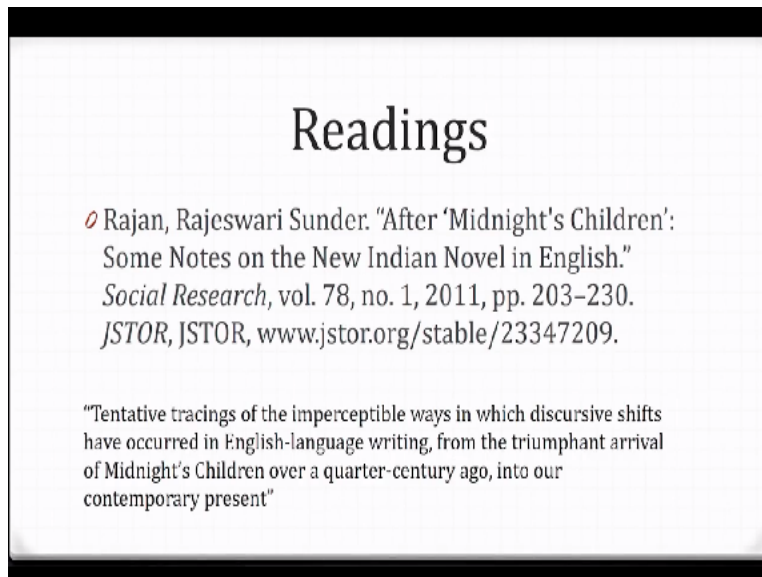


**Indian Fiction in English**  
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**Lecture – 30**  
**Notes on the New Indian Novel in English**

Hello and welcome to today's session. Today's lecture is loosely based on Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's essay titled *After Midnight's Children*, some notes on the New Indian Novel in English.

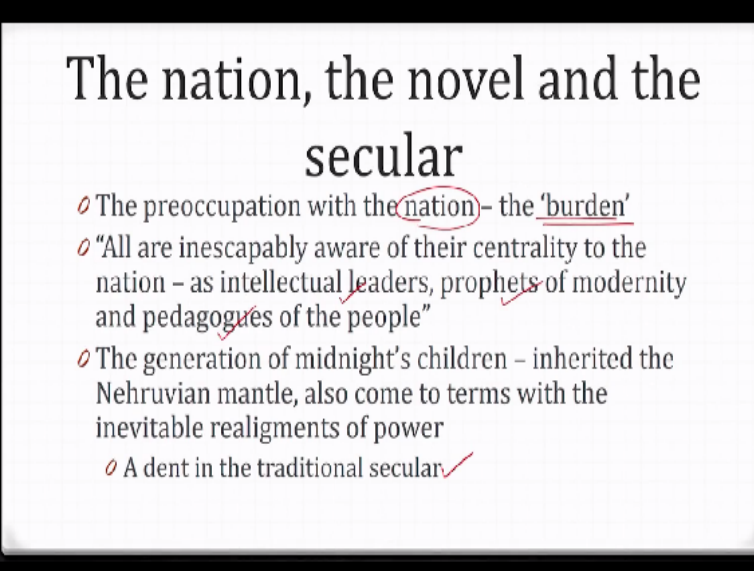
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This is a 2011 essay, a fairly recent one where she proposes to take a look at the tentative tracings of the imperceptible ways in which discursive shifts have occurred in English-language writing, from the triumphant arrival of *Midnight's Children* over a quarter-century ago, into our contemporary present. The major arguments which are part of this lecture are drawn from Sunder Rajan's essay.

And I hope this would also help you to situate the discussions that we will be having on 3 novels this week, Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and the third novel, *English August* by Upamanyu Chatterjee. So these arguments that Rajeswari Sunder Rajan makes, the suggestions and many challenges that she puts forth, they need to be read alongside the novels which we shall be discussing this week. Sunder Rajan opens her essay by drawing our attention to the Indian English writer's preoccupation with the nation which she also refers to as a burden.

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The nation, the novel and the secular

- o The preoccupation with the nation - the 'burden'
- o "All are inescapably aware of their centrality to the nation - as intellectual leaders, prophets of modernity and pedagogues of the people"
- o The generation of midnight's children - inherited the Nehruvian mantle, also come to terms with the inevitable realignments of power
- o A dent in the traditional secular

She clarifies that she uses the term burden in the sense that Spivak had already used it. Sundar Rajan also draws this connection between the novel and the nation and the relationship of the novel with the idea of the secular, with the idea of the secular self that most often the author, that the author figure also stands for. And she argues that these writers, the Indian English writers of the contemporary, especially the ones who are writing in the post-Rushdie decades, they are inescapably aware of their centrality to the nation.

