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Classroom

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# Nationalism and Otherness: Reading Nation in the Literature Classroom

Nandana Dutta

## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the motives and fallout, both overt and tactical, that surround the materiality of postcolonial novels and critical texts in specific institutional and pedagogical contexts. At stake is both the ontology and materiality of the other—more specifically their representation at the hands of a self as center of political power that legitimates its own systems of knowledge and meaning. The specific institutional context and point of departure is the recent revision of the postgraduate English syllabus at Guahati University in northeast India. The essay examines this academic exercise for a larger ideological meaning by drawing to a logical conclusion the assumption that a so-called mufassil (provincial) Indian university that is implicated in the life of the people of its region stands committed to the human resource development of that region. The institutional assumption is that the university's students of English studies in the socioeconomically challenged state of Assam should be sensitized to the complex issues of the nation and its otherness; it is also assumed that they should be able to construct a politically engaged reading of such texts, one informed by the problems of discontent of being on the nation's margins literally and metaphorically. The texts, however, instead tend to generate anxieties and discomfiture as Assamese students—already the nation's other—encounter postcolonial celebrations of the borderless nation, dissemination, porous borders, liminality, etc., which fail to empathize with the miseries of the Assamese people and the deplorable conditions of the region—the product of years of neglect by the metropolitan center, heavy immigration from Bangladesh and the resultant strain on the land and regional economy, and subnationalist aspirations being perceived as secessionism and terrorism.

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## READING/BEING READ

In a recent curricular change in the postgraduate course in English at Gauhati University, where I teach, two developments occurred that initially seemed quite innocuous. One was the introduction of a compulsory paper on “Contemporary Indian English Writing” for which the reading list included two essays—Gauri Viswanathan’s “The Beginnings of English Literary Study in India” and Aijaz Ahmad’s “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness”—expected to ‘prepare’ students for the paper by giving them a necessary theoretical/historical ‘background’; and two novels, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, which would offer interesting reading possibilities. The second development was the inclusion of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* among the readings for the compulsory “Fiction” Paper—a move that was radical primarily because of stiff resistance to its ‘style’, ‘content’, ‘controversial author’, etc., during earlier discussions on syllabus revision (assumptions that are a legacy of the basic conservatism of university courses caught within the hegemony of colonial educational processes). We prepared the course against a certain interpretation/assumption of socio-political context, given the directives and expectations for a regional university closely implicated in the “life of the people.”<sup>1</sup>

This overt ideological intention, however, disguised the potential of these texts and ideas to be read and internalized in other unexpected ways. This essay constitutes an attempt to understand this repressed ideology, perhaps retrospectively inserted into the practice of reading, noting in the process the reciprocal exchange between this disciplinary complex—the prescription of texts; stated intention for the course; and the interpretation and teaching of a particular text in a class made up of students from several ethnic communities of the region, separated by very real sociocultural differences, but united under the centrist gaze directed at them, consigning them to ‘otherness’—and the site in which this reading takes place. This essay looks at the way sociopolitical awareness works in the reading of a text and the production of ideologies, the ideological in the text in turn transforming our understanding of our time. The unique conjunction of the concepts of nation and otherness emanate most urgently from the political reality of this region, with ideas of the nation (and component state) deriving from the prevailing democratic structure, and from actually existing center-state relations that serve as a metaphor for the nation and its others. In this sense the essay does not so much offer an interpretation of texts such as *The Shadow Lines*, but rather looks at the motives and the fallout, both overt and tacit, that surround the materiality of the text; its presence in this particular location; its reception among a particular readership; and its influence in the formation of concepts and ideas that it addresses, but that its readers also compulsorily and independently address. Given this characteristic location, I

have tried to balance ideas of nation and other, as made available by ‘theory’, their representation (both within a text and in the act of choosing that text) within a literature course constructed by a motivated subject, and their emergence from the political necessities and realities of this location, yet without drawing them together into an overarching argument—a method that would be unethical in a paper that works on the premise of offering an ear to the other.

In 1997, during a stay at the erstwhile American Studies Research Center (now the Indo-American Center for International Studies) in Hyderabad, I was taken aback when a fellow Indian, on hearing that I was from Assam, expressed surprise at my “non-Mongoloid looks.” A series of questions followed, in what seemed a display of abysmal ignorance about another part of the same country to which we both belonged: questions about human sacrifice and witchcraft, about humans turning into animals, while of course displaying a compensatory ‘knowledge’ about Bihu (harvest festival) and the ‘beautiful’ mekhela sador (traditional women’s attire)—all in a spirit of wide-eyed ‘wonder’. Surprise and wonder were basic tropes of the colonial experience (as Stephen Greenblatt demonstrates in *Marvelous Possessions*).<sup>2</sup> But it was momentarily jolting to discover traces of this perspectival legacy in contemporary India at a time when the ‘northeast’ (an umbrella term that includes the eight states in the northeastern arm of India) had entered the pan-Indian picture, albeit through the backdoor, through its immersion in various insurgencies and separatist movements.<sup>3</sup>

The northeastern part of India has historically been invisible to the rest of the country for reasons of topography and cultural difference, and the fact that it was seldom integrated into any centrist formation in the past. Edward Gait in *A History of Assam*, a book that is popular reading in Assam, notes Assam’s difference: “the whole country is famed in Hindu tradition as a land of magic and witchcraft” (Gait vii); unlike the rest of India, Gait avers, the Ahom rulers had a “keen historical sense; and they have given us a full and detailed account of their rule.... Assam was one of the few countries in India which beat back the tide of Mughal Conquest”(vii-viii). Despite these important elements of history, “there is, probably, no part of India regarding whose past less is generally known. In the histories of India as a whole, Assam is barely mentioned” (viii). (Gait’s description puts together two sets of ideas about Assam that have formed part of the self-imagination of the people: strong, resistant, and distinctive, yet caught in the primitive and the alien.) This sense of separation, of being other, was thus coursing through the lifeblood of the region, long before ‘nation’ and ‘other’ became fashionable theoretical buzzwords.<sup>4</sup>

