

# Reconstructing the Nation: Image of the Nation in the Fiction of Muslim Writers

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## I

The present essay is not aimed at resolving all the issues associated with the problematic of the reconstruction of the image of the nation in fiction. At the most, it addresses some of the points related to the politics of writing and reception. It is an endeavour to assess the reconstruction of the nation by some of the well-known Muslim writers who narrativise various aspects and experiences of their community in their novels. Two such novels have been chosen for analysis here. The purpose behind this exercise is to feel the 'genuine' voice of the writers who are 'insiders' in the Muslim community. By writing narratives, they are also writing the nation. This is precisely the point where the strategies of reconstructing the nation through narrative come in. Learning about the 'making' of the nation in the selected works is likely to suggest some of the ways in which the nation is perceived and reconstructed in several different ways in fiction.

It is worthwhile to record at the outset that the present kind of an endeavour runs the risk of falling headlong into the mire of sentimentality of "Hindu Muslim bhai bhai." It is, however, far from my mind to add to the available 'tracts' on the Hindu-Muslim question or its variant rhetoric. The essay is precisely about the de-differentiation of a mass of humanity as the majority (Hindu) and the minority (Muslim) community. Muslims, in spite of their socio-culturally vibrant presence and their contribution to our composite culture, are treated by some as the 'other' of Hindus. But if India still survives as a nation amidst the chaotic global trends, it is only because of its people irrespective of their particular communities.

The second part of the essay deals in brief with the problematic of the concept of the nation and its representation through narration substantiating the critical positions with the analysis of the two novels, namely *Topi Shukla* by Rahi Masoom Raza and *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadaria* by Abdul Bismillah. A few more novels have been referred to in passing.

Here are my two basic premises. The issue of narrating the nation is invariably linked with its people, their beliefs, their inter-community and intra-community relationships, and their culture and politics. The text, like its reader as well as its writer, is tied to its circumstances and contexts. Secondly, I proceed by assuming that literature often functions as a signifier

of national identity; it recreates the nation it belongs to. This is a troublesome idea, no doubt, since the image of a nation exists only in the mind's eye. However, this dialectical relationship is an important source of the production of fiction. The concept behind the nation is not just a matter of geographical territory or political maps. A collectivity finally emerges as a 'nation' only when it is textualised. Some post-structuralists and post-colonialist thinkers debunk the concept of the nation because they regard it as excessively romantic, as something that impedes understanding and promotes chauvinistic attitudes. However, the nationalistic discourse as well as the concept of the nation has a major constructive role in the third world societies. Accordingly, there is nothing wrong if literature helps reconstruct the image of a nation. It needs to be added though that such 'nation making' is not a homogenising exercise denying space for pluralism, multiculturalism, or ethnic differences. We in the third world are more in need of such construction of the nation rather than its deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while no monolithic structure of meaning or ideology dominates the two chosen texts, the nation nevertheless remains their central concern.

For my hermeneutic purposes, I have relied upon Ernest Renan's celebrated concept of a nation.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. . . . To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present, to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions for being a people.<sup>2</sup>

This is especially helpful to us, for we like to believe that the nation is a spiritual principle, a shared legacy, a common heritage.

Again, there is need to recognise the affiliation between narration and nation. With whatever motive a novelist may tell his or her story, the task of telling invariably involves the context which provides the narrative with a subject or a centre. Consciously or unconsciously each story contributes to the making of the image of the nation. A nation, in this sense, is the collective socio-politico-cultural aspirations of a community. Frederic Jameson aptly equates the individual experience in fiction with a national allegory, "where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself."<sup>3</sup> It is in this sense that these texts use narrative as a vehicle to transport what Edward Said has called "an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness placed against the unitary web of vision embedded in dominant discourse."<sup>4</sup> It will be shown how the two novelists

narrativise the nation as a sort of protest against the dominant discursive practices of the day.

Finally, a word about the narrative. Narratives exist in society at all levels, in countless texts. Narratives are about people and about actions which are the basis of their social meaning. Etymologically the word narrative comes from the Latin 'narrare' – to tell a story – which in turn perhaps derives from 'gnarus', knowledgeable about. Thus the concept of "narrative retains this potent link between knowing and telling which is central to its ideological effectiveness, since it seems to guarantee a transparent form of telling in which the form of speech closely matches its object."<sup>5</sup> This object, i.e. the nation, is constructed by representing the concrete world of actions and processes that involve people. The sediment of the narrative is the nation; it serves as a bedrock that holds the whole burden of meaning together or aloft and as such can be said to be its ultimate context.

