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Caged in the Nation: Women's Identity, Resistance, and the Paradox of Nationalism in Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist*

Dr. Md Nasir Hossain

Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Madanapalle Institute of Technology & Science (MITS), Deemed to be University, Andhra Pradesh, India
Orcid Id: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9714-0627

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Abstract

This article investigates the intersection of women's identity and nationalist ideology in Qurratulain Hyder's Fireflies in the Mist, highlighting how nationalism functions as a deeply gendered structure that both mobilises and marginalises female subjects in twentieth-century South Asia. The study argues that Hyder's novel functions as a sustained critique of nationalist discourse by unveiling how women's identities are constructed, constrained, and instrumentalised within nation-building projects, while simultaneously demonstrating moments of resistance that illuminate the entangled dynamics of gender and power in postcolonial contexts. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the research utilises close textual analysis to examine narrative strategies, characterisation, and ideological critique. Particular attention is given to the character of Deepali Sarkar, whose political engagement embodies the paradox of nationalist inclusion: women are valorised as symbols of moral purity and sacrifice, yet denied autonomous agency and meaningful political authority. The analysis highlights that Hyder destabilises the notion of gender-neutral national progress by foregrounding women's struggles for selfhood amid overlapping patriarchal and nationalist regimes. Furthermore, the study presents how the novel articulates an implicit call for intersectional feminist resistance, challenging both nationalist idealism and ingrained patriarchal hierarchies. By situating Fireflies in the Mist within debates on gendered nationalism and postcolonial literary resistance, this research paper advances understanding of the structural exclusions embedded in nation-making and underscores literature's capacity to negotiate and critique the limits of political belonging for women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is not a static expression of individual characteristics but a relational construct continuously negotiated within social fields of power. As Norton (2002) argues, identity must be understood through the relationships individuals maintain within unequal structures that mould their access to symbolic and material resources. Extending this relational view,

Weinreich (2003) conceptualises identity as a lifelong process, constantly formed and re-formed through lived experiences and social interaction. This dynamic understanding highlights the interplay between personal agency and structural determinants such as race, caste, class, gender, and nationality in subject formation. Hall's seminal formulation of identity as a "production rather than a fixed essence" epitomises its discursive nature, positioning identity as historically contingent and politically mediated rather than ontologically given (Hall, 1996). Similarly, Butler's theory of performativity advances the argument that identity is constituted through repeated acts that align with socially sanctioned norms, thereby naturalising dominant ideologies while also creating possibilities for subversion (Butler, 1990). Together, these approaches frame identity as a complex process embedded within personal, political, cultural, and social relations.

From a sociological perspective, identity emerges simultaneously as a self-attribute and a social construction moulded by processes of recognition. Taylor (1995) emphasises that identity formation depends upon dialogic relations with others; denial or distortion of recognition generates forms of symbolic harm that restrict self-realisation and social participation. This insight illuminates the stakes of identity politics, especially among marginalised communities whose struggles for recognition mirror broader demands for social justice and representational equity (Fraser, 2013). Foucault's analysis of discourse and power further unveils how institutional knowledge systems categorise, regulate, and normalise identities within specific historical contexts (Foucault, 1980). Identity, therefore, is inseparable from ideological structures that govern inclusion and exclusion. Said's concept of "Othering" demonstrates how colonial discourse builds the colonised subject as a negative mirror to Western selfhood, situating identity formation within asymmetrical relations of domination and epistemic control (Said, 1978). This logic extends beyond colonial binaries to multiple vectors of marginalisation, including race, caste, class, and gender. In contemporary contexts, digital media further complicates identity practices by enabling new forms of self-representation, community building, and political mobilisation that reconfigure conventional modes of belonging (Castells, 1997).

Women's identities have historically been moulded through patriarchal structures that prescribe normative roles within domestic, economic, cultural, and political spheres. Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" embodies the social production of femininity, exposing gender identity as an outcome of ideological conditioning rather than biological determinism (Beauvoir, 1949). Walby (1991) similarly identifies patriarchy as a systematic structure that confines women to caregiving and reproductive labour, thereby restricting their access to economic resources and political power. Feminist scholarship has challenged the tendency to homogenise women's identities by foregrounding intersectional perspectives attentive to class, race, caste, and colonial histories (Hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). Hooks' work highlights that Black women's identities are produced through intersecting structures of gender, racial, and class oppression, thereby problematising singular narratives of womanhood (Hooks, 1984). In parallel, Mohanty critiques Western feminist discourse for constructing "Third World women" as passive and ahistorical victims, calling instead for context-specific analyses that recognise women's agency and resistance within local socio-political conditions (Mohanty, 1988). This intersectional, postcolonial feminist framework enables a more detailed understanding of identity as a contested terrain where domination and resistance coexist. By synthesising discursive, sociological, and feminist theories of identity, this study conceptualises women's subjectivity as produced through negotiations across patriarchal, colonial, and class-based power relations, rather than as a unitary or universal experience.