After independence, this positioning of Assam did not significantly change. Drawn into the national entity as one more linguistically demarcated state, Assam was subsequently carved up into several smaller states as a result of persistent discontent among the heterogeneous linguistic-cultural groups

within it. While the 'national idea' seemed to work for the rest of the country, in this region it also served from the beginning as an image of otherness with which there was only a poor sense of identification. The more vociferous the discourse of unity (and one notes the repeated marketing of the idea of a great and "resurgent" India throughout the last decade), the greater was the discontent and disenchantment in these regions, as the homogeneity of national discourse engendered in inverse proportion an increasingly greater heterogeneity.

The contours of the national idea have changed over time, and its components have periodically undergone shifts in response to the compulsions of politics in a changing world. But this is one constant that remains an ill-assimilated bolus. Two incidents from the recent past would illustrate this point. First, with a markedly fundamentalist rhetoric emerging from the center, the possibility of a nationwide ban on cow-slaughter entered the realm of serious debate during the tenure of the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government, of which the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) with its Hindu fundamentalist ideology formed the largest component. For a large percentage of people in the various northeastern states, for whom beef is an important component of their diet, the call for such a ban was one more reason to feel alienated. Second, the issue of the railway recruitment board's reservation of lower-level posts for people of the state, sparked by the coming of candidates from Bihar to take the examination here, draws further attention to latent feelings of resentment. The violence that followed clashes between Bihari and Assamese youths brought back questions of center-state relations that have always revolved around the issues of neglect and exploitation. The situation resulted in a spate of articles and editorials in local and national newspapers about the idea of one India, about constitutional provisions for the rights of all citizens, etc., and a consequent refueling of the rhetoric of 'us' and 'them'. The NESO (North East Students Organizations), while setting a deadline for the government to fulfill demands that included job reservations for local youth in Central Government offices throughout the region, and threatening agitation, aired their discontent in the familiar language of opposition. At a press conference on November 30, 2003, the report of which was carried by major local newspapers the next day, the chairman of NESO, Samujjal Bhattacharyya, reminded his audience that the central government was treating the people of the northeast as "second class citizens" and demanded that since the region has been declared a separate economic zone, it should also be declared a separate employment zone. Bhattacharyya's assertion demonstrates the ambiguities of the relationship with central government, with separation and difference forming the major causes of resentment but legislation on difference seen as the solution. Sanjoy Hazarika's comment in *Rites of Passage* that "Assamese nationalism has always ranged itself against the outsider" (26–27) is an articulation of this continuing sentiment:

the outsider generally framed by the concept of *bidekhi* or foreigner, meaning “anyone who is not an Assamese speaker” (27).

## READING THE NATION

Gyanendra Pandey’s diagnosis of the situation of the nation and its fragments probably would also explain this peculiar turn of recent events. He points to “the highly centralized state power that now goes by the name of nation-state as representing the interests of a get-rich-quick, consumerist ‘middle class’ and its rural (‘rich peasant’) allies” (Pandey 2). Predictably, the national discourse is being shaped by what Pandey goes on to call the “Brahmanical, Hindu” faction—their idea of India has become the ‘national idea’: “In furthering the ambition of this sectional interest, the state has shown a willingness to mark all opposition as ‘antinational’” (2). In contrast,

The ‘fragments’ of Indian society—the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, and activist women’s groups, all of which might be said to represent ‘minority’ cultures and practices have been expected to fall in line with the ‘mainstream’ (Brahmanical, Hindu, consumerist) national culture.... All that belongs to any minority other than the ruling class, all that is challenging, singular or local—not to say, all difference—appears threatening, intrusive, even ‘foreign’ to this nationalism (3).

While this awareness seems to be characteristic of contemporary histories, one might still be surprised by the unsuspected occurrence of a centrist bias. Sanjib Baruah refers to B. George Verghese’s statement as late as 1996 that “History and Geography have combined to make the Northeast homeland to Mongoloid India” (qtd. in Baruah 16). And yet this is a book that by its declared intention might have been more sensitive in its language use. Baruah’s comment on this point is as interesting as the statement itself: “It is perhaps *heartland India’s* way of seeing” (16, emphasis mine). As this response shows, the rhetoric of otherness crops up in unexpected places, and it is obviously an essential component of the discourse of otherness that has taken shape *against* the idea of the Indian nation. The expansion of this sense of otherness, with added elements of ‘justice for the other’ and ‘recognition of the other as distinct, different, and equal’, of sustaining the idea of the ‘otherness of the other’, as an alternative perspective that is presumably more ethical, would continue to generate such oppositional rhetoric—a problem that even an attitude such as multiculturalism reveals when translated into practice.<sup>5</sup>