## II

Abdul Bismillah's much acclaimed novel, *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadaria*, overtly deals with the miserable plight of the Muslim handloom silk weavers of Benaras and highlights their ghetto existence, their exploitation at the hands of the privileged members of their own community, their slow but sure awakening, their protest against as well as their collaboration with their exploiters, and the larger socio-cultural dynamics which keeps the community backward or retrograde. The narrative revolves round Matin, a poor weaver with aspirations of a utopia, his wife Alimun, his son Iqbal, and his fellow weavers who have to put up with heartless injustice and exploitation. The novel also includes certain privileged members of the weaving Ansari community. Bismillah's forte lies in the creation of disarmingly realistic images of this community. However, at a macro level, the narrative is an attempt to offer a larger image of the nation. The social diseases that afflict the weaver community in Benaras are not atypical of the national malaise that the post-colonial India is beset with. The beginning of the novel takes the reader to the interior of Matin's household where poverty of the nation lies scattered. The community of weavers has its own specific existence which separates it from the other Indian communities.

There is a community of the world. There is a community of India. There is a community of Hindus. There is a community of Muslims. There is also a community of the weavers of Benaras. This community is in many ways different from other communities in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly enough, the narrative exposes both the intra-community and inter-community relationships such as the perpetual exploitation of the daily wage weavers by the gaddidars and kothidars, the abuse of religion and

of the education system to keep the weavers in a state of permanent subjugation and dependence. Matin's father had a loom but no money to buy raw silk, and his mother died of tuberculosis. Now, Matin suffers from acute deprivation like his father, and his wife Alimun has T.B. This vicious circle is replicated in almost all the families of the poor weavers. But there are economic disparities also within the same community. Some of the weavers become wholesale dealers, i.e. gaddidars and kothidars, and control the whole economy; they have "considerable influence upon the social, cultural, economic and political life of the weaving community."<sup>7</sup> Bismillah hits out at the anti-national strain amongst the lower orders of the Muslim community – an issue that generates tremendous communal tension in India. He ridicules the weavers who are toddy-addicts and remain "busy discussing Almighty God, praising Pakistan and calling names to India . . ." (JJBC, 13). Even the young boys of the community are not free from this sort of identification with Pakistan: "Ever since Pakistan defeated India [in cricket], each boy of this community dreams of becoming an Imran [Khan] some day" (JJBC, 32). This identification, along with its causes and consequences, has also been taken up by Rahi Masoom Raza in *Topi Shukla* and *Adha Gaon* and by Manzoor Ehtesham in *Sukha Bargad*. Bismillah is more interested in describing the mechanism of economic exploitation of the poor weavers which lies at the root of all their problems. Matin tries unsuccessfully to form a cooperative society of the handloom weavers but he is frustrated because of the big influence that the kothidars of his own community like Haji Amirulla wield through their money power. Matin's anger is the anger of the common Indian who is forced to remain a silent spectator of his own exploitation amidst tall official claims of progress and democracy.

Bismillah juxtaposes the sordid plight of ordinary Indian weavers with the official, high-sounding claims about them – an advertisement issued by Indian Handloom Technology states that "it is because of the skill of the handloom weavers, their deep study of colours, designs and technological excellence that India has impressed the whole world for the last three thousand years" (JJBC, 23). He also captures the mood of the protagonist who is acutely aware of this iniquitous system.

