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POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL AFTER COVID-19: RETHINKING COSMOPOLITANISM AND POSTNATIONALISM

MADHURIMA NAYAK
Research Scholar (Junior Research Fellow)
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India.
Email: madhurimanayak@gmail.com

MADHURIMA NAYAK

Abstract

This paper rethinks the relevance of the ideal of cosmopolitanism and postnationalism in the field of postcolonial Indian English novels in the post-Covid world. In this age of globalization, postcolonial studies have discredited the essentialist idea of the 'nation' in favour of the fluidity of the postmodern cosmopolitanism. While in the empirical world, the nation is the primary unit of government, the basis of all action, in the postcolonial textual world, nation is the first thing which needs to be eliminated. While this paper discusses the way in which the category of the nation is dealt by postcolonial Indian English novels, it analyses, at the same time the empirical practices of citizens and government during the COVID-19 pandemic which persuades us to reconsider our opinions about the seemingly unflawed project of cosmopolitanism and postnationalism.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism; postnationalism; postcolonial Indian English novel; nation; national identity; COVID-19.

Postcolonial Studies has come a long way and the fiery debates that have raged in postcolonial studies so far, one among them have gained widespread currency and that is about the efficacy of ideal of cosmopolitanism in the postcolonial world. By 'postcolonial studies' I am here specifically referring to postcolonial Indian fiction written in the English in the post-independence era. As the world became a smaller place owing to the economic policy of globalization and the cultural policy of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, postcolonial studies discredited the essentialist idea of the 'nation' in favour of the fluidity of the postmodern 'world.' While in the empirical world, the nation is the primary unit of government, the basis of all action, in the postcolonial textual world, the nation is the first thing that needs to be eliminated. Nuruddin Farah in *Bastards of Empire* (1995) considers nations just as "working hypothesis" (26) and reduces any commitment to the nation as "loyalty to an idea" (26) as does Jefferey Alexander, who in "Fin de Siecle Social Theory" points out, that nationalism is now becoming synonymous with the "negative antinomies of civil society" (1995, 39). Partha Chatterjee too in *Nation and its Fragments* (1993) notes that "nationalism is now viewed as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life" (4). While *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is the ruling paradigm of postcolonial criticism, *Janani janmabhumi swargadapi gariyasi* is regarded as ridiculous. This is an attitude, which Peter Van Der

Veer (2002) terms, "colonial cosmopolitanism" where we have the "*enlightened* individual whose allegiance transcends the boundedness of tradition in which he or she is socialized" (165, emphasis mine). Such an enlightened individual, who invariably belongs to the tradition of "European Enlightenment of eighteenth-century" must transcend not only his "nationhood" and "ethnicity" but also his "religion" if he wishes to "feel allegiance only to a worldwide community of mankind" (165). However, after the global pandemic, COVID 19, after the world "witnessed scenes of people dying outside over-whelmed hospitals and funeral pyres lighting up the night sky" (Najjar and Ibrahim 2021), the empirical practices of citizens and governments during the pandemic, bring us to a point where we need to reconsider our opinions about the absoluteness of the seemingly unflawed project of cosmopolitanism.

Salman Rushdie (2000) marks that "among the great struggles of man – good/evil, reason/unreason, etc. – there is also this mighty conflict between the fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey" (55). Postcolonial literature has, more often than not, privileged the "fantasy of Away" and the "mirage of journey" to the "fantasy of Home" and the "dream of roots." Rajeswari Sundar Rajan (2011) reflects that as the joy of gaining independence from colonial rule was exhausted, nationalist sentiments subsided too, with the consequence that "the postcolonial nation settled into the bad habits of nationalism." The concept of the nation, in India, along with nationalist sentiments fell out of favour with Indira Gandhi's proclamation of Emergency and the falling apart of Nehru's dream of a nation "where all her children may dwell" peacefully (Rushdie 2013, 158) within the nation. After the liberation from former colonizers, as India developed itself into a military and economic superpower, suppressing all minority populations, all patriotic commitments towards it were broken (Rajan 2011) and the great battle between postcolonial novelists and the apparatus of the Nation-State started. Literature, in general, has always engaged with social and political ills of society but the battle against the very concept of the

nation started after India gained independence, faced the horrors of Partition, endured the onslaughts of majoritarian nationalism and of course, with the rise of a class of privileged cosmopolitan authors, educated abroad and who enjoyed the economic advantage of settling in any part of the world they wished to. This dismissal of the nation and nationalism in favour of ideal of cosmopolitanism has been due to the alignment of postcolonial studies with poststructuralism which favours the hybrid and the liminal and induces a celebration of the destruction of borders between people and nations in favour of "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models" (Appadurai 1997, 32). The hostility towards the nation, as a delimited and delimiting category, in postcolonial studies, had also sprung from the fact that

