I had the honor, in December 2004, of speaking at a conference in Tunisia commemorating the work of Edward Said, the celebrated Palestinian-American scholar who had passed away in the previous year. As is well known, Said was a prolific and insightful writer, and *Orientalism* (1978) laid the groundwork for the development of Anglo-American Postcolonial Studies as a field. But it was clear, at the Tunisia conference, that Said was much more than a famous academic. The scholars, writers, and activists attending from around the world were interested in contextualizing Said’s work on literature and theory in terms of his writings on politics and history and global events such as the occupations of Palestine and Iraq. Yasser Arafat and Abu Ghraib were as much in the air, in other words, as *Orientalism* and *Out of Place*. Every scholar seemed to be an activist, too: the chair of my session had worked closely with the leadership of the African National Congress in the anti-apartheid struggle, and one of my co-panelists had been imprisoned by General August Pinochet in Chile. The

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In dark times an intellectual is very often looked to by members of his or her nationality to represent, speak out for, and testify to the sufferings of that nationality [. . .] For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others.


I’d say the biggest indictment of all is that we are still a country, a culture, a society which continues to nurture and practice the notion of untouchability. While our economists number-crunch and boast about the growth rate, a million people—human scavengers—earn their living carrying several kilos of other people’s shit on their heads every day. And if they didn’t carry shit on their heads they would starve to death. Some f***ing superpower this.

pleasant and unassuming academic couple I met one day turned out to be leaders of mass, secular organizations that participated in overthrowing the Shah of Iran in 1979. As if this were not enough, the conference sessions were packed with hundreds of students, eager to hear about Said and to engage in discussions about his work—and all this in English, presumably their third language. Upon learning the purpose of my visit, the taxi driver who picked me up from the airport conveyed to me, as I put my high school French lessons to use, the widespread respect and admiration that the Arab world had for Said.

Academics die every day, but Said stands out because he embodied the intellectual that he describes in the quotation above. Attentive to the Palestinian nation and its people, with whom he shared racial, ethnic, and historic roots, Said was able “to represent, speak out for, and testify to the sufferings of [his] nationality.” Closely linked to global audiences, at the same time, through his academic training and position at Columbia University, he took the opportunity “to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope” to Palestinian suffering. Said expressed, in other words, the very basic principles of namak-halaal cosmopolitanism that I have described throughout Decentering Rushdie, a cosmopolitanism that remains “true to its salt” even as it opposes parochialism and yokes itself to other nations and peoples. The tremendous sense of internationalism and solidarity in this position emerges from the notion that the intellectual ought to “associate that experience [of a nation’s suffering] with the suffering of others.” I particularly appreciate the materialist and historicist basis on which Said constructs these global others: they are capable of empathy because they, too, know what it is to suffer.

The notion that the intellectual can and should translate between worlds in this way is quite far from Gayatri Spivak’s trenchant critique of attempts to represent subaltern suffering in statements such as the following: “The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade” (Critique 255). The sincere effort of the intellectual to speak truth to power in Said becomes, in Spivak’s formulation, an exercise in bad faith, a trick learned in the process of career-building and self-legitimation. But is insincerity and opportunism really constitutive of all intellectual efforts to bear witness to suffering and oppression? Said’s framework opens a space for the possibility of representation despite its many pitfalls—thereby positioning itself against contemporary theories about the inherently limited nature of nation-oriented discourse (e.g., Homi Bhabha), the Eurocentrism of historiography and universalisms (e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty), and Foucauldian paradigms of knowledge/
power that limit our ability to understand others (e.g., Said’s own *Orientalism*).  

