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Thinking with the Nation

“National” Literatures at the Cusp

SUKANYA BANERJEE

Critical discussions of the nineteenth-century nation tend to be anachronistic inasmuch as we retrofit contemporary notions of the nation into nineteenth-century politico-cultural formations. One can be forgiven for this anachronistic move because nineteenth-century literary and cultural history bears ample evidence of the singularity with which the spirit of nationalism imbued itself in and through aesthetic and cultural practices, be it in Romantic imaginings or the literary artifact of the Victorian novel. However, it is worth noting that the object of nationalism—the nation—remained considerably opaque throughout the century. Incidentally, while the French Revolution is widely understood to mark the point at which state power begins to affix itself to national sentiment, the sovereign nation-state was hardly a ubiquitous phenomenon until about the mid-twentieth century.¹ But it is also the case that the nation itself was quite amorphous over the course of the nineteenth century. Even as Walter Bagehot authored a definitive treatise on what is a key instrument of nationhood, the constitution (in this case, the English constitution), he also mused: “But what are nations?”² The opacity of the nation arose not so much from its mutability (changing borders) but from the uncertainty regarding its organizing logic. What was the coherent element around which a community imagined itself? Was it language? Was it race? How much could one put store in territoriality, which, after all, could shift? As twenty-first century readers and scholars, we are all too familiar with the artifice of the nation, the fact of its constructedness. But so were thinkers in the nineteenth

century. What does it mean, then, to read this contingency back into the nineteenth century, when nations were at various stages of making, nonmaking, and unmaking? How does such a chronologically apposite view impinge upon our otherwise unitary understanding of “national literature” or “national tradition” that a post–Second World War critical and political legacy has bequeathed us? How might revisiting the nation in the late nineteenth century, at the cusp, in fact, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reorient our thinking about the nation and the critical frameworks that it might generate?

In addressing these questions, I want to consider analytical frameworks that might be apropos to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries given that this was a period that came in the wake of the Italian *Risorgimento* and German unification but also witnessed an upsurge in anticolonial agitation as well as colonial nationalisms that understood sovereignty and affiliation as nested, layered, and dispersed.³ The idea of the nation was very much in the air in Britain, too, where national sovereignty had been continually negotiated through franchise reform (the latest installment in 1882) and national identity found expression in patriotic jingoism attending the Boer wars. But the British nation was also inextricable from its empire, and if, as Hedinger and Hee point out, the tendency of “transnational history” is to “nationalize empires,” such that “imperial history is read as the history of a nation-state beyond its borders,”⁴ then it is worth noting the inadequacy of the transnational as an analytical template in this context, not least because of the impossibility of reading the British nation as a discrete formation. In trying to read the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nation and the literatures and traditions that gathered under its rubric, it might be productive, instead, to consider theories of nation extant in the nineteenth century, which is to say, to read through the nineteenth century and with the Victorians—widely understood—rather than retrospectively superimpose our late twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical frameworks upon them. At one level, then, I am making a temporal argument about our reading of the nation, suggesting that while we tend to read back into the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nation and its literatures and cultures, we should focus instead on the nineteenth century and use that as a basis for read-

ing forward. Evidently, the famed temporal paradoxes of the nation inflect our reading habits, as well.

But why focus on the nation at all? It may seem that in gesturing to the inadequacy of the transnational as a framework of analysis as I did in the previous paragraph, I am arguing against critical methodologies such as the “transnational,” the “supranational,” or the “cosmopolitan” that put pressure on the nation.⁵ There is no doubt that these analytical categories have yielded generative readings that, at the very least, break down the disciplinary (or even subdisciplinary) silos into which national literatures and traditions are otherwise corralled, and I am very much in concert with the impulse undergirding these critical frameworks. However, the analytical categories mentioned above take the nation as a theoretical point of origin or departure in ways that posit the unitary nation-state as a template. And in such a framing, the nineteenth to early twentieth century is historically designated as an anterior period of nation-making that is instrumental in delivering the more “complete” mid-twentieth century version. My objective, on the other hand, is to consider the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a key moment in the history of nation-making that affords plural concepts, possibilities, and configurations of nation. That we have winnowed this pluralized understanding by placing the nation along a teleology of the nation-state has produced both a historical lacuna and an analytical deficit. Therefore, without fetishizing the nation as a historical-political entity or being unmindful of the exclusionary violence that it continually enacts, this is to acknowledge the salience of the nation as an organizing category in the period under study.⁶ It is to remind ourselves of the remarkable energies that were deployed in the name of the nation, which make it necessary to retain the nation as an analytic and remain alert, instead, to its inchoate, unfulfilled, or supple formations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Doing so allows, at the very least, a pluralized backdrop against which the (exclusionary) choices made in the name of the nation are thrown into relief.

