NATIONALISM

From Territorial to Mobile Belonging: Nationalism as a Productive Assemblage in Select South Asian Fictions

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Abstract

This paper considers new dimensions of nationalism through the lens of contemporary South Asian novels. Drawing on the postmodern approaches towards the cultural economy of the state, as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, the study examines how nationalism emerges as a political effect of imagination of collectivises, now transforming into divergent forms of social formations, belongingness and identities. Rather than treating the nation as a primordial entity, these theories locate its genesis in the modern state's civic and cultural logic. The paper situates these insights within the South Asian context, where colonial administrative divisions and postcolonial state formations have drastically changed territorial identifications. This paper explores novels such as *Exit West*, *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* and *A Golden Age* to demonstrate how literature reflects, challenges, and reimagines the territorially-centered conception of nationalism. In contrast to primordialist and ethno-symbolist arguments, which privilege mythical memories and ancient roots, the paper argues that these South Asian novels foreground the mobile, de-territorial and fluid character of national and subnational identities. Through these theoretical and literary perspectives, the paper argues that nationalism does not possess a rigid and universal character but has an adaptive and context-dependent formation, continually reshaped within the uneven terrain of modern political power and capitalism.

Keywords: de-territorialisation; Deleuze and Guattari; digital capitalism; national allegory; South Asian narratives

1 Introduction: From territorial nation to mobile belonging

Benedict Anderson's (1983) trailblazing formulation of the nation as an "imagined community" provides an important departure from essentialist approaches to nationality. For Anderson, the nation is neither naturally given nor simply inherited from primordial era. It is produced through historical, cultural and political processes that allow individuals who will never meet one another personally to imagine themselves as brothers and sisters, and as members of the same community. The emergence of print-capitalism, particularly newspapers and novels generated this feeling by producing a shared temporal and cultural horizon (Anderson, 1983). The nation-state has been imagined through the conjunction of three apparently inseparable categories: people, territory, and sovereignty (Montevideo Convention, 1933; Weber, 1946). The nation is represented as a community occupying a geographically bounded space and governed through a sovereign political structure. National identity consequently acquires a territorial anchor. To belong to a nation is presumed to mean belonging to a particular land; the border separates the national subject from the outsider, while citizenship equates territorial belonging a political right (Agnew, 1994; Anderson, 2006; Storey, 2012). Yet contemporary processes of globalization, migration, digital communication, transnational

capitalism, and cultural circulation have increasingly challenged this territorial logic. Individuals participate simultaneously in multiple cultural, linguistic, economic, and political networks in different geographical locations. Cultures travel across borders; families are dispersed across states; identities circulate through digital platforms; capital operates beyond national boundaries; and political imaginaries increasingly emerge from networks rather than from territorially enclosed communities.

South Asian political context make this problem particularly visible and something unique as it has one of the large diasporic community across the world and particularly in the west. Colonialism did not simply impose European territorial and administrative logic upon its colonized societies; it reorganized populations, administrative units, identities, and political territories and adapted to its own frameworks at home as well (Jameson, 1986). Partition subsequently transformed these administrative boundaries into bloodletting national borders. The creation of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka demonstrates that territory is neither politically neutral nor perennial. It is produced through political decisions, administrative practices, violence, collective memory, and ideological representation. The contemporary nation therefore appears less as an eternal cultural substance than as a continually produced, and still producing or becoming political formation (Bhabha, 1990).

It is at this point that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari become particularly productive for the study of nationalism. Their conceptual vocabulary enables nationalism to be approached not primarily as holistic cultural essence but as an assemblage of heterogeneous forces. Territory, language, memory, desire, economy, institutions, symbols, and technologies become interconnected components of political formation. Their concept of desire is especially significant. Against theories that understand desire primarily through absence or lack, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize desire as productive. Desire does not necessarily seek a lost object that would finally complete the subject. It produces connections, relations and realities. This provides a useful way of reconsidering nationalist nostalgia. The nationalist desire for a supposedly lost golden age does not simply recover an already existing past. It produces a usable past in the present. The nationalist imagination therefore operates through a paradox. It frequently invokes origins while continuously reconstructing those origins. It presents the nation as ancient while its political manifestation may be historically recent. It claims continuity while depending upon selection, exclusion and reorganization. In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, nationalism can therefore be understood as a process of reterritorialization: heterogeneous histories, memories, cultural practices and populations are assembled into the apparently coherent territory of the nation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The novels examined in this paper expose precisely these contradictions.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, TD Ramakrishnan's *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*, and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* represent different configurations of territory, displacement, memory and territorial, political or networked belonging. Yet each novel destabilizes the assumption that national identity can be adequately mapped onto a fixed geographical territory and its then ideological scheme. The paper therefore put forth the question; how do contemporary South Asian novels expose the territorial nation as an unstable assemblage of state power, capital, memory and desire? It argues that these novels do not simply reject nationalism. Rather, they reveal its constructed, adaptive and contested character, demonstrating how territorial belonging is repeatedly de-territorialized and consequently re-territorialized through migration, historical memory, political struggle and transnational connection.

