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# Imagined Communities: The Individual and the Nation in Aw's Map of the Invisible World and Rushdie's Midnight's Children

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IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE NATION IN AW'S *MAP OF  
THE INVISIBLE WORLD* AND RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

by

YU CHIA CHANG

(Under the Direction of Joe Pellegrino)

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the relationship between the individual and the nation in Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Incorporated Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" into the reading of both of the novels, this thesis discusses the limitation of nationalism and the imagination of individuals, aiming to show that it is the diversity of a nation that turns the stagnant imagined communities into fluid imagining communities.

INDEX WORDS: Aw, Rushdie, Imagined communities, Independence, Nationalism, Postcolonial studies

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* both reveal the crises of unity in newly-formed independent countries. Aw's Indonesia and Rushdie's India are both what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities," communities divided by national borders due to politics. The former experiences a power struggle between communism and capitalism, and the latter is racked by religious and regional conflicts. Although the settings of the books are two different countries, the characters inside them both struggle to find their identities as individuals in these imagined communities.

*Map of the Invisible World* takes place in 1964 Indonesia and it centers on Adam's year-long search for his foster-father, Karl, who has been taken into custody and incarcerated by a group of soldiers. *Midnight's Children* focuses on India's situation before and after Partition, which happens in 1947. Saleem Sinai, born on the day of Partition, believes that his body is falling apart and attempts to tell his life story to his partner, Padma. He's over 30 years old, but says his story must begin even earlier, so the action in *Midnight's Children* encompasses over six decades. *Map* focuses on a brief span of time and sets its eyes to the future, while *Midnight* is about looking into the past. Adam does not remember much about his past, but what he does recall presents an odd family unit, new to the island, trying to negotiate their way in this new world, only to have their lives turned upside down when Karl is remanded into custody. Saleem's family situation is also strange; he was switched at birth, so the people he considers his family are actually not his biological family. He tries to find answers for his present situation in his past, so the stories he tells primarily address the history of his switched family and his



struggle in the newly-independent India from his birth until his early thirties.

Both Aw and Rushdie set their protagonists' birthdays on Independence Day, Adam's on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1945 and Saleem's on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947. Every year, Adam celebrates his birthday with Indonesia, just as Saleem does with India. As individuals, they struggle to find their identities, and especially their places in their newly post-colonial worlds. As an orphan and a switched child, both Adam and Saleem are outsiders looking to find their places in their imagined communities.

This thesis is about the limitation of nationalism. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson proposes that after World War II, every successful national revolution has had its limitation, since a nation is only "an imagined political community" (6). He posits a number of points about these communities that will be salient for our consideration of these novels. They are imagined, limited, sovereign, and a community. Citizens of even the smallest nation will be unaware of the lives of the majority of their fellow citizens, and yet they construct some sense of connection, whether real or abstract, among themselves. Nations are acutely aware that they have borders and boundaries, and beyond them are other nations (the us/them dichotomy). Their sovereignty is guaranteed by the people themselves, not through any divine mandate or supernatural justification. As a community, Anderson says, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7).

But the very idea that holds a nation together can also tear it apart. After their constitution as independent nations, both Indonesia and India will have their sense of community as a nation

challenged, as the diverse cultures, religions, and races within each nation will both seek to manifest their own identities and impose their wills on other subgroups contained within the nation. We need only think of the post-Partition violence in India and Pakistan to see the truth of Anderson's analysis. His recognition of the fragility of the idea of a nation, and just what people are willing to do to shore up that fragile idea, are considerations that can be fruitfully applied to these texts. I aim to prove that, in both of these novels, the idea of "the nation" is unrealistic because it does not take into account the fact that nature abhors a vacuum. Communities centered on political leanings, economic strategies, religious beliefs, racial fault lines, ethnic singularities, and other distinctions all clamor to fill the power vacuum left by the leave-taking of the colonizers. In post-independence Indonesia and India, people fail to recognize that, although geographic proximity may unite a nation, it is the diversity of the groups within that nation that will make a country stronger. Young's theory concerning hybridity and Bhabha's discourse on the impossibility of purity can help the reader better understand and appreciate a nation's diverse nature.

Despite the fact that nationalism is both ever-challenged and unrealistic, nations never cease to exist and prosper. India stays together as a nation, yoking together its overwhelming geographic, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Indonesia also remains a nation, made up of 17, 506 islands, of which over 6,000 are inhabited. The largest archipelago in the world, its inhabitants speak over 580 languages and dialects. Both India and Indonesia are susceptible to, and perhaps even ripe for, fragmentation, yet both of these nations continue to exist. Centering on discussing the complex relationship between nation and history in Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, this thesis aims to find an answer to two questions. First, what makes a nation stay together? Despite vast and powerful forces

pushing for fragmentation, nations continue to exist. Second, does the presence of diverse communities within a nation allow it to forge stronger internal bonds? The competing goals and desires — some mutually exclusive — of multiple communities within a nation may actually bring to the foreground the need for compromise, and thus allow these communities to work together for a common goal.

## CHAPTER TWO

RE-IMAGINING INDONESIA IN *MAP OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD*

The Road ends in the far east of Java. Farther along there are ferry ports to the islands, like Ketapang, just a short hop away from Bali, and then on to the outlying islands that few ever visit. In these ports that lead to no where it sometimes feels as though you are at the very edge of the world, at the end of all things familiar. Small boats sail toward a barren horizon, toward emptiness it seems. The places that lie beyond will, you think, always remain invisible (314).

*Map* is a journey to the future. Adam, an orphan, and his new foster-father, Karl, move to the small island of Nusa Perdo, in Indonesia. It is 1964, about two decades after Indonesian independence. Adam's ethnicity is in question (the text does not specify whether he is Indonesian or Malaysian but only says he looks like a local) and Karl is Dutch; they combined becomes a constant physical reminder of Indonesia's colonial past. The central irony of the story is that Adam himself has no memory of his past. He remembers only that he has a brother named Johan, but he does not remember anything about him, not even his face. This gaping hole in his memory sometimes makes it difficult for him to adapt to this new life. Every time he looks in a mirror, or sees the crowd around him, Adam is reminded that he is different. While Karl constantly tells him "you are just like everyone else," the hostile attitudes and stares from the other people on the island prove this otherwise. Adam's interactions with the others on the island make him realize that "he was[is] not just like the other boys" (47).

Karl's insistence on their commonality with those around them is disproved daily, but he persists in thinking that they are just like the Indonesians. He creates the fantasy of an imagined community. His version of Indonesia exists only in his mind, not in the real world. He thinks he is "as Indonesian as anyone else on this island," while his skin color and nationality as a former

colonizer make it hard for him to fit in (5). Karl's outsider status eventually leads to his arrest, and he is taken away from Adam. Karl is captured by a group of child soldiers, while "gangs of youths roam[ed] the streets armed with machetes and daubing graffiti on houses. *Commies DIE. Foreigners Chinese go to hel*" (3).

Historically, Indonesia in 1964 experienced a spasm of nationalism which manifested itself in a purge of all suspected Communists. Stirred by the anti-Communist sentiments of the West, and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency of the US, Indonesia was a key figure in the fights against the "Bamboo Curtain" in Southeast Asia. But this rabid rooting out of Communists did not stop with just the followers of Mao. All foreigners, and especially the Chinese, were targets for the hatred of the public.

