PROJECTIONS OF OTHERNESS IN INDIAN DIASPORIC WRITING

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Abstract

The given paper focuses on the concept of otherness and its representation in the works of contemporary Indian-origin UK-based writers Amit Chaudhuri, Neel Mukherjee and Mirza Waheed. In the modern globalized world literature's universalistic perspective is of a vital importance and centers around transnational experiences of the main characters. The feeling of the so-called otherness plays a key role in the novels "Afternoon Raag", "Odysseus Abroad", "A Life Apart" and "The Collaborator" and challenges the conventional understanding of identity and belonging present in Indian diasporic writing. The works of the authors discussed in the paper demonstrate that the concept of otherness has undergone changes and evolved into a complex multi-layered notion and is no longer only about the Post-Colonial "Other", but also about feeling one's otherness at home, in India.

Key words: *Indian diasporic writing, otherness, the Other, Transnationalism*

The given work focuses on the ways how contemporary Indian diasporic writers depict otherness in their works. Traditionally the condition of otherness is shown through the lens of being the so-called Other and goes hand in hand with such notions as Colonialism, Post-colonialism and more recently Transnationalism. Spivak (1985) argues that the concept of being the Other is related to the knowledge that the colonizer is forcing onto the colonized. It is more discrete than what she calls "naked repression" (1985:133), but at the same time compels the colonized "to domesticate the alien as Master, a process generating the force to make the native see himself as "other" (ibid.). The colonized lose the knowledge of self, instead they are left with the knowledge fabricated by the so-called masters according to which their ideology is the only existing truth and stands on a much higher position, thus gaining dominance not only territory-wise, but also in terms of identity, culture, history and voice of the colonized nation.

The colonized become objectivised which is well illustrated by E. Said in his seminal work "Orientalism" (1978) by pointing out the way the Orient was used in the Western world: "Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical these about mankind and the universe, for instance of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character" (1978, 7-8). That certain representation of the above-mentioned "complex Orient" shaped what some researchers call "the Western gaze, that is "a hegemonic Eurocentric perspective (that) subjectifies and objectifies all that it sees in its own image, through its own coloured lenses, and from its own position of power" (Burney, 2012:26). The Other is viewed both as a primitive and savage creature that is strikingly undeveloped and inferior in all possible ways to the highly refined Western man. It is not surprising that after such a long time of this one-sided Western perspective people from the formerly colonized countries can still feel as the Other.

In the Post-colonial world the reader hears all kinds of voices. Authors write about their experiences, the Post-colonial struggles of their nations and countries, writers create "different versions of reality, […] recognize and appreciate difference and to reflect upon their own ways of being in the world and […] ask questions about who has power, who has voice" (Hawley, 2001:29). As a result, over the years there has sprung a strong Indian diasporic representation among the most acclaimed contemporary writers. The modern globalized world has witnessed a boom of the transnational voices in Anglophone literature. The given article focuses on the works written by the three Indian-origin transnational writers currently living in the UK Amit Chaudhuri, Neel Mukherjee and Mirza Waheed. The works of these authors transcend national boundaries and show the world what it means to be looked at as the Other.

Their experience of living both in India and the UK definitely has facilitated their dwelling upon the topic of otherness and the different layers this concept contains.

In the novels *Afternoon Raag* and *Odysseus Abroad* written by Amit Chaudhuri the protagonists live and study in England, but still they feel their otherness, not belonging to the place; they feel lonely and homesick. They crave everything Indian while they are away from home. In both the novels the authors pay a lot of attention to the feelings and inner voices of the protagonists, their sufferings and sorrows connected to being away from their homeland. Both of the characters look forward to their move, but once in England, feel trapped and alone. The open transnational English society is claustrophobic and suffocating for them. For instance, in *The Afternoon Raag* the hero tries to integrate into the local society, but realises it is impossible. The author underlines this fact by giving the title of the novel in which he introduces one Indian word *Raag*. As the main character lives in Oxford the reader gets to know some bits about the life of students studying there: "Yet the students do not really matter, because within the college walls there is a world - a geography and a weather – that clings to its own time and definition and is changed by no one. In this world, glimpsed briefly by the passer-by through the open doorway, a certain light and space and greyness of stone, and at night, a certain balance of lamplight, stone, and darkness, co-exist almost eternally, and it is the students, with their nationalities and individual features, their different voices and accents, their different habits and attempts at adjustment, their sense of bathos and possession of reality, who, in truth, vanish, are strangely negated, so that, when the passer-by later remembers what he saw, the students seem blurred, colourful, accidental, even touching, but constantly skirting the edge of his vision." (p.101) All of these dormitory residents are foreign students who are, on the one hand, together in being different from the locals and, on the other hand, separated by their diverse nationalities, thus creating a kind of double isolation.