2 Deleuze and Guattari: Nation as assemblage

Deleuze and Guattari's importance for a theory of nationalism lies partly in their refusal to begin with stable identities. Instead of assuming that entities such as the individual, society, state or nation exist as completed structures, they explores how these formations are produced through relations among heterogeneous elements. Their concept of the *assemblage* (some scholars argue *arrangement* is the most suitable term for the French term *agencement,* originally used by Deleuze and Guattari) is give more insight into this. An assemblage is not simply a collection of things put together side by side. It is a temporary organization of heterogeneous components whose adjacent produce a particular social formation. A nation can consequently be approached as an assemblage composed of territory, language, political institutions, legal system, memories, myths, religions, economic relations, media, citizenship and forms of collective desire. None of these components independently produce the nation. Their articulation produces the effect of nationalism partly. This allows nationalism to be understood differently from primordialist theories. If primordialism searches for an ancient cultural root, an assemblage-based approach seeks how heterogeneous elements are connected to produce the national unity. Thus it gives us an answer that the nation is no longer simply something that people inherit rather it becomes something that is continuously assembling, performing and generating. Territory had a crucial role in this process. A geographical space becomes national territory when political institutions, cartographic practices, legal systems, historical narratives and emotional attachments transform geographical space into a base of collective identification. The map is therefore not merely a representation of the nation. The map participates in making the nation. Here the concept of a "cartography of belonging" gets more nuances. National maps do not simply tell us where and how a nation exists. They also determine its coherence based on a geographical boundary, who belongs within it, who exists outside it, where borders begin and end, which histories are remembered, and which populations become legible as national subjects.

2.1 Desire and the making of nation

Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire provides another important dimension to this argument. In *Anti-Oedipus*, desire is conceived as productive rather than fundamentally negative. Desire produces connections. The desiring-machine operates by connecting one element to another, generating new relations and formations. This has important implications for nationalism. Nationalist discourse frequently represents itself as a response to loss: loss of an ancient homeland, loss of cultural purity, loss of sovereignty, loss of traditional values, loss of an imagined golden age. However, if desire is productive rather than lack-based, nationalist nostalgia cannot simply be understood as a psychological longing for something that once existed. The "golden past" invoked by nationalism is therefore not simply retrieved from historical memory. It is selected, edited, mythologized and connected to contemporary political needs. This distinction is crucial; Nationalist desire does not merely remember the past; it manufactures a politically usable past. The past becomes a component in a contemporary assemblage. A myth of ancient cultural unity can be connected to territory. Territory can be connected to ethnicity. Ethnicity can be connected to religion. Religion can be connected to political sovereignty. Sovereignty can then be connected to contemporary claims about who legitimately belongs to the nation. The resulting formation appears natural because its heterogeneous components have been successfully assembled. Deleuze and Guattari's framework consequently enables us to understand nationalism as a machine of connection. But machines can also break down. When migration, colonialism, war, globalization or digital communication interrupt the assumed

correspondence between territory and identity, the nationalist assemblage undergoes deterritorialization.

Deleuze and Guattari assert that desire, like power for Foucault, is fundamentally positive and productive in nature, operating not in search of a lost object which would consummate and complete it, but out of the productive plenitude of its own energy which propels it to seek ever new connections and instantiations. Hence, desire cannot be theorized in Hegelian, Freudian, or Lacanian terms as lack - 'an idealist (dialectical, nihilistic) conception' (1983: p.25) - and is better theorized as a kind of dynamic machine. Deleuze and Guattari insist that this is no mere metaphor, that desire actually is a machine: it produces things ('alliances' and reality itself), it runs in discontinuous fluxes and 'break-flows', always making connections with ('partial') objects and other desiring-machines. Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of desire (in its affirmative capacity) as productive and creative, rather than as suffering, lack, and negativity. So instead of the “golden past” nostalgia, the very existence of nation at any point itself is complete. It produces a version for the future that is totally freed from the clutches of the past and its primordial ethnic notions.

