Introduction

Nationalism can only ever be a crucial political agenda against oppression. All longings to the contrary, it cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity. (Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*)

Say No, Black Woman
Say No,
When they give you a back seat
In the liberation wagon
Yes Black Woman
A Big No. (Gcina Mhlope, ‘Say no’)

Girl at war

The beginning of this study of gender, nation and postcolonial narrative lies, appropriately, in story – a story about a ‘girl’, a girl at war.

The ‘girl’, Gladys, is the at first nameless young woman whom the narrator of Chinua Achebe’s 1960s short story ‘Girls at war’ encounters at three representative moments during the years of the Biafra War. Achebe has long been intrigued by the power granted women in myth (take Ani, Idemili), but what is at issue in the present story is not so much mythical presence as the ‘girl’ Gladys’s nationally signifying condition. She is in effect on three different occasions and under three different guises a sign of the at-first-emergent and then declining nationalist times.

With ‘Girls at war’ Achebe expresses something of the exhaustion and disillusionment that was the aftermath of the 1967–70 Biafra conflict in Nigeria. In this protracted war, the secessionist, minoritarian nationalism of the Igbo East or Biafra that had brought Nigeria’s triumphant, multi-ethnic nationalism of the anti-colonial era to crisis (and of which the writer, like the poet Christopher Okigbo, was a supporter), was painfully suppressed. In the short story three distinct phases in the worsening conflict are charted, each phase corresponding to
a meeting between the narrator, Reginald Nwankwo, an official in the doomed new state’s Ministry of Justice, and Gladys, the girl. As the narrator of the story, Reginald indexes each phase in the action relative to Gladys’s various incarnations as a ‘girl at war’. The term ‘girl’, with its compound implications of vulnerability, immaturity, helplessness and sexual provocativeness, is used throughout.

The first time the two meet, Gladys is off to join the militia and Reginald gives her a lift in his car. This takes place, it is said, in ‘the first heady days of war, when thousands of young men and sometimes women too were coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defence of the exciting new nation’ (GW 98, emphasis added). Reginald tells her that ‘girls [are] not required in the militia’ and instructs her to go home (GW100). On their second meeting, he is again in his car, she on the side of the road, but as she is supervising a road block, she now gives the instructions. Reginald’s irritation registers the extent to which this contravenes his expectations as a privileged government official and as a man. His feelings are somewhat mitigated, however, by the pleasure he takes in her appearance: her military look aside, she is ‘a beautiful girl in a breasty blue jersey’ (GW99). He is even more impressed when she reveals her identity. ‘Yes, you were the girl’, says Reginald when he recognises her. As he drives off his preconceptions have been sufficiently shaken for him to acknowledge that ‘the girls’ in the national militia must now be taken seriously; they are no longer to be compared to children imitating their fathers’ drilling exercises (GW 100). Significantly though, despite the potential subversion implicit in their new military work, ‘their devotion’ to the nation’s cause, the time-honoured role of self-dedication, has redeemed them. The cause itself not only remains of the first importance, but also is elite-driven, firmly in the hands of those at the top. As he drives away, Reginald repeats to himself the words his new friend used to describe her activity: ‘we are doing the work you asked us to do’ (GW100).

Reginald and ‘the girl’ meet for the third time 18 months later. The war is going badly; the once optimistic Biafra is crippled with defeat and mass starvation. Reginald has gone out for food supplies for his family, in ‘search of relief’, as he says (GW101). On the way home relief comes in the form of his old friend the girl, once again hitch-hiking by the side of the road, once again in a different garb. The military look, Reginald observes with relief, has not lasted long: ‘You were always beautiful of course, but now you are a beauty queen’ (GW103). In his eyes her new appearance secures her a measure of individuality; she is no longer merely an exponent of devoted national service. At last Reginald learns her name.

However, Reginald is not entirely comfortable with the way that Gladys has turned out. Taking note of her high-tinted wig and expensive shoes he concludes that these are smuggled goods: his friend has been corrupted, no doubt
by an attack-trader dealing in looted goods. Once again the girl is not entirely in charge; she is susceptible to being manipulated. ‘Too many girls were simply too easy these days’, Reginald says to himself, ‘War sickness, some called it’ (GW 106). His friend’s physical state, compounded by her alleged status as a pawn in an underground enterprise, becomes an emblem of the general state of the nation. Reginald himself recognises this: ‘Gladys . . . was just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre’ (GW 114).

The girl’s ‘rottenness’, however, excites Reginald’s desire. After she has ‘[yielded]’ to him – another sign of her corruptibility – he offers to drive her to her home, hoping in this way to find out more about her. En route, having picked up another hitch-hiker, a disabled young soldier, they are caught in an air raid. Gladys runs back to help the soldier and the two of them are caught in the bombardment, immolated in one another’s arms. This final image, significantly elaborated by the presence of the soldier bearing the wounds of his national service on his body, confirms Gladys’s emblematic role. The moment of conflagration signifies the destruction of young Biafra, of brave, loyal soldiers and dutiful girls united in a hopeless and yet ennobling national struggle. Moreover, through her heroic act Gladys reasserts the integrity she appeared to have lost, but does so by becoming once again unambiguously feminine. Her death fixes her in the time-honoured attitude for women of self-sacrifice.

