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Deconstructing Identity in Postcolonial Fiction

Summary

With the destabilization of political and cultural boundaries between peoples and nations, the concept of identity, with its implications in the dialectics of self and other, becomes a philosophical challenge in a globalised cosmopolitan world. The challenge resides in the fact that in such a postmodern situation where identity is viewed as shapeless, shifting and moving beyond the fixity of Manichean thought, a process of questioning is enacted to interrogate identity in its past, present and future implications.

This paper will attempt to look at the ways in which some postcolonial novels set out to deconstruct the concept of identity by constructing ambivalent texts, blurring the borders between self and other, laying the foundations for hybridity where otherness reigns as a process of signification which rests on interpretation.

Key words: identity, hybridity, deconstruction, otherness, ambivalence, interpretation

Dekonstrukcija identitete v postkolonialni prozi

Povzetek

Ošibitev političnih in kulturnih meja med narodi in nacijami vzpostavlja koncept identitete, vključujoč dialektično razmerje med jazom in drugim, kot filozofski izziv v globaliziranem kozmopolitskem svetu. V postmoderni situaciji, kjer je identiteta razumljena kot brezoblična in pomikajoča se onkraj ustaljene manihejske misli, se izziv poraja v procesu izpraševanja identitete v okviru njenih preteklih, sedanjih in prihodnjih implikacij.

Članek skuša orisati načine, s katerimi se nekateri postkolonialni romani lotevajo dekonstrukcije koncepta identitete, ko z ustvarjanjem ambivalentnih besedil brišejo meje med jazom in drugim in tako postavljajo temelje za hibridnost, kjer vlada drugost kot proces označevanja, ki se opira na interpretacijo.

Ključne besede: identiteta, hibridnost, dekonstrukcija, drugost, ambivalenca, interpretacija

Deconstructing Identity in Postcolonial Fiction

1. The old identity discourse

In his *Reflections on Identity*, Stanley Aronowitz reiterates the fact that “the older theories of identity have tended to posit ‘society’ and the ‘individual’ as fixed” (in Rajchman 1995, 115). The observation that identity was traditionally thought of as something stable and fixed can be corroborated by Stuart Hall who assumes that in the past the discourse of identity rested on the idea of fixity and stability wherein authenticity was sought for as a guarantee to secure continuity and resist the mutability of a rapidly changing world.

The logic of the discourse of identity assumes a stable subject, i.e., we’ve assumed that there is something which we can call our identity which, in a rapidly shifting world, has the great advantage of staying still. Identities are a kind of guarantee that the world isn’t falling apart quite as rapidly as it sometimes seems to be. It’s a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, a still point in the turning world. That’s the kind of ultimate guarantee that identity seems to provide us with. (Hall 1989, 10)

This traditional discourse conceives of identity as being related to a fixed point, a particular set of values, serving as a sort of hallmark for the individual in society. Stuart Hall goes further to suggest that identity is a discourse wherein the logic of stability and continuity steers towards the belief that an individual can remain the same person over time, whatever his life experiences may be. In this discourse, identity is associated with a point of reference, a kind of origin that secures or guarantees authenticity, fixity and stability.

The logic of identity is the logic of something like a “true self.” And the language of identity has often been related to the search for a kind of authenticity to one’s experience, something that tells me where I come from. The logic and language of identity is the logic of depth – in here, deep inside me, is my Self which I can reflect upon. It is an element of continuity. I think most of us do recognize that our identities have changed over time, but we have the hope or nostalgia that they change at the rate of a glacier. So, while we’re not the fledglings that we were when we were one year old, we are the same sort of person. (Hall 1989, 10)¹

The old logic of identity creates, as Stanley Aronowitz puts it, “a self-enclosed universe of identity discourse” (in Rajchman 119). The old self-enclosed discourse of identity rests on the exclusion of the other, the other individual or the other identity group, whose difference is felt as constituting a potential threat or danger. The danger of such an identity discourse is that it offers a fertile terrain for all sorts of essentialist thinking such as communitarianism, extremism and radical nationalism.