2.2 Deterritorialization and reterritorialization

The most productive Deleuze-Guattarian concept for this paper is deterritorialization. Deterritorialization describes the movement by which an established relation between identity, territory and social organization becomes destabilized. However, deterritorialization is rarely absolute. It is usually accompanied by reterritorialization: the creation of a new organization, attachment or territorial logic. This double movement is particularly visible in nationalism. Migration deterritorializes the relationship between people and territory. The migrant leaves the geographical space associated with national identity. Yet the migrant may subsequently recreate belonging through: language of the host land, culinary, memory of the homeland, digital communication, diasporic communities, its cultural practices, transnational family networks. The original territory is therefore replaced by a network of symbolic and social connections. The contemporary subject may consequently belong without being territorially located in the conventional sense.

This is one of the major tensions explored in the novels *Exit West*, *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* and *A Golden Age*. Each novel produces a different form of deterritorialization: *Exit West* represents geographical deterritorialization, *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayak*i evokes historical and cultural deterritorialization *and A Golden Age* showcases political deterritorialization through the transformation of state territory. The novels consequently provide three different literary maps of belonging in south Asia.

3 *Exit West*: The collapse of territorial borders and distance

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* offers one of the most direct literary challenges to territorial nationalism. The novel begins within a non-recognizable geopolitical world. Nadia and Saeed inhabit a city experiencing political violence and social fragmentation. Their lives are shaped by a particular territorial order in which geographical movement is constrained by borders, checkpoints and political violence. The metaphor, magical doors fundamentally transform this order. The doors compress geographical distance. They do not merely provide an alternative means of transportation. They fundamentally challenge the political meaning of geographical separation. Under the conventional territorial system, distance and border create a horizontal understanding of the uniqueness of nation states. The virtual world disrupts this structure, in Parallel, the metaphorical doors in the

novel disrupt the territorial logic. Here distance becomes traversable, borders are ceased to exist. The border ceases to function as an absolute barrier. The significance of this narrative device is therefore political rather than merely fantasy. The magical door can be interpreted as a de-territorializing machine. It disconnects human movement from the geographical continuity of territory. A person no longer needs to move gradually from one territorial jurisdiction to another. The door creates an instantaneous connection between distant spaces. The novel consequently imagines a world in which territorial distance loses some of its political power. This is why *Exit West* can be read as political theory as much as migration fiction.

Traditional international politics assumes: sovereign territorial states, controlled borders, fixed citizenship, national security, territorial jurisdiction. Hamid's magical doors destabilize these assumptions. Migration becomes almost ontological rather than exceptional. People move, Communities transform, Cities become migrant spaces. The distinction between "inside" and "outside" becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The novel therefore transforms the border from a fixed line into a zone of negotiation.

The protagonists in the novel, Nadia and Saeed's movement also complicates the idea of a singular national identity. Their journey does not simply involve movement from one country to another. It simultaneously transform them and their identities. Their relationship to their original home changes, their relationship to each other changes and their relationship to religion, culture and community changes. Their experience demonstrates that identity is not necessarily preserved intact during migration. The migrant, per se any person who has the possibility to trespass the geographical and it's nation state, is therefore not simply a national subject. Migration can transform the subject itself. This is precisely the kind of movement that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization helps conceptualize. The subject becomes disconnected from an original territorial assemblage and enters new assemblages. The migrant is subsequently connected to multiple spaces without being fully reducible to any single one.

3.1 From territorial borders to networked belonging

The novel's camps and migrant settlements further complicate territorial nationalism. This distinction becomes increasingly important in the digital era. Digital communication allows migrants to maintain relationships across territorial distances. A migrant can participate simultaneously in several cultural spaces. The smartphone, social media platform and messaging application therefore become contemporary technologies of deterritorialization. They allow language to travel, political ideas to circulate, memories to be preserved, families to remain connected, diasporic identities to be maintained, nationalist discourse to cross borders. Thus, digital capitalism does not simply dissolve nationalism. It reorganizes its spatial form. National identity can now circulate beyond the national territory. The same networks that enable cosmopolitan and transnational identities can also intensify nationalist mobilization. This produces a central contradiction: Digital networks deterritorialize identity while simultaneously enabling new forms of nationalist/ transnational reterritorialization.

