

## Conclusion: defining the nation differently

In some notable instances, as has been seen, women writers work to transform the male lineaments of the postcolonial nation. In others, they attempt merely to decipher and to modify its structures of privilege. Although the topics and texts discussed in this book have varied widely, the foregoing chapters have been linked by their shared concern with the strategies used by novel writers, women but also men, to recast the colonial and patriarchal symbolic legacies embedded in many versions of post-independence nationalism. These strategies, which are often interlinked, have included what has been called *literalising* inherited gender-marked tropes – concretising and ironising them – and also *reconfiguring* them in different ways, not least through the deployment of testing, teasing or disruptive narrative styles.

The question left open, however, is whether this recasting and reconfiguring represents a divestment from the nation-state on the part of writers – those who are often set up as the unofficial dreamers of national dreams. Or, alternatively, does it signify an effort to rework national belief to assume a different, more inclusive and progressive form? Is nationalism a discourse that can be challenged, dismantled and rethought even as the necessary efforts are made towards the accommodation of its Third World realities, as R. Radhakrishnan has put it:<sup>1</sup> Can its idealising tendencies be calibrated with reference to the day-to-day contexts through which it is expressed in the world? And if so, can it be rethought in a feminising or more woman-centred direction, so as to acknowledge the discriminations it has helped propagate in the past, and revise or disaggregate its masculinist inheritances from the ground up? Some feminist theorists of nationalism would indeed insist that anything other than a comprehensive overhaul would merely produce another version of the traditional national family drama in which the father is positioned ‘on top’. Nationalism, they contend, must work to incorporate a gender-aware imperative if it is to be rethought in a fully liberatory and transformative way.

In their attempts to reappraise national symbolic histories and the narrative forms into which they are cast, women writers extending from Flora Nwapa in the 1960s to Arundhati Roy in the new twenty-first century have, my readings indicate, tended to take the approach of redress rather than out-and-out reconfiguration. To generalise grossly for a moment – they have explored in particular the iconic home and family as the preserves of the traditional values beloved of the nation, dramatising how women's roles and responsibilities have shaped this private sphere. They have shown how family relations and spaces have, despite a binary legacy of gendered symbolism, overlapped in a variety of ways with the male-controlled public sphere of the nation-state, more intricately and densely so than Jameson's theory of the national allegory, for one, allows. Consider, for example, the case of Emecheta's Debbie Ogedemgbe the civil war soldier (chapter 6), or, more substantially, the attempts by writers like Arundhati Roy and Yvonne Vera to shape the nation from a woman's perspective (chapter 11). By probing and nuancing images of the gendered nation, by 'interrupting nationalist discourse with a women's vocality', writers like Emecheta and Roy have powerfully demonstrated how 'small' familial and domestic realities impinge on the large questions of the nation-state. The public narrative of the nation both is, and is not, separate from the *petit récits* of grand/mothers', aunts' and daughters' lives.<sup>2</sup> As in the case of the civilian women who during Zimbabwe's liberation war deftly negotiated between the combatants' bases and the civilian 'keep' or compound, women play several roles relative to the new nation, not only as 'mothers of the struggle' and providers, but as political activists, agents of history.<sup>3</sup>

The Zimbabwean example is apt in this context considering that women writers, like feminist critics of women's writing, appear to encounter a particular difficulty in envisaging roles and spaces through which women might mobilise political power outside of conventional structures, such as that of the nation-state.<sup>4</sup> Given existing hierarchies of privilege, the question is whether it is possible for women to conceive a mode of political leadership that is neither co-opted nor subtly marginalised, nor indeed vulnerable to endless metaphoric expansion (as in 'mothers of the struggle'). While the 'stories of women' explored in this book have outlined many different strategies and subterfuges through which *individual* women wield influence and power, they have also suggested the tentative beginnings of a response to this question in their joint attention to *community*. This is as opposed to the situation of many male post-colonial writers, such as those discussed in chapter 8, whose response to the neocolonised nation or postcolony has been (no doubt understandably) bleakly pessimistic. Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy in her political writing, all at one or other point affirm the power of the *collective*, of women in solidarity, community or colloquy with one another. Moreover, they emphasise the importance not simply of commu-

nity as such, but of translocal connections of support and interchange *between* communities. They claim the prerogative of *defining the nation differently* – as do Yvonne Vera's women combatants on the verandah of Mahlatini's store in *The Stone Virgins* – not as a single-cell entity, but as gangliar, operating through exchange, network, juxtaposition and interrelationship.