**Tracking the Postnational Turn**

All postcolonial Indian novels in English, one can argue, are thrust into the position of speaking on behalf of the nation and its people given the contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and consumed. Many of the cosmopolitan and elite writers of the genre, whether based in India or not, deliberately take on the “task”—as Said calls it—of representing the nation and its history; those who do not are often read as “native informants” anyway. But after the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1980, Indian English novels tended to problematize the decolonized nation itself in their representations of postcolonial suffering, focusing on the problems of narrating history rather than on history itself. While India and Indianness continued to be central to Indian English novels of the 1980s and 1990s such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1988), Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995), such texts tended to identify continuing problems of hierarchy and oppression in India with the nation-state and nationalism as such. In *Decentering Rushdie*, I have suggested that this “postnational” turn was a common response of left/progressive Indian English writers to the crisis of the nation-state that culminated in the Emergency of 1975–77 and developments in its aftermath, including the fragmentation of the Indian polity and rise of communalism, the transition from Nehruvian state capitalism to neoliberal economics, and, on the flip side, the Indian middle classes’ increasing access to the West in terms of commodities, culture, and physical relocation. These Indian events were part of larger, global transitions after the economic downturn of the early 1970s, engendering the failures of decolonized nation-states.

As I suggested in the first chapter, however, the specificity of the postnational turn in the Indian English novel has been lost in light of the theoretical paradigms that dominate Anglo-American Postcolonial Studies. Itself a product of the early 1980s, the field quickly aligned itself with postmodernism and developed ways of thinking about representation, the nation, power/resistance, and history in which postnational orientations were seen as being inherently progressive in relation to national thinking.
Even worse, from the perspective of literary criticism, it canonized the postmodern, postnational texts of the 1980s and 1990s and made them—especially *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*—the mark of “the” postcolonial. “Postcoloniality” was now a mode of knowledge, and cosmopolitan intellectuals’ task was not to represent national and popular suffering but to point to the problems of national thinking and the impossibility and violence of representation. Migrancy, exile, hybridity, transnationalism—these are the tropes that Postcolonial Studies, ironically, has universalized in its unitary conceptualizations of the nation, the cosmopolitan intellectual, and postcoloniality itself. As a corrective, *Decentering Rushdie* historicizes and particularizes the postnational turn in both literature and theory by revealing the presence of *namak-halaal* cosmopolitanisms that dominated the Indian English novel before the 1980s. Novels of the Nehruvian era, like literary and artistic movements during the anticolonial struggle, set out to embrace the very “task of the intellectual” that Said describes—representing national and local spaces as sites for postcolonial regeneration even when they sharply criticized the existing nation and reflected on the difficulties that emerge when English-educated elites attempt to speak for all Indians. The dominant tropes for *namak-halaal* writings have been the struggle to achieve “the ordinariness of living” (Sahgal), fusion (Markandaya, Sahgal), wholeness (Desai), and “shared rage” (Roy). Concordant relations between the implied author, narrator, and implied reader are key to establishing a *namak-halaal* cosmopolitanism and the ethical commitments to the nation. Rather than positioning themselves as nonteleological, these *namak-halaal* texts freely admit their goal and direction: to confront injustice and inequality, to image a more egalitarian nation and world, and to direct their elite readers toward critical self-reflection in this regard.

By “decentering Rushdie,” I aim to expand our theoretical categories of postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism in order that we may more fully grasp the heterogeneity of the genre and postcolonial cultural production in general. This means, however, challenging the urge to simplify and valorize *namak-halaal* texts over postnational ones. My readings of novels by Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Rushdie, and Nayantara Sahgal complicate the broad shift from *namak-halaal* to postnational cosmopolitanisms by debunking rigid, deterministic associations of three kinds: history with literature, orientation with political ideology, and either of these with literary form. I contrast the representations of modernity and subjectivity in two *namak-halaal* texts (chapter 2), pursue the development of interiority and characterization in two feminist, *namak-
halaal texts (chapter 3), pair together post-Emergency novels with very different perspectives on the nation in terms of their class politics (chapter 4), and read a contemporary, magical realist text as namak-halaal (chapter 5). In this way, the ideological and narrative analyses of Decentering Rushdie portray a map of postcolonial cosmopolitan writing that reveals the shift from namak-halaal to postnational visions over time even as it traces the intricate web of elements—ideological, thematic, and aesthetic—that connects them organically. The selection of multiple novels by Sahgal, whose writings span the entire postcolonial period, is meant to offer a small version of the book’s larger project; we can see how her texts change even as they remain steadily namak-halaal (and nationalist) in their orientation.