4 *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*: Identity beyond the national map

If *Exit West* challenges territorial nationalism through geographical mobility, *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* destabilizes it through historical and cultural multiplicity. The novel's title itself provides an important conceptual entry point. The word "Alias" immediately challenges singular identity. Sugandhi is also Andal Devanayaki. The contemporary subject is connected to a mythological figure.

The individual is connected to collective memory. The present is connected to the past. Sri Lanka becomes connected to South India. The national becomes connected to the transnational. Identity consequently appears not as a single territorial location but as a network of connections.

4.1 Devanayaki as a rhizomatic figure

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the *rhizome* offers a productive way of interpreting Devanayaki. Arborescent models of structured thought and activity are replaced by an exploratory rhizome. Any move of thought or social relation is desirable, so long as it does not lead back into an old or new convention, obligation, or institution. This image of thought is closely related to the cultural milieu of Integrated Global Capitalism (Philip GoodChild, 2007). Unlike the tree, which implies: origin, hierarchy, genealogy, vertical continuity; the rhizome operates through: multiplicity, connection, lateral expansion, heterogeneity, discontinuity. Devanayaki's narrative existence follows precisely such a structure. She cannot easily be confined to one historical period or one geographical territory. Her identity emerges through connections across time and space. This makes her resistant to the genealogical logic through which nationalism frequently constructs identity. The nationalist question is often: Where did we originate? The rhizomatic question is: What are we connected to? The difference is fundamental. The first seeks an origin. The second maps relations. Devanayaki consequently becomes a figure through whom the novel imagines belonging outside the conventional territorial nation.

The novel also distinguishes between official history and cultural memory. The nation-state tends to organize history through territorial chronology such as from territory to its population to historical/collective memory/forgetting to national identity. The novel disrupts this linear structure. Memory crosses borders; Myths travel. Stories move between historical periods. Cultural memory therefore becomes mobile. This mobility challenges the state's monopoly over historical belonging. The nation claims: this is our history because this is our territory. The novel responds by suggesting: histories exceed territories. This is one of the most significant post-national possibilities of the text. Devanayaki does not simply represent another national identity. She reveals the inadequacy of the national category itself. She embodies: mobility rather than territorial fixation, memory rather than official historical closure, plural belonging rather than exclusive identity, cultural continuity rather than national isolation, multiplicity rather than singular identity. Her identity is therefore better understood as rhizomatic than genealogical.

5 *A Golden Age*: Nation-making and the production of territory

A Golden Age presents a different problem. Tahmima Anam's novel is set against the Bangladesh Liberation War and therefore engages directly with the formation of a new national territory. At first sight, this might seem to contradict the argument of deterritorialization. The novel, after all, concerns the creation of Bangladesh. But precisely here the concept of assemblage becomes useful. Bangladesh does not emerge simply because an ancient national essence finally discovers its political form. Its formation results from a complex intersection of cultural identity, political discrimination economic inequality, military violence etc. National identity is consequently produced through struggle. The novel demonstrates that territory becomes politically meaningful through collective action. The emergence of Bangladesh illustrates both sides of Deleuze and Guattari's territorial logic: deterritorialization of an existing political order followed by reterritorialization into a new political formation. Pakistan's territorial imagination becomes unstable. The Bengali population develops alternative forms of political belonging. The eventual result is a new territorial state. Thus, deterritorialization

does not automatically produce an anarchic condition as in the Bangladesh context. It can generate another nation. The nation therefore becomes a continuing process rather than a completed achievement. This complicates any simplistic claim that globalization or mobility has "ended" nationalism. Instead, contemporary political formations repeatedly oscillate between deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

6 Digital capitalism and the new cartography of belonging

The digital era intensifies this transformation. Print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson famously demonstrated, contributed to the formation of imagined communities by allowing individuals who would never meet to imagine themselves as part of a common national community. Digital capitalism modifies this mechanism. the contemporary subject encounters national discourse through social media, streaming platforms, digital news, algorithmic recommendation and online communities. The imagined community therefore becomes increasingly networked. This does not mean that Anderson's imagined community disappears. Rather, its technological infrastructure changes. Print capitalism primarily organized national imagination through relatively stable textual publics. Digital capitalism produces much more immediate, interactive and personalized forms of collective identification. The subject is no longer merely a reader of national narratives. The subject can produce, circulate, modify and contest them. Nationalism consequently becomes increasingly participatory. This has an Deleuze-Guattarian implication. The nation becomes a constantly operating assemblage-machine. Its components are continuously connected and disconnected. A meme can connect religion, territory and political leadership. A viral video can transform a historical event into contemporary nationalist affect. A digital campaign can produce a temporary collective identity. A hashtag can connect geographically dispersed individuals. The territorial nation therefore acquires a networked afterlife beyond its territory.