As the final chapter of this book demonstrated, the writer-activist Arundhati Roy provides an emblematic instance of such *defining otherwise* when she rejects the cultural chauvinism of the corporate, privatised Indian nation-state while at the same time acclaiming what she sees as the real India, the feminised land and 'her' people'. The stories through which women narrate their subjectivity, like the diverse groups and communities through which they may seek to wield power, are characterised by such iconoclastic, *heterogeneous identifications* – moulded, too, by where the women situate themselves along the axes of differentiation of race, religion, region, sexuality, class and nation. Through the medium of their layered narratives featuring networks of interrelationship and friends in powerful pairs, woman writers may lay claim to several social spaces at once – spaces which also intersect with the 'scattered hegemonies' (in Caren Kaplan's phrase) of the transnationalised world. As in the woman-centred, yet nation-affiliated work of the contemporary Indian writer Manju Kapur, as in Roy, women reclaim the nation by working with and within these networks. This book will close with a comparative reading of Kapur's two novels (to date), which will epitomise a particularly compelling if controversial way in which the (re-)engendered nation might be reclaimed as a structure of feeling, if not of passion, for women.

Yet, in order that the concept of the constellated-yet-national postcolonial collective not be seen as exclusive to women, just as gender is something not pertaining to women only, it is instructive to draw on an alternative image of the nation, or a nation-of-sorts, from Achebe's *Home and Exile* (2000).<sup>5</sup> Traditional Igbo cultural and political life, Achebe writes in this memoir, was based on a conglomerate system of co-operative villages, the complicated workings of which were embodied within (and illustrated by) its 'intricate and vibrant [market] network'. This decentred network, through which goods, news and new ideas for songs were constantly exchanged, was one, he further notes, for which women had responsibility. Neatly weighed against his story of the 'girl at war' featured in my introduction, Achebe's sketch of an internally networked nation, enshrining community values yet incorporating individualism, and part-managed by women, traces another pathway towards a concept of the nation with which women might choose to identify.

But why do I insist upon testing the viability of that seeming historical impossibility, the 'woman's nation'? Is it not the case that, regardless of the communal and/or postcolonial incarnation it may assume, the nation is inimical to women's self-determination and is therefore to be rejected as a woman's

space? From the evidence of postcolonial women's writing the answer to this last question would appear to be no. No, women in the post-independence and neocolonial world do not on balance choose to rid themselves of the nation. Their preferred country – to quote Virginia Woolf one last time – is not the cosmopolitan (and inevitably Eurocentric) 'whole world'. What is instead the case, especially in the context of increasing globalisation, is that women tend to explore and attempt to *adapt* the nation as a site through which their particular relational brand of politics may be organised. They may of course choose to break down the embedded structures of the *state* as the organising principle of political culture. But at the same time the nation – *their* nation – becomes a crucial interface between, on the one hand, market-driven, frequently hyper-exploitative transnational relations, and, on the other, local issues and venues, which have a tendency to become inward-looking, obsessed with cultural authenticity, resistant to change.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the globalisation of national economies and of communication technologies, political, social and cultural management in the world today remains divided along national borderlines, as Samir Amin and Neil Lazarus among others contend.<sup>7</sup> The nation-state continues to be an important agent in the world political order, a countervailing force to transnationalism: it retains the power to regulate the operations of capital and, culturally, to delimit some of the more serious outrages of fundamentalism. Of course, as numbers of women critics, Deniz Kanyoti and Natasha Barnes among them, have argued, the achievement of postcolonial national independence has, to this day, nowhere brought the concomitant liberation of women citizens.<sup>8</sup> Transitions from colonial and other authoritarian rule are often forged by way of 'elite pacts' between men. Yet it remains the case – contradictory as this may seem – that nationalism holds an undying attraction for many women, especially in new or post-independence nation-states. As Djurdja Knesevic writes of the Croatian context, or Mamphela Ramphele of the South African, the nation encourages a sense of *belonging to*; it provides channels through which women can mobilise and take part in public debate.<sup>9</sup> Symbolically, too, albeit in a back-handed manner, the nation can be seen as invoking the prominence of women's roles in the imagining of a community in ways that postcolonial women writers from Buchi Emecheta through to Carol Shields have found enabling.