Verghese’s statement—almost a throwaway line and used by Baruah as such—represents a sentiment that naturally evokes either Baruah’s kind of response, which is a criticism of a myopic/incomplete vision, or the more

widespread discontent among people in the entire northeast region, raising the peculiar but important issue of how the other perceives herself—whether she is willingly, or perhaps unconsciously, trapped into a borrowed or imposed stereotype, or manages to break free of such compulsive self-representation. Baruah’s book, also an example of such ‘self-as-other representation’, responds to this condition and the discourses that it feeds and fetishizes. It exploits this very otherness to justify/understand/find explanations for insurgencies re-described as “subnationalisms.” While the book’s overt claim about studying subnationalism in Assam is sustained through various chapters, its hidden thrust is revealed in statements such as “heartland India.” And the position of participant/observer, insider/outsider leads to a conceptual conflation between subject and object and self and others evident in the chapter “Assam and its Immigrants”—in its characterization of people from other Indian states as “immigrants,” clubbed in the broad sweep of its argument with immigrants from Bangladesh. Of course since my argument is not bound by the parameters of political science, these categories—Muslims of Bengali descent, Hindu Bengalis, Marwaris or Nepalis and the “tea labor community” (Baruah 53)—may not hold the same degree of significance for me. But the solution that Baruah offers to the turmoil of subnationalisms—a greater federalism—does not adequately address the problem he describes in his book’s subtitle as “the politics of nationality” (not subnationality)—a phrase that within the book itself seems to be undermined by its own rhetorical preference, as the separatist discourse *is also* a nationalist discourse.

This is not an indictment of Baruah’s approach so much as a recognition of inevitability—perhaps this is bound to be the perspective of one who must be both inside and outside, as a redeeming alternative to being merely a detached observer—that the existence of problems may be used to critique the inside-outside position, the favorite vantage point of the postcolonial intellectual; one is reminded of Rushdie’s claims in *Imaginary Homelands*.<sup>6</sup> The case of Baruah offers an opportunity to review the ethical dimensions of this liminal, in-between position vis-à-vis the ‘object of study’, and to discern its contours in center-state, nation-other relations (when the view from outside is unethical and the one from inside inadequate).

Baruah’s investigation of otherness in the northeastern part of India, and specifically in Assam, helps ventilate an area and a growing discourse about the latter that now stretches beyond discontented marginality and seeks centrality.<sup>7</sup> This particular aspect of the issue encourages the thesis of this essay that material conditions can significantly reread/review existing theoretical definitions or positions. Further, the light in which the concepts of nation and others appear from a site where they are also vital everyday questions must necessarily change ways of viewing both categories before drawing attention to the genuine ethical concern for the other—beyond and perhaps beneath multi-

culturalism and pluralism (each of which, having become virtual master narratives, appears to provide effective camouflage for ignoring the other). Indeed, a place that is already positioned as other by the nation-state—with its proximity to a foreign country making ‘security concerns’ the excuse through which its marginalization is made more complete—can ill afford the luxury of partaking in the dubious and increasingly ambivalent pleasures of the multiculturalist high table and gladly welcome refugees and illegal aliens into its territory in numbers large enough to threaten its economy, and subsequently, its cultural and ethnic profile.<sup>8</sup> (The response of such a place to the immigrant offers a preview of the suspicions generated in the wake of 9/11, and the fear that spread throughout the developed world that a way of life was under threat from a barbaric and little understood other, undermining multiculturalism itself as the appropriate cognitive tool of a globalized world. These realities even disturb our responses to Derrida’s reflections on “hospitality” and his urgent formulation for a migrant-affected world, “cities of refuge.”<sup>9</sup>) And the resistance to incorporation within a centrist/nationalist discourse demonstrated in Assam is also one of the ways by which the idea of the nation, especially in its avatar as an entity that harmoniously unifies all its diverse religious, linguistic, and ethnic communities and speaks for them, must find itself seriously questioned.

While the situation in Assam and the northeast region offers a certain kind of interpretation of the nation, the concept’s circulation within postcolonial theory provides another set of vantage points from which to approach it. Nation/nationalism as postcolonial theoretical categories enter discursive practice via filters such as “imagined community” or “derivative discourse”; through the work of Renan, Kedourie, Gellner, Hobsbawm; or for that matter though the Western intellectual inheritance of Nehru, or the blend of tradition and modernity achieved by Gandhi.<sup>10</sup> We might encounter it in the discourse of Todorov, in the way nationalism is seen to have departed from humanitarian ideals (Todorov 246), or move from the modernist unity of the nation to the postmodernist fragmentedness of “dissemination” or “nationalism without a nation.”<sup>11</sup> Or postcolonialism’s concern with ‘nation’ as an imported Western category that sets the colonized on the road to modernity may be counterbalanced by the search for indigenous origins, which would contest the notion of modernity itself. One might opt for any of these to evaluate the viability/durability of the national idea. As is evident from these examples, the “derivative discourse” thesis is borne out by the direction from which our ideas of nation arrive, returning us to the issue of perspective that lies at the heart of the center-periphery, nation-other relationship.

The otherness with which the northeast of India is invested and invests itself, in the process articulating a metanarrative of resistance comprised in equal measure of ‘little’ narratives of neglect, exploitation, and difference, simultaneously facilitates a lack of concern with the others contained within



it—assuming the right to speak, for example, for all Assamese peoples (including the Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Lalung, Mising, and Dimasa—each a distinct sociocultural group that views with suspicion this attempted embrace by the majority). So the ‘Assamese narrative’, viewed variously as other, ‘little’, and resistant, exploits an otherness that is only relative, deliberately turning away from its own aspirations to master narrative status with respect to its component elements. Is there an absolute otherness—that can retain its difference, and disclaim metanarrativity? Such a question, when both sides insist on their point of view as authentic, becomes vital.

The issue of historiographic perspective that Partha Chatterjee raises repeatedly reformulates this question through the issue of subject and object.

