

Textualizing Postcolonial India: Gita Hariharan's *Siege* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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The emergence of Postcolonialism as an important critical tool has led critics to question certain concepts and ideas which were taken for granted, especially the notion of 'nation' and 'citizenship'. This in turn has led to questioning of 'identity' and citizenship statuses and the impact of globalization. This paper analyses the textualization of postcolonial India in Gita Hariharan's 'Siege' and Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss' and shows the manner in which the accepted notions of citizenship, identity and culture are challenged. Generally in the postcolonial period nations were supposed to carve out their own identity but the ideas of nationalism and nation are homogenised in such a way that after independence the ruling classes occupy the position of the erstwhile colonisers and the marginalized minority becomes the colonised. The re-invocation of the glorious past and the idea of a unified nation serve to undermine the plurality and heterogeneity that exists in a nation. This paper critically analyses the issues of identity, minorities and borders in the context of India through 'The Inheritance of Loss' and 'In Times of Seige' to show the fissures existing in a postcolonial nation like India and stresses on the need for a multicultural and plural approach to construct a nation.

Before delving into these issues, one needs to analyse the reasons for studying the 'nation' through the novel. Timothy Brennan in his essay 'The National Longing for Form' talks of the relationship between the nation and the novel. He writes,

It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Secondly, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to image the special community that was the nation. In the words of Benedict Anderson, the novel depicts:

[T]he movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside. The picaresque *tour d'horizon* – hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negroes – is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded. (Brennan 49-50)

The novel in general and the novels chosen for study in the present paper offer a heteroglot world to the readers and enable them to ponder over certain important issues of culture and identity and critically analyse the direction in which the nation is moving. What these writers have done is to use classical realism and fold the imaginary into the real within what Simon During calls 'Global Imaginary' (During

151) They move around the globe and connect their societies with the world through the forms of representation available to the contemporary novel.

Coming to the main issues which this paper intends to discuss, one would like to delve into the concept of culture and postcoloniality. Culture is seen as a nonorganic, free-floating ambience that frees intellectuals and theorists from their solidarities to their regional modes of being (Radhakrishnan 157). It is within this transcendental space that postcoloniality is actively cultivated as the cutting edge of cultural theory. Ella Shohat in her essay *Notes on the 'Post-Colonial'* says:

“Echoing “post-modernity”, “postcoloniality” marks a contemporary state, situation, condition or epoch. The prefix “post”, then aligns “postcolonialism”, “post-marxism”, “post-feminism”, “post-deconstructionism” – all sharing the notion of a movement beyond. Yet while these “posts” refer largely to the supersession of outmoded philosophical, aesthetic and political theories, the “post-colonial” implies both going beyond anti-colonial nationalist theory as well as a movement beyond a specific point in history, that of colonialism and Third World nationalist struggle”. (Shohat 101)

But it is also critiqued and endorsed when the endorsement is in opposition to what Homi Bhabha calls “the pedagogical plenitude” of a unilinear historicism. (Dissemination 291-322) The postcolonial search for Identity in the third world is beset primarily with the problem of location. This is seen at its best in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* which questions the fixity of cultures and whether cultures can be contained within boundaries demarcated by maps. A similar sentiment is echoed by Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* which focuses on issues of minorities, demand for separation and touches on globalization. Gita Hariharan’s *In Times of Seige* focuses on the writing of histories and the appropriation of the idea of the glorious Hindu past for constructing an essentially Hindu India. Both Desai and Hariharan portray an India trying to deal with its colonial past, a homogenised nationalism and securing a future in the era of globalization.

Generally a nation is defined as a body of people who share a real or imagined common history, culture, language or ethnic origin. Anderson defines a nation as an “imagined community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (Anderson 7) The imagination is made possible by extensive use of printing press, mass media (electronic and print) and capitalism and would also include topography mapping. Nations are therefore defined by how the communities are imagined. On the other hand, Eric Hobsbawm argues nations are invented tradition, and include invention of education, public ceremonies and mass production of public monuments. (Hobsbawm 2-5) These invented traditions define nations. In the words of Ernest Renan, a nation is

“a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” (Renan 19)

Renan talks of not only the past heritage but also of a shared future programme to be put into effect and also ‘the fact of having suffered, enjoyed and hoped together’. (Renan 19) How far is this true of postcolonial nations like India which were divided

at the time of independence? And in present day different units of such a nation are again demanding segregation from the centre. Is the postcolonial nation a homogenous unit? Desai and Hariharan critique the 'rich legacy of memories' which have become a source of various regional and communal differences in post-colonial India.

