Nation and nationalism: The Ideological Aspects

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Abstract: The word 'nation' carries varying meanings, and the connotation of the term has changed over time. Etymologically, the word came from English to the Old French word nation, which in turn originates from the Latin Word nation literally meaning "that which has been born." Ernest Renan, the French Orientalist, in his lecture entitled "What is a Nation?" clarifies that the idea of the nation is a recent phenomenon. According to him: Nation...are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations...Classical antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term. Thus, he tries to trace the origins of the emergence of the nation-state, in the disintegration of the classic and medieval empires. He calls them profoundly unstable formations, always at the threshold of collapsing back into subdivisions of clan, tribe, language or religious group. He opines that one should not give undue importance to ethnography, that is, identification on the basis of race or language. Renan even dismisses religion to be an "adequate basis" for the constitution of a modern nationality for he argues that state religion has ceased to exist in the modern times. Unlike the olden times, one is free to be either a French or English or German, or practice Catholicism or Protestantism or no religion at all. Rather, it has now transformed itself into an allegiance to the "cult of the flag." Mutual interests may suffice to bring about trade agreements but not the formation of a nation, because nationality has a sentimental value: "it is both soul and body at once". Further, geographical elements like rivers and mountains or even military necessity may play a considerable role in dividing land masses into nations, but it cannot be the norm for natural frontiers.