Given that from the point of view of women political and cultural freedoms cannot be expected as the natural harvest of independence and must therefore be claimed, the nation continues to be for women – as for other minorities – an unforfeitable or irrefutable means through which to forge such claims. And if there are admittedly multiple instances of the nation-state failing to deliver on its promises of freedom for all groups, the difficulties of the nightmare-ridden postcolony must be set in the context of the continuing neocolonial domination of the Third World by the west (and of excessive post-independence ideal-

ism). When all is said and done, nationalism, with its defining attributes cross-hatched out of myth and historical legend, provides a new civil society with a usable past and a serviceable set of cultural identities. True, the nation in many instances intolerantly identifies itself in contradistinction to an 'other' and therefore quickly raises enemies, yet globalisation, too, is arguably based on very similar premises, as the current global war on terror chillingly demonstrates.<sup>10</sup> In fact it is probably the case that the forces of globalisation disallow diversity and sabotage claims to rights far more thoroughly than the nation ever did.

If, finally, in contradistinction to the uniformity imposed by transnational capital, the modern nation channels what both Anthony Smith and Perry Anderson acknowledge as the overpowering drive within cultures to establish collective meaning, do we not then uncover further persuasive grounds for recuperating the seeming oxymoron of the 'women's nation'?<sup>11</sup> By way of the reading of Manju Kapur which follows, I will ask whether the nation has not paradoxically come into use for women as a refuge and site of sisterly, even homoerotic, resistance – a resistance not only to global market forces from without but to religious fundamentalism from within. Does the nation not provide a base where valuable cultural and libidinal solidarities for women may be claimed and recuperated?

### 'First realise your need': Manju Kapur

Manju Kapur specialises in the telling of ordinary, apparently insignificant women's stories – stories that provide extended footnotes, pitched from a woman's perspective, to the official narrative of Indian nationalism. *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *A Married Woman* (2003), her two published novels, each take the tale of an individual woman's *Bildung* from young adulthood through marriage, work and motherhood as their central narrative strand.<sup>12</sup> Fulfilling a principle of the *petit récit*, the novels' narrative structure is comprised in each case of short snapshots or snatches of day-to-day life, including letters, diary entries and first-person interjections from one or other of the main characters, often set up like monologues in a play. Significantly, as in Vera and Roy, both novels concentrate on the articulation of personal emotions and feelings, in particular on erotic self-fulfilment.

However, where in *Difficult Daughters* a personal *jouissance*, or women's self-expression generally, is placed in a marginal position in relation to the authoritative narratives of the traditional family on the one hand, and the coming-into-being of the nation on the other, in *A Married Woman* the situation is, intriguingly, reversed. Here the narrative of erotic (specifically and subversively of homoerotic) self-awakening is identified, even if implicitly, with the increasingly embattled narrative of secular nationalism. My concluding paragraphs will revolve around this fascinating shift of focus in Kapur – one

that intertwines intriguingly with the May 2004 shift in the fortunes of the Congress Party. For, if the taboo *petit récit* of a liaison between two women, a widow and a wife, is offered as a protest against communalism, what does this say about women's revised relationship with the secularist, formerly hegemonic nation?

In *Difficult Daughters*, set during the years preceding Partition in the cities of Amritsar and Lahore, Kapur movingly evokes the multiple frustrations encountered by the central character Virmati in her efforts to educate herself and establish a domestic space she can call home. Struggling to integrate her aspirations for learning (initially identified as a masculine terrain) and her desire for a love match, Virmati endures and survives a clandestine abortion, a socially condemned affair, self-chosen marriage, and the difficult position of second wife. Unlike her decisive, politically involved friend Swarna Lata (but *like* the diverse 'national' daughters discussed earlier), Virmati spends long periods of time 'soft' with compliance, languishing in her incapacity to assert herself, in particular *vis-à-vis* her domineering if well-meaning lover (*DD* 236).

Yet, although she is often alienated and alone, Virmati's story is not singular, as the title *Difficult Daughters* itself suggests. Her narrative is woven into a lineage of three generations of daughters, extending from Kasturi, Virmati's mother, through to Ida, Virmati's daughter and the novel's narrator, each one of whom grows alienated from *her* mother while negotiating between the poles of 'Education versus marriage' (*DD* 38, 57). By thus probing daughter-family relations, Virmati's story refracts the divisions between mothers and daughters as correlates for the political partition in the country at large. In this novel daughters' lives *do* parallel national history, though negatively so. Virmati in her wrangling with tradition and authority reflects the turmoil in the public political world, though she is also positioned, paradoxically, as peripheral to national debates. Daughterhood signals 'difficulty' therefore, not only in so far as it denotes rebelliousness, but because daughterhood – traditionally subordinate and dependent – itself represents a difficult or painful position. Moreover matrilineal links, however full of potential, by no means guarantee a continuity of communication across the generations (*DD* 190, 203–4). After her marriage Virmati is symbolically cast out of her mother's house and forced to find her own way. Her punishing exile ends only when the massacres of Partition make her family's continuing rejection untenable.

