillusioned Tara decides to go back to the US: 'If

she were to stay, she thought, there would be other concessions, other deals and compromises, all menacing and unbearably real, waiting to be made' (*TD*, 202).

Indeed, at the novel's close, Tara is suspended in a state of darkness and uncertainty, having discovered that she 'had slipped outside' of the parameters of a home to which she thought she belonged by virtue of her origins and that after seven years away, 'reentry was barred' (*TD*, 109-10). The novel's final, symbolic, image is that of Tara, stranded in a locked car outside the Catelli-Continental Hotel, besieged by a violent mob of Naxalite protesters who have just attacked the old aristocrat Joyonto and killed Tara's friend, the businessman Pronob. Her last thoughts are if 'she would ever get out of Calcutta' (*TD*, 210).

The impossibility of return as well as the 'unheimlich' terror of home is underscored by a narrative configuration which begins with an evocation of Tara's ancestral home of Pachapara, the ordered, stable and pre-partitioned Bengal⁷⁹ of Tara's great-grandfather Hari Lal Banerjee which Tara reminisces about in America to stave off her deracination. Alienated in America, Tara had invented the Bengal countryside as the landscape of her past and as a place of rest and pastoral stability. However, in brutal defiance of its idyllic opening image, the

⁷⁹In 1905, the province of Bengal was divided into West Bengal and East Bengal under the administrative reforms outlined by the British Viceroy George Curzon. At the time of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the largely Muslim East Bengal became known as East Pakistan, which later sought independence from Pakistan and established itself as the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971. With the secession of East Bengal, the predominantly Hindu West Bengal became known as Bengal, with Calcutta as its capital city.

narrative ends by focusing on the inordinate violence of modern nation formation, with a city that that 'was losing its memories in a bonfire of effigies, buses and trams' (*TD*, 9). Tara is forced to realise that the 'greenery' and 'forests' she had associated with the India of her 'roots' are no longer recoverable, something or the other had 'killed them' (*TD*, 207).

'A Wife's Story'⁸⁰

As I had noted in my preamble to this chapter, Mukherjee's interrogations and reconstructions of the 'stable' cultural narratives of home are launched primarily through the figure of the migrant woman. My intention in the following section is to examine how Mukherjee's attempt to construct a viable cultural and national narrative is carried out through a reworking of the ideological structures and imperatives that shape the construction of the migrant woman's identity in America.

The Indian woman, as Partha Chatterjee has demonstrated in his important essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', bears an immense ideological load in Indian nationalist discourse. Chatterjee identifies the dual discourse of the material and the spiritual, the world and the home as the strategy aimed at resolving the binary opposition between tradition and modernity put into place by the workings of colonialism:

⁸⁰Bharati Mukherjee, 'A Wife's Story' in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (Canada: Penguin, 1989), p.40. All further references to the story will be cited by title and page number in the body of the text.

The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms 'world' and 'home' corresponded, had acquired...a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture.... In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one's very identity.⁸¹

The opposition between outer and inner, world and home, as Chatterjee argues, was hierarchized by Indian nationalist discourse in such a way that home soon came to be seen as the space of inner, 'pure', Indian culture; accommodations to the West in the outer or material sphere were represented as superficial changes that did not compromise the 'essential' inner culture. The inner sanctum of home thus came to be regarded as the crucial marker of the purity of Indian culture and tradition which had at all costs to be guarded against the threat of contamination posed by modernization. Since home has historically been gendered feminine, the place of the woman in securing this 'true' nationalist Indian culture has been crucial.

Accordingly, within the workings of this binary, the Indian woman, who represents the inner sanctum, the pure space, had to be protected from the contamination of Westernization. It is she, through her feminine purity, who is the representative of the continuing traditions of the community.

⁸¹Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* ed. by Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 233-53 (p.239).

In addition to the cultural construction of the woman in nineteenth-century Indian nationalist discourse as I have delineated above, there are numerous other cultural narratives of the Indian past which establish chastity as a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood: the most famous of the legendary 'good wives' in Hindu culture and tradition being Sita of the *Ramayana* and Savitri of the *Puranas*.⁸² In all these cases, the rhetoric of purity highlights women as crucial symbols of communal identity and as bearers of tradition and culture.

One of the ways in which Mukherjee negotiates a new cultural identity for her women characters is by undermining the fixity with which these cultural narratives construct the subjectivity of the Indian woman. This process of interrogation is carried out primarily through her dismantling of the binary construction of social space for women as private and public or pure and polluted. Eschewing such static representations and understanding of cultural meaning and experience, Mukherjee demonstrates in her fictions that the act of migration allows her characters to discover alternative meanings of home. Her Indian women, especially the wives, for instance, find out that the private and public are never absolutely distinct categories, however much it is in the interests of their husbands

⁸²In the epic *Ramayana*, Sita, the wife of Rama, is abducted by the evil king Ravana, and held captive until Rama rescues her. But before she can continue to live with him, public opinion must be satisfied, and she undergoes an ordeal by fire to prove that she has remained chaste. In the *Puranas*, after the death of Savitri's husband Satyavan, she goes to battle with the god of death Yama himself, and journeys to the underworld to reclaim her husband; because of her penances she is able to win back her husband's life as a boon from Yama.

or their community to insist on this structure of strict and binary opposition. Since the discourse of culture operates within a system that defines purity in terms of the woman's lack of Westernization, the community (in Mukherjee's fictions often symbolised by the husband) makes sure that the woman's contact with American society is kept to the minimum.

For instance, it is Dimple's confinement within fixed meanings of home that creates the crisis in Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife* (1975). In this novel, Dimple leaves Calcutta to come to the US as the dependent wife of an engineer. While she is expected by her husband to have no interaction with American culture, epitomized literally in her almost total incarceration in her high-rise Manhattan apartment, Dimple is, unknown to her husband, exposed and then slowly seduced by the cultural narratives of Americanness that are daily brought into the interior, 'pure', space of her home through the television. Isolated in her apartment, Dimple is unable to make a distinction between the lives led in the soap operas she watches on American television and the lives of real American women. It is Dimple's entrapment, on the one hand by her idea of the ideal Indian wife as one who lives an austere life devoted to the well-being of her husband, and on the other hand by the fantasy narratives fed by media images of American women leading lives of high passion and intrigue, that creates the crisis of cultural identity for which Dimple is unable to seek a resolution. Thinking that her entry into American

culture will be aided if she adapts to certain (largely physical) 'initiation' rites, Dimple, in her husband's absence, wears American-style clothing, cooks and eats hamburgers, and even has a brief affair with an American man in the attempt to imitate the romance and excitement lived by American women on television. In her mind, however, Dimple is still the Sita-Savitri of Hindu lore, having internalized the culturally-sanctioned fixity of women's gendered code of conduct as 'pure' and dutiful wives. The binary distinction between the outer sphere and inner home is manifested in the kind of double life that Dimple tries to lead inevitably fails, and this leads to her nervous breakdown. Thus, Dimple is represented as a migrant who is torn between her apprehension of two fixed and opposing cultural narratives, the 'Indian' and the 'American'.

Thus, *Wife* highlights the tragedy that can result when the migrant is prevented from effectively engaging in new inscriptions of self by a hegemonic view of home as fixed and immutable, and hence of national and cultural identities as fixed and irrevocable. Such an essentialized view of culture, as Mukherjee posits in *Wife*, forecloses any possibility of a negotiation of one's identity. The novel demonstrates that the act of simply transposing one cultural narrative onto another geographical and cultural location without leaving space for interaction and negotiation with the new culture -- in this case, the American culture -- is unhealthy, even unnatural.

In the following pages, I will attempt to demonstrate how Mukherjee employs the ambivalence of female migrant subjectivity in 'A Wife's Story' to problematize the settled basis for national and cultural identity-construction. In this story, as in Mukherjee's oeuvre as a whole, female sexuality as a means to empowerment and individual agency becomes an effective trope to undermine the fixed boundaries between 'stable' cultural narratives of identity.

'A Wife's Story' is narrated by Panna Bhatt, a young Bengali Brahmin woman who has left her home and her husband in Ahmadabad to pursue a Ph.D in special education in New York. Her academic success is all the more extraordinary given that she comes from a strongly traditional and feudalistic patriarchal culture⁸³ which has been suppressive of and inimical to the question of women's education. Panna herself is aware of the conflicted space she has to traverse in order to negotiate an identity for herself between the cultural narratives of the past and the choices available to her in the new world cultural location:

My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she'd registered for French lessons at the Alliance Francaise. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar, was illiterate. (*M*, 29)

⁸³While all contemporary societies can be classified as patriarchal, in that each operates a social system characterized by male dominance, they are patriarchal in different ways, for each constructs gender within different cultural and economic histories. Having said that, I would like to point out that within the context of my analysis, it is the woman's negotiation with Indian structures that is foregrounded in my critique of hegemonic national-cultural models of identity. In view of this, an examination of the woman's relationship with Western structures would fall outside the parameters of this study.

Such a construction of Indian womanhood which limits transformative possibilities for women is the pre-text with and against which Panna attempts to construct her own agency in America. More specifically, Mukherjee employs the rubric of 'wifedom' in the narrative as a metaphor for the fixed paradigm of cultural identity which Panna must open up to integration and mediation. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that it is Panna's sexuality that becomes the site through which this resistance against the cultural construction of 'wifedom' will primarily be articulated.

Panna herself is aware that men find her attractive, from Imre, the refugee from Budapest whom she meets at graduate school, to the various other men she meets as she goes about her life in New York. Panna is aware also that as an Indian woman, she is constructed as the exotic other by the dominant cultural narrative of America. Thinking that her beauty can facilitate her integration into American society, she colludes, in a sense, in the dominant culture's exoticization of cultural difference by drawing attention to her status as the exotic Indian woman. Central here to Mukherjee's representation of Panna as an Indian woman is that visible signifier of her cultural identity -- her darkness of skin.

Kwame Appiah and Henry Gates, Jr have argued, in the context of African American identity construction, that '[r]acial identities...are defined in a peculiarly corporeal way: one's identity as an African American is rooted in one's embodiment as a black body. The significance of the [black] body here may sometimes be as

pronounced as it is in our gendered identities, as men and women, gay, straight, bisexual'.⁸⁴ For Mukherjee, too, the darkness of the Indian woman's body in hegemonic-white America becomes an important signifier of cultural difference. Crucially, Mukherjee, in this text and elsewhere, treats darkness not as a visible disfigurement of the whiteness, or purity, of the American body politic but as a marker that forces an acknowledgement of the multiple and differentiated configurations of its national and cultural identity.

The narrative itself opens by foregrounding Panna's predicament as a woman mediating among and mediated by the contradictory dynamics that impinge on her 'visibility' as an Indian woman. The trope of visibility, of seeing and being seen, becomes a representational strategy to articulate the ambivalence, the splitting, the instability of Panna's subjectivity.

Dressed carefully to attend a play with her graduate friend Imre, Panna, when the text begins, is seated in the front row of the auditorium, where she is rendered 'conspicuous', visible, in the dark, by her 'showy' (*M*, 31) 'red silk sari [with] its plump, gold paisleys spark[ling] on [her] chest' (*M*, 25). Even the darkness of the theatre, it is implied, cannot hide her beauty, her darkness of body. Interestingly, the choice of David Mamet, whose plays profess to be anti-racist yet come across as being underwritten by a racist attitude, intensifies the

⁸⁴Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Editors' Introduction: Multiplying Identities', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), pp.625-29 (p.628).

ambivalence and indeterminacy of Panna's identity. Panna finds that she is the object of the play's racist invective against the Indian migrant community, its women in particular. Her Indianness, her darkness of body, on this occasion, makes her the object of derision rather than the object of desire. Thus, while Panna is aware of the hold of her exotic beauty, she discovers too that her body's visibility can render her the target of racist prejudice: 'First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting' (*M*, 26).

Mukherjee's point here seems to be that whether 'elevated' to the status of exotic object or relegated to the domain of racist insults, the Indian woman, as an ethnic and a non-white, is still constructed by a discourse that maintains a firm border between the 'out there' and the 'in here'; the 'normative' American is always associated with a particular colour and culture.

The contrasting life-style and modern, Westernized, outlook of her Chinese-American roommate represents another model through which Panna's options for identity-construction are explored. The roommate in question is Charity Chin, a young woman of about Panna's age, who has adopted the dominant American culture's attitude to and values about sexuality. Estranged from her husband, Chin sleeps, 'out of gratitude', with her plastic surgeon 'every third Wednesday', while being at the same time involved with another man with whom she spends her weekends.

Panna is quick to contrast her own adherence to her Indian cultural code of marital propriety and decorum with Chin's sexual autonomy, particularly in relation to her own traditional Hindu arranged marriage and her room-mate's idea of partnership based on volition and agency. The narrative implicitly highlights the concomitant problem of a culture which has sustained the status quo, not only through its identification of women as pure and as iconic repositories of tradition, but through its evaluation of them as passive and fixed as commodities in a society where marriages are arranged by families, and where all extramarital relationships between the sexes are inhibited, if not entirely prohibited. Panna says:

[M]ine was a traditional Hindu marriage. My parents, with the help of a marriage broker, who was my mother's cousin, picked out a groom. All I had to do was get to know his taste in food. (*M*, 30-31)

The cultural practices and inscriptions which regulate Panna's sexual propriety and 'inherited notions of marital duty' (*M*, 32) are in this way juxtaposed with the individualistic possibilities of assimilation that her roommate Chin represents. It is significant that although Chin herself comes from China, another ancestral home of arranged marriages, she appears to have integrated quite easily into the dominant patterns of American life and culture. Panna reads the apparent ease and freedom with which Chin enters into relationships with men as an index of her cultural assimilation, though the narrative itself suggests that Chin's breaking away from her cultural narratives of Chineseness is a dubious sort of liberation. For one, such an

uncritical insertion into the dominant narrative of Americanness does not seem to have brought inner happiness for Chin.

This comparison with Chin allows Panna to ponder the ways in which she herself has been changed by her experience in America. In realizing 'the way *trucks* have replaced *lorries* in [her] vocabulary' (*M*, 32), Panna alludes to a process central to the migrant condition in which the cultural transformation or evolution of characters is manifested in their 'translation'. Migrancy, in the words of Rushdie, is an act of 'translation' as it is a bearing across of bodies and narratives. Here, Mukherjee falls back on the literal associations of translation in showing how language itself shifts and moulds itself to the new cultural environment. Language here functions as a metaphor for cultural identities and narratives; the act of translation thus creates the possibilities for new narratives and languages as a reinscription, a cross-inscription, or a writing over without obliterating the old.

Panna's identity as an 'Indian wife' is foregrounded when her husband comes to New York for a visit. Her husband's visit serves to bring to the fore the changing configurations that Panna has already begun to notice in her identity and offers the context for an exploration of ethnic and cultural stereotypes. Although Panna inhabits multiple identities as an Indian woman, foreigner and graduate student, it is as an Indian wife that Panna's identity is primarily located and

through which her subjectivity is explored, and challenged, in this story. Panna's cultural identity as an Indian wife is manifested through certain fixed signs -- 'the marriage necklace of *mangalsutra* [the traditional jewellery worn by an Indian woman as the symbol of marriage], gold drop earrings, heavy gold bangles' (*M*, 33). These traditional markers of ethnic and cultural identity delineate her identity construction as an Indian woman who has to constantly negotiate with the signifiers of Westernization that are a daily part of her life in New York. For her husband, however, these signs are important not only to assert Panna's identity as an Indian woman, but, more importantly, as that of an Indian wife. It is for this reason that Panna 'do[es] not forget' to cast off her habitual Western attire of 'cotton pants and shirt' (*M*, 33) for her sari and traditional marriage jewellery when she goes to meet her husband at the airport. The narrative, however, points to the tenuousness of the sanctity and currency of such fixed manifestations of Indian cultural identity in the ambivalent cultural space of Panna's 'new world' cultural location. For one thing, Panna herself is only too aware of how easily she can be robbed of her traditional jewellery in the violence-prone streets of New York.

As an Indian wife, Panna is expected to be obedient to her husband and not display any show of independence when in his company. In fact, Mukherjee's first-person narrativization of her 'wife's story' neither names nor refers to him by name, signalling the text's inscription of her female subjectivity within a narrative that

reinforces the culture of husband-worship (*pativrata*).⁸⁵ What Mukherjee attempts here is to rework the relationship between sexuality and femininity within the parameters of an Indian ethnicity. In other words, the Indian narrative is not jettisoned for an American one; Panna's ethnic and cultural identity as an Indian woman, the text suggests, is necessary to force a reconfiguration of the dominant narrative of American identity.

Taking him on a sightseeing tour of the city, Panna is acutely conscious of the realignment of gender relations that is inscribed via the crisis in her identity as a 'wife':

[My husband] looks disconcerted. He's used to a different role. He's the knowing, suspicious one in the family.... I handle the money, buy the tickets. I don't know if this makes me unhappy. (*M*, 33)

The implications here are that Panna's agency -- her energy, assertiveness, and confidence in taking charge of things -- challenges the place of her husband's prescribed role within the Indian cultural narrative that constructs Panna's womanhood. As a man ideologically conditioned by the dominant narrative of Indian culture which valorizes an unquestioned perpetration of traditions through circumscribed notions of femininity, her husband reads Panna's independence as

⁸⁵See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), for an account of the Hindu doctrine of *pativrata*, or 'husband-worship'. According to Rajan, 'the prohibition enjoined by the good Hindu wife on uttering the name of the husband [is] a taboo founded on the belief that with each such utterance his life is shortened by a day' (p. 83).

being both dangerous and destructive to the maintenance of the gender hierarchies inherent to such a system. The dominant Indian narrative of culture, as I indicated earlier, constructs an artificial binary between 'tradition' as good, essentially indigenous, uninterpellated by Western influence, and 'modernity' as evil, degraded and linked with Western mores. Here, in the heartland of the new world, the adherence to tradition through prescribed notions of femininity is deemed vital for combatting the 'contaminating' influence of American culture. Panna's husband, uncomfortable with the way Panna is admired by other men, asks that she accompany him back to India.

Significantly, Panna rejects the option of returning to India on the grounds that she has yet to complete her course. By saying 'no' to her husband, the text signals Panna's symbolic repudiation of the fixity of her cultural construction as an Indian wife. This is not to suggest, however, that the text's distancing of Panna from the normative paradigm of Indian cultural identity is tantamount to her facile assimilation into the American centre.

The final image in the narrative powerfully captures the text's delineation of Panna's subjectivity as being constructed between stable 'American' and 'Indian' cultural narratives. On the night before her husband's departure for India, Panna checks her reflection in the bedroom mirror:

I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else. (*M*, 40)

Her gaze activates a splitting; the body that confronts Panna is one that is so sexualized that Panna feels she is a spectator, watching someone else, her cultural 'other', reflected in the mirror. Yet, she is also the subject conscious of her own alterity. In this sense, Panna is both the self and other, subject and object, same and different. The text here resonates with Lacan's concept of split subjectivity to emphasize the ambivalence inherent to the dynamics of national and cultural identity production. According to Lacan, the position of the 'I' within language, the subject, does not simply represent the presence of a subject that pre-exists it, but produces it by a system of differentiations between the 'I' and that which is not 'I', between the enunciator and the enunciated. This distinction is not static but continuous, the subject being in a continual process of development. From this perspective, both subjectivity and the language that produces it constitute a process in which meaning is never fully present in any utterance but is continually deferred. Since the speaking and spoken subject do not coincide, identity is never self-identical, never whole, but split between signifier and the signified. It is Lacan's account of subjectivity as a site of contested and unstable meanings that provides the basis for Derrida's conception of the 'supplement' which offers an invaluable resource for critics like Bhabha to reformulate dominant nationalist narratives.

Crucially, like the stage device that opened the narrative, the mirror image works here to provide a point outside the self through which Panna is viewed. The important difference here is that it is Panna who does the viewing this time. This brings to mind the interesting comment made by Gail Low that Mukherjee's first-person narratives in *The Middleman* collection of stories 'are not filled with the plenitude and security of agency (presence) and identity but are turned inside out so that they only gain coherence through being the site which registers the gaze of others'.⁸⁶ While Low is correct in pointing out the problem of migrant disempowerment, I contend that the text's ending can be read as offering the possibility of migrant agency. In this final, pivotal, image of the narrative, it is Panna, unpossessed of her husband's gaze, who activates the splitting. In that split moment, her resistance to the master narratives of cultural identity allows her to wrest agency. Thus, Mukherjee presents the transformation that comes over her character in terms of a movement from object, someone whose identity is viewed, to subject, a character who does the viewing. As long as she remains an object of contemplation within the space of the dominant American cultural discourse, Panna is viewed as the victim of the racism of American hegemonic culture which subjects her to stereotypical readings, either as the exotic other or the cultural other. At the same

⁸⁶Gail Ching-Liang Low, 'In a Free State: Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 4.1 (1993), pp. 8-17 (p.15).

time, she is also the victim of the dominant Indian cultural narrative which views her in her fixed, iconic, status as dutiful and devoted 'wife'.

I want, in this context, to read Mukherjee's use of the word 'shameless' in the passage above as a term which invokes the intrinsic instability of the space in/through which Panna's subjectivity is constructed. For how is 'shameless' to be construed here? Is Panna 'shameless' in that she is an American woman who has divested herself of shame? Or is she 'shameless' in that she is that fallen creature, an Indian woman without shame, one who has violated the moral code of her culturally-sanctioned purity?

Is the woman's body the site of emancipation or is it the site of oppression? It is precisely this indeterminacy that Mukherjee's narrative sets out to create. This ambivalence is further evidenced in the fact that Panna's body is in this instance 'unclothed' and unadorned, unmarked by any of the external signifiers of cultural identity, whether 'American' or 'Indian'. In this emergent, transnational, space through/in which Mukherjee attempts to construct Panna's subjectivity, I argue that the dominant tropes of Indianness and Americanness collide and coalesce and suffer continual attenuation. There is not a simple, definable, culture, either Indian or American, that can be identified within this textual space. In so doing, Mukherjee offers the possibility of a space which cuts across stable cultural

narratives, producing complex configurations of sameness and difference, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.

Instead, the text proposes that there are only the multiple narratives that reposition the subject in ways that disrupt the dominant mythology of home as single and homogeneous. It is from this space that Mukherjee restages narratives that blur and reconfigure ideas of national and cultural identity, in which difference cannot be so simply and completely appropriated because of the way it slips beyond the dominant culture's ability to define and control it. Though power and dominance are still at work in this model, heterogeneity is a constant that flows and redefines itself even as it is appropriated and commodified by the dominant culture. By refusing to fall back on a fixed and stable narrative of national and cultural identity and by showing Panna's identity in the process of *becoming*, Mukherjee participates in a move to bring 'roots' in active mediation with 'routes' and to thus reveal the possibility of a new, transnational, paradigm for the construction of national and cultural identity.

Chapter Two

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats.¹

Salman Rushdie is a well-known figure among novelists writing in the Indian diaspora. His fame is, in no small way, connected with the widespread political controversy generated by *The Satanic Verses*,² a novel which, on account of the ideological tensions implicated in the debates it has raised, brought into critical re-evaluation the terms by which national and cultural narratives of identity are being conceived and performed in the Western metropolitan space. I will go on to argue later in this chapter that the dialectics of reconstruction that *The Satanic Verses* proposes to the dominant narrative of Britain can equally be applied to the project of reconfiguring the Indian nation. In the novel, the narrative voice poses the question -- 'How does newness enter the world?'³ It can perhaps be said that Rushdie's oeuvre as a whole

¹Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p. 125.

²In February 1989, following the publication in 1988 of *The Satanic Verses*, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a *fatwa*, a religious edict carrying the death sentence, against the author on charges that he had committed blasphemy against Islam. Rushdie was forced to go into hiding and lived under police protection for a decade; the *fatwa* was lifted after a series of diplomatic negotiations early in 1999.

³Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 8. Further page references are to this edition and will be given in the main text, after the abbreviated title *SV*.

is an attempt to address the cultural urgency of this question. The epigraph to this chapter points to this important area of his work and its critique of overintegrated conceptions of culture. Indeed, for Rushdie, the complex, crosscultural and lateral dynamics represented by the figure of the migrant have necessitated a dismantling of the old paradigms for constructing and representing identity. While I shall go on to show how precisely *The Moor's Last Sigh* attempts to narrate newness into the nation's space, in this preliminary section of the chapter, I want to demonstrate how my own attempts to construct diaspora as an unstable yet productively ambivalent space shares resonances with Rushdie's own apprehension of the 'in-betweenness' of the space he occupies as a migrant.

Rushdie was born into a Muslim family in Bombay in 1947, the year of Indian independence from British colonial rule. While his family subsequently moved to Karachi, he himself has settled in England, having been sent to study in 1961. His family's crossing of borders from India to Pakistan was part of an uprooting that was significant in the subcontinent's cultural and political imaginary. This is because the moment of India's creation as a nation also heralded the dark side of independence; it was the year also of the 'famous moth-eaten partition that chopped up the old country and handed Al-Lah a few insect-nibbled slices of it'.⁴ Thus if 1947 saw the coming into existence of the secular Indian state, it also saw the

⁴Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, 1983), p. 61. Further page references are to this edition and will be given in the main text, after the abbreviated title *S*.

creation of Pakistan, a country born of the historical and political need to provide a separate nation/state for India's Muslims.

For Rushdie, who is among the first generation of Indians born into and shaped by what he calls 'the secular ideal' of India, the religious intolerance on the part of Muslims that led to the creation of 'that unmentionable country across the border'⁵ is a cause for profound concern. In *Shame*, Rushdie's fictional chronotope is called 'Peccavistan', meaning 'a country born in sin or a place of sin' -- a naming which deliberately subverts the meaning of 'Pakistan', 'land of the pure'. The notion that a nation which has its origins in the exclusionary politics and violence of Partition can only end up a catastrophic moral failure is borne out by a narrative which focuses on the grotesqueries and corruptions of the state's ruling elite.⁶ Indeed, 'shame', the novel suggests, is the defining condition of Pakistan's national life. Insofar as the subsequent history of Pakistan still attests to ongoing separatist disputes within its territorial borders, Rushdie's vehement

⁵Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 - 1991* (London: Granta: 1991), p. 16, 9. Further page references are to this edition and will be given in the main text after the abbreviated title *IH*.

⁶Although Rushdie, like most other secular Indians, invariably assigns primary responsibility for Partition to Muslim separatism, recent historical research has complicated the conventions of this picture by offering different interpretations of the historical past. Thus, it is important to make clear that Rushdie's views on Pakistan are idiosyncratic. For instance, even immediately after independence, there were writers in Pakistan who, for all their feelings of alienation and unease, considered the new nation as geo-politically necessary.

critique of religion as the founding narrative of the nation appears to me to be a matter of legitimate concern.⁷

In relation to this, Rushdie sees his migrancy as providing him with a valuable perspective for narrating alternative identities insofar as it produces strategies of negotiation to undermine hegemonic conceptions of nation space and the fixity of its borders. In particular, Rushdie sees the migrant's 'long geographical distance' from his homeland and 'the physical fact of [his] discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past' (*IH*, 12) as shaping and influencing his narratives of the nation in ways that novelists writing from within the nation space cannot easily attempt. As he states it: 'the ability to see at once from inside and out is a great thing, a piece of good fortune which the indigenous writer cannot enjoy'.⁸ While its exuberant idiom may appear a little spurious in the light of Rushdie's own awareness of the fundamental instabilities of the migrant position, the statement, nevertheless, does point to the fact that Rushdie is ideologically attuned to foregrounding migrancy as a potentially enabling, anti-hegemonic and creative condition. In fact, the state of migrancy, which he describes as being predicated on 'the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis' (*IH*, 394), is the

⁷While the most dramatic effect of the instabilities of Muslim nationalism in Pakistan was seen in its division into two separate nations after the secession of East from West Pakistan in 1971 and its creation into Bangladesh (where a Bengali identity sought freedom from domination by a Punjabi-dominant Pakistani elite), the violent conflicts still being staged in the provinces of Sind and Baluchistan attest to the fundamental instabilities in the nation's politics.

⁸Salman Rushdie, 'A Dangerous Art Form', *Third World Book Review*, 1 (1984), pp. 3-5 (p.3).

process by which Rushdie's cultural aesthetics and his very identity as a writer has been produced. This is a point which Rushdie himself articulates at some length in several of the essays written between 1981 and 1991 and collected in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), and in which the productive ambivalences of the migrant's location 'in-between' cultures and nations are aestheticized into a new cultural politics. '[H]owever ambiguous and shifting this ground may be', he argues, 'it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy' (*IH*, 15).

More significantly, Rushdie's view of migrancy as a potentially productive position is itself based on his willingness to make the most of his unstable positioning between nations. In fact, Rushdie implies that it is its very instability that gives rise to the flexible dynamics of the migrant position. Furthermore, the ambivalent energies created in the 'in-between' space occupied by the migrant can be turned into a politics of resistance against the totalizing tendencies of the dominant culture of the nation/state. In this sense, Rushdie's foregrounding of the interstitial space as potentially subversive echoes the formulations of other theorists of diaspora culture like Homi Bhabha who treat the interstitial as a space of resistance against the assimilatory tendencies of the nation/state. In this respect, it perhaps should be pointed out that, despite his privileged position (being educated, middle class, fair-skinned, and male), Rushdie has consistently been relegated to a minority status in terms of the place he occupies in the hegemonic narrative of the nation -- as a

Muslim in Hindu-dominant India, then as a member of a *mohajir*, or migrant, family in Pakistan, and now as a British subject of South Asian ancestry.

More specifically, Rushdie has provided a sustained articulation of the complex tensions and ambivalences intrinsic to the migrant position which bears resonances with my own attempts in this thesis to formulate diaspora as a space of multiple criss-crossings. In *Shame*, the narrator, an expatriate like Rushdie, who knows ‘something of this immigrant business’, while meditating at length on his migrant status, foregrounds some of the elements that strike me as being particularly insightful to a discussion of the ‘in-between’ dynamics experienced by the migrant. Here, the writer/narrator defines as ‘migrants’ those individuals who have ‘come unstuck from their native land’ (*S*, 85-86); the phrase ‘come unstuck’ in itself mirrors the complex ambivalences of migrancy; while it suggests the liberating notion of release (from the weight of oppressive traditions, totalizing ideologies, etc.), it also conveys a note of peril from the loss of anchorage (of stability, security, familiarity, etc.).

Crucially also, the choice of the term ‘migrant’ itself is emblematic of Rushdie's conceptual stance to privilege neither the ‘emigrant’ nor the ‘immigrant’. While the first term, ‘emigrant’, foregrounds the place left behind, the second, ‘immigrant’, emphasizes where he or she has come to. Instead, Rushdie's

'migrant' foregrounds the *passage* between the *emigrant's* departure and the *immigrant's* arrival, between a past and a present, a here and an 'elsewhere'.

My understanding of the migrant's position as being one of ambivalent in-betweenness is clarified and deepened by Victor Turner's anthropological concept of the 'liminal'. In a chapter entitled 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', Turner uses 'liminal' as a term to describe individuals who are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence into another:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial... Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing.⁹

According to Turner, the liminal subject, stripped of its 'preliminal' and 'postliminal' attributes, has 'few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state'. In this respect, Turner argues, the liminal subject is 'neither here nor there' and exists 'betwixt and between' fixed cultural identifications. But while the liminal passage results in '[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition', it is also 'accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new

⁹Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.95.

patterns'.¹⁰ Drawing from Turner, it can be argued that the liminal space is not an empty space but a space of continual movement, crossing and interaction between different cultural states. It is the ambivalent and shifting configurations of the liminal space that give rise to the strategies and resources through and in which cultural (ex)change is negotiated.

As I have suggested earlier on, it is Rushdie's awareness that the migrant space is not an empty area or a space of loss that ultimately shapes his view of migrancy: 'It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can always be gained' (*IH*, 17). Using the situation of Indian writers in England as a case in point, Rushdie argues that these writers are not just negatively marked as either 'English' or 'Indian', but 'have access to a second tradition', which he goes on to describe as 'the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group' (*IH*, 20). What is conceptually creative about this position is that it formulates a politics of identity that is built on the idea of 'routes', on cross-cultural or transnational connections, not on the notion of 'roots' or primordial origins.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.99. While the anthropological concept of the liminal assumes social reassimilation after the rite of passage, my concern here is to foreground the experience of liminality itself, that is, the experience of being in permanent transit.

It is this same theoretical response to national identity formation that Rushdie invokes when he says that *The Satanic Verses* was the book in which he was 'writing for the first time from the whole of myself. The English part, the Indian part'.¹¹ Significant here is that what Rushdie means by 'whole of myself' is already split -- 'the English part, the Indian part'. The conception of national subject formation as 'partial', as always-already plural, is again stressed when Rushdie describes his migrancy as being 'made up of bits and fragments from here, there'.¹² It is the idea that the national 'whole' is actually constituted by ambivalence, by a split between a 'here' and a 'there', 'a bit of this and a bit of that' (*IH*, 394), that most surely informs Rushdie's description of himself as an 'international' (*IH* 20, my emphasis) writer. In positioning himself in the 'partial' and plural site of migrancy, Rushdie participates in the unstable, potentially productive, transnational dynamics of diaspora, as I have attempted to conceptually (re)define it in this study.

It is in relation to this 'in-between' cultural politics of diaspora that we should see Rushdie's 'imaginary homelands' as an epistemological trope that foregrounds the anti-hegemonic potential of the transnational dynamics symbolised by the migrant. Rushdie's dissatisfaction with the exclusionary language and politics of

¹¹Gerald Marzorati, 'Salman Rushdie: Fiction's Embattled Infidel', *New York Times Magazine*, 29 January 1989, pp. 24 + 100 (p. 100).

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 100.

nationalism has propelled him to formulate a new ideological response to the idea of the nation. By locating the dynamics of nation and national identity construction *outside* of the nation, he seeks not only to reform narratives of the nation but also to lift the nation away from the repressive ideologies of empire implicit in the culture of colonialism that the nation/state has inherited. It is this *transnational* position of the migrant that is foregrounded when Rushdie asserts that 'to be a migrant is, perhaps, to be the only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism' and 'its ugly sister, patriotism' (*IH*, 124).

