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## CAUGHT BETWEEN NATIONALISMS: HOW THE MARGIN TRIED TO CONQUER THE CENTRE IN HANIF KUREISHI'S *THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA* AND AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

**Keywords:** margin – centre relationship; nationalism; ethnic identity; post-modernism; orientalism; Occidentalism; the other; post-colonialism

**Abstract:** *The Second World War brought an end to colonization and, along with it, a series of demographic changes to the countries of Europe. The great number of immigrants, exiles and refugees grew to the extent that the very understanding of nation changed and the transnational margin-centre relationship was reversed. The Other, more than ever before, became part and parcel of the identity of any Western European nation that had had a colonial empire. In the present essay I shall endeavour to give an account of these changes in post-colonial Britain and later discuss two seminal novels against the background of a continent that had relinquished the ideals of the Enlightenment. My essay will focus on the ambivalent cultural conquering of the centre by the immigrant margin as displayed in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. My claim is that while in the first novel the margin has to undergo a process of self-orientalization in order to reach the centre, in the latter's case, it is the centre that has to adapt to the oriental vista, thus undergoing a process of occidentalization.*

### **The Indian Margin of the British Nation**

In his essay "Reflexions on Exile", Edward Said claims that for a person living in exile, nationalism is the only means by which that particular person can preserve his or her culture and at the same time alleviate the painstaking effects of being uprooted.

Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation. How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and triumphant language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions? What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other? (Said, *Reflexions* 359-60)

Said suggests that being lonely makes one an easy prey to inclusive, encompassing discourses such as nationalism. By nationalism, Said means the transnational relation that the diaspora maintains with their homelands, which implies an idealized version of the homeland and a feeling of nostalgia for the invented paradise lost. Although it is often the case that the exiles, refugees, immigrants and other wanderers

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cannot resist the temptation of homeland nationalism, my claim is that nationalism does not necessarily bind one to his homeland, but rather, as I wish to show in this paper, the new nation can also provide an encompassing narrative. But how can an exile, therefore somebody not belonging to the dominant culture claiming the nation-state, commit himself to such a discourse? His status as the Other would necessarily confine him to a discourse asserting his ethnic identity, in which case, the two discourses would clash. Is there any way in which the Other can also be a part of the nation? In order to answer this question, we must analyze the way nationalistic and ethnic discourses interact. In order to shed light upon this issue, I shall rely on Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, in which, although the author starts from the same premise as Said, his arguments are much more rewarding from the point of view of this paper.

The nation fills the void left in the uprooting communities and kin, and turns the loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage', or the central European steppes across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people. (Bhabha 139-140)

This quotation states very clearly that Bhabha endorses Said's view with respect to how nationalism can compensate for the loss of one's homeland. Geographically dislocated subjects are not necessarily spiritually dislocated from their homeland, on the contrary, the bigger the distance, the greater the attachment. So far, Bhabha and Said overlap. What Bhabha brings new to the discussion is the idea that belonging to a nation is not something given, but acquired. He contends that nationalistic discourse is two-folded, in the sense that, on the one hand, there is a pedagogical side which has the people as its objects and asserts a set of universal atemporal characteristics of the nation-people, while on the other hand, there is a performative side which constructs the nation-people as different from the Other who is outside (Bhabha 147-8). The questions that need to be raised is whether the Other against whom the nation is rhetorically constructed can be included in the nation and, secondly, if the rhetorical construction of the nation needs an ethnic Other in order to be able to define itself. A glance at the history of the 20th century will show that, indeed, the ethnic Other can be included in the nation's narrative, and that the margin of the nation is not always ethnical.

After the Second World War, the Other, in opposition to whom any nation defined itself, was no longer found on a different continent, but rather in the same country or even city. As a result, the Romantic narrative of the nationhood entered a critical stage in which its claim to perfect homogeneity was no longer feasible. The increasing number of immigrants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century imposed a limit on the performative side of the nationalistic discourse, eventually challenging the universality claims of the pedagogical side. The only way by which a nation could still claim any sort of universality was simply by regarding individuality as being universal and in the end accepting the margin as part of the nation (Bhabha 151).