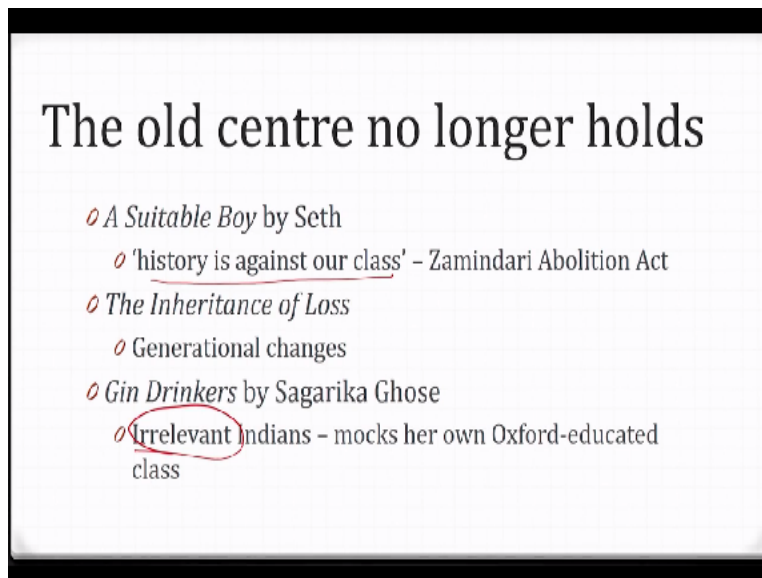
So they assume different positions as intellectual leaders, as prophets of modernity and as pedagogues of the people. In one of the introductory lectures where we looked at Rushdie's introduction to his anthology of Indian writing, we observed how Rushdie assumes the status of a canon maker, how he takes on this position of identifying the best writings produced in India in last 50 years.

And these are certain responsibilities, these are certain burdens which the Indian English writer is happy to assume, though there is no external agency investing them with these different responsible positions. Sundar Rajan further identifies and argues that this generation of Midnight's Children, the ones who started writing after Rushdie's what she said event, the novel Midnight's Children, they all have inherited the Nehruvian mantle.

But at the same time, they are also aware that the centres of power had changed. So simultaneously they have also come to terms with the inevitable realignments of power. So the post-Rushdie generation which is situated within this post-colonial predicament, they are aware of this dent in the traditional secular.

So in their writings, in post-Rushdie writings, we can find a certain moving away from the traditional concept of nationalism and the traditional concept of secularism. Sundar Rajan gives 3 examples where she argues that the old centre cannot hold any longer in Vikram Seth's novel, *A Suitable Boy*.

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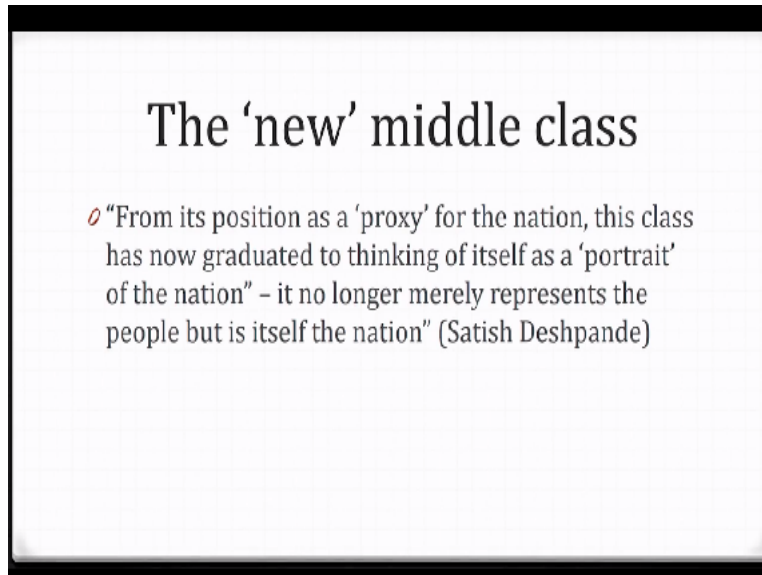


There is statement made in the context of the discussion on the Zamindari Abolition Act where the middle class character is articulating. History is against our class and the Booker winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai laments the generational changes, the title itself is a reference, a very direct reference to the generational changes where loss is also being inherited, which is an inevitability in the post-colonial condition.