Women's identity and social positioning are profoundly shaped by political-economic structures that operate at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. Federici's analysis shows how women's unpaid domestic and care labour functions as an invisible foundation of capitalist accumulation, reinforcing gendered exploitation and economic dependency (Federici, 2004). Extending this critique, Fraser contends that neoliberal regimes have appropriated feminist discourses of empowerment and choice, redirecting struggles away from

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systematic transformation towards individualised narratives of success. This ideological shift, rather than dismantling inequality, often reproduces and conceals structural forms of gender injustice (Fraser, 2013). Within contemporary cultural and political arenas, women's identities remain sites of contestation across media representation, labour participation, and political visibility. The transnational #MeToo movement exemplifies a collective reclamation of identity against entrenched cultures of sexual violence and silencing, highlighting how feminist resistance functions through shared narrative and public testimony (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Yet, Banet-Weiser cautions that the assimilation of feminist rhetoric into market-driven frameworks risks depoliticising gender struggles, converting movements of resistance into commodified expressions of visibility devoid of structural critique (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Nationalism, as a political ideology and cultural discourse, occupies a similarly powerful role in identity formation. It operates as a collective imaginary that binds individuals into a shared political community through narratives of common history, language, and cultural heritage (Smith, 1991). Anderson's foundational concept of the nation as an "imagined community" embodies how national belonging emerges not through direct interpersonal relations, but via symbolic systems sustained by print media, linguistic standardisation, and shared historical memory (Anderson, 1983). Language remains central to this process, functioning both as a unifying medium and a marker of exclusion. Gellner's account of linguistic standardisation highlights how national identity is consolidated through educational and administrative institutions that elevate a dominant language, thereby differentiating the national in-group from linguistic others (Gellner, 1983).

However, nationalism is rarely the product of cultural homogeneity alone; it frequently emerges in response to perceived threats to collective identity. In postcolonial contexts, nationalist movements have served as mechanisms for reclaiming indigenous identities marginalised under imperial rule. Chatterjee highlights how anti-colonial nationalism mobilised cultural difference as a cornerstone of political resistance, redefining sovereignty through the recovery of suppressed histories and traditions (Chatterjee, 1993). Connor's articulation of ethnic nationalism further unveils the tensions embedded in defining national membership through descent-based or ethnocultural criteria, a framework that often legitimises exclusionary politics and minoritarian marginalisation (Connor, 1994). In contrast, civic nationalism advances a model of national belonging grounded in shared political values rather than ethnic lineage, providing a comparatively inclusive conception of identity (Habermas, 1996).

Despite its integrative aspirations, nationalism frequently intensifies identity conflicts within multicultural societies. Exclusionary formulations of national identity can marginalise minority groups, generating resistance and political instability. Brubaker's examination of post-Soviet nation-state formation emphasises how (re)assertions of national identity have led to ethnic tensions and contested citizenship regimes across newly consolidated states (Brubaker, 1996). Under conditions of globalisation, the relationship between identity and nationalism becomes further complicated. Transnational mobility, economic interdependence, and digitally mediated communications blur the boundaries of nationhood, promoting hybrid identities that challenge rigid nationalist categories (Appadurai, 1996). Nonetheless, nationalist sentiment persists and, in many contexts, intensifies as a reaction to global uncertainty and cultural permeability, materialising in the growth of populist movements seeking to reaffirm fixed conceptions of national belonging against perceived external threats (Mudde, 2007). Taken together, the intersections of gendered political economy and nationalist discourse illustrate that identity is not a stable or singular formation but a contested and ongoing production moulded by power relations, ideological negotiations, and socio-political struggle. Nationalism and feminism alike unveil how identities are mobilised both as instruments of domination and as resources for resistance. Understanding this dynamic relationship is therefore crucial for analysing contemporary debates on cultural belonging, recognition politics, and the politics of representation within pluralistic and postcolonial societies.

Women's identity is moulded by the interaction of patriarchal norms, economic structures, and cultural representations, all of which operate

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within historically situated regimes of power. Contemporary feminist scholarship emphasises the importance of an intersectional approach to identity, recognising how gender is co-constituted with class, race, caste, religion, and nationalism in the production of women's lived experiences (Hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988). Within this paradigm, identity is not merely an individual attribute but a field of negotiation, discipline, and resistance where subjectivities are continuously shaped by socio-political forces (Hall, 1996; Butler, 1990). A feminist reading of Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) allows for a detailed examination of how nationalist movements in twentieth-century South Asia simultaneously mobilised women as ideological symbols while constraining their agency within patriarchal frames. Hyder's text foregrounds the contradictions inherent in nationalist politics by unveiling how women's political participation is often celebrated rhetorically yet curtailed materially, thereby exposing the limits of emancipatory promises embedded within nationalist discourse.