One can think of the nation in two ways – political nation and cultural nation. Of the two the latter is a sociological concept and is more ambiguous in meaning than the former. To begin a discussion one can say that the members of a cultural nation are aware of constituting an ethical-political body together, which is differentiated from others by the members sharing a number of defining cultural features. Those features can include language, religion, tradition, or shared history. All this can be taken as a sign of a historically evolved distinct culture. The question whether a nation needs to have an associated territory is subject of debate. The concept of cultural nation is normally coupled with a historical doctrine taking as a principle that all humans can be divided into groups called nations. In this sense, we are dealing with an ethical and philosophical doctrine which is the basis of the ideology of nationalism. The members of a nation are distinguished by a common identity and generally by a shared origin and the sense of common ancestry. While in colonial times, cultural nationalism became a source of inspiration for the independence movements, post-independence it has become a restrictive notion in postcolonial nations like India where voices are muted and identity is treated as a monolith.

Identity

Desai in *'The Inheritance of Loss'* lead us to question the basic concept of identity and show how identity is treated as a monolith in postcolonial nations like India, thereby leading to fissures in the social life. This is not new. The seeds were sown with colonialism which not only destroyed native culture but also 'induced the natives to abandon their culture and way of life and imitate the colonials' (Nayar 40). Natives like Jemubhai Patel ended up as 'pale imitations of the white man.' (Nayar 40) The life of Jemubhai Patel is nothing but mimicry - mimicry of the Europeans and his obsession with cleanliness sets him apart from his own people. Bhabha defines 'mimicry' as the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as 'almost the same, but not quite.' (Bhabha 86) While the Indian nationals were fighting for independence, people like Jemubhai Patel were, through English education, affected by what Ashis Nandy has called 'the second form of colonization' which 'colonizes minds in addition to bodies' (Nandy ix) and alters cultural priorities. The Judge even "envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become; he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (Desai 131). The Judge's education in England caused him so much pain and suffering that he desperately tried to become as English as possible, and hated anything Indian, including his family and wife who brought the money which could send him to England. The Judge's encounter with the English culture is so humiliating and filled with such strong feelings of resentment and anger that he becomes doubly displaced when he returns home. He is neither European nor Indian, and becomes an immigrant within himself. The result is what Charles Taylor calls the 'misrecognition' (Ghosh-Schellhorn 139) of one's values in the related context of multiculturalism. In this context, it is appropriate to quote Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin:

When the colonial discourse encourages the colonised subject to ‘mimic’ the coloniser, by adopting the coloniser’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the coloniser that can be quite threatening. (Ashcroft et al 139)

Generally writers talk of national identity being equivalent to nationalist feelings without any racial, communal or caste distinction but it seems to be a falsification in the contemporary context as seen in Desai’s *The inheritance of Loss* which shows characters combating questions of national identity. Gyan is a Nepali who comes to teach Sai. The cook was expecting a Bengali tutor, not a Nepali because ‘Bengalis are very intelligent’ (Desai 73). Such statements show how human beings tend to stereotype people on the basis of religion, region, nation etc. In his book ‘Identity and Violence’ Amartya Sen talks of “singular affiliation” (Sen 20) which he explains as ‘assuming that any person prominently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only – no more, no less.’ In the novel the cook lays stress on Gyan’s regional identity, disregarding other affiliations.

Similarly Lola and Noni have hired Budhoo, a retired army man to guard them but they didn’t trust him completely. His national identity came in question all the time: “I tell you these Neps can’t be trusted. And they don’t just rob. They think absolutely nothing of murdering, as well.” (Desai 45) Such singular affiliations work even among the migrants and can be seen in the ‘Desi against Paki’ (Desai 23) war in the basement of a restaurant in United States. In contrast, the character of Saeed Saeed, a Muslim from Zanzibar shows how people have ‘multiple affiliations’ but choose the ones they want to give preference to: “*First I am a Muslim, then I am Zanzibari, then I will BE American.*” (Desai 127)

In a similar manner Gita Hariharan’s novel *In times of Siege* contributes to the debate on nationalism and communalism movement in India. It deals with the subject of contemporary historiography – there is not one true version of history but variety of historical accounts can be used and abused by political groupings. History and nationalism is intertwined thereby dwelling on Anderson’s idea that the postcolonial nation is an imagined community which invents its own history on which national identity is based. The novel shows that the myth of the nation is exclusive as well as inclusive.

