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The affective construction of plurality of nationalism and citizenship

by Aparajita Dutta

In our contemporary world, where our bodies are marked by the legality (or illegality) of our citizenship created by the normative construction of the nation, affect theory offers new ways to understand our position as citizens through the exploration of our lived experiences within a nation that exists as a nation of the community. In this paper, I aim to look at how affect theory constructs the idea of a nation in plurality thereby shows another way to claim the nation and how the bodies, considered as the “other,” the LGBTQ people, people rejected on the grounds of religion like Muslims, and others are all incorporated in this nation that exists in the consciousness of the community; their emotions of nationalism is created affectively through the emotions of people, individual and collective. My theoretical propositions are especially focused on the works of Sarah Ahmed and Jasbir Puar, among others. This paper will look at the Indian context as the point of analysis focusing on the Trans Act 2019, CAA 2019 under the rule of the Hindu nationalist government and reveal how this nation constructed affectively transcends identity politics and culture.

Understanding “Nation,” “Nationalism,” and Its Connection to Bodies :

In this paper, I look at the concept of nation as “imagined community,” following Benedict Anderson. Anderson, in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, points out the “limitedness” of a nation, as, according to him, “the nation is

imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” He then proceeds to state that, “It (nation) is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” I draw upon this limitedness of Anderson’s nation and the space of the nation as an “imagined community” to explore further the possibilities of existence of bodies, within these homogenous imagined community of nation; these bodies I analyze exist within this imagined community as resisting bodies, who create alternative power structure and offer possibilities to imagine more communities within the homogenous space of nation. Working on the liminality of the concept of nation, Homi Bhaba in his book, *Nation and Narration* talks about, “a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (1). He brings to forefront, minority or marginal bodies within the liminal space of the nation. I draw upon Bhaba’s “marginal” or “minority” bodies existing within the scope of the liminal nation to talk about the oppressed, subjugated bodies within the space of the nation (4). By intervening the rationalization of the authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies of the nation-space, these bodies, offer pathways to envision the scope for creating alternative power structures within the space of nation. Bhaba, further explicates his position of nation as a narration, as he says, that, “it is the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy – and an apparatus of power—that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic, categories, like the people, minorities, or ‘cultural difference’ that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation” (292). I aim to look into these slippages, the ways these oppressed bodies create alternative identities and in turn, contribute to what Bhaba calls, “writing the nation” with the use of affect theory.

Affect Theory and its influence in postcolonial feminist scholarship:

The significance of work on emotions and affects in humanities and social sciences has been pointed out by scholars from all over the globe. Kristyn Gorton in her “Theorizing emotion and affect” traced the long history of theorizing emotions and affects where we find influences of feminist theorists like Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), bell hooks (1989), Alison Jaggar (1989), Audre Lorde (1984), Elizabeth Spelman (1989) and Catherine Lutz (1988) (333). Exploring works of scholars like Sedgwick, Cvetkovich, Ahmed, Probyn and others, Gorton reveals how work on emotion and affect allows us to reconsider the importance of feelings in everyday life, politics, the media, and in formulating notions of citizenship (345). According to her, the theorization of emotion and affect is particularly important to feminism, a politics, which as many of the authors point out, is suffused with feelings, passions and emotions. Jasper in “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research” showed how social movements can be understood by theorization of affects and emotions as emotions “motivate individuals, are generated in crowds, are expressed rhetorically, and shape stated and unstated goals of social movements.” Naisargi N. Dave in her book, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*” draws upon affect theory to argue that, “activism is ethical practice, an effect of the affective exercises: the problematization of social norms, the invention of alternatives to these norms, and creative practice of these newly invented possibilities” (3). Affect theory, therefore has opened ways to understand and relate the individual and collective experiences, the protests, literature, and culture, giving us into an insight into human emotions and feelings irrespective of their identities and their geo-political status. One of the pioneers of affect theory, Sarah Ahmed in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* led the way into understanding how affect theory can be applied in understanding the socio-cultural-political understanding of the

world. She establishes that emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy; emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits (4). According to Ahmed, emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So, emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others (10). These are the points from where we can investigate how emotions and affects shape our consciousness, our feelings and our belongingness to nation. William E. Connolly in his “The Complexity of Intention,” also talked about the importance of affect theory stating that there is reason to believe that conscious judgments of many about race, gender, sexuality, violence, and/or ecology stand in some tension with affect-imbued tendencies that nudge us in different directions (795). Added to this the radical expansion of the mass media that adds urgency to this issue. Critical engagement with such scholarly works of affect theory has the potential to open new understandings of the postcolonial world with respect to issues like nation and nationalism. Ann Cvetkovich, in the Introduction to her book, *An Archive of Feelings* pointed out that it is important to incorporate affective life into our conception of citizenship and to recognize that these affective forms of citizenship may fall outside the institutional practices that we customarily associate with the concept of a citizen (10). Works of Sarah Ahmed and Jasbir Puar are focused on the constructions of nationalism and therefore guide us in our understanding of pluralistic construction of nationalism where the nation exists as a space belonging to the people and the “other,” the people who are rejected on the basis of their identities form a part of the collective.