Sagarika Ghose's novel *Gin Drinkers*, it talks about Irrelevant Indians and she is mocking her own class, the Oxford-educated Indians who return to India and remain irrelevant in some form or the other. So there is a way in which a shift has been taking place and this shift is important and needs to be seen in the context of the nation, in the context of the power shifts which had

been happening at the centre. Sundar Rajan alight this argument with Deshpande's point that there is a new middle class which has immerged.

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And this new middle class is also identified as a proxy for the nation. To quote Deshpande's words, "From its position as a proxy for the nation, this class has now graduated to thinking of itself as a portrait of the nation. It no longer merely represents the people but is itself the nation." So when we were looking at this large body of writing in the form of Indian Writing in English, in the earlier segments, in the earlier generations, it, the emergence of the middle class, the identity of the middle class was seen as a proxy for the nation.

But in the later novels, especially in the post-Rushdie decades, they begin to see that the middle class itself is the nation. That is the way in which the secular self which is part of the oeuvre of Indian Writing in English, this is how the secular self had been projecting itself as the nation. Not as a proxy of the nation anymore but the urban middle class transforms itself, transforms its identity to make it the identity of the nation itself.

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## Changing ideas of the nation

- o "I secede. I hereby declare myself as independent, mobile republic" - Arundhati Roy 2001
- o 'narrowly individualistic and selfish - Amitava Kumar
- o Hyperidentification with the nation
- o The critique of nationalism = expressed in the language of individualism
- o *English, August* - defines an Indian as 'one who is born one and doesn't wish to change his citizenship'
- o This choice (to stay or to leave) is a luxury available only to the privileged cosmopolitan

The changing ideas of the nation could be observed in the ways in which the, some of the prominent Indian English writers respond to the, either the events which are important in the national scene or in the way in which they themselves define and redefine their relationship with nation. Arundhati Roy remark in 2001, "I secede, I hereby declare myself as independent, mobile republic."

This observation by Arundhati Roy like many of her other controversial statements, it drew much of lack. Amitava Kumar, one of the other writers, fellow writers of Indian English, he dismissed this as being narrowly individualistic and selfish. But there are other critics including Sundar Rajan, Leela Gandhi, they all argue and they all perhaps feel that what Arundhati Roy was trying to do was not reject the identity of the nation.

But on the contrary, there is a hyperidentification with the nation in the persona of writers such as Arundhati Roy. And here we find that the critique of nationalism which is evident in these words spoken by Arundhati Roy. These kind of criminal critiques also come across as expressions in the language of individuals and which again perhaps writers like Amitava Kumar would again dismiss as being selfish and individualistic.

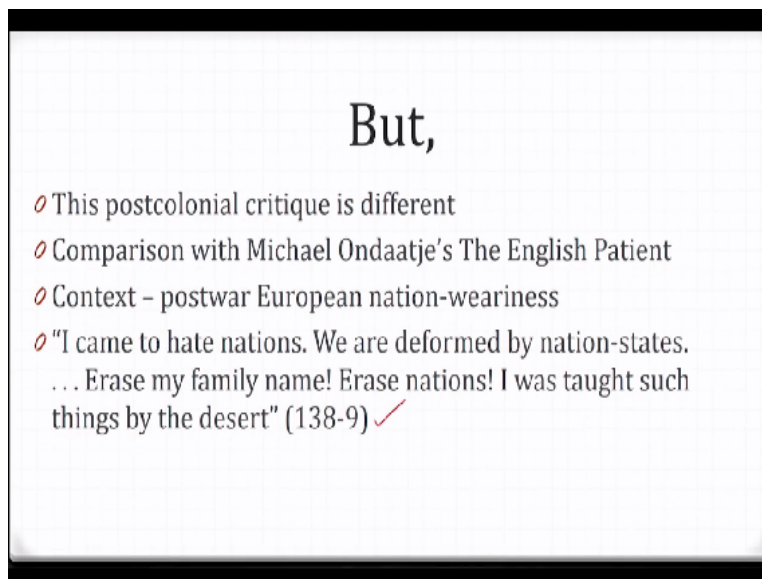
But nevertheless, it is important to notice that in the current scenario, a number of writers who are writing about India, they tend to have these individualistic notions rather than the collective

idea, rather than subscribing to a collective notion about the nation. In *English August*, we will notice that the Indian citizen is defined as one who is born one and does not wish to change his citizenship which also means that there is an exercise of choice.

