

National Consciousness and Critical Cartography in the Works of  
Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, and Michelle Cliff

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Abstract

That the nation has rapidly been rendered outmoded by the sweeping tide of globalizing processes of commodity exchange and migratory flow has been proclaimed by a varying range of political and ideological camps. As a political and cultural category that binds people together and endow them with a strong sense of solidarity and comradeship, the nation has undoubtedly been an essential unit of collectivity through which freedom and well-being of the population are continuously sought and realized. However, for the past three decades, a number of scholars in the social sciences and humanities have argued for the dismissal of the nation both as an analytical framework and a political force, focusing instead on the fluid nature of cultural practices which allegedly deviate from a homogenizing and totalizing tendency of nationalism. Such discourses of postnationalism often share the assumption that cultural practices can never be entirely contained within the territorial and symbolic borders of the nation and that diasporic networks and transnational migratory flows are replacing the rigidity of territorial nationalism. This dissertation challenges such line of argument by demonstrating how postcolonial writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century maintain acute sensitivity to the issue of nationalism and their works evince alternative types of national consciousness that allow us to recognize the nation not as a

fixed entity but as a contested sphere in which people's senses of identity are developed and cultivated in the face of uneven globalization. My investigation into contemporary postcolonial literature places particular focus on the ways in which each literary work overtly and covertly revives liberatory ideals of decolonizing nationalism emerging in the mid-twentieth century. In addition, this dissertation pays close attention to writers' keen awareness of and critical engagement with geographical unevenness that originates in imperial domination and persists in capitalist globalization.

In Introduction, I build a theoretical framework in order to map the problematics concerning national consciousness in light of uneven development. Although current discourses of postnationalism often postulate that cultural flows refuse to be contained within national borders, it was in the concept of culture that decolonizing nationalism found expression of their aspiration to unify and liberate the colonized population. Extending Frantz Fanon's insight into the peripheral generation of national consciousness to a global milieu, I analyze how national consciousness performatively arises in writers' efforts to make sense of and grapple with their marginal experiences in uneven globalization. While the portrayal of national consciousness as one performed on a global arena might seem to endorse postnationalists' rhetoric about transnationalization of nationalism, I differentiate my argument from culturalism by remaining attentive to the ways in which material forces both curtail access to the liberatory potential of culture and give rise to the marginalization of particular areas. It is with a keen recognition of and in response to such marginalization that writers commit themselves to critical cartography and aspire to evoke, re-conceive, and reconstitute national consciousness. By inserting

geographical unevenness as a material condition for national consciousness, I seek to suggest that performativity inherent in the narrative of the nation must be reconsidered in conjunction with the city-country divide that has expanded to an international scale. Decolonizing nationalism's liberatory ideals that call for organicist alliances across the diverse population provides me with conceptual frames and interpretive schemes to unravel how each work commits themselves to (re)imagining national collectivities.

Chapter 1 "Narrative Strategies to Represent the Nation in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*" takes up Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, whose portrayal of the Indian national collectivity has attracted critical attention by a number of commentators. Saleem, the narrator-protagonist of the novel, aspires towards the idealist unification of the miscellaneous children scattered across the country, whose sole denominator is nothing but a temporal coincidence of their births. In their conversations through Saleem's special ability of telepathy, however, he is overwhelmed by the vastness and heterogeneity of their ideological orientations. A sharp opposition appears between Saleem and Shiva, which develops into that between idealism and materialism. Instead of making a compromise, the story complicates their relationship by presenting the affiliative connection between them and inverts the ideological dualism. The novel's postmodernist narrative structure characterized by self-reflexivity suggests that the oscillatory process between them endures beyond the temporal frame of the story, thereby evoking a sense of eternity of the Indian nation.

In Chapter 2 "Magic Realism and Hybridity in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*," I turn to Rushdie's most polemical work, *The Satanic Verses*, in order to explore

how national imagination undergoes transformation in the contemporary migratory movement. In so doing, I examine the two literary characteristics that have been accepted as appropriate in political tactics of postcolonial literature: magic realism and hybridity. The two methods, or styles, have been praised as particularly effective in postcolonial writing as they overtly and covertly undermine the assumptions of Western, rational mode of narrative and recuperate the pre-colonial culture and worldviews. My reading, however, suggests that these purportedly subversive tactics must be considered in light of how they contribute to the generation of a sense of communal attachment.

Chapter 3 “Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*” focuses on the peripheral realm in a rather literal sense, analyzing Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, whose main plot unfolds in Kalimpong, a mountainous district in the Indian state of West Bengal. Developed as a “hill station” in the era of colonialism, the area is presently in turmoil amid the Gurkha insurrectionary movement that seeks to attain political autonomy. I read the novel with particular attention to the ways in which the local scenery is perceived variously by characters in different social strata. The geography presented by the novel denaturalizes the predominant, colonialist notion of the Himalayas as an innocent place of retreat and recovery. In this process, Gurkha nationalism is revealed to be predicated on the colonialist notion of masculinity. Nevertheless, the novel ends with a suggestion that Gurkha nationalism remains an unresolvable dilemma.

Drawing on Edward Said’s insight into what he calls the “cartographical impulse” discernible widely in anti-colonial imaginations, Chapter 4 ““Ruin

Landscape' in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*" reads Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* with particular attention to the ways in which the protagonist, Clare Savage, acquires a critical perspective on plantation colonialism and the tourism industry through the development of geographical imagination. Inspired by the message left by her dead mother, she attempts to approach the underprivileged masses in Jamaica. She aspires to conceive the native land as distinct from the tourism's version by means of synthesizing the antagonism between human projections onto the natural environment and nature's unique vitality that endures beyond the protagonist's finite life.

In Conclusion, I make a brief reference to recent theories of world literature to observe how a range of issues surrounding nation and nationalism tend to be downplayed in these theories, which mainly address diffusion and circulation of literary works. What is missing from the current theories of world literature is the dimension of the transformative potential of literature to express progressive aspiration, an element that often crystalizes into national consciousness. The works discussed in the dissertation can be aligned with the ideals of decolonizing nationalism in their aspiration to break out of the status quo.