> [t]he nation state is one of the West's most formidable forms of political belongings, and in most cases, also the legacy left behind for ex-colonies. The liberation from colonial control was, thus, hardly total, leaving ex-colonies in a Fanonesque prison, in the mould of Western political and social organisation, often in ghastly combinations of their own forms of cultural violence and hierarchies. The dismantling of the nation state is thus a monumentally significant action and a potentially radical act. (Raghavan 2017, 34)

Rajan (2011) refers to Shuddhabrata Sengupta's essay "Confessions of an Anti-National" where he gives vent to his "fantasy of Away" and his dis-ease with a restricted and limited nation and national identity:

> Columbus went sailing in search of India and found the New World instead. Perhaps I need to gather a band of fool hardy mariners, a bunch of time-passing exiles, refugees and refugees, stateless and rootless illegal immigrants of the imagination to continue his journey—a quest in the other direction. In losing what he sought we might find another new world. We could each take our own favourite India with us, not the excess

baggage of India that is *Bharat*, that is *Aryavarta* multiplied by *Dravida Nadu*, that is *Punya, Pi tri, Matri, Janma, Mrityu-Bhoomi*, but the India that is the ink, the India that is the rubber, and the India that is the magazine—these we could still carry with us, provided we left our identity cards behind (Sengupta 1997: 13) (emphasis in original; Sengupta 1997 as quoted in Rajan 2011)

Such a desire for a "stateless and rootless" existence, as desired by Shuddhabrata Sengupta, the inclination to shake off the nation and find a "new world" which would not be overloaded with "excess baggage" of culture, sentiment, nostalgia for the homeland, culminated in the production of "novels of delegitimization" (Appiah 1992, 152) which blamed and criticized the nation for the partition, the economic and social inequality, caste system, majoritarian nationalism and its other failings. The most prominent example of this is Amitav Ghosh's celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines* (2005) which reveals the unnaturalness and artificiality of national borders and national identity and the bloody consequences of holding on to the same. Ghosh's novel, as Kaul (1994) puts it, believes that "the modern nation-states is necessarily at odds with various forms of subcontinental commonality… to be "Indian" is to perversely and perhaps unsuccessfully define oneself against one's mirror image from across the borders" (270). The violence, in Ghosh's novel, assumes religious colour as does the other partition narratives such as Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1988), Vibhuti Narayan Rai's *Curfew in the City* (2016), Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* (2004), Manohar Malgonkar's *Bend in the Ganges* (1974). As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2015) states, "…from a cosmopolitan perspective, the borders of states merely restrict the scope of justice and are irrelevant obstacles to appreciating and acting on one's responsibilities to everyone in the global community." The intra-national struggles or sub-nationalism, as evinced in Arundhati Roy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), depicting the Kashmir Insurgency, Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006), about the Gorkhaland separatist movement, Amandeep Sandhu's *Roll of Honour* (2012),

representing the Khalistan movement, Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014), dealing with the Naxal movement in West Bengal question the primacy of the nation and idea of national integrity. The secessionist tendency either from a particular state or from the nation itself to give expression to the needs of the minority population gives a heavy blow to national integrity and making the internal divisions of the country more glaring to the international readership. No attempt is made by these novelists at "redescribing the world," i.e., presenting a vision and hope of a unified nation, which according to Rushdie "is the necessary first step towards changing it." While writers like Rushdie, Ghosh, Roy and Desai question the concept of the "Pure[-ity]" and integrity of national identity and borders, Aravind Adiga (in *The White Tiger* (2008) and *Between the Assassinations* (2008)) engages in "vernacular cosmopolitanism" as does Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) Somnath Batabyal *The Price You Pay* (2013) where they supposedly look at their nation with "self-doubt and reflexive self-distantiation" (Werbner 2006) which often turns into ruthless self-mockery and unwarranted self-denigration devoid of any attachment, hope, belongingness and pride. As Fraser writes, "[f]unctionally speaking, the novel is transformed into a laboratory in which the technology of national self-criticism is developed and tested" (Fraser 2000 as quoted in Rajan 2011). The failure of the nation-state "paved way for a 'critical nationalism' (Buttle) that undermined the importance of 'national identity' (the criteria that legitimize one's membership in the nation), 'national attachment' (one's fidelity to one's nation), 'national pride'… and 'national integrity'… popularised cooperational ideas like internationalism, globalism and transnationalism." (Chakraborty 2021, 166). As a result, we see Rushdie proclaiming that to write "nationalistically" would be a "trap" and the need of the hour would be "holding conversion with the world" through their literature (Rushdie 1997, xiii-xvi) even if that would mean criticizing and exoticizing one's own nation. He further points out that "the writer who sets himself or herself up as the voice of a nation" (Rushdie 2003 144), should be regarded suspicious. This, according to him is called