Indeed, across the course of the short story Gladys carries both the positive and the negative connotations of women’s action in service of the postcolonial nation-in-formation – of national conflict as glorious, for a brief time, and then, more predictably, of double-dealing and civil strife as diseased and corrupting. The representation of the male soldier, introduced only at the point of glorious immolation, is more straightforward. If manipulable girls, crudely speaking, represent the state of the nation whatever its condition, male figures by contrast exemplify honest-to-goodness integrity and staunch national character.4 This seems to be so not only because men command the action – driving the cars and carrying the guns – but also because they determine its meanings. The contrast pertains whether we look at the arena of postcolonial national politics – at national pageantry, presidential cavalcades, garlanded grandstands – or, as in this book Stories of Women, within the somewhat more secluded spaces of national literatures and the writing of the nation.

Gender, the nation and postcolonial narrative

As in the cross-section of a tree trunk that is nowhere unmarked by its grain – by that pattern expressing its history – so, too, is the nation informed throughout by its gendered history, by the normative masculinities and femininities that have shaped its growth over time. This concept, of the gendered configuration
of the postcolonial nation, and, specifically, of the nation embodied as woman by male leaders, artists and writers, has demonstrated a remarkable charge in recent years, generating a large number of historical, literary and cultural studies. Joining this discussion, it is the contention of this book, too, that gendered, predominantly familial (patriarchal), forms have been invoked, paradoxically, to imagine postcolonial nations into being, and that, reciprocally, constructions of the nation in fiction and other discourses are differentially marked by masculine and feminine systems of value.

What then was the justification for adding yet another book to the expanding group? The answer comes in two parts. First, to a feminist critic it centres on the intriguing reappearance across time, and across nations, including anticolonial nations, if with inevitable cultural modifications, of women as the bearers of national culture. This historical and ‘transnational’ reiteration is demonstrated in numerous fictional reflections and responses, from men and women writers (and, indeed, in my own continuing fascination with the trope). In this book I am therefore interested in questioning more closely, and in more cross-cultural detail than has been attempted up to this point, the political motivations for, and the possible feminist responses to, this apparent constant.

Yet, although women may be objectified by the nation, where the normative citizen is usually defined as male, there remains – and this would form the second part of my answer – the extraordinary durability of the nation-concept, especially in relation to liberation politics. Famously contradictory, nationalism can be deployed to reactionary and progressive ends; as a means to self-determination and social justice for an entire people, and a channel of their at once national and international consciousness, and as an oppressive formation run in the interests of an elite. The nation has historically not only offered important ways of recovering self and reclaiming cultural integrity after colonial occupation, but has also remained an important ground for transforming political and economic conditions, forging identity and achieving social justice. Not only Janus-faced but protean, adaptive and affiliative rather than derivative, taking on different forms at the hands of different groups and classes, the nation continues to exert a hold on emergent geopolitical entities in quest of self-representation. Despite its ‘en-gendering’, its liberatory potential remains compelling, also to women. Therefore I was concerned to ask, in the later chapters of the book in particular, why this might be so, and how in an apparently transnational, globalised world, this appeal is expressed. These are questions that to date most discussions of nationalism as a patriarchal project have, as if by definition, tended to avoid.

It would be fair to say that my own critical work on iconic women and their nationalist creators, in particular ‘Stories of women and mothers’ and ‘The master’s dance’ (expanded as chapters 5 and 3, respectively), played a role in
the making of early 1990s gender-and-nation studies. This is demonstrated in their repeated citation, both overt and silent – in particular as regards the interlocking of national concepts and signifiers of femininity – in the influential work of critics such as Anne McClintock and Florence Stratton.6 Crossing feminist critique and postcolonial debates with political theories of the nation, initial attempts (my own and others’) to theorise the gender configurations of the postcolonial nation, brought feminist ideas into the heart of a field which was not particularly animated by women’s issues per se. From such diverse and relatively modest beginnings, postcolonial studies of the woman-as-nation have since travelled widely in feminist circles, and in productive, cross-border ways. In view of this still-ramifying and, it should be said, still-contested interest, I feel it to be productive in this book to revisit and, variously, to elaborate, modify and consolidate my own thinking (and thus my own original essays) on the woman-nation topic. I also aim to do so within a more comparative, cross-cultural frame than I have attempted before, in order critically to reflect upon as well as to reflect the spread of gender-nation theory – as of the phenomenon of woman-as-nation. Taken together, these two interests form a synoptic justification for Stories of Women.

The case I wish to develop is, it is worth emphasising, a ‘strong’ one: not only that woman-as-sign buttresses national imagining, but that gender has been, to date, habitual and apparently intrinsic to national imagining. It is difficult, though not impossible, to conceive of the nation without the inscription of specific symbolic roles for male and female historical actors. ‘The production of a unified, homogeneous entity such as [the nation] . . . hinges, to a large degree, on the determinate subject position of “woman” for its articulation’, and it is this which has led to the entrenched but not irresolvable tension between nationalist and feminist agendas in many countries.7 In short, national difference, like other forms of difference, is constituted through the medium of the sexual binary, using the figure of the woman as a primary vehicle.8

This claim is supported by another, which I share with Sangeeta Ray, Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, and others, that no theory engaging fully with either (national) resistance or sociality at both micropolitical and macropolitical levels can adopt ‘a gender-neutral method of inquiry’.9 To theorise social relations and space in the absence of feminist theories of spatialisation and modernity is to lose ‘a whole line of argument’ central to such constructions, as Caren Kaplan emphasises by citing Doreen Massey.10 Theories of the nation, and indeed of postcolonialism, like those of modernity in Massey’s case, remain in this sense ‘deeply invested’ in their absences.

