

A Study on Post-Colonial Fiction of Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

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Abstract:

The present paper A STUDY ON POST-COLONIAL FICTION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE AND AMITAV GHOSH. “is a serious attempt to explore their concern for the subalterns, their philosophy about exile and home, and their diasporic experiences. The socio-cultural perspective has been taken to explore the various cross-currents and ethnic pluralities discussed by these novelists under research. The interdisciplinary and comparative approach offers a new dimension to the study of the novels of, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. Different aspects of these novelists have been explored in this dissertation through analysis and criticism. The postmodernist world has seen the emergence of interdisciplinary and cultural studies as the major thrust areas of academic exploration. As Elleke Boehmer states thus:

The postcolonial and migrant novels are seen as appropriate texts for such explorations because they offer multi-voiced resistance to the idea of boundaries and present texts open to transgressive and non-authoritative reading” (Boehmer 143).

The field of Postcolonial Studies has been gaining prominence since the publication of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978). The term "postcolonial" became more popular with the appearance of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Since then, the use of terms "Commonwealth" and "Third World" that were used to describe the literature of Europe's former colonies has become rarer. Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and the definition of the term "postcolonial," in a very general

sense, it is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. The diasporic literature is diverse:

The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity. (Ashcroft 218)

INTRODUCTION

The present paper A STUDY ON POST-COLONIAL FICTION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE AND AMITAV GHOSH. “is a serious attempt to explore their concern for the subalterns, their philosophy about exile and home, and their diasporic experiences. The socio-cultural perspective has been taken to explore the various cross-currents and ethnic pluralities discussed by these novelists under research. The interdisciplinary and comparative approach offers a new dimension to the study of the novels of, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. Different aspects of these novelists have been explored in this dissertation through analysis and criticism. The postmodernist world has seen the emergence of interdisciplinary and cultural studies as the major thrust areas of academic exploration. As Elleke Boehmer states thus:

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1) CONCEPT OF THE “OTHER”

The notion of the *Other* has always been an important topic examined by philosophers, anthropologists, and ethnologists. Throughout the years, the *Other* has been described as the quintessence of another individual who was different from the inner self (Sarukkai, 1997). But the recognition of the *Other* has also meant its contact/relationship with the self. In fact the act of “othering” is a manifestation of power relations. When we start describing ourselves as part of a group of people united in a “we”, while other people are constructed as

fundamentally different, united in a “they”, we are using a powerful weapon that might serve to delegitimize others. And too often, these distinctions are drawn along the classic axes of discrimination and power differences, like sexuality, gender, ethnicity, “race”, class and so on. According to Michel Foucault, “othering” is strongly connected with power and knowledge. When we “other” another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better. It implies a hierarchy, and it serves to keep power where it already lies. Colonialism is one such example of the powers of “othering.” Precisely stated, according to Hall (1996), identity is not only important for its political aspect, but also for its foundation of culture and representation of the individual and the society. In fact, identity, the definition of the *Other* and culture are connected and contribute to the explanation of a specific topic in international relations, cultural diplomacy. According to Hall (1976): “... The most important psychological aspect of culture - the bridge between culture and personality – is

the identification process. This process...is most certainly a major impediment to cross-cultural understanding...” (Hall, 240). In other words, by discovering and appreciating the *Other*, people can recognize culture as a tool for fostering mutual understanding, establishing relationships between countries, and promoting social cohesion.

In the Post-Colonial fiction of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, terms “Other”, “Exile” and “Dispossession” have historical and cultural significance. The critical theories of Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said can be conveniently applied to explore the cultural and political tensions of the colonized people depicted in the works of Naipaul, Rushdie and Ghosh. Paul Gilroy in his historical defense of the multicultural society in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2002) analysis the impact of race, politics and culture on the colonized people and their multilayered traumas of life. Ultimately,

Postcolonial Melancholia goes beyond the idea of mere tolerance to propose that it is possible to celebrate the multicultural and live with “otherness” without becoming anxious, fearful, or violent. Paul Gilroy’s *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2006) questions the place of “race” in political culture from the nineteenth century imperialism through anti-colonial and national liberation struggles of the mid- twentieth century to dismissal of multiculturalism of the present.

