

The counter-discursive young and their oscillation between culture inherited and culture acquired in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*.

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Abstract

V. S. Naipaul and Amitav Ghosh, two brilliant diasporic Indian writers belong to two extreme poles in regard to their views on the socio-cultural aspects and analysis of a nation/society through the postcolonial discourse. But, quite surprisingly, when it comes to the portrayals of the generations of characters in search of their home/nation, both these novelists offer a similar host of characters where the older generation represents an illusion of the stability of a culture/nationhood while the young appear to be counter-discursive and perpetually belonging to an oscillation between the culture they inherited and the culture that they adopted. Through a postcolonial survey of two representative novels by these two stalwarts, this article attempts to look into the elusive sense of belonging to a culture/community/nationhood that the characters across the generations, representatives of the modern and postmodern fragmented selves, face.

Keywords: Creole; cultural affiliation; inherited culture; cultural interpenetration; acculturation; cultural continuum; nationhood; borderlines; counter-discursive; interstitial

borderlands; de- and re-territorialization of culture; cultural affiliations; community; liminal space; interstitial environment.

Introduction

“Is the project of recovering the ‘subaltern’ best served by locating her separateness from dominant culture, or by highlighting the extent to which she moulded even those processes and cultures which subjugated her?” (Loomba, 2007:193) This query raised by Loomba can aptly introduce the tension between the cultures that the protagonists in *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Shadow Lines* confront in their narratives. The early times to which the settings of both *A House for Mr Biswas* by V. S. Naipaul and *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh are extended are usually regarded as a time when the social, cultural, and political role of an individual in the society was clearly prescribed without any ambiguities. The pre-partition East Bengal, where the affluent joint family of Tha'mma, the unnamed narrator's grandmother in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, lived, therefore is presented as having a culturally stable society distinguished by security, definite role-playing and strict discipline in the stories of her childhood days that Tha'mma narrates to her grandson.

It is only later, however, that we find the joint family breaking down following the death of the family patriarch and Tha'mma experiencing the first moments of cultural disintegration in her life that her juvenile mind smoothes away by believing in a childish differentiation between the ‘us’—her immediate family—and the ‘strange others’—her

estranged uncle's family. Quite ironically, she does not even realize when she starts administering this childhood concept of borderlines of hers to the biggest cultural-political issue in her life ever—the concept of nationhood. But this is also where, as we might say, the act of “‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of the extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.” (Bhaba, 1994:13)

However, her life in East Bengal is also remembered by her as the time when her young soul was drawn towards the patriotic zeal of the militant nationalism of the day while her free spirit rebelled against the social and cultural restrictions she faced such as being excluded from the active, militant process of making an independent nation for being a woman. Though later in life, both within the confines of her family and in her vocation as a school teacher, she proves to be as strict a disciplinarian as her late grandfather was, she also appears much different from her own people as compared to her sister, Mayadevi. Tha'mma acquires a culture, quite distinct from the one she inherited, during her passionate process of nation-making that sets her apart from others, as her grandson discovers and admits: “she was only a modern middle-class woman—though not wholly, for she would not permit herself the self-deceptions that make up the fantasy world of that kind of person” (Ghosh, 1988:78).

Naipaul's Mr Biswas, being born in the Creole world of the West Indies of parents both Indian migrants, inherits a culture that, because it is already in danger of losing its significance to the people concerned, tries to be so stable that it becomes stagnant. This is reflected in the regular assembly of the old Indian expatriates at the Hanuman House in Arwacas: “They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they

lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness” (Naipaul, 1961:201).

But as Bhaba suggests, “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres” (Bhaba, 1994:13). Mr Biswas, therefore, enjoys quite a cosmopolitan culture in his childhood with his early school experiences, his Christian friend Alec, a convert Christian like Mr Lal as his teacher, and an unorthodox Hindu family like that of Bhandat. But that the traditional Hindu culture has started growing absurdities into the migrant’s subjectivity becomes clear to Mr Biswas in his very childhood, “he was respected as a Brahmin and pampered; yet as soon as the ceremony was over and he had taken his gift of money and cloth and left, he became once more only a labourer’s son. . . . And throughout life his position was like that” (Naipaul, 1961:47-8). And therefore, though it is this caste standing of his that gives him the most easily available status and prestige among the Hindu community in Trinidad, he finds it a superficial and stifling alternative to his search for a dignified life for himself and refuses to adhere to this cultural aspect of his society.

