

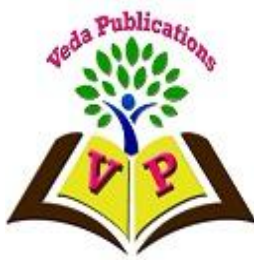
NARRATING THE NATION FROM GENDERED LOCATIONS

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ABSTRACT



The post-Independence, postcolonial narratives work out the constructs of the nation and analyze its text. The discourses or narratives written then and later address the issues of the 'new' nation-mapping of territorial spaces, the regrouping of communities, peoples, cultures, languages into a homogenous identity of being Indian and belonging to India. Within this text of national identity runs the sub-text of centrality and marginality. The schemes of the nation include or exclude people, communities from its centre space. In this article I will attempt to look at the issues of marginality as dealt within the gender narratives and also how these narratives construct the nation in the short stories. I will take up short stories written in English, Hindi as well as those written in regional languages and translated into English.

Keywords: *Gender Narratives, Indian Nation, Short Stories.*

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Gender narratives are different because it relates to a different kind of experience. Women have different contexts, different roles and positions in the national, social and familial frameworks. Hence their manner of relating to these contexts or communicating their experiences is different. From their constrained subject-positions, as Michel Foucault uses the term, how they address the question of the nation and relate it to their selves and their frameworks require an in-depth study.

I will problematize how women have created national spaces and centres through roles, how they have re-casted or re-written histories, contested spaces of domination from subaltern positions and also how the gender Diaspora consciousness relates to the nation from insider-outsider positions.

The nation, or the 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson terms it, is as much a historically sculpted entity as a geographically contested space or a culturally embedded idea.

It is an evolving process that is constantly defined and rewritten, an emotional entity that binds multiplicity of identities into a unified whole. Idea of a nation includes people, community, culture, language, traditions, religions and myths. It incorporates the ways in which people relate to their land, how they historicize their past to forge a common entity, and how their individual lives are written with the life of the nation.

The narrative of any nation constructs the identity of its people, the identity of the self. It is also a discourse on spaces that create specific locations for communities, classes or genders. These locations in turn determine the availability of frames and define the questions of power. Those outside the frames are the decentralized, inarticulate and invisible margins while those at the centres are the selves that others the other. The other then are the alternate spaces, the silent voices, the subverted subjects.

The narrative of the Indian nation after its independence had to be rewritten with new perspectives. The postcolonial experience and the trauma of the Partition necessitated that new positions be taken other than that of the freedom struggle. It became necessary to come to an understanding of the Indian identity, and to define the new nation not merely in terms of geographical boundaries or historical contexts of tradition and roots but also to account for new political, social and gender power structures. This understanding of the Indian identity as it emerges in the discourse of women calls for re-formulations of selves and renegotiations of centres and margins.

As we turn to the writings of women in the 1940s and 1950s, we find that they are freed from the romanticized and westernized perceptions of an Indian woman's identity that colour the visions of Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu. Toru Dutt constructs the identity of the Indian woman in terms of a Victorian ideal of a morally chaste, sexually pure, sanitized and self-effacing figure of the past, thus glorifying those aspects of the Indian past that calls for subordination to regimes and systems. Sarojini Naidu on the other hand, appears to be seemingly different but hers is an exotic and romanticized picture of Indian culture and the nation. Thus both of them operate within the frameworks of the colonial perceptions of women and the nation. Though the contexts appeared to be altered after independence, did their positions improve?

As subjects of the independent India placed on an equal political status with men, the women seemed to have power, but nothing in reality had changed. They were still placed in patriarchal family structures, hidden behind veils or placed in the inner courtyards where visibility was minimal. They were still in economically destabilized conditions and, as writers writing from complexly constituted positions. The power structures within the family and outside largely remained the same. Their marginality and exclusion from canons placed them in subordinate positions and they had to contest for spaces of visibility. Consequently their visions of the nation and* their narrative discourses are very different from a man's.

A man's text uses rational discourse, rhetoric or logic to construct the nation but a woman's narrative relies on her experiences, her traditions to do the same, hence it works through words, memories, relationships. She uses folk traditions, stories, myths to relate her

vision, and her text always has a subtext. Julia Kristeva, in her essay 'Woman's Time' points out that the nation as a cultural construct and a symbolic signpost erases the rationalist logics of the patriarchal* 'canonical nation.' Woman's writings are directly or indirectly addressed to come to an understanding of the issues of empowerment and to realize the tropes of her world.