Bhabha begins by contending that colonial discourse depends on the "concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of “otherness” (Bhabha 18) This fixity is the "sign of cultural/historical/racial difference" (Bhabha:18). Its major discursive strategy is the stereotype which Bhabha defines as a "form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 18). The essential ‘duplicity’ of the Asian or the ‘sexual license’ of the African seemingly needs no proof but in fact cannot be proved. It is this ambivalence that is integral to the stereotypical structure of colonial discourse and ensures the stereotype's "repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed" (Bhabha 18).

According to Bhabha colonial discourse produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth that is structurally similar to realism. (Bhabha 23).

Regarding national culture, Franz Fanon focuses on the effects of the hegemonic devices used by the colonizers to obliterate the culture of the colonized and the resulting desire of the colonized to unite under a homogenous national identity and culture. He says, “Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to over-simplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of the conquered people” (Fanon:236). Colonialism is not only satisfied with emptying the native’s brain of all form and content but it “distorts, disfigures and destroys” the history of the colonized people. Therefore, colonial rulers propagated a false belief that colonialism came to “lighten their darkness;” “the colonizers focused on convincing the colonized that if the settlers were to leave, the natives would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality”.(Fanon 180).

2) **HYBRIDITY**

The post-colonial fiction of V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh has become very popular because their works are devoted to issues regarding globalization, borders, migration, repatriation, exile refugees, assimilation, multiculturalism and hybridity. They have discussed the dilemmas and predicaments of the colonized people who were the victims of the cruel politics of indenture. In the present dissertation, the term “Diaspora” is used as an effective tool to highlight the diversity of cultures, languages, people, places and times, the interaction and assimilation of people belonging to diverse cultures. In its transformational quality “diaspora is typically a site of hybridity which questions fixed identities based on essentialisms.” (Bannerji 28)

What is hybridization? Bakhtin aptly observes thus: It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor. (Bakhtin 358)

The term hybridity has become very popular in postcolonial cultural criticism. Homi Bhabha is has tried to disclose the contradictions inherent in colonial discourse in order to highlight the colonizer's ambivalence in respect to his position toward the colonized "Other". His analysis, which is largely based on the Lacanian conceptualization of mimicry as camouflage focuses on colonial ambivalence. On the one hand, he sees the colonizer as a snake in the grass who, speaks in "a tongue that is forked," and produces a mimetic representation that "... emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge " (Bhabha 85).

Bhabha recognizes then that colonial power carefully establishes highly-sophisticated strategies of control and dominance, the category of people referred to by Frantz Fanon in the phrase, "black skin/white masks," or as "mimic men" by V.S.Naipaul. Diaspora implies people who are "scattered" away from their original homes. It does not mean that people are dispersed in different places but that they congregate in other lands forming new communities and assimilating with others cultures. Scattering, as Homi K. Bhabha observes, becomes a gathering;

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees.... Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora; indentured, migrant, (Bhabha 21)

Since Indian independence, UK has been a prime destination for migrant Indians. The earliest of such communities constituted either of "Anglophiles," whose purpose of migration has been to experience the pristine beauty of England, or of "Anglophobes," who migrate to take the proverbial "postcolonial revenge". In England both these types of migrant Indians are pressed together and marked as the "Others". No doubt, problems like racism are no longer as headstrong as before, but the problems of the inner "human condition" still plague the colonized community.

Bharti Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), question the values of indenture politics highlighting social tensions, contradictions and conflicts. Both the novels vouch for pluralistic values and promote intercultural equality. Rushdie also debunks the British and US societies which have exploited the "Other" for their selfish motives in the name of "multiculturalism". Interestingly, the novels of V.S.Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh deal with issues like migrancy, hybridity, loss of identity, post-colonial predicament of the people trapped in rigid national identities. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (2009) has the character Ila whose father is a roaming diplomat and whose upbringing has been totally on foreign soils. She finds herself as much out of place in India as any foreigner. Amit Chaudhuri in his novel *Afternoon Raag* (2012) portrays the lives of Indian students in Oxford. Similarly, Anita Desai in the second part of her novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) depicts Arun as a migrant student living in the suburbs of Massachusetts..