In wresting the nation away from the teleology that designates a homogenous, isomorphic, statal formation—the nation-state—as its endpoint, it is worth revisiting a text from the late nineteenth century, Ernest Renan’s classic essay, “What is a Nation?” which he delivered at

the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882. In what has become a critical commonplace for us but was no doubt a provocation for his audience, Renan pronounced that the future of the nation rested on its inhabitants remembering to forget aspects of the nation's past: "Forgetting . . . and historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation, and this is why the progress of historical studies is often a danger to the principle of nationality."⁷ Such forgetting was necessary, for neither could the nation afford to remind its inhabitants of its often bloody and violent origins, nor could it be reminded of its inhabitants' less than primordial ties to it. In fact, Renan's envisioning of the nation is stark in its contingency. According to him, a nation is not constituted according to a commonality of language or race or the delineation of physical geography alone, although these factors undoubtedly play a defining role. Rather, for Renan, the nation is constituted by a shared "moral consciousness," a "clearly expressed consent and desire to continue a common life."⁸ While the shared consciousness is buttressed by numerous and regular acts of sacrifice (by its inhabitants), it is also one that needs to regularly renew itself: as Renan famously noted, a nation is "a daily plebiscite."⁹

Renan's essay is remarkable for its astute analysis of the features of modern nationhood, and its nascent ideas constitute the bedrock of later twentieth-century perorations on the nation: be it Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented tradition," Tom Nairn's idea of "Janus-faced nationalism," or Benedict Anderson's "imagined community."¹⁰ It is important to track two threads of uncertainty that course through the essay. One thread—and this has received due attention—is the contingency of the nation itself, the fact that it is but a daily plebiscite.¹¹ In such a context, the invocation of national literatures or traditions serves both as a warrant for renewal as well as an instantiation of it. The second thread—and this is the less-studied thread of uncertainty—is that Renan does not at all make clear what form the nation should take, or has taken. If Renan arrives at the conclusion that the nation is nothing more than a "shared moral consciousness," then he arrives at such a conclusion through a process of elimination: a nation is not conclusively bound by ties of race, language, or territory. But the contours of the collective that is to partake of the "shared consciousness" are left unclear

as is the political wellspring undergirding it. What Renan ideates, therefore, is “nation thinking” that leaves the structure of the nation quite open-ended. Nation thinking constitutes what Partha Chatterjee, in his recent exegesis of the nation, denotes as “people-nation” in contradistinction to the nation-state.”¹² The nation, in other words, can exist in multiple forms, and this multiplicity is resonant in Bagehot’s invocation of the nation as well. In place of Renan’s “moral consciousness,” Bagehot hones in on a “nation-making force”¹³ that manifests itself in the formation of “national character,”¹⁴ which, for Bagehot is signaled by collective likes or dislikes.¹⁵ But as it was for Renan, for Bagehot, too, the contours of a national collective are hazy. In order to demonstrate his point, Bagehot points at once to New England as well as New Zealand, which is to say that, for him, “nation thinking” manifests itself in multiple guises and, more importantly, through multiple scales.

I will presently take up the question of scale, but in order to do so, I want to return to the point about the contingency of the nation mentioned earlier. Although the nation was deemed an act of daily plebiscite and was recognized in its discursiveness, it did attach itself to certain objects and registers of expression and belief, such as that of literature, education, and tradition. For Johann Gotlieb Fichte, who delivered lectures on nationalism to a German audience in 1808, it was not political unity that was instrumental in constituting a nation but a common language and literature.¹⁶ Fichte’s view can be read in context of the Germany that he inhabited, which was a conglomeration of multiple states. A “national” literature or culture, then, presaged a nation that did not yet exist. “National literature” did not quite bear the same burden in nineteenth-century Britain even though the question of “national identity” was explored and reiterated in novels all the way from Walter Scott. It was not until 1864 that Hippolyte Taine’s *The History of English Literature* was published, and Margaret Oliphant’s *Literary History of England* appeared in 1882. However, there was an abiding interest in the institutionalization of “national literatures” from the early decades of the nineteenth century. In her study of issues of the weekly journal *Athanaeum* in the years 1834–1838, Anne-Marie Milim tracks a recurrent interest in national literatures from other parts of