And what has India given to an ordinary weaver? When Matin, trying to understand with his small intelligence the high-sounding language of the advertisement, asked himself such questions, he could only see those people who did not know whether or not their hearths had been lit at their homes but were anxious about the burning of an imaginary building in America. (JJBC, 23)

Abdul Bismillah also harnesses the narrative to castigate the reactionary trends prevalent in the Muslim community such as the decadent *madarasa* education system. Matin, for all his poverty, does not want his son Iqbal to be

a Maulavi or even a weaver like himself. However, Latif, a fellow weaver, desperately wants his son Sharif to obtain religious education and adopt his, Latif's, profession at an early stage. The novelist does not spare the malfunctioning of the *madarasas* which have become the hotbeds of petty politics, nepotism and favouritism (JJBC, pp. 33-4). Mashirul Haq, an eminent scholar of Islamic studies, aptly comments on the *madarasa* system in India:

Today the situation is that madrasah students are . . . supposedly prepared and trained for spreading the 'divine message' in a modern and cosmopolitan society without equipping them with the modern tools of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

The fact is that the poor weavers do not have the necessary resources to educate their children in secular institutions, whereas the affluent sections of the community would not allow them to enter such institutions because of fear of modernity and what it might do to the children. Bismillah demonstrates this pattern by showing the reluctance on the part of the members of Haji Amirulla's family to get their children higher education. In the second, "Bana" section of the novel, the writer uses excerpts from several newspaper reports to bring out the negative impact of powerlooms on the poor handloom weavers. Even though these progressive facilities are supposed to be in the interest of the poor weavers, the fact is that the big sharks swallow them entirely. In the novel, Haji Amirullah, Haji Minister and Habibullah all get powerlooms installed in their homes. In contrast, Bashir Mian laments the non-availability of a government loan to the poor weavers, which drives them into the trap of wholesale dealers. Besides using intertextuality through newspaper excerpts, Bismillah invests the narrative with self-reflexivity. In a scene, he enters the narrative and contacts Haji Amirulla for information on the condition of the weavers. He tells him that he needs this information for writing his novel. Haji Amirulla dismisses all his 'allegations' about their exploitation by the kothidars, and calls novelists "proud and conceited," "dishonest" creatures enjoying a problem-free existence (JJBC, 140). The novelist gets "squashed into silence."

The subject of this self-referential encounter again proves that the weavers are an oppressed class that is forced to sell its labour at a cheap rate, thus contributing to the profit of the kothidars or master weavers. The poor operatives are not able to rise economically upward for want of financial support necessary to launch their own independent enterprise. The richer class, therefore, continues to get richer while the poor class keeps on living in the mire of destitution. Bismillah similarly exposes the way in which communal riots are engineered by the so-called political leaders of the Hindu and Muslim communities. In a communal riot, "the devil in man comes out" (JJBC, 162). Altafurrhman and Sharafuddin both provide help to the riot victims for their own vested interests – they are going to contest

the elections. A riot helps them enhance their prestige. Iqbal sees through the real purpose behind a *mushaira* organised for promoting communal harmony after a riot; the purpose is to win votes: "He could not understand what these *ghazals* and *nazms* had to do with the Hindu-Muslim unity? What could such *mushairas* do to change the life here?" (JJBC, 171).

In the latter part of the novel Iqbal voices the weavers' protest against exploitation and injustice. He makes an impassioned appeal to his fellow weavers to uproot this corrupt, diseased and decadent system that perpetuates their oppression generation after generation. He exposes it by asking the audience: "Answer my question. Can your women wear the Benarasi sari that you prepare out of your blood and sweat, your hard work and skill? Tell me how many of you have Benarasi saris" (JJBC, 184). With Iqbal the first rumblings of "modernisation"<sup>9</sup> are heard. He represents a new generation that believes in action and is non-conformist. When his mother Alimun dies he refuses to follow the ritualistic reading of the *Quran* disclaiming it as a mere contrived show: "The person who was to die is dead. Nothing will happen to her even if one reads not one but ten *Qurans* for her. The whole farce has been created by the authorities. It is a means of extracting profit. We do not pay heed to what we ought to do. Instead, we remain busy in futile activities of all sorts" (JJBC, 192). Iqbal becomes a metaphor for the revolutionary proletariat.