"New Behalfism" which offers "moral instruction…. [and] abhors the tragic sense of life." They are, he continues, "murderer of thought" since they "substitutes political values for literary ones" (144):

> Closed systems have always appealed to writers. This is why so much writing deals with prisons, police forces, hospitals, schools. Is the nation a closed system? In this internationalized moment, can any system remain closed? (144)

For him "[g]ood writing assumes a frontierless nation. Writers who serve frontiers have become border guards." Rushdie (1991) himself declares that his novel *Satanic Verses* "rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure" and presents a "migrant's eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis" (394). Any representation of national self-determination or rootedness in postcolonial fiction is considered archaic and fundamentalist. The fear of "border-guards," the denial of the nation has been immediately followed by the desire for a cosmopolitan world where the world would not be divided between the powerful nations and the less powerful ones, the First and the Third World, where "our ethical and political responsibilities do not stop at national borders or at the boundaries of identity-forming groups – whether these are religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial or traditional" (Vandekerckhove and Hooft 2010, xvii). But has this "internationalized moment" led to a "cosmopolitanization" of mentality (Beck 2006) on the part of both Global North and Global South? How far is this hype of global integration successful when a crisis hits the world?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, after the borders were closed and restrictions were imposed on travel across the malleable borders of the pre-pandemic days, we are brought face to face with the hollowness and ineffectuality of the desire of postcolonial Indian English novelists for "a collaborative morality' (Lloyd 1996 as quoted in Chakraborty 2021), the hope for a postnational world where there would be an ethical engagement with the people outside the official borders of the State so that the people of a nation would not be constricted by the "excess baggage" (Sengupta 1997 as quoted in Rajan 2011) of national identity and national citizenship. Postnation, as Chakraborty (2021) defines it, is a "movement towards becoming planetary states by sharing the aftereffects of post-local economic structures- transnational organizations operating on meritocracy, a worldwide unity emerging out of easy connectivity and mobility… solidarities aimed at promoting human rights across the world…" (171). I theorize the desire for a postnational world order as hollow and ineffectual since it fails to perform it task when the world needs it the most. An analysis of the empirical practices of governments and citizens during the COVID crisis questions the relevance of the continual criticism of national identity and integrity by postcolonial Indian English novelists in favour of the utopian paradigm of cosmopolitanism and postnationalism. Rayan and Nanda (2022) point out that the slogan of unity- "We're all in this together"- during this pandemic by politicians, scientific experts, media was meant to provide a "hopeful mantra" to the people and generate "a sense of security suggesting that through collaborative efforts the world would quickly overcome this historic global disaster" (1). The question which arises here: were we really all together? Though the lofty ideals of being "global citizens" with "cosmopolitan identity" and "cosmopolitan outlook" (Vandekerckhove and Hooft 2010, xvii) seemed glamourous in the pre-pandemic world, it sounds goofy today, the term "responsibility" being affronted by the boundless racism against the Asians and Africans, the xenophobia directed towards immigrants and the unwillingness to treat diasporic patients during the pandemic (the hospitals in Iran refused to admit Afgan patients (https://www.middleeasteye.net/coronavirus-iran-hospitals-refusing-treat-afghans)). The pandemic unmasked the divisions of the world which were previously cloaked in the guise of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Eric Taylor Woods et al. (2020) provide a brief picture of the scenario which brings out the dreadful situation even after much

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ado with cosmopolitanism just before the pandemic commenced:

> "[a]cross Europe and North America there has already been documented rise in xenophobic, anti-immigrant, anti- Asian and anti-Semitic hate during the global pandemic. The US administration's insistence on using the term "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus" is one of "many strategies of apportioning the blame for the (spread of the) virus to a specific place/country and to construct the disease as a foreign-grown threat to the nation" (Nossem 2020: 5). In the United States alone, over 1,700 anti-Asian hate incidents were reported within the first 6 weeks of a new website established by Asian American and Pacific Islander civil rights groups (Lee & Yadav, 2020), to name just one example (see Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center, n.d. online) … Dehumanizing language about "dirty" immigrants carrying disease has accompanied immigration bans alongwith border closures, asylum application denials, deportations.