No one has raised the possibility and the accompanying problems, of a rational understanding of ‘us’ by a member of the ‘other’ culture – of, let us say, a Kalabari anthropology of the white man.... [even] a Kalabari anthropology of the Kalabari will adopt *the same representational form...* as the white man’s anthropology of the Kalabari (Chatterjee *Nationalist* 17, emphasis added).

In other words, the viewer-viewed structure remains—always someone looking and someone looked at—even if the occupants of these positions exchange places. This structural tyranny would be impossible to overthrow. One attempt to get out of it may be the locating of indigenous nationalisms that predate the entry of nationalist ideas into the public domain. Chatterjee’s method in his second book, *Nation and its Fragments*, of dealing with and doing justice to the various fragments of Indian society again demonstrates the power of this structure. In a methodological statement early in the book, Chatterjee states that

anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power... by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the *material* and the *spiritual*. The *material* is the domain of the ‘outside’ of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and had therefore to be “studied and replicated.” The *spiritual* on the other hand is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. (Chatterjee *Nation* 5–6).

Using this grid, Chatterjee shows how Bengali women, while allowed a certain access to Western culture, were encouraged to retain the home and tradition as their domain, while the men interacted with the world and modernized themselves. In a second chapter on women, “Women and the Nation,” specifically on women’s autobiographies, he allows the voices of women

themselves to speak of their experiences in the twin realms of the home and the world. Two kinds of perspectives are at work here. In the narrative of modernity and nation, the women are positioned as other, decisions made for them, and they themselves appropriated or placed. The second instance is even more problematic, as the historian is the agent through whom the five women speak—through whom their autobiographies are made available.

In an early section of his previous book, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Chatterjee sets up a two-part model that determines historical narrative: the problematic and the thematic. Chatterjee defines the problematic as that part of a social ideology that “asserts the existence and often the practical realizability of certain historical possibilities,” and the thematic as “the part which seeks to justify those things by an appeal to both epistemic and moral principles” (Chatterjee *Nationalist* 38)—a sketchy version of the preformulative principles, the “tropological understructure” elaborated by Hayden White in *Metahistory*.<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee further describes the thematic as an “epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules” (*Nationalist* 38), hinting at how difficult it must be to break away from both a discipline’s intellectual tradition and the one-sided nature of the viewing process, bound by the grid of subject and object.

In a chapter on “Secularism and Toleration” in his third book, *A Possible India*, Chatterjee reiterates his assertions about ‘home’ and the ‘world’. Speaking of the modernizing efforts of the Indian elite Chatterjee states:

In the second half of the nineteenth century (however), the rise of nationalism led to a refusal on the part of the Indian elite to let the colonized state enter into areas that were regarded as crucial to the cultural identity of the nation. (Chatterjee *Possible* 235)<sup>13</sup>

Chatterjee’s investigation of the reform process in the ‘inner world’ focuses once again on the unidirectional nature of the gaze. In almost a repetition of the intersubjective matrix that Lacan demonstrated in his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” both of the discourses of otherness that we have encountered so far—one in northeast India, the second in Chatterjee’s reading of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal—raise the question of the freezing of subject-object *positions*, despite the freeing of individual subjects and objects. By extension, the “legislations” for secularism (Chatterjee *Possible* 236) are necessarily the result of a one-sided approach, and perpetuate the subject-object structure.

Writing from within one’s disciplinary limitations, there are obviously certain aspects of a work from a different discipline that we privilege, or find especially relevant, at the expense of others—a compulsive misreading. The idea of nation as described by the political scientist is only selectively available through this process of misreading. The route that current ideas about ‘nation’, ‘otherness’, ‘little narrativity’, etc. take is interesting primarily because of the

manner in which we choose to borrow aspects of these ideas and interpret them.<sup>14</sup> Through the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives and the valorization of little narratives and the idea of ‘play’, via the subalternist practice of unearthing various kinds of resistant little narratives and fragments, to the attractive postcolonial ideas of dissemination, marginality, and travel, this trajectory is marked by a fundamental absorption in perspective: Who looks? And what representational apparatus is deployed?

This rush of ideas—inherited, borrowed, selected, imposed, and unified or fragmentary—encounters the ‘reality’ of otherness, giving rise to a series of questions: Where does northeast India, or for that matter, Assam, stand in relation to the nation? Is the national idea viable anymore? How can it be re-fashioned to suit the changed shape/size/nature of this conglomeration of peoples and regions? How does the nationalist discourse deal with otherness—beyond adopting the easiest version of doing justice, which is appropriation or accommodation within it? It was against this background of concerns and concepts that the literature classroom waited to undertake its journey into *The Shadow Lines* and *Midnight’s Children*.

## MODELS OF READING, MODELING READINGS

The project of syllabus revision presented us with an ethical dilemma. We were deeply conscious of the need to give students sufficient scope to read and understand as freely as they wished. At the same time we were also conscious of the need to do justice to our regional and academic context, to provide the students with the foundation to undertake that journey on their own, to offer them a model of reading that would touch them. As a first step we undertook to transform the design of the syllabus—the compulsion (through the University Grants Commission draft syllabus and university statutes) to have a more or less fixed syllabus undermined by disturbing the basics of that determination—by inserting a postcolonial politics, an intention, into the introductory paper by which literary and social history would be reimagined completely in terms of the history, theory, practice/motives/ perspectives of colonization. This also allowed us to retain at the subtextual level a sense of location that we felt would ‘place’ our syllabus, and through it our interactions in the classroom with contemporary theory and contemporary Indian and global politics, thus helping to produce a series of meaningfully subversive discourses.