Originally written in Urdu as *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Humsafar*, *Fireflies in the Mist* spans the socio-political transformations of Bengal from the 1940s to the 1970s, encompassing the Partition of India, the rise of communist movements, and the Bangladesh Liberation War. The narrative centres on Deepali Sarkar, a politically conscious Bengali woman whose personal trajectory unfolds alongside these epochal events. Deepali's experiences of love, ideological commitment, marriage, and emotional displacement operate as micro-histories that mirror broader national upheavals. Her relationship with Rehan Ahmed, a committed communist, anchors the emotional core of the narrative, while simultaneously dramatising the tension between revolutionary ideals and the everyday realities of women's lives. Although nationalist and leftist movements advocate egalitarian principles, Hyder demonstrates their failure to dismantle embedded patriarchal hierarchies. Deepali's political engagement does not translate into sustained autonomy; rather, her aspirations are repeatedly circumscribed by domestic expectations, gendered moral scrutiny, and her instrumentalisation within male-dominated revolutionary networks.

Hyder's critique aligns with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) argument that nationalist discourse frequently marginalises the subaltern woman by subsuming her voice within masculinist narratives of liberation. In *Fireflies in the Mist*, women are elevated symbolically as custodians of cultural authenticity and moral virtue, yet this idealisation paradoxically restricts their social mobility and expressive freedom. Female subjectivity is subordinated to the nationalist imperative, reducing women to metaphors of the nation rather than recognising them as autonomous political agents. Hyder problematises this binary by foregrounding women's emotional labour, ideological disillusionment, and everyday resistance, thereby exposing the exclusions underlying nationalist representations of collective struggle.

The novel also interrogates identity through the interconnections between history, memory, and displacement. Through a layered narrative that combines fiction with documented historical events, Hyder builds a panoramic cultural archive of Bengal's fractured political landscape. Characters throughout the text experience forced migration, ideological exile, and psychic uprooting, whether as Hindus fleeing East Pakistan or Muslims negotiating belonging within newly demarcated political terrains. These experiences of displacement operate as key sites of identity formation, disclosing how national borders impose new temporal and emotional geographies of belonging and loss. For women in particular, displacement intensifies vulnerabilities while also generating forms of resilience rooted in memory, kinship, and narrative articulation.

Hyder's use of a non-linear narrative structure further reinforces her critique of historical certainty. By moving across time periods and perspectives, and integrating philosophical reflection with archival detail, she resists the consolidation of a monolithic, nationalist master narrative. Instead, history emerges as fragmented, layered, and contested, reflecting women's unstable negotiations of identity across social and political terrains. While some critics have noted that the English translation lacks aspects of the lyrical intensity of the Urdu original, *Fireflies in the Mist* remains a seminal contribution to South Asian literature for its synthesis of personal narrative with political historiography.

Through its exploration of gendered subjectivity within nationalist movements, the novel displays how women's identities are continuously

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moulded by the intersecting forces of patriarchy, political ideology, and historical trauma. Hyder portrays identity not as a fixed essence, but as a process of becoming marked by tension between constraint and self-assertion. The text thus contributes to feminist debates on nationalism and agency by unveiling how women negotiate spaces of limited autonomy while contesting the symbolic and material structures that marginalise them. In this way, *Fireflies in the Mist* stands as both an intimate portrait of female subjectivity and a critical literary intervention into South Asia's political and cultural history.

Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* has attracted sustained scholarly attention for its layered representation of socio-political transformations in Bengal between the 1940s and the 1970s. Critics have primarily approached the novel from historical, political, and narrative angles, examining its engagement with partition, leftist movements, communal fractures, and post-1971 reconfigurations of identity. Mairhofer-Mehmood (2013), for instance, situates the novel within the ideological atmosphere of the Bengali Communist Party, highlighting themes of communal coexistence, cross-religious solidarity, and the complex afterlives of partition trauma. Similarly, Kabir (2012) focuses on women's friendships across national borders, interpreting these bonds as symbolic representations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Her analysis presents how nationalist realignments dismantle interpersonal relations and shared cultural histories, unveiling the emotional costs of political borders.

Within discussions of Hyder's broader narrative project, Russell (1994, cited in Karmakar and Chakraborty, 2021) identifies the realism of North Indian writers of her era as a shared commitment to charting social transformation. However, Hyder's work departs from the politically instrumental realism of the Progressive Writers' Association through its philosophical and modernist sensibility. Rather than confining historical change to overt political messaging, her partition narratives integrate memory, interiority, and psychological depth, thereby offering intimate perspectives on the human condition. Karmakar and Chakraborty (2021) further highlight how Hyder's engagement with collective trauma and mnemonic reconstruction distinguishes her from contemporaries who prioritise macro-political events over subjective experiences. Complementing these findings, Hussein (2008) highlights Hyder's narrative technique that weaves history and fiction into a counter-historical discourse, complicating official accounts of political upheaval. Hussein also points toward the importance of gender dynamics within Hyder's oeuvre, although this dimension remains only tangentially addressed, indicating a broader scholarly neglect of women's identity as a central thematic concern.