If we turn now to The Buddha of Suburbia, we realize that Haroon is a good example for the way in which the British nation appropriates him, in spite of his Indian

origin. His allegiance to the British state, at least on a public level, is attested firstly by his job as clerk, and secondly by the fact that the British call him Harry.

Unfortunately, Haroon's integration in the British nation does not mean that the former colonial power relations have been abolished. Haroon's progress within British society, as well as his growth in fame and his gradual movement from the margin of London to the centre are done only on British terms, as I shall explain in the following section.

### **Self-orientalization**

In his book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said tries to show how the western world rhetorically fashions a whole geographic area, the Orient, according to its own occidental phantasies and expectations. The author attempts to deconstruct the image of the Orient by revealing its cultural contingency.

Academic Orientalists for the most part were interested in the classical period of whatever language or society it was that they studied. Not until quite late in the century, with the single major exception of Napoleon's Institut d'Egypte, was much attention given to the academic study of the modern, or actual, Orient. Moreover, the Orient studied was a textual universe by and large; . . . Even the rapport between an Orientalist and the Orient was textual, so much so that it is reported of some of the early-nineteenth-century German Orientalists that their first view of an eight-armed Indian statue cured them completely of their Orientalist taste. When a learned Orientalist travelled in the country of his specialization, it was always with unshakable abstract maxims about the "civilization" he had studied; rarely were Orientalists interested in anything except proving the validity of these musty "truths" by applying them, without great success, to uncomprehending, hence degenerate, natives (53).

Said's claim is mainly that the knowledge the West had about the Orient was not acquired through a direct experience of the Orient, i.e. not by travelling in the first place, but rather through texts, which more often than not were concerned with ancient Oriental civilizations. Having thus established a particular horizon of expectations, the Westerner travelling to the Orient would sense the gap between his prefigured notion of the Orient and the direct experience of it. What was left for the Westerner to do was to project his culturally constructed notion of the Orient onto the concrete geography and people he encountered. Should this attempt fail, it didn't mean that the Westerner possessed a distorted knowledge of the Orient, but rather that the native was "degenerate".

As a result, if a native didn't wish to be regarded as a humbug, he had to confirm the western horizon of expectations, or, in other words, he had to enact western clichés about the Orient. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Haroon undergoes a process of self-orientalization, in order for him to be successful to the British audience. In spite of the fact that he is a Muslim, he takes up Buddhism, does his best to look, act and talk in a highly stereotypically oriental manner, so that he may hold spiritual lectures and yoga lessons.

He was speaking slowly, in a deeper voice than usual as if he were addressing a crowd. He was hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads. (Kureishi 21)

If the Other's recognition within the society of the centre depends on the Other's ability to enact the West's culturally constructed stereotypes of him, then it means that, in terms of power relations, the colonial margin–centre relationship, in which the centre has a sovereign position, is still there. The London of *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a microversion of the former British Empire. Haroon's progress from the suburbs to the centre of London metaphorically suggests the movement from the colony to the metropolis. Such a progression would usually imply the overcoming of the centre – margin power relation, yet, as I have just shown, such a progress can be achieved only by respecting the rules provided by the authority of the centre. Because of the cultural hegemony of the centre – London, Haroon has to come up with a domesticated translation of himself and his culture, thus cultural subordination. The centre lets itself be conquered, but on its terms. Consequently, one can, of course, speak of class emancipation, since leaving the suburbs denotes moving up the class ladder from lower-middle to the upper class, but as far as the relation to the centre is concerned, Haroon cannot evade the authority of the centre's discourse.