Understanding Body-Nation Discourse through Affect Theory:

The connection between the production of bodies and the production of the nation as an imagined community giving rise to many trials, approximations and controversies has been explained by Elena Castro in her Introduction to a special issue of the journal, *Letras femeninas* (15). Drawing upon theorists like Foucault, Preciado, and others, Castro visualizes the body as a living archive, with the capacity of agency in the battlefield of cultural representation and political action (15). Now looking at this construction of nation as an imagined community with bodies as living archives, one can explore how nation and nationalism are constructed in multiple ways through affect theory. Sarah Ahmed's book *Cultural Political of Emotion* offers insight into how the nationalism sponsored by the state works and how are people made to "feel" the emotions of belonging to the nation. She starts with the example of the British National Front where "the others" are the illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers, threaten to overwhelm and swamp the nation (1). The familiarity of this narrative, pointed out by Ahmed, therefore can be used to understand the construction of the idea of nationalism in various countries with varying political ideologies because in all these instances, there is always the narrative of othering. "Such others," as Ahmed points out, "threaten to take away from what 'you' have, as the legitimate subject of the nation, as the one who is the true recipient of national benefits" (1). Therefore, it is the fear of the threat that is employed by the state to create the emotions of belonging to the nation among the citizens. In her chapter, "The Organization of Hate," Ahmed gives us the equation of how hate as an emotion is used to create the "other." She points out that the, "presence of this other is imagined as a threat to the object of love" (43) and thus, "this emotional reading of others as hateful aligns the imagined subject with rights and the imagined nation with ground." Therefore, people who belong to the idea of nation constructed by the ruling government are made to feel hatred for the

“other” who causes injury to the nation or rather the way the nation is defended by that ruling government. In her chapter, “In the Name of Love,” Ahmed notes, “The conversion of hate into love allows the groups to associate themselves with ‘good feeling’ and ‘positive value’. Indeed, such groups become the ones concerned with the well-being of others; their project becomes redemptive, or about saving loved others” (122). This is exactly the way, people who are embraced by the nation defended by the ruling government are made to feel. In this construction of love for nation, this nationalism, the question then comes up is how do people feel? What happens when people support the “other?” How then is their love for nation challenged? In what ways do they feel the love for “others?” While Ahmed explains how people are united by love for nation in their hatred towards the “other,” Jasbir Puar in “Queer assemblages” explained how the “others,” the terrorist bodies, the suicide bombers, the Muslims and the homosexuals all become queer assemblages because queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion, deviance, deformity (Puar 127).

Drawing upon this construction of love for the nation through hatred and the existence of the queer bodies, the Muslim bodies, the terrorists as queer assemblages, once can address how the citizens of India felt as they joined protests against Trans Act 2019 and CAA in 2019-2020. The questions that arise here are, how then can these protests invite the creation of love for the nation working against the homonormative discourse of nationalism promoted by the Indian government and how is this affect transmitted? How in the existence of the Indian government that excludes queer bodies, and Muslims, are emotions of being a citizen and the love for India as a nation, experienced by people irrespective of their gender, sexual, and religious identity? How does the resignification of the Indian national anthem, that symbolizes India’s freedom from the

British colonizers affectually create the sentiment of nationalism which works against the enforced Islamophobic homonationalism by the Indian nation state? Exploring these questions will help us understand how nationalism is created in plurality from affective discourse and how this creation of nationalism in its multiple forms construct the idea of plurality of citizen who belong to the queer nation.