Even two decades after Indonesia's independence from The Netherlands, poverty is still a problem for the thousand islands within this nation. Sukarno's government initially enticed people to many of the smaller islands with the promise of well-paid jobs, while urging people to "believe in the future of this country," but failed to keep that promise (36). By 1964, thousands of people were forced to leave their homes, including Neng, Adam's classmate, whose family is the victim of the "transmigration" (42). Obviously, the socio-political reality does not coincide with the ideal state, and, at times like this, the imagined community begins to crumble. But nothing unites people like a common enemy, and Indonesia had a great deal of motivation to single out the Communists.

This purge of Communists, backed overtly by the US government and covertly by the CIA, is led by Suharto, the leader of the Indonesian military at that time. In exchange for allying with US interests, Suharto is promised support should he ever wish to claim the presidency (whether through the democratic process or through other, more bloody, means). Looming in the

future of this novel, then, are the horrifying events of the following year, known as either the 1965 Tragedy, the Indonesian Communist Purge, or, less euphemistically, the Indonesian mass killings of 1965, or the Indonesian genocide. Over a million people died during this violent period, which was when all the Indonesian resentment, frustration, and fear of foreigners came to a head. Even the CIA, in a report from 1968, stated that these massacres “rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s” (Aarons, 81). Suharto is rewarded by the West for his actions, and becomes the president in 1967. He claims to start the *Orde Baru* “The New Order,” a move supported fully by the US. For the US, Indonesia and its people are merely objects that are useful in stopping the growth of communist power in Southeast Asia.

*Map of Invisible World* is based on, and assumes the reader’s knowledge of, this historical background. Adam’s foster father Karl is captured because, putatively, he is suspected of being a communist. But in reality, his mere presence is a constant reminder of Indonesia’s colonial past, a past the nation seems to wish to forget. Karl’s picture is seen in a newspaper by his former lover, Margaret, an American anthropologist. It is a group photo of arrested Communists, and in it, she notes, “there was one face, paler than the others: a European” (30). Why Karl is suspected to be a communist remains unanswered throughout the novel; in the name of eliminating communists, the authority merely captures people who are different or deemed as threats to the country.

Indonesia in 1964 is also full of ethnic conflict. Every group has their own self-interest at heart, and these may differ from, and even be diametrically opposed to, the interests of other groups. The very geography of the archipelago nation makes this type of rancor almost

inevitable. And again, Karl's obvious physical differences, and the incorrect assumption that he is in Indonesia because he is a holdover from their colonial past, mark him as one who can safely be vilified by all ethnic groups. He is a target for the hatred of many indigenous groups. As they struggle to create a cohesive nation, a common enemy, especially one who represents centuries of colonial rule, is an expedient political device.

To the US government, the significance of Southeast Asia after WWII lies in its function to "save the whole postcolonial region from the communist spectre" (Anderson *Spectre* 7). But Indonesians themselves are trying to find their positions in this imagined community, and they cannot do it without revisiting their colonial past. To draw out the connections between Indonesia's colonized past and decolonized present and future, I will focus on five characters in *Map of the Invisible World*: Din the local, Karl the Dutch man, Margaret the American anthropologist, Adam the adopted son of Karl, and finally, Johan, the missing brother of Adam. Each of them has a different version of the imagined community, Indonesia. Their relations to one another interweave a complicated map of the invisible Indonesia, the nation of a thousand islands.

After Karl's arrest, Adam begins searching for his western-looking foster father. His quest leads him to Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, where he meets Din, a conflicted and very radical local who, despite working with and for foreign powers (like the CIA), loathes most foreigners. He wants to return to some imagined idyllic pre-colonial state, one that is "pure" because it is not tainted with any foreign influences:

I was looking into writing a Secret History of the Indonesian islands in the South East, everything from Bali eastwards. To me those islands were like a lost world where everything remained true and authentic, away from the gaze of foreigners— a kind of

invisible world, almost. (22)

Din further elaborates on his idea of Indonesian history being exclusive for Indonesians when he explains to Margaret that “We needed a history of our country written by an Indonesian, something that explored non-standard sources that Westerners could not easily reach. Like folk stories, local stories, local mythology, or ancient manuscripts written on palm leaves” (23).

The idea that locals should decide their own fate and write their own history sounds magnificent, but like any over-simplified definition of an imagined community, it is only a fantasy. In reality, it does not take an indigenous author to write as he desires. For example, Elizabeth Pisani, a well-known American author, incorporates such fascinating descriptions of historical events and many folk stories in her best seller, *Indonesia Etc.* In *Map*, Karl, obviously a foreigner, but also familiar with Indonesian history, passes unselfishly all his knowledge of the islands to his adopted son, Adam. When Karl swims with Adam, he tells him many stories about the shipwrecks that lie beneath their feet: “in this way Adam learned the history of Perdo; about the Opium wars, Catholicism and the destructive power of religion, and the unjust conquering of Asia by Europe” (34). That last phrase characterizes Karl’s stance on the colonial project as whole and positions him all the more as an unjust victim of the anti-Communist purge. Din’s view of history as authentic only if written by locals seems far too oversimplified to address the hybridity inherent in the colonial experience. As Bhabha notes, there is no such thing as a “pure” culture; the cultures of both the colonized and the colonizer have been, and will continue to be, reconstituted and hybridized.

Din is an avatar of the mob mentality. His version of the imagined community represents that of the majority of Indonesians, who are fully aware of what they are against, but have no idea what they are for. The post-independence future is challenging for them, since the future is



in their hands now. Out of fear for the future and the experience of being oppressed, the locals like Din turn their hatred toward “the others,” and Karl, being a Dutch national living in Indonesia after decolonization, is an easy target. That is why Karl is captured at the beginning of *Map* without any clear accusation.

But Din works closely with Margaret, an American, and also a CIA operative. His hidden motive for appeasing those whom he hates is that he wants to use Margaret’s connections to get close enough to President Sukarno to attempt to assassinate him. He believes that he is manipulating those who believe they are manipulating him. These particular foreigners are useful for achieving his ultimately nationalistic end, and so are to be tolerated and used, until they are no longer useful. As a native Indonesian, Din’s drastic refusal to accept foreigners, Chinese, communists, or, to put it simply, his opposition for the sake of opposition, causes his final imprisonment after his assassination attempt fails.

Margaret is an American professor of anthropology and an old acquaintance of Karl’s. Like Karl, she is also a westerner inhabiting the East. Unlike Karl, she is not actually what she seems to be. She feeds intelligence on political activities to the CIA’s station chief. She also does not share Karl’s understanding of Indonesia, holding herself aloof and believing Western culture to be superior to the culture of Indonesia. Perhaps her academic position forces her into a more clinical and less sympathetic position, but she desires to “save” the country, although she is unclear about what such a salvation would mean. The reality of Indonesia after independence does not meet her expectations; her imagined construction of an ideal post-independent Indonesia starts to shatter. Aw describes vividly how her mood changes from happiness to worry as Indonesia grows into its independence:

She saw how those first Independence Days had seemed so exciting, so full of promise.