It is a sign of Virmati's marginality that events surrounding the struggle for Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan are relayed in the novel by way of external report, at times almost as an official voice-over. Harish the Professor, Virmati's married lover and then, much later, husband, interprets the progress of the Second World War and its implications for India through occasional commentaries paternalistically intended as educative. At the end of the novel Nehru is quoted speaking with heavy, retrospective irony of a free and

inclusive India (DD 252). Other than this we are preoccupied with the affairs of Virmati's heart and her conflicted quest for education – that is, her negotiation, central to many Third World women's lives, between the apparently opposed points of tradition and modernity, which repeatedly threatens her social position and her peace of mind. Rather than being in any sense a building block of her identity therefore, the nation at first features mainly as a subject her lover brings up in conversation. In this sense Virmati sets to one side the male-identified nation as much as she is set to one side or excluded by it.

Towards the end of *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, a married woman at last, exiles herself from her marriage to continue her education in Lahore. Rather than being perverse, this balancing of options has become her preferred mode of being (DD 169, 231, 235–6). She now *elects* to occupy a split space-time or domestic limbo, separate from her husband. From the beginning her dogged attempts to cope with the demands of love against independence have committed her to a series of successive confinements in intractable situations and enclosing, stifling rooms. The 'small' Lahore house where she goes to work on her MA is but the latest in a succession of imprisoning places: the godown, 'poky' student room, two-room hill cottage, and the dressing-room that is the only available place to conduct her married life (DD 231, 80, 105, 168). Faced throughout with new beginnings, degrees, teaching positions, she attempts with each new bid for escape to put the past behind her, '[blanket] everything in oblivion' (DD 182, 125). Yet with every door she closes, a new confining room appears to shut her in. She becomes reconciled to her difficult choices therefore only by living out a kind of modern schizophrenia, in effect a self-partition, choosing to occupy tenuously linked locations in her unconventional role as a wife who remains a student.

If *Difficult Daughters* is to be read as a *reinscription* of the male-authored nation and the history of middle-class self-determination from which it derives, it is significant that Virmati's story effectively undermines the structures of western-origin romance. In a romance plot the narrative closure provided by marriage conventionally connotes the successful achievement of national and/or bourgeois class identities: take, for example, the ending of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) or indeed of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).<sup>13</sup> By contrast, marriage merely brings Virmati a new phase of emotional agitation and discomfort, as well as professional compromise and continuing social embarrassment. Kapur's romance plot carries an alien, even ridiculous imprint in so far as the Oxford-educated Professor, a reader of Wordsworth, is a classic mimic man who sees Virmati as his Romantic 'other soul' and Pygmalion-like tries to remake her in his image. In an emblematic, tragicomic scene during the final, critical stages of their courtship, Harish explains to Virmati the touching significance of a picturesque hill tomb commemorating the loyalty of a colonial wife who survived her medical officer husband by several decades. Virmati's

response is literal, cynical and uncompromising: “Silly woman! . . . Staying for thirty-eight years. Just because her husband had died there” (DD 177). For a woman, unlike for a man, she perceives, marriage and parenthood do not equate with public success, or the accession to an important national or civic role. All the same, just as she rejects the compromises of classic romance, so, too, does she elide the conflicts of emergent India when she is pregnant, choosing to bask in a dry swimming pool, an anomalous island in the storm. For her both romance and the nation signify the unwelcome surrender of self to the collective will.

It is of course true that Virmati’s dogged attempt to survive against all odds while at the same time erasing the past can be read at one level as an extended metaphor for the fate of Pakistan, and to a lesser extent India, at Partition. *Difficult Daughters* itself, although a daughter’s rather than a national son’s story, would according to this reading emblematised the nation and fulfil the terms of Jameson’s hypothesis ‘writ small’, as Susan Andrade would put it. To support this interpretation, the social and political situation in Lahore as well as in Amritsar at times mirrors Virmati’s personal state. This is made explicit when she comments: ‘I fret about my petty, domestic matters, at a time when the nation is on trial. I too must take a stand. I have tried adjustment and compromise, now I will try non-cooperation’ (DD 239). Simultaneously, however, Virmati feels increasingly cut off from the city, as she does from her past – and as Lahore indeed is from the Indian nation (DD 232). The obvious analogy is with Saleem Sinai’s amnesia over the creation of Pakistan in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981).