If a "cosmopolitan form of subjectivity differs in fundamental ways from the forms of subjectivity that express themselves in chauvinism, nationalism, intolerance of difference, belligerence towards foreigners, racism, imperialism, ignorance of other cultures, and bigotry" the pandemic Covid 19 revealed that when a crisis occurs, all commitment towards cosmopolitan ideals are broken and what remains is only the great divide between the Global North and the Global South and a commitment only towards one's own nation, diminishing all forms of inter-cultural and inter-national dialogue though repeatedly insisted by UNESCO (UNESCO Universal Declaration On Cultural Diversity) and the flagbearers of this cosmopolitan ideal i.e. the diasporas. Given postcolonial literature's desire for the cosmopolitan world, the diaspora has always been seen as a coveted vantage point from which to enunciate cosmopolitan, neutral and objective viewpoints about the native country. Covid 19 transformed

the diasporas seeking opportunities abroad – the diasporas "of hope", as Appadurai ([1996] 2003, n.p.) calls them – which enjoy the unlimited freedom and mobility of movement, but rather the deprived and the dispossessed who, instead of enjoying the fluidity of our "liquid modern world" (Bauman 2003, n.p.) in a global village of global exchanges, experience the ruggedness of a global geography of hard borders instead of malleable lines (Cohen 2006) (Král et al 2019).

Commitment towards one's own nation is immediately followed by hatred, suspicion and racism towards the other nation. It is rightly said that though the virus has caused enough suffering on its own, this suffering has not unfurled alone but has collaborated with a "sense of xenophobia pervading into the political and social responses… Throughout history, it is clear that when a disease spreads, xenophobia is rarely left far behind." (Clissold et al 2020). Though the facade of cosmopolitanism had been broken earlier too by "the specter of … new nationalism, ranging from violent separatist movements, religious nationalism to neo-fascism and the more subtle cultural nationalisms which have become an integral part of the political culture of many Western countries" (Delanty 1999), the COVID 19 pandemic aggravated the situation and further revealed the utopianism of the worldview of cosmopolitanism. The greater the need for international cooperation, during the pandemic, the greater nationalists we were becoming. The closing of the borders may be justifiable due to the spread of the disease but why were the more affluent countries at dis-ease with sharing vaccines and extending help to the less affluent ones? *The Times of India* stated in April 2020 that "India imposed a ban on the export of Hydroxychloroquine on which Trump is now banking heavily… to take stock of the domestic requirements and ensure that the country has enough in its kitty" while Trump had declared that if India refuses this export of Hydrochloroquine, then "that will be okay but of course, there may be retaliation. Why wouldn't there be". Such a threat "came at a time when both countries are in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic". Nehring and Hu (2021)

observe that the "pandemic has revealed the fragility of contemporary transnationalism in terms of its structural dependence on nation-level politics and governance". It would be fair to quote here an excerpt of an article which was published during the second wave of Covid-19 which struck India, in the "Global Times" (2021):

> India's public health system is weak, … Relying on India's own strength to deal with the current situation will very likely worsen this humanitarian disaster. … It is very necessary for the international society to cooperate with India to alleviate the epidemic situation. It is all parties' joint responsibility to promote such cooperation together. … Developed countries such as the US and the UK have dominated the international public opinion's focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and have shaped the Western world's moral view. *Western public opinion has not shown the same concern about India's epidemic situation as it did to that of Europe and the US*. Or maybe it is because India's population is too large, and they believe it is not realistic for the West to '*save India*.' … Their closeness to each other is *fragile and superficial*. *China and India feel more empathy for each other*. In terms of fundamental interests, including development and improvement of people's livelihood, the two countries should have been partners in the same camp. (Emphasis mine)

The excerpt raises certain rhetorical questions: After Covid 19 pandemic can we trust the idealistic conception of cosmopolitanism (whose abiding principle is equality to all nations) in favour of the dissolution of the Nation and talk about the redundancy of diasporic experience? What happened to the patronizing project of 'saving India' when India actually needed help? What is the purpose of international cooperation and treatise which are made during normal times? Rather than building up false alliances, alliances which help in no way in times of need, is not the time ripe for building up South-South solidarity in which there would be more empathy, more humanitarianism?

