EDITORIAL: What's in a Nation?

Globally, in the past several years, we have seen an upsurge in ethno-nationalist sentiment – exacerbated in recent years by the pandemic, and the panicky xenophobia towards any 'outsiders' who could, in the world's fevered imagination, be carrying the plague. The many refugee crises around the world were met by increasing hostility towards the perceived 'other' invading the 'sacred' space of the nation. The idea of nation itself has been contested, challenged, even rewritten. Borders are protected, negotiated, questioned, invaded. Belonging within those borders is challenged based on at best insular, at worst racist, responses; in contrast, there are those who treat borders as spaces that can expand to include the other. Borders are treated by many as simple things – you belong on that side, and we belong on this side, and that is how things always have been and always should be; we can decide whether or not you get to come to this side.

This idea of restricted belonging as a given, as something inarguable and natural, ignores the point that "[t]he 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation' – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure" (Brennan 4). Jacqueline Lo underlines this sense of nationalism as being constructed, that is, *un*natural:

> In other words, nationalism as myth works to efface the traces of its own determinate historical production by re-presenting the nation as a transcendental subject […]. Historical, cultural and ethnographical continuity is often fabricated to support political dominance whilst new symbols of the nation such as the flag and the anthem, are created to facilitate the process of identification. ("Myths" 5)

It takes emotional engagement for a state – a politically constructed entity – to become a nation. Benedict Anderson has written of "the attachment that peoples feel for the inventions of their imagination," stating that "people are ready to die for these inventions" (141). Ernest Renan makes a similar point: "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle […]. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; […] these are the essential conditions for

being a people" (19). Nationalism is born of an attachment to an entity that has been constructed within living memory. The symbols of this attachment are also constructed. And yet, this attachment has become ingrained in the imagination of the inhabitants of the world's nations as something almost primordial, performatively turned into loyalty and patriotism.

Our Special Issue, ably guest edited by Nukhbah Taj Langah and Goutam Karmakar, takes on some of these complexities, with its focus on nationalism and secularism in South Asian literature. They are interested, through the articles curated for this Special Issue, in examining the multifarious nature of South Asia, and the often contradictory responses to the idea of nationalism. In a postcolonial situation, the idea of 'nation' serves as a rallying point for unity. But South Asia is not a monolith – it is fragmented in a myriad ways by ruptures caused by differences in ethnicity, religion, and language. South Asia encompasses India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal – each nation is separated by language, religion, and politics. Difference *from* other nations can serve as a unifying element. But this is disrupted by difference *within* the nation – differences of ethnicity, culture, language, religion, and so on. Langah and Karmakar argue that the failure to account for difference has undermined postcolonial attempts to create and impose a unified, hegemonic idea of nation.

Given the multifaceted nature of the question of nationalism in South Asia, it is not surprising that the guest editors have put together a wide-ranging selection of articles on the topic. The articles touch on ideas as far apart as Partition, responses to the many wars within the region, uncertainty and liminality within the space of the nation, and culinary practices which challenge traditional beliefs. There is also space for creative works which focus on these complex ideas, with translations of politically-oriented poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Akhtar Raza Saleemi.

The General Section this time offers a number of reviews of books by Malaysian and Singaporean writers. Like South Asia, but on a smaller scale, Malaysia and Singapore also face

numerous challenges in terms of constructing and nurturing a nation. These were nations that had to be carefully negotiated to strike a balance between ethnicity, culture, and religion. Ideas of indigeneity were redefined and imposed in ways which were exclusive in all senses of the word. The creation of the nation re-drew ancient borders and brought strangers together in uneasy partnerships. Initially yoked together as one country, Malaysia and Singapore suffered further rupture and became two separate countries. Difference is highlighted to the detriment of unity. And yet, despite this, there is an underlying sense of belonging to the nation, which is evident in the creative writing emerging from the two countries.

But before I get to the review, I want to highlight Malachi Edwin Vethamani's tribute to the late Wong Phui Nam, the renowned Malaysian poet who passed away in 2022. Vethamani portrays Wong as a poet who was discouraged from writing by "indifferent" or "hostile" faculty at the University of Malaya in Singapore, and was later marginalized by a postcolonial government for choosing to write in the language of the colonisers. Vethamani highlights Wong's choice to stay in Malaysia, despite his sense of not having an audience for his poetry. Wong continued to write throughout his life, and in various ways, was responsible for helping young poetic voices to develop. Wong's contribution to Malaysian literature was immense. His work was challenging, often difficult to read, but in many ways it spoke deeply of what it means to be Malaysian.

Vethamani himself is a poet, and Jhilam Chattaraj reviews his poetry collection *Rambutan Kisses*; the collection is not politically-oriented, but the assertion of a Malaysian identity through language use, and the refusal of imposed gender and sexual identities, makes an oblique comment on the need to accept the other. Enakshi Samarawickrama has chosen to review *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?: Two Novellas* by Malaysian writer Shivani Sivagurunathan. The novellas (*What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?* and *Master Your Life*) are not focused on politics or ideology, but on mental health issues and the darkness within. Ivan

Ling, meanwhile, reviews Sivagurunathan's poetry collection *Being Born*, which touches lightly on some of the more intractable issues of nationhood in Malaysia, but ultimately takes a more inward path. Foong Soon Seng has reviewed *Anything but Human*, a poetry collection by Singaporean poet Daryl Lim Wei Jie, who roots his work within the Singapore landscape, meditating on the environment and its destruction. Another Singaporean collection, *This Floating World* by Gwee Li Sui, has been reviewed by Zainor Izzat Zainal, who notes that this collection of haikus is very much focused on the Singaporean experience. And turning back now to South Asia, Sangamitra Dalal has reviewed an edited volume, *Rabindranath Tagore's Journey as an Educator: Critical Perspectives on His Poetics and Praxis*, edited by leading Tagore scholar Mohammad A. Quayum. Quayum's volume tackles the under-researched idea of Tagore's work as an educator.

I would like to thank our two Guest Editors for the sterling job they have done in putting together a thought-provoking and timely issue, as we continue, all across the world, to grapple with the seemingly intractable issues caused by socio-political commitment to the idea of the nation-state.

Susan Philip

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