Eminent philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, who composed “Jana Gana Mana,” the national anthem of India has defined nation as “the aspect of a whole people as an organized power” (107) in his book, *Nationalism*. This ideological understanding of nation and nationalism refutes the idea of nation and nationalism as defended by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has led to the construction of a Hindu homonationalist state with the imposition of Trans Act 2019 and CAA (2019) has resulted in protests all over India and abroad where people have united irrespective of their gender, sexual, and religious identity joining hands to resist the homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and others. Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj DasGupta in their Introduction to the book, *Queering Digital India: Activisms, Identities, Subjectivities*, has expressed the need for understanding the entanglements between digital technologies, nationalism, neoliberalism and sexual subjectivities in India (1). This situation replicates Sarah Ahmed’s theory of construction of nationalism through love and hate and Puar’s construction of terrorist bodies as queer, here in this case, the Muslims, and the LGBTQ people of India. When the protests take place against the government, and get labelled as “anti-nationals,” one can understand a creation of nationalism in plurality through affective labor.

Understanding Indian Diaspora and its connection to nationalism and citizenship:

Analysis of texts as repositories of feelings and emotions (Cvetkovich 7) composed individually reveals the emotions of nationalism in plurality. Following Gayatri Gopinath's claim that while the BJP-led Hindu nationalist government in India acknowledged the diaspora solely in the form of the prosperous, Hindu, heterosexual NRI businessman, there exists a different embodiment of diaspora that remains unthinkable within this Hindu nationalist imaginary (10), I am taking into consideration a poetry performance by the diasporic Indian artist, Alok Vaid Menon. Born and brought up in U.S., Menon faced homophobia and transphobia within their Indian community and has to erase some part of them to make other people more comfortable (Sarkar).

A writer, performer, and designer, they have earned reputation internationally. Their poetry addresses issues like homophobia, transphobia, among others. One such poetry performance is "Trans/Generation." Alok Vaid Menon, through their poem, "Trans/Generation" presents an "alternative rendering of the diaspora" and instead of dislodging it from "nationalist ideologies," as pointed out by Gopinath, I would argue that they establish the emotions and feelings of nationalism through affective labor. Menon begins their poem on violence and resistance by talking about their "culture." By not using the word "India" or "nation," in the poem, Menon echoes Tagore's nationalism where "nation" is not defended by any political ideology but rather is an aspect of Tagore's nation as an organized power. Vaid- Menon talks about "the routine acts of violence that rendered invisible" and from there, draws the conclusion that " I refuse to call my grandmother transphobic I will not blame her for her own violence; instead I will join her in not smiling in this family photograph and there is solidarity in the silence and there is resistance and our refusal to pretend we are both something we are not." This act of resistance is produced through

affective labor where Vaid-Menon's grandmother's transphobia, her blaming them for the abuse he faced in the train ceased to exist in the light of the greater violence that both of them faced; Menon recognizes "this not as a form of my own gender oppression, it is hers." Here, Menon and their grandmother become the "other," echoing queer temporalities in the relay of affective information between and amid beings, the sequence of reflection, repetition, resound, and return (but with a difference, as in mimicry), and brings forth waves of the future breaking into the present (Puar 129).

While we see Menon's grandmother hating Menon for their gender, she is affectively united in the discourse of the "other," the "queer" body as Menon rejects the hatred and embraces their grandmother with love. In the repetitive "silence"- "violence" performance, Menon brings out this silencing of emotions towards the violence that even heterosexual women face within this heteronormative society. Throughout the text, Menon thereby resists the heteronormative culture but not the people who are a part of it. Their feelings towards their grandmother, their emotions, and their embracing of their grandmother irrespective of what she felt towards them creates the sense of nationalism where the nation is not defended by any political ideology but represents the community. It is the nationalism where the grandmother exists as a person of the normative culture, the nation and her hatred towards the "other," the queer is reciprocated by love. Vaid-Menon's conversion of their grandmother's hate into their collective resistance against the normativity as opposed to the emotions of nationalism where love for the nation is constructed as hate towards the other (Ahmed 123) constructs this nationalism in plurality through affective labor. Here, they join their heterosexual grandmother in "feeling vulnerable and fearful of attack" (157) and therefore, "we" of the queer becomes "we" of the community reclaiming the nation that was seized from them through affective labor.

Understanding “Jana Gana Mana,” the national anthem of India and its connection to citizenship:

The national anthem of India, “Jana Gana Mana” was written in the 1911 and first sung in the same year when India was still under the British rule comprising of the Indian sub-continent (Cultural India). It was declared as the National Anthem of India on January 24, 1950, three years after India earned her freedom from the British rule. The song was created by Tagore and evokes the sentiments of inclusion including modern day Pakistan which was then a part of British India. In the English translation as well as in the original, the songs embraces all the bodies irrespective of gender, sexuality, religion, and other identities who are considered as “other,” who are considered to posit threat to object of love, in this case, India (Ahmed 43) or who are considered as terrorists as traitors to the nation (Puar 127) defended by a political ideology. He speaks of communities settled around geographical areas of Punjab, Sind, Gujrat, Maratha, Dravid, Orissa, and Bengal. He unites these communities in an all embracing “they” with emphasis on “all people” within the poem. The India or the Bharat referred in the poem is the British India representing inclusivity, the India who was not divided by political ideologies.