Yet to see Virmati’s life as bearing the weight of the national symbolic is to erase the tensions, contradictions and accidents from her meandering story. One of the more resonant of these tensions occurs at the very end of the novel when, overcome by the tragedy of Partition, it is Harish who refuses the name Bharati (India) for his daughter, a name Virmati suggests. Exclaiming that rather than being born his country has descended into atavism, he rejects the national narrative as treacherous, and in so doing decisively breaks the metaphoric link of submissive woman and emergent nation. Instead their daughter is given the name Ida, ‘two letters short of India’.<sup>14</sup> In other respects, too, the novel deliberately falls short of attempting to represent the ‘public turmoil’ of the nation. It offers by its own admission a women’s story based on personal history and, though it concedes that women may be interpellated by the national cause, it warns that unless they have political and social power they should be wary of any such link.

If *Difficult Daughters* steers a path around the national imaginary, although always with reference to it, *A Married Woman*, despite its provocative homoeroticism, is by comparison firmly committed to the success of the secular nation. Even if it at times questions its political efficacy, it takes its imperatives

of social justice seriously. Largely set in the sprawling suburbs of Delhi in the late 1980s and early 1990s, against the historical background of the Babri Masjid crisis in Ayodhya, the novel follows more or less the same line of development as *Difficult Daughters*, tracking an individual woman's life from young adulthood into maturity. In this case, however, the emphasis, certainly at first, is on the monadic individual and the nuclear family, rather than the individual's relations to the extended family or to tradition. Written in part while the author was abroad, *A Married Woman's* tale of the middle-class quest for self-improvement and self-pleasuring is recognisably informed by western values of individualism and of personal desire as a viable site of self-realisation. A related westernised focus colours the language which is less conversational than in *Difficult Daughters*, less grounded in the untranslated Hindi signifiers which were a localising feature of the earlier novel: *almirah*, *tikki*, *gol gappa*, *samagri*, and so on.

Brought up on a diet of 'mushy novels', Astha the eponymous heroine of *A Married Woman* (her name – ironically – means 'faith'), is from the beginning in quest of 'true love' (*MW* 8). At the same time she feels drawn to the 'safe and secure' – it is this tendency which will ultimately determine her decision to stick with her unsatisfactory but financially stable marriage to the businessman Hemant Vadera. After a few romantic mishaps she finds considerable erotic satisfaction in the early days of her attachment to him, an attachment benignly choreographed by their families. Already at this early point, the central character's development begins to diverge from, while also intertextually commenting on, that of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*. There, individual choice in matters of love led to repeated emotional betrayals and deferred desire. Here, an arranged marriage brings delayed but real sexual gratification (*MW* 46), and proves to have considerable holding power, surviving the rearing of two children, life with the in-laws, work outside the home for both partners, and Hemant's suspected one-night stands.

The greatest test which the marriage faces, however, is Astha's desire for self-fulfilment and some measure of autonomy away from the family, a goal which she conceives of in canonical western feminist terms as being true to herself, an escape from feeling misunderstood, 'throttled, and choked' (*MW* 109, 167). She is 'fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail' (*MW* 168). The singularity of her quest is offset by the fact that the relationship with Hemant is viewed by virtually everyone other than Astha herself as based, correctly, on wifely self-sacrifice, as against the phony marriages of mutual convenience allegedly contracted by non-resident Indians in America (*MW* 40–1). As with the woman-loving undertones of Vera and Dangarembga, Kapur in this novel is interested in those female potentialities that exceed the possibilities for relationships sanctioned within the confines of the traditional family and its analogue, the nation-state.

Astha's painting, her primary vehicle of self-expression since childhood, is raised to new heights of inspiration when she becomes involved in political protests against the Hindu fundamentalist movement aimed at razing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Built by Emperor Babur on the site, it is said, of a destroyed Hindu temple, the birthplace of the god Ram, the mosque is eventually pulled down in late 1992, as the novel reports at its end, and becomes the flashpoint of serious communal tensions across India (MW 290–1). The first step in the politicisation of Astha's art occurs when, in response to a request from an activist, Aijaz, she writes a dramatic script about the Masjid's history for a theatre workshop (MW 110–11). The second step comes not long after with the Muslim Aijaz's death at the hands, it is presumed, of Hindu fundamentalists. Astha's paintings are then sold to raise money for the Manch set up in his memory. Even if circumscribed by family commitments and her husband's resistance, Astha's agency as an artist, it becomes clear, is given direction by this political activism, and her social awareness in turn primes her for exercising a new-found autonomy as her friend Pipeelika's lover. '[Painting] represented security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself' (MW 149–50).