She was newly arrived from Europe and her whole life was waiting to be rebuilt, much like this new country with its young President. She had been ready for change, ready for the task ahead of her, and so had they. She looked around this city now: they had lost their way, but she would not allow herself to be dragged away with it. (141)

Margaret witnesses the once-promising future of Indonesia turn into chaos. Meeting Adam, and helping him in his search, changes her life profoundly. After their search for Karl ends in success, both she and the now-reunited Adam and Karl realize that they do not fit into what this imagined community has actually become. All of them leave Jakarta, heading to some small island that Aw does not specify. While remaining within the archipelago, they choose to get away from the city. Indonesia does not meet Margaret's expectations, and all the promise she saw when independence was new has been squandered over time. Indonesia for her has become less hopeful, less beautiful, and less idyllic. Since she no longer has any ties with this nation and has found Karl, the only man she cares for, leaving Jakarta, "*travel*, as young Americans keep saying nowadays" seems pretty tempting to her (317). Whether this choice is serendipitous or is forced by a *realpolitik* vision of the future, Margaret makes the right decision. In their desire to return to some imaginary, pure, past, it is only a matter of time before the Indonesians begin to turn on those, like the CIA, who supported their drive for independence. Her ultimate fate, as well as those of Adam, Karl, and Din, is unknown. This novel ends in ambiguity, with all the characters heading to the invisible islands.

In *Map of the Invisible World*, Adam's "non-memory" (13) of his brother Johan also troubles him and clouds his imagination of his identity in Indonesia: "Because amidst the fogginess of his non-memory there is one lonely certainty, one person whom he knows did exist, and it is this that lures him back. Adam had a brother. His name was Johan. The only problem is

that Adam cannot remember the slightest thing about him, not even his face” (13). Adam and Johan are forced to separate; later in the story, when Adam and Karl reunite, Adam finds out that Johan was adopted by a wealthy family in Malaysia. Under the pressure of the times, both of them had no choices concerning their own fates. This doubt about the nature of individual choices and their power to determine one’s future is a persistent theme for Aw. It also appears in the preface to *Five Star Billionaire*: “we think we can control our world, but in fact we are powerless” (2). Every choice one makes narrows the possibilities for any future choices. So if a character ties his future self too tightly to the fate of the nation, his future choices are occluded by the future of the nation. All four of the major characters here have their future choices limited by the imaginings of the nameless, faceless groups that are busy imagining a new, independent Indonesia. Karl, who has rejected his colonial national past and chosen Indonesia as his home, is imprisoned. Adam (whose “birthday” is Indonesian Independence Day) is forced to fend for himself and search for his lost sole human connection. Din is used by forces beyond his comprehension, and Margaret is ultimately disappointed by and rightly wary of those whom she has helped to achieve their independence. Aw’s characters demonstrate the fact that every affirmation implies countless negations. Saying “yes” to one vision of the future requires saying “no” to a million other possible futures. Affirming a strictly nationalist imagined community means negating the presence of all those who do not share in that vision.

However, the collective memories that come together to imagine a possible future are incomplete. They are constructed through individual memories, but memory itself is full of gaps. Memory fragments keep coming back to Adam during his search for Karl, just like Indonesia’s once-colonized past haunts its independent present. Aw shows the connection between the individual and the collective memory with Adam’s birthday, but also demonstrates its

fundamental weakness. Adam's memory is filled with lacunae, as are those of Karl, Margaret, and Din. But national consciousness is built with such fragile things, all compounding the weaknesses present in another's memory.

Historian Pierre Nora recognizes this in "Era of Commemoration," where he states that "in the past, then, there was *one* national history and there were *many* particular memories. Today, there is one national memory, but its unity stems from a divided patrimonial demand that is constantly expanding and in search of coherence" (632). A collective, shared memory made up of shared experiences and culture is a difficult thing to achieve if all its constituent memories themselves are rife with mistakes, omissions, and deliberate misrepresentations. Yet it is necessary to ignore those holes, those twists and tangential interpretations in order to achieve a sense of a national identity. In order to achieve the cultural cohesion necessary to imagine a nation, a national memory must necessarily ignore many memories that might stand in opposition to how it wishes to see itself. Both Nora and Aw make one ponder on the meaning of a national independence and indicate that every individual may have a different opinion about each specific historical event. To remember and to commemorate are two different things. Aw characters show the reader what a nation stands for differs from person to person.

Adam's loss of memory about Johan echoes what Susan Suleiman says in "Amnesia and Amnesty: Reflections on Forgetting and Forgiving," that what is forgotten is more important than what is remembered. Adam's past is important for the identity construction of his present and future. Adam's individual quest for his identity also resonates what Aleida Assmann proposes in "Canon and Archive" that "actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the canon and the passively stored memory that preserves the past past as the archive" (98). The interaction between canon and archive keeps the story going. For the imagination of a nation to

continue, the stories of different individuals have to go on. Any definition of “what is Indonesia” will stop the imagination and jeopardize its future. Memory is what wheels the story and connects the past with the present and the future. During this struggle of choosing to remember or to forget, Adam brings back his memory of Johan bit by bit. These memory fragments come into pieces as he searches for Karl; he reunites with Karl but not yet with Johan at the end of the novel. This suggests the search for both individual and national identity should never end.

In “Tash Aw, *Map of the Invisible World*,” Ting-hui Hsiung shows how the act of trying to remember the past keeps the imagination alive, stating that Aw tends to “tell his readers how important memory is, especially when map of the invisible world is made possible only in memorizing and passing on old stories” (214). Through looking into the past, at the end of *Map of the Invisible World*, Adam is able to begin a new life with Karl. Hsiung thinks this ending symbolizes that “ethic awakening is doomed to fail, while the compromise of culture mixture embodied by Adam is the only way out” (215). Unlike Ting-hui Hsiung, I view cultural mixture not as a compromise, but as a natural process of human progress.

Cultural mixture is inevitable when it comes to the construction of a nation. Sadly, people tend to imagine a mutual enemy after Independence in order to stick together. This mutual enemy is like a ghost of comparison that only exists in imagination and haunts reality. In Aw’s *Map*, the limitation of nationalism starts to reveal itself in post-independent Indonesia. Due to the chaos, one knows that the revolution is not yet complete after independence. While the majority of Indonesians treat outsiders like communists, foreigners, or Chinese as the enemy of Indonesia, they fail to see the real enemy is actually the rising local upper class who sit back and witness this chaos in glee. Before independence, there’s cultural oppression; the colonized can mimic the colonizer, but there’s a cultural divide that keeps them down. It is easier to see who the enemy is.

At that time, the colonizer, to a lesser extent, oppresses the upper-class Indonesians as well. After independence, what keeps the lower class oppressed is economic. The upper-class Indonesians exploit its own people, the lower-class Indonesians, and this exploitation keeps the lower class from enjoying the same freedom as the upper class. The power struggle is between the upper class and the lower class, and the one in power shifts from colonizers to the upper class. After Independence, the “enemy” is no longer on the outside. The “enemy” is within its own people.

For the lower class, one way to subvert this power dynamic is to recognize the limitation of nationalism. There should be no restriction on the imagination of the imagined community. The imagined community should take pride in its consistency of various kinds of people. In *Map of the Invisible World*, Aw uses all the characters to show that there is diversity within the same group. Karl subverts the imagination that all westerners are ruthless exploiters, Din represents the danger of the mob mentality, Margaret proves the falsehood of western superiority, and Adam demonstrates how hybridity and an on-going search for identity can be beneficial to the imagination of a nation.