Yet if this argument respecting gender is one trajectory which Stories of Women traces, the second case it wishes to put, which is equally important, and, I would submit, equally generative, pertains to the allegedly compromised relationship of women to the postcolonial nation, given its marked gender
differentials. On the face of it, progressive, self-assertive women appear caught in a dilemma, in that the ideology that promises self-expression, liberation and transformation through political action is characterised by their simultaneous marginalisation, and that nationalist resistance has often been resolved in a revivalist direction, reifying traditional gender differences. A number of the chapters in this book certainly take this line. In response to such gender weighting, as other chapters show, postcolonial women writers have questioned, cut across, upended or refused entirely the dominant if not dominatory narrative of the independent nation. They have placed their own subjectivities, sexualities, maternal duties, private stories and intimate pleasures in tension with conventional roles transmitted by national and other traditional narratives.

Yet it is also true, compellingly true, as Kumari Jayawardena urged in the 1980s, that in the twentieth century ‘struggles for women’s emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements’ across the decolonising world. Indeed, not only have women’s political movements often borrowed from nationalist discourses of rights and identity formation (and vice versa), but women nationalists specifically, where they have had the opportunity, have tended to develop the progressive dimensions of nationalism more profitably than their male counterparts. Whereas nationalist movements led by men, especially those of a nativist brand, have promoted cultural homogeneity and feminised traditions, women within such movements have tended to be more concerned with political egalitarianism founded on the recognition of diversity. As in Avtar Brah’s reminder (the full version of which pays respects to both Lenin and Fanon): ‘nationalist discourses construct and embody a variety of contradictory political and cultural tendencies; therefore nationalism can operate powerfully as a force against oppression.’

With this in mind, Stories of Women asks whether, in the face of growing communalism on the one hand, and of the rise of economic, political and cultural transnationalism on the other, the nation may once again, or may continue to, provide channels for women’s social and political transformation. If the nation may be said to remain a key actor in a globalised world and to lay important ground for political mobilisation against multinational corporations, might it then (still) offer women a platform from which to mount movements of resistance and self-representation? Does it give scope for a new or renewed purchase on public political life? Are women perhaps less ready than before to disavow the nation, despite its lasting gender biases? Transnational and multicultural discourses are after all as eager as nationalism to deploy the reductive concept-metaphor of woman, whereas only the nation, by contrast, specifically invites the woman as citizen to enter modernity and public space. Does the nation, in theory if not yet historically, provide a site of democratic belonging that embraces the domestic context, from which ethnocentrisms and fundamentalisms sometimes far more hostile to women’s wellbeing may be questioned?
A study of the interrelationship of gender and nationalism which places itself, as does this book, within the ambit of postcolonial critique, has two important impacts on that body of critical discourse. For one, it usefully reminds postcolonial theory of the significance of the nation, as I will explain. For another, it persuasively introduces (and reintroduces) the constitutive reality of sexual difference to a critical practice that has till very recently, unless in passing, tended to overlook this formative legacy. In mainstream postcolonial studies, gender is still conventionally treated in a tokenistic way, or as subsidiary to the category of race. These two impacts correspond to the two major ironies or blind-spots of postcolonial theory which continue even today to compete for centre-stage. For, although the theory emerges from the political actions of the colonised involved in changing the conditions of their lives, great numbers of whom have been feminists and nationalists, postcolonial theorists have to date often neglected or peripheralised the legacies both of women’s resistance and of nationalist struggles for self-determination.

In the 1980s Chandra Mohanty’s essay ‘Under western eyes’ rightly gave warning about western feminism’s proprietorial if not colonising approach to Third World women. This is a point to which I will return. Yet, as if sanctioned by this censure, but in fact loftily removed from it, male-authored postcolonial theory, however well-intentioned, has since then remained relatively untouched by any serious consideration of gender, and certainly not of the *gendered nation*, even though the nation has been widely dismissed as monolithic. Similarly, while leading nationalist activists including Fanon have acknowledged the part played by women in national liberation struggles, the relative silence of the dominant postcolonial thinkers on the subject of nationalism, and of women’s roles in nationalist movements, has, by contrast, been notable.

Following the work of Ernest Gellner, Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, and, most influentially, Benedict Anderson, the nation is widely conceptualised as a fabricated entity, even though it may be experienced as a community defined by certain ‘real’ attributes held in common: ‘only imaginary communities are real’, Balibar writes. Far from being a biological or cultural given, a nation operates as a fiction uniting a people into a horizontally structured conglomerate into which they imagine themselves. As with the nation, so, too, for gender. Although experienced as natural, as a fundamental category of identity based on innate difference, gender as the construction of sexual orientation, too, is discursively organised, relationally derived, and culturally variable. Moreover, nationalism and gender have been deployed mutu-ally to invoke and constitute one another (while at the same time being constituted, always inconstantly, frangibly, in relation to other categories of difference also). Benedict Anderson himself once famously underlined the parallel: ‘in the modern world everyone can, should, will “have” an identity, as
he or she “has” a gender.17 Yet, even if the most persuasive advocate of the fictive nation thus openly recognised its base in male homosociality (‘fraternity’), he was less quick to develop the question of what this meant for the gender and sexual makeup of the imagined community. What were the repercussions for women in their attempts to enter what Nadine Gordimer once called the ‘commonality’ of a country?18 He declined to be drawn.

