THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN THE WRITINGS OF SALMAN RUSHDIE, V. S. NAIPAUL AND KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract

This paper explores identity patterns in writings that belong to postcolonial literatures and highlights the split identities that inherently surface within the postcolonial intercultural hybridization. Under the lens are postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul and Kazuo Ishiguro. These writers' split consciousness places them between cultures and mentalities, which they incorporate by reshaping identities in the increasingly more globalized space of literature that follows the canons of the postcolonial theory but also proposes new perspectives of marginality.

Keywords: identity, liminality, hybridization, ethnicity, post-colonialism

Colonialism has had a powerful subversive effect on its own project: its political and cultural monocentrism generated an alienation process as well as one that awakened the consciousness of those pushed to the periphery. Marginality has become a powerful source of creation and the colonial discourse has been challenged by the postcolonial one, which by promoting pluralism and decentralization, gets closer to post-structuralism. Thus, the diversity of the cultures incorporated in the postcolonial writings challenges the patterns of the European literary theories.

When speaking about post-colonialism and literature, the plural "postcolonial literatures" is considered more adequate as it implies a multitude of meanings: historic, political, ideological, social, cultural, linguistic and esthetic. Beyond this diversity, the postcolonial literatures share common themes and discourses which ironically return to the centre. S. Rushdie argues that *the Empire writes back to the Centre* with the purpose of deconstructing and contesting the colonial discourses and of rendering history, this time from the perspective of the colonized. The hegemonic discourse is confronted with the diversity of the postcolonial space which proposes recognition of diversity, yet from equal positions. The poles of the colonial discourse, the colonizer and the colonized, are reversed, and the concept of dominance, as a main element in regulating the evolution of the human society is recognized as such, but is questioned at the same time. The confrontation between the two worlds takes the form of a confrontation between the temporal linearity of history and the space plurality. Postcolonial theory proposes by its comparative methodology a new background that privileges the space as an ordering element of reality, a space that accommodates hybridity and the syncretic vision of the modern world where the historic distinction between the metropolis and the colony does not leave room to monolithic perceptions.

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The postcolonial themes and discourses include cultural displacement, marginality, subalternity, displaced identity-caused by the identification with two different worlds and by the inevitable cultural hybridizations-, liminality, the problem of belonging and that of self-identification with a cultural hybridization. All these themes are recurrent in the novels of S. Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul and Kazuo Ishiguro. They are representative writers for postcolonial literatures and their multicultural identity transcends the conventional limits of race, nationality or ethnicity and is inscribed in the hybrid space of a universal humanism.

The displacement of these writers that migrated from their countries of origin to the former imperial metropolis is absorbed by their texts leading to moments of alterity and hybridity that fall into the paradigms of postcolonial theory and criticism. Their bicultural identity places them between different cultures and mentalities – that of origin and that of adoption –, which they incorporate in the present globalized literary space where the concept of *home* tends to be more and more ambiguous, thus inspiring new ways of defining identity. This permanent search takes different forms: the migration to the metropolis that brings along geographical, historic and cultural dislocation; the experience of the exile that results in alienation from the social and cultural environment; the cultural mimetic experience which produces that hybrid space to which Homi Bhabha refers to as a *Third Space*[2], which is neither the *One*, nor the *Other*, and which leads to the estrangement from one's own identity, but which proposes new ways for defining it.

The way the individual refers to the new space is through a perpetual dual movement that accommodates both alienation, the feeling of not-belonging in a space that is negatively perceived and ascribes him a marginal identity, as well as his placement in an ideal space of becoming, usually associated with the centre, the metropolis. While migration is perceived as a utopia of liberation within the idealized space of the European civilization, the utopia of an ideal space of the metropolitan culture, of a monological discourse, of a unique model of cultural authenticity is confronted with the dystopia of marginal identity. The consciousness of marginality, of subalternity is translated through the feeling of non-belonging, of alienation, where the image of *home* is continuously moved somewhere else. The result is a hybrid space that Foucault defines as *heterotopia*[3]. This bicultural space imposes a dialogic pattern where cultures mirror each other in a non-hegemonic relation. This translates into the bicultural consciousness placed within a space that, by means of the colonial project, has generated the displacements and relocations of history, which at present celebrates the epiphany of a cultural hybridity.