¹ There is little need to focus on the ways in which the great collective identities related to nation, class, race or gender contribute to fix the concept of identity to the notion of stability:

“The whole adventure of the modern world was, for a long time, blocked out in terms of these great collective identities. As one knew one’s class, one knew one’s place in the social universe. As one knew one’s race, one knew one’s racial position within the great races of the world in their hierarchical relationship to one another. As one knew one’s gender, one was able to locate oneself in the huge social divisions between men and women. As one knew one’s national identity, one certainly knew about the pecking order of the universe. These collective identities stabilized and staged our sense of ourselves. That logic of identity that seemed so confident (...) was in part held in place by these great collective social identities...” (Hall 1989, 10–11)

All too frequently in the contemporary world we find groups obsessed with asserting the “identity” or “sameness” of their members in order to affirm the contrast with what they perceive to threaten them as “different” or “other.” The perceived differences may belong to any number of familiar typologies, including race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual preference, or other status taken to be “fundamental” in some supposedly alarming sense. (Grier 2007, 1)

2. The postcolonial discourse of identity

In line with postmodern thought, postcolonial theory fully subscribes to the new identity discourse by acknowledging the destabilisation and the fragmentation affecting the concept of identity. The destabilisation of the concept of identity stems from the growing awareness that identity is a question involving the relationship of the self and the other. Without the other, there would be no self, no identity. The contemporary concern with otherness highlights the proposition that alterity (difference or the existence of the other) determines the process of identification. It is the existence of the other that gives the self meaning. Besides, the self is not a finished product; it is not a stable construct; it is, rather, a process in constant flux; something that is incessantly shifting. The ceaseless change that affects the self in its relation with the other endows identity with mutable fluidity. “Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses” (Hall 1989, 10).

Many thinkers agree today on the shifting nature of identity in a globalised world characterised by what Edward Said calls in *Culture and Imperialism* “the mixture of cultures and identities” (Said 1994, 407). For Edward Said, instability is a major characteristic of identity. Identity is always in progress, fluctuating between differences, shifting beyond Manichean thought, undergoing an endless process of change. “No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind” (ibid., 407).

As it develops the self embraces different identities and becomes therefore an on-going process of differentiation. Identity is not stable because the self is constantly shifting from one identity to another, and this is mainly because of the inherent diversity within identity. Identity cannot be restricted to only one particular thing; instead of being en-closed within the boundaries of particularism, identity opens out to embrace pluralism.

Pluralistic identity is a notion that calls for Homi Bhabha’s treatment of the concept of hybridity; such a concept is inescapably intertwined with the notion of ambivalence and indeterminacy. The indeterminacy and ambivalence of identity, the fluctuation between sameness and difference, spring from the inadequacy of any attempt to adopt only one particular identity. The inherent diversity of the self, places identity in an in-between interval, a third space, for Homi Bhabha who, in adopting a politics of the in-between, opens the scope for investigation into the fertile interstitial space of identity.

Seen under the light of this new discourse, identity in postcolonial theory becomes a process of questioning. Postcolonial theory perceives identity as a process in constant flux wherein the self,

in its perpetual negotiation with the other, enacts a self-interrogating mechanism, a self-centred process of interrogation, establishing a deconstructive apprehension of identity. According to Jacques Derrida, the self, “in departing from itself, lets itself be put into question by the other” (1978, 96). In its encounter with the other, the self indulges in a process of becoming other than itself (ibid., 119, 133). In its “adventuring outside oneself towards the unforeseeably-other” (ibid., 95), the self has to face “the impossibility of return to the same”. The acknowledgment of this inescapable impossibility of return to the same after encountering the other plays an active role in approaching postcolonial identities.

3. Deconstructing identity in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*:

Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is a telling example of how identity is deconstructed in postcolonial fiction. The narrator-character of the novel is self-consciously aware of the hybrid nature of his identity, an identity to be situated in an in-between interstitial space. Karim Amir, the London Suburbian of Indian origin, speaks of himself as inhabiting an indeterminate in-between space, a third space of both belonging and unbelonging. The opening paragraph sets the autobiographical tone of the narrative wherein identity emerges as a central concern for the author who, from the outset, reveals his deconstructive approach to the important postcolonial issue of identity.