the world in what can be viewed as a cosmopolitan self-styling of the periodical and its readers. One might note here that Goethe's preference for "world literature" in place of "national literature," which, according to Goethe had become an "unmeaning term" in 1827, was contemporaneous with—and made possible by—efforts to formalize national literatures.¹⁷ But even as a journal such as the *Athenaeum* participated in a literary historiography envisioned along national lines, Millim notes the "malleability, undecidability, and arbitrariness" that underwrote "dominant modes of *national literary identities*."¹⁸ It is instructive in that context to note the list of "national literatures" in the *Athenaeum*. It included literature from Spain, France, Germany, Poland, and America. The list also included "Othoman literature" and "Persian and Arabic" literatures. Evidently, the list runs the gamut from a defined political entity (France), to a nation-in-the-making (Germany), to a multinational empire ("Othoman") while also clubbing together otherwise distinct literary traditions ("Persian and Arabic") under the appellation of "national literature." What the list denotes in its multifariousness is an open-endedness about the referent for "national literature," or indeed, the nation. It can of course be suggested that the *Athenaeum* is well meaning but ill-informed on this score and that one need not take this list to be definitive or even representative. Fair enough. But that this open endedness is evident in other ways in more pronounced and studied meditations on the nation later in the century signifies, at the very least, the tensility of nation thinking in the nineteenth century even as the proposed tools of nationhood—national literature, education, tradition—harden into self-evident boundary-markers by the next century.

I want to hold on to the tensility of the nation while shifting attention to the question of scale. The nation did not only lend itself to multiple formations, but it also operated at multiple scales. An increasing anticolonial sentiment in late nineteenth-century India was accompanied by a sharp interest in carving a distinct literary identity through the compilation of dictionaries, bibliographies, and literary institutes. Significantly, these endeavors took place at the level of the region, which is to say nation-thinking operated at the level of what we now term "regional" identity. Therefore, Romesh Chunder Dutt, a vocal

critic of Britain's economic policies vis-à-vis India, was also heavily involved with the institutionalization of Bengali literary culture and was elected to preside over the newly formed *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* (Literary Association of Bengal) in 1894. Something similar was apparently underway in pre-Federation Australia, where it was not the idea of the nation at the level of the continent but at the level of the various self-governing colonies that animated nation thinking over the nineteenth century. Pointing to the challenges of reading national feeling located at "other, smaller scales," Robert Dixon asks: "What challenges might the idea of 'colonial nationalism' present to readers on the other side of that watershed of nationalist historiography, which has taught us to read nineteenth-century Australia literature retrospectively in light of the continental nation?"¹⁹

Dixon's question takes us back to the problematic that I had begun the essay with, which is the feasibility of reading the nineteenth century through the retrospective lens of the post-Second World War nation. The challenge is posed as much by scale as the tensility of nation-thinking. This is not to gainsay the formation of the Australian nation-state or Indian nation-state. But if we were to study them at the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moment when nation thinking manifested itself through various forms or was being reconfigured (the self-governing colonies of Australia constituted the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901), then adopting a methodological nationalism that reads these stages only as transitional moments en route to a "developed" end point obscures lateral and multiple modes of attachment and aesthetic expression, besides postulating temporal hierarchies that posit nationalisms as "belated" or otherwise. On the other hand, staying attuned to the nation as a multivalent entity helps, among other things, to genealogize federated political formations that were imagined as alternatives to the end of empire.²⁰ The contiguous and overlapping veins of nation thinking that fueled Kwame Nkrumah's pan-African vision, or, equally, effected the carapace of the British Commonwealth make it difficult for us to dispense with the nation even as—or precisely because—it appears in different scales and formations. It is also difficult not to see in these formations the dilemmas of nineteenth-century visions of nation thinking, which can be read either as lag or legacy.