The paper on “Contemporary Indian English Literature” is categorical in its expectations. A strong ideological bent is evident in the entire paper, an overtly political statement of intention being part of the paper itself. The paper is divided into three sections the first of which, containing the Viswanathan and Ahmad essays, “requires knowledge of the politics of English Literary Study in India and the circumstances of literary production” expecting stu-

dents not only to be aware of this politics but also to be able to deploy it in their readings of the essays, poetry and fiction in the paper. Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, as is by now well known, demonstrates how literature was used to disguise the imperialist design. Carrying on the spirit of Viswanathan's research, the student was expected to discover how certain ideas in literary texts may be privileged over others, with for instance 'Shakespeare' being as important as certain interpretations of Shakespeare. The 'unity in diversity' thesis about India that was such a useful Orientalist legacy for the later imperialists' desire to rule over 'one' India was the frame within which we expected to read the Tillyard-generated Elizabethan World Picture marked by order and harmony, facilitating reciprocal exchanges between the text and the ideology behind a 'unity' thesis. The aspect of reading that actually emerged out of the students' encounter with the argument of Viswanathan's essay, however, was a desire to look anew at the intense missionary activity that has taken place in northeast India, with entire communities converted to Christianity, mostly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and school education virtually monopolized by different missionary groups. A review of this complex contribution questions the familiar versions of Orientalist critique. A student from the Boro community chose to write a seminar paper on the role of Christian missionaries in educating members of his community, setting up schools which may still be the only ones imparting a decent education, and unearthing, publishing and preserving texts of Boro language and literature.<sup>15</sup> In the process he attempted to refute Viswanathan's point about the imperialist intention behind the mask, and sought to demonstrate how the community had been thereby empowered against the dominant Assamese. He also remembered to mention in the course of his presentation, the contributions of Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson (American Baptist missionaries who came to Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to the growth and establishment of the Assamese language (against the earlier predominant use of Bengali), reminding us once again of the futility of even a pan-*Indian* approach and of the strength of a discriminating and nuanced interpretation from regional historical context.

Ahmad's essay fits rather neatly with our own wish to avoid generalizations. (In fact, several other essays in Ahmad's *In Theory* mount vigorous attacks on universalist categories such as "third world literature" and "Indian literature"<sup>16</sup>). Read with Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital," its criticism of the complacent attempt to formulate, in Jameson's terms, "a theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third world literature" (qtd. in Ahmad 97) invites readers to be particularly watchful in the face of categories such as "third world literature" or "cognitive aesthetics," especially when these emanate from the metropolis. Ahmad guides readers through Jameson's prescriptions for the production of "Third World texts" (a term heavily underscored by Ahmad's argument, for being a symptom of that same facile generalization)

that they are or should be “national allegories,” since the only rationale for their existence is the experience of colonization and resistance to it in the form of nationalist movements. Ahmad ‘explains’ Jameson as saying that *only* national allegories can be admitted as authentic texts of Third World literature. Along with *India Against Itself*, *Masks of Conquest*, and Chatterjee’s demonstration of the trouble with a disciplinary perspective, Ahmad’s essay captures the imagination of the impressionable student. These texts, engaging in mild versions of revenge historiography, appeal to the ‘grievance against the center’ attitude that defines and determines so much of the northeastern region’s discourse about itself. With such preparation, the process of seeing oneself as ‘other’ and ‘marginal’ appears more natural than conceding this resonant condition of otherness to the migrant from across the border or from other states of India, and it is with this peculiar armor that the student is required to enter the carefully chosen fictional worlds of Rushdie, Ghosh, and Tharoor. *In Theory* also includes an essay on Rushdie’s second ‘subcontinental’ novel *Shame*, in which Ahmad identifies two versions of Rushdie’s migrancy—one “an ontological condition of all human beings” and the other “an excess of belongings” (127). These delectable choices are pitted against the actual occurrence of migrant conditions—the migrants who flood our region do not fit either of these sophisticated interpretations of migrancy. The reader in our university classroom either feels victimized by the flux, the sheer numbers clouding her understanding of the condition in either its ontological version or its postmodern multiplicity; or she is expected to put herself in the place of this other and try to imagine how it feels. She is caught between the theoretical expectations and the ‘real’ conditions, uniquely *in between*.

The third section of the syllabus, on “Indian English Fiction”—the section in which the results of this theoretical preparation will be tested—contains three novels: Anita Desai’s *Fasting Feasting*, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, and Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*. This section requires students to “engage with the urgent issues of our time, particularly with the developing contours of a modern nation, a society in flux, and (acquire) a sense of historical situatedness.” On the other hand, *Midnight’s Children* figures in a paper on “Modern and Postmodern Fiction” and is expected to be read as an example of postmodern and postcolonial fiction.

It seemed that we had covered all fronts in mapping the terrain in this particular way. What we had failed to note was the possibility of the texts resonating in ways other than the ones we hoped to ‘discover’. As is commonly acknowledged, both *The Shadow Lines* and *Midnight’s Children* undertake revisionist readings of the category of the nation as a modernist trope against the darkness of colonialism. But by considering nations without borders, and the dissemination of peoples across frontiers and through porous borders—resulting in the presence of migrants/foreigners/outsideers in those