The imagination of a nation should go beyond race and pre-colonized experiences. The core of the problem for Indonesia is the economy. The poor locals envy those successful businessmen, and it is a point which politicians or rising upper class Indonesians can make good use of to manipulate public opinion. The media serves as a tool of this manipulation and the wide-spread of blindsided nationalism. The media tells its people that to love a country is to hate the communists. Sooner or later, the brainwash is going to work. By reading Jan Assmann’s “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” and *Map*, the reader is aware at the same time of collective memory’s power and threat to the imagination

of a community.

The collective memory has to become communicative for a culture to function well with different voices. Well goes the Chinese proverb; “water can carry boats, but it can topple them, too”. Nationalism is a two-edged sword that can bring a country together but also tear it apart. Benedict Anderson’s discourse in *The Spectre of Comparisons* addresses mass media’s effect on the spread of nationalism. Through the wide and speedy spread of information, the misinformation of nationalism becomes highly accessible to the public. During such time, *Map* serves as a narrative that questions the singularity of nationalism.

Focusing on the five characters in *Map*, one can see that every person has a different version of their imagined community. Nationalism should not and never will be a concrete concept, but a fluid and international consciousness. In this global village, what connects different countries together is the economy. In the Chinese preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Liao Xien-Hao mentions the conspiracy of capitalism and colonialism and how it defies nationalism because most of the people leading national movements are actually “national bourgeoisie,” (61) i.e. the merchants who are benefit-oriented. The original purpose of anti-colonization is only to rob the local resources possessed by the colonizers, which is a purpose at stake and must be adjusted after independence is gained. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon reminds us that nationalism is full of traps set by such national bourgeoisie for they manipulate nationalism for their own sake.

According to Fanon, although nationalism is indispensable to unite people in their fight for independence, it must undergo some changes after independence. The change should allow the people to have autonomous social and political consciousness while unfortunately, many post-independent countries are still held hostage by the empowered politicians, the national

bourgeoisie, and this phenomenon is also prominent in Indonesia. In *Map*, thanks to Zubeida, a beautiful girl whose father is an influential businessman, Din is captured by the police and Karl is successfully found and rescued afterwards. After the failure of Din's mission, Zubeida points out she snitches on Din and helps Adam for her father's connection with the government, saying that "he [Z's father] still needs the president to help him with his business-or whatever they do together," so the businessman needs the president to stay alive for his own sake (308). This conspiracy of the government and the businessmen is not fair for the majority of the people in this nation. The people in Indonesia not only need to fight their colonial past but also their post-independent economic and political predicament.

In Chapter One of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Concerning Violence, Frantz Fanon mentions the abrupt change decolonization has brought about to the newly-born imagined community. The change is forced upon violently. Sukarno declares Indonesia's independence abruptly in one day after the draft of Independence was made on 8/17/1945. With no time for adjustment, people within a decolonization country will have to accept "a total, complete, and absolute substitution" (35). For the once colonized but now independent Indonesia, however this "tabula rasa" (35) seems promising at the first place, it also seems sudden and uncertain. During turbulent times like this, people tend to hold on to whatever promise and stories the new government feed them.

The declaration of independence occurred during Japanese occupation of the Dutch colonized Indonesia. For Indonesia, the colonial influence lingers after independence and it takes another four years for the Dutch to actually admit Indonesia's independence. From the moment Indonesians are free, they dread to face the spectre of the colonized past, which was, ironically, what they cannot deny. At the same time, they have to deal with their post-independent reality.



They try to survive under the uncertainty about the haunted past, the stressful present, and the unknown future.

Adam's anxiety when he finally sees the sea with Johan and his reluctance to walk out to the sea and swim symbolizes Indonesians' fear of decolonization. After the country is independent, there will be people like Adam who is afraid of the unknown future while there will also be people like Johan who just wants to leave the past behind and "forget it all. Just pretend it didn't happen" (313). Between the past and the present, Indonesians struggle to find the answer to the future.

Unlike Adam, Johan's denial of the past causes him a lot of pain. For the colonized, the very force of violence they use to break free from colonization would hurt themselves as well. Fanon states "that same violence will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters" (40). Getting rid of the past results in fear and wholly abomination when it comes to anything western-related. Just like in *Map*, the sudden arrest of Karl without a reason, the graffiti on the walls saying all the foreigners, Chinese, and communists should go to hell, however understandable the wretch might seem, this overall abominable attitude toward the others is unreasonable. The mass proletariat is too blind to see no matter how violently they try to forget, they cannot change the irrevocable past. For Indonesians, to remember and then to forgive the colonial past is an important act. Without the realization that the present matters, the imagined community is haunted by its colonial past, showing the fear of acknowledging the past in wretch. Due to this wretch, Indonesians have forgotten what matters is the present.

Instead of focusing on nationalism, what Fanon pays attention to is national consciousness which transcends the boundary of race. For the people in the post-independent

countries like Indonesia, having national consciousness is a pressing problem. The over-worshipping of modernity and the total denial of the past are dangerous; they make the past the spectre which keeps coming back in the dark. Anti-tradition is no different than colonizers' policy of despising Localism. Attacking the minority will not make a country stronger. The Spectre of the past will not stop coming back just because you choose to ignore it as an individual or a society. The revisiting of the past will always occur unless one confronts the past like Adam and chooses to forget and forgive after remembering. As individuals in a country, people need to learn to remember the wound but still hold prospects for the future.

In *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, Jean-Paul Sartre shows the significance of switching viewpoints. In this preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre directly addresses Europeans. Unlike Fanon, who speaks to the oppressed and the colonized, Sartre warns those who once used violence to achieve their imperial and colonial goals. Violence, he says, will eventually redound upon Europeans, as power shifts in postcolonial countries. Just like all the characters in *Map*, everyone is in a different position, so everyone is able to provide a different blueprint of the invisible world, the imagination of Indonesia's post-independence, when "the balance of power has been reversed" (171).

However, *Map* also shows that an imagined community cannot go on without the act of forgiving after remembering the traumatic colonized past. This issue of forgetting in once-colonized Indonesia is in concert with Susan Suleiman's memory theory about forgiving and forgetting in "Amnesia and Amnesty: Reflections on Forgetting and Forgiving". Writing about the cultural memory of Shoah, the systematic massacre of Jews in The Second World War, Suleiman recognizes that there is a drastic difference between a Jew that forgives after remembering and one that forgets about the past totally. What Adam does is the former. Toward

the end of *Map*, he recalls his heartbreaking forced separation from Johan and realizes “you can’t control the future. You just have to take what comes” (302). The realization that the future will always be unpredictable completes the imagination of the map of the invisible world.

The realization that what matters is the present makes Adam’s imagination of his place in the community more complete. Although the map of the invisible world, the imagination of the community, will always remain invisible to some degree, the act of re-imagination keeps the imagination alive. The transformation of Adam’s attitude toward Karl is crucial. Before Karl is captured, Adam feels very uncomfortable every time Karl calls him his son. After Karl is found, Adam reunites with him with content and the realization that a community is not particularism and it hates to be simplified. The colonized past is not shameful. Revisiting the past and rediscovering what is lost help to open doors to the future.