Within the pro-secular terms laid down by the novel, it is significant that a cultural movement pitted against fundamentalism is directly responsible for drawing Aijaz's widow Pipee and Astha together in a self-delighting, intensely physical affair. As *A Married Woman* itself suggests, the Babri Masjid crisis from its beginning denoted for Congress and other secularist nationalist parties a serious crisis of confidence in the brand of non-sectarian politics that had sustained the Indian nation since independence. They found to their shock that they did not in fact have a sufficiently powerful purchase on the nation's cultural capital, certainly not one powerful enough to mount an adequate countervailing force to withstand the upsurge of religious feeling which animated the fundamentalists. Astha's throwaway line, 'I don't need religion, whatever I am', spoken in response to her mother's growing devoutness, is a marker of this widespread secular disengagement (MW 85). Ayodhya demonstrated that at the level of mobilising the spiritual and private domains of society (those areas of culture and belief conventionally presided over by women), fundamentalist nationalism had the distinct edge over secular state nationalism with its rationalist emphases on self-determination and democratic rights.

It is into this lack within the Nehruvian tradition and, by extension, within the market-driven nation-state, that the woman-centred passion and respect shared by Astha and Pipee is strategically allowed to flow. The novel explicitly chooses *not* to mobilise religious belief of any description, even though its heroine is called Astha.<sup>15</sup> Its alternative to the strong affective hold of religion is an emotionally invested, mutual relationship, especially though not exclu-

sively intimacy between women, the kind of relationship that is relatively unspoken in the Indian women's novel in English. The women's feelings (and the fact they are reciprocated) are set up in contradistinction to, on the one hand, the fullness represented by a communal sensibility, for both women and men, and, on the other, the unbridled individualism represented by India's economic neoliberalism, which is Hemant's domain.<sup>16</sup>

To deflect the charge that her alternative domains of intimacy are merely western and middle-class in derivation (as of course was Nehru's modernising nationalism), Kapur significantly chooses not to describe Astha and Pipee's relationship in terms of a conventional western vocabulary of lesbian queer or homoerotic desire. In this way she strategically sidesteps, if perhaps not entirely convincingly, the widespread controversy which films such as Mira Nair's *Kamasutra* (1996) or *Fire* by Deepa Mehta (1996) met, both of which showed graphic erotic exchanges between women.<sup>17</sup> If anything, the novel's language of female love is decorous, modest, even chaste. At the height of the affair there is much lingering description of the women's (largely non-western) clothing, of dupatta, sari and blouse tantalisingly revealing and concealing, of the delight of touching arms, breasts, fingers, the focus remaining on the upper body. Intercourse itself is conceived of in terms of an abstracted 'mind-fucking', Hemant's sceptical term for what he believes women in love share – literally visualised by Astha as intercourse in the head (*MW* 218).<sup>18</sup>

In terms of the politics of the relationship, too, this sexual reserve or relative conservatism is corroborated: there is no significant disruption of conventional heterosexual identity-formation. Pipee insists all too soon on becoming the dominant partner, so repeating the power differential between Astha and her husband and precipitating the breakdown in their affair (*MW* 233, 234). Astha never uses the words lesbian or woman-loving of herself. She is not given to looking into her sexuality to that extent. She also avoids any allusion to adultery and finds the prospect of leaving her family to set up with Pipee unthinkable (*MW* 232). To Pipee's disapproval, and eventual indifference, their love is always subsidiary to the marriage with Hemant. It is a diversion, not a rival to that socially established bond: 'So far as her marriage was concerned, they were both women, nothing was seriously threatened' (*MW* 232). For the lovers to spend time together, they must occupy, uncomfortably, the hidden, child-free spaces of Pipee's flat.

As the references to women's domains and hidden space will have suggested, Kapur rouses the suspicion that to locate a sufficiently powerful cultural alternative to religious nationalism, she must make a move reminiscent of the masculine nationalist discourses of the past. Yet, given prevailing prejudices, she must do so in a circumscribed, perhaps even compromised, always-already co-opted way. As in Tagore or Bankim, she offers private, feminine space as the central locus of the cultural nation. A creative, self-realising love between

women is set up in contradistinction to the self-abnegating love of the divine. But this is not all. Problematically but perhaps unavoidably, Kapur goes one step further by not only eroticising but homoeroticising this love – a step which commits her to raising or rousing the stereotype of the secret, allegedly lesbian passion of the eastern woman. Despite her precautions she runs the risk, in other words, of basing the cultural heartland of the nation within the *ne plus ultra* of orientalist discourse, the colonial ‘phantasm’.<sup>19</sup> The activist Aijaz in fact draws a direct analogy between Pipee’s love for other women and the strong ties shared by women in the zenana (MW 129).