sacred cultural and social spaces that a nation guards as its own—this particular discourse of nationalism, while placing itself squarely in the postmodern/postcolonial world, fails to empathize with its constituent others: with the fear of immigrants threatening and obliterating the ‘true national’; of porous borders encouraging acts of terrorism, facilitating easy entry and escape of criminals/terrorists/insurgents into the safety of another country; of the subnational turned terrorist. In fact the plurality and play associated with postmodernism, tested against ‘actual’ conditions, are likely to result in the debunking of the hallowed conditions of marginality, migrancy, and liminality, because these are not only the conditions of the migrant. It is often the recipient community that is already marginalized and views this influx into its spaces as a more or less direct result of its marginality, of a center/nation-state’s neglect or lack of concern, and its willingness to use this area and people distant from itself to play out a cynical politics of numbers and votes.<sup>17</sup> Border states are naturally vulnerable, and the charm of postmodern migrancy as an ontological condition is unlikely to work on them. For people in India’s northeastern states the migrant is not a Bhabha or Rushdie-like individual who may be lionized for the way he eloquently articulates and markets his marginality, but one of hundreds and thousands of practically faceless people who seep into a society, silently swelling it to proportions neither the land nor the economy can sustain. None of the novels mentioned can be read without determination by this politico-intellectual context. And since in both *The Shadow Lines* and *Midnight’s Children* students encounter nation-making and its turbulent underbelly (which includes migration), the invitation to connect to context encourages a much more engaged reading of the text.

*The Shadow Lines*, written against the backdrop of two nation-making experiences—the partition and the formation of East Pakistan and, tacitly, the memory of the formation of Bangladesh—speaks movingly of a humanity that transcends borders, but would also seem to touch directly this most urgent concern in the states of the northeast of a porous border with Bangladesh and immigrant influx of such proportions that it has altered the demographic profile, as much as the cultural, social, and political life of its people. It is perhaps salutary for postcolonial theory to remember that the most eloquent advocate of DissemiNation as the analogue of Nation-as-coming-together is Homi Bhabha, a Third World intellectual and cultural alien on the “edge of a foreign culture,” whose visibility and influence is a result of an effective exploitation of this alien position: “I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that... in the nations of others becomes a time of gathering” (Bhabha “DissemiNation” 291). The sophisticated state of in-betweenness and migrancy is caught up in the same representational mode that Chatterjee mentions, where it is only possible to see oneself as the other on the margin of another’s culture, never to consider the other whose spaces one ‘invades’. *The Shadow Lines* offers

border transgression—of actual borders and those of the imagination—as the most desirable condition. The two people the narrator is therefore most obsessed by are Ila and Tridib, both inveterate travelers living constantly in a condition of in-betweeness.

The text of *The Shadow Lines* most popular with students (again because of accessibility—availability and price) is the OUP CULT (College and University Level Texts) edition, which also contains five critical essays. From seminar papers and assignments written by students, it would seem that the essay they find most interesting and ‘usable’ is Suvir Kaul’s “Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*.” Kaul sees “the narrator’s autobiography” as “interwoven” with “the national biography.” Students are familiar with the problematics of this conflation of the personal with the national from their reading of Ahmad’s essay critiquing Jameson’s reading of the Third World text as national allegory, as well as from Timothy Brennan’s “The National Longing for Form.” The discovery of these echoes in Kaul’s text facilitates their entry into its argument. Kaul’s essay begins with a couple of epigraphs from Ernest Renan and Jawaharlal Nehru (both invariably read by students), and goes on to speak of “Memory” as the “abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state”(Kaul 269). This may be, and very often is, read into the novel in the way Thamma rethinks her idea of nation and the third generation becomes inter/national—in the process showing how one might wish to retain the ‘unity’ thesis of the nation yet at the same time be compelled or even desire to adopt the ‘fragmentary’ thesis. (This is particularly pertinent to the way the Indian nation has been imagined as a federal-unitary compromise that smartly represents the ‘both/and’ spirit of postmodernism. This is a problem area and its ideological pressure is evident behind the difficulty of resolving whether one would align with the unitary thesis or with the federal/fragmentary one). In other words, the ‘nation’ may give way to ‘dissemi/nation’—ideas that students play with from their reading of the novel and the commentaries on it, and from ideas of ‘nation’ circulating in the theory or emerging from contemporary political reality. Kaul’s essay sees the narrator tracing the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of an English-speaking, bilingual, metropolitan middle-class Indian subjectivity... formed, in part, by ideas inherited from the history of anti-imperialist activism, but one which comes to recognize how closely ‘Indianness’ is a product of images and desires whose origins lie far away across the seas (270). Such a claim encourages investigation into the idea of ‘nation’, its use during the struggle for independence and its contemporary shape and viability, with the results of this research ploughed back into the novel in a reciprocity of application.

One of Kaul’s comments, one that students most often like to cite, seems to have most significance for the reading situation I have tried to describe. Kaul states that middle-class subjectivity in the novel is “marked by a growing sense

that the logic of the modern nation-state is *necessarily at odds with various forms of subcontinental commonality*,” and perhaps even more pertinently for the reader in *this* location, “that to be ‘Indian’ is to perversely, and perhaps unsuccessfully, define oneself against one’s mirror-image from across the borders” (270, emphasis mine). An interpretation such as this, attractive because it brings home to students so many of the “key concepts in postcolonial theory” that they would study as part of the course, is also provocative because it directly attacks students’ political perceptions, their sense of being in a certain place and sharing in the everyday life of the people of that place, especially against the insistence in the classroom that students learn to read from their own context.

Besides the evocation of the freedom struggle in Thamma’s recalling for her nephew and grandson her desire to fight for freedom from British rule (Ghosh 39), and the subsequent formation of East Pakistan as an exclusive territory for a homogeneous religious and linguistic group—an image/example of separate existence that resounds in various separatist movements in the northeast—the novel also succeeds in projecting beyond its fictional frame the circumstances of Bangladesh’s formation, a human and personal tragedy that is particularly vivid in the border states, bringing in its wake the separation of families, the loss of a land with which characters closely identified themselves, the loss of roots for many, and the displacement of people as refugees and immigrants. This is the part of the novel that offers the most intense occasion for reading from context and thence for re-viewing, where the story of the ‘other side’, the society on whose fringes relocation takes place, is a searing absence. The sheer magnitude of migration compels review of the stock assumption that the tragedy is only that of the migrants, returning us effectually to the problem of vantage point, of subject and object.