Displacement, hybridity - defined by Homi Bhabha as the resistance and not the assimilation of one culture by the other - , alienation, the lack of authenticity in self-

[2] Homi Bhabha, "Postcolonial Criticism", pp. 57-58 in S. Greenblatt & G. Gunn (Eds.), *Redrawing the boundaries: The transformation of English and American literary studies*, Modern Language Association, New York, 1992

[3] Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias,* http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault

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representation, all these are characteristics of postmodern identity and are themes shared by Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul and Kazuo Ishiguro. The text analysis reveals moments of split identity caused by the diasporic intercultural hybridizations experienced by Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul and Kazuo Ishiguro. Themes such as displacement and hybridity are central to the postcolonial theory and their recurrence in the novels written by the three authors justifies their analysis from the perspective of postcolonial studies grounded by critics such as Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Elleke Boehmer, Gareth Griffiths, Alan Lawson, Helen Tiffin, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. The theme of identity and its construction in the three writers' texts engages also the Freudian, psychoanalytical method of interpretation, which reveals ways of defining the Self in all areas of its existence: public, private, national, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious identity, areas that complicate the identity displacement which is characteristic to postcolonial and postmodern era. The writings of Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul and Kazuo Ishiguro can also be approached from the perspective of their narrative structure. The mixture of narrative techniques, of archetypes, of myths from the countries of origin, with the characteristics of the European novel affirms also a hybridity of the bicultural text that engages a dialogue of discourses and places the novels of these writers into the Bakhtinian category of the polyphonic novel specific to postmodern writing.

The novels of the three writers also propose a reconsideration of history from the perspective of postcolonial consciousness, a necessary action for restoring the historic and cultural identity of the marginalized. Rewriting history is made within the context of the national freedom fighting movements, of the results of decolonization and self-governing, of defining national, ethnical, religious and cultural identity. The colonial and postcolonial history engage in a discourse that, by using irony and skepticism, removes the veil of the self-claimed absolute objectivity of the historic text, thus proposing its reception as a product of a discursive representation. Moreover, by the displacements and relocations it has produced, history is presented as a fertile source of new identities and values within the new space of history that accommodates hybridity and cultural syncretism.

The novels of the three authors follow the above-mentioned themes of postcolonialism and their identity discourses converge in their attempt of self-discovery, self-defining in relation to the postcolonial experience by means of their texts which place these authors beyond the conventional limits of race, nationality or ethnicity and inscribes them in a hybrid space of a universal humanism.

In an interview given on the occasion of receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, when asked about the reason of writing, Naipaul answered: "to discover what kind of person I am." The attempt of self-defining has been the catalyzing element of his works. By placing his characters in different positions of cultural and identity hybridization within the colonial space, Naipaul is actually trying to understand the world through his characters. As we follow his novels, we can notice an evolution of the author from a negative perception of cultural hybridization caused by colonialism to a more

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optimistic vision regarding the protean character of the cultural convergences in defining postcolonial identity.

Thus colonialism is for Naipaul an alteration of the culture and consciousness of the colonized who is presented as a victim of the social, historic and geographical displacements which have led to the racial, ethnic, religious and cultural amalgam in the West Indies. The source of these visions is actually Naipaul's own life: he descends from the ethnical group of Indians living in Trinidad, whose ancestors left India to make money and go back to their home, but who never returned. *Home* is the central space for defining identity and its representation as absence, privation or provisory in his novels such as *A House for Mr. Biswas, The Mimic Men, The Enigma of Arrival* generates the individuals' displacement and alienation. The same alienation is felt in the case of the individual's positioning in the central place of the metropolis and, as a result, of going through the cultural mimetic experience. According to Homi Bhabha this mimetic experience replaces the reality with the desire of identification with the other and the result is a false image of the self. The fascination with the western world in *The Mimic Men* is a false mirage but it offers a possible space for redefining identity at the limit between two cultures, that of origin and that of adoption. The result is hybridity, which surfaces not only at the level of identities' configuration but also at the level of the text. Thus Naipaul's texts combine elements of the Victorian novel with those of travel journal, reportage, including even the autobiographical confessions, which engage his novels in the hybridization of genres specific to the postmodern novel.