But this choice whether to retain the citizenship or to give it away or move to a different country altogether, this choice, it is a luxury available only the privileged cosmopolitan. In the context of discussing that per literature, these are also some of the things which would come to our attention. And while *English August*, the novel like *English August* or a protagonist like Agastya Sen who is part of this novel, they are not aware of this choice being a privileged luxury available only a select few.

So the critique, the critiques which originate from such subject positions, they are also limited in a certain way. And at the same time, the post-colonial critique, when we look at it from a wider perspective, it is for example Sundar Rajan attempts this comparison between Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* and Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*.

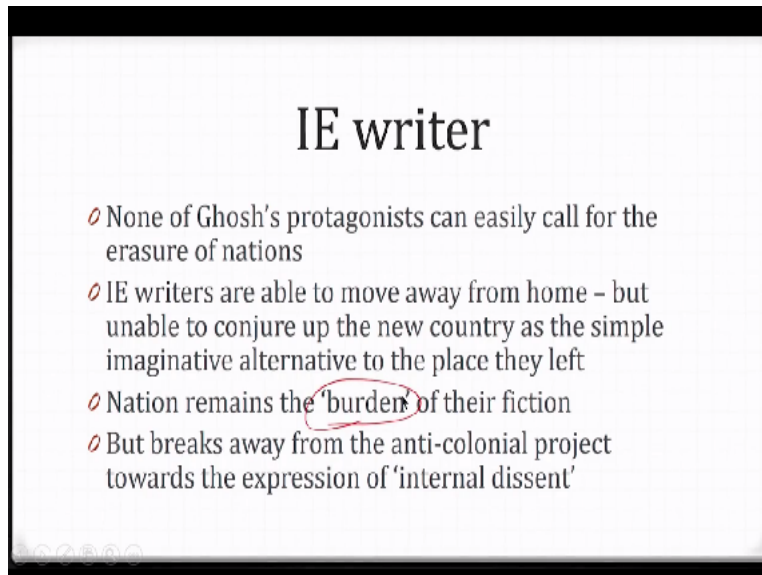
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And in Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*, the context is the post-war European nation weariness where the protagonist is allowed to say "I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Erase my family name. Erase nations. I was taught such things by the desert." There is a rejection of the identity of the nation but when we take a look at the Indian English

writer and the post-colonial critique which is immersing from those contexts and if we take Ghosh as an immediate example, *The Shadow Lines*, being one of the best narratives about the nation.

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We also realize that none of Ghosh's protagonist can easily call for the erasure of nations. There are very pointed critiques against the idea of the nation. There are ways in which the borderlines which separate nations, which separate individuals, are being talked about as being arbitrary, as illusions. But there is no erasure of the nations. The protagonist does not call for the rejection of these identities altogether.

And notably Sundar Rajan extends this argument from the fictional space to the ways in which it operates within the personal, lies in the personal choices that Indian English writers make. Most Indian English writers are able to move away from home. There are a number of writers of International-national repute who have chosen to live in different parts of the world and this is not a recent phenomenon in the post-Rushdie generation alone, even Raja Rao as being noted, had lived abroad for a considerable number of years.

But even when they move away from home, even when they establish homes in these alien, foreign spaces, they are unable to conjure of the new country as a simple imaginative alternative to the place they left. They continue writing about India. And this could be extended even to be

as Naipaul who had never lived in India. He is ethnically of Indian origin but he has got no lived experience in India.