He thereafter becomes a sign-painter and steadily becomes branded as an atheist and rebel. His lifelong relationship with the Tulsi clan again brings out his disagreement over the cultural ambiguities of the migrant Hindu society in Trinidad. But as it appears, the Tulsi clan, regarded as the cultural preserver of the Hindu community by the local people of Arwacas, might also have appeared as the ‘strange other’ side beyond Tha’mma’s

borderline of 'us', in this case beyond the mainstream Hindu culture in India to Mr Biswas. The Tulsi clan contains reverse images of the mainstream Hindu culture in its being ruled by a matriarch, the sons-in-laws being absorbed in their wives' family and suffering the loss of identity that married women suffer in mainstream Hindu culture, the sons being sent to their marital homes, the widowed daughters being treated equally with or at times even better than the married daughters in the house and so on.

But as with Tha'mma's border/shadow lines in Ghosh's novel, this inverted image becomes as stifling to the culturally misfit self in Naipaul's novel, and we find Mr Biswas openly defying and negating the Tulsidom, though unlike Tha'mma he does not get the scope to pause and marvel at his achievement early in life. Tha'mma, on the other hand, content and proud at her nation making through her command over her school and her family finds time enough to unknowingly be absorbed into those cultural offshoots of her society that she would have hated in her youth, such as gradually becoming a traditionally dominating and intruding mother-in-law who denies her daughter-in-law any role except that of the homemaker.

But early or late in life, that cultural indoctrinations are hard to get rid off becomes clear when we find that "Mr Biswas's Hindu instincts didn't permit him stock lard" (ibid.:175) in his shop. Mr Biswas, however, continually struggling against every possible odd to carve out a dignified identity for himself, to some extent retains the rebellious strain of his youth till his death against the cultural impositions on an individual that deny him freedom. But at the same time, even though he spends his whole life fighting the cultural indoctrination of the Tulsi clan, it cannot be denied that the Tulsi

family also proves to be a unitary community that provides security and shelter to every member of it—even to the disruptive Mr Biswas.

And may be that, coupled with the unhappy instance of Mr Biswas's cultural isolation, is why the vulnerable younger generation—the numerous children at the Tulsi household including Mr Biswas's own children—try their best to conform to the cultural impositions at the Hanuman House. Even Anand, Mr Biswas's young son and companion in his counterculture, becomes attracted towards the Hindu cultural activities like other children at the Hanuman House though not because of their pomp, play acting aspects, and their offering a sense of belonging to a larger community but simply because of the practical advantages that these could provide him with. He, for example, pursues his father to let him undergo the brahminical initiation primarily because it ensured a shaved head, and a shaved head in turn ensured a long, compulsory holiday from his Christian school.

However, though Mr Biswas discards the Hindu customs and beliefs in his early youth even without having an alternative, well-defined cultural resource to belong to, the younger generation in the novel appears to be provided with an attractive choice—the Western culture. Owad, Mrs Tulsi's young son, goes for medical studies to England and returns completely westernized. His stamp of approval on the superiority of Western culture leads the whole Tulsi household too to hold it in high esteem to the extent to prepare for a communist revolution in the Russian style in Trinidad.

There are other similar examples like the account of Anand's initiation into the Western culture that present the transition of the younger generation from the inherited culture to the adopted one in a significant way. After coming to the urban city of Port of

Spain following the lure of ‘real icecream and Coca Cola’, Anand’s reaction to his first taste of these things—“It don’t taste like icecream at all”, “It is like horse pee”[Coca Cola]—are prompted by his life at Hanuman House in rural Arwacas. But then the process of initiation takes over, “‘Anand!’ Mr Biswas said, smiling at the man behind the counter. ‘You’ve got to stop talking like that. You are in Port of Spain now’ (ibid.:353). This particular account might also remind us of the narrator’s initiation into the mysterious adult world by his father in *The Shadow Lines*, “You’re growing up now, you’re a big boy, and you have to understand that there are things grown-ups don’t talk about” (Ghosh, 1988:239).