In his reading of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1885), Jed Esty makes a larger point about the relation between colonial modernity and the *bildungsroman*. Viewing "national-historical time" as a marker for the developmental arc that also provides necessary closure for the *bildungsroman*, Esty suggests that the site of colonial modernity, which is marked by the accumulation of endless capital and is free of the tempering influence of national time, produces a temporal anomaly that fails to meet the developmental remit of the *bildungsroman*.²¹ What we get instead in "colonial" novels of the late-Victorian period, Esty suggests, is perpetual immaturity or, as he eloquently puts it, "unseasonable youth."²² Significantly, in the scrambled *bildungsroman* that Esty notes as characteristic of the late-Victorian period, he also discerns a modernist script that questions the Victorian-modernist divide. Esty's point is well taken, but one also wonders if the nation at this late-Victorian moment were not to be viewed as the prerogative of Britain—or Europe—alone and colonial modernity perceived in terms of the nation principle that it engendered (which was highly conducive to capital), then how might the apportioning of generic differences, as Esty suggests, be reread? If this question is also taken as a plea for (anti)colonial nationalisms to be included within the analytical rubric, then such an interpretation would not be out of place, given that, for better or for worse, nation thinking was quite often the driver for colonial articulation, aesthetic or political, be it in the dominions or the dependencies. That alone makes it imperative to stay with the nation, if we wish, that is, to view our field of scholarship through a more capacious and representative lens. But I want to point out that it is also the case that the teleology of the nation-state is foisted too easily on colonial texts that engage with any form of nation thinking, as is evident in the reception history of South African writer Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje's *Mbudi*, for instance. Written between 1919 and 1920 but not published until 1932, the text is set in southern Africa of the 1830s and is plotted around the triangulated relation between the Baralong (Rolong), the Matabele (Ndebele), and the Boers. As a piece of historical fiction that Plaatje, the first secretary of the South African Native National Congress (forerunner of the African National Congress), was purportedly inspired by the "failure" of the Union of South

Africa (1910) to write, the novel offers a nuanced representation of the interrelation between these constituencies and ends on a distinctly ambivalent note about the future.²³ The open-endedness of the novel's conclusion, however, is ironed over, and the novel, now firmly ensconced within the literary historiography of the South African nation-state, is read as allegorizing, if not prophesying, the future (post-1994) South African nation-state.²⁴ There seems to be little room to ponder the gaps, doubts, and alternatives that a novel about nation-making set in the pre-national era and written in the aftermath of a nation that had just been made, but to the detriment and exclusion of its indigenous inhabitants, may open up.

Though far from comprehensive, these examples suggest that we are not yet done with the nation, not even at an analytical level. As far as nation thinking is concerned, the late nineteenth to early twentieth century is rife with possibilities, uncertainties, with roads taken and not taken.²⁵ Either way, the nation was not conceived as a discrete, crystalline entity but in terms that were contiguous, overlapping, or connected. Tracking the nation in this period, then, is about following through with multiple frameworks and scales that are germane to the modalities of nation thinking rather than those that hold the nation in abeyance. It is to think about frameworks in terms of a systematic connectivity akin to that adopted by world systems theorists.²⁶ It is to approach nation thinking at smaller, "regional" scales familiar to practitioners of Area Studies, even as ironically enough, Area Studies was inaugurated in the United States to leverage a hegemonic position for the US nation-state with the advent of the Cold War.²⁷ And, in order to adjudge the coevality of various formations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—non-nations, supernations, nation-like—it is also to think in terms of a transimperial mode of analysis that underlines the relationality between these seemingly incommensurable entities.²⁸ But these critical frameworks are not extraneous to what this moment offers; rather, if the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth century is also a cusp between nation thinking and the nation-state, a cusp between contingencies of nation and its abiding *imprimatur*, then such a cusp invites these frameworks if only to make them more supple and robust.