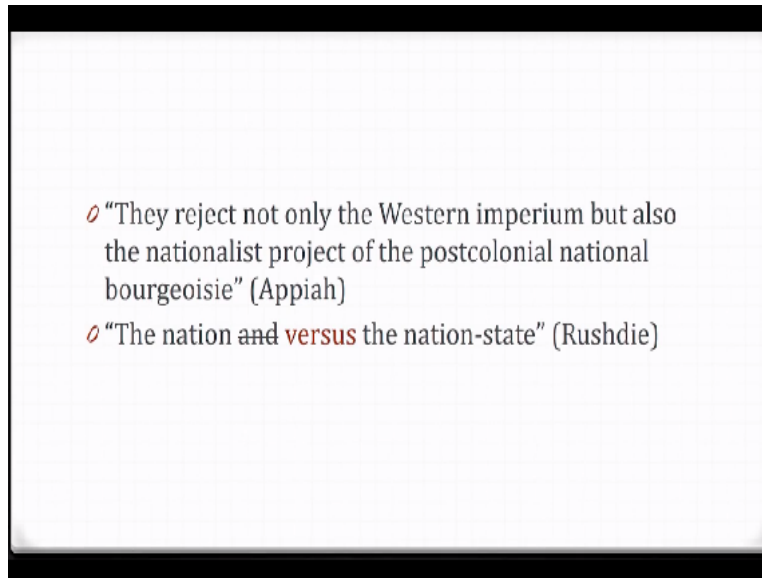
In spite of which he continued to write about India and Rushdie who has lived much of his adult life in places other than India, continues to write solely about India and also is invested with this responsible, powerful position of being the most authentic voice about India as per. So in this context, it is possible to further this argument, further cement this argument that the nation remains the burden of the kind of fiction that the Indian English writer is producing irrespective of whether, where they are located.

But there is a certain change in the way in which the articulation about the nation is articulated. The initial articulations about the nation when we talk about the 30s or the 50s, we can see an evident anti-colonial project in place. The expressions of nationalism were equated with anti-colonial objectives and anti-colonial articulations. But in the contemporary, we see that they have begun to break away from the anti-colonial project towards an expression of internal dissent.

Midnight's Children is a perfect example in this case where Rushdie begins to talk about the need for an alternate history altogether. He rejects the frameworks available in the telling of history and he brings in fresh perspective and newer points view to talk about histories which were otherwise not narrated in any of the forums. And in this process, we find them rejecting 2 things at the same time.

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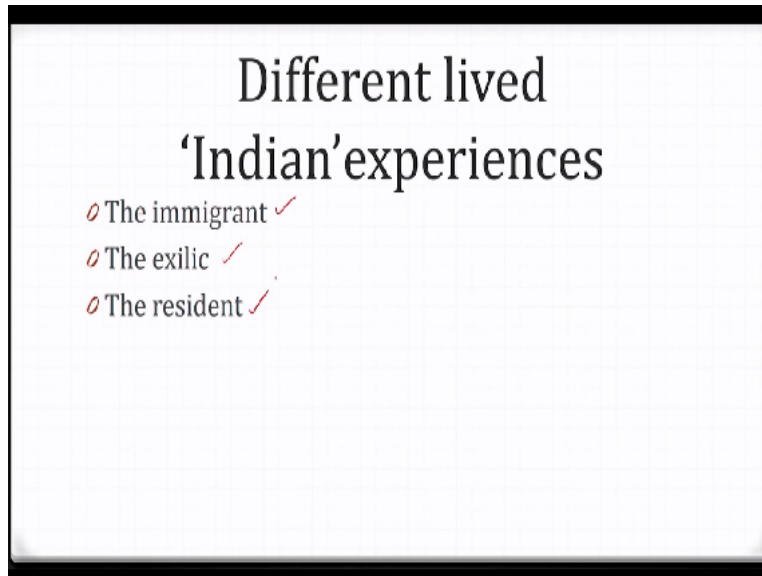


One the western imperialism and secondly, the nationalist project which initially emerged as an anti-colonial project to quote Kwame Anthony Appiah's words. The, this is in the context of the post-colonial writers in Africa. Appiah notes, "they reject not only the Western imperium but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial nationalist bourgeoisie."

This is the statement. This is an argument, an observation which could be applied in quite right terms with the Indian Writers in English as well. Rushdie himself has written elsewhere that when he talks about the relation between nation and the nation's status, especially in his own personal context, it is not nation and the nation state but in his case, it becomes the nation versus the nation state.