As Bhaba finds that Naipaul’s “characters made their way in the world while acknowledging its fragmented structures, its split imperatives, and a prevailing sense of a loss of cultural authority” (Bhaba, 1994:xii), we too find that it is particularly Mr Biswas who tries to ensure that his children, especially Anand, break free from their ancestral culture that has become too retrogressive to be relevant to their present and future life. Even in his own case, the culture he inherited left him with no higher possible glory than that of a Brahmin pundit, while it was the Creole culture, leaning towards the Western model that helped him with the status of a journalist in an English newspaper that he regarded more prestigious and suitable to his literary inclination and modern outlook. And in this regard, the delineation of the heroes and heroines in Mr Biswas’s short stories can be regarded as the offshoots of his dilemma with the transference of his cultural affiliation: “Sometimes his hero had a Hindi name; then he was short and unattractive and poor, and surrounded by ugliness, which was anatomized in bitter detail. Sometimes his hero had a Western name; he was then faceless, but tall and broad-shouldered: he was a

reporter and moved in a world derived from the novels Mr Biswas had read and the films he had seen” (Naipaul, 1961:362).

In the same way, his Western heroine, Sybil, is “slim, almost thin, and dressed in white. She is fresh, tender, unknissed; and she is unable to bear children” whereas his Indian heroine, Ratni, a mother of four, “walked heavily, ‘as though perpetually pregnant’; her arms filled the sleeves of her bodice and seemed about to burst them; she sucked in her breath through her teeth while she worked at her accounts, the only reading and writing she did” (ibid.:363-4).

Anand too faces this war between cultures at an early age when still in school where while playing a quiz among the boys about the way they addressed their parents in, “Anand, wishing only to debase himself, lied and said, ‘Bap and Mai,’ and was duly derided; while Vidiadhar, shrewd despite his short stay at the school, unhesitatingly said, ‘Mummy and Daddy.’ For these boys, who called their parents Ma and Pa, who all came from homes where the sudden flow of American dollars had unleashed ambition, push and uncertainty, these boys had begun to take their English compositions very seriously: their Daddies worked in offices, and at week-ends Daddy and Mummy took them in cars to the seaside, with laden hampers” (ibid.:465).

But this cultural interpenetration is also brought out by Naipaul at times with his characteristic touch of wry humour, such as when Govind, Vidiadhar’s father, beats up Chinta, Vidiadhar’s mother, at the Hanuman House, “ Anand came running on tiptoe into Mr Biswas’s room and whispered joyfully, ‘Daddy is beating Mummy.’ . . . Her beatings gave Chinta a matriarchal dignity and curiously, gained her a respect she never had

before. They had the subsidiary effects of quelling her children, killing her song, and rousing her to cultural rivalry” (ibid.:488).

And in this disarray, where, unlike Mr Biswas, Anand finds a great many accompanying him in the rush to get affiliated to the Western cultural standards, in desperation to escape his inherited culture—attenuated and stagnant—Anand equates it with his embattled and jaded father (Mr Biswas did the same with his mother, Bipti, when he was of Anand’s age) and even fails to be present at his last moments. Anand’s unuttered anguish at his own betrayal might be reflected, partly if not entirely, by the grieving words of the unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Lines* who was not even informed of his grandmother’s death at house because of his examinations, “she had always been too passionate a person to find a real place in my tidy late-bourgeois world, the world that I had inherited, in which examinations were more important than death” (Ghosh, 1988:92). The narrator, as he realizes here, belongs to a different nation created by the likes of his parents where the cultural context of Tha’mma’s nationhood had lost its relevance long ago.

But as Said points out, “the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable” (Said, 1994:261), in *The Shadow lines* Ila, as part of a globe-trotting family, experiences the cultural interpenetration in a different way. She occasionally visits her extended family in Calcutta and fascinates her cousin, the unnamed narrator in the novel, with her westernized attires and behaviour. But as we come to realize later, her acculturation in the West is accompanied by the humiliating experiences she faces there as an Indian such as being avoided by Nick, the white English boy she is drawn towards since her childhood, in her school days. But she fabricates

several stories to convince her cousin in India of her acceptance in the dominant Western culture as a beautiful and popular young girl. And later, as a young woman, she also boasts of her numerous boyfriends to her cousin as if in defiance of the conservative Indian culture that she however does not find of significance enough to belong to. It is as if her words are creating/destroying a world in itself—“It is in the language that the curious tension of cultural ‘revelation’ and cultural ‘silence’ is most evident” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989:58).

Robi, on the other hand, appears a very much Indian unlike Ila in his beliefs and practices, though they never reach the notional opposite ends of the cultural continuum that they share. He has a far more flexible view than Tha'mma regarding the concept of nationhood, but he has a fixed set of cultural standards that he consciously practices. He promptly and effectively resists when someone stronger attempts to bully him, but he also believes that “a rule’s rule”; he secretly drinks in his hostel with his friends, but he hates to drink in a nightclub with his adult niece and nephew. When Ila, in defiance of his dictates, behaves in a manner inappropriate according to him, he intervenes violently because, as he says to her, “You can do what you like in England But here [in Calcutta, India] there are certain things you cannot do. That’s our culture; that’s how we live” (Ghosh, 1988:88). Ila, trapped between the values of the culture she inherits and of the one she adopts, hits back at her uncle and cousin, “Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free....Free of *you*....Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (ibid.:88-9).