Indeed, what stands out about Sahgal is not her representative quality but her uniqueness in terms of the explicit attention she pays to the dialectical relationship between individuals and their sociopolitical situations. Decentering Rushdie argues for her necessary presence in discussions about the Indian English novel.

The fact that the texts I have selected and read as namak-halaal are all written by women is more than a coincidence, even though I did not set out to write a book about “postcolonial women’s writing” per se. I do not mean to imply that there is a necessary link between national orientation and women’s writing: one could easily find namak-halaal texts by male writers (e.g., Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan [1956], Bhabani Bhattacharya’s Shadow from Ladakh [1966]). Nevertheless, the selected novels and authors, paired together, stand out for me in terms of what they reveal about the diversity of the postcolonial Indian English over time—including the richness of their narratives, the close attention they pay to questions of elite/subaltern voice and characterization, their concerns with postcolonial inequalities, and the diversity of their approaches to the nation. More specifically, as I have found, turning toward novels from the 1950s and 1960s itself means highlighting novels by women, and it is significant that so many of these, often raising critical questions about unequal gender relations and the continuing hold of traditional attitudes, are unwilling to write off the nation. While postcolonial theory has long insisted on the opposition between a reactionary, sexist nationalism and women’s freedom—no doubt because mainstream nationalism has been notorious in orienting around a normative male subject—these novels by women and featuring female protagonists have sought to create gender-equalitarian spaces within the nation, continuing to see it as the terrain for future emancipation. Decentering Rushdie, from this point of view, chronicles the development of a powerful set of female protagonists across different
novels by women, whose implied and real authors have them take up the tasks of the intellectual as described by Said.

Decentering Rushdie’s attempt to complicate the categories of nationalism and national orientation as inherently reactionary and of cosmopolitanism as inherently radical and progressive is, potentially, its most important contribution. The pre-Emergency, namak-halaal texts I read in the first two chapters, for instance, do not hold onto the nation for reactionary purposes but—seeking to fulfill Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals of “wiping every tear from every eye” (Nehru, “Tryst” 4)—exhort their cosmopolitan-elite characters and implied audiences to construct subaltern-friendly models of India. On the flip side, postnational positions, explicitly radical in outlook, can become either Western-oriented or, succumbing to the global marketing of India today, slip into modes that, paradoxically, fetishize and romanticize the nation. We come to recognize that namak-halaal and postnational orientations ought not to be regarded, a priori, as either inherently radical or conservative. As I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, critics need to maintain a flexibility in our conceptions of political affiliation in order to properly read the meaning behind a given novel’s or author’s concerns. The following illustration of a complicated interaction between Roy and Rushdie demonstrates the need for a methodological openness to the texts and authors themselves before making political judgments.

“Some f***ing superpower this.”

In their joint interview with Charlie Rose on August 14, 1997, the eve of India’s fiftieth anniversary, Rushdie and Roy provide a snapshot of two positions that are available to contemporary Indian intellectuals and artists as they negotiate their relationships to the nation and the world. Rushdie is clearly positioned as the dominant voice in the interview—The God of Small Things has not yet won the Booker and Roy’s major political essays are a few years away. Rushdie is chummy with Rose throughout, often treating Roy in patronizing ways when not cutting her off in mid-sentence. But he becomes increasingly annoyed as Roy continues to raise questions about his pronouncements regarding India, the Indian middle class, and Indian writing. This leads to complicated developments. Rushdie’s celebrated postnational cynicism easily slips into a mainstream nationalist discourse that is complicit with Rose’s romanticization of India—even though Rushdie is firmly situated outside India. On the other hand, Roy
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constantly rejects the suggestion that the growing wealth of Indian elites represents Indian progress and critiques the nation—but she makes this criticism by rhetorically affirming her location within and commitment to the national space.