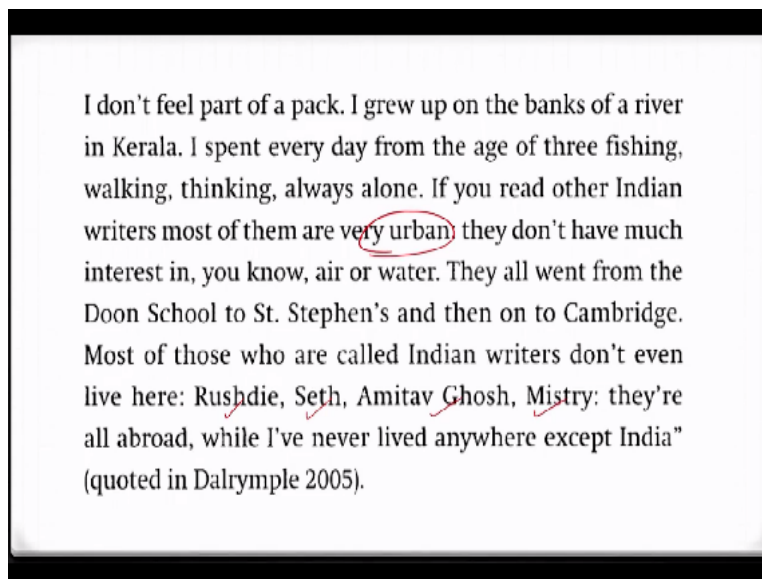
It is a different kind of relation where the other becomes not just the colonial power, not just a western imperialist force but the other also becomes the prominent, the powerful, dominant mainstream nationalist historiography as well against which the writers like Rushdie have been writing and they continue to write as well. And when we talk about the experience of writing post-coloniality, the different experiences of defining and redefining the nation, it is also important to be alert to the fact that these writers have different lived Indian experiences.

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Sundar Rajan identifies 3 different kinds of Indian writers, the immigrant, the exilic and the resident and even of course, find the number of writers who would fit into each of these categories as well. She quotes extensively from (( )) (14:44) where he talks about Arundhati Roy. Roy comes across as a person, an Indian writer who has got a very different lived experience altogether.

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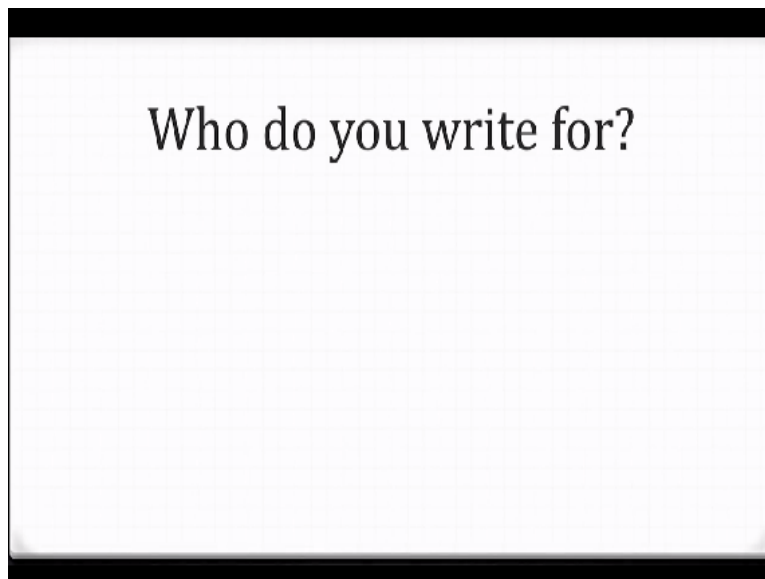
To quote Arundhati Roy's words, "I don't feel part of a pack. I grew up on the banks of a river in Kerala. I spent every day from the age of three fishing, walking, thinking, always alone. If you read other Indian writers, most of them are very urban. They don't have much interest in, you know, air or water. They all went from the Doon School to St. Stephen's and then to Cambridge.

Most of those who are called Indian writers don't even live here. Rushdie, Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Mistry, they're all abroad, while I've never lived anywhere except India."

It is difficult to miss the subtle mockery over here. And she is also trying to point out that her experience of being an Indian is different from the Indian experiences that the other important writers such as Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh, or Mistry talk about. Their experiences, they all talk about the nation. They all have narrativised the nation in different forms but the lived experience that they bring in to the narrative space is different on account of many things.

One of those being as Arundhati Roy points out the choice of where they have chosen to live their life. Is it in India where they write about or is it elsewhere. From where they write about the authentic voices and the authentic representations of the nation. Now we come to this question about the audience, who do you write for?