However, I wish to emphasize that the freedom Rushdie seeks from the constraints from the temporal and nationalist cartography is not tantamount to an erasure of cultural history. The character of Bilquis Hyder in *Shame*, for instance, powerfully exemplifies the impossibility of living in a state free 'from history, from memory, from Time' (*S*, 87). Forced by the impending Partition of the subcontinent to flee Delhi for Karachi, Bilquis is burnt in an explosion and stripped of 'the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging' (*S*, 63-64). She is the *mohajir* who struggles to counteract the 'rootlessness' of her being. Her desperate need for 'placement' is evidenced every time the loo wind blows; shutting all windows and strapping down the furniture, Bilquis tries to circumvent her debilitating sense of weightlessness by at least enforcing permanence and stability on her physical environment. Emptied of her past, she succumbs to the 'disease of

fixity' that, the text suggests, is the fate of those who have no history. From this I would argue that Rushdie is not suggesting that in crossing borders the migrant has left behind his cultural history. In fact, I will go on to argue that his migrant aesthetic is rooted in and routed through cultures and histories.

It thus bears reiterating at this juncture that while Rushdie views migrancy as a historical and cultural location, he also considers it a place of epistemological habitation. In 'The Location of Brazil', Rushdie asserts that the migrant is one 'who is rooted in ideas and memories rather than places and material objects, and therefore has a profound mistrust of what constitutes "reality"' (*IH*, 125). What comes across here is a sense of the migrant figure's affiliation to ideas rather than to material places. 'Having experienced several ways of being', Rushdie argues, 'the migrant suspects reality' (*IH*, 125).

It is out of his intention to confound the nationalist 'reality' of not only Pakistan but also India as a 'precise', historically unitary and ontological entity that Rushdie speaks, for instance, of the existence of heterogeneous constructs of India, of the many Indias, that disrupt its imagined unity (*IH*, 10). In this sense, Rushdie raises important questions concerning the appropriateness or usefulness of current theories or concepts of nation and national identity in changing world contexts. This is all the more urgent given the nature of the political upheavals and disputes that presently characterize the national topographies of the

contemporary age. Rushdie's work, like that of other writers of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, such as Romesh Gunesekera and A. Sivanandan, looks back at and articulates the South Asian homeland through the productively ambivalent and critical perspectives of the migrant consciousness. For such writers, the 'pure' space of 'home' in the light of the prevailing atmosphere of violence and bloodletting in contemporary Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, and on the larger world stage, can no longer be viewed as an innocent utopia. '[I]t was a mistake to *go home*', says the returning migrant, Saladin Chamcha, in *The Satanic Verses*, 'after so long, how could it be other than a regression; it was an unnatural journey; a denial of time; a revolt against history; the whole thing was bound to be a disaster' (*SV*, 34, emphasis in original). It is precisely Rushdie's critical awareness of, and his location in, the plural and provisional site of home that informs and articulates Rushdie's (re)construction of the Indian nation in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as I will go on to argue. Functioning as an ideological counterpoint to the homogeneous and exclusionary politics of the nation/state, the trope of 'imaginary homelands' is an impetus behind all his reconfigurations of nation, be it India or Pakistan. This explains why, although living in London, Rushdie continually returns to the 'national' scenario of the subcontinent in work after work, right up to his most recent novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), to launch a political and cultural critique of its exclusionary narratives of identity.

However, the fundamental and material implications of his migrancy mean that Rushdie's diasporic rewritings of the nation's spaces are not confined to the Indian homeland. Diaspora impels Rushdie to redraw the boundaries of the Western nation, so that new ideas of nation and national identity are also made available for Britain. It is the reality of diaspora within Britain that most fundamentally disrupts the dominant narrative of the white nation as being homogeneous and unitary. In Bhabha's view, and it is one that reinforces Rushdie's, the arrival of the postcolonial 'Other' into the very heart of the Western metropolis has unsettled the national-historical narrative of Britain so radically that 'the language of national collectiveness and cohesiveness is [what is] now at stake'.¹³

The dominant culture's response, however, to the fact of post-colonial migration has been, in Stuart Hall's words, 'a defensive exclusivism...an embattled defensiveness of a narrow, national definition of Englishness, of cultural identity'.¹⁴ Thus, from Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech to Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test'¹⁵ a

¹³Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 291-322 (p.304).

¹⁴Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 173-87 (p. 177).

¹⁵In my introduction, I had commented briefly on the racist discourse of nationalism articulated by politicians like Enoch Powell. In his 'Rivers of Blood Speech', first delivered in 1968, Powell gave vent to a feeling amongst a large majority of white English people that the presence in England of immigrant groups from the Caribbean and Asia had contributed to a profound loss to notions of home, Empire, personal identity and national belonging. Powell's evocation of race and nation played a key role in creating the hegemony of Thatcherism. The 'cricket test', that I also invoke above, is named after the right-wing minister, Norman Tebbit, who in 1990 said that West Indians and Asians in Britain should be judged on whether they supported England's cricket team.

considerable attempt has been made to define and safeguard what the dominant group sees as the default culture of its national narrative -- 'true' Englishness. *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, suggests that Britain can no longer conceive of itself as a cohesive and continuous cultural and historical community. Its textual construction of spaces like the Shandaar Cafe with its Bangladeshi immigrants, symbolically contests the nation state's hegemonic structures by foregrounding the nation not as a secure and stable interior space of belonging, but as one split and fissured by the reality of difference.

The writer Hanif Kureishi, a second-generation Briton of Pakistani ancestry, expresses in his work a similar need to challenge the narrative of a fixed and identifiable narrative of culture produced by a white-hegemonic British nation. 'It is the British, the white British', he writes, 'who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements'.¹⁶ The works of Rushdie, together with those of Kureishi, Caryl Phillips, Timothy Mo, Kazuo Ishiguro and Buchi Emecheta, for instance, pose a serious challenge to the imagined borders and hermetically-sealed space of British national and cultural identity by destabilizing the narratives forged by the nation/state to define the dominant (English) culture in terms of cohesion and purity. By persistently prying open the English habitus and its discourses of belonging, and by opening them up to the reality of cultural

¹⁶Hanif Kureishi, 'England, your England', *New Statesman and Society*, 21 July 1989, p.29.

difference, these diasporic texts, as one critic cogently puts it, ‘unhouses in order to disclose and illuminate more permanent forms of dwelling’.¹⁷

The Moor's Last Sigh

The Moor's Last Sigh (1995) is a seminal text for my purposes as it offers a literary enactment of some of the key ideas and issues that I have earlier identified in theoretical formulations of diaspora. In so doing, it offers a clarification of my own attempts in this thesis to construct diaspora as an enabling space through which more egalitarian and empowering constructions of national and cultural identity can be undertaken. In the following section, I will specifically look at the alternative national narrative of the Indian homeland imagined by Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh* from his ‘partial’ and ‘provisional’ location in diaspora. In particular, I will argue that Rushdie's experience and awareness of the productive ambivalences of his ‘in-between’ location in diaspora problematizes essentialist and totalizing conceptions of national and cultural identity with their presumption of fixed roots in culture and history. I will also argue that in rejecting homogeneous conceptions of the nation, the text formulates alternative metaphors and images of the national community.

Set mostly in Bombay, *The Moor's Last Sigh* tells ‘the story of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed’, Moraes Zogoiby, also known as the Moor,

¹⁷Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950 - 1995* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.85.

'heir to the spice-trade-'n'-big-business crores of the da Gama-Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin'.¹⁸ As the Moor, who is born with a deformed right hand and afflicted with a body which ages twice as fast as a normal human being, tells the story of four generations of his family from the last four decades of the nineteenth century right up to the novel's narrative present of 1992, it becomes clear that the text is tracing the fortunes of the narrator's family in complex, allegorical relation to the fate of the Indian nation. As in the case of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* (1981), the mixed and 'impure' ancestry of the Moor is made to parallel the heterogeneous nature of the Indian nation. But while *The Moor's Last Sigh* begins just after Indian independence to encompass, like *Midnight's Children*, the problems of growing authoritarian politics, corruption, caste antagonisms, illiteracy and poverty associated with the post-independence history of India, its canvas is extended to include the more recent developments, chiefly the rise of Hindu fundamentalism since 1989 and its aftermath. Given that *The Moor's Last Sigh* was the first novel to be written with the *fatwa* in force -- in the book, the narrator is pursued to the death by a policeman named after the Islamic holy city of Medina -- it is as concerned with writing against the tyranny of Muslim fundamentalism as it is with rejecting the 'folkloristic straightjacket' (SV, 52) of Hindu nationalist politics. But if *The Moor's Last Sigh* extends the chronology of

¹⁸Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 5. Further page references are to this edition and will be made in the text, after the abbreviated title *MLS*.

Midnight's Children to encompass more recent historical events, it also arcs back further in time, and in space, to connect the political events of twentieth-century India with earlier world historical moments. Some of the key historical events invoked by the narrator in his story about the Zogoiby and da Gama families of India are the Spanish reconquest of Granada in 1492, the expulsion of Jews and Moors from Catholic Spain in the fifteenth century, the founding of the spice trade between Europe and India, and Portuguese colonial expansion. *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a darker, more elegiac, representation of Bombay, for reasons other than the fatwa and the impossibility of Rushdie's return to the city of his birth. For while *Midnight's Children* constructs the nation in the processes of its making, birthed by the idealism, talent and heterogeneous imagination of its leaders and people, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, published almost fifteen years later, reflects the dissipation that has befallen the idea of India as 'a collective fiction in which anything was possible' (MC, 112). At the end of the novel, as the Moor looks back from the Alhambra at his once promising, but now ruined, family and on the India he knew, it becomes clear that the text is holding up for scrutiny the myriad possibilities which the Indian nation has wasted through the forces of dogmatism, sectarianism and cultural nationalism.

In order to understand the specific ways in which Rushdie launches his critique of Indian nationalism in the novel, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the

forms of nationalism currently in force in India. I shall begin by looking at the official discourse of nationalism, as first propounded by Jawaharlal Nehru. As the first Prime Minister of the Indian nation, Nehru put in place a process of political formation whereby the different communities and religions, each of which had made significant and distinctive historical contributions to the subcontinent, were incorporated into a collective unity. According to Nehru's secular concept of nationalism, Hinduism was merely one of the sources of India's greatness; the achievements of Asoka and the Guptas, for instance, existed alongside the achievements of Buddhism, and those of the Mughal emperors, such as Akbar, and other religious or cultural sources. For Nehru, then, secular nationalism became the most authentic testimony to the capacity of Indians to maintain an ordered heterogeneity, and the secular model of 'unity among diversity' provided the political framework through which he sought to unite the cultural diversity of the newly independent Indian nation. The workings of anti-colonial nationalism, which attempts to impose an imagined unity out of diverse peoples, is clearly at work here.

In attempting the difficult task of formulating his secular nation/state, Nehru talks of India in *The Discovery of India* as an all-inclusive ideal, which brings together different 'classes, castes, religions, races'.¹⁹ Here, Nehru's conceptualization of

¹⁹Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta, 1946; New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 28. This book is considered one of the founding texts of Indian nationalism after independence and it does not challenge Partha Chatterjee's account, in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*

a unifying national identity is phrased largely in terms of a common history and origins, a harking back to Bharata, 'the mythical founder of the race'. The trajectory of Nehru's anti-colonial nationalism, then, principally entails a looking back to the past.

According to the revisionist historian, Prasenjit Duara, it was Nehru who was the first to narrativize a history of the subcontinental empire into what has come to be known as 'the secular History of India'; the use of the capital H in 'secular History', according to Duara, is a marker that distinguishes Nehru's nationalist conception of India's past which 'derives from the linear, teleological model of Enlightenment History ... from other modes of figuring the past'.²⁰ My point here is that, though Nehru was the first to construct a secular narrative of the Indian nation, there were already other and preceding attempts to define India's history and identity. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for instance, there were moves by social and religious groups to define India's history in terms of Hindu values; among these were predecessors of the groups that eventually formed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It was, however, only from the 1980s, with the diminishing popularity of the Congress and rise in prominence of Hindu political organizations, that the secularist conception

(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), that 'nationalism proper began in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress' (p. 5).

²⁰Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 4.

of the nation's history was interrogated more openly by these other, more exclusionist, ideas of India's past.

According to the ideology of Hindu nationalism,²¹ Indian history is divided into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. The originating and defining historical moment was to be found in the ancient Hindu period, the classical era of Vedic culture, and in such periods as the Gupta Empire from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Decline set in in the 'Muslim Period', a dark age that corrupted society from the eleventh century onwards and left it prey to British conquest.²² The task, therefore, of the Hindu nationalists was to reclaim the 'essence' of India's cultural identity from beneath the accretions of foreign, Mughal and British, cultures. This project was to be carried out chiefly through the articulation of *Hindutva*, as the sole or privileged criterion for eradicating differences and creating the political community of the nation. The tenets of *Hindutva* suggested that it is only the Hindus, with their (so-called) ancestral roots in Indian soil, who could legitimately claim to constitute the Indian nation.

²¹What can be spoken of as Hindu, or BJP, nationalism in India today actually started out as a coalition of movements or organizations which in the core were not themselves part of mainstream Hindu culture. Among these was the RSS, a radical Hindu organization founded in 1925 to revive the traditional values of Hindu India, set the standard and defined the terms of Hindu nationalism so effectively that they continue in force today. For a detailed discussion of the rise of militant Hindu nationalism in India, see, for example, Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 81-90.

²² The search for a seamless Hindu past was led by V. D. Savarkar, from whose writings the BJP would later foreground the concept of *Hindutva*. Savarkar is the key figure in the emergence of a modern Hindu political identity, for it was he who first made the genealogical equation between the Hindu and the Indian. See, Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, pp. 159-61.

Significantly, the dominant Indian nationalist discourses, ranging from the views of secularists like Nehru to Hindu nationalists like the BJP, have harked back to India's 'true' past to appropriate symbols or material for constructing a viable national identity. It is in this context that Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's concept of a 'useable past' becomes particularly significant. In *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger suggest that since most (European) nations were forged in the nineteenth century, they have little basis on which to claim a settled or timeless identity. The comparative newness of most nation/states, and the sense of instability that this suggests, give rise, according to Hobsbawm and Ranger, to a tremendous investment in the 'myth' of nationhood to sustain their sense of antiquity. This myth of nationhood, masked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism, which appropriates the past for 'timeless' culture-specific materials in order to create exclusive and homogeneous conceptions of national traditions.²³

Hobsbawm and Ranger's principal contention that national traditions are largely invented for political purposes helps to highlight the conflicting versions of the Indian past. For instance, in his effort to contest colonialist versions of the past, Nehru, like other emergent 'Third World' nationalist leaders, was of the view that the diversity of Indian identities could only be understood in the unity of common history and experience. Official secular nationalism here again falls back on another

²³Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

myth of nationhood, that of a unified past in order to create a single narrative of national and cultural identity. On the other hand, the BJP's mobilization of a 'true' Vedic past for India speaks of an attempt to posit an authenticity with which to legitimize its claim to an Indian national identity. In so doing, its intention is also to undermine Muslim, Christian, Sikh and other claims to that identity. Thus, while for Nehru India's past was constructed as being both diverse and unified, for the Hindu nationalist that past was homogeneous, Hindu and unchanging. These conflicting constructions of the nation reveal the different types of potential inherent in different models of nationalism. More to the point, while the signifiers of collectivity appropriated by these different nationalisms fail to represent the reality of the diversity of the 'national' community they purport to speak for, constructions of the nation have become potent sites of control and domination in contemporary society. The comment by the editors of *Asian Forms of the Nation* is worth recalling here: a 'Hindu nationalist version of the Indian past is not necessarily more false -- or true -- than a secular image of the same past, but the former may be more powerful in the hands of agitators'.²⁴

The nationalist project to recover a 'Hindu' past assumed literal and sinister implications in the recent campaign by militant Hindu activists to unearth the alleged birthplace of Rama, the mythological hero of the *Ramayana* and a

²⁴Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov, 'Asia in Theories of Nationalism and National Identity', in *Asian Forms of the Nation* (Curzon Press: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 1-39 (p. 18).

god central to the Hindu pantheon, from under a sixteenth-century Muslim shrine in Ayodhya. According to the BJP and its close religious (and now also political) allies, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Shiv Sena, the Babri Masjid had been erected by a general of Babar, founder of the Mughal dynasty, to replace an ancient Hindu temple which had marked the spot where Rama was born. The demolition of the mosque over December 1992 and January 1993 instigated the worst Hindu-Muslim riots since Partition.

It is precisely the exclusions inherent in the project of cultural 'recovery' epitomized by the Ayodhya episode that Rushdie argues against in his work. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie articulates his own sense of incredulity and hopelessness at the likely scenario of events to engulf the country if the pursuit of an 'authentic' Indian identity is left unchecked. In the novel, the Moor's friend, Zeenat Vakil, in the wake of the communal killings set in motion by the destruction of the Babri Masjid, tells the narrator that the search for 'origins' along the binary split of Hindus and Muslims can only be self-defeating: 'the followers of one fiction knock down another popular piece of make-believe, and bingo! It's war. Next they will find Vyasa's cradle under Iqbal's house, and Valmiki's baby-rattle under Mirza Ghalib's hang-out' (*MLS*, 351). Indeed, the razing of the mosque by Hindu extremists marked a crucial event in India's national imagining. As the narrator puts it: 'it was an end and a beginning. It was ... the coming of the Battering Ram' (*MLS*, 363). For many secular Indians, it

marked the end of 'that historical generosity of spirit' (*MLS*, 33) epitomized by Nehru's vision of an egalitarian and democratic Indian nation; in the novel, Jawarharlal is the name of a stuffed dog, as if to suggest the ossification of Nehru's ideals of secularism, democracy and tolerance in contemporary India. In its place, the razing of the mosque saw the emergence of *Ram Rajya*, the rule of Ram. The narrator has a tilt at the choice of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu and thus the 'most metamorphic of the gods', as the icon for Hindu nationalism. As the Moor puts it, the rule of Ram 'should therefore, surely, be premised on the mutating, inconstant, shape-shifting realities' (*MLS*, 351) of Ram's part-divine, part-human nature. In so doing, the text implicitly draws attention to the fixity with which Hindu nationalism views the question of national identity.

In relation to this, I want to suggest that while *Midnight's Children* uncritically celebrates the secular ideal of a heterogeneous Indian nation, *The Moor's Last Sigh* registers a crucial shift in the author's erstwhile celebratory attitude to secular nationalism. But if the text reveals a loss of faith in secularism, it rejects secularism not so much as a unifying ideology, but as a form of nationalism that can unite the differences in contemporary India. The text's critique of secular nationalism is principally articulated through its characterization of the Moor's grandfather, Camoens da Gama, a 'Nehru man' (*MLS*, 55) who inherits his anti-colonial nationalist zeal from his father, Francisco. 'Like Nehru', says the narrator,

'[Camoens] was for business and technology and progress and modernity' (*MLS*, 54) and, like Nehru, was also imprisoned by the British for his participation in the activities of the Indian National Congress. More specifically, Rushdie expresses his disenchantment with secularism through an articulation of the excessive idealism with which Camoens describes his vision of a unified, secular, Indian nation that is

above religion because secular, above class because socialist, above caste because enlightened, above hatred because loving, above vengeance because forgiving, above tribe because unifying, above language because many-tongued, above colour because multi-coloured, above poverty because victorious over it, above ignorance because literate, above stupidity because brilliant.... (*MLS*, 51)

While recognizing the fact that it was a collective will which both propelled anti-colonialist nationalism and continued to mobilize notions of unity and common interest out of heterogeneous groups of people in the immediate post-independence period, *The Moor's Last Sigh* suggests that the politics of difference in the Indian nation presents instead an interrogation of the liberal multiculturalist terms with which secular nationalism constructs a unifying narrative for a plural nation. Crucially in this respect, the text suggests that the secular nation's constant harking back to the past for a common history is, ironically, unable to confront the challenge of difference presented by the contentious realities of the contemporary nation. Thus, for Rushdie, secular nationalism, as propounded by Camoens in the quote above, can only appear little more than an impossibly romantic or idealized vision in the face of the plural politics

of the nation. The fact that Camoens, a 'passive positive' who is constantly criticized for his political inaction (although he writes massive journals on the subject of Indian nationalism, for instance, he never publishes a word), should be the book's exemplar of Nehruvian secularism, can be read as a sign of the text's loss of faith in the ability of secular nationalism to sufficiently confront and address the mammoth task of unifying India's heterogeneous realities.

I also want to suggest that Rushdie's diminishing optimism about the ability of secularism to adequately confront the plural politics of India is already discernible in *Imaginary Homelands*. Here, we see a noticeable, if subtle, shift from the author of the opening essay (written in 1982), who confidently describes himself as 'a secular man' whose belief in the 'secular ideal' is sustained by the 'remarkably secular ambience' of his birth city (*IH*, 16), to the beginnings of uncertainty and doubt in the essay of 1987. Written on the fortieth anniversary of Indian independence, and dealing at some length with the rise of sectarian movements and 'the politics of religious hatred' (*IH*, 27) in India, the essay suggests that the pursuit of a 'common ground' under the 'old, secular definition of India' (*IH*, 27, 30) was now perhaps to be viewed as 'absurdly, romantically optimistic' (*IH*, 33). In the ten or so years between the earliest and the last essay on India's national state of affairs, it should be noted that the idea of nationalism in India itself, to use Rushdie's own words, 'had grown more and more chauvinistic, had become narrower and narrower' (*IH*, 32). So, it

is, in a sense, hardly surprising that by the time of *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), Rushdie's belief in 'a united, democratic, secular India' (*IH*, 46) can now, in the face of the intensifying social pressures foregrounded in the novel, only be seen for the excessive idealism it represents.

The critical historical moments highlighted in the text span the period between the narrator's birth in 1957 and his death in 1992: the Gujarati-Marathi language riots that broke out in 1957 and ended with the partition of the state of Bombay; the fall in support for the ruling Congress (the political vehicle through which Nehru sought to articulate the secular, democratic will of the nation) as a result of the ideological splits and factions within the party; the crisis set in motion by the suspension of democracy during Indira Gandhi's period of Emergency in the mid-1970s which had radical effects on India's national imagining of itself (the narrator remarks, 'Before the Emergency we were Indians. After it we were Christian Jews' (*MLS*, 235); the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi set off by the assassination in 1984 of Mrs Gandhi by Sikhs seeking vengeance for the Indian Army's attack earlier that year on the Amritsar shrine; the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by Tamil extremists aggrieved with what they perceived to be India's interference in Sri Lanka's domestic dispute with Tamil nationalists; and the Hindu-Muslim riots in Ayodhya and Bombay following the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalists in 1992. For

Rushdie, these are critical moments of historical change whose violent repercussions have left deep scars in the national imagination.

In suggesting, then, that *The Moor's Last Sigh* implicitly offers a critique of the failure of secular nationalism to sufficiently confront the intractable fact of the multiplicity of the contemporary Indian nation, I wish to place my reading of the novel alongside recent studies in social science which argue that secularism not only has failed to put an end to factional strife and sectarianism, but that it is inherently unable to do so. In their recent study on the rise of religious movements in India, Ashis Nandy and his co-editors suggest that the rise of Hindu nationalism is a consequence of the view of most Hindus that secular nationalism is an ideology of a modernist, Western-educated elite that was at odds with India's 'true' national character. It is secular nationalism that has

sanctioned the concept of a "mainstream national culture" that is fearful of diversities, intolerant of dissent unless it is cast in the language of the mainstream.... This [secular] culture promotes a vision of India that is culturally unitary and a belief that the legitimacy of the modern state can be maintained only on the basis of a steamrolling concept of nationalism that promises to eliminate all fundamental cultural differences within the polity... For both these institutions are essentially secular in their ideological thrust. It is in this context that one must read the proposition ... that fundamentalism is a direct creation of secularism.²⁵

²⁵Ashis Nandy, Shikha Trivedy, Shail Mayaram and Achyut Yagnik (eds), *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmbhumi Movement and the Fear of the Self* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 19-20.

Lying at the heart of Nandy's rejection of secularism as a national-cultural narrative is its implicit endorsement of the argument made by revisionist historians such as Gyan Prakash that the concept of Indian nationalism, although founded as an anti-colonial movement, is still implicated in the ideologies and practices of the colonial culture that it seeks to repudiate.²⁶ Even Partha Chatterjee, who makes an important conceptual distinction between Indian nationalism as an official political movement and Indian nationalism as a cultural construct, agrees that Indian nationalism is basically a 'derivative', Western construct.²⁷

Viewing nationalism as a political movement out of tradition into the Enlightenment ideals of modernity, linear progress and democracy, Western models of nationalism do not give any significance to the racial or ethnic aspect of nation formation. Neither do they take into consideration the historical fact of colonialism. This is implicit even in Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationalism which traces the beginnings of a 'Third World' national consciousness to the emergence of print literature and clearly relies on Western modular nationalisms.²⁸ In other words, what is imagined, under the terms of Anderson's paradigm of nation formation, is not just the nation as a projection of community, but also the very

²⁶Gyan Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), p. 13.

²⁷Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁸Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

coherence and solidarity on which nationhood is then predicated. Anderson's idea, then, of the nation being an imagined community because of the 'deep comradeship' between citizens inevitably omits the language of exclusion and *un*belonging that is present as a shadow under every construction of inclusion and belonging.

The Indian context bears out my argument that the formation of a homogeneous national identity is shaped at any one time by the writing out of the 'Other'. The 'Other', of course, is variable, dependent upon which criteria are being used to define the nation -- linguistic, religious, and regional or common historical experience. Although secular nationalism is inspired by the principle of unity and cohesion, in contrast to the nativist discourse of Hindu nationalism which assumes from the start the principle of exclusion, it nevertheless is based on the universalist Western language of secularism which, as I have suggested, above, elides cultural, racial, class and linguistic diversities in the interest of projecting an imagined (comm)unity.

The Moor's Last Sigh conceptualizes Indian national identity in a way that refuses to take on board existing conceptions about the imagined community of the nation which wilfully suppress difference in the search for commonalities. It recognizes from the outset that the nation is an amalgam of disparate and eclectic elements, the plural traditions of different peoples and groups whose complex, multiple and shifting interactions make up the actual shape of what we then imagine as the nation. A major

implication of this conception is that the text breaks with the most important assumption underlying most models of nationalism -- the privileging of the nation as a cohesive and homogeneous cultural space of collective identification. It does this by focusing from the start on the significance of the national 'Other', the inevitable exclusion of any theory of nationalism that seeks homogeneity in the interest of achieving an imagined national community.

This is where I see the singular importance of the text's conceptual re-imagining of the Indian nation. By arriving at an alternative methodology for reading *The Moor's Last Sigh* where the nation is represented from the perspective of the very voices it discounts, I also hope to address, in some small measure, the problem singled out by critics like Aijaz Ahmad who have critiqued Rushdie for his failure to represent marginalized communities in his narratives of the nation.²⁹

Of relevance here is the comment by Ania Loomba that '[i]n "metropolitan" nations as well as "third world" ones, the difficulty of creating national cultures that might preserve, indeed nourish internal differences has emerged as a major issue in our time'.³⁰ In relation to this, I want to draw attention to the fact that while the concept of 'cultural difference' has been developed by Bhabha and other critics as a strategy

²⁹See especially, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992). Ahmad's principal contention here is that Rushdie's elitist class orientation prevents him from engaging effectively with an oppositional postcolonial practice in his writings. In his reading of *Shame*, Ahmad argues that the absence of marginalized figures in the novel is evidence of Rushdie's lack of political praxis.

³⁰Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge: London, 1998), p.203.

that intervenes in dominant nationalist narratives of Western metropolitan nations, the formulation or application of this concept in the context of 'Third World' nations remains under-researched and under-utilized. Related to this is the consideration that while Rushdie deploys the concept of cultural difference to interrogate the nationalist narrative of Britain in *The Satanic Verses*, he has come under attack for failing to do the same for the Indian nation.

Kumkum Sangari's criticism of Rushdie is worth recalling here. In her reading of *Midnight's Children* in 'The Politics of the Possible', Sangari points to Rushdie's insufficient confrontation with domestic politics in India. She argues that Rushdie 'appears at times to grasp Indianness as if it were a torrent of religious, class, and regional diversity rather than a complex articulation of cultural difference, contradiction, and political use that can scarcely be idealized'.³¹

Implicit in Sangari's comment is the conceptual distinction that critics have drawn between 'cultural diversity' and 'cultural difference' as two opposing ways of representing culture. Drawing on Bhabha,³² we can see how cultural difference, by

³¹Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd (Oxford UP: New York, 1990) pp. 216-245 (p.239).

³²Homi Bhabha views cultural diversity as a concept that denies contestation through its assertion of simple plurality and the existence of pre-given or absolute cultural meaning. Such a prescriptive definition of culture is inherent in nationalist discourses such as Indian secularism, which are predicated on a belief in the existence of a set of authentic, self-evident traditions that contribute to a definition and unification of a nation or a people. Such a view of culture reveals secularism's Western epistemological underpinnings. By contrast, cultural difference, Bhabha clarifies, focuses on the ambivalence of culture as a space of agency and intervention that unsettles essentialist readings of culture and makes it possible to begin envisaging national (or anti-nationalist) histories of the people. See Homi Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *The Location of Culture*, pp. 19-39.

interrogating the homogeneities of nationalism, aims to represent national and cultural identity from the perspective of the minority or marginalized. Thus, going back to Sangari's comment, the terms by which she critiques Rushdie's representation of national identity in *Midnight's Children* become quite clear.

Keeping in mind this criticism of Rushdie by Sangari, I shall go on to argue that *The Moor's Last Sigh* addresses these very issues by working towards the formulation of a national aesthetic that eludes prescriptive cultural definitions. In fact, the text's representation of national and cultural identity is not simply committed to celebrating or idealizing difference, but to showing how the whole idea of Indianness undergoes a transformation in the processes of its representation. In particular, I hope to show that the text does not only politicize difference in terms of theme, but also as a textual strategy that functions as a signifier of Indianness in ways that allow the questioning of whether or not an Indian national and cultural identity can possibly be designated in terms of a cohesive imagery. Rushdie's intention here, it seems to me, is to suggest that nationalism, even as it claims a unifying identity, becomes empowering and progressive only if it first accepts the reality of difference.

The fact that the text pursues from the start the trajectory of foregrounding the differences that constitute the nation is symbolised in the novel's opening section entitled 'A House Divided'; the feuding between the Menezes and Lobo clans, the division of the da Gama family business in two, and partitioning of the family home

in Cabral Island are all signifiers of the internal heterogeneities and differences of the nation's space.

Furthermore, resisting the notion of an unambivalent Indianness rooted in a conception of a coherent and monolithic culture, the text foregrounds the restless and shifting landscape of the Moor's 'hybrid universe' (*MLS*, 247). In relation to this, Rushdie's choice of 'a nowhere-and-no-community man' (*MLS*, 336) for his narrator is inextricably tied to his aim to confound the nationalist terminology of 'majority' and 'minority' cultures currently in force in India, according to the Hindu nationalist conception. Members of the core, or majority, community are those who are united by geographical origin and a shared culture based on Sanskritic languages and 'common laws and rites' -- in effect, a nebulous definition that is designed to include as many Hindus as possible in this category. Those who did not belong to this majority grouping -- Muslims (who constituted a quarter of pre-partition India's population), Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, Christians, etc -- were relegated to secondary, or 'minority', positions.

'Majority, that mighty elephant', says the narrator, 'will not crush my tale beneath her feet. Are not my personages Indian, every one?' (*MLS*, 87). In resisting the appropriation of 'Indian' national identity by the majority (Hindu) community, the central characters in the alternative national topography constructed by *The Moor's Last Sigh* all belong to the 'tiny minority' (*MLS*, 262) of India's Portuguese-Catholic

and Spanish-Jewish communities. The narrator, Moraes, who is a member of both communities owing to his mixed genealogy, also tells us that he ‘had been raised in Elephanta, where all communal ties had been deliberately disrupted; in a country where all citizens owe an instinctive dual allegiance to a place and a faith’ (*MLS*, 336). Rushdie's choice of ‘Elephanta’ as the name for the Moor's Bombay family home is in this sense ironic; although called after the elephant-headed Hindu god, Ganesh, Elephanta is also the site where the Moor's mother, Aurora, stages her annual dance of defiance and contempt for the ‘Hindu-fundamentalist triumphalism’ (*MLS*, 124) of the Mumbai's-Axis-backed Hindu religious procession of Ganesh Chaturthi. Raman Fielding, who heads this Hindu nationalist movement in the novel, is a thinly-veiled caricature of Bal Thakeray, leader of the Shiv Sena party, the Bombay-based arm of the BJP, which Rushdie elsewhere calls ‘the most overtly Hindu-fundamentalist grouping ever to achieve office anywhere in India’ (*IH*, 31).

In place of ‘the solitary, the isolated, the austere, the dogmatic, the pure’ (*MLS*, 289) (terms of representation which view cultures as totalities), *The Moor's Last Sigh* privileges what Rushdie elsewhere calls the aesthetic of ‘mongrelization’, and which he defines as a cultural politics which ‘celebrate[s] hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human being, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs’ (*IH*, 394). In the context of this novel, the mongrel aesthetic, I suggest, can more usefully be spoken of as a ‘masala

aesthetic', where the idea of mixedness invoked by the 'masala' (literally, meaning 'mixed spices') serves as a cultural signifier of an Indian national identity.³³ The multiple ancestries and complex lineage of the Moor is in this sense a perfect embodiment of the 'masala' aesthetic which the text deploys to challenge any notion of an authentic or unambivalent Indian national and cultural identity.