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don’t care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (3)

The sense of restlessness that the narrator expresses in the opening paragraph may be viewed as revealing the crisis of identity from which the postcolonial self suffers. Karim’s restlessness could be related to the sense of displacement and dislocation he faces as an individual living in a postcolonial world where he must come to terms with a hybrid identity, an identity that ties him up to more than one culture. But the restlessness Karim feels might be connected with the dynamic workings of the postcolonial hybrid identity. This restlessness is the inner movement which reveals identity as a process in constant flux. The in-between nature of identity, the “belonging and not” of which Karim speaks is the deconstructive process, the in-and-out movement of the self, the quest for meaning that allows the self to embark on a perpetual journey towards the unattainable understanding of his own identity. Karim’s restlessness is the process of self-questioning; it is identity in constant flux. Throughout the novel, identity is constantly interrogated, moving away from the fixity of Manichean thought as incarnated by Karim’s uncle who stands for the failure of the old identity discourse which rigidly sticks to the ideal of stability. Karim’s uncle blames his brother for losing his Indian authenticity by becoming too westernised. Karim’s father, who represents the first generation of immigrants in Britain, undergoes an identity-change, leading him away from the traditional values left back home, there in India, in order to embrace the English culture adopted here in England. His choice to divorce his first wife, Karim’s mother, and his love for Eva, could be interpreted as revealing his desire to change

and seek a new identity. Karim inherits his restlessness from his father, perhaps; but he seems to share with his Indian-born genitor that balance which consists in accepting the identity of origin while accommodating other identities. Like his father's, Karim's restlessness stems from his wavering between cultures and identities.

Karim's restlessness, associated with the postcolonial dynamic quest for a meaning to identity, is to be found in Anita Desai's novel *Fire On the Mountain*; it is incarnated by the little wild girl Raka who stands for revolt against the past, as personified by her great-grand-mother, the heroine of the novel. Raka, who allegorically represents the new generation of Indians struggling to overcome the sense of loss in a rapidly changing world, could be thought of as reminiscent of Okwonko's inner energy which ends in tragedy at the close of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The same inner energy is to be found in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* where the hero's sexual dynamism betrays his restless strive to come to terms with his being trapped between cultures and identities.

Like Karim and Raka, Okwonko faces a crisis of identity, a crisis that fictional characters at times tend to resolve in violence. Karim's depression and "self hatred" make him desire "to mutilate himself with broken bottles" in Kureishi's *Bhudda of Suburbia* (249–50).

All the same, my depression and self hatred, my desire to mutilate myself with broken bottles, and numbness and crying fits, my inability to get out of bed for days and days, the feeling of the world moving in to crush me, went on and on. But I knew I wouldn't go mad, even if that letting-go was a freedom I desired. I was waiting for myself to heal. I began to wonder why I was so strong – what it was that held me together. I thought that it was that I'd inherited from Dad a strong survival instinct. (249–50)²

Okwonko commits suicide at the end of Achebe's novel, and Raka, at the close of Anita Desai's narrative, mysteriously sets a fire in the forest, destroying the local landscape which is part of the heroine's roots and identity. Fire as a destructive element is closely associated with the identity crisis from which the heroine suffers in *The Wide Saragasso Sea*. This narrative reeks with violence as Antoinette struggles against insanity and alienation, allowing the Caribbean writer Jean Rhys to delve into a profound investigation into postcolonial identity. The final descent of the "mad woman in the attic" with a candle in her hand, ready to set the whole house on fire, dramatises the violent inner struggle to apprehend identity.

In Tayeb Salih's novel, *Season of Migration to the North*, Mustapha Saeed, a typical postcolonial hero, drowns himself in the Nile in a final desperate attempt to resolve his identity crisis. Salih's postcolonial narrative is permeated with violence which characterises the hero's sexual relationships with his female victims. Such a silent sort of violence culminates in his final submission "to the destructive forces of the river" (168). His drowning marks the end of his innermost identity conflict between the oriental components of his Arab identity and the acquired occidental parts of his personality; the western part of his identity is personified by the European women he seeks to conquer, driven by the desire to embrace the Other's identity.

² The same survival instinct is a central issue for Margaret Atwood as her well-known *Survival* (1972) testifies.

Violence also reigns in Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game*, a recent novel where the civil war in Lebanon provides the canvas on which the author's brush attempts to render the crisis of personal and collective identities in a postcolonial country. Bassam and George, the heroes of the novel, embody the struggle to cope with their multiple identities in a world endangered by political, cultural and religious hatred between communities.