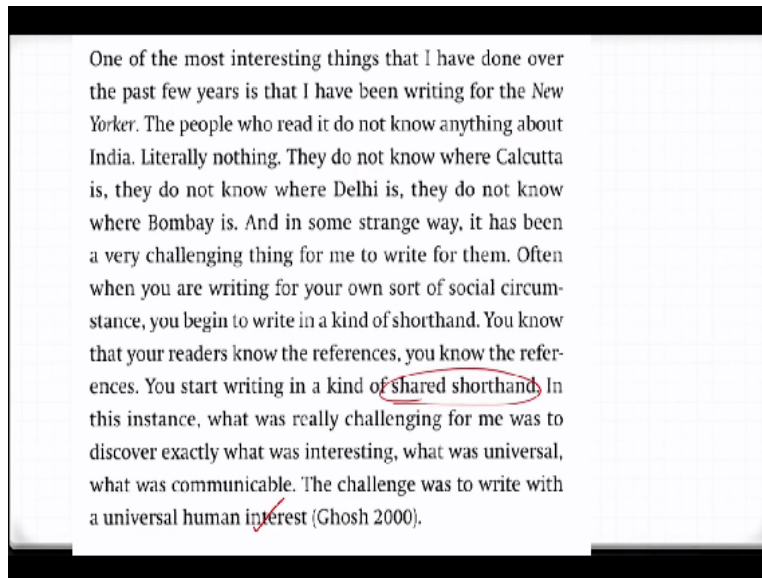
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This is an age old question which has been haunting the Indian English writer to which the writers have also responded in multiple ways. This dilemma about writing in a language which is not really your own but also writing things which are dear to you such as your nation, this is an age old dilemma which began to be expressed in the space of fiction form Raja Rao's times onwards.

We also know about the nationalistic compulsions which forced writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay too move away from English towards native tongues, Bangla. So in this context, in the contemporary if we ask this question about the audience who do you write for? Sundar Rajan chooses to respond to this question with an extensive quote from Amitav Ghosh.

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Ghosh writes, "One of the most interesting things that I have done over the past few years is that I have been writing for the *New Yorker*. The people who read it do not know anything about India. Literally nothing. They do not know where Calcutta is, they do not know where Delhi is, they do not know where Bombay is. And in some strange way, it has been a very challenging thing for me to write for them.

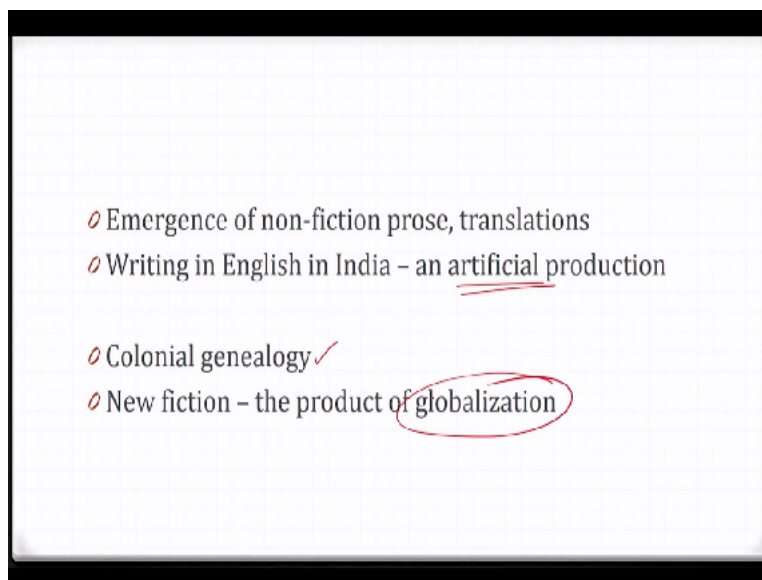
Often when you are writing for your own sort of social circumstance, you begin to write in a kind of shorthand. You know that your readers know the references, you know the references. You start writing in a kind of shared shorthand. In this instance, what was really challenging for me was to discover what exactly was interesting, what was the universal, what was communicable.

The challenge was to write with a universal human interest." This is very interesting because even the writer like Ghosh in home critiques like Meenakshi Mukherjee had never discovered any sign of Anxiety of Indianness. We find that he too has this Anxiety in his mind when he is

writing for whom he knows is a predominantly western audience. So how do you write about this nation, about India, to an audience who is not familiar with the nation and given this context, what is the compulsion to write about the nation.

This is the, this is why perhaps at the outset of the essay itself, Sundar Rajan refers to this preoccupation with the nation as a burden. In another essay, in an earlier work by Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Anxiety of Indianness*, she refers to this continuing obsession of writing about India as an anxiety and this seems to be an ongoing thing for whatsoever reasons. This compulsion to write about India, and this obsessive concern to narrativise the nation, it continues to be the in thing in the field of Indian Writing in English. Sundar Rajan, as she goes on to wind up her essay, she also refers to the emergence of non-fiction prose.