In *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, similar to Susan Suleiman, Wole Soyinka poses questions related to forgiveness and views art as one way of easing the burden of memory. Aw’s *Map* is a catharsis that may heal the wound of the once-colonized Indonesia. Similar to Fanon’s analysis, Soyinka exposes the issue of the colonized being exposed to violence of the colonizer for so long that their minds are twisted, and the harm turns inward and between its own people “and, for sheer survival, themselves become predators on their own kind” (80). The people are used to violence, so having a common enemy like communists seems easy for them to stick together. To end this exploitation of its own kind, Soyinka emphasizes on memory’s influence on the future:

Memory- of what has been, of acts of commission or omission, of a responsibility abdicated- affects the future conduct of power in any form. Failure to adopt some imaginative recognition of such a principle merely results in the enthronement of a

political culture that appears to know no boundaries- the culture of impunity. (82)

For post-independence Indonesia, problems arise from too much freedom and total amnesty of the colonized past. Forgiveness after remembrance is the ultimate destination and “the remission of wrongs, and a recovery of lost innocence” (194). Even if the memory of violence and exploitation due to colonization is irrevocable, it is the future, a map of the invisible world with numerous possibilities, that matters and awaits Indonesians to discover.

## Conclusion

British authors write about the death of empire; it is all from the colonizer’s perspective. Tash Aw’s *Map of the Invisible World* situates at the opposite end of the spectrum. Aw succeeds in narrating decolonization from the native’s side. Focusing on the five characters’ imagined communities respectively, I conclude that *Map* purges the cultural memory of Dutch colonization and serves as an allegory to warn the decolonized Indonesia not to let history repeat itself by always imagining enemies based on certain classifications of communities; in *Map*, this classification is communists. In postcolonial discourse, regardless of race, the invisible world of the minority still exists, and it can be rediscovered by revisiting the cultural memory of people who live through decolonization. Through storytelling and retelling the stories in *Map of the Invisible World*, Tash Aw succeeds in subverting the official colonizer’s depiction of Indonesia, breaking the chain of colonial impact for the reason that this time “the Third World is discovering *itself* and talking to *itself* through this voice” (Sartre 156). From the moment the decolonized voice autonomously, they hold the key to the future in their hands.

*Map* ends with Johan driving aimlessly toward the future. As a character who looks forward to adoption without any fear, embraces the unknown future and tells Adam to forget

everything in the past, Johan ends up being desperately lost and angry. On the contrary, after the search for Karl, Adam learns how to forgive instead of just forgetting. What is different from the beginning is that after the revision of the colonized past, Adam can finally walk toward the future with the re-imagination of his community. The reunion of Adam and Johan does not occur, but Adam reunites with his foster father Karl and is going to start a new life with him. This shows the reconciliation of the past might never be truly complete. One can only choose to forgive after remembering in order to go on. For both Adam and Indonesia, it is the future that matters.

*Map* opens the door to the future and shows us that after independence, the power imposed has transferred from external colonizer to internal upper-class Indonesians. For the lower-class Indonesians, it is easier to tear down everything than it is to build just one thing, and the reason why the future seems so terrifying to them is because they ignore their colonized past completely. A narrative like *Map* is a kind of communicative memory that gives you a foundation on which you can build something you are for. Adam is looking for his roots, and after the journey, he is ready to build a new life with his foster father Karl. In this way, indigenous perspective mingles with the once-colonial influence. As long as the decolonized are ready to accept the differences within themselves and their colonial past, they will find solutions for present predicament and imagine their possible paths toward the future in this community.

In light of post-independent nationalism, Benedict Anderson perfectly depicts how the development in nationalism is going to affect Indonesia's future greatly. For characters in *Map of the Invisible World*, everyone still appreciates Indonesia's existence in spite of its difference in expectation and reality:

In political shame, and in the future perfect. Each in a different but related way shows

why, no matter what crimes a nation's government commits and its passing citizenry endorses, My Country is ultimately good. In these strained millennial times, can such goodness be profitably discarded? (Benedict, *Spectre*368)

*Map* eases the burden of Indonesia's colonized past, opening doors to a more diverse imagination of Indonesia. After remembrance and forgiveness, a nation's existence is even more precious and crucial; it is precious because many people have died for it with belief of a better future; it is crucial because we all have our different versions of the imagined community, and each version matters to the construction of the ever-changing map of the invisible world. We should continue to believe in a nation's ultimate good nature with realization that diversity within unity is essential for a country's existence.

## CHAPTER THREE

RE-IMAGINING INDIA IN *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

“At the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world...I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3).

While Tash Aw’s *Map of the Invisible World* takes us on a journey to an unknown future, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* unpacks and tries to make sense of the past. The main character, Saleem, born at the exact minute of India’s independence, says that, in order to “know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me” (4). Saleem’s birth “at the precise moment of India’s arrival at independence,” thrusts him into multiple imagined communities: his imagined family, all those other “Midnight’s Children” who were born at the same time as him with different kinds of superpower, and all citizens of the newly-independent India. As with Aw’s protagonist, Saleem’s birthday celebration is tied to the birth of the nation itself.

According to O.P. Dwivedi, Saleem is a representation of India, and through his storytelling the reader sees that “both imagination and history play a vital role to churn out a nation” (498). Saleem’s imagination about his past and present reflects India’s understanding of its own past and present. Just like any postcolonial country’s imagination of its community, such a construct is ever-changing. Dwivedi sums up this complicated relationship, noting that *Midnight’s Children* shows the reader “there are more than one national history [*sic*]” (501).

This chapter focuses on Saleem’s three communities, which are his family, Midnight’s Children, and India. This study asks if Rushdie’s *Midnight* proves that the fate of an individual is truly inseparable from the fate of his or her nation. Though Rushdie titled this novel *Midnight’s*

*Children*, the text primarily focuses almost exclusively on a sole member of that group, Saleem Sinai, and all events in the text revolve around him and his imagined family. Other Children are considered in the text (one, Shiva, serves as Saleem's foil), but anyone outside Saleem's family is considered only insofar as their actions affect Saleem.

The seminal event in *Midnight's Children* is obviously the independence of India. The 1947 Indian Independence Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom partitioned British India into the two new independent dominions of India and Pakistan. The Act received the royal assent on July 18, 1947, and thus India and Pakistan, comprising West (modern day Pakistan) and East (modern day Bangladesh) regions, came into being on August 15, 1947. The process of dividing the colony into these three nations is known as Partition. As they demonstrated in both Ireland and Egypt prior to this, the British never leave their colonies cleanly; the ramifications of this Act reverberated on the world stage, and are still deeply felt in India and Pakistan today. Partition caused the largest mass migration in human history, with over 14,000,000 people migrating from one nation to another, in search of the security of co-religionists as a majority in that state. Of course, prior to Independence, there was no conception that population transfers would be necessary because of the partitioning. Religious minorities were expected to stay put in the states they found themselves residing in. However, the horrific violence that accompanied the birth of these nations was both the cause and the result of these migrations. The violence was, as William Dalrymple puts it, "a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented" ("Great Divide"). Estimates of the number of deaths caused by Partition vary, with most settling at between one and two million people killed in the aftermath of Indian Independence.

Although Rushdie's narrative quickly moves both beyond and before this spasm of violence that gripped the subcontinent, it is a specter that haunts Saleem, his family, his nation,



and any informed reader of the text. The after-effects of these post-Independence migrations, and the generational legacies of this mass leave-taking--where familial properties were abandoned, houses and estates left empty, and mob violence manifested itself in mass slaughters--continue to affect Saleem, his family, the other Children, and all the nation-states involved.