In the short stories written by women we shall see how the narrative of the nation is worked out. The configuration of the nation in maternal terms is a common cultural symbol that figures in the narrative of every nation or works as an imaginative artifact. 'Mother India' too became 'the vocabulary of the nation,' as Anderson says, a cultural metaphor popularized in fiction as well as in the Hindi film by that name to sculpt a loving, generous, self-effacing figure. The same image construct had been deployed in the freedom struggle to gear women's active participation and glorify the cause of the movement. In the nineteenth-century Bengali literature, the female principle represents indomitable power, the concept of Shakti, easily associated with the maternal figure of Goddess Kali. And the same construct continued to work in the national imagination after independence in the re-construction of the nation.

The women writers used this configuration to negotiate and demarcate alternate spaces and centres. In many stories, this figure is validated and valorized and occupies a centre. In Shivani's story 'Dadi' [Grandmother] the maternal figure of the grandmother is emblematic of a national figure that endorses the age old customs and traditions. However, she has a more humanitarian and secular perspective than her daughter-in-law who is a pale copy of westernized modernity. The story also builds up the polarities of visions that seemed to confuse a nation that had western models of progress pitted against the traditions of the historical past.

In Mahasweta Devi's story 'Stanadayin' [breast-giver], the maternal figure becomes a critique of the nation construct. Jashoda, the lactating, bounteous woman who becomes a wet-nurse in the Haldar household to support her impoverished family, is a metaphor for the exploited nation. The author wrote the story as a parable of the nation, impoverished of its resources by its own people and then left to die a slow and painful death.

There are continuous references to the female body as object of the male gaze, as a means of procreativity, not as a biological given but as a social means of codifying and foregrounding. Jashoda is seen exclusively in terms of her body, in sexual, pro-creative roles and later in maternal contexts. She is 'visible' in ways that denominate her as a body and within the social construct as a mother like her mythical counterpart who had mothered Lord Krishna. She is valorized and empowered in the frames that give her a role. Her text when extended becomes the national text when the feminine principle, the motherland is subsumed by a patriarchal culture. The maternal figure here becomes a subverted figure, seen more in terms of function and utility in a system and not as an individual, but visible only as a body.

The centrality available to these women as maternal figures is also a variant and shifts from positions of centre space to the margins.

Mahasweta Devi's stories show how the 4eJite culture of nationalism' excludes the subaltern. In one of the stories, 'Draupadi'. the heroine Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen bears a semblance to her mythical counterpart in more than the name that she shares with her. Both become territories the enemy has conquered, the prize he has won and the female body that he has to dishonour. The mythical Draupadi cannot be disrobed, after she is dragged into the court to be dishonoured. Lord Krishna saves her. Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal, a tribal and part of the insurgency group that the state forces have to subdue, is captured and raped repeatedly. The attempts to 'make her' or subjugate her fail. Her violators can only mutilate her body but cannot subdue her spirit or make her give way to tortures. When she refuses to clothe her body the subsequent morning, her captors and violators do not know how to confront an 'unarmed target*' that attacks them with its naked, mutilated body. They are afraid of her, scared of her nakedness.

The encounters between the centres and the margins in Mahasweta Devi's stories are always tentative, awesome 'for the empowered and privileged forces. In another story 'Shishu,' the hero, the symbol of the condescending privileged forces of the mainstream culture is horrified when he sees the undernourished, punitive beings who seem to mock his healthy, normal body and his privileged position.

History, whether of a nation or a community, as written from male-centred positions, has always been HIS STORY and not HER STORY and it has always been a process of closures. Historical spaces are not allotted to women and they have been denied a voice, and visibility. Male versions of history conceal rather than say the whole truth. Feminists, therefore, challenge such constructions of the past and insist on writing the woman's story to incorporate it in the national narrative. Thus the past is in a process of review and revision. The woman's story is relocated and included in chronicles from which it was excluded earlier and this process of retrieving the past necessitates that the cultural narratives be rewritten and translated to newer realities.