The absence of visible lines of demarcation (Thamma vainly expects to see clear lines dividing India and Bangladesh because her sense of nation is still one of a particular geographical territory) is repositioned by the narrative as the condition of the modern Indian, of Ghosh himself, whose movements are not limited by borders. But this circumstance would also remind readers of the continuing problems with borders and of frequent transgressions, both deliberate and unwitting (but often also part of a political process: people-to-people contact etc.). Beyond these issues, there are also the marginal ones: of the reader’s knowledge of the author, a Bengali who writes about this most prickly historical period; of the novel’s evocation of a distinctive Bengali milieu—kinship terms, cuisine, and social peculiarities such as the ‘adda’; and Assam’s complex relationship with Bengali culture, language, and people, probably best described by the cliché ‘love-hate’.

*The Shadow Lines* also happens to be a very popular and much admired book ‘here’, snapped up every time it appears on local bookshelves and annual book fairs—again a result of that ambivalent relationship between the Assa-



mese and the Bengali that has resulted in close interaction as well as intense resentment, an exchange that has also meant a stronger articulation of 'roots'.<sup>18</sup>

*The Great Indian Novel* brought to our notice several delicious ironies. Despite its subversive intention, it evokes a very different conception of nation from the other two novels. Basic to its imagery is the notion of Mahabharat: the great Indian nation. For at least 10% of the class, the *Mahabharat* was alien territory. For students from communities converted to Christianity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *Mahabharat* does not form part of a childhood story-corpus. They had only encountered the epic in their school textbooks, and their subsequent acquaintance with it came not in the form of a common cultural inheritance but as aligned to the narrow religious pantheon of Hindutva. They were therefore caught in an interesting bind—'outside/other' to 'great India', yet at the same time free from the traditional understanding of the epic and thus able to identify with unexpected areas of the novel. In an unconsciously fashionable critical move, they identified with the marginal—predictably perhaps, with Eklavya (dalit, adivasi, whose brilliant career as an archer to rival favored pupil Arjuna was cut short by the Dronacharya's demand of guru-dakshina in the form of his right thumb) and with Karna/Jinnah. This second identification had intriguing ramifications—serious debate (against the centrist Indian discourse) about the birth of Pakistan and the right of self-determination, which was considered legitimate when these nations came into being but is quite illegitimate when demanded now. Ploughed back into the novel, such awareness finds a text very different from the one we had prescribed.

*Midnight's Children* offers a similarly fertile testing ground and is actually read with similar theoretical background and political assumptions, although it appears in a paper with a somewhat different design. The novel is about the birth of a nation—India coming into existence at midnight to the accompaniment of Nehru's resounding eloquence—a birth that is now a historical marker, emotively evoked and celebrated every year, but also resisted and questioned here in Assam by the invariable declaration of a bandh by one or another separatist group. The novel contains three births, three national formations—India's, Pakistan's, and then in 1971, Bangladesh—kept in the reader's sights by Saleem's movement from India to Pakistan to Bangladesh and then back to India. At the same time, the novel contains a perfectly surreal breakdown of borders and divisions, and in its chaotic, frenzied pace offers a dramatic and sassy comeback to the staid contours of nation.

Rushdie's novel first appeared in 1980, and became available in a student-friendly edition (from Avon Books) in 1982. The early 1980s were a crucial period for Assam: the time of the students' movement against a heavy influx of refugees from Bangladesh<sup>10</sup>; the shaping of the discourse of neglect; and the marshalling of forces to combat something that in general perception was not being addressed seriously enough by the center (the government of the time in

Assam and Delhi), leaving the margin to its own devices.<sup>19</sup> The visual impression of a society swamped from all sides by numbers in excess of what it can bear is matched by a similar image at the beginning of *Midnight's Children*—of Saleem's "crumblng, overused body" and of the urgent note in the line: "I must work fast... if I am to end up meaning—yes meaning—something" (4). Or "there are so many stories to tell... I have been a swallower of lives... Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (4). This prehistory, before it arrives in the classroom in 2008 in the guise of postcolonial/post-modern fiction, is worth noting. It entered our lives when we were students, idling away an academic year as student agitation brought educational institutions to a standstill. The separatist rhetoric that was part of the way a new identity was being imagined—breaking away and yet internally holding together, a conception that seemed to visualize the possibility of a new nation much like the one described by Renan—was confronted by this celebration of chaos. We were confused by the novel's "teeming," its sense of bursting at the seams, its fragmentary perspective and fragmented identities, because precisely the opposite was happening in the world outside the book.

Today as *our* students try to collate *Midnight's Children* with ideas of nation, of identities growing out of recent political history, the processing effort they have to expend is minimum. In the nearly 30 years since its publication, various conceptions of nation have entered common linguistic usage, besides becoming part of the equipment of the literature student, very often through the mediation of academics who were produced by this history. This is supplemented by Timothy Brennan:

It was the novel... that was crucial in defining the nation as an 'imagined community'.... 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. (49)

Brennan goes on to ask, in the context of languages and "polyglot entities": "How is a continual, chaotic splintering to be prevented" (51)? And in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie himself determines the novel's interpretation in virtually the same vein as Brennan. Referring to *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie says, "the form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy" (Rushdie *Imaginary* 16). All this carries the suggestion that the form of the novel actually offers a model to deal with sociopolitical splintering and division, teaches a politics and a way of living.