During this transition, regions with different religions and culture were yoked together as a nation, and “the question then arises as to what type of nation is India, when its basic constituents are relentlessly struggling against each other” (Dwivedi 506). Saleem’s family is from the disputed state of Kashmir, and there are different voices within this region regarding what is best for post-independence India. At the beginning of the novel, one can see how conflicts of interests grow in Kashmir and lead to the assassination of the anti-partition leader Abdullah. This assassination is a part of history, and it also affects Saleem’s family greatly because “Nadir Khan, his [Abdullah’s] lieutenant, spent three years under my [Saleem’s] family’s rug” (50). Throughout the story, the familial and national histories are interwoven like this. Saleem’s family is politically active, a well-established, solidly reliable community firmly rooted in their support for the status quo, and the beneficiaries of much luck and largesse because of that.

Unlike Adam in *Map*, Saleem remembers his past, and he focuses on telling the reader his family history. For Saleem, his consideration of his significance in the imagined community of India is based on his past. Whenever there is an unexpected twist in Saleem’s story, the reader doubts his significance in post-independent India. However, this is further complicated when Saleem discovers that he was switched at birth with another of *Midnight’s Children*. It is the fundamental twist in this story, and calls into question all that he knows or imagines about his membership in any community. Not until the end of Book One does the reader find out that

Ahmed Sinai and Amina are *not* Saleem's biological parents; Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita are. It turns out that Saleem is telling the story of his *imagined* family. For him, his real parents are the ones who raise him. If Saleem is not actually who the reader thinks he is, how can the reader believe him and his significance in post-independence India? In this state, he is just like everyone else who does not have a lot of choices over their fate.

In this newly-born imagined community, India, the major religion is Hinduism. Being Muslims, Saleem's family have no choice but to worry about their safety wherever they go. Throughout the story, Saleem moves from his hometown in Kashmir to Bombay, Pakistan, and finally back to Bombay again. The family relocate when there is dispute or violence in their neighborhood. Every time they move, they see how there is actually diversity within the unity of the imagined India. From their relocation, the reader can see that after Partition, unsolved problems linger on this land as India tries to open a new page with its new British-like regime. No matter how India imagines itself to be like Great Britain, India would never really be Great Britain. The imagined community India is suffering from the struggle between its colonial past and post-independent present and future.

As the anti-Muslim atmosphere in Kashmir intensifies, the storehouse of Ahmed Sinai, Saleem's *imagined* father, is set on fire. The family decides to move to Bombay, and they buy The Methwold Estate from a British who demands the house to remain the exact same condition until India's independence; "Methwold was a symbol of British brutalities in India which continued to haunt the Indians even after the British departure" (Dwivedi 515). When things are starting to get better for the family, Gandhi is assassinated in 1948. The family rushes out the theater, hoping the assassin is not a Muslim. When they find out the assassin is not Muslims, the family is relieved for a short period of time before things start to go south again. This time, what

worries them is not religion, but their new government's capability to make the right call.

After Commander Sabartami, a neighbor of the Sinai's in Bombay, kills his wife and her lover, Saleem's imagined mother, Amina, breaks up with Nadir Khan for fear that her affair would get her into trouble. Meanwhile, the nation goes wild on Commander Sabartami's case; "it is a theatre in which India will discover who she was, what she is, and what she might become" (518). The jury first pleads him not guilty, but the judge deems him guilty. The public think it is unfair for a patriotic commander like him to be guilty of killing cheaters and to be deprived of promotion because of this charge. The case reaches the president of India, but it remains guilty still, causing dispute in the society. Disappointed at the Indian government, a lot of people move out in Saleem's neighborhood in Bombay. Saleem's grandpa chooses to go back to Kashmir, and he remains there until his death. The new government fails the imagination of the people.

Except for Saleem's grandfather, who misses the good old days and chooses to go back to his hometown, the whole family moves to Pakistan. Saleem's family starts a new towel business. Saleem's parents adapt to the new life pretty well, while Saleem's heart is left in Bombay. He just cannot fit in. His superpower, telepathy, fails to work in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the powerful one is not Saleem but Saleem's sister. Given a new name as Jamila Singer, Saleem's sister made Pakistan fall in love with her voice. The theme of her songs is patriotism. She not only mesmerizes Pakistanis but also Saleem. Both Saleem's incest feeling and the public's emotional attachment toward Jamila Singer ironically point out the irrationality of Patriotism. Through Jamila's overnight fame, the reader sees how shaky nationalism, the foundation of an imagined community, is. Adored and respected by Pakistanis, Jamila Singer is not even from Pakistan.

Titled "How Saleem Achieved Purity," this last chapter of Book Two talks about how

Saleem firmly believes “the hidden purpose of the Indo Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth” (403). All the people, including himself, go insane in that war. Both sides oppose for the sake of opposition, spew propaganda, and attack each other based on hatred; “nothing was real; nothing certain” (406). This leads to the destruction of both Pakistan and Saleem’s family. What Saleem does during this time is only “in search of friendly, obliterating, sleep-giving, Paradise-bringing bombs” (407). In destruction, Saleem finally sees the price of maintaining an imagined community. Air raids are all over Pakistan. It is a living hell.

Throughout his life, Saleem struggles with the idea of what is real. He is bothered by his own version of imagined India. Drifting from Kashmir to India and to Pakistan, torn between his feelings for his biological parents and parents who actually raise him, Saleem is stuck in the grey area. He belongs to all the places and people, but he also does not belong to anywhere and anyone. After the death of his family, Saleem has to face the world by himself.

Saleem’s fear of the unknown after the death of his family reminds us that his purpose of telling his story is to “end up meaning-yes-meaning something. I admit it: Above all things, I fear absurdity” (4). The death of his family makes him realize his insignificance:

The terrible fatalism which had overcome me of late had taken on an even more terrible form; drowning in the disintegration of family, of both countries to which I had belonged, of everything which can sanely be called real, lost in the sorrow of my filthy unrequited love, I sought out the oblivion of – I am making it sound too noble; no orotund phrases must be used. Badly, then: I rode the night-streets of the city, looking for death (407).

For Saleem, the fear of the unknown arises from the sense of not belonging to a community, and this seems familiar for the reader because the first time it happens in this story is about the fallout

of *Midnight's Children*. The end of his family story and the fallout of *Midnight's Children* mark the beginning of another journey. After these incidents, Saleem is no longer optimistic; he is aware of his possible insignificance. His imagination is no longer restricted to the past. He puts himself out there, detached from his family and his nation, starting to think about his place in this imagined community, i.e. India.

On Saleem's tenth birthday, which is in the middle of Book Two, Saleem finally connects with the other *Midnight's Children* through his telepathy. However, after he knows their existence, he does not mention them or talk to them much. Initially, Saleem takes his job as the leader of this community very seriously. At the beginning of the novel, he proposes to the reader the story of the collective. After the guilty charge of Commander Sabarmarti, as the people are disappointed at their nation, both Saleem and the other *Midnight's Children* are caught up in their own personal business as well, drifting apart gradually due to the mundane everyday life. The fallout of *Midnight's Children* symbolizes the failure of an unified India and of a singular nationalism.