Parallel to literary scholarship on Hyder, nationalism has been extensively theorised across sociological and historical traditions. Anderson's conception of the nation as an "imagined community" (1983), Gellner's (1983) emphasis on the modernist roots of nationalist ideology, Hobsbawm's (1992) focus on invented traditions, and Smith's (1991) ethno-symbolic model collectively establish nationalism as a complex socio-cultural construct. Subsequent debates distinguish between civic and ethnic nationalism (Kohn, 1944; Brubaker, 1996), while postcolonial theorists expose the Eurocentric limitations of nationalist discourse and its imbrication with colonial power structures (Chatterjee, 1993; Said, 1978; Fanon, 1961). More recent perspectives examine nationalism in relation to migration, globalisation, and digital networks, highlighting its contemporary transformations and resurgence (Castells, 1997; Mudde, 2019). Despite the depth of this theoretical engagement, gender remains largely peripheral within these debates, particularly in relation to how nationalism is represented and negotiated in South Asian literary narratives.

In existing studies of *Fireflies in the Mist*, attention to form is largely confined to the novel's historical layering and fragmented temporal structure, without sustained inquiry into how non-linearity mirrors the instability of the protagonist Deepali Sarkar's gendered identity. Literary critiques often prioritise ideological disillusionment, the failures of revolutionary leadership, and contradictions within nationalist politics, thereby highlighting male political actors while sidelining the processes through which female subjectivity is shaped and constrained. Deepali's shifting allegiances, ethical uncertainties, and emotional ruptures are frequently read as reflections of political flux alone; however, they also register a deeper crisis of women's agency

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embedded within nationalist and revolutionary movements. Such interpretive tendencies risk reinscribing the marginalisation of women by rendering them symbolic adjuncts to male-dominated political narratives rather than autonomous subjects negotiating ideological terrain.

Although feminist theorists have underscored nationalism as a gendered project that mobilises women as biological reproducers, cultural bearers, and symbolic markers of the nation, these frameworks have yet to be systematically applied to Hyder's novel. Yuval-Davis's (1997) theorisation of gendered nationalism offers an especially relevant lens through which to examine women's positioning within nationalist discourse, yet scholarship on *Fireflies in the Mist* has not adequately utilised such approaches. Similarly, intersectional feminist critiques of homogenised representations of women, particularly in postcolonial contexts, remain under-integrated into studies of Hyder's work. Consequently, how caste, class, religion, and political ideology intersect with gender to produce distinguished forms of female subjectivity remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses these lacunae by situating *Fireflies in the Mist* at the convergence of feminist literary criticism and theories of gendered nationalism. By focusing on Deepali Sarkar and other female figures within the novel, the analysis examines how Hyder simultaneously exposes the structural limitations placed on women within nationalist movements and articulates moments of resistance, negotiation, and ethical autonomy. The review thus positions the present research as a necessary intervention that extends existing historical and political readings of the novel toward a sustained feminist engagement with identity, displacement, and resistance. This study argues that *Fireflies in the Mist* functions as a sustained critique of nationalist discourse by exposing how women's identities are constructed, constrained, and instrumentalised within projects of nation-making, while simultaneously revealing moments of resistance that illuminate the intersections of gender, power, and agency in postcolonial South Asia.

The study utilises a qualitative research approach, using close textual analysis as the primary method. The analysis is grounded in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, encompassing the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty to analyse the novel's representation of women's identity. The research focuses on the character arcs of Deepali Sarkar, Rosie Bannerjee, and Yasmin Majid, investigating how their struggles for self-independence are moulded by patriarchal and nationalist structures. Secondary resources, including feminist literary criticism and historical accounts of South Asian women's roles in nationalist movements, provide contextual depth to the analysis. The study also utilises Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' (1983) and Homi Bhabha's theory of 'cultural hybridity' (1994) to examine the novel's critique of nationalism and identity formation.

The analysis is informed by feminist and postcolonial theories that investigate the intersections of gender, identity, and power. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) 'the Other' is used to examine the marginalisation of women in patriarchal societies, while Gayatri Spivak's (1988) essence of 'subaltern' provides insights into the resistance and empowerment of Hyder's female sheroes. Additionally, Judith Butler's (1990) 'gender performativity' is utilised to explore how women's identities are built through repeated acts that align with social norms. Interestingly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western feminist discourse emphasises the need to contextualise female autonomy within specific socio-political realities, especially in postcolonial contexts. Further, Homi Bhabha's (1994) 'cultural hybridity' is applied to interpret the fragmented and fluid identities of the novel's characters, showing the insecurity of both national and personal identities in postcolonial South Asia.