After the pandemic, the hybrid and liminal spaces are no longer considered empowering since the diasporic people were the most vulnerable victims of the Covid crisis. Nehring and Hu (2021) point out that the "long-term vulnerability and poor living conditions (e.g. crowded dwelling, economic deprivation) of certain migrant groups, coupled with a lack of structural support and intensifying adversities during the pandemic, has led to their high COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, particularly among low-skilled migrant workers and refugees on a global scale (Migration Data Portal, 2021)." Even in these times of utmost crisis the "hermeneutics of alterity" (Sherma 2011) continues. It is rightly said that "in a crisis, the concept of solidarity [which is] championed by European Union and the Globalists count for nothing. We are all nationalists now." (Farage 2020) The "post-national" age (Habermas 2001) demanded that we "need to think ourselves beyond the nation" (Appadurai, 1993, p. 411) But is the time ripe yet for such cosmopolitan imaginings? Cosmopolitanism can be effective when there is symmetry in international power-relationship. The truth that the world is still divided, in spite of all claims of a post-national and cosmopolitan world, between the Global South and the Global North, between the less powerful and more powerful ones, is betrayed by the difference in the effect Covid 19 had on Global South and Global North.

Vandekerckhove and Hooft (2010) theorize cosmopolitans as the ones who "refuse to see the national economic and military interests of their country as more important than global values such as human rights, global justice and the protection of the global environment, and they refuse to give their co-nationals any priority in their concerns or responsibilities at the expense of more distant others" (xvii); but what happens when a crisis hits the world? The "nation blaming narratives" continued throughout the pandemic and the prejudice against one another at the time of a crisis becomes evident from the fact that although China had tactfully controlled Coronavirus infections and had developed effective vaccines, there was a proliferation of hoax news across world, which was suspicious of China's vaccine components and it's

(China's) attempt to dominate the world population through it (Gonçalves 2021). She further notes that "[t]he situation of prejudice, exclusion and persecution of people who share features commonly read as Asian became acknowledged through the broad repercussion of physical attacks and the social media campaign '#IamNotaVirus', organized by victims all around the world aiming to raise awareness…" (2021) The pandemic made it clear that nation-state is still valid and will continue to be so, "the global coronavirus pandemic and state responses are not going to fundamentally alter this reality" (Bieber 2020) and "[t]he process of othering, the search for blame and the calls to protect our "own" are driving a dynamic whereby foreigners and migrants are being targeted in many states" as a result of which the "[m]igrants are facing hostility as potentially dangerous vectors of the virus and threats to the host society" (Woods et al 2020). At the time of a crisis, this "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) becomes the real community which will work for its people. It is for this reason Simon During (1990) says that whatever may be the case, the nation-state will remain the most effective and legitimate political institution in the world (139). The way colonial prejudices continue throughout the pandemic reveals the ongoing "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000) despite all claims to a cosmopolitan and just world.

COVID-19 has aggravated the fragility of the idea of cosmopolitanism which so interested the postcolonial Indian English novelists. The ideal which in no way serves in the time of need deserves rethinking. The racism against the poorer postcolonial nations during the COVID times shows that though decolonization may seem to be a thing of the past and though it may seem that nation-building is no more important so that we can aspire not for a solidarity among the people within the nation but for global integration and solidarity, it is the nation which will actually work for its people and the only institution people will look up to in the time of need. Therefore, the nation and national identity, which is perhaps the last resort and last weapon of the postcolonial nation to resist the global hegemony of power, *is* important. Though Habermas's words that "[i]n contrast to the

territorial form of the nation-state, 'globalization' conjures up images of flowing rivers, washing away all the frontier checkpoints and controls, and ultimately the bulwark of the nation itself" (Habermas 2001, 67) seems inspiring enough, Trivedi reminds us correctly that even if a new world order- a postnational world- emerges, it will be motivated basically by economic consideration rather than by political agendas, by "markets and profits rather than by any vision of universal harmony and egalitarianism" (2007, xxvi). Though Salman Rushdie's India is "quiet imaginary," nothing other than "a mythical land," a "mass fantasy", holding onto which will suppress "free intelligence" and create nothing other than a "ghetto mentality" (Rushdie 1991), although for Amitav Ghosh, "believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power" (86) is farcical and absurd, these seemingly progressive ideas are instances of "reconciliatory postcolonial thought" working towards a "rejection of resistance" (During 1998, 32) with the objective of establishing "a neutral, ideology-free zone from which the social dissension and political contest inscribed in the antagonistic pairing of colonizer/colonized has been expelled" (Parry 2004, 65). Postcolonial literature in general and postcolonial Indian English fiction in particular must deal constructively with social and political ills within the nation, in order to correct it without attempting to transcend the nation altogether, in the hope of global integration of people and nation which is perhaps not immediately possible, as the COVID pandemic has shown, given the asymmetry in power-relationship at the international level even after much fuss over cosmopolitanism and postnationalism.

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