*Midnight's Children* are "the very essence of multiplicity" (516). They were born with superpower, but they cannot pass on their superpower. In the end, the government tries to sterilize them for fear that they will put the future of the imagined India in the hands of the people with superpower. The essence of nationalism is supposed to be its people, but at times they must stay together, its people betray themselves. In order to maintain power, the government rather eliminates the talented minority in order to save the ordinary majority.

All *Midnight's Children* have strange superpowers from being born on India's Independence Day. The most special two are Saleem and Shiva. Being born "on the stroke of midnight," Saleem's superpower is that he can hear voices from all over India. Shiva's

superpower is causing war and he demands absolute obedience from his subordinates. Saleem cares about the voice of the others while Shiva only cares about himself. Shiva is the foil of Saleem and “the loss of Saleem was the gain of Shiva” (Dwivedi 517). When Saleem loses control over Midnight’s Children, Shiva becomes more powerful day after day.

Ironically, it is Shiva’s power of destruction that makes it possible for the people in India to have more power. By sleeping around and not committing to any woman, Shiva gets to pass on his gene for superpower to the next generation before the government tries to sterilize Midnight’s Children. Eventually, Saleem gets married to Parvati, the woman who is pregnant because of Shiva. This marriage solves Saleem’s problem of impotence, only that his heir is actually Shiva’s heir. Being a switched child, Saleem also ends up taking a switched child as his own. This cycle of Saleem’s life symbolizes the fate of the imagined India: India, once a *place* with its unique culture before colonization, has to be taken over by a local government that mimics British regime after they become an independent *nation*. Just like Aw’s *Map*, what remains of the colonial past haunts the postcolonial present and future. For both Saleem and India, the imagination fails them because they construct it the wrong way.

In Book Three, Saleem struggles to find meaning in his life. Facing the unknown, Saleem wants to choose his destiny instead of letting people define who he is. He becomes a communist, but just like any party, there is still dispute within the unity. Throughout the novel, Saleem’s attempt to show that he is the representation of multiple communities all fail. Concerning his family, Midnight’s Children, India, and the communist party, Saleem belongs to all of them, but at the same time, neither of them can define him. So, Saleem’s assumption that his “destinies indissolubly chained to those of my[his] country” fails undoubtedly and inevitably (3). Saleem’s fate is in fact not chained to his nation but affected by multiple communities.

After the death of Saleem's family and the destruction of Pakistan, the ending of *Midnight's Children* comes with the realization that the imagined India consists of multitudes. War brings peace, and destruction actually means creation. Shiva, the advocate of war, has already had thousands of children before the post-independent government attempts to sterilize Midnight's Children. The government does not want the people to have power over them, but Shiva's legacy might empower them. Although Bombay is no longer the old Bombay Saleem knows, it is going toward a whole new direction. For the imagined community, i.e. India, the possibility of a better future is never a certainty.

### **Conclusion**

At the ending of the novel, Shiva's biological kid pronounces his first words-abracadabra, a word for the magician transmitting healing power inscribed in an amulet. This is supposed to be promising for India, while Saleem is pessimistic toward both his life and the future of India after all his imagination fails him. Holding "my son who is not my son" but Shiva's, Saleem realizes "it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be suck into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace" (552). Toward the very end, Saleem is still stuck in this whirlpool where he thinks his life matters and his destiny is connected to that of his nation.

What is Saleem's nation? Is it Kashmir, India, Pakistan, or a combination of all of them? The answer to this question lies in Rushdie's version of Imaginary India, which is similar to Bill Ashcroft's idea of transnation. Bill Ashcroft suggests that *Midnight's Children* is a writing beyond borders. The traditional imagined community of India is redefined by innovative transnation, "the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the nation"(3). Saleem

and his family move from Kashmir, to Bombay in India, to Pakistan, and finally in Bombay again, crossing the boundaries among different nations and providing the reader with multi-aspects of the construction of India. Saleem and his family show that border lines cannot confine people and there is diversity within any community. *Midnight's Children* turns the passive imagined community into an active imagining community.

By constructing such a nationalistic character like Saleem, Rushdie's purpose is to point out the problematic nature of nationalism: it is oversimplifying. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie himself clearly states that "Saleem is wrong...*Midnight's Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independent India" (23). What matters to a nation is never the nation itself as a entirety, but the ever-changing imagination of the diverse people within them. Although Rushdie's imaginary India cannot live without the discussion of the past, *Midnight's Children* proves that "we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones, imaginary homeland, Indias of the mind" (504). *Midnight's Children* is a re-imagination of the past which shows that in order to get to a better future, the imagination should never stop since there is never only one imagination for the imagined community of India.



## CHAPTER FOUR

## FROM IMAGINED COMMUNITY TO IMAGINING COMMUNITY

Both *Map* and *Midnight* advocate the importance of individualism within an imagined community. Shedding light on Saleem's relationship with his communities, *Midnight* serves as a counter example of the power of the collective. Focusing on Adam's successful individual quest for his foster father Karl, *Map* is a celebration of individualism against the unknown and ever-changing imagined community.

Reading *Map* and *Midnight* together shows the reader how individuals are both powerful and powerless at the same time. Individuals have a choice, but their choices are bound to be affected by the courses of their nations to some degree. Rushdie's Saleem is powerless because in spite of his failed attempt to represent India as the leader of *Midnight's Children*, he still thinks his fate is tied to India inevitably while in reality, nobody actually knows for sure what will happen to him after the story ends. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie states that he "is struck by a remarkable paradox, that, in a country created by the Congress's nationalist campaign, the well-being of the [Indian] people might now require that all nationalist rhetoric be abandoned," proving that nationalism *might* no longer be necessary after the formation of the nation, i.e. India (33). Rushdie's word choice of "might" suggests only a possibility rather than a certainty.

For Tash Aw, it is certain that nationalism is not necessary after the birth of an imagined community, and he believes individuals are often more powerful than they imagine themselves to be. In the preface to *Five Star Billionaire*, Tash Aw reveals his composition philosophy behind his novels. He suggests the past we imagine has an impact on our identity construction: "It takes

us a while to realise that the things we were born with – ideas of race, belonging and home – have wormed their way into every decision we will ever make” (1). He also shares his attempt to reshape Asia’s image by focusing on the people’s imagination of their history, but how this attempt turns into an attempt to tell “intimate human stories” (2). In this preface, Tash Aw shows how individual stories and their imagination of the connection between the past, the present, and the future affect the construction of a nation’s identity. For him, it is the individuals that matter to the nation, not the other way around.

Saleem in *Midnight’s Children* is pessimistic about his and India’s future. Rushdie says “I remember that when *Midnight’s Children* was first published in 1981, the most common Indian criticism of it was it was too pessimistic about the future. It’s a sad truth that nobody finds the novel’s ending pessimistic anymore, because what has happened in India since 1981 is so much darker than I had imagined;” pessimism is intensified by the even crueler reality (33). For the characters in *Midnight*, after Partition and the Indo-Pakistan War, it is the hopelessness of the individuals that block people’s prospect of a better future.