It is a sign of the historical and moral difficulty that women’s erotic mobilisation represents in *A Married Woman* that the narrative is committed to so many complex, contradictory connotations, which function either as tactical diversions or as a mode of self-censorship. Astha’s is but is not a gay relationship. It is but is not conceived in westernised terms. It is within a domestic space, though an alien, sterile one, that her affair runs its course. It is when she is politically conscientised that Astha becomes aware of Pipee’s erotic interest in her, yet her involvement with Pipee also distracts her from the Ayodhya tragedy and eventually leads her back to the solitary, if politically preoccupied, activity of painting. Kapur references a whole matrix of cultural resources to which different configurations of the Indian nation have traditionally had recourse: home, the mother (Astha), the widow (Pipee), the realm of the private, the harem, the *Kamasutra*, symbolic art. And yet, such is her sense of crisis concerning the future of secular nationalism that she pushes these well beyond their conventional meanings into both radical and taboo areas. There is a connection here with Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), where the loving friendship between the cousins Nyasha and Tambu builds an alternative space of interactive self-identification for women, one which does not, however, reject the bourgeois story of nationalist coming-into-being.

Indian women, Inderpal Grewal observes, have historically resisted hegemonic nationalist formations ‘by rearticulating [the home] as a site of struggle rather than of resolution’.<sup>20</sup> Astha comes closest to rearticulating fundamentalist formations from the site of her subversive love affair when she and Pipee briefly join a Yatra or pilgrimage across India in the train of a religious ‘Leader’, organised to demonstrate belief in the united motherland (MW 157–8, 184–6, 193, 246 ff). Although Pipee has professional reasons for her participation, and both women are happy about the opportunity of spending time together, the Yatra soon inspires in Astha a different sort of excitement, stimulated by the symbolic geography of the trip. At the beginning, for example, the lovers stand together at the southern tip of India, viewing with interest the Vivekananda Rock (MW 256–7). Later, during time she has to herself, Astha begins to reflect on the diversity of India and what it signifies (‘The Oneness underlying The

Difference' (MW 258)). She is generally delighted to discover new areas of the country. It is as if, as she concedes to her diary, she has fallen into the rhythm of the Yatra Leader's thoughts (MW 258); as if, indeed, she were plotting an alternative sentimental journey away from her lover and towards the mythic nation. While taking pains to distinguish her India from the Bharat Mata worshipped by fundamentalists (who, as she recognises, enhance their masculinity in serving the nation), she begins implicitly to position herself as the daughter of a nation intriguingly defined in masculine terms. Back in Ayodhya she has already allied herself with a network of affiliation to 'Gandhiji, father of the Nation' (MW 198, 203).<sup>21</sup> Now she finds that the nation's trumpeted qualities of 'patience, tolerance, love and resignation' are qualities she seeks in vain in Pipee (MW 260). Unsurprisingly, the Yatra represents both the culmination point and the end of their relationship.

As Astha's pilgrimage suggests, in Kapur a homoerotic plot is made to cooperate even if in unlikely ways with an edgy – sceptical yet emotive – narrative in defence of the secular nation (MW 216). Whereas previously a concern for the propriety of the nation might have denied any such alliance, now a concern for its survival as a unified polity – as unity in diversity – encourages the co-operation, especially considering that the greater evil from the point of view of democratic freedom, and middle-class respectability, is fundamentalism. Nationalism, Kapur appears to suggest, is mobilised most effectively around some powerful emotion – if not religious, then erotic or homoerotic. After all, given the *Kamasutra*, who is to say that the homoerotic, far from being outlawed, is not central to the nation's cultural makeup? Far from detaching sexual self-realisation from political activity, a typical move in the bourgeois novel, in *A Married Woman* the union of the lovers, even at its most discreet, champions values associated with the secular, national context.<sup>22</sup> To adapt a comment made about Hinduism by one of the characters in the novel: 'The [Indian nation] is wide, is deep, capable of endless interpretation. Anybody can get anything they want from it, ritual, stories, thoughts that sustain. But first you have to realise your need' (MW 85).

If, as Tsitsi Dangarembga once said, the 'gender question is always second to the nation question', then it may be when postcolonial women writers begin to realise their emotional and political needs *at once* within and *besides* the nation that opportunities will be framed for that *always* to be dismantled.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, it is only when male co-participants in the nation recognise that women like men are in quest of symbolic vocabularies of entitlement through which to lay claim to the nation's public and imaginary spaces that women may finally come into their own as both national citizens and storytellers. Only then may the gendered configurations of the nation begin to shift.