### **The Taming of the Other**

Probably more interesting and surely more rewarding for the purpose of the present essay is the case of Karim, Haroon's son, who is a second-generation immigrant, "an Englishman born and bred, almost" (Kureishi 1, emphasis mine). In spite of the fact that Karim grew up in Britain and has no nostalgia for his father's home, his being "almost" British is the cause of the instability of his condition in the novel. On the one hand he wants to be regarded as British, but is not, because he is "almost" British. On the other hand, he relinquishes his Indian identity and, as a result, doesn't commit himself to any discourse asserting ethnic identity. Throughout the novel he is always caught somewhere in-between.

The issue of being almost "the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86) is widely discussed in the chapter "Of Mimicry and Man" of *The Location of Culture*. The author's main claim is that mimicry is a colonial strategy with the help of which the centre makes the Other recognizable. Yet, such a strategy is ambivalent and self-undermining because, if the Other is to remain different, then it must not totally imitate the centre. But if the Other can never fully rise to the expectations of the centre, if it can never achieve a thorough cultural imitation, then this would imply that the colonizing mission of civilizing the Other is and has always been doomed to fail. Once again we stumble upon failure of the Enlightenment project and the twilight of the age of universality and homogeneity.

As Homi Bhabha himself puts it,

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, a recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its own slippage, its excess, its difference. (86)

The need for mimicry to produce its own slippage rises from the need of nationalistic discourse to define its nation-people in opposition to an Other. When that Other is no longer remote, but might as well be our neighbour, mimicry becomes the compromise between making him similar enough so that we may interact with him and at the same time keep him different to the extent that we can define ourselves as being the opposite of what he is.

Karim is a clear case of mimicry, this being the reason why he is always caught in-between, unable (or unwilling) to pledge allegiance to any discourse, caught between two nations, hence transnational. Irrespective of how British he may think, act or talk, his skin colour will always be the thing which makes him almost British and also the element onto which the others project their stereotypes and prejudice. Throughout the novel, Karim is often a victim of discrimination, as it is the case with Helen's father, who disapproves of his daughter's relationship with Karim, due to his being an Indian.

'You can't see my daughter again', said Hairy Back. 'She doesn't go out with boys. Or with wogs.' . . . 'However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a'ammer! With a'ammer'. (Kureishi 40)

The reason behind the projection of stereotypes and hatred onto the Other's skin colour in the case of mimicry is, according to Bhabha, "the confusion of metaphoric and metonymic axes on the cultural production of meaning" (90). In other words, mimicry is achieved on the axis of metonymy in the sense that it is the attempt of the other to camouflage himself, yet this process of horizontal levelling does not harmoniously integrate difference. Difference in mimicry is incongruous, disharmonious and causes an ambivalent projection of meaning from the axis of metaphor. It simultaneously yields sameness and otherness in such a manner that can sometimes horrify the beholder.

### **Exile – the Epitome of Postmodernism**

In this section I wish to dwell on the way Karim situates himself with respect to the different discursive / political standpoints taken up by the other characters in the novel. As I have previously mentioned, Karim is a careless teenager caught in-between political ideologies and various discourses, who, in pursuit of a hedonistic gratification of his needs, chooses to ignore the political implications of his actions. The question that needs be raised is whether we should regard Karim's lack of affiliation as an issue of impossibility or unwillingness. In order to answer this question, I would like to refer back to the discussion of nationalism taken up in the beginning. In the first section of this essay I argued that the 19th century conception of nation could no longer be sustained in post-World War II Europe. However, this does not mean that the understanding of nation as universalizing and at the same time excluding (see the ambivalence discussed in the beginning) was no longer there. My claim is that we can differentiate between a top-down imposed nationalistic discourse supported by the nation-state's policy, where citizenship is the binding element (civic nationalism) and a bottom-up imposed nationalistic discourse where the binding element is ethnicity (ethnic nationalism). The latter excludes

the margin and asserts the universality of a dominant ethnic group. Haroon's integration as a British citizen is valid from the point of view of the first discourse, but unsuccessful from the point of view of a discriminating populace.