If for Naipaul the uncertainty of the notion of *home* brings about the alienation of the postcolonial individual, Rushdie is a more positive spirit as regards the hybridizations of the postcolonial experiences because *home* can be anywhere for him. Hybridizations, impurity, cultural synthesis are celebrated by the author as sources of new identities in a globalized world. In *Midnight's Children* Rushdie proposes a rewriting of the postcolonial history of the Indian subcontinent by combining the historic referential elements with the magic realism; the conflicts between the Hindus and the Muslims are represented in an ironic and satirical way, and by circumscribing them within the area of the fantastic and the absurd, they are projected as a political, social and historic dystopia.

The same vision is continued in the novel entitled *Shame* where the alienating power of the religious dogmatism, which becomes state policy, is denounced. Rushdie defined this novel as a modern fairy tale where the struggle for power and the political corruption no longer engage the forces of the good and evil, but the rational and the irrational, freedom and oppression, morality and immorality. *The Satanic Verses* faces us with the same postcolonial world and its challenges. This novel, which has become famous because of the scandal stirred especially in the Muslim world, gets into discussion the possibilities of defining identity in the postmodern society and revolves around the themes specific to the postcolonial discourse. Beyond the history and the excesses of the religious fundamentalism, the novel has as main themes the ethnic, religious, racial and national identity, the mirage of migration, the cultural mimetic, alterity, discrimination,

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hybridization, syncretism and cultural globalization. The novel promotes cultural dialogism in the construction of postcolonial identity by resorting to themes and motifs that emerge within the angelic-demonic dichotomy. On the text level Rushdie resorts as usually to parallel stories that alternate dream with reality and are linked by recurrent names of characters. These stories provide inter-texts in each of his novels and they offer comments on the other stories. This dialogue on the text level has made some critics consider this novel as evidence of the compatibility between postmodernism and post-colonialism within the same novel.

Kazuo Ishiguro represents a particular case because his novels don't fully match the postcolonial themes. Even if as regards the present more and more globalized literary space Ishiguro describes himself as an international writer that avoids any affiliation with a certain cultural space or literary tradition, his bicultural identity and his hybridization can justify his identification with writers from the postcolonial literary space. Placed between two cultures that engage in a dialogue for defining the emerging identities, Ishiguro inscribes his writings in the same hybrid space of post-colonialism and experiences the same phenomenon of displacing. In his case the analysis of identity representation is pertaining to the psychoanalytical interpretation and to Freudian concepts of self-defining. Through symbolization, memory selectivity, suppression, self-consoling, the characters are trying to define themselves, as in the case of Naipaul's and Rushdie's characters, by relating to the experience of history. Actually, in the case of the novels *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* the characters define their identity through a false association with the national identity and through the illusion of assuming an important role in the evolution of history. The feeling of guilt and the regret regarding certain decisions are masked by defense mechanisms of the subconscious through the illusion of fulfilling an active role in historic missions and by repressing logical evaluation and introspection impulses. Self-failure and mediocrity are hidden beyond a nationalist and imperialist discourse that loses its justification, the discourse turning its objective towards the individual aspirations that are subjected to the conditions of the external space of history.

The moment that Ishiguro chooses is after the war, a time of revisions, of redefining, when the individual is defined in relation to the collective identity carrying along the burden of the history traumas. Again the dystopia of displacement is counterattacked by the utopian identification of the individual with a collective ideal. *When We Were Orphans* proposes a cultural hybridity under the form of a utopia necessary for saving humanity from self-destruction. This hybridity takes the form of childhood innocence that suggests a space without borders or ideologies. The dystopian experience of the confrontation between different worlds is opposed with a utopian projection of a world that has found its harmony in the gracious and innocent state of childhood.

The novel *The Unconsoled* gets Ishiguro even closer to post-modernity by dealing with the topic of individual alienation against the background of a dysfunctional society marked by the failure of inter-human communication. Displacing has as consequence not

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only the alteration of the social and historic consciousness but also the alienation of the individual by his enstrangement from his own identity that is symbolically represented through that loss of memory and through the utopia of constructing an idealized version of the main character's artistic biography.

To conclude, the works of these three contemporary writers that originate from different cultural spaces redefine the postcolonial identity discourse by tracing new maps on the more and more globalized literary space. By representing history against the backgound of the national freedom fighting movements, of self-governing and of defining the identity of the marginalized, Naipaul, Rushdie and Ishiguro propose a new common discourse that demythisizes the history discourse and that accomodates hybridity and cultural syncretism.

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Acknowledgements:

This paper is a result of the project `Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)" - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013.

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