Hariharan’s novel shows how a medieval History course lessons are distorted because the writer has ‘not made the heroes heroic enough, and that [he has] made the villains too villainous..... It seems [he has] not sung enough of a paean to the glory of the Hindu Kingdoms; and that [he makes] too much of caste divisions among the Hindus.’ (Hariharan 55) And Professor Shiv Murthy is made out to be indulging in ‘ignorant and unpatriotic acts.’ (Hariharan 77) A history which during colonial times was glorified by the nationalists can not be questioned in postcolonial times. And the act of re-writing History or even questioning official History is seen as an act of betrayal. A rich, plural History is homogenised into a “golden Hindu history” legitimising the programme of one language, one religion, one nation. (Hariharan 93) National identity is defined in contrast to colonial history and ‘Others’ in a nation, the minorities.

The novel deals with the 1990s- Communalism and ethnic conflicts and the rise of the Hindu right – based on Glorification of Hindu Past – which enables nationalists to get

superiority over other groups. (Hariharan 75-80) People like Arya relate citizenship with loyalty and to be a foreign-lover means being anti-national. (Hariharan 133) Against this background the novel debates on nationalism and reveals the fragility of the concept of nation and criticises groups which condemn cultural diversity and impose homogeneity ignoring the idea of arbitrariness of nation. It demands a space where new identities can co-exist. (Hariharan 194)

While a revival of native cultural forms and identities was essential to the anti-colonial struggle, in post-independence era 'nativism' took a different look – the birth of the fear of a homogenising national culture whereby local cultures would be destroyed and subsumed under the guise of 'national identity'.

Minorities, Migrants and Belongingness

While postcolonial texts harness the trauma of colonialism, the pride of nationalism and the hope for a future, they also give the hint that all is not well in the post colony. The early writers observed indigenous societies moving from colonial corruption to postcolonial decadence. Simultaneously segments of population were marginalised by the native rulers. Postcoloniality brought in its wake a new process of exclusion, whereby certain groups/classes dominated other ethnic groups, communities, races and classes, who, therefore, became disempowered, 'colonized', and marginal (even) in the independent nations. (Nayar 69)

The most obvious deviation from the ideal of 'one nation, one state' is the presence of minorities, especially ethnic minorities, which are clearly not members of the majority nation. 'Minorities are constituted along with the nation.' (Nayar 69) Negative responses to minorities within the nation-state have ranged from state-enforced cultural assimilation, to expulsion, persecution, violence, and extermination. The assimilation policies are usually state-enforced, but violence against minorities is not always state initiated: it can occur in the form of mob violence. Nation-states are responsible for some of the worst historical examples of violence against minorities which were not considered part of the nation.

The issue of minorities is highlighted in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* through the figure of Gyan, a Nepali whose family had migrated to India in the 1800s. His great-grandfather had joined the Indian army but Gyan, on the other hand, wanted to leave everything behind and fly away to the land of opportunity – America or Britain or Australia. He wanted to 'free himself from family demands and built-up debt of centuries' (Desai 157).

Gyan's is the story of young men who are drawn into insurgency and rebellion. Gyan is an Indian citizen but he and his family are barely on the margins of the middle class. They are treated like minority in the area where they are actually numerically in the majority. A procession of men on Mintri Road shouting 'Jai Gorkha' (Desai 156) showed him the sense of injustice which the Gorkhas felt. One of the leaders articulating the problem of the Gorkhas said,

"In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves. Everyday the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of foreigners. Everyday our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad." (Desai 159).

To an extent it can be said that negating other affiliations and looking at people singularly leads to the growth of insurgency as in the case of the birth of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). GNLF demanded recognition and status for the Indian Nepalese. For this purpose many young men came into its fold but things took a violent turn:

The incidents of horror grew, through the changing of the seasons..... Roads were closed, there was curfew every night, and Kalimpong was trapped in its own madness.....