Taylor stresses the fact that cultural identities are things we negotiate through dialogue with others. Thus, he says, cultural recognition is important because its "refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view...The projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort or oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized." On this view, to withhold recognition from others, or to impose misrecognition on them, "can be a form of oppression." (Taylor 21)

For Taylor, socio-political and educational policies must evince cultural recognition because cultural misrecognition may prevent individuals from being capable of finding value in their identity. And when it does, cultural misrecognition results into cultural displacement and alienation. Cohen asserts that people who lived in colonial plantations had to struggle to emerge, survive, and thrive. Post-colonial

fiction transmits a linguistic and cultural heritage that is articulated through acts of personal and collective memory. In this way the writers become chroniclers of the histories of the displaced whose stories will otherwise go unrecorded. The novels of V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh are social documents of the culture of dislocation and exile. Their literary and critical texts serve as condensed archives of national, ethnic and linguistic memories.

3) EXILE

Edward W. Said in his book *Reflections on Exile* writes in the title essay about exile:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while “it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, there are no more than efforts to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement..” (Said 5)

The word ‘exile’ evokes multiple meanings which cover a variety of relationships with the mother country- alienation, forced exile, self imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context perhaps all meanings are true with the migratory movements having been governed by different reasons at different times of history. Economic reasons governed the movement of indentured labour and of trading communities. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* writes that exile “is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact. (Simpson 2). Anita Badami observes that I was 29 years in India and 10 years here (Canada), so I have one foot in India and a couple of toes here. (26). Indian-English writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. The non-resident Indian writers have explored their sense of displacement—a perennial theme in all exile literature.

In an interview with Nikhil Padgaonkar for Doordarshan, Edward W. Said reflected on the condition of exile:

I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary, and to see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence— commitment—but independence and a certain kind of detachment. (Said 13).

Badami was speaking of her experience as a Canadian writer of Indian origin in the context of the launch of her novel *The Hero’s Walk*. Badami’s own resolution of the crises of being diasporic is expressed in her affirmation of the blessings of double vision: we are both doomed and blessed, to be suspended between two worlds, always looking back but with two gorgeous places to inhabit, in our imaginations or our hearts.” (26), The texts themselves are journeys between source cultures and target cultures, between homelands and diasporas, until the two overlap, change places or merge.

V.S. Naipaul has been identified with a new literary tradition of Indian writing in English, which is stylistically different and less conservative than colonial Indian literature and concerns such issues as hybridity, shifting identity, and “imaginary homelands,” a phrase coined by Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. (Rushdie:11). One of the most relevant aspects of Post-Colonial writing is that it forces, interrogates and challenges the authoritative voices of time. *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh has the impulse when the Indian States were complicit in the programs after Indira Gandhi’s assassination. The author elaborates the truth in the book when he says:

In India there is a drill associated with civil disturbances, a curfew is declared, paramilitary units are deployed; in extreme cases, the army marches to the stricken areas. No city in India is better equipped to perform this drill than New Delhi, with its high security apparatus. (SL 2)