Adam in *Map of the Invisible World* is optimistic about his and Indonesia’s future. He is happy to go anywhere with Karl in the archipelago. Unlike his brother, Johan, who only wants to get rid of his past and forgets about Adam and the pain of separating from him, Adam now knows where Johan is but is not in a hurry to reunite with him. Adam knows that what matters to him is Karl and the present since the present holds the key to a better future. For the characters in *Map*, after the internal conflict caused by opposing political forces, it is the hope of the people that makes the imagination of a better community possible.

For both Indonesia and India, communism represents the specter of the past that is detrimental for the future of these imagined communities. In both *Map* and *Midnight*,

communists are the enemy of the public, and this proves that national affairs interrelate. Both the people in Indonesia and India are deeply influenced by the ideology of the times and by the US government's attempt to suppress the growth of communism in their homelands. They think they are defending their homelands, while in reality, they are helping the world's superpower to eliminate potential threats. Once again, their imagination fails them. They fail to see an organization such as a communist party won't only have a negative impact on their nation. Indonesia and India fail to respect the differences within their imagined communities.

In both *Map* and *Midnight*, the protagonists Adam and Saleem are hybrids. They strive to find their meanings in multiple communities, and because of their struggles, the reader recognizes the importance of embracing differences within an imagined community. Saleem's story proves this criticism wrong: "metaphorically, Saleem's face represents the map of India and the events that take place in India are connected to his life" (Dwivedi 503). Saleem's story is Saleem's story; for his story to mean something, he cannot be somebody else.

This resonates with Tash Aw's feeling that "all my life, I have had a sense of living on the margins, of being caught in a no-man's: not quite an outsider, but definitely not an insider" (2). Just like Aw, Adam and Saleem belong to multiple communities, but at the same time, they feel they do not actually belong anywhere. According to J.C. Young, hybridity is "making difference into sameness", and this action inevitably causes disruption (24). Hybridity enables Adam and Saleem to see that the imagination of a nation should be fluid. From them, the reader sees that nations are just imagined constructs. Just like any imagination, they are bound to clash the reality. The nation's struggle to find its identity is manifested in the protagonists' struggle to find meanings from their past. In both *Map* and *Midnight*, the clash occurs every time the protagonist looks into his past. Adam's memory of his childhood is very fragmented; he only

remembers he has a brother, but he does not remember a lot of details about him. Saleem's focus on retelling family stories becomes futile when readers find out what he remembers is not correct. In both cases, the attempt of trying to find an answer to the future by looking into the past fails. For the past to mean something, one has to learn to let go of the past after remembering and look beyond the colonial experiences.

Similar to the idea of hybridity, both *Map* and *Midnight* turns the passive imagined community into active imagining community. *Map* and *Midnight* prove that there is not only black and white in the world; there is actually a space in between, and that space arises from the imagination of the people in the imagined community. Because each individual's imagination differs, it is problematic to view the imagined community as a collective at all times. The idea of what makes a nation differs from person to person and changes all the time.

After reading Tash Aw's *Map of the Invisible World* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the reader can see that though imagining a free nation gives birth to Indonesia and India, the consequences of such an imagination—enforcement of a rule of law, the creation of a superstructure that necessarily limits individual freedoms, and, most importantly, the structures associated with national borders—begin to infringe upon the will of the citizens of this new nation. A national superstructure necessarily runs roughshod over the religious, regional, and cultural differences of its citizens; they are yoked together despite being very different. This thesis aims to analyze the consequences of imagining a nation into being, paying particular attention to both what is gained and what is lost in the consolidation of provincial powers. Using Aw's and Rushdie's texts as examples, we eventually see that forcing boundaries on diverse regions, races, ethnicities, and religions actually causes more harm than good. Both novels position their individual main characters as connected to their countries, but are quick to make

distinctions between the individual and the corporate “people” of the nation. Despite Whitman’s “I am large, I contain multitudes,” no individual can be the microcosm of a country.

From the moment Adam and Saleem are born, they should be free to imagine and construct their future without being constantly reminded of their ties with their nations. This is true not only for the characters in the novels but also for every individual living in Indonesia and India nowadays. Individuals are tied to the nations when Tash Aw sets the birthday of Adam, the protagonist in *Map*, on the same day as Indonesia’s independence. Similarly, Rushdie sets Saleem’s birthday on the same day as India’s independence. Adam breaks free from the past, walking toward the unknown future with Karl, while Saleem still thinks his fate is connected to India even if he holds a new born child in his hands. Adam’s realization and Saleem’s denial of individualism show the reader that the individual’s connection with the nation is merely a forced-upon construct. The authors want the reader to think that from the moment they are born, Adam and Saleem’s destinies as individuals are inseparable from their countries’ development, but in reality, they could have meant something more, or become someone else, if the reader does not just read them that way. Both *Map* and *Midnight* point the reader toward the direction of the unknown future.

Both *Map* and *Midnight* end with the uncertainty for the future of the imagined communities, i.e. Indonesia and India. In *Map*, Adam reconciles the past and the present for he is willing to follow wherever Karl goes, while in *Midnight*, Saleem reveals that the past he believed happened never did; he is not biologically related to the Sinais. Be it reconciliation or realization about the past, both Adam and Saleem show the reader the importance to forgive and forget about the past and focus on the present.

Adam and Saleem's struggles to find their places in the newly post-colonial Indonesia and India are the manifestations of their nations' attempts to identify themselves after independence. Both the countries and the individuals are trying to find answers to their unknown future by looking into the past, and that is why the discussion between history and nation is a recurring theme in both *Map* and *Midnight*. In spite of Rushdie's pessimism about the future of India, there is something that holds that nation together, even with all its overwhelming geographic, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. The same is true of Indonesia, which would be even more susceptible to fragmentation because it is a nation of a thousand islands. And yet, both of these nations continue to exist.

For both Indonesia and India, the shared version of the history unites the imagined communities together. Given all the differences within a nation, the common experience of having lived through and fought off the colonizer is the ultimate glue that makes Indonesians and Indians stick another.

It is this shared experience that makes the imagination of a mutual common enemy possible. However, problems will arise if a nation allows itself to indulge in this shared version of history. The nation would end up imagining some past where there was a "pure" community, unexposed to and unaffected by any other international geopolitical actors, while a pure nation never truly exists. Homi Bhabha proves the impossibility of such purity, saying "cultures come to be represented by processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to—*through*—an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures. . ."(82). By recognizing the impossibility of such purity, one can easily comprehend Young's discourse on hybridity: a nation is always a mixture of multiple imagined communities.

Reading *Map* and *Midnight* together with the focus on the imagined communities within them, one finds that it is the shared common experience against the colonial past, and the stories told about it, that fights against all the forces aligned against the existence of the nation. In imagining that shared past, one ends up falsely creating the memory of a nation, somewhere in the past, that was pure and unsullied by external forces. However, as Bhabha and Young both show us, there's no such thing. Hybridity is a universal process; there's never been a time when a nation has existed without accommodating itself to other international actors.

*Map* and *Midnight* show how identity construction for a single character can mean something larger than himself. An individual can guide us toward the imagination of a nation, and an individual's struggle within an imagined community can lead the reader to understand more about the imagined community, but such a struggle should never be seen as a representation of the whole. The celebration of individualism turns stagnant imagined communities into fluid imagining communities. By reading Aw and Rushdie together, one understands that the discourse on what history unites a nation shall never cease. The construction of the past and the realization of its immense possibility are the active imagination of the imagined communities, i.e. the nations, in which every individual participates and matters.

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