Towards the end of the novel, the hope of reforming the community and rebuilding the nation becomes stronger. Apart from the bitter conflict between labour and capital, the entire narrative is replete with references to the various Hindu and Muslim festivals that infuse a new breath of life in the dry routine of the weavers. Bismillah, with his characteristic use of the dialect, evokes the festive mood in all its variegated forms and colours. The Id, the Moharram, the Bakr-Id, the annual fairs to welcome the seasons, Durga Puja, Dussehra, Holi, etc. – all have been described with a touch of panache. Of the folk songs, too, here is God's plenty. Thus Bismillah reconstructs the image of the nation which, though certainly rotten and decadent, is not at all dead. The micro-nation of the Benaras weavers immediately reminds us of the predicament of the workers at the macro level. The Ansari community of Benaras is at once a typical as well as a specific Indian community battling for its survival and for "functionings" both elementary and complex.<sup>10</sup>

A provocatively experimental novel, Rahi Massom Raza's *Topi Shukla* is not so much about the Hindu-Muslim unity as about India and Indianness. It is a strong plea for de-differentiation of humanity. A person is not a Hindu, a Muslim, a Sikh, or a Christian by birth; he is only a human being. The novel also addresses the problem in the much-hailed discourse of secularism and in the context of using religion for political ends. Topi Shukla, the protagonist, staunchly believes in Indianness rejecting the parochial and casteist-communal considerations. A born non-conformist, he exposes the hypocrisies of both communities by anchoring himself to a Muslim family.

He commits suicide but his death is a reminder of the ground realities on which the hollow edifice of Hindu-Muslim relationship rests.

In the Introduction, the author calls the novel "the story of time."<sup>11</sup> The strategy behind this suggestion is evidently aimed at making the novel as much of a political critique as another story of time by him, *Adha Gaon*. In *Topi Shukla* the secular credentials of the protagonist are set at naught by the obscurantist and fundamentalist forces of our time. Is this not the travesty of time that people like him should be so completely marginalised by those professing obsolete beliefs? The locale of the novel is thus the whole of India. Topi remains without job since the Hindu institutions do not employ him due to his intimacy with Muslims while the Muslim institutions would not take him due to his name. There are jobs for Muslims, Agrawals, Kayasthas, Christians, Sikhs. "But where should the Indians go? It would seem that unemployment plays an important role in making people Hindus and Muslims" (TS, 13). Topi advocates the abolition of castes and communities.

Those who are born are only infants. By the time they die they are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, atheists, Indians, Pakistanis, whites, blacks, etc., etc. (TS, 18)

The writer frequently enters the narrative to expose the futility of the rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. If Hindus and Muslims are brothers, there is no need of reiterating the fact so very brazenly. And if they are not, what difference would our reiterating that they are really make? The author tells us that the Hindu-Muslim relationship is plagued by three devils, namely "hatred, suspicion, fear" (TS, 77). In contrast to Topi, the novel presents his three brothers who have nothing except hatred and suspicion for Muslims: "If all these Muslims are sent to Pakistan, the jobs they get will come to Hindus" (TS, 96). Even the supposedly secular parties like Congress are rather ambiguous in their commitment to secularism; they can both appear to appease Muslims and sometimes act as their enemy (TS, 97).

Since a major part of the action is enacted in and around the Aligarh Muslim University Campus, the novel depicts a lot of controversy and debate along the communal lines. Topi admonishes students for their pro-Pakistan attitude at the time of a cricket match between India and Pakistan. When a famous historian reads a paper on the need for national integration, a Muslim woman blasts the whole exercise by calling it futile; she is not basically communal but is bitter, for she lost her father in a communal riot.

The novel has a perceptive comment on the sad controversy involving the two sister languages which are basically one.

This game of names is puzzling indeed. Urdu and Hindi are the names of one language - Hindavi. But you can see yourself how much misunderstanding can be created by the change of names. If the name is Krishna, they call him an avatar; if it is Mohammed, they call him a

prophet. In this controversy of names, people have forgotten that both were milkmen and used to graze the cattle. (TS, 32)