II. ANALYSIS

Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) presents the elements of identity, nationalism, and gender within the socio-political scenario of Bengal. Extending from colonial rule to the formation of Bangladesh, the novel critically presents the role of women in nationalist movements and their struggle for self-definition. This analysis highlights how women's identities are constructed and negotiated in nationalist discourses while being moulded by political ideologies,

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gendered roles, and cultural nationalism. Through the shero Deepali Sarkar and other female characters, Hyder criticises patriarchal nationalism and exclusion of women in political discourses.

2.1. Women's Identity: Struggle for Selfhood in Colonial and Postcolonial Nationalism

Hyder beautifully explores women's identities within the contexts of colonial and postcolonial nationalism, presenting the intersections of class, gender, and cultural hybridity. The novel's female characters: Deepali Sarkar, Rosie Bannerjee, and Yasmin Majid, encapsulate the struggles of selfhood, representing the paradoxes of nationalist movements and patriarchal structures.

Deepali Sarkar, a Hindu Bengali woman chased to leftist ideologies, exemplifies the tension between women's participation in nationalist struggles and their elimination from power structures. Her journey highlights the discontentment with political ideologies that strengthen gender hierarchies rather than dismantle them. As Hyder implies, 'Deepali had begun to understand that nationalism and women's liberation were not necessarily linked' (Hyder, 1994). This realisation signifies the exclusion of women in nationalist discourses, resonating with Spivak's idea of the subaltern and limits of women's status within the hegemonic structure (Spivak, 1988). Women are often placed as symbolic figures of tradition and culture. Partha Chatterjee has rightly argued that nationalist discourses demote women to the private sphere, affiliating them with domestic purity while men are associated with the public struggle for independence (Chatterjee, 1993). Hyder criticises this through Deepali's realisation that political ideologies often fortify gender hierarchies rather than dismantle them. In one instance, Deepali disclosed the restriction imposed upon her: 'I thought I was fighting for a cause, but in the end, I was only fighting within a cage built by men' (Hyder, 1994). This statement embodies the paradox of her involvement in nationalist movements, where her labour is exploited, but her voice remains unnoticed.

The intersection of gender and cultural identity is further highlighted through the performativity of gender roles in nationalist movements. Deepali and other female characters implement traditional femininity to gain access to political structures, yet their contributions are overlooked (Hyder, 1994). This shows Butler's (1990) argument that gender is not an innate identity but a social construct fortified through repeated acts of performance. Similarly, Rosie Bannerjee's narrative presents the performative nature of gender roles and the intersectionality of colonial history and identity. As a Christian woman trapped between colonial loyalty and nationalist aspirations, Rosie scuffles with her hybrid identity, as she says, "Neither fish nor fowl, as it were" (Hyder, 1994, p. 51). Her defiance of an arranged marriage and her obsession with revolutionary figures like Pritilata Wadedar and Beena Das disclose her desire for agency, yet her story shows how women's aspirations are often co-opted by larger ideological frameworks. Further, Rosie personifies the complexities of selfhood as she negotiates between different cultural and political influences. Her confusion regarding identity is clearly evident when she says, "Now she also wanted to identify with Indian culture and nationalism. Her own 'native Christian' society had been created by the British and was generally loyal to its founders" (Hyder, 1994, p. 51). Rosie's dilemma shows the intersectionality of gender, class, and colonial history; her struggle is not just personal but connected in historical processes that have moulded women's identities in the subcontinent. The question of *performativity* (Butler, 1990) has been reflected in Rosie's characterisation. She is drawn to nationalist movements and revolutionary women, yet she remains limited by her background. The novel presents how performative roles are often thrust upon women; they are expected to epitomise either national ideals or remain within traditional domestic spheres.

Hyder highlights a complex narrative where women trace their subjectivity and selfhood against the backdrop of historical disruption. Rosie Bannerjee's struggle signifies the tension between personal wishes and societal needs. When faced with an arranged marriage, Rosie's resistance is evident: "Rosie was dumbfounded. It was preposterous. How could her parents do this to her?" (Hyder, 1994, p. 79). Additionally, her father misconceived her silence as "a well-bred maiden's natural shyness in matters pertaining to her nuptials" (Hyder, 1994, p. 80). This shows the performative nature of gender roles where women are anticipated to conform to patriarchal

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norms, a concept Judith Butler (1990) critiques in her theory of *gender performativity*.

Yasmin Majid's narrative further represents the insubstantial agency of women who try to break free from societal limitations. Yasmin's transnational experiences and artistic aspirations place her in a liminal space, but her choices are met with vilification. "Black Beauty. Dark Dancer. Is Yasmin a racehorse?" (Hyder, 1994, p. 259), comments a male character upon hearing about her marriage to a European. This racialised and gendered language embodies how women's bodies are commodified, a central theme to postcolonial feminist critique (Mohanty, 1988). Yasmin Majid's character further entangles the narrative of women's agency. As a woman who violates societal boundaries, Yasmin experiences cultural displacement and alienation, both in the East and the West. Her exile and rejection signify the hybridity of postcolonial identities, as she laments in the text, 'I am neither here nor there. In the West, I am an exotic relic; in the East, I am a fallen woman' (Hyder, 1994). Her story strengthens Bhabha's (1994) concept of 'cultural hybridity' as a site of both marginalisation and empowerment, while also presenting the gendered scrutiny and racialisation women face when they defy traditional roles (Mohanty, 1988).