If you were a Nepali reluctant to join in, it was bad. The Metal-Box watchman had been beaten, forced to repeat “*Jai Gorkha*” and dragged to Mahakala Temple to swear an oath of loyalty to the cause.

If you weren't Nepali it was worse.

If you were Bengali, people who had known you your whole life wouldn't acknowledge you in the street.(Desai 279)

The narrator mentions incidents where circuit houses are burnt and houses of relatives of politicians are destroyed. A movement which sprung to create recognition for one group has turned into a movement which has divided others on the basis of state and region. It seems that ‘belongingness’ is not country specific but region specific. The violence that has grown with the movement is not only due to the injustices suffered by Gorkhas but also due to ignorance. Neglect is reason enough for resentment but “a sense of encroachment, degradation and humiliation can be even easier to mobilize for rebellion and revolt.” (Sen 144) The figures of Lola and Noni in *The Inheritance of Loss* shows racial and class prejudices in people who are on the higher rung of the social and economic ladder. The two sisters act superior and treat people differently on the basis of class and ethnicity. They “constantly [have] to discourage their maid, Kesang, from divulging personal information [and entering] into areas of the heart that should be referred to only between social equals” (Desai 75). “Culture and race developed together, imbricated within each other, their discontinuous forms repetition suggests, as Foucault puts it, ‘how we have been trapped in our own history’. The nightmare of the ideologies and categories and categories of racism continue to repeat upon the living.” (Young 159)

Through the story of Gyan, Father Booty and Biju, Desai touches upon the issue of migrants. Living in Diaspora means living in either a forced or a voluntary exile and this usually leads to identity confusion. Salman Rushdie in ‘Shame’ writes:

“All migrants leave their past behind although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes – but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognise them, because it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked among the scorn of strangers upon whom they see their rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging.” (Rushdie 116)

Such is the case of Father Booty, a Swiss Jesuit priest who has been living in India for the last 45 years but turns out to be a foreigner whose certificate of residence has lapsed. The political situation in the north-east brought turmoil in his life and he was asked to leave the place where he had resided ‘illegally’ for 45 years in two weeks. Suddenly he had become a threat to ‘national security’, and his home and dairy were illegal. (Desai 220-222) The question is does one need a passport or has to be born in

a country to prove that s/he is honest person working for the well-being of the nation? If this is the case then there shouldn't be uprisings and violent demonstrations by the 'citizens' of a nation during which property worth crores is destroyed. Desai shows the existence of two types of migrants - privileged and skilled and illegal migrants like Biju. For the former, migration off shore opens a world of opportunities while the latter are left in a worse situation than before.

Gita Hariharan raises the issue of minorities through Dr. Arya in *'In Times of Seige'* who while using words like 'foreigner' or 'Muslim' "spits them out like something sour in his mouth" (Hariharan 19) whereby someone like Mrs. Khan, the secretary is pushed to the margins of religious identity.

Both Desai and Gita Hariharan illustrate that when nationalism gets institutionalised in the postcolonial space, there is the danger of the ruling classes appropriating the nationalist ideology and using it to force and persuade the heterogenous minority groups to accept the old hegemony that ruling classes may reproduce in the new political scenario.

It is in Amitav Ghosh's *'The Shadow Lines'* that the idea of belongingness is dealt with depth in when the narrator's grandmother goes to Dhaka – a place where she took birth but the place appears foreign to her. Tridib, her nephew points out,

"But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreign here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here." (Ghosh 195)

- thereby questioning the validity of nations and the restrictions upon the free movement of people through them. A nation, in such a context, appears to be drawn, constructed on paper, and enforced through material 'forces' like Immigration Offices, the military, passports, and visas. It exists within these forms.