More than Saleem Sinai, or even Omar Khayyam in *Shame*, whose ambiguous cultural identity sets them at a distance from the majority, Moraes Zogoiby personifies the 'masala' as 'melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that' (*IH*, 394). A product of the 'pepper love' between his parents and their 'passionate conjoining' in a 'foetid atmosphere heavy with the odours of cardamom and cumin' (*MLS*, 90), the Moor is raised as neither Catholic nor Jew but a 'jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stew-pot, a mongrel cur... Yessir: a real Bombay mix' (*MLS*, 104). His father, Abraham Zogoiby, is one of the few remaining members of the ancient Cochin Jewish community of India; Abraham's lineage on his father's side can be traced to the first batch of Jews who arrived in India after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Abraham's ancestry, and hence the narrator's, is further complicated by the possibility that one of the Moor's Jewish ancestors who had left Spain and settled in India was the mistress of Boabdil, the last Moorish Sultan of Granada, who was driven into exile, together with the Jews, following the

³³The film, *Masala* (1991), directed by Srinivas Krishna, is another text that advances the conceptual imagery of the 'masala' to problematize normative understandings of Canadian multiculturalism.

conquest of Spain by the Catholic rulers, Ferdinand and Isabella, in the fifteenth century. When he discovers that he is possibly descended from a Moor, the Abraham realizes that although his mother, a caretaker of the old Jewish synagogue in Mattancheri, has worked zealously to preserve the purity of their ancient Jewish lineage, the Zogoibys of Cochin can no longer claim 'purity of race'. If Moraes' father is a Moorish-Jew, his mother, Aurora da Gama, is a Portuguese-Catholic who is descended from a spice-trading family based in Cochin, what is now Kerala state. In fact, the da Gamas proudly claim illegitimate descent from Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator who brought European trade and colonialism to India's Malabar coast in 1498.

Thus, while the Moor's precise genealogy cannot be ascertained, since his line of descent from Boabdil and Vasco da Gama is partly fabulous, what is beyond doubt is that his cultural history has been engendered by miscegenation and intermingling.³⁴ A mix of Portuguese-Catholic, Jewish and Arabic-Spanish cultures and identities, the complex, syncretic history of the Moor foregrounds India's long history of cultural mixing; while Moraes' genealogy can be traced four generations back to his maternal great-grandparents, his family history, on his father's line of descent, can be dated back to the arrival of the Jews in the fifteenth century.

³⁴The narrator's name of 'Moor' itself already problematizes the idea of cultural identity as pure and distinct. The Moors were originally Muslims of mixed Berber and Arab descent, who lived in north-west Africa and Southern Spain from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.

Clearly, lying behind the ideological concerns of the text's 'masala' aesthetic is not only the interrogation of the overly simplified and reductive logic of secular and religious nationalism, but also the deconstruction of the cultural, linguistic and racial categories which enabled the formulation and subsequent propagation of imperialist ideologies during European colonial expansion. In particular, the text's foregrounding of the 'mongrel' genealogy of its narrator writes back to the ethic of 'racial purity' privileged by colonial discourse. To this end, the Moor's deformed, club-like right hand is the physical sign which makes 'visible' the fact of his cultural miscegenation. More crucially, this 'impurity' is foregrounded in the text as a positive signifier of national and cultural identity. At one point, referring to his own plural family history, the narrator poses the following question:

Christians, Portuguese, and Jews; Chinese tiles promoting godless views; pushy ladies, skirts-not-saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns...can this really be India? *Bharat-mata, Hindustan-hamara*, is this the place? (MLS, 87)

Of significance here is that the Moor should allude to the image of 'Bharat Mata', Mother India, against which he sets up the reality of the heterogeneity of the Indian nation. While the figure of woman is an enormously powerful signifier in the cultural mythologizing of India, as I noted in the earlier chapter, the image of the woman-as-mother has important symbolic resonances in nationalist discourse. The Moor himself attests to the significance of this image in the national imagining of India:

‘Motherness...is a big idea in India, maybe the biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet...I'm talking *major* mother country’ (MLS, 137, emphasis in original). In the period of militant Hindu resurgence in the late nineteenth century, for instance, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel, *Anand Math*, captured the appeal of the mother figure in the Indian national consciousness through its famous slogan, ‘Vande Mataram’, ‘Victory to the Motherland’. This image was to find its classic cinematic representation in the famous Hindi film of the 1950s, *Mother India*, in which the newly independent nation gains its strength and validity from the metonymic identification of itself with the figure of the woman.³⁵ Furthermore, in *The Discovery of India*, Nehru's nationalist aspirations for a single, unified India finds its ideological moorings in the figure of an all-encompassing Mother India, who, through her accommodating virtues, has the power to bring to a unified and cohesive form the heterogeneity of the Indian masses.

³⁵In the film, ‘Mother India’, directed by Mehboob Khan, the mother, Radha, works the land as a serf and is exploited by the forces of capitalism represented by Sukhilala, the moneylender. Even after the death of her husband, she continues to work the land to provide for the family. Her dedication to her family, and particularly to her husband, even after his death, equates her with other images of ideal Indian womanhood -- Sita of the *Ramayana* and Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, who encounter privations (and in Sita's case rejection and expulsion) in the service of their hero-husbands. Radha's younger son, Birju, joins the dacoits in order to avenge his family's ruin. The mother kills her own son, using her moral authority within the family and the nation to uphold the law, making the figure of woman a force of conservatism. Several critics have described this film as ‘the archetypal film of [Indian] nationalism’. See, for instance, Nalini Natarajan, ‘Woman, Nation, and Narration in *Midnight's Children*’, in *Scattered Hegemonies: Poststructuralism and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 76-89 (p. 85).

Lying at the heart of these nationalist claims is the identification of the figure of woman with the soil. Like the timeless land of Bharat, she is patient, eternal and unchanging. The linking of the figure of woman/mother with land also gains much strength from Sita, who was said to be the daughter of the Earth Mother.³⁶ This in itself makes clear the importance of ontology in the constructing of a national identity. In his paper, 'Assimilation, Unspeakable Traces and the Ontologies of Nation', Joseph Pugliese offers a succinct explanation as to why ontology has been essential to nationalist enterprise:

Ontology functions as a type of guarantor which produces the desired reality effects for nationalist claims. Ontology is called upon, time and again, in order to situate the images of nation upon the ground of being. The figure of *ground* is significant as it supplies, both philosophically and rhetorically, the parameters critical to any nationalist enterprise: the figure of ground is the structuring a priori to nationalist projects, as it articulates both the foundation and borders within which essentialist concepts of nation are encoded and within which they achieve cultural intelligibility.³⁷

Drawing on Pugliese, we see that, in linking the figure of woman/mother with the 'values' of the soil, nationalist projects have sought to define the nation in terms of an idealized, unchanging, unified space that conceptually elides the existence of real divisive forces in society. Very early on, *The Moor's Last Sigh* disrupts the nationalist

³⁶See, for instance, Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 160.

³⁷Joseph Pugliese, 'Assimilation, Unspeakable Traces and the Ontologies of Nation', in *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*, ed. by Suwendrini Perera, Special Book issue of *Meridian*, 14.2 (1995), pp. 229 - 54 (p. 233).

idealization of the figure of the woman-as-mother through its re-imagining of it in terms of unconventional imagery: 'From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight-clear', says the narrator, 'They came for the hot stuff, just like any man calling on a tart' (*MLS*, 5). Having, at the outset, invoked and subverted Mother India in terms of her sexuality ('hot stuff', 'bloody mother', 'tart'), Rushdie continues to use this nationalist image in the text not as the symbol of mythic transcendence in the face of fragmentation -- in the way envisioned by Nehru -- but as a lethal and monstrous entity. He achieves this principally through his characterization of the mothers in the novel: Belle's mother-in-law, Epifania; Aurora's mother, Belle; Abraham's mother, Flory; and, above all, the narrator's mother, the artist Aurora. Thus, for Rushdie, the nation is neither fixed nor unchanging, but a mobile, changing construct, that is constantly constituting itself, despite the attempts to secure the figure by invoking the grounding operations of ontology.

Another significant way in which the text destabilizes hegemonic narratives of the nation/state is through the invocation of collective memory. I want, in this context, to recall Ernest Renan's foregrounding of collective amnesia as the fundamental principle behind the act of nation formation. The thrust of Renan's argument is that 'the most perfect national unity' is achieved when an entire people not only remember shared experiences, but also when they forget particular

diversities.³⁸ To be a French citizen, Renan argues, a Frenchman needs to have forgotten his origins as a Visigoth, Frank, Alan, Burgundian or Taifale. Clearly at work here is the erasure of personal history in the movement towards creating a cohesive and unitary history for the nation. However, what one finds in reading *The Moor's Last Sigh* is that Renan's thesis is turned on its head. For far from securing a cohesive national identity by forgetting historical diversities, *The Moor's Last Sigh* constructs political and social community precisely by remembering those very historical differences.

In the text, Abraham's mother, Flory Zogoiby, for instance, uses 'her memory and behind and beneath it the longer memory of the tribe' (*MLS*, 70) to recover the forgotten history of India's ancient Jewish minority community. As a member of the White Jewish community, Flora is one of the last descendants of Jews who fled Roman persecution in Palestine and arrived in India in the year 72 of the Christian era (*MLS*, 70-71). Flora's son, Abraham, similarly supplements the dominant national narrative of Indianness by recalling the more ancient history of the Black Jews from whom he is descended on his father's side. '[T]he Black Jews', says the narrator, 'had arrived in India long before the White, fleeing Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar's armies five hundred and eighty-seven years before the Christian era...and ...there were [also] the Jews who came from Babylon and Persia in 490-518 CE' (*MLS*, 71-72). The Moor's father,

³⁸Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', trans. by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8-22.

Abraham Zogoiby, here actually traces his cultural history back to the earliest Jews of the diaspora.

Similarly, the painter, Vasco Miranda, who comes to work for Aurora just before the declaration of Indian independence in 1947 is obsessed with retaining the purity of his Portuguese-Goan identity. Miranda wages a 'counter-revolution' (*MLS*, 156) against the dominant nationalist history, which threatens to subsume the distinctive individual history of Goa, a Portuguese colony before its annexation by India in 1961. Preoccupied with the preservation of his Portuguese cultural heritage, Miranda constantly recounts to the young Moor the 'tales of the heroism of Alfonso de Albuquerque who conquered Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur, one Yusuf Adilshah, on St Catherine's Day, 1510' (*MLS*, 156). For him, the 'colonialist [and] cultural supremacist' (*MLS*, 156) is not Britain, not even Portugal, but India. 'Down with Mother India ...Viva Mother Portuguese...I'm Portuguese' (*MLS*, 156, 167), he exclaims, resisting identification with the official narrative of Indian nationality which has subsumed the individual history of his Goan cultural identity.

These various voices and memories articulate how differently, even contradictorily, these characters imagine their Indianness. What must be emphasized is that in contesting any notion of a unitary national identity, Rushdie's aim is not simply to celebrate difference. By viewing the dynamics of national identity within a space of temporal flux, as the site for the competing imaginings of different ideological

and political interests, Rushdie's point is not that these different narratives override the nation, but in fact actually constitute it.

The terms with which *The Moor's Last Sigh* reconfigures Indian national space recalls for me another diasporic text, *The Trotter-Nama* (1988), a novel by the Allahabad-born writer, I. Allan Sealy. 'People want to hear stories about places so you make them up',³⁹ suggests the novel's narrator, as he sets out on his pursuit to recuperate the forgotten history of India's minority Anglo-Indian community, exuberantly mixing fact with fiction in the process.⁴⁰ The Anglo-Indians, of course, are a group that clearly lies outside of any definition of Indianness in terms of some 'pure' racial or cultural identity. Rushdie has elsewhere described this community

³⁹I. Allan Sealy, *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle 1977-1984* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 491.

⁴⁰Like *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *The Trotter-Nama* is informed by the idea of cultural miscegenation -- the Anglo-Indians are described in Sealy's book as being 'neither Indian nor European' or as 'two-in-one' (p. 282) -- to force a recognition of the complex tensions which undergird India's national community. Indeed, as with Saleem Sinai who exclaims that '[t]here are so many stories to tell, too many' (MC, 9) about the Indian nation, Sealy's narrator goes back to eighteenth-century (Mughal) India and retraces Persian, French and British influences. If *The Moor's Last Sigh* goes back four generations of the da Gama-Zogoiby family, Sealy's novel chronicles the lives of seven generations of Trotters; the 'excess of intertwined lives' (MC, 9) foregrounded by each novel given visual impact by the elaborate family tree that opens each book. *The Trotter-Nama*, like Rushdie's novel, as I will go on to show, is an amalgamation of different -- Persian, Mughal as well as European -- literary forms. In fact, Sealy calls his novel a 'nama', after the chronicle of court historians in the Mughal Empire. For Sealy, the hybridized art form of the 'nama' is a 'national' form which reflects the historical fact of Mughal migration into India; in Rushdie's novel, such cultural productions are viewed by the communalist Hindu politician, Fielding, as 'alien artefacts', relics of 'invader-history' that 'have to be erased' lest they besmirch 'India's holy soil' (MLS, 364). In *The Trotter-Nama*, too, we see the presence of multiple, often competing, stories in a narrative every bit as digressive and disrupted as *The Moor's Last Sigh's*. In both texts, the dense historical, cultural and mythical images in the novel don't exist simply on a thematic level but are part of a textuality that attempts to articulate the nation in terms of a cultural temporality of flux to undermine any return to an originary or 'authentic' Indianness.

as a 'post-colonial anomaly, the bastard child of Empire, sired on India by the departing British...and [looked upon] as forever inauthentic'.⁴¹

Crucially, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as in his other fictional works, Rushdie is concerned not only with exploring the experience of national belonging, but the very fictional conditions necessary for representing it. Integral to this concern is the rejection of the realist novel, whose rise as a genre has been found to be implicated in the rise of European nationalism. Benedict Anderson, as I have indicated earlier, was the first theorist of nationalism to trace the project of constructing a national identity back to the earliest novels emerging from the West. According to Anderson, the emergence of print capitalism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the making available of newspapers and novels in a standardised language, helped create the illusion of homogeneity in community that gave rise to the beginnings of a national consciousness. The conventions of the classic European realist novel, with its narrative and characters moving calendrically through what Anderson calls 'empty, homogeneous time', construct the nation as 'a solid community moving steadily down or up history'.⁴²

⁴¹Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, ed. by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (London: Vintage, 1997), p. xii. There is the possibility that Saleem himself is of Anglo-Indian parentage, given that his father may have been the departing colonial officer, William Methwold, who had a brief affair with his mother, Vanita.

⁴²Anderson, pp. 29-32.

In the Indian context, the post-independence novel in English, modelled predominantly on the European realist mode, has played a crucial role in the construction of a national imagination and in the production, and consolidation, of knowledge about the nation. Such novels, functioning as a synecdoche of nationalist discourse, helped construct the illusion of a homogeneous national identity through eliding material disparities and issues of cultural difference.⁴³

But while it is necessary to acknowledge that the conventions of the realist novel perform the ideologically important role of securing the idea of India as a collective and cohesive space in the immediate aftermath of independence, it must also be emphasized that the stabilities upon which the realist mode is predicated can no longer represent the full weight of the complexity of the cultural experience of the contemporary plural nation. Indeed, modes of representation that privilege historical continuity, spatial boundedness and cultural homogeneity are inadequate for the purpose of representing, what Rushdie himself variously describes as, the 'polyglot

⁴³See Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives: Cultural Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1996) for an examination of the relationship between literature and the formation of Indian national identity. In chapter five of her book, Singh reads Anita Desai's *The Clear Light of Day*, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* as examples of Indian realist novels written in English which can be seen to buttress the ideology of Indian nationalism through their construction of a national imagined community which elides issues of geographical and cultural difference. Though I am aware of the danger of reducing the complexities of these texts through the kind of reading that such an approach proposes, I nevertheless agree with Singh's principal contention that these texts can be seen to be largely based on realist modes of representation.

frenzy' (*MC*, 207), the 'multitudinous realities' (*MC*, 168), or 'the chaotic pluralism' (*MLS*, 45) of 'that vast, metamorphic, continent-sized...multiform' Indian nation.⁴⁴

The crisis in the representation of the nation is one that the author himself directly addresses in the text. This dilemma confronts the narrator's mother, the artist Aurora, who becomes a leading nationalist figure in India:

In the decade after Independence, Aurora fell into a deep, creative confusion, a semi-paralysis born of an uncertainty not merely about realism, but about the nature of the real itself. (*MLS*, 173)

The narrator sees the changes and developments in Aurora's paintings of the post-independence period as an outcome of her struggle to reconcile her sense of nationalism within the representational parameters of a 'sefless, dedicated -- even patriotic -- mimesis' (*MLS*, 173). Although she keeps company with a select circle of artistic friends, which includes such distinguished and committed social realists as Mulk Raj Anand and Saadat Hasan Manto, Aurora herself feels the need to give free rein to her own aesthetic and political temperament which clearly shows an affinity to the 'mythic-realist' mode. Rejecting the notion that only a 'clear-sighted naturalism ... would help India describe herself to herself' (*MLS*, 173), Aurora finds that the 'glorious too-muchness' of India (*MLS*, 202) can only be represented through the ideological and cultural contours of a 'mythic-romantic mode in which history,

⁴⁴Salman Rushdie, 'Introduction', in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, ed. by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. ix-x

family, politics and fantasy [jostle] each other' (*MLS*, 203). Through her Palimpstine, Aurora attempts the urgent task of constructing 'a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation' (*MLS*, 227) which interrogates the teleology of the realist mode. Consequently, she describes her reimagined national chronotope of Palimpstine in terms of temporal and spatial shifts: 'One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo'ing into another, or being under, or on top of' (*MLS*, 226).

Through the figure of Aurora, Rushdie suggests that realism, both in art and literature, is an inadequate tool with which to imagine the nation. Instead, Rushdie posits magic realism, which he defines as the 'mingling of fantasy and naturalism' (*IH*, 19), as the antidote to that peculiarly 'Indian disease' -- the 'urge to encapsulate the whole of reality' (*MC*, 75). In *Shame*, Rushdie foregrounds the mediated nature of his representation of Pakistan, in much the same way that Aurora defines her Palimpstine:

I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change. (*S*, 77-78)

In fact, being a migrant subject, Rushdie says he is already a 'fantasist' in that the tools and apparatuses of mimetic realism are no longer available to the migrant. 'Having experienced several ways of being', the migrant, says Rushdie,

suspects, and thus resists, reality; to be a migrant is to be forced to formulate 'a new relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats' (*IH*, 124-25).

In 'The Politics of the Possible', Kumkum Sangari argues that magic realism is a literary mode that 'answers an emergent society's need for renewed self-description and radical assessment, [and] displaces the established categories through which the West has construed other cultures either in its own image or as alterity'. More significantly, Sangari contends that magic realism must not be regarded as being constructed in a simple way upon a binary relationship between realism and fantasy; instead it can offer an enabling negotiation between a real *and* a possible. Such a mode is particularly appropriate for representing the cultural heterogeneity of nations which are 'at once different from and determined by the "linear" history of the West'.⁴⁵ In other words, what Sangari suggests is in keeping with Rushdie's own literary aesthetic to resist the assimilatory pull of the more 'stable' and linear Western literary modes like realism for one which combines 'real history' with fiction so as to convey a sense of the hybridity of the nation's space.

Much has been written on the magic-realist mode in Rushdie's fiction. References, for instance, have been made to Gothic conventions and to Rushdie's

⁴⁵Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', p. 221, 217. Throughout her article, Sangari, however, refers to 'magic realism' as 'marvellous realism', to reflect its Latin American origins in Alejo Carpentier's coinage of 'lo real maravilloso'. For other discussions on magic realism in Rushdie's work, see also, Jean-Pierre Durix, 'Magic Realism in *Midnight's Children*', *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 8.1 (1985), pp. 57-63.

indebtedness to Marquez. I wish to add a brief note to this body of critical opinion with reference to his use of folktales. The informal structure of the folktales -- their amenability to digression, interpolation, digression -- makes it a suitable basis of multiple stories, multiple histories that resist assimilation by more stable generic systems. Although the Moor's narration begins within the conventions of realism, with a clear sense of time and place ('I have lost count of the days that have passed since I fled the horrors of Vasco Miranda's mad fortress in the Andalusian mountain-village of Benengeli...'), soon elements of the fantastic enter the text. One example of this is the 'metamorphic tiles' (*MLS*, 76) which covered the floor, walls and ceiling of the Jewish synagogue. 'No two are identical', we are told (*MLS*, 75). More interestingly, the blue-and-white pictures on the tiles tell a story: 'Some said if you explored for long enough you'd find your own story in one of the blue-and-white squares, because the pictures on the tiles could change, were changing, generation by generation, to tell the story of the Cochin Jews' (*MLS*, 75-76). Thus, existing alongside the Moor's story of his family are the multiple, changing stories from the tiles which seem to exist in continuous dialectic with the 'other', that is, the Moor's narration. The transformative capacity of the tiles point to the understanding that throughout the text the mimetic exists in tension with the fabulous.

Rushdie's recourse to folktales also influences the narrative structure of his novel. Calling itself an 'Indian yarn' (*MLS*, 87), *The Moor's Last Sigh* energetically evokes

‘the poignancy and passion of the country's immense life’ (*MLS*, 173) and the heterogeneous character of its ‘national form’ through the Moor's decentred and spiralling ‘masala’ narrative with its entangled individual histories and jumbled genealogies cutting across different times and spaces. Such a narrative recalls the loose, informal, unbounded structure of the *Katha-Sarit-Sagara* (‘the ocean of stories’)⁴⁶ which allow for interpolation and digression. Such a form from folktales provides Rushdie with the space to accommodate a multiplicity of stories or perspectives that does not necessarily privilege one story over another. While digressions and other interruptions are not anti-realistic in and of themselves, they nevertheless shatter the illusion that the narrative is going on under its own momentum and in an end-directed fashion.

In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, the title of which clearly invokes the *Katha-Sarit-Sagara*, Rushdie elaborates on the process of narrative-construction embodied in such a traditional Indian literary form:

[T]he stories were held here in fluid form, they retained the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories; so that unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a store-room of yarns. It was not dead but alive...Nothing comes from nothing...no story comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old--it is the new combinations that make them new.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Several critics have already noted the influence of Indian story-telling conventions such as the *Katha-Sarit-Sagar* on Rushdie's earlier works. See for example, Jean-Pierre Durix, “‘The Gardener of Stories’: Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 29:1 (1993), pp. 114-22.

⁴⁷Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta, 1990), p. 72, 86

Clearly, the alternative space foregrounded in *Haroun* is the ocean, a site of heterogeneity and commingling of the thousand and one narratives that are the substance of the ocean's, and the nation's, history. Like the ocean in *Haroun*, which throws up ever-newer versions of stories by combining new stories with fragments of the old, the narrative form of *The Moor's Last Sigh* is constituted of 'an ocean of stories' where 'everybody talked at once' (*MLS*, 350). In telling his family story and invoking the multiple voices and memories as always-already implicated in the story he tells, the Moor is aware that there is no one single or originary story; only stories 'polished and fantasicated by many re-tellings' (*MLS*, 11).

In place of the authoritative and totalizing stance of the omniscient narrative, we are left with the gasping, breathless, asthmatic voice of a fast disintegrating first-person narrator - 'born too fast, born wrong, damaged, and growing old too quickly' (*MLS*, 344). Crucially, by having his narrator go through life in 'double quick' time (*MLS*, 143), Rushdie draws attention to the multiple cultures and geographies that intersect on his body. In contrast to Hindu nationalist discourse which seeks to locate Indianness as anterior, as existing prior and without reference to historical time, and that of secular nationalism which seeks to locate this time within a unified spatio-temporal continuum, the chronotope in *The Moor's Last Sigh* consists of a cultural temporality of ambivalence and flux. The Moor himself, aging

twice as fast as other human beings, lives life at dizzying speed. The Moor himself continually draws attention to his strange disease: 'I'll say it again: from the moment of my conception, like a visitor from another dimension, another time-line, I have aged twice as rapidly as the old earth and everyone thereupon' (*MLS*, 251). Thus, like the narrator of *Midnight's Children* whose physical dissolution becomes a complex allegory of the fate of the newly independent Indian nation, the Moor's 'premature-ageing disorder' (*MLS*, 145) is a metaphor for the various, disordered spatial and temporal configurations that internally mark the nation's space. By foregrounding the disintegrating body of the national subject, it is the text's intention to reject as impossible any notion of the nation's space-time coherence.

Crucially also, Rushdie's narrator frequently admits his lack of reliability. The narrative inadequacy of the narrator and his lack of authoritativeness are foregrounded several times in the text. At critical points in his narration, the Moor stops to question his own reliability as a narrator. Here are two such instances:

Reader: I have sought only to express a certain head-shaking puzzlement, but rest assured, I make no allegations. I stick to my story... (*MLS*, 177)

And once again:

Am I sentimentalising? Now that I have left it all behind, have I, among my many losses, also lost clear sight? -- It

may be said I have, but still I stand by my words.
(*MLS*, 350)

Although at the end of this line of self-examination, he insists that he is speaking the 'truth', the fact that he should stop to question his own narration, as well as his subsequent protestations of objectivity ('clear sight'), are enough to raise doubts about the reliability of his account.

Also, on several occasions, the Moor interrupts his narration to remind us of his limited perception and incomplete knowledge of events in the 'real', outer world. While this is another way in which the text reminds us of the Moor's presence as narrator, it also suggests that the narrator has very little or no investment in reality at all. On the goings-on in the Bombay underworld, for instance, he says he can only tell us what he knows -- 'Hidden factors? The meddling of secret/foreign hands? These I leave for wiser analysts to reveal' (*MLS*, 352). His partial or limited knowledge, and the possible unreliability of his account of historical events, are also in evidence when he tells us about the circumstances leading up to his conception at a hill-station four and a half months before he was born; aging twice as fast, the Moor needs only half the time in the womb. Although he insists he knows the facts -- 'While there can be no disputing that I was conceived in the Lord's Central House, Matheran' (*MLS*, 144) -- a little while later he intervenes in his story to raise doubts about his paternity: 'Nine months to the day before I arrived,

there was a missing night. But ... neither Aurora nor that late great leader [Nehru] have any proof of impropriety to answer.... How vain it would be of me baselessly to claim descent -- even illegitimate descent -- from so great a line!' (*MLS*, 177). What we witness here is the Moor questioning the legitimacy of his status as narrator, but although he tries immediately afterwards to squash any doubt he might have raised, the fact that he should raise such doubts in the first place is meant to put us on our guard about the reliability of his narration. Interestingly, the suspicions raised concern the indeterminacy of his paternal origins. While the text's blurring of the 'truth' of his origins is tied in with its larger ideological project to question all truths, the consideration that the Moor is possibly the illegitimate child of the 'father' of the Indian nation offers another angle from which he might be telling his story of India.

Significantly, the choice of a first-person narrator who is also the protagonist is inextricably connected to the text's aim to call attention to the narrative process. The absence of an omniscient voice to order and subsume the 'the clamour of the voices' (*IH*, 393) in the novel is, as I've suggested, a technique to resist the totalizing historical consciousness of the traditional realist narrative. By decentring traditional realist narrative forms and by replacing such forms, and reader expectation of such modes of presentation, with a narration that undermines its own potential control of the content, *The Moor's Last Sigh* becomes a text which draws attention to the self-reflexive nature of narrative, or what Rushdie elsewhere calls

the 'fictionality of fiction' (*IH*, 393). One of the ways in which Rushdie stresses the constructedness of the text and the boundaries of representation is by staging encounters between 'real' and 'fictional' characters. In the novel, the actress Nargis, known to virtually every Indian for her role as 'Mother India' in the film by that name, and her husband, Sunil, who plays her son in the film, are guests at a dinner party thrown by Aurora. By making the 'real' Nargis appear in a fictional text and having her meet other fictional characters, the fictiveness of the image of 'Mother India' is emphasized, thus problematizing the ontological basis on which the nation's identity as timeless and eternal is constructed.

The Moor's Last Sigh thus foregrounds the issue of national identity, in particular that its construction is closely implicated with the fictional process. The multiple digressions from the main narrative of the Moor's life, the absence of a well-defined, centralizing and statist narrative, the playfulness that underlies the construction of the Moor's narrative, and the instances when the narrator cannot resist interrupting his own story to observe himself in the process of telling it, are all devices that call attention to the text's status as fiction and to the processes of representation. In particular, by drawing attention to the many and complex pressures that impinge on the act of composition, Rushdie suggests that the nation does not exist independent of the text, but is in fact deeply implicated in it. Also, by focusing on the difficulties, limitations, inadequacies and intricacies of the

processes of narrative itself, it is Rushdie's aim to disrupt the boundaries of representation so as to resist any imposed or totalizing concept of reality.

The contention that the nation, like the novel, is a constructed space is also articulated in the essay, 'Is Nothing Sacred?' (1990), in which Rushdie argues that the space of novelistic discourse is a site in which different, incompatible and even hostile languages collide and are negotiated. Echoing the views of the Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, who himself draws from Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel, Rushdie argues that 'the novel is born from the very fact that we do not understand one another, because unitary, orthodox language has broken down' (*IH*, 420). It is because of its dialogic nature which is able to bring together plural and multiple worlds without silencing their differences, that the novel, Rushdie argues, can offer us 'something new', a 'transcendence' of the limiting and vitiating perspective of the monological narrative (*IH*, 420).

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, it is this language of 'transcendence' of the racial or ethnic categories undergirding *nationalist* dynamics that is posited as one of the ways in which newness can enter the nation. The 'masala' is invoked in the novel as hot and strong stuff -- the 'stink' and 'heavy...odours of cardamom and cumin' (*MLS*, 90) exists as a subtext throughout the narrative -- that resists bland assimilation; although the spices come together in a mixture, each of the ingredients still retain their powerful astringent differences. Rushdie has himself stated that the dialogic 'selfhood of

India [which] is so capacious, so elastic, that it accommodates one billion kinds of difference'⁴⁸ offers a new paradigm for negotiating the imagined community of the nation.

Significantly, it is the idea of spices that, in the novel, is linked with the text's problematizing of the 'discovery' of India. In particular, the text employs the trope of 'discovery' to call into question the language of colonization which represented newly 'discovered' lands as an empty space on which the colonizers then inscribed their linguistic, cultural and, later, territorial claims. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie undermines the notion of a Portuguese 'discovery' of Indian territory:

Pepper is what brought Vasco de Gama's tall ships across the ocean...in the period called Discovery-of-India -- but how could we be discovered when we were not covered before? (*MLS*, 4)

In rejecting the ontological bias of colonial discourse, in which the Indian nation state is also implicated, the text offers us its own 'discovery' of India in terms, not of some originating notion of identity, but as a space of multiple cultural 'presences'. Again here, in speaking of the nation's many layered cultural and historical foundations, it is the idea of multiple beginnings that the text invokes.

It is in this respect that we are asked to view the significance of the novel's organizing metaphor of the palimpsest. The idea of palimpsest suggests that every narrative betrays the constitutive presence of other possible narratives, so that nothing

⁴⁸Salman Rushdie, 'The Midnight Nation', *The Observer*, 10 August 1997, pp. 14-15 (p. 15).

can claim the status of originary authority. By inscribing layer upon layer of history and culture on Indian national space, the text resists the essentialist attempt to retrieve a culture free from colonial or foreign inscriptions. In the novel, the palimpsest operates on several levels. The first, more obvious, image is Aurora's masterpiece, 'The Moor's Last Sigh', which portrays Boabdil's leavetaking of Granada in 1492, over which Miranda has painted his own version of the Sultan's expulsion. Another palimpsest is invoked in the novel's title; the 'Moor' refers to the narrator, it also refers to the Moorish sultan, Boabdil, in which case the 'last sigh' can refer to either Boabdil's lament as he leaves the Alhambra for the last time or to the Moor's cry for the 'lost world' of Bombay as he himself speaks his last words to us.

Tying together the multiple resonances and spatial and temporal ambivalences of its individual palimpsests, *The Moor's Last Sigh* suggests that the palimpsestic nation, such as that which inspires Aurora's Palimpstine, is constituted neither primordially nor monolithically, but is the complex site of multiple accretions. This is one of the areas where we can read empowerment in Rushdie's constructions of nation. Rather than emphasize the search for the original, the multiple 'presences' in the nation space foreground reinscription, cross-inscription, a writing over. In so doing, the text suggests that it is in the process of signification, the endless play of difference, wherein every sign is inscribed in a chain within which it refers to other signs by means of the systematic play of differences, that newness enters the nation. In short, the

palimpsest is a space of hybridity itself, in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities. Such a view of nation and national identity, as I've suggested, eschews the notion of a transcendental original as the definitive point of reference. The search for the original 'Moor's Last Sigh' sought after by Vasco Miranda can only mean death. Aoi Ue, the picture restorer together with whom the Moor is imprisoned in Miranda's Benengeli fortress, discovers that in having removed the top layer of the painting to reveal the layer beneath, she has, like Scheherazade, brought death upon herself.⁴⁹ Miranda is killed by the Moor who then escapes, himself dying.

Crucially, the Moor's narrative ends with Moraes speaking to us from Granada, within sight of the Alhambra, Boabdil's lost capital, and, like Bombay before its binary Hindu-Muslim divisions, a city of teeming multiplicity before its conquest by the Catholic rulers, Isabella and Ferdinand. The Alhambra was also the scene, five centuries before, of the expulsion of the narrator's Jewish and Muslim ancestors at the onset of the Spanish Inquisition. If 1492 marked the dispersal of Granada's persecuted religious communities into India, then Moraes' return to Spain in 1992, a year that witnessed India's worst communal clashes in recent history, is in a sense a reversal of the trajectory set five hundred years ago. In both historical

⁴⁹Here, Rushdie invokes Scheherazade's plight at the hands of King Shahryar in *The Thousand and One Nights*, whom she must keep continuously entertained by her stories if she is to save her own life. It seems to me that Rushdie is here emphasizing his belief in the life-affirming value of story-telling.

epochs -- fifteenth-century Granada and twentieth-century India -- what has been lost is the regeneration promised by intercultural mingling and the cohabitation of different groups on equal terms. In this sense, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* by Tariq Ali,⁵⁰ another writer of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, can be read as a complement to *The Moor's Last Sigh*. For if Rushdie's novel represents the impact of the rise of Hindu nationalism on the erstwhile intercultural ambience of the Indian nation, Ali's novel offers a depiction of the persecution of Muslims and the smaller community of Jews by the Catholic Inquisition, leading to their expulsion from Andalusia in 1492 and bringing to an end centuries of Moorish and Jewish life on the Iberian peninsular. Both texts ultimately point to the kinds of communities that are lost to the violent politics of exclusion.