It is a refusal or an overlooking, however, in which Anderson is not alone, whether among theorists of the nation in general, or of postcolonial national resistance in particular. Here it is helpful to cite a few examples, selected from among many. Homi Bhabha’s controversial though theoretically productive suggestion that the homogenising ‘pedagogies’ of the prescriptive national ‘master-discourse’ are ceaselessly fractured by the performative interventions of those on its margins, including women, is, despite this inclusion, undisturbed by gender.19 For him, gender is effectively merely another sign of difference. Joe Cleary’s Literature, Partition and the Nation-State cogently examines minority divisions within nations, and the problem of conflicting claims to self-determination where communities are territorially interspersed. Even so, he erases in the course of his critique the widely recognised minority of women.20 Questioning Anderson’s elite-based or ‘top-down’ theory of national self-invention, he details the conflicting aspirations brought by class, ethnic, regional and religious differences, yet seemingly overlooks gender. It is thus left to Partha Chatterjee, when formulating his theory of apparently derivative yet creatively adaptive Third World nationalisms some ten years or so before Cleary, to point to gender as the operative means through which the nation distinguishes tradition from modernity. Although Chatterjee is exclusively interested in male proponents of anti-colonial nationalism (perhaps for obvious historical reasons), his essays insightfully establish the female domestic sphere as a storehouse of traditional attitudes (specifically for South Asia), one which enables male nationalists to appropriate the forms of European modernity while simultaneously conserving an apparent cultural authenticity.21

Differently from these thinkers, proponents and theorists of anti-colonial nationalism, like Frantz Fanon and Nelson Mandela, have openly recognised the important contribution of women to national struggles, and women’s self-transformation by way of that contribution. Yet even they, as chapter 4 on the national leader’s autobiography will also make clear, do not explore the full implications of their gendered understanding of the nation and of anti-colonial movements. Amilcar Cabral, independence leader of Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands in the 1960s and early 1970s, for example, pays noteworthy attention to the differential position of women as against men in relation to the nation-state. Nonetheless, in his speeches and writing he views the comrades and martyrs who stood at the head of the nationalist struggle as normatively, if not exclusively, male: each comrade who has ‘fallen under the
bullets of the . . . colonialists [is] identified . . . with all peace-loving men and freedom-loving men everywhere'. On one occasion, during 'an informal talk with Black Americans' in 1972, Cabral acknowledges that his party has made important advances as regards the exclusion of women from power, thus honouring what he describes as the varying forms of recognition given to women among the cultures of his country. But as part of the same response he makes a straightforward further admission: ‘We have (even myself) to combat ourselves on this problem [of the cultural marginalisation of women]’. Significantly, the entire comment was made in answer to a question from the group of African Americans; he did not offer it of his own accord.

For Frantz Fanon, the leading theorist of nationalism as an unforgoable phase of opposition to the destructions of colonisation, the anti-colonial struggle is first and foremost always a struggle for ‘man’s liberation’, a struggle waged by men against other men. Such an assumption co-exists with Fanon’s often remarkable insights for his time into the gendering and transgendering through which the colonial project is configured, and into how women’s investment in anti-colonialism is therefore different from men’s. Nationalism, he perceives in the trenchant essay ‘Algeria Unveiled’, as elsewhere, invokes men and women in contrasting ways, especially as, he writes, both the occupying colons and the (male) ‘occupied’ enlist women as signifiers of culture. Concomitantly, however, woman to Fanon becomes a subject of history only through her part in the national resistance. She is uniquely politicised by means of this involvement, and, moreover, politicised in an ‘instinctive’ way. In the fight for liberation, he revealingly writes, ‘Algerian society . . . renewed itself and developed new values governing sexual relations’. Women did not exercise a self-transforming agency in relation to these changes.

However, if gender poses difficulties for male theorists of the nation, how much more, comparatively speaking, has the nation, even Fanon’s liberatory nation, become a troubling and troubled concept for many versions of postcolonial theory, in particular those privileging the heterogeneous (and rhetorically ‘feminine’) over the national and (allegedly) unitary. Developments in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and southern Africa notwithstanding, the nation in the current ‘globalised’ world is widely and understandably regarded both by historians like Eric Hobsbawn and postcolonial theorists like Paul Gilroy, Deepak Chakrabarty, Achille Mbembe, and many others, as undermined or discredited. Consistently demonstrating elite-driven, appropriative, exclusionary and xenophobic tendencies often carried over from the colonial state, the post-independence nation is seen to have presided over kleptomaniacal surplus extraction, the formation of predatory cartels and contract cabals, and the immiseration of its people. It has fulfilled the predictions of the most pessimistic of its detractors as being ‘one-eyed’ and hate-filled, as, for example, in the work of self-consciously cosmopolitan writers such as James
Joyce, or, more recently, Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje. As national GDPs widely attest, most Third World countries now are in real terms poorer than they were at independence (or at in-dependence, as a current pun has it). In the face of this evidence, Fanon’s vision of the national project as an essential site of liberation struggle has been downgraded in importance relative to his apparently less obviously revolutionary analysis of colonial pathologies, as in *Black Skin, White Masks*.26