But quite ironically, just like Tha'mma, with whom she shares a mutual dislike and who fails to devise an exemplary nationhood as she dreamt of; Ila too fails to build a free

world for herself. London, the place she admires because it is not like India with a ‘bloody culture’ where nothing important happens, proves to be a place that actually never accepts her in the fold in spite of her devotion to its culture and politics. Her housemates, with whom she hopes to share a ‘collective political life’, nevertheless “seemed to regard her as a kind of guest, a decoration almost” and it was clear that “they had made their decisions long ago before they asked her for her opinion” (ibid.:97). Even Nick, her English husband, fails to help her with the construction of her free world. His adultery and her helpless acceptance of this truth rather points to the fact of her being as bound by a sense of insecurity if not by the impositions by her inherited culture.

Consequently we find her denying Nick’s adultery in the same vein in which she had condemned her inherited culture. Besides, that she has not discarded her ‘Indian’ values altogether is reflected by her admission to her cousin that a sexually liberal, Western life that she painted of herself to him was actually all made up by her, “I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I’m about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you’ll ever meet” (ibid.:188). But by this time Ila has lost her eligibility to belong to Tha’mma’s ideal nationhood for her living in a country (England) where she does not belong to and also, in Tha’mma’s words, for “her hair cut short, like the bristles on a toothbrush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore” (ibid.:80).

Even Robi, Tha’mma’s most favourite heir to her nationhood, discards this inheritance of strict borderlines drawn by blood following his memories of a riot in Bangladesh that claimed his brother’s life and his experiences as an administrator in a free country—India—troubled by separatist insurgency. When his host in a Bangladeshi restaurant in

London boasts of his national culture in Bangladesh—“they’re so hospitable, they’ll take you straight into their houses”—Robi severely contrasts this hospitable image with his own account of the place where his brother was killed by a hysterical mob. Later we find him wondering, much against the concept of the rigid borderlines of Tha’mma, “why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change?” (ibid.:247)

Besides these cross-cultural contexts in the lives of these counter-discursive young members of society, there also remain other elements that determine the nature and origin of this apparent opposition between the inherited culture and the acquired one in them. The ‘deterritorialization’ of culture, to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s term, (Bose, 2003:20)—where a culture ceases to have a coherent and distinct identity and reaches beyond its defined territory—remains another important aspect in indicating the interstitial borderlands that discourage an essentialist approach to culture in these young architects of nationhood and culture.

Whereas the elements of de- and re-territorialization in Tha’mma’s case create instability in cultural affiliations, in Mr Biswas it is the other way round. His instability in cultural affiliations with the traditional Hinduism of the Tulsi clan results in his de-territorialization, metaphorically, if not literally, expressed in his search of a house of his own. Ila and Anand too follow the example of Mr Biswas, though in their case their de- and re-territorialization is actual, not metaphorical. They both decide to live in London trying to adjust to an adopted culture—an acquired notion of Englishness—while at home their elders struggle at building a nation/house. In another sense they all represent the a group of migrants who “are vernacular cosmopolitans of a kind, moving in-between

cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language” (Bhaba, 1994:xiii).

Conclusion

At the end of everything, as it also comes out, while exerting themselves thus, Tha'mma loses her place of birth in her search of a nation and Mr Biswas loses his community in his search of a home thereby leaving behind the question whether in the larger context, this loss of the elder architects of place and culture foreshadow a cultural predicament of the young, of Anand and Ila too. They all have been, are and perhaps will be striving to be free from some or other elements in their inherited cultures—submission, restrictions, ambiguities, regression, impositions, violence, inapplicability—and thereby will forever try to reach the ‘liminal space’, ‘an interstitial environment’ (Thieme, 2003:144), to create a perfect balance between their inherited culture and the adopted one to originate a meaningful cultural discourse.

The unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Lines* may lend us his words again to highlight the counter-discursive nature of the cultural revolt of these young protagonists: “You can never be free of me.... If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because *I am within you...* just as you are within me” (Ghosh, 1988:89) and the dilemma of these young souls caught in this precarious balancing act as well as a possible alternative: “I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound: whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me” (ibid.:89).

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