Upon being asked about the future of India in light of internal separatist strife and continuing tensions with Pakistan, Rushdie contends:

I don’t think there was ever a moment when I thought [India] would split [. . . ] It just does exist. It just is there, does exist, and it ain’t gonna break up [. . . ] Maybe the opposite is going to happen [. . . ] Anti-Partition, un-Partition, by which I don’t really mean political unity. The oldest object I possess, given to me when I was born, is a block of silver on which is engraved the map of undivided India, the real India [. . . ] If I was looking optimistically, 50 years from now, maybe we would see Partition as a blip. (Interview with Charlie Rose)

The ideals that Rushdie expresses represent, at once, a desire for the end of nationalist rivalries and a tautological faith in the unity of the Indian nation: it will never split because it “just is there.” National borders mean little for this postnational intellectual, but his position is derived from a deeply Indian notion of subjectivity, one that is secured in almost a religious manner through the sacred, silver block, a talisman marked with the nation and handed down through the family. The perspective seems to evoke a powerful namak-halaal narrative, one that is specifically tied to a secular Muslim family’s faith in the Indian nation in the late colonial period (Rushdie was born, like Saleem Sinai, in 1947).

Roy’s response to this comment, however, draws out how disaffiliated Rushdie’s view is from the sociopolitical realities of India in 1997:

Actually [. . . ] I would love to feel the way you feel, because it’s the right way to feel, and many of us do wish that this barrier didn’t exist between India and Pakistan. But what I think is that . . . maybe it’s just a perspective from living there and seeing what happens . . . the fact is that what is happening is peculiar. One the one hand you have this internet culture [. . . ] and on the other hand you have tribalism [. . . ] (Interview with Charlie Rose; ellipses represent pauses in Roy’s speech)

Trying not to appear uncharitable toward Rushdie’s desire for a larger unity, Roy nevertheless marks his feeling as one that comes from not “living there and seeing what happens.” We are reminded strongly of
Bim’s repudiation of Bakul’s NRI visions of India in Clear Light of Day. Migrancy/exile is rewritten here as a space of unknowing, in which memories of the nation—however powerful—are reified to such an extent that they posit the nation as an inherently unified entity. Rather than simply gesturing to the nation as an idea, Roy engages it by discussing the contradictions within it, the class divisions and the contrast between global thinking and “tribalism.” And when the reporter Barbara Crossette jumps into the conversation from its margins in order to gloss “tribalism” as a despicable subaltern attitude, Roy asserts that she is in fact talking about middle-class elites and politicians who hold right-wing ideas about religious, class, and caste difference.

This dynamic continues throughout the interview, with Rushdie, Rose, and Crossette continually highlighting India’s uniqueness as a hybrid nation with “larger-than-life characters” (Crossette) and a perfect “cornucopia” for any novelist (Rushdie), and Roy emphasizing that India is not all that special—that “there are things about India that are just like everywhere else.” Frustrated with Roy, Rushdie makes a stark differentiation between her project and his own:

What I’m saying is this: India allowed me to become the writer that I have become, that I could not have become otherwise. I mean, I know that this is a book [pointing to Roy’s novel] about small things, and intimacies, and details, and so on and, you know, good for it. But I’m saying that there is this other project which excited me which has to do with taking on the whole damn thing, you know, and that’s what I’ve wanted to do and tried to do [. . . ]

No longer allowed to play the native informant as he usually does, Rushdie is forced to particularize his views about India as those emanating from a specific ideological position as well as—as a result of India’s shameful ban of The Satanic Verses—his physical distance from the nation. The surface distinction made here between Rushdie and Roy—nation/fragment, big things/small things—might seem to posit Roy as representing the real postmodernist and postnational position and Rushdie as exemplifying namak-halaal and nationalist cosmopolitanism. But it is in fact Roy’s attention to the conditions of Indian life, to the stories of loss hidden behind the image of the nation as cornucopia, that marks her as being situated within the space of India on many levels. It is Roy’s materialist critique of postcoloniality, resisting both the transnational dismissal of the nation and the expatriate’s abstract longing for it, that produces her subaltern-centered version
of namak-halaal cosmopolitanism. In this Roy is very much taking up the
tasks of the intellectual as outlined by Said.