The poem achieves unity among diverse communities of India through love, through hope as, “They pray for thy blessings and sing thy praise.” This is how love for the nation is constructed where people are united with hope and not any threat or injury. Such a form of nationalism constructed with the emotions of love and hope as opposed to the nationalism where love is constructed by hatred, where the “other” becomes a threat as pointed out by Ahmed, exists as a public discourse. This poem’s becoming of national anthem therefore through affective transmission celebrates the existence of nationalism in its plurality. Therefore, in the situation where India is represented as a nation backed by a certain political ideology who enforce laws

excluding the LGBTQ people, and the Muslims, this song, as the national anthem through affective labor establishes the emotions of nationalism where love for the nation is constructed on the basis of love for the other.

“Out of Syllabus: Gender Identity Song,” and its connection to protest movements, identity building and nationalism:

Posted on YouTube on Dec 6, 2019, “Out of Syllabus: Gender Identity Song” created by Abish Mathew was created as a resistance to stop the Trans Bill to be passed as an Act in India in 2019. Even though the Trans Bill managed its way through the parliament, the YouTube video remains a powerful tool of dissent for times to come. The Trans Bill 2019 which got passed by the Indian parliament requires an individual to apply for a “transgender certificate” from the District Magistrate where they live (Knight). If one wants, to do so, then the person has to provide proof of surgery, issued by a hospital official, to the District Magistrate for a second evaluation, and the official must be “satisfied with the correctness of such certificate. Therefore, in order to claim their right to their own bodies, transgender people in India were required permission from the government and go through a particular medical process supervised by people appointed by the government. Therefore, we see, this Bill which went on to become an Act, is based on the politics of exclusion where only a certain type of people with their paperwork done will be included based on certain conditions.

In the name of love and protection, the government sought to exclude certain bodies which are considered as “threat” to the nation. Like the construction of the emotions of Hindu nationalism by the ruling political party, BJP, this Bill/ Act too is based on the construction of subjects of

nation on hatred towards the other, and love for the nation that is followed by it. An emotional reading of this Bill/ Act will reveal how the transgender people are conditioned to exist as bodies and excluded if they fail to meet the requirements. “This alignment is affected by the representation of the rights of the subject,” (Ahmed 43) and therefore, the “other” is created on the failure to adhere to the rules imposed by the heteronormative Indian state ruled by BJP. The “Out of Syllabus: Gender Identity Song” created as a reaction to this exclusionary politics however followed a different route to reach out to people. The video has several components to it. The animated song is set in a classroom where we find two students called, “Boy” and “Girl.” This very use of gender identities in naming the students introduces the readers to the existing binary structure of the society. The teacher, Angel introduces themselves and says, “I am gender fluid.” The next moment, we find “Boy,” shrinking, his reactions show utter confusion. As Angel proceeds to talk about their gender identity, Boy clearly says he does not understand. This scene performed in the video shows the nature of heteronormativity explained by Ahmed as a form of “public comfort” which exists by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape (143). The video works against this public comfort of heteronormativity and through affective labor, unites the heteronormative people and the non-normative people in one space of nation where nation is not defended by a political ideology but rather becomes an inclusive space for the community to exist. Throughout the video, we find “Boy,” and “Girl” showing discomfort through their physical and verbal gestures.

By this displacement from the comfort zone, the video provides way for a resolution and space for inclusivity. It addresses the very discomfort on which the normative state creates the hatred for other, the queer bodies and in turn, constructs the love for nation and nationalism. The video takes an affective turn here and moves towards resolution. Characters like Mehek are

introduced and they talk about the abuse they face both at home and in public, thereby recognizing queer lives as ‘lives lost,’ an exigency that Ahmed has emphasized on (156). In the end, we find all the characters singing, “You don’t have to get it, you have to respect it.” This is the moment that affectively constructs nationalism where love for the nation, love for the people is based on respect.