In this context the narrator's father aptly states,

"This is the modern world. The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things." (Ghosh 151-52)

This encounter raises questions like how should nationality be determined? Does birth in a country alone can give one right to nationality? And does nationality change if the borders demarcating one's nation changes? Tha'mma's uncle Jethamoshai/ Ukil-babu sums it up,

"I don't believe in this India-Shindia. [...] suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? [...] As for me I was born here, and I'll die here." (Ghosh 213)

Mental borders and Globalisation

On the sub-continent, the notion of demarcation is very strong among India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. But abroad this border disappears. In *'The Shadow Lines'* Ghosh shows how an Indian restaurant in England is actually a Bangladeshi place. Robi once says, "I'll treat you two to dinner at my favourite Indian restaurant – it's a small Bangladeshi place in Clapham." (Ghosh 54) Later the narrator mentions, 'Ila had promised to give Robi and me dinner at her favourite "Indian' restaurant – a small Bangladeshi place called the Maharaja, in Clapham....' (Ghosh 240) This is again to be seen in Desai's *'The Inheritance of Loss'*. We find restaurants like 'Baby Bistro',

'Le Colonial' etc. which have the American flag on the top but Indian, Guatemalan flag (in form of the workers) below. (Desai 20-21)

The cravings of characters of Desai like Lola and Noni and the judge in for western products has economic as well as ideological significance and generates the feeling of superiority of the west. Colonialism arose out of search for new markets which were created not just by invading the land but also through mental invasion of the colonised subjects. In postcolonial India such attitudes have come in for strong criticism but the danger of the criticism is that it tries to negate the influence of globalization and go to the ancient History of India. Githa Hariharan in '*In Times of Siege*' critiques the new kind of cultural nationalism and calls it 'monstrous' (Hariharan 133). A revival of the glorious Hindu past means rejecting cultural modes of the west like Michal Jackson and McDonald's – a result of mental blockage. To remove such blockages an international and multicultural outlook is needed.

The need for a borderless outlook is shown in '*The Shadow Lines*'. The narrator in '*The Shadow Lines*' draws attention to the incident regarding the theft of the sacred relic, the Mu-i-Mubarak – said to be hair of Prophet Mohammed. This episode drew Muslims across the borders together but this incident and the trouble in Khulna in East Pakistan hardly find a mention in the paper published in Calcutta of the same date. (Ghosh 225-228) This clearly shows the role of the media in the creation of 'borders of the mind'. This is clearly defined in '*The Shadow Lines*' when the narrator starts pondering over the events which led to the death of his uncle in Dhaka. The narrator's experiment with circles (Ghosh 231-233) creates the realisation that we are so divided that no event, except war, can bring humanity to the streets. He writes, "It seemed to me then that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all." (Ghosh 233)

Conclusion

Desai depicts the problems of insurgency in '*The Inheritance of Loss*' and one of the ways to solve it would be 'an equitable sharing of the benefits of globalization'. (Sen 145) This can be done through a process of integration and 'social opportunities of education and participation in civil society.' (Sen 150) A similar argument is made by Arjun Appadurai when he talks of 'globalization from below' or 'grassroot globalization' of local, national and regional groups and non-governmental organizations. (Nayar 211) Acceptance of a multicultural outlook and cultural diversity will lead to a positive contribution in the life of the common man. In the new world order where the power of global capital looms over governments and social formations are fissured by class divisions and conflicts, the question is whether it is 'gratuitous for governments, politicians and intellectuals to entreat [...] the dispossessed whose material needs and future-oriented aspirations remain unappeased [...] to pardon their expropriators and exploiters?' (Parry 192) and Benita Parry suggests, 'For our best hope for universal emancipation lies in remaining unreconciled to the past and unconsolated by the present.' (Parry 193)

Both the novels offer an alternative vision to dominant versions and show that riots are born out of gross political manipulation and as products of a new world, we do not need borders which separate people sharing one culture. What is needed is not only multiculturalism but also universalism – 'that argument about art, about individuals and society, about culture and tradition which seeks to resolve all issues of difference by translating them into the realm of universal values.' (Gunew 116)

What these writers have tried to do is to discover the limits and extent of their 'nation' and become aware of the constructedness (Nayar 78) of the idea of the nation. Like

Salman Rushdie, they argue for an image of India that is plural in nature and not a unitary and monolithic one and that in postcolonial nations like India conditions are similar to what Ahponen states, "Borders have not disappeared from the globalizing world. In addition to the geopolitical borders which mark nation-states state coalitions, society is composed of numerous group formations consisting of cultural qualifications and differences." (Ahponen 285) These writers have tried to protest 'a homogenising discourse of nationalism that threatens to silence the marginalised and the dispossessed' (Sayantan Dasgupta 297) and show that in the new political context one needs to think 'internationally'.

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