THE PROTEAN CULTURAL SYNTHESIS OF POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY

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Abstract:
In the age of mass migration and global travel, the claim of many to a global citizenship becomes a common reality. The multiculturalism of the postmodern European nation remains a beautiful slogan, which cannot always redress the loose ends of traumatic (post)colonial histories of cultural identity, still reminiscent of the traditional geographic divisions into haves and have-nots, developed, developing or underdeveloped. Political correctness alone cannot erase the memory of centuries of colonial antagonism and hurt, with their attending displacements of cultural identity, traditions and native civilisations. The agonistic intricacies of former colonial relations, which warped the construction of racial, national and cultural identity on both sides, continue to condition the redefinitions of national identity and culture in ex-imperial metropolises and their former territories and their reflection in postcolonial literature.
Key-words:
Postcolonial, multiculturalism, hybridity, interstitial cultural identity.

Rezumat:
În era migrației în masă şi a mobilității globale, asumarea cetățeniei globale a devenit o realitate comună. Multiculturalismul națiunilor Europene postmoderne rămâne un slogan frumos, care nu poate redresa întotdeauna urmările deseori traumatice ale istoriei (post)coloniale a identității culturale, ce aminteşte încă de diviziunile geografice tradiționale: țări avute şi sărace, dezvoltate, în curs de dezvoltare şi subdezvoltate. Doar prin corectitudinea politică nu se poate şterge amintirea secolelor de antagonism colonial, cu inerentele dislocări de identitate culturală, tradiții şi civilizații indigene. Complexitățile conflictuale caracteristice vechilor relații coloniale, care au distorsionat construcția identității rasiale, naționale şi culturale de ambele părți, continuă să condiționeze redefinirea identității naționale şi culturale în fostele metropole imperiale şi colonii, precum şi reprezentările ei în literatura postcolonială.
Cuvinte cheie:
Postcolonial, multiculturalism, hibriditate, identitate culturală interstițială.

Multiculturalism and the celebration of cultural diversity in Britain and elsewhere have become the buzzwords of the new ideology of

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globalisation, which has dominated the last decades of the twentieth century, surging into the new millennium with the momentous drive of a trans-cultural plenitude arrived at its zenith. The generous inclusiveness of such concepts has been construed as a triumph of the British-born liberal humanism and of a general desire to move beyond the sectarian cultural binarisms of East/West, North/South, First/Third World, centre/periphery. This enlightened humanistic universalism seems to proclaim the healing of the wounds left by the historical legacy of colonialism and cultural subservience, promoting, through the metaphor of the global village, a cross-cultural ideal of unity in diversity. This revolutionary ideology of the new millennium is constructed as a postmodern Enlightenment. However, many read this new, utopian, pre-eminently Western construct as either an expiation of guilt in the wake of imperialism and decolonisation, or a covert legitimisation of neo-colonialist practices, which disingenuously seek to unite the world in the eternal binary of capital and labour, the technological and cultural hegemony of the centre and the dependency of a still developing or underdeveloped periphery.

The very emergence and expansion of such interdisciplinary domains as postcolonial, subaltern or minority studies instantiates the still unresolved cultural tensions and anxieties which demand radical revisions and re-inscriptions of cultural identities. Although in the age of mass migration and global travel the claim of many to a global citizenship becomes a common reality, the multiculturalism of the postmodern European nation remains a beautiful slogan, which cannot address the loose ends of traumatic histories of cultural identity, still reminiscent of traditional geographic divisions in haves and have-nots, developed, developing or underdeveloped. Political correctness alone cannot erase the memory of centuries of colonial antagonism and hurt, with their attendant displacements of cultural identity, traditions and native civilisations. The agonistic intricacies of former colonial relations, which warped the construction of racial and national identity on both sides, continue to condition the redefinition of national identity and culture of the metropolis and its former territories.

While the West's multiculturalism and cultural globalism internalises the overwhelming circulation and exchange of cultural images, brought about by the upsurge of global communication technologies, it may also be

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read as a resigned acceptance of the changed demographic landscape and mindscape of the Western national space itself – irredeemably transfigured and hybridised by the post-war inflow of immigrants and refugees streaming towards the metropolis from all corners of the former empires. For the last half a century, Britain has had to cope with what may be deemed as the greatest identity crisis in its history. The loss of its empire, and implicitly of its former influence as a world power, became tied up with its accommodation within the boundaries of its nationhood of ever increasing diasporas and minority groups, whose very presence, fraught with distressing historical significance, has unsettled its formerly secure schemata of national identity, rooted in the long-standing myths of Englishness and Rule Britannia. As the age-old myths about the inherent ascendancy of the world-civilising British race begin to crumble, alongside with their historicist teleology of cultural progress, the nation is forced to direct its unrecognising gaze inwards, to acknowledge the otherness of its changed physiognomy and assimilate the ghostly return of their imperial history, most of which, in Rushdie's words, 'happened overseas'.