Roy, indeed, consistently operates from within such nation-oriented
paradigms. Certainly, the criticism of Indian postcoloniality in the sec-
ond epigraph above positions ongoing caste oppression in direct opposi-
tion to nationalist mythologies: a million people have to choose between
“carry[ing] shit on their heads” and “stary[ing] to death” even while the
national and global media trumpet India’s economic growth rate and its
advancement as a “superpower” (“It’s Outright War”). But Roy’s consist-
tent use of the first-person plural—“we are still a country,” “our econo-
mists”—and her engagement throughout the interview with specific Indian
questions, aim to transform the nation by reimagining and reclaiming it
from within. As Roy asserts on a more personal note in another inter-
view with Tehelka, national orientation and nationalism ought not to
be conflated: “I don’t have a nationalistic bone in my body. It’s just not
my instinct. Yet it’s inconceivable for me to not be [in India], because it’s
everything that I love [. . . ] I’m just a full desi—full-time desi in that way.
I just feel, where else can you be?” (“Success”).

“Who dared lose heart when there was work to be done?”

Namak-balaal cosmopolitan writers always resituate themselves thus, in
the middle of the very sites of suffering that they critique—and hope to
change. While this orientation and ethics emerges from a variety of ideo-
logical positions, novels and other texts penned in this mode seek to draw
the implied audience into asking questions that, demanding a response,
aim to move us into critical thought and action. Both namak-balaal and
postnational novels in English depict gender inequality, caste oppression,
elite brutality, poverty, corruption, and the end of the grand promises that
had been made to Indians at the “dawn of freedom” in 1947. But it is only
the namak-balaal texts that seek a path leading away from that devas-
tation—one that emerges from within the national space itself. The con-
cept of namak-balaal writing ought not to be restricted to postcolonial
India. The powerful spoken-word poem “First Writing Since” (2001) by
the Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad, capturing her feeling as a Mus-
lim and a New Yorker immediately after the terrorist attacks of September
11, 2001, powerfully portrays the “dialectic of suffering and redemption”
(Ndebele 54) discussed in chapter 5. Toward the end of her piece, for
instance, Hammad writes/says: “anyone reading this is breathing, maybe
hurting / but breathing for sure” (3). The lines invoke, simultaneously, the pain that the speaker and implied audience are feeling, as well as the ability to withstand that pain. But by grounding the possibility of hope and agency in the implied and real audiences’ acts of breathing, the poem seeks to make us realize our own role in changing the world—the real world lying outside the text. The speaker of the poem can do nothing without the reader/listener; their fates are intertwined.

The passage that concludes *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1952), Sahgal’s early memoir, seeks to create the same relationship with its implied audience as Hammad’s poem in order to find respite in a similar moment of crisis and tragedy. Sahgal reports on her feelings after witnessing the cremation of M. K. Gandhi, killed by a Hindu fanatic on January 31, 1948. Though too young to have participated in any of the anticolonial agitations—“that had been the work of a different generation”—Sahgal feels the loss on both a visceral and a historiographical level: “It was as if the continuity of a long process begun before my birth had suddenly snapped like a dry twig, leaving me entirely without a sense of direction” (233). We can discern the mainstream nationalist discourse that lies beneath Sahgal’s words and the elite-centered models of leadership that her sorrow about Gandhi conveys—but also the desire to respond to subaltern suffering. In short, we can comprehend the power of the namak-halaal narrative, an aspect of postcolonial cosmopolitan-elite writing that deserves to be factored into discussions about postcoloniality.