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The emergence of translations from English to other languages and from other languages to English because the space of Indian Writing in English is opening up to newer avenues to accept more different and varied kinds of writings. She also talks about the emergence of newer, newer publishing houses, the new alliances which are coming in between and across huge global publishing houses and the local ones, (( )) (19:49) for women and their translation into Zubaan being one of the most recent examples.

And nevertheless, he, she continues to maintain this view that writing in English in India is an

artificial production. Sundar Rajan, Meenakshi Mukherjee and critics such as Ajanta Sarkar, they always had maintained that there is a way in which Indian Writer in English tries to reproduce an authentic version of India. There is an obsession about authenticity but nevertheless, the Indian English writer fails to produce, reproduce an authentic telling, an authentic portrayal of the nation.

Now Sundar Rajan herself says that she would rather not get into the arguments related to authenticity but she continues to maintain this position that writing in English in India is an artificial production and she also draws this important comparison earlier, the Indian English novel, the Indian English fiction was the product of colonial genealogy, this significance, this starting point cannot be ignored, it cannot be done away with.

But today when we look at the new fiction which is produced in the post-Rushdie period, in the post-1980s decades, we find that more than the colonial legacy what becomes important in shaping and defining the prospects and contours of this body of writing is this mega event, globalization.

So today the fiction, contemporary Indian English fiction can be seen as a product of the globalization with an evident, with a very visible focus on the global market. A very visible focus on this audience which lies scattered across the world and not merely within this geographical space, not within, within these borders. Keeping this in mind, we need to approach the 3 novels which are part of this week's discussion.

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## Three novels

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|---|---|
| o <i>Riot</i> , 2001 - Shashi Tharoor                 |   |
| o Zalilgarh, UP                                       | Urban young Indian male                           |
| o Lakshman, St. Stephen's, western educated           | English speaking                                  |
| o <i>English, August</i> , 1988 - Upamanyu Chatterjee | Highly educated                                   |
| o A fictional rural town, Madna                       | Western, modern outlook                           |
| o Agastya Sen, New Delhi and Calcutta                 | Traditional 'enough'                              |
| o <i>The Hungry Tide</i> , 2004 - Amitav Ghosh        | Feels 'out of place' in rural, non-urban settings |
| o Sundarbans  |   |
| o Delhi-based Kanai Dutt                              |   |

First one is *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor. *English August* by Upamanyu Chatterjee and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. The novel *Riot* is set in Zalilgarh in Uttar Pradesh. The protagonist is Lakshman who is currently the district magistrate of Zalilgarh. He is a product of the St. Stephen's college. He is also educated abroad. And Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English August* is set in a fictional rural town named Madna.

The protagonist Agastya Sen is also an IAS officer, currently posted in Madna. He also has spent most of his life growing up and studying in New Delhi and Calcutta. 2004 novel *Hungry Tide* is set in the island of Sundarbans. The protagonist is Delhi based businessman named Kanai Dutt who is also well versed in his linguistic skills. He is wonderful in translation. There are certain common things which would emerge as we begin to look at these novels.

The protagonists are all urban, young Indian males. They also though there is, though caste is rendered rather invisible, the names, the background and many such markers suggest that they also belong to the upper caste. They are all English speaking. It is not merely a knowledge of the language; they are all excellently skilled in using English language. They are highly educated. Their outlook comes across as being western and modern but they are also traditional enough.

If you look at the character of Lakshman, he is very modern in his outlook, in his value system but he also has to think twice before making this choice between Priscilla with whom he is

having an extramarital affair and his wife and child with whom he is not able to emotionally connect well. All these 3 protagonists, they are all based in India, they are working in different parts of the country but they feel quite similarly out of place in rural, in non-urban settings.

Lakshman feels out of place in Zalilgarh. Agastya Sen feels he does not belong to Madna at all and Kanai Dutt, he realizes that there is a very little in-common that he shares with this space which is also the Sundarbans, which is also dear to him in certain different ways. So we will be looking at 3, these 3 novels and try and analyze them from the perspective of the many arguments which are part of Sundar Rajan's essay.

And also bring in fresh insights to try and understand how the post-Rushdie novelists have approached the idea of the nation and how the secular self emerges as the most important kind of protagonist in this body of writing. Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.