## Notes

- 1 R. Radhakrishnan, 'Nationalism, gender and the narrative of identity', in Andrew Parker *et al.* (eds), *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 77–95.
- 2 The term *petit récit*, derived from Jean-François Lyotard's critique of the grand narratives of modernity, is defined as a modest, locally based, at times fragmentary or stochastic tale, opposed to the so-called grand narrative of the official, male-authored and -authorised nation. It comes to hand as a particularly appropriate way of describing the non-authoritative stories women, in particular here women writers, might tell. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- 3 See the Zimbabwean women's testimonies collected in Irene Staunton (ed.), *Mothers of the Revolution: The War Experiences of Thirty Zimbabwean Women* (London: James Currey, 1990).
- 4 On the feminist difficulty with conceptualising female leadership and authority, and indeed with the notion of women representing other women, see Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983); and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), especially pp. 116–22;
- 5 Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 5–7. See Laura Chrisman's reading of Achebe's critique of contemporary 'cosmopolitical' thought in 'The killer that doesn't pay back', *Postcolonial Contraventions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 157–63.
- 6 On the problematics of a feminist politics of location in the homogenising transnational context, see Caren Kaplan, 'Politics of location as transnational feminist critical practice', in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 137–52; and Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), especially p. 146.
- 7 See, for example, Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalisation* (London: Zed Press, 1997), and Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 29–51.
- 8 Natasha Barnes, 'Reluctant matriarch: Sylvia Wynter and the problematics of Caribbean feminism', *Small Axe*, 5 (March 1999), 34–47; Deniz Kanyoti, 'Identity and its discontents: women and the nation', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20:3 (1991), 429–23.
- 9 See Djurdja Knezevic, 'Affective nationalism', and Mamphela Ramphele, 'Whither feminism', in Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan and Debra Keates (eds), *Transitions, Environments, Translations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 65–71, and 334–8, respectively. See also Simon Gikandi, 'Globalization and the claims of postcoloniality', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100:3 (Summer 2001), 626–58.

- 10 For a critical view of the nation that targets its tendency to other, see Christine Leveq, 'Nation, race and postmodern gestures in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 35:2–3 (Spring/Summer 2002), 281–98.
- 11 See Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (London: Polity, 2003), and Perry Anderson, *The Invention of the Region 1945–90* (San Domenico: European University Institute, 1994); and the review by Tom Nairn, 'It's not the economy, stupid', *TLS*, 5223 (9 May 2003), 24.
- 12 Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (London: Faber, 1998), and *A Married Woman* (London: Faber, 2003). Pages references will henceforth be cited in the text along with the abbreviations *DD* and *MW* respectively.
- 13 Compare Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), which contends that the progress of love in Latin American romance novels mirrors the processes of consolidating the nation-state. So, too, in key works of African fiction. As well as *A Grain of Wheat*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* features a tightly knit nuclear family whose travails 'write small' trouble in Nigerian society at large. At the end of Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns* (1989) and of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) symbolic women are pictured big with child or as giving birth.
- 14 Pallavi Rastogi, 'Manju Kapur', in Jaina C. Sanga (ed.), *South Asian Novelists in English: An A-to-Z Guide* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press 2003), p. 123.
- 15 Astha's name is offset by her lover's unusual secularist name Pipeelika, meaning ant: with regard at least to names, their relationship signifies a juxtaposition of belief and non-belief. Pipee's marriage to Aijaz, it is also worth noting, is cross-communal, Hindu–Muslim. Throughout, religious faith is generally represented either as atavistic or as reduced to overmystified ritual.
- 16 On the appeal of a communal sensibility for women, see Sangeeta Ray, *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 6–7.
- 17 Chitrallekha Basu, 'A meeting of minds', *TLS*, 5212 (21 February 2003), 23.
- 18 To adapt from a description which is given of Astha's poems, such same-sex 'mind-fucking' is like 'her own experience endlessly replayed' (*MW* 79).
- 19 See Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), pp. 5–7; and also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 147.
- 20 Grewal, *Home and Harem*, p. 7.
- 21 *A Married Woman* does, however, criticise the Congress Party's concessionary handling of the build-up to Ayodhya (*MW* 111).
- 22 There is evidence to suggest that among urban, middle-class Indians, religious affiliation is becoming itself increasingly private, individualised, 'secularised'. At the same time, the growing sense is that women should not have to 'de-sex' themselves to gain access to the wider space of the nation. See, respectively, Maya Warrior, 'Processes of secularisation in contemporary India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37:1 (2003), 213–53; and Nilufer E. Barucha, 'Inhabiting enclosures and creating spaces:

the worlds of women in Indian literature in English', *ARIEL*, 29:2 (1999), 93–107.

See also Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

- 23 See Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'Between gender, race and history: interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga', *Kunapipi*, 16:1 (1994), 347.