7 Beyond primordialism: Nationalism as productive assemblage

Primordialist and ethno-symbolist approaches tend to emphasize the historical continuity of ethnic identity, myths, memories and cultural symbols. These elements are undeniably important. But the Deleuze-Guattarian approach changes the analytical question. Instead of asking: What ancient essence does the nation preserve? it asks: How are memories, symbols, territories, institutions and desires assembled into the contemporary formation called the nation? This shift is significant in South Asia. The region contains overlapping linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural histories that cannot easily be contained within contemporary national borders. The political map is comparatively recent; cultural connections frequently predate it. Consequently, the modern nation-state must continually transform heterogeneous historical materials into coherent national narratives.

8 Literature as counter-cartography

The three novels do more than represent displacement. They produce alternative maps. The conventional political map organizes space according to sovereign territory. Literary narratives can organize space according to memory, affect, imagination, desire etc. This is what may be called a counter-cartography of belonging. The literary map does not necessarily ask where the border lies. It asks: Where does belonging occur? In *Exit West*, belonging emerges through movement and migrant community. In *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki*, belonging emerges through memory, myth and transhistorical connection. In *A Golden Age*, belonging emerges through political struggle and collect-

ive transformation. The novels therefore demonstrate that territory is only one possible medium of belonging.

9 Conclusion: Unmaking the territorial nation

The territorial nation remains one of the most powerful political formations of modernity. Yet the contemporary South Asian literary imagination reveals that its apparent solidity depends upon continuous processes of construction, repetition and reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari provide a particularly productive theoretical vocabulary for understanding this instability. Their concepts of assemblage, desire, deterritorialization and the rhizome allow nationalism to be understood not as a primordial essence but as a dynamic political formation produced through the interaction of heterogeneous forces. The concept of productive desire is particularly important. Nationalist nostalgia does not merely seek a lost past. It actively constructs a usable past, connecting memory, territory, religion, ethnicity and political power within a contemporary assemblage. The "golden past" therefore becomes less an archaeological object than a political production. The three novels examined in this paper expose different dimensions of this process. *Exit West* deterritorializes belonging through radical geographical mobility. Its metaphor magical doors transform the border from an absolute political barrier into a permeable and unstable interface. The migrant consequently emerges as a subject whose identity cannot be adequately contained by a single territorial nation. *Sugandhi Alias Andal Devanayaki* produces a different form of deterritorialization. Its protagonist's identity emerges through connections across historical periods, geographical spaces and cultural memories. Devanayaki becomes a rhizomatic figure whose existence challenges the assumption that identity requires a singular origin or territorial location. *A Golden Age*, meanwhile, demonstrates the other side of deterritorialization. The disruption of an existing political territory can result in the formation of another national territory. The emergence of Bangladesh therefore illustrates the necessity of understanding deterritorialization and reterritorialization as interconnected processes. Taken together, these novels demonstrate that the nation is neither simply permanent nor simply disappearing. It is continually being remade. The contemporary condition is therefore not adequately described through the opposition between nationalism and post-nationalism. A more productive formulation is to understand nationalism itself as a mobile assemblage, continually negotiating between territorial fixation and transnational flow. This becomes particularly significant in the age of digital capitalism. Digital networks have intensified the circulation of people, images, memories, affects and political narratives beyond territorial boundaries. Yet these same networks can be appropriated to reconstruct national identities, disseminate nationalist nostalgia and produce new forms of territorial attachment. The result is a paradoxical spatial condition; the nation becomes deterritorialized in its circulation while becoming reterritorialized in its imagination. These selected South Asian fiction makes this paradox visible. Its characters cross borders; memories exceed maps; identities multiply; territories are contested; and political communities are repeatedly assembled and dismantled. The literary text consequently becomes a site for imagining forms of belonging that cannot be reduced to the territorial nation. The task, then, is not to declare the disappearance of the nation. It is to unmake its apparent naturalness. Once the nation is understood as an assemblage rather than an essence, its borders become historical rather than inevitable, its identities become constructed rather than primordial, and its territories become political rather than natural. What emerges from this literary cartography is not necessarily a world without nations, but a world in which belonging can no longer be assumed to have only one geography.

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