Towards the close of the novel, the Moor, with Bombay going up in flames behind him, becomes increasingly disillusioned. Rejecting his Indian national identity, he instead affirms his ethnic identity as a Jew and leaves for Spain:

I found myself looking forward to Spain -- to Elsewhere. I was going to the place whence we had been cast out, centuries ago. Might it not turn out to be my lost home, my resting-place, my promised land? Might it not be my Jerusalem? (*MLS*, 376)

However, if the Moor can no longer claim India as home, neither can he 'return' to the 'pure' space of his ancestral home. Arriving in Spain, and going out for a walk in the

⁵⁰Tariq Ali, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992).

city, the narrator experiences the 'unheimlich' terrors of experiencing home as not-home. For instead of the feeling of belonging he had assumed he would feel here, he finds himself

in a most un-Spanish thoroughfare.... in the midst of a crowd ... speaking English, American, French, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and what might have been either Dutch or Afrikaans. But these were not visitors...and behaved as people do on their own territory. This denatured part of Benengeli had become theirs. There was not a single Spaniard to be seen. (*MLS*, 390)

Caught between the desire for home and the reality of homelessness, Moraes Zogoiby is compelled to accept his identity as 'a nobody from nowhere, like no-one, belonging to nothing.... All my ties had loosened. I had reached an anti-Jerusalem: not a home, but an *away*. A place that did not bind, but dissolved' (*MLS*, 388, my emphasis).

On a textual level of interpretation, the movement outwards, *away* from 'home', is connected to the larger purpose of Rushdie's dialogic text to resist the teleology of closure in the treatment of cultural identity and in the creation of an *international* imaginary. The primary constitution of narrative, and of culture, the text suggests, is a plurality of contending and diverging social voices with no possibility of a decisive resolution into a 'monologic' truth. It is this 'incompleteness' of the social and political imaginary of the nation that the Moor's outward trajectory exemplifies as opposed to the finality and closure sought by the Hindu nationalist construction of nation. While the absence of closure draws attention to the processual and pluralized

conceptualization of community, it also shows national life in continual negotiation and interaction, not always among a group of homogeneous voices but also among contending or opposing voices.

It is significant that it is from this location, outside India, from the ambivalence of his location in the Alhambra, that the Moor looks back and remembers his life in Bombay. The Moor's entire story of his family, like the story that the text tells of the twentieth-century Indian nation, has, in fact, been narrated from an 'away' location. More crucially, as I have suggested earlier, this 'away' is also the imagined -- cultural, historical, political, and ideological -- (migrant) space through and in which hybrid, transnational narratives of identity can be formulated. The Moor's remembering of his family history from the geographical 'away' of the Alhambra is metaphorized in the text, as I will show later, in Aurora's 'Moor paintings' which consistently use 'Arab Spain to re-imagine India' (*MLS*, 227). Like Boabdil who looks back on his kingdom and whose sigh is a lament at the death of syncretism in the Andalusian peninsula, the Moor also looks on his Bombay, 'no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy' (*MLS*, 376).

Crucially in this respect, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is the only novel in Rushdie's oeuvre in which the narrator-protagonist reconstructs his entire narrative of the Indian nation from a position outside its geographical boundaries. It

can thus be surmised that it is in this text that Rushdie comes closest to approximating the hybrid and shifting dynamics of his in-between position as the critical and self-reflexive insider-outsider.

Significantly, this 'away' space that the text formulates has correspondences with Rushdie's favourite city -- Bombay -- and in the remaining section of this chapter I would like to look at how Rushdie continues to problematize Indian national-cultural identity by plotting out its instabilities through the city spaces of Bombay. Indeed the figure of the city occupies a central place in Rushdie's oeuvre; '[t]he city as reality and as a metaphor is at the heart of all my work' (*IH*, 404), he has observed.

It is important in this context to note the terminology with which Bombay is invoked as a conceptual space. If it is elsewhere described as the 'most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch of Indian cities' (*IH*, 404), in this novel it is also the 'inexhaustible Bombay of excess' (*MLS*, 193), the 'not Proper, but Improper Bombay' (*MLS*, 126), 'the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy' (*MLS*, 376); the imagery invoked by words such as 'excess', 'improper', 'hotchpotch', 'mongrel' are all in keeping with the 'masala' aesthetic which is aimed at repudiating any move to valorize the notion of cultural purity or homogeneity. This imagery also invokes a vitality, exuberance and haphazard energy that depends crucially upon the values of mixedness, miscegenation,

chaos and disorganized complexity. In *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani writes:

The political imagination of a movement like the Shiv Sena shares with the nationalist one the ambition to have a modern, rational, clean and functional city. But it differs entirely in its idea of the India in which such a city can exist.... The difference lies in its conception of the cultural substance and units that constitute India. The Shiv Sena visualizes India not as a land of cosmopolitan miscegenation, but as a hierarchical grid that contains internally homogeneous communities, each insulated from the others.⁵¹

In light of Khilnani's observations, it is clear that both Hindu and secular nationalist conceptions of Bombay form the backdrop out of and against which Rushdie launches his own reconceptualization of the city. If Rushdie is principally concerned with interrogating the Shiv Sena party's⁵² purifying and exclusionary ethic to efface the city's plural character, he also, in a parallel move, destabilizes the secular nationalist's narrative of the city as a cohesive and ordered homogeneous space. Instead, he invokes the miasmatic air and labyrinthine disorder of the city. In fact, the violence and indeterminate atmosphere of the city, its menacing and disorientating air, is literalized at one point when the narrator finds himself deep in the city's underbelly

⁵¹Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (Hamish Hamilton: London, 1997), p.144

⁵²The Shiv Sena party, a close ally of the BJP, enjoys political control in Maharashtra, the state of which Bombay is capital city. The party is said to have orchestrated the riots in Bombay in the wake of the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya. In its determination to win support, it has polarized the city's residents into majority and minority communities. It is also said to have instituted a pogrom against the Muslim residents of the city, branded as 'Mughal invaders'. By labelling them 'Mughals', it is the intention of the Hindu nationalists to treat Muslims as migrants, outsiders, with no prior claim to the land. This is part of their agenda to erase what they consider to be India's invader-history.

where the 'heat intensified the stench of ordure. Mosquitoes, straw, pools of fluid, and everywhere, in the dark, cockroaches... Something -- a defilement had begun' (*MLS*, 286). The next day he is told he is in Bombay Central lock-up.

Crucially also, the narrator refers to Bombay as 'the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet the most Indian of Indian cities' (*MLS*, 350). By describing Bombay's origins in terms of bastardy and miscegenation, and by using those terms to define Indianness, it is Rushdie's intention not only to resist the nationalist insistence on the cultural purity of the city space and its borders but also to undermine the sacredness of its genealogy. Not only in his mixed ancestry, but in his excessive physical growth, the narrator resembles the city: 'Like the city itself...I mushroomed into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow' (*MLS*, 161). Significantly also, it is through the Moor's Christian-Muslim-Jewish genealogy that Bombay is linked to the Alhambra as a symbol of the vitality of cultural mixing. Rushdie deliberately sets out to resist the austere and intransigent idiom in which the nation's identity as exclusively Hindu and unitary is being articulated. By representing the city in terms of its shifting and unstable identity, Rushdie attempts to construct a space that is so syncretic it cannot be seized or possessed by any one group.

It is Bombay's crowds that offer Rushdie the appropriate metaphor with which to render the presence of cultural difference. For Rushdie, 'the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous,

many things at once. But the India of the communalists is none of these things' (*IH*, 32). 'In Bombay', says the Moor, 'you live crushed in this crazy crowd, you are deafened by its blaring horns of plenty, and...your own story has to shove its way through the throngs' (*MLS*, 128). Indeed, it is the trope of the 'crowd itself, the dense crowd, the crowd without boundaries' (*MLS*, 60) that the text suggests create the unpredictable energies of chance, change and commingling that are necessary to ensure the continued narrativization of the city's, and the nation's, spaces. Through this image Rushdie suggests that the city, like all narratives, is improvisational and contingent.

In *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban strongly emphasizes the city as a shifting space 'filled with colourful entries that have no relation to each other, no determining, rational, or economic scheme'.⁵³ Such a space is the site not of a fixed, unchanging identifications, but that of a kind of ambivalence that lends itself to reconstruction and adaptation. This gestures to Rushdie's own intention to narrativize Bombay not in images of permanence, hardness and clarity, but in terms that suggest fluidity, softness or imprecise distinctions. For instance, he tells us about the 'great city's powers of dilution' (*MLS*, 351), about how 'all rivers flowed into its human sea' (*MLS*, 350), and about its 'insaan-soup' (*MLS*, 350). 'On the way to Bombay', he says, 'the rivers of blood⁵⁴ were usually diluted, other rivers poured into them' (*MLS*, 350).

⁵³Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988).

⁵⁴The reference here to Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech, in which he proclaimed his idea of England as a racially pure and unitary nation, is unmistakable.

Rushdie's foregrounding of the softening, dissolving effects of the city has as its impetus the desire to undermine the claims of cultural purists which tolerate no admixture or impurity. Such imagery also emphasizes the plasticity of the city and the malleability of its surfaces and appearances that are able to resist absolute truths.

Crucially, it is the urban expanses of the city as a liberating space that, as the Moor tells us, both informs and inspires Aurora's visual representation of the Indian nation in the series of paintings she calls 'Mooristan'. Thus her Mooristan, behind which is also multicultural Spain, is 'a golden age' where 'Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains' (*MLS*, 227) co-exist with each other, in and through their differences. Her re-imagined India is a place where:

worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and wash off away. Place where an air-man can drown in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk, but also choke off, on air. (*MLS*, 226)

What is striking is the preponderance of the images of sea and water in Aurora's visual representation of the nation. Significantly also, in 'Mooristan', it is the boundaries -- 'the water's edge, the dividing line between two worlds' (*MLS*, 226) -- that are foregrounded:

At the water's edge strange composite creatures slithered to and fro across the frontier of the elements. Often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest that you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another. But was it a waterworld being painted over the world of air, or vice versa? Impossible to be sure. (*MLS*, 226)

Although the boundaries between land and sea are foregrounded in Aurora's alternative topography of the nation, they do not function as lines of absolute division. In fact, Mooristan is a 'land-sea-scape in which the land could be fluid and the sea stone-dry' (*MLS*, 227), collapsing the notion of impermeable boundaries in order to problematize any notion of a secure, bounded and cohesive national space. Such a reordering of national space which largely eschews the idea of the impermeability of borders can be seen to appropriate the image of the island. The narrator tells us that Aurora's urge to redefine the social and political community of the nation through the metaphor of the intermingling of land and water itself derives from Aurora's childhood spent in Cabral Island, 'where the land pretended to be part of England, but was washed by an Indian sea' (*MLS*, 227). The implications of the play of land and water inherent in Bombay's status as a reclaimed construction⁵⁵ are significant here, for it is the image of the waves beating against the shore and breaking down boundaries which is the underlying impetus for Aurora's re-visioned Mooristan. The idea of the island is one that can be seen to have

⁵⁵The city of Bombay is largely reclaimed or constructed from the sea: '[a]s late as two hundred years ago, the island of Bombay was one of a group of distinct small rocky islets, ranged in nearly parallel rows and separated by the waters of the sea. Originally, then, before the work of silting up and of the reclamation of the ground had progressed, this single island was an archipelago of mere island rocks, divided by narrow creeks. And in prehistoric times, it seems to have been a portion of the mainland. When broken off from it by volcanic agency that portion became a cluster of rocky islets, some say seven to correspond with the Heptanesia of the Greeks; but actually there are about 25 islands, known as the Bombaygroup' (from J. Gerson da Cunha, *The Origin of Bombay*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1900, reprinted 1993), p. 23.

important implications for national identity-construction and cultural imagining. Gillian Beer, in her analysis of the island metaphor in the writings of Virginia Woolf, suggests that the figure of the island in England's imagining of the nation emphasizes centrality and insularity for its controlling image is the enclosure of land within surrounding shores.⁵⁶ In this sense, the cultural idea represented by the island, the binding in of the land by the sea, is closely implicated with the concept of nationhood which typically projects the stability and unity of the projected nation. However, in Aurora's 'land-sea-scape', the projected space of the nation is not contained within the determining contours of 'land-space'. Instead, the continual beating of water against the land undermines the notion of stability inherent to the cultural idea of the island by destabilizing the impermeability of boundaries to set national culture in flux.

Rushdie's critique of the fixity of the nation-space and its borders is already one that is suggested in *Shame*. Omar Khayyam, who inhabits the border town of Q, finds himself in the grip of a terrifying visceral experience each time he approaches the border post. Indeed, for Omar, who is terrified of the dizzy spells and vertigo that await him every time he nears the border, 'the crossing of the frontier' is 'the worst of all his nightmares':

⁵⁶Gillian Beer, 'The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (Routledge: London, 1990) pp. 265 - 90 (p. 280).

[H]e ought to know that the border is the edge of his world, the rim of things, and that the real dreams are these far-fetched notions of getting across that supernatural frontier into some wild hallucination of a promised land. (*S*, 268)

By 'fixing' Omar to his land and thus making it impossible for him to move across the border, the national boundaries of Peccavistan assert their hegemonic hold over him. Unable to be 'borne-across', Omar, then, will always remain 'a creature of the edge, a peripheral man' (*S*, 24). For him there is no possibility of cultural translation -- only the terrible choice between his oppressive homeland of Nishapur and the void, between shame and shamelessness.

As a counterpoint to *Shame's* unitary chronotope of *Peccavistan*, then, *The Moor's Last Sigh* offers us Mooristan, where land and water border on each other, without completely effacing either. Significant also is the processes of language used to describe Aurora's re-imagined India of Mooristan. On her easel, '[t]he Alhambra quickly became a not-quite Alhambra' and the 'hill became a not-Malabar looking down upon a not-quite-Chowpatty' (*MLS*, 226). The semantic instability in this description signals a collapse and blurring of binary divisions. The text deploys the loss of stable language combinations to suggest that national space is inherently heterogeneous and resistant to a homogenizing unity. Also, this technique of linguistic play and strange verbal conjoinings calls attention to the linguistic process, foregrounding yet again the text's intention to highlight the processes of representation.

In a sense, this is as a strategy to destabilize the intransigent idiom in which the formation of a putative Hindu nation is being articulated.

The place of Bombay in Rushdie's reconstruction of nation is thus crucial. In appropriating its island image to show us that the boundaries of places cannot be drawn with binary precision and in using its ambivalent energies to problematize hegemonic conceptions of national space, the text suggests that the nation's city spaces are places in which the narrative of Indianness continues to be written, and in which form is continually *transformed* to convey a vital sense of the nation's complex heterogeneities.

Chapter Three

AMITAV GHOSH

All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a 'natural' nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact.¹

In 'The Diaspora in Indian Culture', Amitav Ghosh writes that what Indians of the diaspora carry with them are not so much items (such as language or religion) but processes. 'India exported with her population', he argues, 'not a language, as other civilizations have done, but a linguistic process -- the process of adaptation to heteroglossia'.² Thus, Ghosh sees in the diaspora a significance of the kind that draws attention to the peripheries of culture, which he considers to be a distinguishing feature of Indian culture. He contrasts this condition with the notion of 'the colonial' in Britain. In Britain, Ghosh clarifies, to be a colonial, whether Canadian, Australian, or South African, is to be imperfectly British.³ Ghosh's point is that because Indian culture is constructed out of heteroglossia,⁴ out of conditions of

¹Amitav Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia: At Large in Burma* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998), p.100.

²Amitav Ghosh, 'The Diaspora in Indian Culture', *Public Culture*, 2.1 (1989), pp. 73-78 (p.75).

³Ibid., p. 77.

⁴According to Bakhtin, most texts have historically been 'monological'. A monological text, like the epic or the pastoral, is one which essentially has a single, homogeneous and relatively uniform logic. The novel, however, according to Bakhtin, works through 'heteroglossia', that is, by juxtaposing the different levels of discourse within a given language, no one of which can fully capture that language's variety and resourcefulness. See, Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.368.

dialogue in which differences that permit the process of 'othering' to occur are already inscribed, there is no such thing as being 'imperfectly Indian'. Such a term, Ghosh implies, sets up a presumed authenticity, the idea of a 'perfect' cultural identity, untouched by difference, which heteroglossia rejects as always-already untenable.

I begin this chapter with this particular quote from Ghosh for it highlights one of my main reasons for selecting him as one of the novelists under study in this thesis. Although Ghosh's diasporic affiliations are not as clear or as straightforward as those of the other novelists, all migrants who have made their homes in other geopolitical spaces, his embrace of the diaspora aesthetic is evidenced in his fundamental rejection of the purity of cultural identities and the idea of the coherence of 'home'. Born in Calcutta in 1956 and raised for much of his youth there, Ghosh has also lived and studied in New Delhi, and spent some time in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Sri Lanka before leaving to pursue a doctorate in social anthropology at the University of Oxford, England. His ethnographic fieldwork and research have entailed extensive travelling through the Middle East, North Africa and South-East Asia, in the course of which Ghosh lived for a few years in Iran and Egypt. He presently lives and teaches in New York. For Ghosh, whose life has been marked by multiple movements across geographic, linguistic, national and cultural boundaries, diaspora offers a valuable 'transnational' perspective from

cultural boundaries, diaspora offers a valuable 'transnational' perspective from which to destabilize homogeneous conceptions of national culture and identity. These cross-border movements, in addition to Ghosh's understanding of the alternative history of Bengal, his intensive travelling in and knowledge of the Middle East, familiarity with the cultures and histories of South-East Asia, as well as his professional interest in anthropology have provided him with a unique and valuable insight into the processes of cultural construction and representation.

As a Western-trained Indian anthropologist, Ghosh is only too aware of the privilege with which anthropology as a discipline has, from the moment of its inception, employed the concept of culture in the service of imperial ideology. From the start, anthropology has sought to locate and define modernity by contrasting it with its non-Western, primitive other; the principle of contrast itself suggesting the discipline's implicit epistemological conception of cultures as totalities with clear boundaries. The *fixing* of cultures through boundary-making asserts the idea of cultures as pre-given, bounded and unchanging rather than the products of history. The assumptions behind the construction and representation of cultures in anthropology are not innocent as they have been shown to underpin the ideological bases of a range of contexts of domination, such as Orientalism, colonialism and nationalism.⁵

⁵Stephen Tyler, in 'Postmodern Ethnography: from Document of the Occult to Occult Document', claims that ethnography is the 'superordinate discourse to which all other discourses are relativized and in which

Ghosh's interrogation of conceptual boundaries as fixed, unequivocal and unnegotiable is directly implicated in his intention to interrogate the conventions that install the West as a reference point for anthropological knowledge. In the short story, 'The Imam and the Indian',⁶ for instance, the narrator, in the course of conducting his ethnographic research on kinship patterns in a small village in a 'quiet corner of the Nile Delta', finds evidence of considerable migration within the village community. This disrupts his conventional anthropological expectations of the village as a land of stasis, belonging to an autonomous, authentic culture. 'Every man in [the village] was a traveller', the disconcerted narrator discovers. Indeed, his 'ancient and settled' fieldsite displays all 'the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge'.⁷ Migration, cultural contact and interaction, epitomized in the constant movement out and into the village, the narrator learns, has been a practice implicit to the life of the village, going as far back to the twelfth century.

James Clifford uses this episode from Ghosh's text in his article, 'The Transit Lounge of Culture',⁸ and in his more recent work, *Routes*,⁹ as a 'parable'

they find their meaning and justification'. Quoted in Peter Childs & Patrick Williams (eds), *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 187.

⁶Amitav Ghosh, 'The Imam and the Indian', *Granta*, 20 (1986), pp. 135-46 (p. 140). This story was later developed and expanded into *In An Antique Land* (1993); it was subsequently reprinted in the collection entitled *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (see Angelika Bammer, 1994) providing further evidence of the story's significance not only to anthropology but to the field of cultural criticism in general.

⁷Ibid., p. 140.

⁸James Clifford, 'The Transit Lounge of Culture', *TLS*, 4596 (3 May 1991), p. 7.

⁹James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 1997), pp. 1-6.

identity in ethnographic studies. As Clifford views it, Ghosh's conflation of a traditional, rural village with the busy restlessness of an airport transit lounge is a concept-metaphor that profoundly exemplifies the complex, intersecting trajectory of 'routes', of practices of crossing, movement and displacement, that weave¹⁰ through and unsettle the statist metaphor of 'roots', of anthropological assumptions of cultural coherence, continuity and authenticity. Ghosh himself, as I've noted elsewhere, has argued that the Indian diaspora is not so much predisposed to 'roots', the desire to return to the 'homeland', as it is to 'routes', the ability to recreate a distinct culture in discrepant locations.¹¹

Indeed, for Ghosh, diaspora is a phenomenon which undermines notions of cultural purity and political enclosure. The most obvious way in which Ghosh's texts disrupt any notion of the boundedness of cultural spaces and temporalities is to construct culture as a site of different spatial intersections. His first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), links a small village in rural Bengal to the mythical 'boom' city of

¹⁰My choice of term 'weave' here is deliberate for it strikes important resonances within the context of Ghosh's work. In Ghosh's texts, weaving functions as a synecdoche of that 'intricate network of differences' in which all cultures are enmeshed. For instance, in Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, the decision by the village schoolmaster, Balaram, that the young Alu should train as a weaver is based on his understanding that the history of the technology of weaving cuts across national borders, evoking the transcultural nature of human experience. As Balaram puts it, '[the loom] has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together' (p. 55). By contesting the idea of the impermeability of national borders, weaving can be seen to function as a signifier of 'routes' instead of 'roots'. See also, for instance, Robert Dixon, "'Travelling in the West': The Writing of Amitav Ghosh", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 31.1 (1996), pp. 3-24.

¹¹Ghosh, 'The Diaspora in Indian Culture', pp. 73-78.

Reason (1986), links a small village in rural Bengal to the mythical 'boom' city of al-Ghazira in the Gulf and the desert town of El-Oued in Algeria; *The Shadow Lines* (1988) criss-crosses Calcutta, Dhaka and London, uniting them in a complex network of personal and national events which stretches from the late 1930s to the early 1980s; *In An Antique Land* (1993) moves back and forth, in time and space, between the Mediterranean, the Middle East and South Asia to sharply critique the reification of differences between people and cultures in the contemporary age; *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) unravels the experiences of an Egyptian computer-programmer based in New York, whose pursuit of truth transports him into and out of the nineteenth-century Calcutta laboratory of Ronald Ross and the Calcutta of the 1990s; and Ghosh's most recent publication, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), in tracing the troubled history of these South-East Asian nations, flits between present-day Cambodia and Marseille in the early years of the century, and also interweaves the contemporary narrative of Burma with its pre- and early independence past.

In this respect, while Ghosh's texts construct a complex cartography of crosscutting movements and affiliations within and across nation-spaces, the boundaries that they explore and explode are not only temporal and spatial but also generic. Crossing and blurring the disciplinary boundaries between fiction, ethnography, history and travel-writing, these texts illustrate the dynamics that

sustain Ghosh's oeuvre -- a rejection of the separatist, binary logic of boundaries.

In drawing attention to this central aspect of Ghosh's aesthetic, the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, in his review of *In An Antique Land*, points out that the text, which criss-crosses Fez and Seville in the West, through Cairo and Aden around the Red Sea, across the Indian Ocean to Calicut and the Malabar Coast, constructs a 'mobile, polyglot and virtually borderless region' which today would be 'divided, like the rest of the globe, into singular and separated national States'.¹² In the text, a work that defies classification in a specific genre by destabilizing the boundaries between ethnography, history and fiction, the twelfth-century *geniza* world history of Arab-Jewish trade routes to and from India functions as a representation of an undivided community, one characterized by cultural mixing, an absence of ghettos and multilingualism, where people of distinct races, religions, cultures and languages coexisted. This is evidenced, for instance, when the novel's narrator looks for material on Sidi Abu-Hasira, a Muslim saint converted from Judaism. His search for information under such headings as 'religion' and 'Judaism' in the library proves unsuccessful; the narrator only finds the information he requires when he looks under the categories of 'anthropology' and 'folklore'. This bears out the narrator's suspicion that such categories as 'religion', which were largely formulated 'to suit the patterns of

¹²Clifford Geertz, 'Review of Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*', *The Australian*, 25 August 1993, p. 30.

the Western academy',¹³ do not accommodate a more syncretic history that dissolves boundaries between private and public domains, between local communities and concepts of the nation.¹⁴ Indeed, this twelfth-century *geniza* world, like the fifteenth-century Spain of the Alhambra where Jews, Christians and Muslims co-existed, and which Rushdie invokes in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, offers an alternative history and a cultural critique of the current national, racial and religious separations that characterize our contemporary age. Without reducing the complexities of that historical period, it would be possible to say that lines of identity were then drawn less absolutely, and not along ethnic or racial lines. Ghosh implies that in this age, the divisiveness of cultural difference has proven so strong that solutions to the problem of dealing with difference are weakly sought, either in a totalizing brand of official nationalism, which amalgamates difference with the objective of forging a unified whole, or in ethnic separatism, which rejects the means to negotiate difference.

In the sections that follow, I wish to explore Ghosh's reformulations of home and nation in *The Shadow Lines*, which constitutes the most extended, and explicit, of Ghosh's elaborations on the concepts of home, nation and belonging. The principal question that will shape my analysis in this chapter is how the problematic of home and belonging, an issue of central significance in the

¹³Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992), p. 342.

¹⁴Gauri Viswanathan, 'Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge', <http://shr.stanford.edu/shreview/5-1/text/viswanathan.html>.

writings of Ghosh, is approached and addressed through the rethinking of cultural and national boundaries. The border, of course, presupposes binary oppositions, for central to its definition is its function of separating entities, which in turn situates us within the confrontational dialectics of self/other, sameness/difference, inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion. My point here is to emphasize that within the framework of binary thinking, inherent in conventional understandings of culture, differences are often perceived in terms of clear-cut oppositions; things can only be one or the other. My illustration of this point draws on a reading of the Russian semiotician, Yuri Lotman, who suggests that every culture ‘begins by dividing the world into “its own” internal space and “their” external space’.¹⁵ This division of the world into the spaces marked as ‘self’ and ‘other’ is significant, according to Lotman, since it reveals the workings of a binary division where the ‘other’ is perceived not only in opposition to the ‘self’ but also as that which exists beyond the border line, literally ‘out of bounds’, symbolizing the foreign, the impermissible. A similar dialectic of spatial division is articulated in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, where ‘home’ and ‘non-home’ are identified as the basic divisions of geographic space, in the same way that ‘self’ and ‘other’ represent the basic divisions of psychic space.¹⁶ But what is significant about Bachelard's articulations is the unspoken supposition that home and non-home exist as distinct, clearly-marked out spaces. The lines

¹⁵Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: Tauris, 1990), p.131.

¹⁶Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1957).

demarcating these spaces are assumed to be real and fixed, giving the impression that home is an easily identifiable, self-evident and always-available category. This lack of conceptual ambivalence about home, together with the logic of binary opposition identified by Lotman as shaping the formation of cultural units, is highly significant for the purposes of my discussion since it explains the ways in which nationalist discourses construct and interpret boundaries.

The Shadow Lines

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a significant text for the purposes of this study on account of its sustained and engaged articulation of the basic aesthetic position on which this thesis is premised -- the belief that the nation's space and its boundaries are not unambivalent, but contested, allowing for renegotiation and reinvention. Ghosh's renarration of the nation in this novel, while implicitly acknowledging the material realities that made Partition inevitable, derive, I will go on to demonstrate, from an emphatic rejection of the separatist binary logic behind the division of the subcontinent. In fact, the novel's central concern is to emphasize the futility of cartographic demarcations to effectively deal with the question of cultural difference. More significantly, I will argue that Ghosh uses the fractures and dislocations of Partition to destabilize a continuist narrative of nationalist history and to uncover the

silences and omissions upon which the nations of India and Bangladesh have been created.

Taking as its pivotal moment the (re)Partition of Bengal into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (East Pakistan) at the time of Indian Independence in 1947,¹⁷ the novel uses the ambiguities, unresolved tensions and hesitations set off by Partition to question some of the key certainties of nation and national identity-formation. In the process, having rejected as separatist and inimical the binary logic inherent in the construction of national boundaries, Ghosh impels his narrator to wander through a destructive post-Partition Bengal to recover lost connections and reclaim that 'indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments'.¹⁸

In the novel, Ghosh writes of an Indian family whose members cross and recross two geo-political borders. One border joins and divides Calcutta and London, the other Calcutta and Dhaka. There are several lines of family introduced: that of the narrator, who is never named, based in Calcutta; that of his Tha'mma,

¹⁷The first partition of Bengal took place in 1905. Although the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, and other officials of the British raj cited purely administrative reasons for partition, their intention was to encourage the idea of a Muslim-majority East Bengal and a Hindu-majority West Bengal. Following mass outrage and severe Hindu-Muslim communal rioting, the decision was rescinded and East and West Bengal were re-united as a Governor's Province in 1912. For a full discussion, see, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, 'Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920-47', in *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, ed. by Mushirul Hassan (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1993), pp. 258-78. My point here is that Hindu-Muslim communal clashes in the subcontinent can trace their beginnings back to a history of Hindu-Muslim enmity fuelled by Britain's divide and rule policy.

¹⁸Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), p. 225. Further page references are to this edition and will appear in the main text, after the abbreviated title *SL*.

grandmother, and her sister, Mayadebi, born in Dhaka but presently living in Calcutta as part of a mass exodus of Bengali Hindus during Partition; and two further lines bringing into the story the narrator's other relatives, his cousin Ila and uncles Robi and Tridib. The narrator's closest links are with his Tha'mma and her sister's son, the enigmatic Tridib, a character who exercises a powerful hold on the narrator's imagination and is a formative influence on his attitudes and perceptions to life. Blood relationships merge with those forged by friendship and intimacy, as evidenced in the ties between the narrator's (extended) family and the British family of Lionel Tresawsen, linked, through being domiciled in India, to the narrator's great-granduncle, Justice Datta-Chaudhuri. When the narrator's grand-aunt, Mayadebi, together with her husband and their young son, Tridib, leave Calcutta for London in 1939, just as England is about to go to war with Germany, the Indian connections with the English family are re-established, but this time through Tresawsen's daughter, Elizabeth Price. Years later, his memories of war-torn England still fresh in his mind, Tridib falls in love with Mrs. Price's daughter, May. In 1964, May visits Tridib in Calcutta. The two of them, together with Tridib's brother, Robi, then join Mayadebi and Tha'mma, as the two women fly to their birthplace of Dhaka, then capital of East Pakistan, to bring back an old uncle whose life they think is in danger. Tridib is killed in Dhaka, a victim of Hindu-Muslim communal riots when he tries to rescue his aged relative from a Muslim mob which has organized itself, like other Hindu and Muslim mobs across the

borders, independently of the state war machinery. May survives, as do the two sisters, but May and Tha'mma's lives are drastically affected by Tridib's death. Seventeen years later, the narrator, on a year's research grant in England, meets up with May and together both of them try to come to terms with the reasons for and circumstances behind Tridib's death.

From the brief outline of the novel, it is possible to see that Ghosh has structured his book around a cluster of human relationships, the closeness and intimacy of which transcends geo-political boundaries. London, Calcutta and Dhaka are united by the personal relationships forged between (and within) the Price family in London and the narrator's family in Calcutta. Ghosh's foregrounding of the intimacy of human relationships is significant for the central dynamics of the novel derive from the logic of the self and the Other, of sameness and difference, which itself stems from the tensions between longing and repudiation that inevitably underlie all personal relationships. It is the binary dialectics underpinning the logic of the self and Other which the novel suggests the narrator must deconstruct if he is to gain a fuller understanding of the historical and political dimensions to identity-construction.

In his essay, 'Interrogating Identity', Homi Bhabha writes that '[i]n the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image...is confronted with its difference, its

Other'.¹⁹ *The Shadow Lines* enacts what Bhabha describes, in psychoanalytical terms, as 'the artifice of identity' and 'the otherness of the Self'²⁰ -- the Other and the self exemplify the ambivalence of the same/difference. According to Bhabha, in this space of splitting, identity is not pre-given, progressive or whole, but divided by othernesses within itself, and always in a state of ambivalence.

Correspondingly, Ghosh's representation of national subjectivities is always split, caught in what Bhabha describes as the 'tension for demand and desire'.²¹ In the novel, this desire for the other is articulated by Tridib when he tells the narrator that

one could never know anything except through desire...a longing for everything that was not in oneself...that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and ...to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (*SL*, 29)

The ambivalences inherent to the dialectics between the self and its Other, sameness and difference determines the interpersonal relationships not only between the narrator and the other characters in the novel, but also between London, Dhaka and Calcutta. While I return later to the narrator's deconstruction of the *unreal* distance imposed between these spaces by nationalist discourse, I want now to suggest that the device of the mirror is used in the text to foreground the inter-connections between his characters and the narrator by making them function as mirror-images of the

¹⁹Homi Bhabha, 'Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge: 1994), pp. 40-65 (p. 46).

²⁰Ibid., p.44.

²¹Ibid., p.44.

narrator. The fact that the narrator recognizes each of the other characters -- Tridib, Ila, Robi, Nick, Tha'mma -- as his mirror-image, i.e. whose being, or difference, defines his lack, is an illustration of Ghosh's point that his (the narrator's) identity is already implicated in theirs and consequently that any attempt on his part to effect closure by providing them with ontological meaning will necessarily be reductive. To this end, the narrator's lack of a name, on a metaphoric level, can be read as a sign that his *self* lacks ontological value. It is only as the narrative unfolds, and as he begins to understand the interdependence of his subjectivity with his various mirror-images, his Others, that he attains some form of selfhood and measure of understanding of his identity. The mirror-image is, in this sense, a fitting trope to illustrate Ghosh's belief that the self and the Other, sameness and difference, do not exist independently of each other. In other words, the self has to be known, the text suggests, not in its separateness from, but in its relatedness to, the Other. It is the increasing awareness of this idea of mutual constructedness that is the basis of the novel's inquiry and the narrator's growing maturity. In other words, the narrator's self-development comes about only by realizing that the boundary is that line 'where the shadow of the other falls upon the self'.²² Only then can the narrator fully grasp the creative possibilities of mutuality and inter-dependence to arrive at a fuller

²²Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.60.

conception of identity. It is in such a reading of the novel, I suggest, that the full significance of the novel's title is understood.