Taking this into account, it can be assumed that as far as Karim is concerned, his ignorance of discourses and ideologies is to a great extent more willed than imposed by his condition as a hyphenated British citizen. Although from the point of view of a part of the populace he will always be a "wog" (Kureishi 40), he might very well be integrated from the point of view of the nation-state. Should he decline this possibility, there is no reason why he could not commit himself to a discourse affirming his Indian identity or be part of an active diaspora.

In the novel, Karim's political status is alluded to on a concrete level by the many houses he may live in, yet none of them being his home. This aspect is very wisely noted by Susheila Nasta, who in her book *Home Truths - Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* asserts that

In fact, Karim is shown from the start to code-switch across the standard discourses of a whole number of different communities: whether as son to his Pakistani father who maintains, like Uncle Anwar and Auntie Jeeta (Karim's 'second family'), that despite the length of his long sojourn in England, he will remain first and foremost an Indian man; or as bisexual lover to both Charlie and Jamila; working-class nephew to Uncle Ted and Auntie Jean, who can beat up a 'frog' in Calais; be a 'loyal' Indian friend to Changez; or, in various masquerades as a professional actor, play London itself, as much as the theatre world, for what he can get. (200)

At this point we can clearly state that Karim is an exile among exiles, experiencing a self-imposed uprootedness. He does not wish to become an English citizen like his father and he cannot be accepted as an Englishman by the majority of the populace. Neither does he take part in the leftist protest to which Jamila invites him, nor does he take heed of Chavez's warning of the interplay between power, politics and art when, as an actor, accepts stereotypical Indian roles.

Nonetheless, his lack of commitment makes him highly post-modern, in the sense that taking up any discourse would automatically imply regarding one interpretation of the world as holding the truth, hence accusing the others of being false. In his constant pendulation between homes, by constantly shifting identity masks without assuming any one of them, Karim asserts a postmodern understanding of identity as being multifaceted and contradictory.

In this case exile is a status to crave for, since it is the only condition that can keep the individual away from the assertion of universal truths and full certainties. This is in tune with what Said, drawing on Theodor Adorno, had to say about exile, namely that:

To follow Adorno is to stand away from "home" in order to look at it with the exile's detachment. For there is considerable merit in the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they actually produce. We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. (Said, *Reflexions* 365)

The view Said seems to endorse is that exile is the right condition for one to acknowledge relativism. If we regard any discourse as a “system difference” (Derrida 354), then standing outside any such system gives one the possibility to realize that the centre of that system does not transcend the system itself and that, like the entire structure formed around it, it is subject to play (Derrida 351-4). In other words, no discourse can claim universality, since any such claim would ignore the cultural contingency of any belief, view or idea.

### **Occidentalization**

In my discussion of the margin – centre relation in Kureishi’s novel, I have concluded that the dominance of the centre’s discourse can actually never be overcome by the margin. Both Haroon and Karim have to undergo a process of self-orientalization in order for them to emancipate themselves from their social statuses. In other words, the margin is coerced to confirm the centre’s horizon of expectations.

In Ghosh’s novel, the situation changes, since it is no longer the margin that has to live up to the centre’s expectations, but rather the centre has to come to terms with a narrative, which is produced by the margin. This is a clear attempt to reverse the centre – margin relationship, by having the centre translate itself in a domesticated manner so as to be familiar to the margin, since, according to Maria Tymoczko, domestication is a sign of cultural subordination (28). In the novel, the narrator hears many stories about London from friends and relatives who have already been there, thus building an image of London even before he visits the place. When finally travelling to London, the narrator meets Ila, an old acquaintance, who has been to London before him.

. . . the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. And then, because she shrugged dismissively and said: Why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn’t blankness – it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions. . . . And then, because I knew she had forgotten, I tried to recall for her how, when we were eight-year-old children, she herself had once invented London for me. (Ghosh 24)

In the novel, Tridib takes up a constructivist stance, claiming that perceiving is an act of interpreting, in the sense that the perceiver projects meaning onto what he sees. In this passage, Ila sides with essentialism, claiming that things do have an essential meaning that we can reach. Caught between these two opposites, the narrator reminds Ila of how she bestowed her interpretation of London onto him, his regret being that he hadn’t had the opportunity to forge an interpretation of his own, he “couldn’t see properly”.