However, while strongly conditioned by the passing of the triumphal era of anti-colonial struggles, the predominantly metropolitan, postcolonial disaffection about the nation is, it should be acknowledged, equally a function of the (multi-)culturalist, counter-political turn in literary and cultural studies. In the wake of theories of globalisation that appear persuasively to describe decentralised, outsourced and networked conditions in the west, the emphasis is increasingly on the transnational movements of migrancy and diaspora (of floating upwards from history, in Rushdie’s phrase, or ‘being out of things’27). On the road towards this progressive dismissal of the monologic nation, Bhabha’s paradigmatic 1990 essay ‘DissemiNation’, originally intended as a corrective to Benedict Anderson’s by then authoritative account of ‘the language of national collectiveness and cohesiveness’, serves as a significant marker.28 For Bhabha in this and other essays the discourse of those at the margins of national communities – immigrants, ‘women’, and so on – produces a performative doubleness that subversively unravels the centrality of the nation (as of the colony).

Against its emphasis on subversion, the ironic effect of Bhabha’s work, and of the many imitations it generated, however, was to canonise the equation of the postcolonial with the migrant ‘supplement’ (‘the postcolonial space is now “supplementary”’), demoting the nation as an object of postcolonially correct interest. Within many strands of postcolonial criticism it has thus gradually been forgotten that the nation may be more than a mere counter-force and mirror image to the colonial power it resists. To this it must be added that some of the responsibility for this forgetting can be laid at the feet, too, of feminist critiques of the (patriarchal, univocal) nation, if read superficially. I would want to contend, however, that the more insightful of these critiques have in fact had the reverse effect of reconfirming the liberatory potential of self-defining and/or nationalist discourses with respect to women’s lives, even if this potential has to date rarely been fully realised. The nation, it is important to bear in mind, remains a place from which to resist the multiple ways in which colonialism distorts and disfigures a people’s history.

The narrative of a nation imposes a meaningful chronology and continuity upon the anarchic flux which the coloniser ascribes to the native’s past. This is by now a truism of postcolonial literary studies of the nation. Whether critics view the nation as grounded in a material facticity, or, from the other side of
the spectrum, as *purely* a fictive ‘invention’, they tend to find overlapping interests in the area of the nation as conceived through the ‘meaning generating institutions’ of national literatures.29 Narrative, like metaphor, can be said to have a discursive materiality; therefore the *story* of the nation permits the forging and testing of particular kinds of affiliation to a national community. Stories, as will be claimed many times in the course of this book, *embody* nations, inscribing a national destiny into time and injecting new life into its myths of the past.30 In Chinua Achebe, for example, the repossession of a cultural inheritance requires an ‘enabling story’, to the extent indeed that *story* becomes for him virtually synonymous with words like *meaning* and *consciousness*.31 From this it follows, as later chapters will show, that a departure from or break in such enabling, form-giving forms, especially where they become officially sanctioned and embedded, has the effect of disrupting, at times profitably, the coercive common destiny or shared cultural tradition that is invoked.

Perhaps the most influential, though also the most contested-against advocate of narrative as a ‘process of [national] form-giving’, of writing plot into history, is Fredric Jameson, in particular as he expresses his ideas in the widely cited, controversial essay ‘Third-world literature in the era of multinational capitalism’.32 Although Jameson is one of those prominent critical theorists whose work remains largely unperturbed by concerns of gender or the private sphere, his argument informs, indeed insists itself upon the present study, as upon the many readings of Third World writing which have, even so, strenuously sought to disavow his influence. The homogenising, transnationalising ‘sweep’ of Jameson’s proposition regarding Third World writing needs of course to be carefully qualified, with respect to women’s writing as to other cultural differences, as several critics have attempted in the wake of Aijaz Ahmad’s initial excoriating critique.33 (Feminist criticism has contended *contra* Jameson, for example, that women’s texts focused on the family are not always necessarily intended as emblems of the body politic, although these texts may recognise at the same time that the family is part of that body politic, and may choose to symbolise it.34) Given the essay’s influence, however, and that way in which it has become virtually paradigmatic in readings of writers ranging from Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor, through Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, to Ian McEwan and Martin Amis, it is worth briefly looking at Jameson’s original postulates more closely.

Jameson’s ‘sweeping hypothesis’, as he himself calls it, posited as a countervailing force to the presumptuous criticism of the ‘first-world’ reader (and an over-aestheticised postmodernism), is encapsulated on a single page of the essay.35 Here he writes that ‘third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic’, are to be read as ‘*national allegories*. ‘[T]he story of the private individual is *always* an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society’
(emphasis added). By contrast, he further suggests, the First World text is not conscious of its nationalising designs in the same way. I would want to suggest against this, however, that many narratives preoccupied with the social and national imaginary can be understood as inscribing the nation, and that these nation-informing stories are by no means exclusive to the Third World. Indeed, many hail from the First World. If anything, this has become more evidently the case with the 1990s resurgence of nationalist preoccupations in the west and in the former Second World (think only of devolution in the UK).

