Activity 3 – Use your ImagiNation

In 1983, a political scientist called Benedict Anderson published an important book called *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. One of the arguments he makes in it is particularly useful for our reading of *Midnight's Children*. This is what Anderson says: 'The nation … is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' In other words, the only reality to which the word 'nation' points is an imaginative reality – something that happens within the minds of the individuals who make up the kind of community which calls itself a nation. What do you think about this idea?

Benedict Anderson goes on to explore the question of what holds a nation together in all kinds of different and interesting ways, and his book has been hugely influential. Salman Rushdie indicated how far it had shaped his writing and thinking when he published a collection of his essays and named it *Imaginary Homelands*. And, in an essay marking the 40th anniversary of Indian independence, Rushdie asks a question which draws on Anderson's ideas about nations:

> Does India exist? If it doesn't, what's keeping Pakistan and Bangladesh apart?
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> It's when you start thinking about the political entity, the nation of India, the thing whose fortieth anniversary it is, that the question starts making sense. After all, in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly "free". But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it, stand?
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> Some countries are united by a common language; India has around fifteen major languages and numberless minor ones. Nor are its people united by race, religion or culture. These days, you can even hear some voices suggesting that the preservation of the union is not in the common interest.

Click on this link for maps which show very vividly the many ways in which the Indian subcontinent has been divided by its various invading and indigenous rulers over the past four thousand years: http://www.mapsofindia.com/history/flash-history.htm Does India exist? In what real ways can any 'nation' be said to exist? A novel creates a world that exists in the mind of the reader. But in *Midnight's Children*, and in a number of other novels written in English by writers from societies coming to grips with decolonization, with national life after independence, the imaginative effort to communicate the reality of a nation goes hand-in-hand with an awareness that the nation might only exist through a kind of collective fiction: the idea of nation depends on imagiNation (postcolonial critics like playing with typography).

These are not just theoretical or academic issues. Many postcolonial novels in English explore the ways that the knotty question of nation and nationality plays out in individual characters' lives and experiences. Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, for instance, the novel he wrote immediately after *Midnight's Children*, describes Pakistan (which from 1947 to 1971 included the country we now know as Bangladesh, even though the two territories were separated by the width of northern India) like this:

> Al-Lah's new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable that it could almost exist. […] The city [Lahore]'s old inhabitants, who

> had become accustomed to living in a land older than time, and were therefore being slowly eroded by the implacably revenant tides of the past, had been given a bad shock by independence, by being told to think of themselves, as well as the country itself, as new. Well, their imaginations simply weren't up to the job, you can understand that.

Amitav Ghosh, another Indian writer, explores similar questions in his 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines* – its title suggests one way of conceptualising the borders between nations. The narrator's grandmother is startled to discover that there is nothing in between India and Pakistan, and asks: "If there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, what's the difference then? … What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?" Her 'place of birth had come to be … messily at odds with her nationality' – she had been born in Dhaka when it was a city in British India; after 1947 it became part of East Pakistan, but after the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 found itself part of another 'new' country; small wonder that the character feels unsure of herself: 'Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said … it's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?'

The lines that divide up and define the nation have a powerful psychological reality, as *The Shadow Lines* goes on to show. The novel's narrator muses on the way that physical distance matters less than national affiliation when it comes to the way that human beings relate to one another (you can use Google maps to see what he means about where the cities he names are in relation to each other):

> …within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space … Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet, did the people of Khulna care about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)? I doubted it. … It seemed to me then that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all.

Questions

- How does *Midnight's Children* contribute to and problematize the experience of defining a nation? Look again at the image of the perforated sheet: how does national history shape, determine or define individual lives in the novel?
- *Midnight's Children* repeatedly claims that the process of nation-building is complicated by the enormous number and variety of people identifying themselves as 'Indian'. How does Rushdie use repetition and doubling to capture something of this vastness and multiplicity? (You might want to trace images of knees and a nose, the spittoon, snakes, or the themes of infidelity, impotence, the power of emotions…)