The aftermath of this history of conquest and colonisation, which for centuries informed the self-glorifying myths of imperial pride, has brought home the truth that their legendarily insular, and therefore insulated, sense of national identity has to be revised and redefined in the face of the new socio-demographic realities and their bearing on national and cultural politics. The residual mental habits of imperial Britain's sense of nationhood became confronted with the otherness of its own history, reflected in the multiplying, alternative histories of the colonial migrants, constituted as a collective icon of the 'Other'. As the images of otherness, formerly associated with exoticism and the romance of the foreign counties of the vast empire, begin to engulf the centre, the metropolis discovers its own otherness. This demands a reconsideration of an antiquated sense of British identity and nationality, estranged from itself. The traditional notions of a unitary cultural configuration disintegrate under unavoidable perplexities and interrogations, which challenge Britain's ingrained concepts of cultural purity and authenticity underlying its original myths of national identity. The anxieties of the centre are enhanced by the migrants' own sense of cultural difference. This splitting of metropolitan identity opens up a process of self-assessment, involving both the mainstream host

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society and its ethnic diasporas, bound together in the dilemma of 'how newness enters the world', to use another of Rushdie's emblematic postcolonial leitmotifs.

New theories are required to map out the confused and confusing signs of a changing present, which cannot recognize itself in the debris of past Eurocentric epistemologies. This dead end of post-Enlightenment rationality and myths of nationhood is the starting point of interdisciplinary, borderline studies such as postcolonial or cultural theory and criticism, cross-cultural studies, subaltern studies, migration and minority studies. Such up-and-coming theoretical constructs have been harnessed to interpret and give meaning to the social, political and cultural realities of the historical crossroads of postmodernity and postcoloniality, whose dislocations and re-locations of power centres, erupting nationalisms and emerging national and cultural myths require the redefinition and re-articulation of collective and national identity. The formerly stable, fixed meanings, identities, discourses originating in a world map of binary oppositions and images of alterity such as metropolis/colony, coloniser/colonised, hegemonic/subaltern, centre/periphery have had to give way in the face of new identity formations and sites of cultural significance opened up by the process of decolonisation and the ascent of the new postcolonial nation states. The monologic discourse which Edward Said has defined as Orientalism – the body of texts which the exploratory and expansive West has elaborated about the East from a hegemonic, Eurocentric position – is displaced by the inherent dialogism of the revisionist, alternative historical and cultural enunciations envisaged by the postcolonial project of re-inscribing the cultural identity of the margin.

The cross-cultural interrogations underlying the restitutive discourses of those most affected by the legacy of Empire, the so-called colonies of invasion and conquest of India, Africa and the West Indies begin with reclaiming what Homi Bhabha calls 'the right to signify', to recuperate a lost sense of cultural essence or myth of origin and authenticity, an original historical matrix from which to reconstruct a valid sense of national, racial and cultural identity. While attempting to retrieve and reconnect the loose ends of their collective story of cultural descent, the emerging nations had to take on board the reality that postcolonial identity is the inner space of an enduring cultural hybridisation, which makes any recourse to a primal,

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essential myth of cultural purity and authenticity appear naïvely utopian. The intercultural contaminations initiated by the turbulent history of exploration, conquest and colonisation have resulted in a world whose irredeemable hybridity precludes any utopian visions of cultural purity. The empire's hybridisation of the former colonial space finds its postcolonial reversal in what is often called a 'colonisation in reverse' – the exodus of migrants from the colonies to the 'mother country', by which the metropolis itself becomes hybridised through the presence of its others. Thus, the former empire seems to fold in upon itself, hosting within its shrunken borders a humanised palimpsest of its own colonial history, constituted in what Rushdie calls 'the new empire within Britain'.