Hyder also highlights the fragmentation and fluidity in women's identities through generational shifts. The older generation of women, like Jehan Ara Begum, inherently adhere to traditional patriarchal norms, while younger women like Nadira struggle to balance cultural expectations with their choices for independence (Hyder, 1994). The contrast between these characters shows the constructedness of gender roles and the ongoing struggle for women's status in postcolonial societies. Through Deepali, Rosie, and Yasmin, the novel unveils the paradoxes of women's participation in political movements, their marginalisation within power structures, and the enduring struggle for selfhood and agency in the face of patriarchal and colonial legacies. As Deepali rightly reflects, 'I thought I was fighting for a cause, but in the end, I was only fighting within a cage built by men' (Hyder, 1994), encompassing the enduring tension between women's aspirations and the limitations imposed upon them.

2.2. Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Nationalism

Despite its critique of patriarchal nationalism, the novel also presents the internal divisions within women's movements. Deepali, Rosie, and Jehan Ara come from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds, and their solidarity is often disturbed by class, caste, and communal tensions. This fragmentation signifies the difficulties in moulding a unified feminist resistance within nationalist movements. Nasira, a young activist, ironically observes: "Yesterday's rebels have joined today's establishment. You are a present-day rebel-you may become part of tomorrow's establishment" (Hyder, 1994, p. 267). This statement encompasses the cyclical nature of political movements, where revolutionary zeal gives way to new hierarchies, strengthening rather than challenging existing power structures.

The novel also discusses the historical erasure of women's roles in nationalist struggles. Rosie internalises about becoming a revolutionary heroine, yearning, "Can't I also become a national heroine like them and atone for the servility of my community?" (Hyder, 1994, p. 52). However, the narrative defies such aspirations, indicating that female revolutionaries are often ignored within nationalist mythmaking rather than credited as independent agents of transformation. However, Hyder destabilises this ideal by showing how women revolutionaries are often sidelined in official histories. This aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, which evaluates the historical invisibility of women's resistance within nationalist discourses.

The novel critiques nationalist movements that claim to advocate liberation while maintaining patriarchal structures. Rehan Ahmed, a Marxist revolutionary, initially seems to be an ally to progressive ideals, yet he ultimately abides by traditional power dynamics, leaving Deepali disenchanted. Her realisation, 'Rehan spoke of revolution, but his world remained a man's world' (Hyder, 1994), embodies the inherent exclusion of women from political structure within nationalist discourse. This critique resonates with Gayatri Spivak's concept of 'subalternity', wherein women, especially in postcolonial contexts, struggle to be heard within male-dominated ideological systems

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(Spivak, 1988). Deepali's eventual deportation symbolises the broader failure of nationalist movements to create an inclusive space for women beyond their prescribed symbolic roles, strengthening the need for a feminist (re)imagining of political resistance.

2.3. Women and Nationalism: Gendered Resistance and Symbolism

Hyder deconstructs the essence of the nation-state as an inclusive space for women. Deepali's exclusion from leadership within revolutionary circles and her subordination in political discourse signify gendered nationalism (Hyder, 1994). Nationalist movements often mobilise women as symbols of cultural purity while denying them substantive political agency, a critique resonated by Chatterjee (1993).

While the novel illuminates women's roles in anti-colonial movements, it simultaneously discloses the gendered hierarchies that limit their authority and status. Deepali Sarkar, an active participant in revolutionary politics, defies patriarchal restrictions by financially supporting the cause: "You said it was absolutely imperative that you get five hundred rupees by this evening, that it was a matter of life and death" (Hyder, 1994, p. 18). Despite such contributions, women like Deepali remain secondary figures within male-dominated revolutionary networks. Her actions show the paradox of women's agency within male-dominated struggles. While they subscribe to political movements, their sacrifices are often erased from historical narratives, aligning with Spivak's (1988) argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Women's resistance is exhibited through disruptive acts, whether in Deepali's political association or Yasmin's artistic rebellion. Even when overt political participation is denied, Hyder indicates that women carve out spaces of agency through alternative means. Storytelling itself becomes a mode of resistance, as seen in Yasmin's diary, which presents as a testimony to marginalised voices (Hyder, 1994). The character of Jehan Ara embodies how women are used as pawns in nationalist projects. When she is married off for strategic reasons, the decision is framed as necessary for family honour rather than personal choice: "Jehan Ara is such a good girl. She will reform him…" (Hyder, 1994, p. 222). This shows patriarchal dominance over women's sexuality and choices, strengthening the idea of women as symbols rather than active participants in nation-building.