Many short stories like K.B. Sreedevi's 'Stone Woman' [Malayalam]. Shashi Deshpande's 'Hear me Sanjay' [English] or Vaidehi's 'An Afternoon with Shakuntala' [Kannada] are attempts to re-construct and re-write myths, and cultural histories. The mythical characters in these stories are trying to break traditions of silence and asserting the need to be heard and legitimizing their right to chronicle their lives,

Shashi Deshpande's 'Hear me Sanjay/ a monologue by Kunti, the mother of Pandavas, also carries the subtexts of Gandhari and Draupadi. It is the unwritten narrative of all those lives that were invisible or partially seen or heard. The title of the story is an imperative to Sanjay, the male listener/ reader who is probably unwilling to listen to a woman's story. As she recounts her past and analyzes her multiple roles as a mother, mother-in-law, daughter and a wife, the guilt embedded in her as a woman, as a mother, as a mother-in-law finds articulation. Conventions forced her to abandon her child born out of wedlock, an act that places her in a guilty framework. Again as a mother-in-law, she is guilty for compelling her daughter-in-law to accept the five brothers as her husbands. The title of the story is also a plea of a guilty woman who is begging to be heard.

Vaidehi's Shakuntala in the story 'An Afternoon with Shakuntala' re-writes her story, thus questioning the male version written by Kalidasa. This points to male realities that are made to superimpose upon the woman's reality, which anyway is never written or articulated. Kalidasa's version is the canon and the accepted truth. He wrote of the love between King Dushyanta and Shakuntala but does not write of the king's numerous relationships with various women. Later in the court, when he refuses to recognize or recall Shakuntala, it is ascribed to a curse by Durvasa, the ascetic who had visited the love-lorn Shakuntala in her ashram and had cursed her. This has been the male text. Even memory and oblivion are justified from a patriarchal perspective. However Shakuntala's story varies and she asserts that she had chosen not to produce the ring, the token the king had left with her. She was convinced that the king had known many women like her and left them to suffer and pine for him. So, rather than beg love from one who had erased her from his life and memory, she chooses to go away. She chooses dignity to abject pleading, oblivion to forced recall. The life she leads now, one of loneliness and isolation, is a life that she has chosen. Her singleness is her choice and not a socially imposed male exile. She is proud of her choice. The story affirms her right to deconstruct patriarchal versions of untruths and tell her story from her perspective.

The Indian Diaspora is a part of India's cultural space and its links to the mother country, however tenuous, bind it to the nation even if they are on the periphery. They are more than cultural ambassadors, rather they are a part of the nation which probably is more rooted in their imagination to such an extent that they can never be distanced from their mother country. India is part of their memories, their realities, and their vocabulary.

The diasporic imagination, bonded to its roots by cultural memories and nostalgic longings, perceives its mother country as "imaginary homelands". It transports and recreates cultural artifacts or residues to construct microcosms of its homeland abroad. The Diaspora writings construct India in terms of the "other space" or the "third space," as Homi Bhabha terms it, a fluid space that allows the Diaspora to "ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew." These narratives then work out the problematic of movements between the country of origins to the adopted land in terms of cultural shocks, strong ethnic bonds or stereotyped perceptions and deconstruction of identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of stories. *The Interpreter of Maladies* includes stories that work out the negotiation of identities and perspectives and movements from one space to another that pose such problems. Cultural displacement involves loss of support systems, family ties which creates its own problems as it does for Mrs. Das in the title story. She is on a visit to India with her husband and children. As a second generation American, their link with India is not a very strong one and is most likely to snap after the death of the parents whom they have to visit once in a while. When Mrs. Das [for she has no other identity than that of a wife and a mother] meets Kapasi, the taxi driver, who works as an interpreter with a doctor interpreting the problems of the patients from a different linguistic background, she feels that he can rid her of her terrible guilt that she has suffered for eight years. After

marriage, she settles into the domestic roles of a wife and a mother obliterating everything else and everyone else. Soon she becomes bored, dissatisfied, plump and she has no support systems to help her. She is alienated from her parents and too distanced from them to seek them. Her space shrinks to the house and there are no movements outside or efforts to relate to the outside. In this state of boredom comes a young man, a friend of her husband who seduces her and the second son is his. She lives with that guilt and when she meets one who she thinks can be a comforter⁹ she is disillusioned once again. She probably is like one of the westerners who come to India seeking answers to their questions, coming with a pre-disposed cultural construct. But Mr. Kapasi is no spiritual guru, he is only a translator and India too has no definite answers to give her.

Women writers, writing from different subject-positions have sculpted the nation in their narratives[^] analyzing the nation-constructs as they do so. Their writings re-arrange spaces, centres and the historical and mythical pasts.

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