The dialectics of the self and its Other acquires a charged significance in the South Asian context where the moment of the creation of India also heralded the formation of Pakistan. The violent and continuing implications to this day of Partition as the foundational act of nation-formation is foregrounded in *The Shadow Lines*, and exists as a subtext in all of Ghosh's other writings, prompting reconfigurations of received paradigms for narrating national and cultural identity. For Ghosh, a national self which has been defined exclusively out of and against its difference across the border is a tenuous construct, teetering on the limits of sanity and rationality. More crucially, the fear of the Other, set into motion and reinforced by what the text suggests is the fundamentally binary impulses behind Partition, as I will go on to show, is crystallized in the collective carnage and violence of communal riots, which lays bare the horrifying reality of the divisions between Hindus and Muslims even within the nation/state. These differences in turn reveal that the unities of nationalism are a seductive fiction, an illusion of the state.

'Partition', Sunil Khilnani writes, 'is the unspeakable sadness at the heart of the idea of India: a [reminder] that what made India possible also profoundly diminished the integral value of the idea...[and of] the conviction that what defined India was its

extraordinary capacity to accumulate and live with differences'.²³ Khilnani's foregrounding of Partition to illustrate the failure of the national idea is from my perspective very significant for it implicitly points to the tension that exists between the conceptual unity of the nation and, what in Bhabha's terms is, the *incommensurability* of 'the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference'²⁴ that internally mark the nation's space. The unities of nation formation are thus predicated on the exclusion of difference, the trauma and violence of which, in terms of both scale and intensity, it is Partition, as Ghosh suggests, that provides the most outstanding example. As one critic views it, '[n]ationalist violence is generated by the need to force reality to conform to that fantasy of wholeness, that recuperative moment, that moment of transcendence free of all contradictions'.²⁵

The task of interrogating the unities of nationalism and re-narrating the nation in all its complex heterogeneity is, as I have noted, one of the chief concerns of *The Shadow Lines*. More specifically, the novel approaches the issue of cultural difference through the perspective of how nations theorize the place of difference in their idea of the national. The text suggests that the relegating of difference to

²³Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), pp. 201-02.

²⁴Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *The Location of Culture*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139-70 (p. 148).

²⁵Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Ethnicity, Nationalism and Violence in South Asia', *Pacific Affairs*, 71.3 (1998), pp. 377 - 96 (p. 385).

the *other* side of the border with the aim of enforcing internal sameness merely induces a fear of the other, of difference, leading eventually to personal madness and national hysteria. The personal narrative is powerfully exemplified when the narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, visits her birthplace of Dhaka, for the first time after Partition, and many years after moving away to live in Calcutta. As the nostalgic 'home comer', Tha'mma, is thus completely unprepared for the Dhaka of the riots which kills her nephew Tridib, the home in which she is now the 'foreigner', the Hindu other of the Muslim national self. Tormented by memories of Tridib's violent death at the hands of the Dhaka rioters, she becomes obsessed with getting rid of the Muslim other of Hindu-dominant India, her nationalist frenzy turning her into a highly unstable woman in her last years. When we see her for the last time, the Indian-Pakistani War of 1965 has just been declared. Tha'mma hysterically articulates her exclusionary language of official nationalism, with its attendant ritual construction of a binary 'we' and 'them' and its rhetoric of organized warfare with enemies across borders: '*We* [the Indians] have to kill *them* [the Pakistanis] before they kill us; *we* have to wipe *them* out', she screams, '*We're* fighting *them* properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs' (*SL*, 232, my emphasis).

In a concomitant move, the text also suggests that an exclusionary nationalism inevitably results in hysteria on a collective scale, as made visible in the violence of communal riots and the terrorism of separatist movements. The

violence of communal hatred stems from the simple fact that it denies others their legitimate right to exist, to be different. This suppression of difference, the novel suggests, is a consequence of an ethic which while it is externally antagonistic is also internally homogenizing.

Peter van der Veer, in tracing the rise of religious nationalism in contemporary India, delineates the binary dialectics underpinning Hindu nationalist ideology. According to van der Veer: 'In the construction of the Muslim "other" by Hindu nationalist movements, Muslims are always referred to as a dangerous "foreign element", as not truly Indian. The partition of 1947...ha[s] given this construction a strongly "realistic" aspect'.²⁶ By foregrounding the role played by Partition in reinforcing the 'naturalness' of the divisions between Hindus and Muslims, van der Veer implicitly highlights the paradigmatic significance of Partition in the imagining of the Indian nation. Related to this is the point made by van der Veer, and also by *The Shadow Lines*, that official Indian nationalism had justified the horror and bloodshed of Partition on the grounds that the borders so delineated were necessary; for indeed, 'across the border there existed another reality' (*SL*, 214). Thus, supremely confident in her belief that nations are separated by real and impermeable borders, Tha'mma is startled when told that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East Pakistan from the plane.

²⁶Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p.10.

‘Where's the difference then?’, she asks, ‘And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before....What was it all for then -- Partition and all the killing and everything -- if there isn't something in between?’ (*SL*, 148-49). For Indians like Tha'mma, who have thoroughly internalized the official nationalist discourse that Partition was a necessary act to demarcate the *real* boundary between Muslims and Hindus on the subcontinent, the lack of even a symbolic marker of these ‘separate realities’ is highly destabilizing. While the loss of her faith in the impermeability of boundaries gradually leads to Thamma's mental derangement, for her grandson, the narrator, however, who too ‘grew up believing...in the reality of borders’ (*SL*, 214), the lesson learnt is that the boundary is only a constructed reality, not ‘a corporeal substance’ (*SL*, 214).

Tha'mma's nationalist faith in the ‘special enchantment in lines’ (*SL*, 228), the text suggests, itself derives from her memory of the partitioning of her family house in Dhaka. In fact, the Dhaka house becomes an important metaphor through which Ghosh articulates his ideas about spatial divisions. The arbitrariness of such a partition is emphasized when the wall that is erected to divide the house cuts a lavatory in half, ‘bisecting an old commode’, so that the house is equally divided, ‘down to the minutest detail’ (*SL*, 121), between Tha'mma's Jethamoshai and his younger brother. The pettiness of such arbitrary demarcations, however, conceals more debilitating after-effects. For instance, Tha'mma's subsequent confusion over what a

fraternal relationship means -- 'What does [being brothers] mean? Does that mean you're friends?' (*SL*, 121) -- underscores the personal trauma, insecurity and damage suffered by the Bose family as a result of Partition.

Significantly, the partitioning of the Bose family house in Dhaka functions as an allegory of nation formation. The use of the metaphor of the house is already familiar in the discourse of the nation, identity and culture. In the novel, the trajectory of developments pursued by the Bose household over the first half of the twentieth century serves as an avenue for Ghosh to deliver a powerful commentary on the politics of the subcontinent over the same spatio-temporal frame. The narrator, as the repository of stories told him by his grandmother and the other characters, describes the pre-partition Bose family house as having 'evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships' (*SL*, 119). This description of the pre-divided house -- its many-sidedness and multi-layeredness, its teeming and confusing multiplicity -- shares resonances with A. K. Ramanujan's evocative rendition of twentieth-century India through the metaphor of the family house in 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House'.²⁷ The looping, digressive rhythms of Ramanujan's poem, the rambling, hap-

²⁷A. K. Ramanujan, 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House', in *Selected Poems* (Delhi: OUP, 1976), pp. 40-43.

hazard diffuseness of its run-on lines, echoes the trajectory of 'routes' to construct a fluid space that is able to hold together a multiplicity of narratives, both familiar and sinister in their cadences. The house is an inclusive space, where things and people stray out, but '[n]othing stays out'. The pre-partition Bose house, like the one celebrated in Ramanujan's poem, is a sprawling hive of differences. Both, in their fluidity and vastness, are seen to be contingent structures, creating accommodation and negotiation in the face of diversity and change. The interior space of the family home, in this sense, becomes a metaphor of powerful political significance -- like the pre-1947 Dhaka house in *The Shadow Lines*, Ramanujan's all-enveloping house makes no move to divide or homogenize, to separate or simplify.

The partition of the Bose family home enacts the troubled politics of the subcontinent. The newly-divided house is founded in violence, symbolically suggested in family mistrust and animosity, everyday bickerings, vicious legal battles and hostile domestic quarrels. After the partition wall is put up, Tha'mma, for the benefit of her younger sister, Mayadebi, invents stories about her Jethamoshai's house on the other side of the wall. This unseen other half of the house becomes a source of endless fascination for the two girls and gradually becomes known as the 'upside-down house' (*SL*, 123). The fundamental principle of binary division is evident here; while Tha'mma's house represents normalcy, her Jethamoshai's house across the

partition represents an inversion of normalcy, where everything is done 'upside-down'. However, despite Tha'mma's attribution of strangeness to the house on the *other* side of the dividing wall, she later discovers that her uncle's house is no more different or alien than hers. With this, Ghosh deconstructs the key separatist assumption underpinning nationalist discourse -- the political logic that borders mark out actual and unambiguous differences, that 'across the border there existed another reality' (*SL*, 214).

Significantly, the division of the house is ultimately self-defeating; not only does it not bring about the peace the Bose families had hoped for, it also leads to a complete breakdown of communication between the families. As the narrator recalls, 'instead of the peace they [the Boses] had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange, eerie silence had descended on the house. It was never the same again after that; the life went out of it' (*SL*, 121). This coupled with the fact that after Partition the whole house is inundated with Muslim refugees, an event the orthodox Hindu patriarchs of the family -- 'who wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of [their] food' (*SL*, 205) -- would have found repugnant, makes the divisions appear even more unnecessary and meaningless. In fact, the Muslims go about their daily lives showing little or no perturbation at having a Hindu living with them under the same roof.

What the text is attempting here is a critique of the principle of absolute distinctions and divisions as a signifier of nationhood. Interpreted on a national level, Ghosh uses the partitioning of the Bose home to suggest the futility of making boundaries to separate populations as a way of dealing with the problem of communalism on the subcontinent. The belief that lines on a map are natural and immutable in constructing national-cultural identity is, for Ghosh, a simplifying and ultimately counter-productive approach to the problem of dealing with difference. For him, the view that national boundaries are whole, coherent spaces merely instils fear, anger, and an aversion for difference, leading to the eruption of anarchy and violence on both personal and political levels, as I have already noted.

Crucially also, the antagonistic, separatist construction of geo-political boundaries forecloses syncretic possibilities for cultural identity formation. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines*, in describing the particular texture of this fear, calls it 'the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror' (*SL*, 200). This fear of the other is ultimately self-defeating for it leads to what the narrator says is 'a special quality of loneliness' (*SL*, 200), a condition that Ghosh has said is unique to the post-Partition psyche of the subcontinent.²⁸

²⁸Amitav Ghosh in Interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell', *Kunapipi*, 29:3 (1997), pp. 171-77 (p.174).

However, perhaps I should state that my intention in foregrounding Hindu-Muslim conflicts and divisions in the subcontinent today is not tantamount to suggesting the absence of any kind of conflict between these communities in a pre-divided India. My point rather is that the terms in which past conflicts were articulated have been altered by the underlying rationale for Partition.

The transformation in these relations is best captured by Sudhir Kakar, who in tracing the psychological roots of Hindu-Muslim violence in the subcontinent, suggests that before Partition, and even as far back as pre-colonial times, conflicts between these groups tended to be of a *religious*, rather than *communal*, nature. Making an important distinction between the two terms, Kakar asserts that while religion is 'solely seen as a matter of personal faith and reverence for a particular set of icons, rituals, and dogmas', communalism evokes one's 'exclusive attachment to his or her community combined with an active hostility against other communities which share its geographical and political space'.²⁹ Thus, drawing from Kakar, it can be seen that communalism not only produces identification with a religious community but is accompanied by the conviction that its political, economic, social and cultural interests not only diverge from but are in actual conflict with the interests of other communities. Kakar goes on to make the even more crucial point that '[t]he partition violence is commonly agreed to have been the most momentous event in the shaping of Hindu-

²⁹Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 13.

Muslim relations in independent India...[with particular reference to] the *division* of the country into two states of India and Pakistan'.³⁰

What this suggests is that the terms with which differences or conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim communities were articulated took on a violent and hostile configuration after Partition -- the act of *division*, as Kakar stresses, which allowed the nations of India and Pakistan to come into being. Kakar's argument is that overarching identities such as 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' were reinforced by the divisiveness of Partition, and became highly charged terms in subsequent nationalist discourse; till today, the nationalist rhetoric in both states continues to range Muslims against Hindus, by placing them as each other's *other*, outside the pale of fraternal bonding.

The Shadow Lines implicitly endorses the view expressed by Kakar, that cultural-religious identities such as 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' are not a set of authentic, autonomous, self-evident and unchanging entities contributing to the creation and subsequent unity of a nation, but constructs, dependent on political, social and economic circumstances. This is powerfully demonstrated in the text when the communal riots of 1964 break out in Calcutta, and the narrator's best friend, his classmate, Mansur, is suddenly transformed into the enemy, the Muslim other. Cultural identities being constructs, Ghosh seems to say, the dialectics of their formation are

³⁰Ibid., p.37-38 (emphasis in original).

variable and thus open to negotiation. It is precisely this measure of deconstruction that he initiates through Tridib's dismantling of the rigid binarisms implicit in the construction of national boundaries in order to live inside, with a difference.

The fact that Partition, and its accompanying bloodshed and violence, has become a recurring motif, both in the subsequent history of the subcontinent -- 'all those...dead people--in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka,³¹ Tripura--people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police' (*SL*, 241)-- makes the task of constructing a more inclusive national narrative all the more urgent. It is within the context of this need to reassess the exclusionary parameters of official and religious nationalisms in India that Tridib occupies a space of special significance within the novel.

The narrative suggests that Tridib, in yearning to play Tristan, 'a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across the-seas' (*SL*, 183), elaborates a desire for fluidity in the trajectory of national-cultural identity. This need for elasticity in his apprehension of selfhood is what underlies his wish to be Tristan, a man whose imagination invests him with the power to think beyond the exclusions sought by

³¹A. Sivanandan, another writer of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, examines the explosive effects of the violent discourse of nationalism in Sri Lanka through its ritual construction of the Sinhalese-Buddhist self and its Tamil-Hindu other in his novel, *When Memory Dies* (London: Arcadia Books, 1997). Like Ghosh's writings, Sivanandan's novel looks back on an earlier historical phase of Sinhalese-Tamil solidarity and shows cultural identities such as 'Sinhalese' and 'Tamil' to be constructs appropriated by the dominant discourse of the nation in Sri Lanka for the furtherance of its own ends.

frontier limits. The narrator recognizes in Tridib this longing for a time and space not yet secured by the historical and geo-political ordering of world events:

He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (*SL*, 29)

Clearly, Tridib's longing for 'a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror' looks back to a shared historical experience, a larger cultural and historical collectivity than that reflected either in secular or religious nationalism. One example of this collectivity is to be found in the 'multicultural' medieval world of the Indian Ocean of *In An Antique Land*, as I noted earlier, where Arabs, South Asians and Jews lived and traded in the process of maintaining distinct communities. Such a crosscultural community, Ghosh implies, preceded the formation of national boundary lines which marked 'the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked' people.³²

However, Ghosh's looking to the past in *The Shadow Lines* is not to be construed, as some critics have claimed,³³ as a foreclosing of a materialist interpretation of the pressures which shape present-day India or as an impossible

³²Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*, p. 236.

³³See, for example, Ajanta Sircar, 'Individualizing History: The "Real" Self in *The Shadow Lines*', *Social Scientist*, 19.12 (1991), pp. 33-46 (p. 44).

nostalgia for a pre-Partition India. Rather, the aim is to foreground the *false* distance that official nationalism, with its emphasis on exclusive, absolutist boundaries and divisions, uncritically privileges in the creation of the national self. If through Tha'mma's personal narrative, Ghosh articulates an exclusionary nationalism, predicated on the notion of 'roots', discovering its limits, through Tridib-as-Tristan, then, he exemplifies the spiralling, outward-oriented, centrifugal trajectory of 'routes' that takes one beyond 'the limits of one's mind to other times and other places' (*SL*, 28) to forge an alternative trajectory of cultural coalitions, connections across and beyond the confining boundaries imposed by nationalist discourse.

This directly leads me to address the criticism, such as I have alluded to above, that Ghosh's representation of India and Indian national identity in *The Shadow Lines* has not conceded the reality of the material pressures and circumstances that have necessitated the partitioning of the subcontinent. I want to argue that Ghosh's project is less about the 'wishing away of troublesome [political] realities' such as national dividing lines into 'shadows' or 'illusions',³⁴ than it is about the formulation of a new aesthetics of cultural and national identity, one which interrogates the way in which identities are currently being polarized, set off against one another, to achieve the unities of nationalism. The very fact that Tridib dies a victim of communal violence, and the violent brutality of his death, his throat slit 'from

³⁴A.N. Kaul, 'A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*', in *The Shadow Lines* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 299-309 (p.303).

ear to ear' (*SL*, 245), at the hands of the Dhaka rioters, is a sign that the text is well aware of the reality of cultural difference, a reality so overwhelming that it can only reject as romanticized and naive any longing for an earlier unity.

I want to suggest that Tridib's transnational framework is empowering precisely because it affirms the reality of difference. To say that his is a 'transnational' ethic is not to make the claim that it seeks an undifferentiated merging by effacing the particularities and specificities without which neither the self nor culture could have been formed. My point here is not that Tridib's transnational paradigm dissolves all difference into sameness, but that it pursues the opposite trajectory to look for a unity that means something other than sameness. Thus, in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh represents national identity in a way which forces us to acknowledge the ambivalence of national boundaries, even as we accept that Partition was necessary for the protection of those occupying minority positions.

The only way to attain empowerment in the subcontinent, the text suggests, is to overcome the fear of the Other and try to come to terms with one's hybridity, the otherness of the self, by embracing difference. This, symbolically, is what Tridib does by jumping out of the certain safety of his car and running towards the Muslim crowd in order to rescue Tha'mma's Jethamoshai, an old man he barely knows. By overcoming his fear of the Other, Tridib embodies the novel's aesthetic of inclusive sympathy and imaginative identification with difference. For

by undoing the self-Other dichotomy, Tridib transgresses the exclusive boundaries of cultural and national identity, and opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that acknowledges that identity is always split, riven by the reality of difference.

Hybridity, thus, as posited in this text, functions as a strategy of negotiation which does not restrict the process of identity formation to the limitation of binary oppositions. In Homi Bhabha's writings, for instance, the concept of hybridity, although deployed initially to expose the ambivalence of colonial discourse, is then extended to address the various ways of living with difference, an area of significant interest for Ghosh. In this sense, Ghosh participates in Bhabha's strategic envisioning of the hybrid cultural politics of a third space as a site of 'encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values'.³⁵

In the text, the transformative possibilities of hybridity are exemplified in Tridib's ideological conceptualizing of a transnational paradigm for national identity, not in the sense that such a framework transcends local cultural specificities, but in a way that allows for a negotiation of difference not only between cultures but also within culture. Such a strategy, then, is empowering because, by not viewing cultural boundaries as a space of absolute othering, it does not move towards closure.

In 'DissemiNation', a seminal essay in which he further attempts to capture the complex ambivalence of the nation through its boundaries, Bhabha views the

³⁵Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.173.

boundary 'that marks the nation's selfhood' as a 'space of representation that threatens binary division with its difference'.³⁶ Participating in many of the central positions articulated by Bhabha in this essay, Ghosh asks us to reject the idea of the nation's boundaries as a coherent and immutable space, and to acknowledge instead that the boundary is a space split within 'It/Self', with the power to intervene in the production of essentialist narratives of the nation. Ghosh's central point is that boundaries are not natural and immutable, but constructions, and therefore subject to negotiation, re-inscription, re-routing -- a belief that runs through the body of his work.

The text's jettisoning of the conception of the nation as a bounded cultural space is evident also in the journeys that are foregrounded in the novel. Hence, the two sections of the novel, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home', are named after the two principal journeys around which all other episodes are structured -- Tridib's journey to England in 1939 and Tha'mma's journey to Dhaka in 1964. Crucially, the journeying foregrounded in the text is not to be perceived solely in terms of physical movement, but as an epistemological mode. The narrator observes:

Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all [but] a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which

³⁶Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p.299.

permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (*SL*, 150)

What triggers the narrator's comment is his grandmother's confusion as she, from her location in Calcutta, speaks of her imminent journey to her birthplace of Dhaka. Instead of saying that she would 'go' home to Dhaka, she says that she would 'come home to Dhaka' (*SL*, 150). Although Tha'mma's lapse is construed by the narrator and his relatives as a mere loss of grammatical coordinates, with the narrator teasing his grandmother about not knowing 'the difference between coming and going' (*SL*, 150), the more mature narrator can now see that Tha'mma's language in fact reflects her conditioning by nationalist discourse. The fixity of her conception of home is shaped by a binary logic which does not accommodate the dynamics of 'routes', the 'comings and goings', the moving to and from, in and out of, cultures and spaces. The rooted -- 'fixed and settled' (*SL*, 150) -- reference point that informs her conception of home is one that derives from her understanding of the fixity of the nation's space and its borders.

Correspondingly, Tha'mma's views and perceptions articulate the national-cultural identity constructed by the dominant state ideology. Ghosh, however, destabilizes the certainties inherent in Tha'mma's fixed and linear discourse of nation, which stipulates that one's birthplace is automatically co-extensive with one's nationality, by revealing the troubled, ambivalent relationship that exists between

national identity and belonging. For by saying that she would 'come' home to Dhaka, it becomes obvious that although she is of Indian nationality, Tha'mma positions herself in relation to her home in Dhaka. *The Shadow Lines* posits that in the contemporary age of movement and migration, 'coming home' and 'going away' can no longer be conceptualized as simple oppositions. For Ghosh, the complexity of home far exceeds this binary structure of representation. Rather, home is shown to be a space of complex ambivalence.

The idea of home is further problematized in the second section of the novel, when Tha'mma returns to Dhaka, now capital of East Pakistan, after many years and for the first time after Partition. Instead of the 'home' she assumes she will return to, Tha'mma discovers that her Dhaka has now become the other of home, a place of danger, threat and instability. Conditioned by a language that assumes an automatic congruence between the desire for home and the precise reality of home, Tha'mma, thus, has no words to describe the violent, murderous, complexity of the home she now experiences. The space of Dhaka, the birthplace she calls 'home', is also the Muslim Dhaka of the riots in which she is now 'the foreigner', the repudiated Hindu other. Home, thus, is transformed into the split space of home/not-home, a space which profoundly destabilizes traditional assumptions of home. It is this experience of home as 'unheimlich',³⁷ this awareness of the

³⁷In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha attempts to represent the complex ambivalence of home through the idea of the 'unhomely' or the 'unheimlich' (which draws upon Freud's the 'uncanny'), which not only

otherness *within* home, that underpins the text's reconfiguration of the stabilities of the nation space. Here, the text foregrounds the linguistic implications of the 'unhomely' in the postcolonial context by locating the gap between signifier and signified; 'between that state and its metaphors there is no more connection than there is between a word such as mat, and the thing itself' (*SL*, 99).

Forced into accepting that national borders have lost their power to demarcate the space of home, Tha'mma discovers that displaced people like herself who have been 'vomited out of their native soil' by the carnage of Partition and 'dumped hundreds of miles away',³⁸ have 'no home but in memory' (*SL*, 190). It is indeed ironic that having once denounced nostalgia as a weakness and having valorized the 'forgetting of the past' as crucial for nation-building, Tha'mma is now forced with the realization that, for her, home, in a sense, now exists only in memory, in the stories she tells her grandson about her ancestral house and the 'mental' Dhaka she had created around it, 'for her memory had shone upon them with the interrupted brilliance of a lighthouse beam' (*SL*, 190).

destabilizes the boundaries of representation between home and homelessness, but also rejects any notion of stability and permanence *within* the space of home. Pointing to the mobility between and within categories, Bhabha argues that the 'unhomely' marks a space of displacement where the borders separating seemingly oppositional categories become confused, where 'the personal-*is*-the-political; the world-*in*-the-home' (p. 11, emphasis in original). Bhabha suggests that it is precisely at the intersection of seemingly oppositional terms, in the 'confused' boundaries between home and homelessness, that the 'unhomely' inheres.

³⁸Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (London: Granta, 1986), p. 59.

The text suggests that the home of memory is able to defy the separatist logic of the nation/state. Also, the mental space in which home is imagined is an inclusive home as the (re)drawing of geographical boundaries cannot efface former ties and affiliations, for 'how can anyone divide a memory?' (SL, 241). As such, *The Shadow Lines* suggests an alternative way of defining the national space, one that moves away from the exclusions sought to be defined through geo-political boundaries to foreground the inclusive power of memory and imagination.

Like Tha'mma, the character of Ila, too, must negotiate to find or create her own home. Although she leads an independent life in London, and makes her own rules, away from the restrictions of middle-class Bengali life in Calcutta, Ila is inextricably trapped between the two cultures. To this end, the novel focuses on Ila's anxieties about being rejected by the Western culture that she strives to embrace while she, at the same time, consciously rejects her native Bengali culture.

Suvir Kaul observes that Ila becomes 'a figure of the novel's account of norms -- sexual, cultural, "national" -- and their transgressions'.³⁹ Ila's 'transgression' of these norms is manifested primarily in her Western clothes, appearance and behaviour. As a result of this, she is constantly perceived as the 'Other' by her older, more conservative, relatives in India, who berate her for repudiating her Bengali origins. However, Ila is also excluded by the dominant national narrative in England, and

³⁹Suvir Kaul, 'Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*', *Oxford Literary Review*, 16 (1994), pp. 125-45 (p. 129).

represents the story of her racist victimization through her doll Magda, who with its deep blue eyes and golden hair, stands for everything that Ila is not. Although she tries very hard to make a life for herself in London, by buying a house, finding a job, participating in political causes, Ila cannot feel a sense of belonging. Her marriage to Nick Price, an Englishman, rather than alleviate her sense of exclusion by the dominant white narrative of culture, only serves to perpetuate her marginalization.

What is obvious is that Ila's access to different cultural expressions does not result in a doubled cultural awareness. It is marked instead by a tragic non-belonging, by her inability to make her home in either culture, whether Indian or British.

In attempting to explain why Ila is imprisoned rather than liberated by her attempt to inhabit two opposing cultures simultaneously, I suggest that part of the problem lies in her dependence on Eurocentric concepts of knowledge. For Ila, history can only happen in Europe -- 'nothing really important ever happens...in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, wherever' (*SL*, 102). Believing in 'the centrality and eloquence' (*SL*, 102) of her Eurocentric narrative of culture and identity, Ila blindly accepts not only the superiority but also universality of Western cultural assumptions.

Furthermore, although Ila, as the daughter of a diplomat, attends a succession of expensive boarding schools all over the world and becomes a frequent traveller, she has not learnt to negotiate the inner, more personal, boundaries

between past and present, familiar and unfamiliar, old and new. Living 'intensely in the present' and through her senses, Ila constructs a binary division between the present and the past, the body and the mind, which reduces the experiences from her travels to a mere description of the location of restrooms in different international airports. Paradoxically, for Ila, airport lounges 'were the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood' (*SL*, 21). 'The inventions she lived in moved with her', the narrator observes, 'so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all' (*SL*, 21). By this the text reinforces its point that travelling is to be regarded not simply in terms of actual movement, but as an epistemological mode.

Unlike Tridib, for whom travel is the basis for the imaginative reconstruction of other people and places, Ila, whose attitudes and perceptions are shaped by the Eurocentric, linear perspective to identity by which Tha'mma also is conditioned, remains firmly grounded in, and bound to, her material reality. 'For Ila', asserts the narrator, 'the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates' (*SL*, 40). Locked in the present, memory and imagination become irrelevant to her; lacking precise imagination, she is trapped in somebody else's interpretative process, somebody else's construction of reality. Thus, the text suggests, it is Ila's assumption of a Eurocentric epistemology that leads to her entrapment and failure to effectively negotiate a home for herself between two cultures.

Functioning antithetically to Ila and Tha'mma, exemplars in the novel of the rooted perspective to home and identity, is the narrator's uncle, Tridib, who believes in 'using one's imagination with precision'. For Tridib, home 'does not merely exist', he tells the narrator, 'it has to be invented in one's imagination' (*SL*, 21). Tridib's understanding of home as a construct of the imagination has significant implications within the context of this novel as it is tied in with the power of the imagination to transgress temporal and spatial boundaries, pointing to the novel's emphasis on the necessity of dismantling binary divisions inherent in the cultural construction of reality. Extended further, the disruption of these binarisms creates an area of overlap, a space where the interactive and dialectical effects of culture are located. This area of overlap, significantly, points to a contrapuntal awareness that recognizes that other times and spaces are inextricably interconnected with one's own. It is Tridib's imagination that, to a large extent, is the driving force behind the novel; even before he moves out of Calcutta, the narrator, like Tridib, inhabits an expanded imaginative world that respects few boundaries. 'I could not forget', says the narrator, 'because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with' (*SL*, 20).

It is this desire to keep the complexities of place from being reduced to a geographical place on the map that the text articulates through the narrator's apprehension of time and place. In fact, the narrator's imaginative apprehension of

space is simultaneously projected onto the geographical reality of grid lines and measurements so much so that it gives rise to a contrapuntal dimension in the text that reconfigures our ideas of place and time. This is seen, for instance, when the narrator, on a visit to London, goes in search of Solent Road with Tridib's descriptions of the place to him as his only guide. 'I knew already', he says, 'for the map was in my head' (*SL*, 54). However, upon finding the place, he discovers that the outer, geographical reality that meets his eyes does not correspond with the complexities of the place he experiences in his mind. Fiercely upholding the authority of his imaginative Solent Road over the material location right before him, the narrator declares: 'I...could not believe in the truth of what I did see.... [D]espite the clear testimony of my eyes, it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road' (*SL*, 55).

This narrator's understanding that there is something more complex, 'something truer', to the fixed and unchanging, ontological, reality of map points and cartographical symbols is powerfully emphasized when, plotting the different points of the globe on the fixed and stable referents symbolized by the accurately measured pages of the Bartholomew Atlas, the narrator comes to learn 'the meaning of distance' (*SL*, 227). If 'reading a map represents a profound act of faith...in the *idea* of the map -- that the unique mosaic of boundaries and symbols corresponds to real space

in what we like to call the real world',⁴⁰ then the text offers us, through the narrator, a certain kind of thinking about place that rejects the polarities of a world constructed out of a 'tidy ordering of Euclidian space' (*SL*, 227). This subjective re-ordering of the world's spaces itself derives from the text's endorsing of a *transnational* perspective. Chiangmai in Thailand is spatially closer to Calcutta than New Delhi; Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. The narrator's rejection, then, of an absolute identification with a place on the map is consistent with his belief that the borders and frontiers of maps have lost their ability to define the spatial and temporal complexities of nations. Although, like Tha'mma, he too had once believed in the corporeality of space and distance, the adult narrator, having come to another understanding of place, has now come to realize the need to redraw the map through a reassessment of his understanding of borders and geographies.

Crucially, the text also draws our attention to the shifting identity of Bengal, given the disruptions in its colonial and postcolonial history. It compels us to rethink Bengal's history, and to try out other ways of thinking about geographies and boundaries. For Ghosh, official nationalism, with its focus on boundaries, separations and divisions between 'oneself and one's image in the mirror', imposes false distances. Arguing for a rethinking of geography in more inclusive terms, the adult narrator now believes that 'Muslim Dhaka' and 'Hindu Calcutta' are essentially mirror-images of

⁴⁰Stephen Hall, *Mapping the Next Millenium* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 369.

each other; the cause for the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka was also the cause for the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. The narrator's realization that separate boundaries do not necessarily make separate entities -- 'I, in Calcutta, only had to look in the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment where each city was the inverted image of the other' (*SL*, 228) -- offers a critique of the oppressive practices that nationalism has inherited from colonialism, whose 'lines drawn in sands still haunt Third World geographies'.⁴¹ This is not to suggest that national borders are unreal, but only that they are not absolute and immutable and are open to negotiation and interaction.

Thus, while in the discourse of Indian nationalism all articulations of home are harnessed into one commonality of time and space, *The Shadow Lines* shatters the unities inherent in the rhetoric of national belonging by exposing home to be a site of multiple accretions. For people like Tha'mma, victims of the subcontinent's history who in a sense have lost, what Edward Said calls, 'their roots, their land, their past',⁴² home becomes the traumatic site of cultural reconstruction which involves a conflict with many inherited assumptions, including the overriding premise that the home always-already exists. As Tha'mma discovers in Dhaka, the experience of the place she knows as home cannot now be marked out in material dimensions. The chasm between the remembered home and the present experience of home is, for

⁴¹Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "Post-colonial"', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1993), pp. 99 - 113 (p.99).

⁴²Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile', *Harper's Magazine*, (September 1984), pp. 49-55 (p. 51).

Tha'mma, all the more unsettling for it calls to question her implicit faith in the defining power of boundaries. Her unstinting nationalist faith had not prepared her for the disruptive discovery that 'her place of birth [had] come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (SL, 149). Home, then, becomes a space of profound ambivalence; it is both home and not-home, a place of violence and safety. This recognition of the unsettling difference within the space of home serves as a catalyst for new perceptions of home. Dispossessed of her geographical home, Tha'mma is compelled to reinvent home in memory.