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NOTES

- 1 Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 22.
- 2 Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (New York: D. Appleton, 1906), 83.
- 3 See Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," in *Subaltern Studies Vol. 7*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993): 1–40.
- 4 Daniel Hedinger et al., "Transimperial History: Connectivity, Cooperation, and Competition," *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 4 (2018): 429–52, at 441.
- 5 Each of these is a distinct category, and the scholarship on each of these categories is extensive, especially in the social sciences. For an analysis of their relation to Victorian studies, see Tanya Agathocleous and Jason Rudy, ed. "Victorian Cosmopolitanisms," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38, no. 2 (2010): 389–614; Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 6 Antoinette Burton's "Who Needs the Nation?" is instructive in holding both these aspects of the nation in tension. See *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 3 (2002): 227–48.
- 7 Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation" in *On the Nation and "The Jewish People,"* preface by Shlomo Sand (London: Verso, 2010), 45.
- 8 Renan, "What is a Nation?" 64
- 9 Renan, "What is a Nation?" 64
- 10 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Tom Nairn, "The New Janus," *New Left Review* (November–December 1975): 3–27; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- 11 The idea of a daily plebiscite has led to the notion of the pedagogic and performative aspects of the nation, as in Homi Bhabha's essay, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 12 Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 88.
- 13 Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 86.
- 14 Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 87.
- 15 It bears mentioning here that Bagehot's notion of national character differs from that espoused by Johann Gotlieb Fichte, whose notion of "national character" presented in a series of lectures to a German audience in 1808 referred to a more organic "inner" sensibility. As Partha Chatterjee points out, Fichte's emphasis on an "inner" sensibility coursed through various nationalist programs throughout the nineteenth century; Chatterjee's own work on late nineteenth-century Indian nationalism is significantly influenced by Fichte's emphasis on an inner "national" core. See Chatterjee, *I Am the People*, 27. But Fichte's concept of inner sensibility is linked to that of an "inner frontier," which as Ann Laura Stoler points out, is

- highly and dangerously effective in laying the basis for a radically unequal and racialized polity. Ann Laura Stoler, "Interior Frontiers," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, May 29, 2018, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/category/issue-4-the-balibar-edition>.
- 16 H. C. Engelbrecht, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte: A Study of His Political Writings with Special Reference to His Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1933.
 - 17 Quoted in Ann Marie Millim, "Literary Histories, National Literatures, and Early Conceptions of World Literature in the *Athanaeuem*, 1833–38," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 48 (2018): 216–36, at 216. As Millim notes, "due to the lack of defining contours described by Goethe, the term world literature came to stand for a variety of ways for approaching and categorizing different national literatures or literature as a general category" (221).
 - 18 Millim, "Literary Histories," 217
 - 19 Robert Dixon, "Before the Nation: *Robin Boldrewood* and the Problem of Scale in National Literatures," *Australian Literary Studies* 30, no. 3 (2015): 6–27, at 7.
 - 20 Merve Fezjula, "The Cosmopolitan Historiography of Twentieth-Century Federalism," *The Historical Journal*, 64, no. 2 (2020): 1–24, at 1.
 - 21 Jed Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman: *The Story of an African Farm* and the Ghost of Goethe," *Victorian Studies* (Spring 2007): 407–29, at 414.
 - 22 Esty, "The Colonial Bildungsroman," 415.
 - 23 The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, bringing together, as Michael Green points out, "the British colonies, the Afrikaner republics conquered during the Anglo-Boer war, and the African kingdoms in the region." However, African interests and representation were overridden by the newly formed state. Michael Green, "Generic Instability and the National Project: History, Nation, and Form in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*," *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 4 (2006): 34–47, at 35.
 - 24 This is the point of Michael Green's essay, which tracks the reception history of the novel. See also Laura Chrisman, "Transforming Imperial Romance: Anti-Colonial Pastoralism and Sexual Politics in *Mhudi*" in her *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 - 25 See, for instance, the autobiographical memoir of Surendranath Banerjea, a prominent member of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century Indian nationalist movement: *A Nation in Making: Being the Reminiscences of Fifty Years of Public Life* (n.p. 1925).
 - 26 Taking from Ferdinand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems analysis, members of the Warwick Research Collective (WREC), for instance, argue for a single, integrated world-literary system: WREC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015). A world systems theory is generally inimical to the idea of nations because it is more invested in looking at regions or zones; however, the fact that it takes interconnectivity as a matter of systemic necessity is what is of significance to my point here.

- 27 Area Studies has a long and checkered history as far as the US nation-state is concerned. I am interested, however, in recent attempts to revivify it in ways that are not geared to geopolitical interests of the US. See, for instance, Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes Toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151–71; John Watkins, "The New Mediterranean Studies: A Mediator between Area and Global Studies," *Mediterranean Studies* 21, no. 2 (2013): 149–54.
- 28 I consider the transimperial as a framework for analysis in "Transimperial," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2018): 925–28. Although they are wary of the nation as a dominant unit of analysis, Hedinger et al. too draw on the transimperial for its parlay between different scales and units of analysis ("Transimperial History").