The cultural syncretism, mutual tolerance and harmony will prevail in the nation only when both the Hindu and the Muslim communities undergo a thorough restructuring through modernisation. Both have to shed the deadwood that has continued to cling to their respective faiths. Masoom Raza is writing the nation as it is, no doubt; but his narrative contains the possibility of reconstructing our nation by rewriting its culture. For example, Iffan is shocked to find a specimen of a highly communalised history in his class through a student in his class. Iffan is explaining that Shivaji and Prithviraj Chauhan were reactionary and created hurdles in the way of nationalism. The student retorts that the "age of Muslim emperors is the dark age of Indian civilisation. Could they build even a single mosque as grand as our ancient temples? Because of this inferiority complex Aurangzeb demolished the temples" (TS, 59). Iffan is stunned. He feels as if "there were no history in the destiny of India. He was taught the history written by the English. Chandrabali [the student] is being indoctrinated with a history written by Hindus. A similar situation will prevail in Pakistan. History will have an Islamic stamp over there. God knows when an Indian history will be written" (TS, 60). A serious issue has been raised here. The dominant structures use the historical or cultural texts to indoctrinate the people with a jingoist version of history – often under the convenient camouflage of nationalism. The novel is not against the concept of the nation, but it cautions us about its possible misuse. It hints at the need of rethinking and rewriting our texts which are loaded with communal overtones. *Topi Shukla* reconstructs the image of the nation in which the Indianness of people like Topi, Iffan and Sakina is crushed under the weight of communalism. But the nation will continue to look for their likes for its survival.

### III

What emerges from the preceding analysis is the commonality of reconstruction of the nation in these novels. Mention can also be made of several more novels written by our Muslim writers. *Adha Gaon* by Masoom Raza is a bold portrayal of the startling realities facing the Muslims of Gangauli in eastern U.P. The novel is a frank commentary on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims at the time of partition and how it strangely changed from intimacy to hostility. Gangauli, semiotically speaking, is India. Another crucial text that has not been discussed here for want of space is Shani's *Kala Jal* which is remarkable for its minute observation of the constantly deteriorating conditions of Muslims in Jagadapur in the Bastar region of M.P. The frightening conditions of draught and exploitation in the rural areas are also graphically depicted in Bismillah's *Zaharbad*. Like *Kala Jal* and *Zaharbad*, Manzoor Ehtesham's *Sukha Bargad* is an unfinished quest



to map the inherent paradoxes and corrupt values of the retrograde Muslim community. It is full of new insights into the questions that have taken our nation by storm. These questions pertain to religion, language, regionalism and communalism. The novel is a plea for greater liberalism and tolerance in the somewhat ossified and hidebound discourse of Islamic faith. It is perhaps admissible to add that *Lajja* by the Bangla Deshi writer Tasleema Nasreen resembles *Topi Shukla* to a great extent and is, therefore, an indispensable text for our times.

While writing the nation in their works, these writers do capture the time-spirit of their age. In their different ways they all suggest that the reconstruction of the nation will not be complete until the Muslim community, which has a unique position in this country, awakens to its full potentialities and makes its contribution at all three levels, i.e. universal, national and local. The novels are of course located in nondescript regions, but their regionality should not be overemphasised, for as well as being regional novels, they are also national allegories.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For further insights into this controversy, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (Bombay: OUP, 1992), Ch. 1 ("Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature': Some Contexts") and Ch. 3 ("Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'"). Ahmad counters the western critical propaganda aimed at the devaluation of national texts.
2. Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, p. 19.
3. Frederic Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), quoted in Homi K. Bhabha, "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, p. 292.
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 240.
5. Robert Hodge, *Literature as Discourse* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 173.
6. Abdul Bismillah, *Jhini Jhini Bini Chadaria* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Paperbacks, 1992), p. 10. All subsequent references to this novel are given in parentheses with the title abbreviated as JJBC and the page number following it. Translations from the Hindi are mine.
7. M. Showeb, "Muslim Handloom Weavers in Varanasi: Problems and Remedial Measures," *Gandhian Perspectives*, Vol. VI, No. 1 (1993), 67.
8. Mushirul Haq, *Islam in Secular India* (Shimla: IAS, 1972), pp. 40-41.
9. Cf. Yoginder Singh: modernisation is a "national attitude towards issues, and their evaluation from a universalistic and not particularistic view-point. . . . [It] is rooted in the scientific world-view; it has deeper and positive association with levels of diffusion of scientific knowledge, technological skill and technological resources in a particular society." *Modernisation of Indian Tradition* (Faridabad: Thomson Press, 1977), p. 61.

10. The term is taken from Amartya Sen's *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Elementary functionings relate to one's being well-nourished, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc. Complex and sophisticated ones have to do with one's need of self-respect and of participation in the life of the community.
11. Rahi Masoom Raza, "Introduction," *Topi Shukla* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Paperbacks, 1991). Subsequently cited as TS, followed by page number(s), in parentheses.