After having been offered a narrative of London as a child in Calcutta, the narrator has to face the ‘real’ London as a grown-up. Like the Westerners who, travelling to the East, were disappointed to see that the Orient didn’t rise to the culturally constructed expectations that they had acquired via mere textual encounters with it, ending up being disappointed and blaming the native for being “degenerate”, so does the narrator have to struggle with a version of London onto which he has to project the narrative of London he had got from others. The failure to do so results in disappointment.

The narrator expects the centre to undergo a process of occidentalization in order for it to fit the narrator's pre-existent interpretation. Notwithstanding this, since the centre – margin power relations cannot be overcome, the centre refuses to Occidentalize itself. At this point we stumble upon a new similarity between Ghosh and Kureishi. Indirectly, both contend that the power relations involved in the margin – centre relation cannot be altered.

When facing London, the narrator says:

But despite that, I still could not believe in the truth of what I did see: the gold-green trees, the old lady walking her Pekinese, the children who darted out of a house and ran to the postbox at the corner, their cries hanging like thistles in the autumn air. I could see all of that, and yet, despite the clear testimony of my eyes, it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta, something I could not have seen had I waited at that corner for years – just as one may watch a tree for months and yet know nothing at all about it if one happens to miss that one week when it bursts into bloom. (Gush 43)

### **I'm more Other than You**

The last issue that I wish to tackle is the way in which *The Shadow Lines* deals with the issue of the margin and how the Indian margin can be integrated in the British nation. Crucial to the formation of any nation is the sense of homogeneity, i.e. the realization of the fact that the nation-people share a certain set of characteristics. In order for a group of people to reach this state of awareness, there is the need for the presence of a cultural other, this other being, then, the margin of that particular nation. According to Gush's novel, in order for the margin of a nation to be integrated, an even greater cultural other has to appear, in opposition to whom, the new nation can define itself. When Mayadebi speaks of her time spent in London right before the beginning of the Second World War, she claims that:

Well, she said, laughing, the couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting – the atmosphere had changed so dramatically, even within the last few weeks. People were becoming friendlier; in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing. Everyone was so much nicer now; often when she and Tridib were out walking people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her how her husband was, and when he was to have his operation. But it wasn't just her – everyone was being friendly with everyone else; why, just that morning his sister, Elisabeth, had said that old Mrs Dunbar who lived down the road had actually been civil for the first time in living memory . . . (Ghosh 49)

The idea endorsed by the novel is that the advent of The Second World War presented to the British a new cultural Other, who was far more 'appropriate' for the projection of British anxieties. Furthermore, the fact that not only the British, but also the Indians were threatened by this new Other, gave both ethnic groups something to share. They gained a sense of homogeneity, which in any other circumstances would not have been there, hence the kindness shown by the British to Mayadebi, an Indian.

In this respect the two novels differ, since, on the one hand, Kureishi speaks of the shifts in the understanding of the concept of nation, which yield the possibility of

integrating a cultural Other, which is no longer located miles away, but right there in the vicinity of the British nation, while, on the other hand, Ghosh relies on an understanding of nation where the Other is the *condicio sine qua non* for the feeling of homogeneity, which is indispensable to any nation.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

Although the approaches may differ, both novels seem to tackle the same issues, namely that of margin – centre power relations, as well as the inclusion of the Indian margin in the British nation. As far as the first problem is concerned, both novels assert the impossibility of the centre's dominant discourse to be overcome, while, with respect to the latter, the margin may be integrated either by giving up universalizing claims (or finding individuality as being universal), or by the appearance of a greater Other that may be considered inimical by both the dominant ethnic group, and the marginal one, thus resulting in a new sense of homogeneity.

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