Hyder's portrayal of the Bangladesh Liberation War further uncovered the gendered violence of nationalist struggles. Women's bodies become sites of symbolic warfare, recalling the historical narratives of partition, where sexual violence was instrumentalised to assert political sovereignty (Hyder, 1994). This aligns with Butalia's (1998) research on women's experiences of partition, examining how nationalism maintains patriarchal control over female bodies.

The novel highlights the gendered nature of nationalism, signifying how women are symbolically tied to the nation-state while being ostracised from its governance. The construct of "Mother India" is critically discussed: "The concept of Mother India was given to the rest of the country by the terrorists of Bengal. They worshipped Divine Power in the image of Kali, the destroyer" (Hyder, 1994, p. 310). This shows how nationalist movements romanticise women's roles while restricting their autonomy. Historical narratives mould collective identity, a key idea in the novel. Hyder highlights multiple perspectives on nationalism, from the idealism of early revolutionaries to the disenchantment of those who witnessed the failures of independence. Rehan Ahmed, who initially embraces Marxist ideals but later capitulates to the materialist pursuits of the postcolonial elite, functions as a critique of how nationalist movements often betray their foundational principles (Hyder, 1994).

The novel also highlights the symbolism of exile and displacement. Deepali's migration and eventual disassociation from nationalist ideologies symbolise the impossibility of complete belonging in a postcolonial nation-state, echoing with Anderson's (1983) concept of the 'imagined community'. Yasmin Majid's tragic end, where she longs for spiritual solace yet remains an outsider in both Western and Eastern spaces, signifies the alienation experienced by women who confront societal norms (Hyder, 1994). Hyder suggests that women's resistance is limited by societal expectations. Yasmin's unusual choices lead to social ostracism, while Jehan Ara's fate is determined by familial pressures. This shows Mohanty's (1988) argument that feminist movements must account for differences in women's experiences rather than

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surmising a universal struggle. Through these characters, Hyder unveils how nationalist movements both empowered and marginalised the women. While women participate in resistance struggles, their agency is often entailed under patriarchal structures that dictate their roles. The novel ultimately argues that true liberation requires not just political independence but a fundamental reshuffling of gendered power relations.

2.4. The Impact of Partition and Nationalism on Female Agency

The partition of India and the creation of Pakistan and Bangladesh shape the experiences of women in the novel. Yasmin Belmont epitomises the displacement and loss that many women endured, showing their status as collateral damage in nationalist struggles. Her lament-"Going back to Hamburg. Now the river and the sea meet the ice. I tremble like a low-down bitch... My heart is the Harlot's Alley of Sonagachi" (Hyder, 1994, p. 278) encapsulates the gendered trauma of partition. Hyder's narrative aligns with feminist critiques of partition literature, which argue that women were often reduced to symbols of national honour, making them vulnerable to violence during communal tensions (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Deepali and Yasmin's experiences show how women were forced to negotiate shifting national identities while struggling to assert their agency. Yasmin's tragic fate further signifies the intersection of partition's violence and the enslavement of women's bodies. Her suicide is inextricably linked to the collective trauma of partition, as highlighted in the novel's grim historical references: "Thousands of Muslim girls were raped here during the War of Liberation, countless were forced to become streetwalkers. Not a single maulvi in the Islamic world protested against the horrible situation" (Hyder, 1994, p. 307). This resonates with Urvashi Butalia's (1998) work on partition, which discloses how women's suffering was often embraced under nationalist narratives, extending their personal trauma invisibly.

The novel's female characters navigate several layers of oppression moulded by caste, religion, and nationalism. Rosie, Yasmin, and Deepali Sarkar each experience marginalisation but respond in distinct ways. Rosie's disillusionment with both Hindu and Muslim patriarchal structures is stark: "Didn't they get little Giribala married at the age of four and persecute her as a child-widow?" (Hyder, 1994, p. 50). Her frustration extends beyond religious orthodoxy to involve the colonial system's role in sustaining social hierarchies. Deepali's final rumination encompasses this struggle: 'Perhaps my battle was never meant to be won. But as long as we keep writing, keep speaking, we will never be erased' (Hyder, 1994). This statement emphasises the role of art in preserving the voices of the oppressed and dominated, ensuring that their narratives remain visible despite historical erasure.

III. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The analysis unveils that *Fireflies in the Mist* critiques the construction of women's identity within the nationalist discourses, presenting limitations of female resistance in patriarchal and postcolonial contexts. Deepali Sarkar's journey epitomises the tension between women's participation in nationalist struggles and their expulsion from power structures. Her realisation that 'nationalism and women's liberation were not necessarily linked' (Hyder, 1994) signifies the marginalisation of women within nationalist discourse. Similarly, Rosie Bannerjee's struggle with her hybrid identity shows the intersectionality of class, gender, and colonial history, while Yasmin Majid's tragic fate represents the racialised and gendered scrutiny experienced by women who defy traditional roles.