It is one of history's ironies, and some would even say revenge, that this inverted replica of the colonial enterprise should come to haunt the very home of its originators with the distortions, reversions, antagonisms, unsettled identities and the echoes of partial truths, which form the legacy of empire. This never really severed umbilical cord linking the mother country to its colonial brood, traverses the intricately knotted chain of causes and effects which continues to bind metropolis and colony, long after decolonisation. The undeniable reality of the empire's hybridising agency fosters the composite ideology of the multiethnic and multicultural postmodern nation, whose conceptual ambiguity displaces the equally ambivalent discourses of colonialism. The centre's reconfiguration of its historically constituted sites of cultural interference and transgression forms the project of Homi Bhabha's theorising of cultural hybridity in his seminal study *The Location of Culture* (1994). In his insightful analysis of the multiplying locations of cross-cultural identification, the scholar and considers, from a postcolonial perspective, the colonial and postcolonial matrixes and patterns of psychic and discursive ambivalence. His anatomy of hybridity is grafted in post-Freudian psychoanalytical theories of subject formation, where the concepts of Self and Other are psychic territories whose overlapping, shifting boundaries yield to phenomena of splitting, doubling and multiple positioning. The Freudian and Lacanian theories capitalised upon are filtered through the postcolonial cultural philosophy and psychoanalysis of Franz Fanon, one of the most influential theorists of colonialism's confounding diffusions of cultural and national essences. His thinking can be traced in the discourse and metaphors of both Naipaul and Rushdie.

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Questions of identity, of historical, political and social agency and of national, racial or ethnic affiliation are to be rethought, Bhabha proposes, from the restorative perspective of the margins, whose collective identification should be sought not only in the social, political or artistic discourses of present nationalisms, but in a self-reflective understanding of the ambivalent practices of the colonial moment. Colonialism's strategies of othering, its ethnographic explorations and classifications, cultural translations and transgressions, sustained by a perfidious apparatus of surveillance and domination, are seen to have operated fundamental alterations in the individuation and identity-formation of both coloniser and colonised, bound together in a vicious circle of doublethink and doublespeak, in a dialectic of dualistic desire of mutual appropriation and phobic demonising, where inclusion and exclusion, articulations of difference or sameness are governed by irreconcilable, often paranoid impulses on either side of the colonial relation. The inherent duplicity of the colonist's self-assigned mission of reforming the native and the native's mimicry of the colonial master, which is both legitimised by colonialist ideology and an instinctive act of defence and resistance, is seen as the source of irreversible phenomena of self-alienation, which affect the colonial psyche on both sides. For the imperial West, the complex of postcoloniality and its anxieties of redefinition have led to a culture of guilt, apparent in the harshly self-scrutinising and self-incriminating fictions of Englishness proliferating in the post-war decades. For the decolonised margin, postcolonial discourse emerges as the inscription of a culture of survival and resistance, which seeks to interrogate and assess old and new positions of identification and agency.

The interrelated constructions of postcoloniality of both centre and margin converge in a kind of epiphany of transcendence or rite of passage, which Bhabha calls 'the beyond' or 'the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (Bhabha 2). Postcolonial literatures in English engaged in the mapping out of this 'beyond' long before its theorisation by academic cultural criticism. The most diverse literary representations of the colonial and postcolonial experience concur in substantiating Bhabha's observation that the 'terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced

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performatively' (Bhabha 3). The postcolonial text constitutes the earliest and most effective performance of the negotiation of cultural difference, sometimes even more potent than social or political engagement. Its very materiality makes it an enduring witness of the spatial, temporal and spiritual vagaries of the hybridised subjectivities and epistemologies bred by the empire. The emergence of postcolonial international writing seems to instantiate Goethe's insight that 'the possibility of world literature arises from the cultural confusions wrought by terrible wars and mutual conflicts' (Bhabha 16). Goethe's diagnosis of the irreversibility of cultural contamination sounds very much like the postcolonial mood: '[Nations] could not return to their settled and independent life again without noticing that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways, which they had unconsciously adopted, and come to feel here and there previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs' (quoted in Bhabha 16). The axiomatic simplicity of Goethe's perception applies to the complexities of colonial and postcolonial cross-pollination, as Rushdie would put it. Bhabha sets a contrast between the spontaneous, contingent contexts of contamination envisaged by Goethe and the systematic, ideologically programmatic nature of colonialism's cultural hybridisation: 'What of the more complex cultural situation where 'previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs' emerge from the imposition of 'foreign' ideas, cultural representations, and structures of power?' (Bhabha 17).

However, Goethe's intimations offer valuable ground for evaluating the status and role of postcolonial literature as world literature in the true sense – construed not merely as the body of national literatures taken together, but in the more literal sense of a trans-national literature of and about the world seen in its most profoundly altering moments and sites of intersection. Indeed, the very controversial term of Third World literature could be read in a new light, as an apposite designation of a literature which conflates the writing of the Old and New World in a third, hybrid locus of composite enunciations. This interstitial writing about the intersections of mental histories and geographies inscribes the consciousness of in-betweenness and the composite self, 'neither the one, nor the other', to use Bhabha's favourite label of cultural indeterminacy. The critic hails this 'third space' of articulation from the interstices of history:

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*"…there may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projection of 'otherness'…perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized or colonial refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrain of world literatur*e." (Bhabha 17).