For the globe-trotting, cosmopolitan Ila, the belief that she can make her home anywhere she chooses is troubled by the uneasy awareness that having repudiated her native culture, she is in turn repudiated by the Western culture to which she longs to belong. For all her Westernised ways and efforts to integrate herself in society, Ila is confronted with the image of herself as England's racial and cultural other, and inhabits her chosen home with growing agitation.

For Tridib, home is not the bounded site of ontological immobility, but invented in language, through the endless and multiple *processes* of knowledge and the imagination, and cuts across oppositional boundaries in search of difference. Implicit in Tridib's interpretation of home as a discourse in process is the figure of 'routes', of travel, that has the power to dismantle binary divisions. The 'simultaneous awareness' that the other is also implicated in the self, the outside in the inside, difference

in sameness, is, the text suggests, a productive option for it invokes the complexity, the actual heterogeneity, of the space of home. Far from dismantling Tridib's ideological construction of home, the reality of cultural difference, of which the Hindu-Muslim riots are emblematic, exemplifies the urgency of such a reconceptualization.

Crucially also, home is the space of unrestful differences that is conceptualized in contrapuntal, rather than unitary, terms. In such a formulation, where dialogue implies the transference across and between differences of culture and other conceptual categories, what is emphasized is not only that dialogue is only possible with the other, but that otherness or difference is the precondition of all dialogue.⁴³ From this perspective, the dialectics of exclusion which construct home as a site of sameness are always-already jettisoned for a dialogic framework, one that openly accommodates and lives with difference.

Ghosh's rejection of the paradigm of 'roots' is also inextricably linked to his attitude and approach to the novel form, his medium of representing and articulating the nation in *The Shadow Lines*. Given Benedict Anderson's seminal thesis that the novel is deeply implicated in the production of knowledge about the nation and its past,⁴⁴ Ghosh is only too aware of the influence that this production of

⁴³T. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).

⁴⁴Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991). I deal with this point at some length in my earlier chapters.

knowledge has on the methods of constructing identity through the selective appropriation of the nation's history. In conjunction with this view, Ghosh realizes that his narrative of nation cannot be presented as being unproblematically situated within the conventions of the realist narrative. Thus, in order to question the process of narrativizing a national identity through a linear and controlled structure of progress or development, Ghosh uses a narrative technique which reflects the instability of his epistemological location in diaspora. As a result, the *The Shadow Lines* speaks from a 'disruptive temporality of enunciation'⁴⁵ which undermines the 'homogeneous, serial time' of the realist narrative of the nation.

One of the ways in which *The Shadow Lines* unsettles the unifying, homogenizing narrative of national identity is by disrupting the nationalist trajectory of sequential and unitary history. The novel's opening sentence undermines any notion of a unified cultural temporality: 'In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib' (*SL*, 3). The novel's *transnational* aesthetic, where time is experienced simultaneously with other times and place with other places, is seen in the overlaying of the Calcutta of 1939 with the Calcutta 1952 and England of 1939. It is against this backdrop of temporal flux, of the persistent, cross-cutting movement of peoples and boundaries,

⁴⁵Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 37.

that the text sets out to interrogate received assumptions about the inherent unity or fixity of national-cultural space.

As for its overall narrative structure, the text moves from a London pub in 1981, the narrative present, to Calcutta in the 1960s, when the narrator was a young schoolboy, to the old house in Raibajar in the 1970s, then back to London in 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War. Equally significant is that the main temporal and spatial strands of the narrative are set, not against a settled history and terrain, but against a backdrop of instability and fragmentation. For instance, even on the more obviously thematic level, the novel's representation of India and Bangladesh is one in which the disruptive signs of Partition are manifestly clear, from the migration of Hindu refugees from Dhaka into Calcutta, among them the narrator's poor relatives who live on the other side of the Gariahat tracks, to the violence of communal rioting in Khulna and Calcutta.

In fact, the novel implies that the idea of fixed signification no longer holds even in Europe. One of its spatial-temporal segments is England, 1939 -- the year that England went to war with Germany. The disruptive signs of World War II are everywhere evident: the bombed-out cricket field; the block of flats on the corner of Lymington Road, its gables and facade almost all gone; the abandoned theatre that Tridib finds, with its 'rows of empty seats looking towards a hole in the wall...where the screen had once hung' (*SL*, 136).

Crucially, the various narratives in the novel can be seen to not only cut across from one specific temporal and spatial location to another. Rather, the text's contrapuntal perception of the nation's space-time narrates identity in a way in which the different temporal and spatial narratives in the text glide imperceptibly into each other, the fluidity of their passage maintained by the narrative voice which remembers connections and associations.

Thus, the world of war-torn London is overlaid by 1970s Calcutta; a chance remark in 1981 by a Bangladeshi restaurant owner in Clapham transports Robi back to the traumatizing events of Dhaka in 1964; the cellar in the Price household on 44 Lymington Road, West Hampsted becomes the scene of another, older, intimacy between Ila and the narrator in the underground room of Shaheb and Mayadebi's old house in Raibajar.

This strategy of a contrapuntal 'overlying' of geographies, cultures and histories to narrate nation and identity implicitly reveals the impossibility of representing the complexities of national experience through the simple oppositional dialectics presupposed by realism and its implicit reliance on the epistemology of binaries. Crucially, as P.K. Dutta's astute reading of the novel suggests, such a technique 'realises that the experience of overlapping heterogeneities itself can be

counterposed to the violent sub-continental insistence on cultural purity and communal division'.⁴⁶

Another crucial way in which the text interrogates the process of narrativizing a national identity through the totalizing, linear and chronological narrative of the nation/state is to create a narrative sequence that is mediated by the transgressive power of memory. Informed by the power of memory to unsettle the simplified, continuous narrative of national identity, *The Shadow Lines* emerges through the memories of different characters and cuts across different times and spaces in order to disrupt the nationalist cartography. It is through his contact and interaction with the other main characters in the novel -- his grandmother, Tha'mma, his cousin, Ila, and his uncles, Tridib and Robi -- that the narrator is exposed to national and cultural experiences he himself has not known or imagined. In the process, his own narrative is supplemented by other narratives. In this way, the totalizing narrative of nationalist history gives way to a multiplicity of personal histories and memories.

Accordingly, *The Shadow Lines* provides no central point of reference through which one can organize the experiential content of the novel; although it is the first-person narrator's voice that frames the narrative, we are aware that his voice and consciousness constantly mediate other voices, other memories, other experiences. No

⁴⁶P.K. Dutta, 'Studies in Heterogeneity: A Reading of Two Recent Indo-Anglian Novels', *Social Scientist*, 18.3 (1990), pp. 61-70 (p.70).

more than Rushdie's Moor, then, does Ghosh's narrator speak the privileged language of 'truth'. This technique of serrating the single, all-informing voice of the 'I' narrator by *other* voices supports my argument that Ghosh's intention here is to create a textual space that defines the nation and national experience not through a totalizing or unifying consciousness but through heteroglossia -- the presence of other, often contending, versions of cultural and national identity. Crucially, thus, a single voice which includes the other's voice within itself is in keeping with Ghosh's construction of an aesthetic that is inclusive, not on a unitary or homogenizing basis, but on its awareness and acceptance of the presence of multiple *other* voices, *other* memories, *other* experiences to enact the heteroglossia which, in Bakhtin's terms, is what constructs the nation.

The importance of forgetting much history in the interest of nation formation has, as I've noted earlier, been emphasized by Ernest Renan. 'Forgetting', he writes, 'is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality'.⁴⁷ Renan's thesis, if I may state it here briefly, is that nationalism is constructed out of a project of *collective* amnesia and *collective* memory -- an entire people building a national culture and identity by forgetting particular diversities and remembering shared similarities. One of the ways in which Renan's thesis on nation-building is borne out is through the kind

⁴⁷Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', trans. by Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8-22 (p.11).

of shared empathy and imagining which is mobilized by the state-endorsed apparatus of war. In the novel, the grandmother, Tha'mma, defends the need for wars with 'enemies' across the border because it makes 'people forget that they are born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood'. But while it valorizes war, the nation/state has no place for riots, for according to its unitary narrative, national identity is defined against a separateness that is ratified by state-sponsored wars fought with foreign enemies, located *outside* national boundaries. Riots *within* nations merely exemplify that *other* reality which subverts the neat, unambiguous dichotomies between inside and outside, sameness and difference put in place by the nation/state.

Thus, in *The Shadow Lines*, while the cricket test-match played on 10 January 1964 between England and India, in which Budhi Kunderan scores a maiden century, remains in the minds of the Indian children of the time, there is no pan-Indian memory of the Calcutta-Dhaka riots that took place at the same time. Through this, the text demonstrates that while cricket, which is able to bolster nationalist sentiment, takes on the role of national signifier for India, the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots are deliberately excised from the collective imagination because the violence exemplified by the riots serve to undermine the dominant historiography's narrative of a unified national identity.

In 1979, desperately searching the public library for newspaper material to confirm the 'reality' of the events etched in his memory, the narrator finds that although there are whole shelves of information on India's 1962 war with China and its war with Pakistan in 1965 -- events which are regarded as 'defining moments' in the national life of India -- there is not even the slightest reference to the Calcutta riots of 10 January 1964. Already 'by the end of January 1964', the narrator discovers, 'the riots had faded away from...the collective imagination ...vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into a crater of a volcano of silence' (*SL*, 226). It is in part the narrator's 'struggle with silence' (*SL*, 213), his increasingly frantic attempts -- 'But don't you *remember*?...Surely you remember--you *must* remember?' (*SL*, 216) -- to give voice to those 'unnameable things' (*SL*, 223) through an interrogation of both public and personal archives, that motivates and sustains the form and flow of his narrative.

To this end, a question that is persistently asked is, 'Don't you remember?', as the narrator forces the other characters to delve back into their past and confront their suppressed memories. This act of willed remembering set against the forces of collective amnesia marks an attempt by the text to uncover those memories which have been excluded by nationalist history. The text asserts that these effaced memories form the basis of the accepted historiography of the nation since their

omission is essential to the construction of a unified narrative of national identity. Thus, *The Shadow Lines* constitutes a reimagining of that official narrative in an attempt to reclaim the multi-layered histories of the nation that are suppressed by the 'pedagogical'⁴⁸ will of official history. To this end, the text uncovers and brings to the fore one of the most traumatic, and pivotal, of these memories -- the 'forgotten fact' of the violent consequences of the subcontinent's dismemberment, specifically in the form of the 'minor riots' within India and Bangladesh that are crucial in forming the subcontinent's 'psyche of fear' that I referred to earlier.

Accordingly, *The Shadow Lines* moves towards the construction of an aesthetic which is based on an acceptance of otherness, where the difference *without* is not a threat to national identity but seen as a catalyst to the recognition of the difference *within*. Recognizing that the boundary is that line 'where the shadow of the other falls upon the self',⁴⁹ this perspective constructs identity through a negotiation, not a suppression, of difference. This, fundamentally, is the lesson that *The Shadow Lines* imparts to its narrator and readers -- that the nation be not so much defined by its distinctions from an 'other' that is outside it, but by the inward and outward facing boundaries, split spaces where cultures meet and overlap as much as they separate.

⁴⁸In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha conceptualizes culture as having two symbiotic or complementary aspects or movements -- the 'pedagogical' and the 'performative'. The pedagogical identifies with tradition, the hegemonic discourse, the conservative desire to totalize and stabilize; the performative can be articulated in terms of disruptive cultural praxis, the counter-discourse, the subversive impulse to destabilize (See the essay, 'DissemiNation', in this volume).

⁴⁹Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 60.

In this respect, then, *The Shadow Lines* exemplifies the multilateral, productive dynamics of diaspora for its evocation of an ‘intervening space’ in which a new ‘transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities’ will displace the polarising violence associated with ideas of a ‘pure, “ethnically cleansed” national identity’.⁵⁰

The success of *The Shadow Lines* lies in its genuine, humanist, impulse to surmount the problems of political and cultural division in India, difficulties that, for Ghosh, stem from the inflexible and absolutist principles of division that presently organize such an identity.

In this context, I want to make a few brief comments on the construction of a national narrative for Britain. Just as the presence of other narratives intervene in the establishing of a totalizing narrative of national identity in India, the presence in London of Bangladeshi restaurants, Bengali neon signs, the Jamme Masjid, Indian retail shops, posters advertising the latest Hindi films, the smell of Fricanor Caribbean curry and the fragrance of rosogollas and the ‘quick exchanges in a dozen dialects of Bengali’ (*SL*, 98) all function as a supplement to the construction of a national narrative for Britain. What Ghosh suggests here is that the cultural signs brought into Britain by the post-World War II influx of Asian immigrants not only mark the end of the homogeneity that defined England's cultural life, they also

⁵⁰Ibid., p.5.

have the power to re-define what it means to be English. This is symbolically exemplified in the setting up of the Bangladeshi-run Taj Travel Agency on the very site that Arthur Price and his comrades had run the Left Book shop. In this way, official or dominant discourses designed to produce an internally coherent time and space for national identity-formation are subject to constant slippage and challenge.

To this end, the 'shadow lines' invoked by the novel's title encompass much more than the geopolitical boundaries constructed in the creation of nation states. As I've tried to demonstrate, they refer implicitly to the lines of demarcation that separate the self and other, private and public, present and past, the home and the world -- the spatially or temporally opposed dialectics at play in the creation of a closed and unified social sphere of experience underpinning national identity-construction. Such lines, for Ghosh, develop an interstitial intimacy that questions the absoluteness of nationalist divisions.

By forcing the people of the Indian subcontinent to confront the complexities of their national-cultural identity, which is constructed as much by similarities as by the othernesses within, as much by continuities as by the fractured temporality and spatiality of the past, Ghosh's narrative of remembering wrenches the re-imagined community of the nation away from the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical and liberates it into the performative space and time of its hybrid present.

Chapter Four

ROHINTON MISTRY

The journey -- chanced, unplanned, solitary -- was the thing to relish.¹

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975. As a 'writer from elsewhere',² a term used by Salman Rushdie to describe those whose narratives fall outside of the dominant culture's construction of itself within the nation/state, Mistry has, in his Canadian narratives, used his location in diaspora to interrogate normative assumptions involving the idea of home and related spaces of emplacement and belonging. '[T]hrbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one ... in Toronto',³ his migrant characters grapple with the complexities of (re)negotiating new identities out of the fragmented cultures and histories of their location in the interstices of nations. While the construction of new narratives of national and cultural identity from the ambivalence of this positioning in-between cultures and nations can be fraught with tension, the very ambivalence of this

¹Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p.184. All further page references are to this edition and will appear in the main text text, after the abbreviated title *SLJ*.

²Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 - 1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p.12.

³Rohinton Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 180. All further page references are to this edition and will appear in the main text, after the abbreviated title *TFB*.

space does offer a potentially productive site outside of the concept of the nation/state which can be used to write against those ideological forces attempting to create a homogeneous, coherent narrative of the nation and its people.

But while Mistry himself may not be as self-consciously or as explicitly political as some of the other writers examined in this thesis, his work, as I will argue later in this chapter, engages effectively with the cultural politics of diaspora, particularly with regard to its emphasis on the instability of the signs of national identity and its interrogation of the static boundaries of nations and cultures. Mistry's experience and awareness of the complex, syncretic tensions of his ideological, cultural and geographical location in diaspora have informed all his writings. This is evident from his first published work, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987).⁴ I wish to begin my examination of Mistry by looking at this text for it offers a compelling representation of the cultural ambivalence of home.

A collection of stories set mostly in a Bombay Parsi tenement, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is largely concerned with constructing a narrative of culture for the Parsi community of India, into which Mistry himself was born. This concern is manifest in the opening story of the collection, 'Auspicious Occasion', which, by focusing on the everyday life and cultural practices of 'an orthodox Parsi [couple] which observed all important days on the Parsi calendar' (*TFB*, 3), inscribes and asserts

⁴*Tales from Firozsha Baag* (first published in 1987 by Penguin Canada) was brought out in Britain and the US under the title *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*.

the presence and cultural distinctiveness of the minority Parsi community into the national space of India. All the major signs of Parsi cultural identity are brought to attention in this story, for example, the ancient, monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism, Parsi festivals such as *Behram roje*, and institutions such as the Fire-temple and the Towers of Silence.

Crucially, although the residential complex of Firozsha Baag functions as the space for the delineation of Parsi identity, Mistry subtly disrupts the boundaries of this identity through the use of an abundance of spatial metaphors of movement: journeys in the form of trips or outings by public transportation which take the Parsi characters away from the enclosed, private space of the Baag and into the overcrowded, public spaces of the city; the incessant 'comings and goings' between India and North America, for the most part Canada, for the purposes of education or migration; and the recurring use of swimming as a spatial image of journeying, especially in the closing story of the collection.

Additionally, the Irani restaurant just outside the compound of the Baag, the neighbouring 'low class' apartment complex of Tar Gully, with its mainly Marathi Hindu residents, the nearby bicycle-repair shop called Cecil Cycles, the name of which hints at India's colonized history, and even the solitary Muslim tenant in Firozsha Baag are all incorporated into Mistry's textual construction of Parsi identity as signs of the complex heterogeneity of Indian life.

On the level of narrative structure, a significant feature is the technique of using a storyteller-within-a-story. In this regard, the choice of Nariman Hansotia as the resident storyteller of Firozsha Baag, through whom Mistry imparts several of his stories, is an important one. Like all storytellers, Nariman is a respectable and highly-regarded elder of his community who 'functions as the tribal spokesman and the repository of the community's heritage'.⁵ Significantly, however, at the same time that the text constructs Nariman as the exemplar of Parsi identity, it also makes several tacit allusions to his Anglicization. For instance, in addition to his English education and obvious love of the English language, seen in the relish with which he introduces new English words into his narration, Nariman, we are told, sports the moustache of a Western movie star (Clark Gable) and often likes to whistle a tune from the Western film, *Bridge on the River Kwai*.⁶ What Mistry suggests in his representation of the Parsi community is that the specificities of its historical experience have opened it up to a long process of 'selective assimilation'⁷, as seen in its amenability to Anglicization during the period of British

⁵Amin Malak, 'Insider/Outsider Views on Belonging: The Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry', in *Short Stories in the New Literatures in English: Proceedings of the Nice Conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, ed. by Jacqueline Bardolph (Nice: Faculte des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Nice, 1989), pp. 189 - 96 (p. 190).

⁶Ajay Heble, 'A Foreign Presence in the Stall: Towards a Poetics of Cultural Hybridity in Rohinton Mistry's Migration Stories', *Canadian Literature*, No. 137 (Summer 1993), pp. 51-61 (p.53).

⁷E. Kulke, *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (Munich: Weltforum Verlag, 1974), p.78 - 79.

colonial rule and its receptivity to 'Indianization'⁸ in the face of the contemporary national realities of India. Parsi identity, Mistry suggests, is by no means pure or continuous, but open to interaction with other cultural systems, while maintaining its own sense of difference.

In destabilizing notions of a discrete, self-enclosed Parsi identity, Mistry assiduously sees to the insertion of the 'Other' into his Parsi narratives: consider, for instance, Gajra, the Marathi maid, in 'Auspicious Occasion'; Francis, the Christian odd-job man, in 'One Sunday'; and Jaakaylee, the Goan ayah, in 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag'. In fact, this background presence of the cultural Other is made explicit in 'The Ghost of Firozsha Baag', which is narrated entirely from the perspective of the elderly Goan, 'proper Catholic' (*TFB*, 46), ayah, Jaakaylee, whose name is actually a vulgarization by the Parsi tongue of her 'English' name, Jacqueline. The ayah's first-person narration, which is sprinkled liberally with expressions in Parsi-Gujerati as well as her native Konkani, is framed in terms of a recollection of her personal history. By ranging back through Jaakaylee's memory to her birth in the former Portuguese colony of Goa and to her fifty years of service

⁸The fact that the language most Parsis speak is Parsi Gujarati (a mixture of the old Farsi and the regional Gujarati) as well as the adoption of the sari by Parsi women, the celebration of Hindu festivals such as 'Dashera' and 'Diwali' and the adoption of the important Hindu social structure such as the Panchayat all point to the successful 'Indianization' of the Parsis. This, as Mistry's text suggests, does not mean that the Parsis have completely or uncritically assimilated into the dominant culture. They still retain several cultural practices that distinguish their community as unique. One of the more conspicuous differences is exemplified in the Parsi way of disposing of the dead.

to the Parsi Karani family of Bombay, Mistry represents Parsi life and culture from the perspective, but also biases and prejudices, of the non-Parsi other. At the same time, as we listen to Jaakaylee's narration of her life story, we get an impression that, despite the ayah's prejudices about the Parsis, she has been transformed -- '[her] name, [her] language, [her] songs' (*TFB*, 45) -- by the very culture she thinks herself as being an outsider to, just as she herself has exerted an influence, no matter how small, on the cultural life of her Parsi employers. For one, Jaakaylee's hot Goan curries have replaced the Parsi *dhansak* as the Karanis' favourite dish. With this, the space of the Karani household and, by extension, that of Firozsha Baag, becomes a metaphor for the shifting configurations of Parsi cultural identity.

The Parsi microcosm of the Baag thus already carries the presence of other voices, other stories, other memories. Mistry implies that because Parsi culture is constituted by heteroglossia, by conditions of dialogue in which differences that permit the process of 'Othering' to occur are already inscribed, there is no such thing as a 'purely' Parsi identity. Such an essentialist view of cultural identity sets up a presumed authenticity, the idea of a 'perfect' Parsiness, untouched by difference, which the hybrid space of Mistry's text rejects as always-already impossible.

Thus, in the passage from the first story, 'Auspicious Occasion', to the stories in the middle section, such as 'Squatter' and 'Lend Me Your Light', which bridge the distance between India and Canada through the incessant journeying back and forth between both countries, and to the final story in the collection, 'Swimming Lessons', the only one set entirely (ostensibly) outside the Parsi enclave of the Baag and in fact outside India, we move from what might be thought of as being a closed and cohesive cultural system through a shifting cultural landscape to finally arrive at an ambivalent, transgressive terrain where the borders between cultures are so fluid that there can no longer be any stable conception of national essences.

Despite the unifying locale, then, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* resists the construction of home as a closed or cohesive space, and calls attention to a complex mediation between 'roots' and 'routes', where home, in the words of Iain Chambers, becomes a 'shifting configuration of transitive coherence'.⁹ In other words, rather than seeking to return us to fixed and identifiable notions of cultural identity, the text asks that we see home and identity as a process, as a 'becoming' rather than a 'being'. Indeed, Mistry's second work of fiction, the novel, *Such A Long Journey* (1991), from which the epigraph to this chapter is taken, reinforces this idea by announcing in its title the difficulty, perhaps even impossibility,

⁹Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.39.

of arrivals, of homecoming. Instead, it is the journey itself, the passage between fixed identifications, which Mistry suggests carries the onus of the meaning of culture.

Mistry's reconfiguration of cultural identity as shifting and ambivalent is inextricably linked, moreover, to the way in which he positions his migrant narratives in relation to the Canadian national imaginary. To this end, he has objected to the way in which the narrative of the migrant writer in Canada has been constructed for him by the discourse of the dominant culture:

I think they [the dominant culture] feel that when a person arrives here [Canada] from a different culture, if that person is a writer, he must have some profound observations about the meeting of the two cultures. And he must write about multiculturalism. He has an area of expertise foisted on him which he may not necessarily want, or which may not necessarily interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations.¹⁰

Mistry's rejection of the racial labels assigned to migrant narratives by the dominant discourse stems from the impetus to jettison stereotypical images of the authors themselves and of their cultural communities. Such labels foreclose an understanding not only of the complexity and plurality of identities inherent in individual communities but also of the various ways in which authors position themselves within their cultural groups and within Canadian society at large.

¹⁰Author's headnotes in *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, ed. by Smaro Kamboureli (Toronto: OUP, 1996), p. 387.

For instance, with reference to works by writers of the Indian diaspora in Canada, the differences that the ethnic designation 'Asian Canadian', or even 'Indian-Canadian', erases is reflected in the works of such novelists as diverse in their thematic concerns and aesthetics as M. G. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, Cyril Dabydeen, Sam Selvon, Nazneen Sadiq, Arnold Itwaru, Yasmin Ladha and Shyam Selvadurai. Over and above the fact that the cultural and historical complexities of the experiences that these novelists, and their characters, grapple with while attempting to construct a new and viable cultural narrative for themselves in Canada transcend the limits of the ethnic paradigm, many among these writers cannot unproblematically consider India as home, either on the grounds that they are children of first-generation migrants, or that they have come to Canada via their historical dispersal to the Caribbean, Africa, Guyana, Fiji or Mauritius.

I have tried to convey something of this complexity in this thesis, in that, although all four writers under study are from India, their writing gestures toward very different spaces for examining contemporary conflicts in the construction of cultural and national identity. For instance, when Mistry was asked to compare his fiction with Mukherjee's, he drew attention to the discrepant cultural spaces occupied by their characters. Referring to Mukherjee's mainly Hindu characters, he said: 'My characters are outside Hindu India. And because of the history of the Zoroastrian

religion, it does not provide a solid anchor like Hinduism or Judaism or Islam'.¹¹ Indeed, Mistry's identity as a Parsi Zoroastrian appears to be important to him, for he has said that he hopes his writing will 'preserve a record of how they [the Parsis] lived, to some extent'.¹²

As a Parsi, Mistry is a member of a minority community in India which traces its roots to pre-Islamic Persia.¹³ Thus, Nilufer Barucha's significant comment that Mistry, as an Indian of Persian origins, was 'in diaspora even in India'.¹⁴ Mistry's location 'outside Hindu India' suggests that there is no space in the dominant Hindu national narrative for the Parsi subject. Additionally, the historical experience of

¹¹Geoffrey Hancock, 'Interview with Rohinton Mistry', *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 65 (1989), pp. 143-50 (p. 149).

¹²Rohinton Mistry in interview with Ali Lakhani at the Vancouver International Writers' Festival, quoted in Nilufer Barucha, "'When Old Tracks are Lost': Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse', in *The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry*, ed. by Jaydipsinh Dodiya (London: Sangam Books, 1996), pp.23-31 (p.25).

¹³The Parsis are Zoroastrians who migrated from their homeland of Persia (now Iran) to India at different times over the last thousand years. The predominant reason for this emigration was the Arab conquest of Iran in the seventh century, which destroyed the Sassanide Empire (226-651 A.D.) and brought about the conversion to Islam of the overwhelming majority of Persian Zoroastrians. To escape religious persecution, those who refused conversion had to flee their homeland. Today the most dynamic remaining Zoroastrian community resides in the north western, Gujerat, region of India -- in Surat, Bombay, Puna -- where its members have sought to live in an environment of religious tolerance where they can practise the monotheistic religion founded by Zarathustra, the prophet of ancient Iran. These Zoroastrians came to be known as Parsis, or Parsees, in India, after Pars (or 'Fars'), the heartland of the ancient Persian empire. While the Parsis started out as farmers, they gradually engaged in trade and commerce under different Hindu princes, and flourished with the arrival of the British, converting themselves to the values of an industrial society and acquiring a new and significant economic standing, far beyond the relatively small size of their community (roughly 100, 000 worldwide, 70,000 of whom live in India, chiefly in Bombay). They are engaged also in the political life of India, having participated in the formation of the Indian National Congress. For background reading, see Jer D. Randeria, *The Parsi Mind: A Zoroastrian Asset to Culture* (New Delhi: MMPublishers, 1993) and Sven Hartman, *Parsism: The Religion of Zoroaster* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1980).

¹⁴Nilufer Barucha, *ibid.*, p. 23.

diaspora has further rendered impossible the ability of the Parsi subject to speak from a cohesive cultural narrative. This expropriation of the Parsi narrative by the dominant culture has created a profound sense of loss and alienation.

Significantly, the fact that the Indian-Parsi migrant is in yet another diaspora in Canada points to the understanding that he inhabits a space which is much more fragmented in culture and discontinuous in terms of history than that inhabited by most other national subjects. Thus, while most migrant writers speak of their experiences of racism and other forms of prejudice in their new or adopted homes, the specificity of Mistry's precarious and problematic location as a Canadian of Indian-Parsi origins entails a common experience of racism both in Canada and India. This common experience of racism offers Mistry another thread by which to connect through time and space those experiences that transcend the limitations of national boundaries. The character, Kersi, for instance, in 'Swimming Lessons', connects his experiences of alienation as a migrant in Toronto with the bullying and other forms of exclusion he has experienced in school in Bombay because of his Parsi ethnicity. More to the point, this experience of 'double displacement',¹⁵ as Barucha terms it, or of 'double diaspora', as it were, gives Mistry added leverage to pry open the idea of culture and its appropriation by the existing nationalist paradigm. For the phenomenon of 'double diaspora', by its very

¹⁵Barucha, p. 23.

nomenclature, signals to the existence of more than two 'homelands'. Yet, in very real terms, for the Parsi, being born in India means there is no other 'homeland' to return to; there is only the narrative of a place of origin before diaspora. Such an awareness of the absence of home is further intensified in the light of the consideration that the historical Persia no longer exists. The homeland, for the Parsi, then, is only a catechistic construction of language. There is no sign to accompany the signifier. It is this awareness of the catachrestic nature of home that the Parsi takes with him to his new home outside India, in this case, Canada. Here, his location in 'double diaspora' further emphasizes the instability of the signs of national identity, which is traditionally based on the notion of the single, primordial, home of culture. In this way, the phenomenon of 'double diaspora' intensifies and accelerates the undermining and reconfiguring of the dominant cultural narrative of Canada.

The point that I am trying to make here is that the writers' negotiation of their cultural origins or national background to their writings, and to their home spaces, both geographical and imaginary, is carried out in ways that engage with the multiple and intersecting subject positions they inhabit in relation to the national imaginary. In noting the political importance of describing minority writing in other than solely racial or ethnic terms, the Canadian literary critic, Craig Tapping asserts

that one should consider 'geographical, lexical, political, and cultural differences [as] the signifying tropes of Indo-American [and Indo-Canadian] ethnic literatures'.¹⁶

Similarly, in rejecting a racial assignation to migrant literature, Mistry draws attention instead to the social, cultural and political contexts that have produced his writing, and by implication, his identity. Such a stance moves the focus away from essentialist representation of cultures to instead contextualize identity and literature within an ongoing Canadian historical narrative.

I wish to emphasize, however, that the rejection of the ethnic label is not equivalent to the transcendence of cultural difference. One critic, for instance, makes the following succinct observation on the double-bind faced by Mistry and, by extension, other Indian migrant writers in Canada:

[T]he dilemma of difference on the one hand means that Mistry can and should be read as Canadian, assimilated into the Canadian canon, judged by perhaps inappropriate criteria, his difference dismissed. On the other, it means that he should be read as Asian Canadian, not really Canadian, perhaps an exotic new offshoot of the Canadian canon, but unable to affect fundamentally the definition of that canon.¹⁷

One way in which writers of the diaspora like Mistry negotiate their way out of this predicament is by problematizing the very terms that are operative in the construction of the dominant narrative of Canadian national and cultural identity. This

¹⁶Craig Tapping, 'South Asia Writes North America: Prose Fictions and Autobiographies from the Indian Diaspora', in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, ed. by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 285 - 301 (p. 287).

¹⁷Ranu Samantrai, 'States of Belonging: Pluralism, Migrancy, Literature', in *Writing Ethnicity*, ed. by Winfried Siemerling (Toronto: ECW Press, 1996), pp. 33- 50 (p. 37).

takes the form of making an important ideological distinction between 'ethnicity' and 'cultural difference'. Mistry, and the other writers under study in this thesis, notably Mukherjee and Rushdie, view ethnicity as an essentialist label foisted on the migrant (writer) by the dominant discourse to perpetuate its hegemonic practices. Rejecting the term ethnic -- 'a suppurating sore of a word, oozing the stench of bigotry' (*TFB*, 176) -- their writing gestures towards the alternative formulation of 'cultural difference'. This term, as I have been suggesting in this thesis, is an empowering construct which migrant writers deploy for the purposes of challenging the dominant culture's definition of itself within the narrative of the nation and, in turn, reconfiguring the place and naming of their work and identity in relation to that definition. This conceptual re-alignment of the place of the ethnic Other in relation to the national self draws attention to the changing historical context of home, and by so doing calls to question conventional understandings of identity and belonging that privilege sameness and continuity.

More specifically, Mistry's attempts at reconfiguring the dominant and established narrative of the nation is carried out principally through a rejection of the hegemonic underpinnings of Canadian multiculturalism. Mistry's stance in this context again invites comparison with Mukherjee who, as I had elaborated in my discussion in Chapter One, has said that her departure from Canada, where she lived from 1966 to 1980 as a citizen and a member of a 'visible minority' community, was motivated

largely by her victimization at the hands of the dominant white culture. More significantly, she has said that the terms for such a discrimination were encoded and perpetuated by what she had come to consider the essentially racist discourse of Canadian multiculturalism.

Although less vehement than Mukherjee, Mistry is well aware of the 'presence of xenophobia and hostility' (*TFB*, 153) in Canada, and feels the need 'to redefine multiculturalism, to de-ghettoize it and de-hyphenate it'.¹⁸ Like Mukherjee, he suggests in his fiction that multiculturalism is merely a political ruse for assimilation, and that the ethnic subject who refuses to assimilate is viewed as aberrant to the national norm:

The Multicultural Department is a Canadian invention. It is supposed to ensure that ethnic cultures are able to flourish, so that Canadian society will consist of a mosaic of cultures -- that's their favourite word, mosaic -- instead of one uniform mix, like the American melting pot. If you ask me, mosaic and melting pot are both nonsense, and ethnic is a polite way of saying bloody foreigner. (*TFB*, 160)

But unlike Mukherjee who has opted to reject the Canadian 'mosaic' for what she views as the potential and egalitarian possibilities for the making of national/cultural identities offered by the American 'melting pot', Mistry has chosen to stay. Mistry's acceptance of Canada, however, is not tantamount to acquiescence, for it is accompanied by a problematization of the terms of Canadian multiculturalism so as

¹⁸Diane McGifford, *The Geography of Voice: Canadian Literature of the South Asian Diaspora* (Toronto: TSAR, 1992), p. x.

to make space for historical and political juxtapositions, for the heterogeneity of the nation's histories and perspectives.