The novel's fragmented narrative structure reflects the fluidity and fragility of women's identities, challenging fixed notions of gender and nationhood. Hyder's use of stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear storytelling embroils the representation of female subjectivity, highlighting the ongoing struggle for selfhood and agency in the face of patriarchal structures. The study also presents the performative nature of gender roles within nationalist movements, as women like Deepali and Rosie adhere to traditional femininity to obtain political spaces, only to have their contributions overlooked.

IV. CONCLUSION

Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* highlights the intersection between women's identity and nationalism, unveiling the complex ways in which women navigate patriarchal structures within

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nationalist movements. Through the experiences of characters like Deepali Sarkar, Rosie Bannerjee, and Yasmin Majid, Hyder critiques the exclusion of women in political discourses, disclosing the limitations of nationalist ideologies that claim liberation while continuing gendered hierarchies. The novel's fragmented narrative structure, representing the instability of identity, signifies the performative and dynamic nature of women's roles in both colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Hyder's representation of women's struggles for selfhood shows the intersectionality of religion, gender, class, and cultural identity. Deepali's disenchantment with nationalist movements, Rosie's negotiation of hybrid identities, and Yasmin's tragic exile and displacement all represent how women are both empowered and limited by socio-political systems. The novel critiques the symbolic role assigned to women as bearers of cultural purity and national honour, unveiling how such representations often obscure their lived experiences. As Deepali believes, 'I thought I was fighting for a cause, but in the end, I was only fighting within a cage built by men' (Hyder, 1994). This statement encompasses the central tension of the novel: the paradox of women's participation in nationalist struggles that simultaneously exploit and exclude them.

The postcolonial feminist lens through which Hyder highlights these aspects aligns with the theoretical frameworks of scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Spivak's 'subaltern' is especially relevant in understanding the silencing of women's voices within nationalist discourses, while Butler's 'gender performativity' illustrates how women are forced to conform to societal expectations even as they seek to challenge them. Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse further emphasises the need to contextualise women's struggles within specific historical and cultural realities, which Hyder addresses in depth.

The novel also highlights the broader historical and political contexts of partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War, representing the gendered violence, exile, and displacement that accompany nationalist struggles. Yasmin's tragic fate and Deepali's eventual expulsion function as powerful reminders of the personal costs of political upheaval, especially for women who are often exhibited invisible in official histories. Hyder's critique of nationalist movements extends to their failure to create inclusive spaces for women, emphasising the need for a feminist (re)imagining of political resistance that prioritises structural transformation over symbolic representation.

The novel *Fireflies in the Mist* is not merely a historical novel but a deep commentary on the enduring struggle for women's identity in the face of patriarchal and nationalist structures. By foregrounding the voices of women who negotiate the complexities of selfhood within oppressive structures, Hyder challenges readers to reconsider the narratives of nationalism and liberation. Her novel calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist discourse, one that recognises the multiplicity of women's experiences and the need for systematic change. Through its rich narrative and critical engagement with historical and theoretical debates, *Fireflies in the Mist* remains a critical text for understanding the gendered dimensions of nationalism and the ongoing quest for gender justice in South Asia. Thus, Hyder's novel serves as a reminder that the struggle for identity is not confined to the past but continues to resonate in the recent discussions of gender, power, and resistance. As Deepali's word suggests, 'perhaps my battle was never meant to be won. But as long as we keep writing, keep speaking, we will never be erased' (Hyder, 1994). In this way, the novel not only critiques the limitations of nationalist and patriarchal structures but also highlights the enduring power of women's voices in moulding more inclusive futures.

V. CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This research contributes to the existing discourse on gendered nationalism and literary representations of female resistance and agency in postcolonial contexts. By evaluating the intersection of women's identity and nationalism in *Fireflies in the Mist*, the study presents the limitations of nationalist movements in emphasising gendered oppression and calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist resistance. The findings also add to feminist literary criticism by providing a detailed understanding of how narrative techniques, such as fragmentation and

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nonlinear storytelling, can show the fluidity and instability of women's identities.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

6.1. Comparative Analysis: Future research could compare Hyder's portrayal of women's identity in *Fireflies in the Mist* with other South Asian novels that highlight similar aspects, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* or Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*.

6.2. Intersectionality: Future studies could examine the intersectionality of gender, caste, and religion in moulding women's identities in postcolonial literature, especially in the context of nationalist movements.

6.3. Contemporary Relevance: Future studies could analyse the contemporary relevance of Hyder's critique of gendered nationalism in the context of rising populist movements and the revival of nationalist ideologies in South Asia and beyond.

6.4. Narrative Techniques: Additional research could inquire how narrative techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear storytelling, add to the representation of female subjectivity in postcolonial literature.

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