Few would probably dispute the fact that nationalism remains a crucial force for liberation and justice especially in once-colonised countries. It is also true that the novels of these countries in particular will be concerned to configure the nation by way of organising (and often gendered) metaphors, if not strictly speaking as allegories in every case. For these elite-generated narratives, Jameson's thesis is almost a necessary hypothesis, as Neil Lazarus has argued; or, at least, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Yet these metaphors and allegories are, I would say, discernible in most novels that collude with and condone processes of nationalist self-determination – such is the insight of Jameson's hypothesis. Take only such examples as Peter Carey's rewriting of Rushdie for Australia in *Illywhacker* (1985), Don de Lillo's *Underworld* (1997), which charts a 'half-century' in the 'soul' of American culture, and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, a 2001 revisiting of the impact of the Second World War on British social identities. Texts such as these reflect back not only on Jameson's but also on Benedict Anderson's hypothesis, advanced some years prior to Jameson's, and without the same level of critical opposition, namely, that the modern novel is a key site where the nation is articulated.

For obvious reasons, most notably that gender like the nation is composed by way of fictions, the concept of narrating the self represents a central area of crossover between the study of women's writing and postcolonial studies. Although women writers tend perhaps to be especially concerned with those narratives that cannot be integrated into the grand teleological march of official history, they, too, deploy the genre to claim and configure national and other identities. By conveying women's complex give-and-take between public and private spaces, women writers use the novel as a powerful instrument with which to reshape national cultures in a way more hospitable to women's presence.

At this point, however, invoking the broad category of 'women' in this apparently homogenising way, it is right that I bring myself up short, not before time, in order to offer a partial apologia by way of closing this section. A question that will unavoidably arise from the foregoing paragraphs is whether my references throughout this book to 'what women do' invite the charge of universalism – just as much indeed as does Jameson’s sweeping 1986 gesture? Its progressive commitments notwithstanding, a feminist study such as this, written from within the western academy and seeming to pronounce upon the
cultural productions of Third World women and men, inevitably runs the risk of ‘collapsing’ the world into the west. Displacing subaltern interests, or so it might appear, a study of this kind can seem to become complicit with the ‘rewriting and silencing’ projects of patriarchy and imperialism. As Spivak cautions: ‘a concern with women, and men, who have not been written in the same cultural inscription . . . cannot be mobilised in the same way as the investigation of gendering in one’s own’. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi encapsulates a related, itself Spivakian, point when she observes that the ‘spoken for’ ‘is no speaking subject’.

Within feminism as within postcolonial studies the difficult question of speaking for resists satisfactory philosophical resolution, yet it may to some extent be politically negotiated. To begin with it must be emphatically stated that this book does not seek at any point to set up Third World woman as a symbol for the global struggles of ‘women’, or indeed for any struggle at all – unless self-elected. On the contrary. While giving non-western nationalist and women’s texts a hearing, I have explicitly attempted to avoid lasso-ing these texts into my own symbolic system or political programme. Against such a commandement approach, I recognise along with Françoise Lionnet, Caren Kaplan, Sangeeta Ray and others, that feminism must be viewed both as respect for the specificity of historical differences between women, and, even if aspirationally, as a relational, global process, that permits intersubjective exchange and cross-category comparatism. This is especially so in situations where the inequalities in power that impact on women’s lives are contested. The assertion of locale and particularity, which is often proffered as a countervailing force to globalising tendencies of feminism, can equally run the risk simply of interpreting the world in terms of the self, forgetting that cultures are fields of interrelationship that exist in dialogue. In contradistinction to this, a qualified, relational feminism that avoids prioritising any one axis of difference over any other should enable women to assert a politically effective even if always provisional consensus about issues in common to be addressed. Hence the comparative framework I have adopted for many of the chapters.

In short, a relational approach allows women, at least in principle, both to proclaim the specificity of their particular historical experience, yet also to affirm common interests and political transformations across cultural and national borders, as they act from a commitment to social justice for those constructed ‘woman’. As Kadiatu Kanneh has described the ‘Black feminism’ of Ama Ata Aidoo’s idiosyncratic novel Our Sister Killjoy (1977):

The feminism of the text is, then, deliberately and inescapably placed within specific cultural locations, at the point of conflict between dominant and subordinate national identities. [It is] . . . both a re-evaluation of African femininity in respect of African communities and men, and a re-examination of racial and cultural differences between women. (emphasis added)
My concomitant commitment is to ‘read’ and interrelate across boundaries, or as Lionnet urges, borrowing a line from Spivak (which might equally come from Emmanuel Levinas or Judith Butler): for feminism there is always a simultaneous other focus, ‘not merely who am I? But who is the other woman?’ Feminism, Kumari Jayawardena usefully reminds us, has no ethnic identity. Even if they have in practice usually occupied secondary or minority positions, women – ‘girls at war’ – have always been part of democratic and revolutionary movements.