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Thus, negating the influence of race, language material interests, religious affinities, geography and military necessity on the formation of a nation, Renan establishes the nation as a "spiritual principle", the outcome of the profound complications of history" Early theorists like Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson were of the opinion that nations are not "natural entities". In fact Anderson having made a detailed study of South East Asia, has gone so far as to call the nation "an imagined political community" which is both "inherently limited and sovereign" (5-6). The idea may be imagined", thus having an unstable foundation, yet it "makes it possible for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imagining". This extreme emotional response to the idea of the nation is termed as Nationalism in current parlance. It, therefore, becomes one of the strongest weapons with which colonial societies have offered resistance to the imperial control. It has enabled post-colonial societies to "invent a self-image" through which such societies could liberate themselves from imperial control and domination. Out of anti-imperialist struggles, nations were born. The 'nation itself is a ground for dispute and debate and "a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests". Hugh Seton-Watson concluded from his exhaustive study of nations and states that "there is no 'scientific' means of establishing what all nations have in common". According to Timothy Brennan, the "nation is a 'discursive formation' - not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure which 'Third World is consciously building or suffering the lack of'". It appears that when political ideology masks the idea of nation, it perpetuates nationalism. It follows that nationalism requires the structure of a modern society to exist. This modern society is nothing but the 'nation-state' - one in which all the instruments of state power, such as, military, judiciary, religious institutions, educational systems and even political organizations are inclusive of expressing a unified national history and culture. Anderson calls the nation-state, the final form of the nation. In fact, the collapsing of the idea of the nation with the nation-state makes nationalism one of the most potent forces in contemporary society. The discourse of nation, nationalism and its derivatives has become inseparable from literature. However, the literature produced as part of a Cultural nationalist project is a literature produced "in opposition to the narratives and representations which deny dignity and autonomy to those who have been colonized". Innes further says that this opposition is addressed to the colonizing power as well as to the people of the emerging nation, engaging them in their own "self-definition" (Innes 120). In order to define one's self, one needs a language, a medium. Since the colonial process itself begins in language, it remains a fundamental site of debate and struggle for the nationalist writers. Ngugi wa Thiong'O, the African writer, feels that "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (267). From the point of view of literary theory, nationalism has garnered surprising interest supposedly because its rise in equally extensive in time, range and sense with the most dominant modern literary form, that is, the novel. Though, Anderson opines that it was the "coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism" (40) that made it possible to "think" the nation (28), it was especially the novel "as a composite but clearly bordered work of art" that was most crucial in "defining the nation as an 'imagined community" (Brennan 129). To get a comprehensive idea of any particular period of time, it is necessary to take into account religious, warfare, expansion of trade and other cultural and economic activities. These, in short, comprise the life of a nation and the issue of narrating the life of the nation can be linked with its people, their lives, beliefs, and inter-communal relations. Renan strengthens the idea by saying that: A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle; two things constitute the soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memory...the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate, the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form.." (19)
According to Benedict Anderson, nation, nationality and nationalism all have proved to be strangely difficult to define, let alone to analyze. He asserts that nationality as well as nation-ness and nationalism are “cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (intro4) and the mystery exists in how they have succeeded in arousing such “deep attachments” (Intro 4) in the masses. Nationalism is formally defined as “a collective sentiment or identity, bounding and binding together those individuals who share a sense of large-scale political solidarity aimed at creating legitimating, or challenging states.” (Marx 6) Thus, it is linked to the idea of a common political destiny. One cannot refrain from citing Anderson's famous definition of the nation which he confessed as proposing in an "anthropological spirit. He proceeds to explain that it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never see, hear or meet their fellow-members but they are aware of them as belonging to the same nation. However, he clarifies that imagination does not mean fabrication or 'falsity' as offered by Gellner, but imagining and 'creation'. Further, he considers the nation as limited because of its finite boundaries, and it is sovereign because the concept of nationalism originated at a time when Enlightenment and Revolution were “destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchial dynastic realm” and each geographical stretch of territory desired and struggled to be free. In fact, the "gage and emblem of this freedom" was the “sovereign state” (Anderson 7). Finally, it is considered as a community because even though there may be in actuality, the presence of inequality or exploitation amongst its members, the nation itself is "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradship", so that millions of people are ready to give up their lives for such imagined entities. Thus, nationalism succeeded in surpassing other large cultural system like the religious community and the dynastic realm. Even though Tom Nairn calls nationalism as "the pathology of modern development history" (Anderson 5), nation-states are still conceived to be 'new' as well as 'historical'. However, the nations to which they give political expression always "loom out of an immemorial past and "glide into a limitless future" (Anderson 11-12). But Hugh Seton Watson observes, Thus, I am driven to the conclusion that no "scientific definition" of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists.” (original emphasis Anderson Intro 3) Partha Chatterjee raises objections to Anderson's demonstrating the nation as an imagined community whose modular form has been lent to the Third World by the historical experience of nationalism in the west. Chatterjee believes that anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within the colonial society even before the political struggle with the imperial power begins in earnest. It is effectively done by dividing the "world of social institutions and practices into two domains the material and the spiritual." (6) The material is the domain of the "outside", pertaining to economy, statecraft, science and technology (Bhabha 46) where the west's superiority is acknowledged and even meant to be imitated or replicated. The spiritual was the "inner" domain which bore the essence of one's cultural identity and had to be preserved and protected from the onslaught of the colonial culture. This inner or spiritual domain is modified by nationalism to "fashion a modern national culture” that is indigenous. Historians often miss the circumstances that influence the morals and manners of people, the transition of communities and silent revolutions. The literary writers, on the other hand, try to find out such gaps in history. Hayden White feels that the facts and events with which fictional writers concern themselves is a "mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality” (105). Writers incorporating social, cultural, political events into the fictional frame of their novels can help build up the idea of the nation, founded on shared values and assumptions, since all literary creations are inherently ideological. As nationalist stirrings gained momentum in India, novels began to reveal a new pattern of awareness and relationship of the individual with the specifics of the milieu. The national struggle for independence impinged upon the imagination of the writers and the novel provided the "technical means of 're-presenting the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (original emphasis; Anderson 25). The social, political and ideological ferment caused by the Gandhian movement influenced the Indian political scenario. Thus, Indian nationalism is a diverse blend of nationalistic sentiments as its people are ethnically and religiously diverse. The growth of Indian nationalism started in the nineteenth century. Political unification of India, fall of India's old social and economic system, the beginning of modern trade and industry and the rise of new social classes laid the basis of nationalism. The social and religious reform movements and popular anti-British revolts contributed to the growth of nationalism. Indian nationalism strongly continues to influence the politics of India a remains an ideological construct that has often caused ethnic and religious conflicts in Indian society.

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