As the hero of Kureishi's novel suggests, it is probably "the odd mixture" of cultures and sensibilities – the multiplicity of selves – that make these postcolonial characters "restless". But the restlessness, if thought of as a characteristic feature of the multiple postcolonial self, enacts a dynamic process of self-interrogation, a process that expresses itself in violence, at times, but it imposes itself as revealing the effort made in order to adjust to a rapidly-changing world.

The restlessness, which is not unrelated to violence in the above-mentioned novels, should be interpreted as signs connected to the crisis of identity faced by the characters in postcolonial fiction; but violence could be perceived as a manifestation of madness, and madness, namely the insanity associated with a number of characters, is revolt, a process of questioning which raises disturbing questions. Madness, which is a form of violence, enacts a process of self-interrogation, putting into question the fixity of meaning that the self may seek to reach in its struggle to apprehend identity.

Madness may manifest itself in the form of schizophrenia which could function as a deconstructive mode of interrogation, an incessant process of questioning identity. Gilles Deleuze perceives schizophrenia as "a line of flight", a sort of escape from "the enclosed and stratified systems of authoritarian thought" (Edgar and Sedgwick 2002, 40). Schizophrenia in the Deleuzian sense is a sort of revolutionary attitude in its rejection of authoritarianism, and it could also be approached, not as mental illness, but rather as a creative process and a productive movement. As a productive and creative process, schizophrenia, which becomes a critical mode, opens onto an incommensurable space of numerous possibilities, variations and potentials of signification.³ It is in this light that the postcolonial approach to the concept of identity may be considered under Deleuze's perception of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia, as a creative and dynamic process, should be compared to the interrogative movement inherent in identity as a process of self-questioning. If identity can be thought of as a "third space", an interstitial universe of border-crossings and numerous possibilities, one may be tempted to suggest that identity as a process of self-questioning is a schizophrenic movement perpetually raising an unlimited number of interrogations. The restlessness mentioned above, as characterising a number of postcolonial characters, could be viewed thus as a sign of schizophrenia in its interpretation as a dynamic process related to the deconstructive investigation into identity.

³ » La schizophrénie est présentée comme un mode théorique et critique (...) Il ne faudrait voir ici aucune apologie de la folie, ni aucune recommandation de passer par l'expérimentation d'états pathologiques. Deleuze et Guattari prennent soin de distinguer la schizophrénie comme production, mouvement et processus, de la schizophrénie comme pathologie... « (Bouaniche 2007, 156). « Deleuze et Guattari abordent ainsi la schizophrénie comme la manifestation de virtualités exceptionnelles », de « forces nouvelles », « ni saines, ni morbides », mais qui renouent avec un certain « élément vital » que nous ne voyons pas ordinairement, et auquel la psychanalyse reste totalement aveugle (ibid., 157). « En outre, l'expérience schizophrénique balaie la conception classique de l'expérience structurée autour d'un sujet et d'un objet, d'une conscience et d'un monde, pour nous ouvrir un univers d'intensités, de devenirs, de franchissements de seuils, de variations de potentiel, de migrations, autant d'éléments qui constituent un ordre intensif qui déborde de toutes parts l'ordre de la représentation l'intérieur duquel la psychanalyse et la philosophie restent le plus souvent enfermées (ibid., 157).

4. Deconstructing identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

In the end of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the heroine undergoes a strange experience that could be considered as a fit of insanity. After the discovery of the body of her father who has been reported missing in the forest, the narrator-character ends her journey (which structures her narrative) by performing a bodily merging with the natural environment. She, who suffers from a deep sense of loss and estrangement, feels that she is undergoing a physical metamorphosis, turning her into something as yet unknown, something hybrid, conflating the human, the animal and the environmental. "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (175). Her body is depicted as undergoing a process of transformation, making her dissolve gradually into the natural elements, turning her into a living creature that identifies with the prehistoric inhabitants of Canada. "I stay on the bank, resting, licking the scratches; no fur yet on my skin" (180). This metamorphosis marks the final stage of her trip back to the place of her childhood, looking for her lost father who represents her individual and collective identities: her personal identity and her Canadian identity. This mystic experience, this madness, occurs at the end as the climax of the protagonist's quest, culminating in the discovery of her own Self. The individual self is deeply rooted in the collective identity; the heroine returns to her Canadian origins which stretch back to the country's primitive history. The heroine identifies with her father who drowns while contemplating prehistoric inscriptions on a rock by the lake. In her madness, which is a complete effacement of otherness, the heroine seems to be merging with the place of her personal and collective origin, invoking the sacred space of primitive gods and old local beliefs. "I invoked it, the fur god with tail and horns, already forming. The mothers of gods..." (175).