For instance, the tragedy that can arise when one fails to recognize the significance of the place of cultural difference in the Canadian national imaginary is powerfully exemplified in the short story, 'Squatter', in which Nariman Hansotia imparts to his young audience the 'whole sad saga' (*TFB*, 168) of the immigrant, Sarosh. Sarosh, a resident of the Baag, makes a promise to his relatives on the eve of his departure for Toronto that he will return to Bombay if he does not become 'completely Canadian in exactly ten years' (*TFB*, 155). In Canada, although he adapts without much difficulty to Western attitudes and values -- his name-change to Sid functioning as an index of his willing cultural assimilation into Canadian society -- Sarosh discovers that the 'completely Canadian' identity that he longs for remains elusive: after almost ten years of living in Canada, Sarosh is still unable to use the Western-style toilet without 'simulating the squat of ... Indian latrines' (*TFB*, 153):

At first this inability was no more than mildly incommodious. As time went by, however, the frustrated attempts caused him great anxiety. And when the failure stretched unbroken over ten years, it began to torment and haunt all his waking hours... He remained dependent on the old way and this unalterable fact, strengthened afresh every morning of his life in the new country, suffocated him (*TFB*, 154).

Comic though this story is, it asks us to look at the social and cultural implications of Sarosh's private predicament. For instance, Sarosh himself reads his

inability to use the Western toilet as a sign of his aberration from what is considered the mainstream: 'If he could not be westernized in all respects, he was nothing but a failure in this land -- a failure not just in the washrooms of the nation but everywhere' (*TFB*, 162). Unable to consider himself a Canadian, Sarosh returns to India, a failed immigrant. But Sarosh's tragedy does not end here. Frustrated in Canada, he returns to India, 'desperately searching for his old place in the pattern of life he had vacated ten years ago.... The old pattern was never found' (*TFB*, 167). His experience of the ambivalences of diaspora prompts Mistry to reject as untenable any notion of a return to the 'pure' space of home.

In this story, Mistry deploys the legitimacy and force of the 'unalterable fact' of cultural difference, conveyed metaphorically in Sarosh's inability to use the Western-style toilet, to not only satirize immigrant desperation to belong, but to force an interrogation of hegemonic notions of the national. What Mistry suggests is that there is no such thing as a 'completely Canadian' identity if such an identity is premised on the definition of national culture as hermetic and pure. Desperately intent on becoming 'completely Canadian', Sarosh tries to completely assimilate into the dominant white culture. The renunciation of cultural history that this calls for is symbolically enacted every time that Sarosh, 'perched on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches' (*TFB*, 153), tries to purge himself of his Indianness. But, as Sarosh discovers, he cannot, as hard as he might try, simply jettison his cultural history.

Mistry's point in this 'sad but instructive chronicle' (*TFB*, 153) is that immigrants like Sarosh are so desirous of acceptance on hegemonic white terms that they do not see that their unassimilable, or 'unalterable', cultural difference is already a signifier of their Canadianness. Such immigrants, for Mistry, will always remain 'squatters', not rightful or legitimate inhabitants of the national space of Canada.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that in the story, 'Swimming Lessons', the father of a former Baag resident who is now a migrant in Canada, obviously keeping the edifying tale of the 'failed immigrant' Sid-Sarosh in mind, should advise his son not to lose 'the important difference' (*TFB*, 248). Although he hopes for his son's successful adaptation to life in Canada, the father asks that he refrain from effecting the type of assimilation into Canada that would erase his Indianness or, more specifically, his Parsiness. However, on reading the story it becomes clear that the fundamental dialectic underlying the father's argument that his son preserve his cultural identity, like that which conceptually informs the concept of multiculturalism, has the effect of preserving the very imaginary distinctions that enable official, or national, definitions of putatively coherent cultures. In other words, such a mode of conceptualizing culture, undergirded as it is by the old imperialist paradigm, is one where the multiple cultures invoked by the term 'multiculturalism' are seen as totalities in themselves, defined by clear boundaries. Such a framework inevitably advocates the hierarchical purity of cultures.

Instead, what is needed is a critique of multiculturalism that does not simply mean inverting existing hierarchies by ‘communicating across borders but of discerning the forces that generate the borders in the first place’.¹⁹ In other words, what is needed is a profound epistemological shift in the theoretical framework informing cultural production that would enable new positions, new possibilities for national-cultural identity to emerge.

My conception of diaspora as a hybrid, dialogical, transnational space from which to view the construction of cultural identity offers one such possibility. One of the most affirmative aspects of this position is that it asks that we move from a conception of national culture as a combination of what might be thought of as different and sometimes incompatible cultures to one where national culture is seen as a complex and *internally* divergent whole. This position entails a radical dismantling of the conventional cartography constituted by the traditional narratives of the modern nation/state. Such a disruption, as I hope to show, is attempted in ‘Swimming Lessons’, where Mistry attempts to construct a new paradigm with the potential to destabilize the established paradigm for the construction of national-cultural identity.

¹⁹Robert Stam, ‘Multiculturalism and the Neoconservatives’, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat and Anne McClintock (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 188 - 203 (p. 200).

In the story, the unnamed narrator, a young Parsi migrant in Toronto and a former resident of the Baag, tells us about his experiences in Canada, especially about his life in the Don Mills apartment block in Toronto and his daily interaction with the residents there. As he tells us about his life in Canada, his first-person narrative is interrupted by another voice telling a story about a middle-aged couple who live in the Firozsha Baag complex in Bombay. This third-person narrative focuses on the couple as they wait eagerly for letters from their son in Toronto which they hope will tell them something about his new life. So that we can distinguish between these narratives, the text's structure of juxtaposed narrations assumes a visual difference -- the narrator's first-person account of life in Canada is in ordinary print while the narrative of India is in italics.

One day, instead of receiving the usual note from their son saying very little about his life in Canada, the parents are sent a volume of short stories; they are delighted to find out that their son is a writer. Hoping to find out something about his new life in Canada, the couple eagerly start reading, but are soon disappointed; the book which their son has sent them is not about 'some story based on his Canadian experience', but 'all about Parsis and Bombay' (TFB, 245):

Mother and Father read the first five stories, and she was very sad after reading some of them, she said he must be so unhappy there, all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and everything he left behind, because if he likes it over there why would he not write stories

about that, there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him. (TFB, 243)

Finally, the parents come to the last story in the volume:

The last story they liked best of all because it had the most in it about Canada, and now they felt they knew at least a little bit...about his day-to-day life in his apartment; and Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested in reading there about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference. (TFB, 248)

This is an important moment of self-reflexivity in the narrative, for we discover that the collection of stories that is being read by the parents is actually the same one we are in the process of reading. To put it another way, they are reading and at the same time being read. We also realise, at this juncture, that the son we have been reading about in the narrative of the Indian couple is actually the narrator himself, presumably Kersi, and also that it is Kersi, their immigrant son and writer, who is the one who writes the Firozsha tales. Kersi, in a sense, becomes a fictional equivalent of the author Mistry himself. This strategy of narrative self-reflexivity destabilizes the fixed and static boundaries between writer/text/reader, and constitutes, as we shall see, a crucial aspect of Mistry's narrative aesthetic.

Crucially also, the moment we make the discovery that the first-person narrator is the son in the third-person narrative, the narrative of home in

Canada coalesces, in time and across space, with the narrative of home in India. Thus, far from being represented as separate and self-enclosed cultural and national systems with stable boundaries between them, Canada and India come together to destabilize any notion of the purity of cultural identity.

The point made by Mistry, in the form of Kersi's response to his parents' plea that he write about his life in Canada, is that the Canadian narrative always-already exists in relation to the Indian narrative. Unlike the parents who dichotomize Kersi's life and experiences in terms of 'here' and 'there', 'home' and 'abroad', Mistry represents Kersi's migrancy as a condition which allows him to see here *and* there, India *and* Canada -- contrapuntally. In other words, the nations of India and Canada are represented as being interconnected with each other, as being constituted by and constituting each other. Like Indianness, Canadianness is in continual process, in a constant state of revision that does not preclude other alliances, other affinities, other identifications. Thus, what Mistry articulates through Kersi is that every national narrative reveals the constitutive presence of other voices, claims, memories, in the process stretching and extending the idea of imagined communities across the static borders that presently construct national-cultural identity.

Significantly, the use of water, alluded to in the story's title, as the governing metaphor of the story further points to Mistry's idea of the transitionality as well as the open-ended and processual contours of cultural

identity. In this sense, the recurring imagery of water, whether in the form of swimming in Bombay's Chaupatty sea, in the swimming-pool of the Toronto apartment complex, or in the bathtub, gestures to, as I will show, Mistry's need to create positions or spaces for new paradigms through which to consider national identities.

In India, Kersi's inability to feel 'at home' is metaphorically referenced in his inability to swim, mainly because the waters of the Chaupatty are too filthy to swim in. In Canada, Kersi's feeling of 'failure' at achieving integration is reflected in his 'terror' of the swimming pool. Nearing the end of the story, Kersi attempts to conquer his fear of swimming by closing his eyes, holding his breath and dunking his head in his bathtub and keeping it underwater for a few seconds. Slowly, he learns to open his eyes underwater: 'I am slowly able to discern the underwater objects. The drain plug looks different, slightly distorted;...I come up...examine quickly the overwater world ...and go in again.... The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside' (*TFB*, 249). Kersi's ability to see 'overwater' and 'underwater' almost simultaneously (because he keeps going into the water and coming up so quickly) is what, metaphorically, constitutes the plural consciousness produced by this space of creative syncretism. Thus, the 'lesson' Mistry teaches requires a movement away from a world conceived in binary terms to one which disrupts the spatial and

temporal coherence of a closed system to offer a new, more flexible, cartography for the construction of national identity.

Crucially, the symbolic resonance of water stands in contrast to the image that is foregrounded in Mistry's next work, *Such a Long Journey*. The novel's dominant visual image is the concrete wall erected outside the compound of the Khodadad Building residential complex which separates it from the street outside. Although it is meant for the security and protection of the inhabitants, the 'solidity of the long, black wall' (*SLJ*, 184), like the blackout sheets that the protagonist, Gustad Noble, has used to cover the windows of his house since the Indo-Sinai war of 1962, acts as a defensive shell, preventing the Parsi residents from interacting with what Gustad considers to be the cultural squalor of Hindu-dominant India -- 'the flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people pissing, squatting alongside the wall' (*SLJ*, 63). In this context, it must be remembered that a distinctive characteristic of the Parsis is the esteem with which they view their cultural and religious identity; the Parsis are, after all, descendants of those who had chosen exile from their homeland of Persia over conversion to the Islamic faith.

Mistry's representation of the closed Parsi community, walled in by its virtual maintaining of ethnic separateness, brings to mind Edward Said's comment about the danger of the defining and divisive power of boundaries. 'Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory', he cautions, 'can also become

prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity'.²⁰ Similarly aware that the attachment to one's cultural or ethnic identity can regress into militant forms of nationalism, Mistry points to the need to destabilize the notion of fixed or established boundaries, particularly those which give rise to the idea of closed or static cultures.

Gustad's view of the boundedness of cultures is eroded when a pavement artist is hired to decorate the Baag's enclosing wall so as to prevent passersby from urinating against it. The artist decides to paint the wall with the gods and goddesses of all the world's religions -- 'Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist' (*SLJ*, 182). Although Gustad goes along with the artist's idea, he inwardly would prefer that a portrait of Zarathustra inaugurate the wall -- an indication here that Gustad has not yet learned to look beyond the wall of his Parsi identity. Soon, the wall is transformed into a repository of India's heterogeneous religious identity -- in the midst of Zarathustra, Buddha, Guru Nanak, 'Nataraja did his cosmic dance, Abraham lifted his axe high above Isaac, Mary cradled the infant Jesus, Laxmi dispensed wealth, Saraswati spread wisdom and learning' (*SLJ*, 184).

Equally significant to the artist's choice of images is that the wall with the sacred images itself becomes another image on the wall of the Khodadad Building which in turn becomes another image on the wall, and so on. The artist's aesthetic wall

²⁰Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter', p. 54.

-- 'the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a painting of the wall featuring a ...' (SLJ, 288) -- undermines all boundaries to destabilize the notion of origins and call attention to the constructedness of all cultural formations -- a lesson that Gustad is yet to learn.

Towards the end of the novel, with fundamentalist Hindu organizations like the Shiv Sena about to take control of the streets of Bombay, the Municipality decides to demolish the ecumenical wall. This is met with protests from the Khodadad residents, who organize a *morcha*, which is joined by people of other faiths from the neighbouring buildings. The wall, however, is brought down. With the wall down, we are left with the final image of Gustad removing the blackout papers on his window. With light pouring into his war-darkened house for the first time in more than a decade, Gustad begins to see that borders are provisional, merely constructs, pointing to Mistry's critique of any cultural space or system which valorizes a retreat from the heteroglossic influence of other cultural systems.

In this sense, like the aesthetic wall surrounding the Khodadad Building compound, and the device in the short story 'Swimming Lessons' of a storyteller-within-a-storyteller-within-a-story (Nariman Hansotia/Kersi/Mistry), Mistry's self-reflexive mode of narration attempts to show the processes by which meaning, identity or culture is created or assigned. By collapsing boundaries, Mistry calls

attention to the status of narrative *as* narrative so as to reject the traditional notion of home as an absolute point of origin and meaning.

To bring this section to a close, I wish to emphasize that Mistry indeed raises significant and compelling questions about the construction of a more equitable national imaginary for Canada and India by staging, as I have attempted to show, the complex 'routes' of culture across, rather than within, stable nationalist cultural narratives. This endeavour is exemplified in his collection of short stories. In *Such a Long Journey*, it might be said, Mistry's ideological energies are focused chiefly on India, and the novel reinserts and reinscribes the Parsi cultural narrative -- 'caught in a cycle of restrictive traditions, economic needs, racial and religious tensions, as well as inner psychological conflicts'²¹ -- so as to articulate the exclusions of nationalist constructions and formations. However, his more recent novel, *A Fine Balance* (1996), opens out to a broader national landscape, an expanded social, political and historical terrain, in order to call into question those processes that construct a homogeneous narrative of national-cultural identity. To this end, *A Fine Balance* leaves behind the Parsi microcosms of Firozsha Baag and the Khodadad Building to plot the 'routes' of national culture against the linear and unitary construction of narrative in India.

²¹Amin Malak, p. 190.

A Fine Balance

In the following section, I wish to examine the ways in which Mistry narrates Indian national-cultural identity, given the specificities of his location in diaspora. In a recent interview, for instance, Mistry suggests that his awareness of India's heterogeneity was only enabled by his experience of the instabilities of his diasporic location in Canada. According to Mistry, he was troubled to find racism 'coming from what I, at the time, assumed was one homogeneous community of Indians. But there was no such thing, just as there is no such thing as Canadian'.²² What Mistry implies is that it was only his experience of racist exclusion in Canada that had opened his eyes to the fact of India's own multiplicity.

The main action of *A Fine Balance* is framed between the opening chapter, 'Prologue: 1975', and the concluding 'Epilogue: 1984'. These are important years, marking some of the crucial events in the history of the Indian nation; 1975 saw the declaration of 'a state of Internal Emergency' by the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, and in 1984 Mrs Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, in

²²Rohinton Mistry, Interview in *Rungh* 2.1 (1994), quoted in Michael Thorpe, 'Making Waves Against the Mainstream: Divergent Prospects for Canadian Literature', *ARIEL*, 27.4 (1996), pp. 139 - 53 (p. 145).

vengeance for the Indian Army's attack earlier that year on the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the death of their religious leader Jarnail Bhindranwale. Mrs Gandhi's assassination triggered nation-wide riots and 'the most serious communal violence in India since Partition',²³ with Sikhs 'being beaten and butchered and burnt alive'²⁴ by Hindus in retaliation for the Prime Minister's murder.

Although the main temporal setting of the novel focuses on the happenings between June 1975 and mid-1976, spanning the months that saw the worst excesses of the two-year Emergency period, the narrative also goes back to the events of personal history and to other pivotal moments in the history of the Indian nation, before resuming its narrative thread between the two main historical points -- the onset of Emergency in 1975 and the riots following Mrs Gandhi's assassination in 1984.

While I have more to say about the text's narrative structure later in the chapter, what I wish now to emphasize is that Mistry's attempt to reimagine Indian national identity is carried out through an evocation of the key moments of crisis and turbulence in the history of India as a nation.

Not surprisingly, then, *A Fine Balance* is replete with details of the abuses of the Emergency, horrors that are framed in terms of the disparities between the

²³Khilnani, p. 53.

²⁴Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 580. All further page references will be to this edition and will be given within parenthesis in the text, after the abbreviated title *FB*.

climate of violence and political and social oppression represented by this period in post-independence India and the principles of democracy, religious tolerance, economic development and cultural pluralism which Jawaharlal Nehru had placed at the heart of his idea of India at the time of the inauguration of the Indian nation in 1947. To return to a point I had made in Chapter Two, Nehru was the first to narrativize a history of the subcontinent into what has come to be known as the secular history of India.²⁵ In Nehru's view, what he considered India was the secular unity of different communities and religions, each of which had made significant historical contributions. Accordingly, for Nehru, the secular history of India became the most authentic testimony to the capacity of Indians to maintain a 'unity among diversity', providing him with the political framework through which he sought to unite the cultural diversity of the subcontinent.

In Chapter Two, I made the suggestion that Salman Rushdie, while committed in principle to Nehru's secular ideology, nevertheless reveals his loss of faith in the ability of secular nationalism to unite India's multiple cultures and religions. More specifically, Rushdie signals that a secular narrativization of history, with its Enlightenment underpinnings of liberal pluralism, is an idealized and ultimately inadequate framework that does not recognize or take into account the contentious reality of the plural politics of the contemporary post-colonial nation.

²⁵Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 4.

For Mistry, however, what is at issue is not so much the Western conceptual underpinnings of secularism (though his narrativization of the nation's history inevitably resists the linear pull of the Enlightenment trajectory implicit in the secular construction of history), but rather how the loss or emptying of secular values in the nation/state has led to the gradual decline and denudation in the concepts of nation and nationalism. Radically egalitarian in his approach, Mistry sees secularism as a philosophical and political position that views history and contemporary social life from the perspective of the fundamental equality of all people in status and rights.

This explains Mistry's accentuating of the role played by Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter and political successor,²⁶ in the two decades after Nehru's death, a period of decline which Mistry represents principally in this text in terms of Mrs Gandhi's sanctioning of Emergency and its totalitarian excesses, especially in the rise of corruption and intrigue in her government -- 'stories of misery, caste violence, government callousness, official arrogance, police brutality' (*FB*, 229) -- and in her abuse of political power for personal ends. In fact, taken accumulatively, all Mistry's texts rewrite the Indian nation against the backdrop of social turbulence and political instability beginning from the late 1960s through to the mid-1980s, a period

²⁶The person who immediately succeeded Nehru, after his death in 1964, was not, however, Indira Gandhi but Lal Bahadur Shastri who served less than two years in office. It was his unexpected death that brought about Mrs Gandhi's abrupt and meteoric rise in the Congress party and entry into office.

when the Indian nation was under the leadership of Mrs Gandhi, and the sense of crisis for which the Emergency, in force from 1975 to 1977, provided dramatic expression. I shall in the following paragraphs provide a brief context for understanding why Emergency is a central event in the political and historical topography of the Indian nation.

By the mid-1970s, Mrs Gandhi's declining popularity in her second successive term in office meant that she could no longer be confident of the landslide victory that elected her into office in 1971. One of the principal reasons for which was the Indian victory in the war against Pakistan that same year, and it is this phase of Indian history and politics that Mistry foregrounds in his first novel, *Such a Long Journey*. However, within a few years of Mrs Gandhi's electoral triumph of 1971, public support for her had evaporated in the face of her failed electoral promises. This, together with growing dissent from within the Congress Party, and the rise of Gandhian socialism spearheaded by the opposition leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, resulted in nationwide strikes and protests. With escalating street violence over demands for her resignation, especially after the ruling by the High Court that found her guilty of malpractice in her 1971 election campaign, Mrs Gandhi, invoking dictatorial powers inherited from the British Raj and preserved in the Indian Constitution, proclaimed a state of national Emergency in June 1975. By suspending democratic rights and judicial procedures, and curtailing the decision-making powers of the cabinet and parliament,

the Emergency precipitated the concentration of power in the prime minister's office. The MISA, or Maintenance of Internal Security Act -- which allowed 'detention without trial, up to two years. Extensions also available on request' (*FB*, 570) -- was one of the draconian measures instituted by Mrs Gandhi to effectively censor any form of opposition to her regime.

Under the Twenty-Point Programme of social and economic reconstruction introduced by the state, slum dwellings were to be demolished under the auspices of a City Beautification project, ostensibly to make way for subsidized housing for low-income families. The Emergency also vowed to put a stop to the 'discrimination against, and harassment of, backward castes by upper castes...to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, the dowry system, child marriage' (*FB*, 143) -- none of which, as Mistry's novel testifies, materialized. One of the most repressive aspects of Mrs Gandhi's new programme, however, was the policy of forced sterilization, which was carried out under the direction of Mrs Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay, who was being groomed by the Prime Minister as her political heir.

Thus, what I particularly wish to emphasize is that, by the mid-1980s, the changes that Mrs Gandhi had wrought upon the political landscape of India she had inherited from her father had significant repercussions on the social and cultural aspects of Indian national life. Whereas democracy had been a deeply ingrained aspect of Nehru's secular ideology, influencing all areas of socio-cultural, political and

economic life, Mrs Gandhi's implicit belief that elections alone were enough to attest to India's thriving democracy gave rise to endemic corruption in state and bureaucratic structures. As Mrs Gandhi's lack of democratic rule led to a general loss of support for the Congress, the party, in a bid to stay in power, began to rely heavily on communal sentiments to muster political support. Indeed, it is the party's increasing dependence on appeals to caste and religion that helped to politicize these social categories and bring them into the national arena.²⁷

The emergence of communal politics within the Congress party inevitably produced an environment conducive to the growth of rival organizations that capitalized on the heavily communalized atmosphere to muster political support for themselves. The main beneficiaries of this were Hindu nationalist parties such as the BJP, which has dedicated itself to the redefinition of nationalism in exclusively Hindu terms. So successful was its appeal, especially in the northern and western regions of the country, that by the late 1990s, the BJP had become the major partner in the ruling coalition, already having relegated the Congress to the status of a parliamentary minority in the mid 1990s.²⁸

In Bombay, for instance, 'the most modern, most cosmopolitan city in the whole country' (*FB*, 222), the success of the BJP is particularly ominous given the heterogeneous mix of the city's population. The party's huge appeal in this state is

²⁷Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), pp. 48-50.

²⁸At the time of writing, the Indian Prime Minister is Atal Behari Vajpayee from the BJP.

reflected in the success of its local ally, the Shiv Sena, whose chief rallying cry of 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians', initially aimed at migrants from the south but more recently also at Bombay's Muslims, is targeted at 'cleansing' Bombay of 'outsiders' and keeping its benefits for the dominant Hindu, Marathi-speaking inhabitants. The Shiv Sena, claiming continuity of habitation and a 'natural' connection to the land, call this Hindu Marathi community the 'sons of the soil'. The change of name from Bombay to Mumbai in fact symbolizes the Shiv Sena's attempt to take over the city, to claim it in the image of their own purposes. Mistry's narrative of nation in his first novel foregrounds the Parsi response to this threat of expropriation of their cultural identity. While the Parsis themselves are a small minority, compared to the Muslims and Tamils and Keralites from the south, their high level of education and expertise is construed as a threat to the majority Hindu population of the state. Hence, the character Gustad's very real fears behind his angry outburst that there is '[n]o future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense' (*SLJ*, 55).

The fact that exclusivist social organizations such as these have moved into the democratic arena by mobilizing electoral support, and by maintaining such support through the use of state-organised violence and protectionism, exemplifies, as Mistry suggests, the dire consequences of the death of secularism as a political ideology in contemporary India. The emergence and swift rise of a character like

Thakur Dharamsi, an upper-caste landowner, as a Congress party leader in Emergency India is precisely owing to the fact that he takes advantage of a heavily communalized and corrupt state machinery to advance his own corrupt and self-serving interests. This close nexus between politics and the politicization of religion is reflected in the Hinduism which he preaches to galvanize the support of the Hindu electoral majority of Bombay. Worse, the sterilization camps that he organizes becomes an ideal vehicle for him to exact his revenge on the oppressed of society who 'dared to break the timeless chain of caste' (*FB*, 95).

In this regard, although the novel does not deal explicitly with the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, the Congress-engineered, BJP-led political event that looms large in the Indian cultural topography as a symbol of the violence and extremism wrought by the loss of a secular national principle, the fact that *A Fine Balance* was published in 1996 suggests that it was written with an awareness of the ascending political and social power of the BJP. The text itself points to the eruption of ethnic nationalisms and their ugly corollary of violence -- 'in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Assam, Tamil Nadu' (*FB*, 582) -- across the Indian subcontinent. One character in the novel, in fact, directly attributes the problems in the Punjab to the machinations of Mrs Gandhi who, he says, had 'help[ed] one group to make trouble for state government. Afterwards the group became so powerful, fighting for separation and Khalistan, they made trouble for her only. She

gave the blessing to the guns and bombs, and then these wicked, violent instruments began hitting her own government.... And then she made the problem worse and worse, telling the army to attack the Golden Temple and capture the terrorists' (*FB*, 582). Although I'm aware that what this particular character is articulating is not offered by the text as 'truth', my belief that Mistry himself might be partial to this view is corroborated in the earlier novel where a character also assigns the rise of fundamentalism in India to the communal politics set in motion by Mrs Gandhi: 'How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don't forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers' (*SLJ*, 39).

Indeed, as Sunil Khilnani reminds us:

The self-confidence that had defined the Nehru era and that had allowed India to position itself grandly in the face of the future, had collapsed into the numbing short-term expediency of a political elite desperate to keep its grip on the state.... The sense of a 'crisis' was everywhere: India's original project seemed to have fallen into corruption and degeneration. Politics and the state, once seen as the prophylactic that would invigorate the country, were now seen as the disease.²⁹

It is this 'sense of a "crisis"' that Mistry attempts to capture in *A Fine Balance*. More specifically, this crisis is played out in terms of the forces which impinge on the lives of ordinary citizens. To this end, Mistry traces the social,

²⁹Khilnani, p. 55.

political and economic implications of Emergency through the lives and destinies of four characters. The coming together, and gradual conjoining, of the lives of these four main characters, is effected against the backdrop of the city of Bombay, a point to which I will return later in the chapter.

Perhaps what is particularly significant about Mistry's novel is that the four central characters are very different from each other, not only in terms of their ethnicity, but also in their class interests and backgrounds. There is Dina Dalal, a middle-class Parsi widow in her forties who struggles to survive independently in the city, free from the domineering influence of her older brother; the tailors, Ishvar and his nephew, Omprakash Darji, former untouchables, who have left their 'native place' in the village, and their oppression by the upper castes, in the hope of finding work in the city. The tailors are hired by Dina so that she can earn her living by sewing dresses on contract to a small export business, but when their shack in the slums is demolished by the government under the City Beautification project, they move in with Dina; and there is the seventeen year-old Parsi student, Maneck Kohlah, whose parents run a small general store in a hill-station of the Himalayas. Due to the failing family business, Maneck, an only child, has been sent by his father to acquire a college education in the city. A son of Dina's old school-friend, Maneck lives with Dina as a 'paying guest'.

Equally significant to Mistry's objective to highlight the unequal interests and identities within the national space is the attempt to call attention to the mutually impacting trajectories of personal and national histories. Although the narrative focuses on the personal history of four people, it places them immediately in the larger political history of their time. What Mistry implies here is that the national is already implicated in the personal lives of the people; the crisis of personal identity is also the crisis of national identity. This brings to mind what Arun Mukherjee, referring to the general thematic concern of *Such a Long Journey*, calls 'life negotiated in the context of [the characters'] total social environment'.³⁰ Mukherjee's use of the word 'total' here is, I think, significant, for Mistry's alternative narrative of the nation persistently draws our attention not only to the excluded narratives of marginalized cultural communities, but also to issues of social and economic oppression that constitute the exigent realities of everyday life. Indeed, the individual, for Mistry, derives significance as a *national* being in the broadest -- social, political and economic as well as cultural -- implications of that term.

Concomitant with Mistry's intention to articulate the national voice in terms of the voice of the people, *A Fine Balance* narrativizes history through the insertion of stories from the popular imagination. This technique of foregrounding the narrative of the ordinary citizen exemplifies a central oppositional technique in Mistry's aesthetics,

³⁰Arun Mukherjee, 'Narrating India', *TSAR*, 10.2 (1992), pp. 82 - 87 (p. 85).

and one already operative in his earlier novel, *Such A Long Journey*. In this earlier work, Mistry attempts to retrieve the incident known popularly in India as the 'Nagarwala case'³¹ from behind the occlusions and erasures of nationalist history.

In his alternative narrative of the nation's official history, Mistry refracts the Nagarwala incident from the perspective of the Parsi community, particularly from that of the novel's central character, Gustad Noble, a middle-aged, hard-working bank employee who is drawn into circumstances he cannot control. What would have appealed most to Mistry about the Nagarwala case was that Nagarwala was a Parsi; the incident, in fact, had provoked great concern from the Parsi community. By casting Nagarwala as Jimmy Bilimoria, a close friend of Gustad, also a Parsi, Mistry creates the context for the narrative of this marginalized community in the India of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in showing how the effects of political intrigue and corruption in high office impinge on the lives of the ordinary citizens of this community. In fact, in this novel, Mistry appears to want to move the Parsis out of the domestic, private sphere of their Firozsha Baag existence into a wider, more political, context of post-colonial Indian society. It must be remembered that writing of India in

³¹In 1971, it was reported in the Indian newspapers that Sohrab Nagarwala, head cashier of the State Bank of India in Delhi, had handed over six million rupees to a messenger on the basis of a phone call from Mrs Gandhi. The Prime Minister denied that she had made any such telephone call and Nagarwala was arrested, on charges of embezzlement, a few days later. What fuelled the public imagination was that Nagarwala subsequently died in prison, apparently of a heart attack, before he could be brought to trial. Another high-ranking civil servant who was investigating the case was killed under mysterious circumstances, giving rise to further suspicions of foul play.

the 1960s, from the heterogeneity of his location in diaspora, Mistry was only too aware of the potential effects of the rise of religious, linguistic and regional chauvinism represented by the Shiv Sena on the cultural and political existence of such a minority Indian community like the Parsis. Thus, Mistry's bringing of the Parsis into the centre of Indian life which is played out against a volatile backdrop of political corruption and intrigue at the highest levels and the rise of essentialist forces in Bombay, suggests an attempt to assert the Parsi presence on the Indian national scene. In fact, with each successive work, Mistry's treatment of the Parsis brings them into closer contact and engagement with a wider variety of Indian realities. In the most recent work, *A Fine Balance*, Mistry no longer focuses solely on the plight of the Parsi community; the Parsis here are represented as just another one of India's several other marginalized minority communities.

Mistry's commitment to an alternative narrative of Indian national history as it is remembered and recalled by ordinary citizens, not politicians or other ruling elite, is clearly evident in *A Fine Balance*. In this work, Mistry moves his focus from the Parsi community to a more heterogeneous group of marginalized Indians, some of whom are from the poorest and most underprivileged classes of society. The tailors, Ishvar and Om, in fact, find out that their home in the slums 'is not an address' and that it is therefore invisible in the 'eyes of the law' (*FB*, 177). When their shack is razed to the ground by government bulldozers under the

city beautification project, and when they lose even their pavement dwelling when they are picked up by the police to serve as construction workers in a labour camp, they wander, homeless, for a while through the streets of the city. By focusing on the narrative of those unhoused by Indira Gandhi's government, Mistry's attempt to reimagine the nation from the perspective of those rendered homeless and invisible by nationalist constructions acquires added resonance.

Not only does Mistry represent Indian history from the perspective of groups who inhabit a space of marginalization in Indian nationalist formations, he even represents the heterogeneity of these communities. While the state calls upon these groups to give their support to state projects and to come together to overcome their various internal differences in the name of the nation, Mistry highlights the diversity in the response of these groups to the Emergency.

For instance, for the ordinary people who have lost their faith in the government, the economic reforms promised under the Emergency means little more than 'one more government tamasha' (*FB*, 5). Others take a more pragmatic view of the situation: 'No consideration for people like us. Murders, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police custody death--everything ends up delaying the trains' (*FB*, 6). Dina initially also feels it is 'government problems--games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us' (*FB*, 75). These reactions of hopelessness or indifference are to be contrasted with the attitude of those who occupy privileged

positions in society. For people in business like Dina's friend, Mrs Gupta, for instance, the Emergency will help facilitate the smoother running of her garment export company since there will be '[n]o more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances' (*FB*, 73). And for the professional classes, represented in the text by people like Dina's brother, Nusswan, a lawyer, the Emergency is a 'pragmatic policy' under which 'poverty is tackled head-on. All the ugly bustees and filthy jhopadpattis are being erased ...to restore [Bombay] to its former glory' (*FB*, 371).

More pertinently, there is an aspect of Mistry's rewriting of Indian history that differs significantly from most other novels that attempt such a revisionism. Unlike other revisionist histories of the Indian nation which use the Emergency as a key reference point for reconstructing the national imaginary, exemplified by texts such as Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, or even Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, to give only two examples, the dissonances in Mistry's text come not from within the national elite but from the ordinary masses. With specific reference to *Rich Like Us*, for instance, a novel which comes closest to Mistry's in terms of its sustained focus on the abuses of the Emergency, Sahgal's inside knowledge as a member of the elite ruling class -- as the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, cousin of Indira Gandhi and daughter of leading nationalist figures -- explains her choice of narrator in the form of the Brahmin, Oxford-educated, senior civil servant, Sonali. Sonali's intimate first-person account of the abuses of the Emergency, interspersed by an omniscient narrative that

revolves around the lives of other privileged members of the Indian nation, points to the kinds of spaces that neither Mistry nor any of his central characters inhabit in the nationalist construction of India.