Another important component is the way songs are sung based on the tune of nursery rhymes. The video plays on childhood innocence where for an infant, emotion and affect are the same (Tompkins 54). While explaining the gender identities and issues, the abuse, the violence LGBTQ people face in India in the form of songs, the tunes of Nursery Rhymes like “Rain rain go away,” “London Bridge is Falling Down,” and others. Thus, the audience, like Boy and Girl who do not have any understanding of the gender and sexual identities and are unaware of the violence LGBTQ people face encounter the issues sung in the known tone of Nursery rhymes, they are dragged into the rhythm of the known music. It is through this affective labor that they face the “other,” the LGBTQ people and their reality. Here, two form of emotions are at work. One is the affective imposition of childhood emotions through the Nursery rhymes. The second one is the emotion of love that works without hate. By talking about the violence and emphasizing on the fact that “you don’t have to get it, you just have to respect it,” the audience is relieved of the fear of the unknown and connect with their childhood comfort of the tunes of Nursery Rhymes. This fear of unknown, which is used by the heteronormative state to introduce hatred for the “other”, through this affective transmission is transformed into love and respect for the “other” by the songs presented through the tune of Nursery rhymes. The audience, therefore, are dragged out of their heteronormative comfort zones but they are not forced to accept or even love but rather respect people. Looking at the content of these songs, we will find how they talk about violence, the abuse

LGBTQ people face in India by the government and the society. In resisting the state, they embrace the community who are a part of the state and it is through this attachment that they create the emotions of nationalism while simultaneously resisting the heteronormative nation-state. The third component of the video is some words from the LGBTQ people of India.

A closer look at the scenes will show that they are surrounded in the frame that represented the projector where the previous animated songs were shown. Here, these people are introduced and talk about their lives, the discrimination they have faced. Their voices of dissent are not of hatred but of love, of empathy, of understanding which is achieved through the classroom environment. The protest here is not through any demands but rather through hope. The description of the video provides a basic summary of the exigency of the situation, of the need to stop the Trans Bill 2019 and links to know more about it. Therefore, Abish Mathew's "Out of Syllabus Gender Identity Song" resists the transphobia imposed on Indians through the affective labor of unlearning, love, empathy and hope. The hashtags, #SonOfAbish #PetitionToPresident #StopTransBill2019, with petition is built on the affective construction of nationalism where the "other," the queer people reach out to the heteronormative people to construct the emotions of nationalism, reclaiming the nation that seeks to exclude them.

How a Pakistani song redefined India's protest movements and nationalism:

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's "Hum Dekhenge" or "We Shall See (1979) became the anthem of anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests nationwide sung late into the night by crowds in Delhi, Vadodara, Pune, and Mumbai even though it is composed in Urdu, a language not spoken by a majority of Indians (Rana). The poem was originally composed by Faiz, a recipient of the Lenin

Peace Prize under the Soviet Union, and much maligned by Islamist Pakistanis under General Zia ul Haq (Ahmed) . This poem, written as a ‘protest poem’ against the intolerant religious order of Pakistan became the anthem of anti-CAA movements in India. The Citizenship Amendment Act in India was passed by the ruling government of India in 2019 whereby smoothing the path for all non-Muslim immigrants from adjoining countries to attain citizenship, the law paves the way for practitioners of Islam to be unfairly disadvantaged when seeking to immigrate to India (Shankar). Thereby, in the situation where India as a nation was being constructed based on Islamophobia, the song of protest that challenged religious atrocities of Islam through affective labor became the song of protest that challenged Islamophobia.

This affective resignification of the song where the song creates an inclusive space, for all forms of terrorist bodies to exist, the Muslims, the homosexuals, the queer people (Puar 127) constructs the emotions of nationalism where all the bodies, rejected by the government are included within this pluralistic idea of nation. The “Hum” or “We” of “We Shall See” is therefore symbolic of the people rejected by the normative nation state of India. This song not only creates the space for inclusion but, as a song of protest, accepted worldwide as the anthem of anti-CAA protests reveals how protests can not only affect people emotionally but also reclaim the normative space through affectual labor. The participation of LGBTQ people in the anti-CAA protests in the scenario (Kuchey) reveals the similar affective transmission of nationalism among people where people from all spheres, irrespective of their gender, sexuality, religion, or any form of identity unite together with love and hope creating the emotion of nationalism against the normative nationalism promoted by the normative nation state of the ruling government.

Conclusion:

Therefore, from our above discussions we see how affective theory helps us in understanding the existence of nationalism and citizenship in its plurality. We see how through affects, alternative forms of nationalism are created through the existing repertoire of nationalism like national anthem, as well as individual and collective pieces, along with the ones created solely as parts of socio-political protest movements. By constructing this nationalism in plurality, affect theory paves the way to reclaim the nation that belongs to the community.

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