Outline

In summary, Stories of women submits that literary texts – here especially novels and autobiographies – are central vehicles in the imaginative construction of new nations, and that gender plays a central, formative role in that construction. Postcolonial nationalist identities, iconographies and traditions are refracted through gender-tagged concepts of power, leadership, lineage and filiation, including, for instance, maternal images of nurturing and service. Developing these ideas, the book will consider how national father/son and mother figures were used in the independence era to imagine the nation into being. It will also look at how later generations of writers, both women and men, reworked those original form-giving symbols in order that they might bear the burden of their own experience. Taking a broadly cross-national approach tackling between West, East and southern Africa and South Asia in particular, Stories of Women balances comparative discussions informed by feminist and postcolonial theory, against situated readings of key emblematic texts. The comparative dimension is central to the book’s conception, probing that tendency underlying many recent gender-nation studies to expound in general terms yet focus on only one particular region or nation – India, Africa or the Caribbean – by way of illustration.

As a structure Stories of women falls roughly into three (unmarked) parts, framed by the Introduction and the Conclusion, though there are numerous intertextual links connecting different chapters between and across these ostensible divides. First, chapters 1 to 4 group together to theorise and exemplify the gendered formation of the nation in text. Chapter 1, ‘Motherlands, mothers and nationalist sons’, examines why and how, overdetermined by colonial history, national structures in post-independent nations have conventionally been organised according to masculine patterns of authority, in particular the family drama, embodied in images like ‘father of the nation’, ‘son of the soil’. Women, by contrast, are cast into the more passive roles/metaphors of motherland, Mother Africa, Bharat Mata. The next three chapters concerning, respectively, Ngugi’s representation of women, the later writing of Achebe, and the male leader’s autobiography in India and Africa, explore the textual inflections and
intensifications of the national family plot. Of chief concern are the contradictions that lie at the heart of the nationalist project, essentially, that a liberatory mode of thought and organisation in practice produces discriminatory structures. So the elder statesmen of African literature, the Kenyan Ngugi and the Nigerian Achebe, set out in their later novels to construct historically redemptive roles for their central women characters – roles which turn out, however, to be as objectifying as the iconic mother roles of the past. Chapter 4, ‘The hero’s story’, which looks at the independence autobiographies by national leaders such as Nehru and Mandela, Nkrumah and Kenyatta, further explores the self-imprisoning circularity involved in writing the nation as the male subject self. Where the story of the growth to self-consciousness of the independence leader presents as a synonym for the rise of the nation, and where that leader has historically been male, it follows that national-son figures become the inheritors of the nation’s future. Some mention will be made of the self-representation of Sarojini Naidu as a political leader, whereas she appears in her westernised persona of ethereal poet in chapter 9.

Taking different generational and national perspectives, chapters 5 and 6, ‘Stories of women and mothers’ and ‘Daughters of the house’, form the conceptual hinge around which the book turns. They reprise the nation’s symbolic legacy in relation to women, and then ask how post-independence women writers have addressed this legacy. First, what is the approach of women writers to the overdetermination of the nurturing ‘motherland’ myth, the symbolic co-ordinates and determinations of which appear inimical to women’s investment in the postcolonial nation? And, second, how do they set about writing the erased or marginalised role of the daughter, indeed of the daughter-writer, into the male-authored national family script? How do they locate a (writerly and/or actual) national home? Even if preoccupied with the personal, interstitial and apparently microcosmic, these chapters suggest writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, as well as Christina Stead, Shashi Deshpande and Carol Shields, self-consciously work in resistance to the exclusions of the national family drama and establish alternative patterns of political affiliation.

The final five chapters connect through the medium of their concern with the re-imagining of community, nationality, subjectivity, sexuality or the native body, especially as a response to the agon of disillusionment of the neocolonised nation – or the postcolony in Achille Mbembe’s now widely accepted phrase, discussed in chapter 7. Whereas the focus at the centre-point of the book was on postcolonial women as the ‘spoken-for’ of national traditions, chapters 7 and 8 act on the idea central to gender theory, namely, that the construction of one mode of sexual difference cannot be viewed in isolation from another. Gender cannot be seen as solely commensurate with ‘woman’ – or, indeed, mother figures with nationalist self-projections, as was clear also from the discussion of the leader’s autobiography.
Chapter 7, ‘Transfiguring’, which explores postcolonial retrieval of the figure of the native body in colonial discourse, unpicks the complex interconnections between colonialism, nationalism, hysteria, gender and sexuality. It concentrates in particular on postcolonial attempts – by Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head and Michelle Cliff, among others – to recuperate or transfigure the native/colonised body by way of the ‘talking cure’ of narrative. Chapter 8, ‘The nation as metaphor’, investigates the self-interpellation and self-inscription of second-generation male writers as indifferently national subjects. Under a range of pressures from the global market to internal economic tensions and minoritarian divisions, the nation has increasingly been exposed as destructive fiction and experienced as trauma. The Zimbabwean writers Chenjerai Hove and Dambudzo Marechera, and the British-resident Nigerian novelist and poet Ben Okri, experiment with metaphor, nightmare and fetish as the signifiers of a national reality, as opposed to viewing the nation as literal truth. The post-colony here becomes phantasmagoria and malaise.