The lines that end Sahgal’s book are a testament to the hope that generations of postcolonial cosmopolitanisms have sought in the struggle to reclaim promises that were broken:

> With an effort I roused myself from my imaginings [. . .] Were my values so fragile [. . .] that I could so easily lose courage when he was no longer there? [. . .] He had come to disturb [people] profoundly, to jolt them out of indifference, to awaken them to one another’s suffering, and in so doing to make them reach for the stars. Those stars still beckoned luminously [. . .] Who among us dared lose heart when there was this work to be done? The curtain had rung down over a great drama, but another one was about to begin. Gandhi was dead but India would live on in his children. (*Prison* 233–44)

The gap between “Gandhi’s children” and “Midnight’s children” describes the difference between Sahgal’s namak-halaal position and Rushdie’s postnational orientation. Clearly, all namak-halaal novelists would not espouse
such a hagiographical representation of Gandhi—and Sahgal, too, moves away from such a stark nationalism in much of her more mature work.

Yet, the idea that there is “work to be done” is exactly the tone with which Said describes the “task” of the intellectual. What will the Indian English writer do today, when—to borrow a phrase from Langston Hughes—India is “in vogue” in the West? Far be it from me to assign a “task,” but I have hoped to offer a methodology that can keep us aware of the various experiments that are already underway. First, the first decade of the new century seems to have re-established, in various ways, that a global hierarchy of nation-states continues to underpin the world system, and that struggles for democracy and self-determination in the postcolonial world continue to express themselves on the terrain of the nation. The diagnosis/prognosis of many on the Left that we have now entered a postnational, decentered phase of world capitalism has been refuted, in my view, by the return of a form of territorial imperialism in the U.S. occupations of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003); by the current global recession, grounded in the failure of the U.S. housing market; and by the various, nation-oriented rebellions against this state of affairs, whether by state actors (Hugo Chavez in Venezuela) or movements of various sorts (Iraqis, Palestinians, Sri Lankan Tamils, Kashmiris, Guatemalans). We may want to examine how postcolonial fictional and theoretical texts, too, are reimagining the nation in these changing contexts.

It may be possible to identify, broadly speaking, a new interest in realism and materialist representations of history in South Asian fiction—even as the lessons of metafiction and the investigations of transnational relations are not lost. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2000) and his new series beginning with *Sea of Poppies* (2008); Tariq Ali’s now-completed quartet of novels on Islamic/Western interactions; Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2002); and Amit Chaudhuri’s *Freedom Song* (1998)—such texts pay attention to the problems of historiography and memory without reducing the nation to either an inexplicable site of chaos or a backdrop for elite dilemmas. The stories in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), similarly, are dedicated to exploring the loss involved in transnational migration, rather than its alleged transcendence of national concerns. The realism and even naturalism of Arvind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), privileging a subaltern character even while treating Indians in general with a Naipaulian disgust, raises important questions about ideology and narrative. And through all this we have the steady and reliable Sahgal, exploring the heterogeneity of the Gandhian movement in *Lesser Breeds* (2003) through the eyes of a young Muslim English professor—
skeptical of nonviolent tactics and, with his background of poverty, alienated by the Anglicized ways of the (nationalist) cosmopolitans around him.

Pierre Bourdieu has written that artists and “cultural producers” have the unique power of presenting to their audiences, in a concrete form, their “more or less confused, vague, unformulated [. . .] experiences of the natural and social world” (qtd. in Lazarus, Nationalism 142). However, much as Paolo Freire has said about teachers, Bourdieu maintains a distinction between the subject position and ideology/practice of individual artists by emphasizing that “they may put this power in the service of the dominant” or “in the logic of their struggle within the field of social power, they may put their power at the service of the dominated” (142). In this uncertain moment, when racism against South Asians in the West increases even while mehndi “tattoos” and bindis proliferate as never before, when new global markets allow an Indian middle class to prosper stupendously but also force thousands of farmers to commit suicide, Indian English writers have a wide range of perspectives to choose from—as they always have. We need to develop models of postcoloniality and cosmopolitanism that will be attentive to new formations and the return of old ones. Decentering Rushdie has aimed to put forward a critical methodology that acknowledges literature’s ability to reimagine its past, present, and future—even while tracing the historical and ideological contexts that shape and limit those imaginings.