*Midnight's Children* fits neatly into literary expectations that are now obviously and unashamedly literary-political expectations. The novel's opening lines are pointedly analogical to nation ("I was born... on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1947

etc.”), and the image of nation it offers is huge and elastic, easily containing identity’s countless fragments, at the same time that it offers the other image of a nation of fragments that refuse to comfortably and seamlessly forge a unity. Taking such direction to a logical conclusion, the student may succeed in making an analogy that meshes together the sense of “teeming” that is part of the novel’s celebratory play with its loaded reference to the 1971 migration as bigger than Exodus: “[Ten] million refugees fled across the borders of East Pakistan-Bangladesh into India.... Bigger than Exodus, larger than the Partition crowds, the many-headed monster poured into India” (Rushdie *Midnight* 427), understanding in their own context the celebration and despair that equally characterize the novel.

Some of the reactions such chaos evokes, especially against the reality of migrations, are startling, often catching us unprepared, but eventually convincing us by their logic and the inevitability of their emergence in a given place and time and within a specific intellectual frame. During discussion of the novel, one of our students wondered worriedly whether there should not be “some kind of order, of discipline,” speaking only incidentally of the novel, but responding to the larger issue of ‘others,’ knowing well the politically incorrect nature of such opinions but willing to risk the restatement of views already jettisoned by the theory that he was also studying as part of the course. It is possible to see in his concern the intrusion of context, where the debate forms around strong centers seeking to politically control the margins, around center-state relations and greater federalism, areas into which the question of nation spreads.

Our choice of these texts was certainly ideologically motivated. But the ideology of which we were conscious was expected to emerge from knowledge of the politics of English in India, a postcolonial condition that demanded acknowledgment. What we did not anticipate was the usurping of the reading strategy by a vastly different ideological thrust: that we might appear to be using the text to disseminate the sentiment that living without borders, living with the alien and the stranger (as distinct from living in a cosmopolitan situation in any of India’s cities or hill stations) was the most admirable postcolonial/ postmodern option. While drawing attention to certain aspects of the novels, then, it is also quite possible to be seen as offering in the form of a subtext a tacit invitation to live in harmony with the stranger, performing and even abusing the role of ‘intellectual pathfinders’ assigned to us, or perhaps assumed by us, as faculty in a regional university.

The concepts of nation and nationalism are no longer the ones we knew from the inheritance of a Western intellectual tradition, nor the ones fossilized following independence and the mapping of a modern nation with its component states. The demands of the nation’s others for recognition and visibility must necessarily distort and reform the concept and perhaps, by extension, also the entity.

## Notes

1. The folklore associated with Gauhati University includes the fact that individuals contributed in cash and kind to set it up, thus rendering the university accountable to the people and the region in a way that more impersonally set up institutions are not. So its 'contribution' has changing implications in critical periods of the life of the region.
2. See Greenblatt, especially 19–25.
3. Since then there have been other signs of visibility: the recognition of the Sastriya dance as a classical form by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and perhaps the ultimate recognition—Assam appearing as the answer to two clues in *The Times of India* Crossword (“a state of India,” “a kind of tea”).
4. As my colleague and teacher Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami would assert, the writings of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Assamese Vaishnava poet-saint Sankardeva reveal a sense of otherness in reference to the great Indian nation, Bharatavarsha, with Assam as a distinct and separate vantage point. This early sense of both nation and otherness are worth studying.
5. Levinas's reflections on ethics and the other in *Totality and Infinity* are particularly relevant to me for an understanding of the other and run as a tacit assumption through the argument. See Levinas.
6. See for example Rushdie 11–17.
7. *India Against Itself* is recommended reading for our students to supplement 'daily experience' and popular interpretations of that experience, all of which comprises part of the 'preparation' for their literature course. See Baruah.
8. The taking of crude from Assam's oilfields to the Barauni Refinery in Bihar is one of the best-known and most resented steps towards such marginalization.
9. See Derrida *Hospitality* and *Cosmopolitanism*, respectively.
10. See Anderson and Chatterjee, respectively.
11. See Bhabha “DissemiNation” and Aloysius, respectively.
12. See for example White xi-xii.
13. This followed the period when “legal intervention” was welcomed, especially in the case of sati.
14. That Partha Chatterjee's three books are conveniently available in an omnibus edition, published by OUP India, shows how accessibility is as important in the choice, formulation, and dissemination of an idea as may be the most convincing or theoretically dense version of it. Other works on nation published and marketed by OUP likewise show how availability and pricing, make for easy assimilation and subsequent application. For examples of such works, see Aloysius, Nandy.
15. Bodo is one of the larger tribal groups in the state of Assam with a distinct cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity.
16. See for example 43–72 & 243–286.
17. The common perception in the northeast, and particularly in Assam, is that immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh have been clandestinely encouraged to settle in many areas of Assam, with land given to them by successive state governments and their names entered on voters' lists.
18. A recent collection of articles commissioned for the Souvenir of the Nagaon Book Fair, 2003, and dedicated to the memory of short story writer and filmmaker Bhabendra Nath Saikia, who is credited with having presented an 'authentic' picture of Assam, is titled “Asomiya Sahitya-Sanskrit Sipar Sandhan”: “The Search for Roots in Assamese Literature and Culture,” ed. Sibananda Kakoti.
19. The Assam Movement was a student-led agitation against illegal immigrants from the neighboring Bangladesh that continued for six years between 1979 and 1985 when the student leadership signed the Assam Accord with the government of India.

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