Rather, it is the nation's most marginalized, who appear in Sahgal's novel in the figure of the armless beggar (who represents to the character, Rose, the dehumanized and disembodied underclass created by Mrs Gandhi's Emergency regime) who are given a name and a history in Mistry's novel. Not insignificantly, this kind of character repeatedly surfaces in Mistry's text through the use of generic names such as Beggarmaster, Monkeyman, Motivator, Facilitator -- to denote a system where individual and collective identity are represented as shells from which life had disappeared. Indeed, such a system views its inhabitants as being 'less than animals' (*FB*, 40), as 'goods' (*FB*, 524), to be evaluated in terms of quotas and rations. Interestingly also, the student that Sonali sees resisting arrest under the Emergency regulations in Sahgal's novel appears in Mistry's text in the figure of Maneck's college mate, Avinash, who embodies the voice of protest silenced by nationalist history.

Crucially, Mistry's urge to narrativize India as a cultural construct invokes a sense of multitudinousness that suggests, in the words of one reviewer, a 'sense of humanity...at once endlessly replenishable and dispersed'.³² Although the narration

³²Amit Chaudhuri, 'Parsi Magic', *London Review of Books*, 4 April 1991, p.19.

proper begins with four main characters, it opens out to a multitude of minor characters, where the appearance of a new character signals the insertion of another narrative within the preceding one. For instance, Maneck's narrative opens out to Avinash and Avinash to that of his parents, while the narrative of Ishvar and Om opens out to Rajaram, Sankar and the other beggars on the streets. It is important to bear in mind that the individual stories influence and determine the texture, shape and form of the main narrative. That is, the stories don't exist as an appendage, as peripheral to or outside of the main narrative, but as intrinsic to, always-already a part of, the whole. This technique of incorporating one narrative within another in an ever-widening multiplicity of narratives is Mistry's way of constructing an alternative history of India which interrupts the linear, cohesive and unitary mode of figuring India's past, a point to which I will return later in the chapter.

On another level, what Mistry attempts to convey through this technique of the main narrative opening out to a multitude of smaller narratives is the interconnections and inter-relatedness between narratives, between characters. To examine some of these interconnections, I should like here to refer to the student activist, Avinash, whom Maneck meets at the college hostel. Avinash's objective, in trying to mobilize the support of university students across the country, is to set up a student reform body that would complement the grassroots movement headed by

Jayaprakash Narayan. The aim, more specifically, is to 'invigorate all of society, [and] transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism' (*FB*, 243).

If through his friendship with Ishvar and Om and the beggars on the streets, Maneck is acquainted, first hand, with the social and economic travails of people under the corrupt and callous government of Mrs Gandhi, through Avinash, Maneck is exposed to the political aspect of life under the Emergency. Significantly also, Avinash is a direct victim of the Emergency; he is tortured and killed by the police on account of his dissident views. The death of Avinash is one of the main factors that forces the sensitive Maneck to go abroad, to Dubai, after finishing college.

Avinash's narrative, in turn, leads to the narrative of his parents. For the parents, Avinash's death is not the only tragic consequence of the 'terrible butchery' (*FB*, 582) of Mrs Gandhi's government; they have also to contend with the death of Avinash's three sisters. The girls, unable to bear being a financial burden to their parents after the death of Avinash, who would have complemented the family income upon getting a job after his university education, hang themselves by their saris. The reason for their suicide is to free their father, a poor mill-worker, of his financial burden, especially the dowry that he would have to provide for all three to be married.³³ Mistry's point here is to show how the dowry system still persists despite

³³This incident appears to be based on the real-life suicide of three sisters in Kanpur who hanged themselves from a ceiling fan, out of despair over their father's having to provide dowries for all three if

Mrs Gandhi's promise to abolish such an oppressive practice. Through this, Mistry suggests the spiralling ramifications of the Emergency on the life of individuals as well as the growing web of despair and helplessness created by the hollow rhetoric of the Emergency.

Similarly, Ishvar's forced sterilization under unhygienic conditions leads to his losing his legs to gangrene. This is particularly tragic because as a tailor he now no longer has the feet to work the pedals on his sewing machine, and is reduced to begging for a living. The maiming of the tailors leads, in turn, to Dina's loss of her sewing business, her consequent bankruptcy and eviction from her flat. Having lost the battle to preserve her 'fragile independence' (*FB*, 11), she is forced to return to her brother's home where she is treated as something of a servant. Through this, Mistry discloses the effects of an unthinking and unfeeling political system on the daily lives of its citizens.

However, because Mistry's characters are represented as fully-realized beings, we see them not only in terms of their suffering and victimization, but also in how they themselves exploit others. A picture thus emerges of a society in which to survive, you have to extract value from some other human being. This attitude is evidenced all the way from Dina, who hires the tailors at meagre wages although it is they who sustain her own existence, to Beggarmaster, who

they married. This incident is quoted in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's *Real and Imagined Women* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.27.

leads and exploits his team of mutilated beggars, to the night watchman whom Om and Ishvar meet as they wander, homeless, through the city and who lets them sleep on the pavement for a small rent.

Mistry further engages with this complexity by focusing upon a shifting network of temporal relationships. Just as the personal is shown to be implicated in the national, there is also an awareness of the significance of the historical past in the shaping of the narrative present. The interruption to the main temporal present of the narrative is carried out in the text either through the characters recounting their personal, individual histories to each other, or by the narrative itself ranging back in time.

Thus, although we meet all four main characters in the Prologue, at the main temporal setting of the novel, we are taken back to crucial moments in their individual histories. With specific reference to the tailors, for instance, their narrative arcs back to around the time of the Independence struggle to encompass their history of oppression by the upper-castes. Their personal narrative of history is specifically focused on the struggles of Ishvar's father, Dukhi Mochi, to liberate his sons, Narayan and Ishvar, from the injustices of the caste system. Dukhi's decision to send his sons away to be apprenticed as tailors with his Muslim friend, Ashraf, who lives in a small town outside the village, unleashes the wrath of the upper-caste members of his village society. Having much to lose if the status quo

is not maintained, they hold that Dukhi, by turning 'cobblers into tailors', has 'distort[ed] society's timeless balance' (*FB*, 147). For having done 'the unthinkable: abandon[ing] leather for cloth' Dukhi and his family are killed. Ishvar and Om, who escape because they are in town at the time of the murders, are subsequently sent off to the city to escape further retribution and also construct new lives for themselves as tailors. Their experiences in the city catch up with the narrative present of the text.

The Epilogue, set eight years after the events of the main narrative, suggests that there has been little or no improvement in the political and social landscape of India. If anything, the picture is even more grim. It is now 1984, eight years after the Emergency, with Rajiv Gandhi heading the ruling Congress following the assassination, three days before, of his mother, Indira. The riots following Indira Gandhi's death in 1984 harks back to the partition riots of 1945, a time of 'arson and riots in large towns and cities; about mayhem and massacre on all sides; about the vast and terrible exchange of populations that had commenced across the new border' (*FB*, 123),

The taxi driver who picks Maneck up from the airport tells him that the Emergency is, in effect, not yet over: '[F]or ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people's homes and jhopadpattis. In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandhi is performed. Living each day is to face one emergency

or another' (*FB*, 581). This lament immediately recalls for us the anger and disappointment expressed almost twenty years ago by Narayan over the failure of the Gandhian movement to eradicate the notion of untouchability even two decades after Independence: 'Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals' (*FB*, 142).

The fact that the Epilogue coincides with Maneck's return to Bombay after eight years of being away in the Gulf is an important one; the Epilogue, like the Prologue, begins by recording events through Maneck's perspective. By so doing, the text's intention is to thwart and ironize the nostalgic underpinnings of the returning migrant. As the narrative tells us, 'Not one day had passed during [Maneck's] long exile that he did not think about his home' (*FB*, 584). But no sooner has Maneck returned to his 'home' than he finds himself 'restless' (*FB*, 584), struck by his feelings of alienation, by his feeling that 'his uprooting never seemed to end' (*FB*, 585). For the home that Maneck returns to is not a site of refuge and stability, but a space marked by the violence of 'mutilation and bludgeoning and decapitation' (*FB*, 583). Instead of affirming the power of home to counter deracination, the text points to the reality of homelessness that Maneck must face.

Another important aspect about Mistry's narration of nation is his representation of the urban context of national life. Like Rushdie and other writers of the Indian diaspora -- among them Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri, Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga and Ardashir Vakil, the last four of whom were born into Bombay's Parsi community -- Mistry also lays claim to the city of Bombay and privileges it as a site for the emergence of more emancipatory forms of social and political community. However, although Bombay is reimagined from a location in diaspora, it is reinscribed from an underprivileged, rather than metropolitan, perspective.

This is evident early on in the novel when Dina scours the city looking for tailors for her business venture. As she walks through the confusing labyrinth of 'the warren of laneways in the sordid belly of the city' (*FB*, 66), Mistry takes the opportunity to register, both to Dina and to a reading audience more familiar with the vibrant cosmopolitan complexity of the city, the presence of a Bombay with its 'dilapidated buildings and shops, each one standing precariously like a house of battered cards...constricted lofts...kholis that looked like subterranean burrows...smelly cubicles...' (*FB*, 66).

But perhaps the one most striking example of the very different Bombay that Mistry's text inscribes is when Dina, travelling in a train, passes through an urban slum area, a 'part of the city she had not seen in all her forty-two years' (*FB*, 67).

Amidst the banners and street processions calling for the Prime Minister's resignation, she sees a street urchin unblocking a sewer:

[He] emerged out of the earth, clinging to the end of the rope. He was covered in the slippery sewer sludge, and when he stood up, he shone and shimmered in the sun with a terrible beauty. His hair, stiffened by the muck, flared from his head like a crown of black flames. Behind him, the slum smoke curled towards the sky, and the hellishness of the place was complete. (*FB*, 67)

This disturbing, and Dickensian, 'underworld vision' of Bombay stays with Dina, 'haunt[ing] her for the rest of the day, and for days to come' (*FB*, 67). This image also serves as a vivid reminder of the Emergency's failure to abolish child labour, one of the objectives under the Twenty Point Programme. More significantly, it is precisely the inhabitants of this Bombay 'underworld' (*FB*, 67), the tailors Ishvar and Om, who will compel Dina to configure her own notions of social and cultural relations in the course of the narrative.

Thus, while the text begins by hinting at the presence of another, often unacknowledged, Bombay, it is this hidden, submerged face of the city that Mistry brings to the surface by foregrounding the tailor's experiences in and of the city. The Bombay they encounter is one whose streets are lined by banners and huge cardboard cut-outs of the Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi, exhorting the masses to participate in the 'Nussbandhi Mela' in the interests of a transcendent commitment to the nation. But alongside a city decked like a fairground, with its 'balloons,

flowers, soap bubbles, coloured lights' (*FB*, 524) are also, as Mistry's representation of the city demonstrates, the urban slums, the sterilization clinics, the forced labour camps, the beggars, the squalor of the city.

In fact, nothing about the city corresponds to the vision of social and economic reconstruction pledged by the Twenty Point economic plan. The representation of the dark, muted, overcrowded and dilapidated spaces of the city suggests the totalitarian excesses of the state under Gandhi's regime. Such a setting forcefully carries the weight of Mistry's cultural, political and ideological critique.

Significantly also, Mistry signals his awareness of the city as an enabling space. For instance, Om and Ishvar leave the oppressive environment of their ancestral village to find work as tailors in the city, an identity that their native village -- '[smeared by] the ethos of the caste system' (*FB*, 96) -- does not sanction. The fixity of identity under the caste system weighs even more heavily on both. For Ishvar and Om belonged to the Chamaar caste 'of tanners and leather-workers' (*FB*, 95), and to be a Chamaar was also to be 'an untouchable in a village society' (*FB*, 97).

In the city, Ishvar Mochi's reinvention into Ishvar Darji -- 'from Chamaar to tailor' (*FB*, 143) -- enacts the transgression of boundaries where Ishvar moves to occupy spaces not his by birth or tradition.

But while the space of the city does provide the context for extending and for transforming their identities, Mistry's characters, unlike Rushdie's in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, such as Adam Braganza or Vasco Miranda who can completely remake their identities and shed all vestiges of their past in the city, always carry the weight of history, the burden of their past with them. For instance, although Ishvar's brother, Narayan, is successfully apprenticed as a tailor and starts a small tailoring business from home, he insists on taking his young son, Om, to the village tannery once a week to join the other Chamaars in their labours, 'helping with whatever stage of skinning, curing, tanning, or dyeing that was in progress' (*FB*, 139). The tannery functions as an important reminder of Narayan's personal history. Like Ishvar's permanently disfigured left cheek (a result of a wound that he sustained while watching a buffalo being skinned by the village Chamaars), like his father Dukhi's 'own skin [which] became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father's own smell' (*FB*, 98), and even like the Sikh taxi-driver's religious bangle, or kara, that 'won't come off' (*FB*, 583), the tannery functions in the text as a sign of the ineradicable difference of personal history.

Thus, it is possible to have a hyphenated identity in the city as 'Chamaars-turned-tailors' (*FB*, 132) or 'Chamaar-tailor, this contradiction in terms' (*FB*, 133). Also, there are no neat dualisms inherent in the social divisions of the city. For instance, when Ishvar and Om come to the city, it is difficulties associated with

class, rather than caste, that they encounter. Consequently, in the city, the 'Chamaar-tailors' constitute a complex admixture of caste and class determinants.

Furthermore, there is simply no one, definable or stable, culture that can be identified within the space offered by the city. The text's representation of the city as a fluid, heterogeneous space, is seen, for instance, in the way the city incorporates other neglected spaces of experience in the construction of a national narrative for India. More specifically, three distinct geographical 'realities' of the Indian nation -- the city, the rural village, and the hill-station -- are brought into connection with one another by the characters, so that a more indeterminate, hybrid picture emerges of Indian national space; while Dina is born and lives in the city, Ishvar and Om come from a rural village while Maneck's home is in the mountains. This space allows the characters in the text to inhabit multiple selves. For instance, the itinerant intellectual, Vasant Rao Valmik, whom Maneck meets on the train journey to Bombay, occupies multiple identities as lawyer, freelance slogan and political speech-writer, newspaper proofreader and as an aide to a con-man. There are no neat or clearly-defined boundaries between his identities; his legal training is the basis for all his other identities. 'You cannot draw lines and compartment', he tells the young Maneck, 'the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt' (*FB*, 230, 231). Similarly also with Ibrahim, Dina's rent collector, who inhabits multiple identities as rent collector, spy, deliverer of threats, blackmailer, and harasser of tenants. The fact

that Ibrahim is constantly in need of new folders, with extra compartments, symbolically suggests that it is difficult to bind one's identities into a pre-assigned or fixed number of roles.

Quilting the Nation

In the next few pages, I wish to make a few comments on the significance of the patchwork quilt that Dina starts making early as soon as the tailors and Maneck move into her apartment. I read this quilt as a metaphor of performative nation-making that epitomizes Mistry's ideas about the processes of construction and reconstitution of personal and national history.

As Dina patiently collects scraps of material for her quilt, Maneck alerts her to the difficulties in fashioning a quilt from the confusing motley of leftover pieces of fabric she has accumulated: 'Too many different colours and designs...it's going to be very difficult to match them properly (*FB*, 273), he warns. For Dina, however, it is the challenge -- 'what to select. What to leave out--and which goes next to which' (*FB*, 273) -- presented by the 'completely different' designs and material of the individual pieces of cloth that is fascinating about the making of the quilt.

Significantly also, although it is Dina alone who first starts work on the quilt, she is gradually joined, first by Maneck and then by Ishvar and Om, so that

the finished quilt epitomizes the coming together of their socially separate and unequal worlds. The quilt, thus, gradually gathers shape as a collective effort, not so much in terms of the stitching of it, but, more significantly, in the consideration that it is the culmination of all the stories the characters tell one another about their lives. For every little square of cloth in the quilt is linked with the memory of an event in the individual history of the characters. For instance, when Ishvar tells Dina about how he had helped save a Muslim family from a murderous Hindu mob during the Partition riots of 1947, Dina, who herself has had a relatively untroubled experience of Partition, immediately connects a new fragment to the quilt so as to include this specific episode in Ishvar's personal history. Thus, each different colour and design in the quilt has its own story, its own history.

After almost one year from the inception of Emergency, the four of them hold out and inspect the quilt, and reconstruct, patch by patch, 'the chain of their mishaps and triumphs' (*FB*, 491) in the form of the stories they have told one another about their lives in the one year they have known one another:

'Look', Om pointed, 'look at that -- the poplin from our first job'....
 'Then came that yellow calico with orange stripes. And what a hard time this fellow gave me...[said Dina]...
 'I recognize these blue and white flowers', said Maneck. 'From ...the day Ishvar and Om did not come to work -- they had been kidnapped for the Prime Minister's compulsory meeting.'...

Ishvar leaned over to indicate a cambric square. 'See this? Our house was destroyed by the government, the day we started on this cloth...'
(*FB*, 488-90)

As a unifying symbol of the characters' disparate histories and experiences, the quilt points inevitably to the interconnections between the patches. As Ishvar says, 'Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece.... So that's the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square' (*FB*, 490).

However, the connection between the pieces gives rise, as Mistry implies, to a unity of common experiences that is based not on a fusion that denies and represses social differences, but on a conception of community which takes as its starting point the recognition of difference.

In this regard, Mistry's aesthetic strategy points to an alternative conception of national space from his location in diaspora. The text's 'patchwork quilt' offers an alternative metaphor for national identity construction which interrogates and problematizes nationalist narratives of identity. In contrast to the conventional metaphors of the 'mosaic' and 'melting pot', the quilt functions as a productive metaphor of containment for the nation's disparate political realities, where harmony and unity is achieved not by means of a totalizing narrative which glosses over or assimilates individual differences into a unified whole but by drawing attention to the differences, the dissonances, within the collective space.

Thus, just as individual pieces retain their own difference, they also configure notions of multiculturalism to construct a hybrid narrative with 'the cultural resources to negotiate the terms through which people, living in different...communities, can coexist peacefully, productively, and creatively within large political units'.³⁴

Interestingly, the quilt is left unfinished, its 'uncompleted corner' (*FB*, 491) serving to remind us that national and cultural identity construction is always-already incomplete to resist closure and to accommodate new routes, new histories.

Significantly also, as the quilt progresses, Dina begins to lose several of her initial prejudices towards the tailors. This process is paralleled by her acceptance of the tailors into her home. This is all the more significant given that, early in the narrative, she was reluctant to even store Om and Ishvar's trunkful of belongings in her flat after their shack in the slum colony is demolished. But when the tailors lose even their pavement dwelling, Dina, by now touched by their narrative of difference, and suffering, takes the opportunity this presents to house them in her flat.

Initially, Om and Ishvar are offered the verandah of Dina's flat to sleep in, and are forbidden to eat in or enter other spaces of her house. But as the narrative unfolds and their lives get enmeshed by the forces set in motion by the Emergency, the changing configurations of their relationship with Dina is seen in

³⁴Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), p. 237 - 38.

the spaces they are allowed to move into. Gradually, as Dina 'connects' with the experiences of the tailors, Ishvar and Om are allowed to cross carefully delineated spatial boundaries and make use of the kitchen and the bathroom, some of the most intimate recesses of the domestic space.

Thus, from the lone boarder, Maneck, who shares Dina's ethnic and class identities, the tiny city flat soon becomes a space of the coming together of differences when the 'Chamaars-turned-tailors' Om and Ishvar move in. In fact, a partitioning curtain is even put up in the verandah to accommodate Om's prospective new wife from the village. All four characters come together to 'sail under one flag' (*FB*, 378) in the crowded space of Dina's city flat, in gradual defiance of caste, class, ethnic and religious boundaries, boundaries that are symbolically referenced in Dina's pink rose border and red rose border tea-cups.

Mistry asks us to consider the space of Dina's flat as an initially enclosed private sphere that takes on increasing political significance. There are other spaces constructed by the narrative, in addition to the city and Dina's home, that Mistry posits as symbolic manifestations of the national space. Among these is the family house of the Muslim tailor, Ashraf. Like Dina's city home which exemplifies an alternative space of housement during the period of the Emergency, Ashraaf's family home takes on important political and cultural reverberations at the time of the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1947. The text demonstrates how home

as a space of stability and protection can, overnight, acquire ‘unhomely’ resonances for identity construction. During the 1947 Partition riots, for instance, Ashraf discovers that his identity as a Muslim, symbolically referenced in the signboard ‘Muzaffar Tailoring Company’ that hangs outside his shophouse, has now rendered him the non-Hindu other. When a mob of rampaging Hindus comes knocking on his door, it is the courage and quick thinking of his Hindu apprentices, Narayan and Ishvar, that save his life and that of his family. It is this sense of the ‘unheimlich’ that underlies Mistry's representation of home. This instability is also seen in the representation of Dina's home as a space under threat of erasure, epitomized in the landlord who continuously harrasses Dina with the threat of eviction. Crucially, home, both as a physical and psychic space, functions as the contradictory site of resistance and containment in times of crisis.

Dina's ‘tightly knit family of patches’ (*FB*, 573) is still capacious enough to accommodate the individual histories and disparate voices of the nation's inhabitants. In this sense, the quilt becomes a resonant symbol of Mistry's own narrative aesthetic in *A Fine Balance*, which resists a totalizing paradigm driven by the need to read history as a single, unified, monolithic narrative. Rather, what this text advocates is the construction of a narrative where personal histories are affirmed in their individual difference and yet recognized as an integral part of the whole. This is brilliantly epitomized in Mistry's collection of short fiction, *Tales from Firozsha*

Baag, where the eleven short stories are separate *and* linked, as they can be read independently yet also collectively because of the characters who interact with one another beyond the boundaries of any single story.

The form epitomized by *A Fine Balance* similarly resists definitional as well as aesthetic closure. Like the 'all-engirdling sprawl' of stories spun by Peerbhoy Paanwalla, the resident story-teller of the Khodadad Building, it is 'not tragedy, comedy or history; not pastoral, tragical-comical, historical-pastoral or tragical-historical. Nor was it epic or mock-heroic. It was not a ballad or an ode, masque or anti-masque, fable or elegy, parody or threnody.... [but] possessed a smattering of all these characteristics' (*SLJ*, 306). In its attempts to capture the multiple narrative differences of Indian national and cultural identity, *A Fine Balance* offers a hybrid, *internally* diversified, space which destabilizes conventional boundaries to reformulate the parameters of home.

'All is true': Realism or Magic Realism?

As the novel's epigraph from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* is meant to tell us, what Mistry sets out to do is narrate the 'truth' about India in the mid-1970s. Indeed, the influence of nineteenth-century European social realism -- a notable proponent of which was the French novelist Balzac -- with its emphasis on representing everyday life and details as accurately as possible, on drawing its

characters from all levels of society, especially those from the lowest social classes, and on drawing from human cruelty and suffering for its subject matter is markedly evident in Mistry's novel.

The use of such a mode of narration is not only appropriate but indispensable to a novel like *A Fine Balance* whose central political preoccupation lies with representing, as the Epigraph tells us, the 'great misfortunes' and 'tragedy' of especially the lower social classes and groups, as a result of the 'gangrenous government' of Mrs Gandhi's Emergency. In fact, not only *A Fine Balance*, but Mistry's two earlier works as well, reveal a predilection for story-telling that is fuelled by the desire to root narrative in the weight of the everyday social, economic and political details of Indian national life. Indeed, Mistry derives the authority and significance of his national narratives from his belief in the power of realism as a mode of social representation that could give voice to the marginalized and to other individuals who resist the hegemony of the dominant system.

However, I wish to emphasize that although the predominant mode of narration and representation deployed by Mistry is one of realism, he is nevertheless aware of the inadequacy of the realist narrative, which underpins nationalist constructions of home and nation, to sustain history. The multiple awarenesses conveyed by the political, cultural and chronological experiences of Mistry's text

itself, as I have shown, reveal a complexity that surpasses the homogeneous temporality and totalizing confines of the traditional realist narrative.

Briefly, and without going over the same ground again, I wish to reiterate that the destabilization of the linear, chronological conventions of the realist narrative is evidenced in the fact that although Mistry sets off by telling us of his own, 'real', world, the characters of that world are given their own, individual histories by the text. Also, the fact that a single, omniscient narrative of that world already carries within it a multitude of narratives suggests that the text does not attempt to lay claim to a single, monolithic 'reality'.

The point I am trying to make here is that although Mistry attempts several ways of interrupting the centralizing pull of the conventional realist narrative, he still works *within* the realist tradition. That is, Mistry's preferred mode of narration and representation is ultimately still one that belongs to the realist tradition of the novel as distinct from magic realism.

One reason that explains Mistry's ideological emphasis on realism is that the use of magic realism can open the text to the risk of being ignored or dismissed as postmodern playfulness or, what Mistry in the epigraph to his novel calls, 'wild exaggeration and flights of fancy'. It is with this danger in mind also that Rushdie, referring to the writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, commonly acknowledged as the father of the form, cautions: 'It would be a mistake to think

of Marquez's literary universe as an invented, self-referential, closed system.... Macondo exists. That is its magic'.³⁵ It should be obvious that Rushdie here is making a case for defending his own use, and valorizing, of magic realism; Marquez's Macondo is but another name for Rushdie's own Peccavistan in *Shame*, or the more recent Palimpstine in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

As I've mentioned in Chapter Two, magic realism functions as a mode of narration that can 'signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems'.³⁶ In this regard, it is a powerful vehicle for subverting the 'monolithic' ideas of representation that correspond to the world view of hegemonic, Western literary discourses and practices such as realism. Magic realism is also, as I've suggested, an especially appropriate device for negotiating the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions, making it indispensable in the attempt to narrativize 'Third World' cultural and national formations. The fact, however, remains that by bringing the magical into conflict with the historical, Rushdie has constructed a literary chronotope that lacks the power of detail, the intensity of engagement and the historical specificity of Mistry's alternative chronotope for the nation. To give one brief comparison: while the deformed human body for Rushdie (as with Saleem and Moraes) becomes a playful

³⁵Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 302.

³⁶Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', *Canadian Literature*, No. 116 (1988). pp. 9 - 25 (p. 10).

metaphor of the body politic, for Mistry the deformed, mutilated body is a sign of the grotesqueries of real and abject poverty and marginalization.

More crucially, I suggest that the privileging of magical realism by one novelist, and the jettisoning of it by another, represents a different attitude to the realization of the status of history as narrative. Although both novelists work within an oppositional idiom that views history as a construct, the intricacies of Mistry's narrative aesthetic, perhaps more than Rushdie's, suggest a concern that has not so much to do with specific representations of a particular 'real' as it does with the notion that a truthful, consensual real exists. This is where Mistry and Rushdie's view of history departs in terms of emphasis.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that *The Moor's Last Sigh*, should flaunt the constructedness of all history. However, the ascendancy of form over material is so pronounced in this novel that the fictiveness of its structure is all. Thus, although *The Moor's Last Sigh* is a more exuberant tour through the national landscape of India than *A Fine Balance*, what it lacks is the latter's sense of the tension between an awareness of the status of history as a construct, and the political desire to retrieve the details of those histories glossed over by the totalizing narrative of nationalist history. In this respect, it is to Mistry's credit that his novel represents 'a fine balance' between the radical need to

recuperate the social and political details of the Indian nation and the awareness of the constructedness of its history.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to show that diaspora constitutes a crucial intervention in the dominant narrative of the nation/state by problematizing the strategies of closure and containment which are perpetrated through the discourse of the homeland. The experience of the hybrid interactions and fundamental instabilities of diaspora is, in the case of each novelist, used to write against those ideological forces attempting to create a homogeneous, coherent narrative of the nation and its people. From this position, there is also the possibility, as I have shown, of interrogating the post-Enlightenment ideology of linear progress and cultural universalism that structures the discourse of national and cultural identity. By calling attention to the limitations of defining national and cultural identity through the existing trope of 'roots' and in their positing of 'routes' as an alternative, and improvised, paradigm for the narration of identity, these texts move us away from the unities and homogeneities presupposed by an exclusionary nationalism to invoke the nation in the name of the people.

Significantly, it is precisely because 'the internal differences of the anti-colonial community are always in excess of the postulated postcolonial nation'¹ that I have foregrounded these alternative narratives of the nation as setting out to problematize

¹Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p.135.

the monologic bases of standard (anti-colonial) nationalism. It is only by rejecting the hegemonic bias of the nation/state that we can meet the challenge posited by R. Radhakrishnan, who, referring to Fanon, reminds us that we need to make a distinction between an official nationalism and a genuine nationalism of the people.²

In this respect, although the related concept of 'cultural difference' has been used by Homi Bhabha and other theorists of diasporic culture to provoke a dismantling of the exclusionary narrative of the Western metropolitan nation/state, I have tried to suggest that such a conceptual tool is also applicable to the 'Third World' post-colonial nation. In particular, I have attempted to demonstrate how the hybrid aesthetic of diaspora always-already rejects the currency about the integrity and purity of cultures. Such essentialist ideas of culture, I have suggested, form the substance of national policies such as multiculturalism or cultural pluralism, not only in the Western metropolitan nations of the US, Canada or Britain, but also in the post-colonial Indian nation.

The aesthetic of diaspora is acquiring increasing significance in recent theorizations of nation and nationalism, for it allows the 'emergence of the interstices -- the overlap and displacement of domains of differences' where the 'intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are

²R. Radhakrishnan, 'Introduction', in *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Locations* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. xxvi.

negotiated'.³ Such an ambivalent, multi-dimensional and hybrid space becomes a productive site through and in which the facile binarisms implicit in the totalizing, normative cultural project of nationalism are dismantled.

In essence, what I have argued for is a rejection of essentialist or organicist notions of national-cultural identity in favour of a vision of cultural production which seeks its explanations in the material conditions of its production. One of the ways this has been done is by showing how the 'pedagogical' will to signify the nation as an *a priori* historical essence is constantly challenged and disrupted by the people in the 'performance of narrative'.⁴ By locating the new nationalism of the people as emanating from the liminal, anti-hegemonic spaces of the diaspora, I have tried to show that it is the hybrid interaction and negotiation between contending cultural constituencies which can offer the space where an imagined community may be secured, as Stuart Hall suggests, 'with and through, not despite, difference'.⁵ Such a model of forming a national community is articulated in discourse that is not based on an erasure of difference, but on continual invention, negotiation and interaction. Thus, despite the range of strategies and techniques they embody, the texts I have examined have been shown to share one common tendency: the post-colonial nation appears in them not as the embodiment of, in Frantz Fanon's cautionary words,

³Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p.2.

⁴Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 145-46.

⁵Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 402.

'the immemorial truth'⁶ of the nation/state, but rather as a historically produced, unfinished and contested terrain. In these texts, unlike standardized nationalist narratives signifying the people as a closed and cohesive unit, the nation and the signs of its cultural life emerge as necessarily constituted of unresolved contradictions and dilemmas.

For Bharati Mukherjee, home is not that fixed point of origin to which the formerly colonized can make some final and absolute return. *The Tiger's Daughter* is in some ways a parody of the trope of return in the grand narratives of national identity and cultural reconstruction in which the newly independent sought absolute identification with the national landscape. In Mukherjee's text, home is not that space of pastoral stability in which the deracinated subject recovers its disalienated self and origins. On the contrary, home is that *unheimlich* space, the scene of the Naxalite riots that rocked Calcutta in the late 1960s.

If Indianness is defined by Hindu nationalists in terms of its racial and cultural purity, Salman Rushdie's subjects inscribe their identities through the ethic of 'masala' -- melange and miscegenation. Accordingly, *The Moor's Last Sigh* disrupts the ordered temporal and spatial cartography of nationalism to make way for 'newness' to enter the nation. Far from providing 'usable pasts', Rushdie shows that the histories and traditions recovered by secular and Hindu nationalisms are variations of

⁶Frantz Fanon, 'On National Culture', pp. 225-27.

the imperialist paradigms of homogeneity and exclusion. Believing that '[u]nreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed',⁷ Rushdie invokes the use of magic realism as a means by which to destabilize the naturalized and naturalizing claims of nationalist history and the realist narrative.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* the certainties created by the 'pedagogical will' to forget and homogenize are constantly disrupted by the performativity of remembering. For this reason, the memory of the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots in Dhaka and Calcutta becomes a signifier of the fissured unities of nationhood, of which Partition itself is a dramatic enactment. For Ghosh, also, the cross-cultural, *transnational* space of home is more readily invoked by the subjective cartography of memory and the imagination than by the fixity of space invoked by maps and actual geography. Coalescing cultures, spaces and histories, the text complicates the linear, sequential logic of the realist narrative, and, ultimately, also of processes of national-cultural identity formation and the production of 'otherness'.

For Rohinton Mistry, the narrative of Indianness is structured not through the presumed homogeneities of the nation/state, but through Homi Bhabha's notion of 'incommensurability'.⁸ For Mistry, the multiple and contending realities of the

⁷Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 122.

⁸Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', p. 319.

ethnicities, cultures and classes that are constitutive of national space are integrated in the metaphor of the 'patchwork quilt'. This concept-metaphor, unlike the Canadian mosaic or Indian secularism, problematizes the unitary temporal and spatial relations of nationalist history. Here, as in the previous texts, the nationalist myth of a unitary voice of the people is replaced by the reality of heteroglossia.

In this thesis, then, I have tried to show how diaspora poses serious questions about the nature of the national. In particular, I have tried to demonstrate that in the literary imaginings of home and nation posited in this study, the nationalist 'fantasy of the national "people-as-one"'⁹ is constantly challenged and disrupted by the reality of the resistant discourses of minorities that occupy the nation's space. As Radhakrishnan reminds us: 'The failures of different nationalisms should be read symptomatically and not suppressed in the name of a spurious solidarity'.¹⁰ To the extent that my reconceptualization of national-cultural identity recuperates the difference that hegemonic nationalist narratives suppress, it offers an empowering construct of nationalism that is able to meet that challenge.

⁹Bhabha, 'Unpacking My Library...Again', in *The Post-Colonial Question*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, pp. 199 - 211 (p. 207).

¹⁰Radhakrishnan, 'Diasporic Mediations', p. xxvi.

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