Her mystic journey back into the personal and collective past is also a journey into the future. Her metamorphosis marks the birth of a new identity, but this new identity is pluralistic; it is a hybrid identity. Her newly-born identity is to be situated in an ambivalent interstitial space, an in-between world where otherness is effaced. Her madness is a world of freedom; it allows her to cross the borders by turning into a hybrid Self, half-male, half-female; half-human, half-animal. Such hybrid self transcends the boundaries between humans, animals and environment. The fluid imagery the author implements to render the heroine's bodily metamorphosis contributes actively to the creation of an atmosphere of transparency. Fluid imagery and transparency reflect the fluidity of the protagonist's identity.

If the father is a symbol of identity, the heroine's genitor is to be considered in this novel as a great symbol of fluidity; he transcends death and returns as a ghostly presence capable of taking any shape imaginable.

I say Father.

He turns towards me and it's not my father. It is what my father saw, the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone. (...)

I am part of the landscape; I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock.

I see now that although it isn't my father it is what my father has become. I knew he wasn't dead.

From the lake a fish jumps

An idea of a fish jumps

A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to the water. How many shapes can he take. (180–1)

The complete effacement of borders in the experience of madness – the space and time compression that Mark Currie uses to define schizophrenia (Currie 1998, 103)⁴ – allows the protagonist to identify with her dead father. She becomes like him, an ethereal, fluid being, wavering between absence and presence, between here and there; between the visible and the intangible, between life and death, between sameness and difference. In her fit of insanity, the heroine in *Surfacing* undergoes a process of “space and time compression” through which she reveals her schizophrenic merging into something other than herself. She becomes a multiple-self being whose schizophrenia or hybridity – if we adopt hybridity as a form of schizophrenia – rehabilitates her as an “interpreter”, to put it in Mark Currie’s words, an interpreter who aims to destabilise meaning (ibid., 103). The world for Margaret Atwood’s heroine becomes “a theatre of signs and discourses which cannot exclude each other and which constitute a babble of voices” (ibid., 103). The new pluralistic identity that the narrator has embraced in the end of the novel grants her the ability to speak through a multiplicity of voices. Speaking the unspeakable, her voice indirectly expresses concerns on behalf of all the oppressed women, all the primitive native Canadians, and, among other things, all the citizens suffering from the oppressive urban capitalist system.

5. Concluding remarks

Surfacing dramatises Atwood’s way of constructing a third identity which raises an infinite number of interrogations about the boundaries between what is traditionally deemed as male and female, human and animal, self and other. Like *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Fire on the Mountain*, *The Wide Saragasso Sea*, *Season of Migration to the North*, or *De Niro’s Game*, *Surfacing* illustrates the way postcolonial fiction offers to deconstruct the concept of identity whose ambivalence remains open to any re-imaginable interpretation. Postcolonial fiction is an ambivalent text that offers a fertile terrain for the never-ending investigation into the third space of identity. Founded on the concept of difference, identity opens onto otherness which reveals itself as a process of signification that feeds on ambivalence and interpretation, calling for perpetual destabilisation of meaning.

With the destabilisation of cultural frontiers between nations, identity emerges as a philosophical challenge. Without offering possibilities of reaching definite answers, identity, as a process of interrogation, will continue to raise questions about the self in its incessant efforts to apprehend the unattainable other. Postcolonial fiction invites us to believe that in our attempts to answer

⁴ Mark Currie discusses the Lacanian definition of schizophrenia as “a kind of linguistic disorder”, resulting in “a different way of construing reality and experience” (Currie 1998, 102). Seen as a split or “disunity in the personality,” schizophrenia is dealt with as a “breakdown in the temporal chain of signification” (ibid., 102–3). Mark Currie accounts for this schizophrenic disunity as being connected with the “inability to sustain the linearity of things” (ibid., 103). This inability to sustain the linearity of things results in ‘space and time compression’.

questions about our relations with others, and no matter what new directions may the concept of identity take in the future, what matters most is perhaps the balance that should be sought for in order to avoid all forms of fixity of meaning that characterise essentialist thinking.

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