Chapter 9, ‘East is east’, on postcolonialism as neo-orientalist, continues the focus on the colonialist affiliations underlying post-independence representations of the colonised body, especially the female body. A study of the fin-de-siècle construction of Sarojini Naidu as Indian female poet in the 1890s, and of the literary and publishing phenomenon of Arundhati Roy in the 1990s, explores how, in almost imperceptible ways, the past of colonial discourse repeats itself upon the present that is postcolonial criticism. Here, too, the reified female body is a central, governing emblem. By contrast, ‘Tropes of yearning and dissent’, chapter 10, extends the discussion of the interrelationship of gender and nation into an area rarely mentioned if not taboo in discourses both colonial and postcolonial, namely, the same-sex desire of women. By evoking women’s unruly, erotic yearnings, the two prominent Zimbabwean writers Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera explore the libidinal energies that exceed, or leak out between the fractures of, the conservative postcolonial state.

Approaching from a different perspective the work of Vera and Arundhati Roy, the final chapter, ‘Beside the west’, returns to the question of how women writers, specifically of a younger generation, theorise and re-emblemise the nation in their work. Whereas some women writers choose to distance themselves from the nation as extraneous to their concerns, these two writers are representative of a subtly different approach. In the face of neocolonial disillusionment and the erasures of identity threatened by globalisation, they extend the ‘revisionary scepticism’ concerning the homogenising nation they share with their male counterparts, yet strategically play off its different narratives – of patriliny and matriliny, of modernity and tradition – against one another. Avoiding the stance of spokesperson and the all-commanding epic voice, they reframe the male-defined co-ordinates of national selfhood in relation to other modes of situating identity, such as those of region, environment, belief and
sexuality, without however refusing the nation altogether. They explore, in other words, the transformative instabilities of the nation viewed at once as narrative construct and as lived reality, intersecting different, contrapuntal discourses and practices. A reading of the Indian writer Manju Kapur's first two novels focusing on Partition and the Ayodhya crisis, decisive moments in the Indian national story, closes this study, developing further the idea of the redemptive nation as a countervailing space for women as against the threats posed by communalism.

Across in particular the latter half of Stories of women it is broadly contended therefore that writers, mainly women writers but also men, radically transform the conditions of national self-identification by viewing the nation not as a static but a relational space. The nation's value, they propose, comes not from a historically fixed, 'authentic' character but from an intersubjective exchange as to its meanings; not from stories about iconic women, but through interlinked stories by diverse women and men participants in the nation. The idea of the liberation of the soul of the oppressed that lies at the heart of anti-colonial nationalism often retains its old power to convince, yet styles of nationalist belief are changing – have indeed had to change under the pressures of post-independence history. The nation-state remains entrenched as a bounding reality, but even so the concept of the nationalist fiction, the nation as fiction, provides diverse possibilities of self-conception for a people: not a single shining path of self-realisation, but any number of symbolic fictions, as many modes of redreaming as there are dreamers in a nation.

Notes

3 Chinua Achebe, 'Girls at war', in Girls at War and Other Stories [1972] (London: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 98–118. Page references will henceforth be cited in the text along with the abbreviation GW. As a suggestive contrast with Achebe's characterisations, see the discussion of literary representations of Biafra and of women's involvement in the conflict in the section on Buchi Emecheta in chapter 6, pp. 114–18.
4 Reginald's surrender to Gladys's charms does not form a moral issue in the story. As a highly placed government official, his improprieties may be significant, yet as an official and the narrator he represents normative male humanity and national citizenry. Masculine roles in national life are, as I will suggest, largely metonymic.
5 On national consciousness as 'universalising', and on the many paradoxes of liberatory nationalism, see Frantz Fanon, 'On national culture', The Wretched of the Earth [1961], trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 166–99.


Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses’, *Feminist Review*, 30 (Autumn 1988), 65–88. With the term ‘male-authored theory’ I attempt to avoid singling out any particular critic for their gender-blindness, as, up until the publication of Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), the condition has been so widespread as to be well-nigh universal.


Andersen, *Imagined Communities*, p. 5.

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20 Joe Cleary, Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), for example, pp. 16–18. As a further case in point, a keynote 1990s collection on the subject of imagined communities, Gopal Balakrishnan (ed.), Mapping the Nation (London: Verso, 1996), includes only two women contributors in a list of more than ten – Sylvia Walby, ‘Woman and nation’, and Katherine Verdery, ‘Whither “nation and “nationalism”?’ Verdery sees the nation as past its peak due to globalisation, even if it is still accepted as a ‘natural condition’ for peoples; Walby bravely asserts that although women’s struggles have local, national and international dimensions, gender and the nation need to be addressed in the context of one another, pp. 235–54. For other examples of postcolonial theorists ‘untroubled’ by or disengaged from gender, see Stratton, Contemporary African Literature, pp. 1–19; Ray, En-gendering India, pp. 4, 158–9; and chapter 1 in this book.


Fanon's nationalism as representing a socialist rather than merely a decolonising demand, see Neil Lazarus's chapter, 'Disavowing decolonisation', *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 68–143.

26 See Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice*, pp. 79–82.


35 Jameson, ‘Third-world literature in the era of multinational capitalism’, p. 96; see also Lazarus, 'Fredric Jameson on “third-world literature”'.


39 Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 'Introduction' to Tharu and Lalita (eds), *Women’s
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45 Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 4.