Postcolonial writing initiates just such a ''worlding' of literature' (Bhabha 17). It functions as testimony from sites of cultural oppression and displacement, emanating from a sense that 'the Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by the influx of post-war migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative *internal to its national identity*' (Bhabha 9). This narrative of new identities should also be read as a diagnosis of a world culture, whose Eurocentric epistemological certainties and fixed concepts of identity yield in front of the hybrid vision of the margin. The hybrid, dialogical world literature feeds on the colonialist intertexts, which fostered the world's alienation from essences and pure origins. Alongside with the historical or literary texts of the empire, the postcolonial text completes the jigsaw puzzle of the ambivalence, the inner contradictions, the perversities and the ultimate collusions of the colonial experience.

Bhabha's own theories about colonial constructions of otherness, ambivalence, mimicry, hybridity, hegemonic and minority discourses have been sparked off by the literary instantiation of these concepts in the work of migrant cosmopolitans such as V. S. Naipaul or Salman Rushdie, to name only those who have had the most powerful impact on his theoretical formulations. In their work, which represents a long overdue 'articulation of difference, from the minority perspective', the critic finds a 'complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize the cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation', which 'estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a 'received' tradition (Bhabha 3). Their alternative 'histories of cultural difference' (Bhabha 3) confront the hegemonic textuality of the empire with an inverted mirror, of alterity. By their counter-discourse of dissonance, which displaces the unisonant hymns of European nationalism, these migrant world writers 'deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to 'translate', and therefore re-inscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity (Bhabha 9). By calling into question the traditional Eurocentric perspectives on man, society, historical progress and the modern nation which dawned with the

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Enlightenment, the decolonising discourse of writers such as Naipaul, Rushdie, Mo and Ishiguro turns postcoloniality into a 'second enlightenment', where, from 'the shifting margins of cultural displacement – that confounds any profound or 'authentic' sense of a 'national' culture or an 'organic' intellectual –…the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world is taken as the paradigmatic point of departure' (Bhabha 31).

Hybridity as imagery, discourse and inspiration riddles the transgressive, cross-fertilising fictions of bicultural writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo. The images and rhetoric of hybridity pervade their hybrid texts, which reflect their author's composite ethnic and cultural backgrounds and mindscapes. Their anatomies of alterity, cultural contamination and interstitial identities bespeak the plight of 'those who have known long and tyrannical histories of domination and misrecognition' and contend that 'cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other' (Bhabha 52). They envision the hybridisation of (post)colonial subjectivity, which brings into focus 'the idea of man as his alienated image: not Self and Other but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity' (Bhabha 63). The writers' own negotiations of an enunciating position are uncertainly poised halfway between the vilification of colonialism and neo-colonialism and the implicit victimisation of the doomed periphery, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the self-critical, politically unorthodox scourging of the emerging nations themselves for perpetuating a culture of impotence and dependency. This situates them in Bhabha's 'third space' of enlightened self-identification, freed from the fixed binaries of partisanship by the rhetoric of doubt, of indeterminate, impermanent and ultimately hybridised truths. In the critic's view, this marks a salutary way out of the deadlock of the fossilised Manichean dichotomies and antagonisms, haunting a historically injured humanity, and the advancement towards complex, enriching and liberating forms of cultural identification. As he astutely observes, 'in exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves' (Bhabha 56).

The post-imperial histories propounded by the postcolonial novel are riddled with fictional instantiations of alterity, mimicry, cultural indeterminacy, hybridity, agonistic negotiations of interstitial identities, posited between hegemonic stereotypes and subaltern strategies of resistance. Their fictional worlds converge on many planes, despite their otherwise widely different geopolitical and cultural contexts. In the idiosyncratic representations of (post)colonial and postmodern processes of depersonalisation, fragmentation and hybridisation of identity which characterise British postcolonial literature, we can identify

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phenomenological and psychological patterns which illustrate the conceptual paradigm of postcolonial theory. Bhabha's theoretical construction on cultural mimicry, ambivalence and hybridisation, which define (post)colonial relations, represents an invaluable framework of reference in any analysis of postcolonial writing and its fictional treatment of (post)colonial cultural individuation.

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