V.S. Naipaul's writings are about colonized people who were the victims of the politics of indenture and exile. His novels take us to the pre-Independence India when coolies in large number were sent to the cotton, sugar and tobacco plantations owned by the imperialists. India was the main source of cheap labor after the abolition of the Negro slavery in 1934. From 1847 to 1917 large number of Indians migrated to many islands and they were called indentured laborers working as slaves in Fiji, Trinidad and other islands. V. S. Naipaul's characters, like Mohun Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Ganesh Ramsumair from *The Mystic Masseur*, are examples of individuals who are generations away from their original homeland, India, but their heritage gives them a consciousness of their past. They become itinerant specimens of the outsider, the unhoused, for the world to see. For them their homeland India is not a geographical space but a construct of imagination. Their predicament can be explained in Rushdie's words: "the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity" (Rushdie 12). The period covered in the novel *A House of Mr. Biswas* is forty seven years of life, from 1905 and 1951. The main changes recorded are the decline of the Hindu culture and the rituals as they undergo the process of "creolisation" and the accompanying changes in attitude. Mr. Biswas himself is caught between the old culture of India and the emerging cross-fertilizations which are dramatized by the departure of Anand and Savi, the children of Biswas. V.S. Naipaul regrets the passing of the old customs and traditions. In *The Middle Passage* Naipaul describes the changes of Trinidad and how it turned into a materialistic society.

Naipaul's life has been one of constant moving about in search of identity and a "resting place for imagination". He used this phrase as his title for the opening chapter in *An Area of Darkness* (1962). There is a unique urge in his novels to find a centre, a fixed place in aesthetic and existential terms. In an extensive interview with *Times Literary Supplement* on September 2, 1994, Naipaul observed thus:

I wanted to deliver the truth, to deliver a form of reality based on what I have observed, seen, experienced. Western writers come from the imperial period without considering themselves imperial writers. They inhabit a world where they do not see the other half or three quarters... I carry many cultures in my head, and these people are much more restricted. (TLS 2).

In a very meaningful statement in *Finding the Centre* he clarifies his quest as a writer to find a centre thus:

A writer after a time carries his world with him, his own burden of experience, a human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other), and I do believe that I would have found equivalent connections with my past and myself wherever I had gone. (Naipaul 2)

4) DISPOSSESSED

V.S. Naipaul presents a consistent image of social reality in the non-Western world, where dispossessed people search for order in their lives. His own search for rootedness expresses the search of many colonial people. He articulates his views of the dispossessed, the former colonial subjects who are seen struggling for identity. In empathic and critical language, Naipaul catalogues the failures of developing societies. The quest for autonomy and form reveals opportunities for self-deception, for seizing

the image of a coherent self or the illusion of a just society rather than grasping their essence. In Naipaul's novels, the West is depicted as an inchoate cluster of culture and technology. Dispossession is a state into which one is born, a fact not of one's own choosing.

GHOSH AND THE THEME OF DISPOSSESSION

Postcolonial societies like India in their quest for development often create vast numbers of dispossessed and displaced. Modernization set in motion brought about dams, industrial projects and this shifted large numbers of people from their habitat, professions and cultural roots. The Narmada dam alone has affected 120,000 people, while the arrival of multinational industries has resulted in a water famine affecting 300,000 people in Karnataka alone. As Arundhati Roy puts it, "the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war" (2001, 65). Postcolonial modernization thus results in the loss of home and homelands. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) offers a humanist critique of dispossession in the postcolonial world. It deals with people who are "out of place" and seeking a "home." It is in a postcolonial India, with its colonial past and continued claims for social justice from the displaced, the Dalits, the minorities and women that refugees are "created." Dalits, minorities and other marginalized occupy an "unhomely" space in the postcolonial nation. In fact, many of the refugees in the Sunderbans are Dalits. They are "un-homely" not only in the sense that they are "out of place," without a place on the land or in history, but that the land itself is "un-homely," by virtue of being inhospitable. (Ghosh HT). They had been "assembling around the island... they burnt the settlers, hearts, they sank their boats, they lay waste their fields." (HT 51).

Thus, Ghosh's novel describes the horrible condition of the dispossessed who lose their sense of home. The sufferings of the dispossessed, their psychological traumas are the result of the politics of modernization. When the refugees arrive from Bangladesh, they encounter very different sort of land. These are, as one of the refugees informs Kusum, "tide country people," and yet the government shifts them to "a dry emptiness." All they want to do is to "plunge their hands once again in our soft, yielding tide country mud," to return to a place that recalls their home-land (HT 164-65).

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