Their otherness is manifested in everything, even in the way they speak English, one of the things that unites all of them: "…Yet his accent, I soon learnt, was never to be silenced completely; it was himself, and however he trained himself to imitate the sounds of English speech, 'toilet', when he pronounced it, would always have the faint but unmistakable and intimate and fortunate hint of 'twilit.' (p.15) "His first two years – at university and out of it – had been painful. Firstly, there was the civilisation itself, with its language – a language only secondarily his -its zebra crossings… He felt terribly excluded. Or chose to be excluded; it gave his drift and insignificance meaning in his own eyes." (p.49) The protagonist's train of thought is exposed to the reader and the reader feels Ananda's sufferings and disappointment at being Other, something he has never expected.

Being the Other he is almost without any friends, on his own and present is interwoven with his memories about his home in India. Generally representation of home becomes highly fictionalized, viewed through a lens of nostalgia "Then I would miss the special feeling of mornings at home, I would think benignly of my mother's good health…" (p.20) In this case Home does not exist as" an actual place", but as "a space one invents for oneself" (Shackleton, 2008). Again otherness is a source of being homesick and raags are important for him to bridge the gap between India and England. His friend Sharma is also a student and they communicate quite often. "Sharma wished to understand the European mind, and nowhere so clearly and accessibly was Western culture contained as in books, and it was these books – Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, The Norton *Anthology of English Literature*, Collin's *Thesaurus, One Hundred Years of Solitude* – that were placed on Sharma's bookshelf." (p.172)

In *Odysseus Abroad* Amit Chaudhuri writes about another Indian who lives and studies in London. He has tight connections with his home in India. Ananda compares India with England a lot and very often he thinks of otherness in England. Quite many things are different, even cities:" How is that our cities are so different? How come I'm so little prepared for here?" (p.11) The author underlines the fact that being a multinational country England is particular about otherness of the nationalities living in it. "England and its tongue refused to rub off on the staff of London's nationalities. (pp.16-17) While in London, being other by origin, paying a lot of attention to polish up his English which he knows in an excellent way, it dawns on him that he is still other and will always be. "Still, none of these compared, in their undermining, of the stripping of his identity itself. None of the things that defined him -that he was a modern Bengali and Indian, with a cursory but proud knowledge of Bengali literature; that he wrote in English, and had spoken it much of his life; that he used to be served lettuce sandwiches as a

teatime snack as a child; that in his early teenage years he'd subsisted on a diet of Agatha Christie and Earl Stanley Gardner; that he'd developed a taste of corduroys over jeans recently – almost none of this counted for anything in London, since everyone here spoke English, ate sandwiches, they wore jeans or corduroys. In this way his identity had been taken away from him." (pp.17-18). There is a distinct feeling of unrootedness. All the things he was sure about in the past are no longer as clear as they were and from this new perspective even his homeland seems different, it is "no longer a closed familiar place, but an open system, a dialectic sphere that uses the image of crossroads — you can move backwards and forwards, there is no beginning or end and also, no home to go back to." (Zhang, 2004) In both novels Amit Chaudhuri emphasizes the fact that the protagonists do not feel that they belong to the place they currently reside in, but does it mean that if they come back to India, they will fully belong to their homeland again? Definitely not. The identity that, as it is written, "had been taken away from him" is developing into something different and with the help of the new experiences "molding in a transnational identity" (Schultermandl and Toplu, 2010:22).

A Life Apart by Neel Mukherjee is a strikingly painful novel in which the reader suffers alongside with the main character Ritwik Ghosh who experiences being the Other both in India and the UK.

First of all, he is constantly beaten by his mother for any kind of error. Often does he remember her and her manner of disciplining him: "The firely flowers bloomed rapidly across his legs his thighs his back his scalp, now all one clarifying tingle of pain, and his hairs took life in rising to attention to this rain of weals. Maybe he was sobbing maybe crying *please spare me spare me I'll never do it again never again never stop* but this was not just any rain of fire, it was a deluge, which didn't know when to stop, until she put an end to it and instead she started kicking his head his stomach his chest then stood on him with her fierce weight of fury. He felt choked and air air was all he wanted to breathe in, air in, not this hollow of nothing of craving to inhale; then there is only dark, only a saving obliterating blackness..." (pp.47-48) Despite that he does not necessarily remember this and many other distressing moments with horror. He feels nostalgic for those times – everything was simple and familiar when he was a child and the physical pain that he felt then cannot be compared with the moral struggles to adjust to the new life.

He is given a lifetime chance to study in a prestigious university, but he feels his otherness strongly. "The first meeting with his tutor and his group had induced a similar feeling of distance" (p.42) Even his name was Other." Peter gave a polite wow and repeated his name a few times. "Ritwik, Ritwik. Is that a common name from where you come?" "No, not really, but it's not unusual." "It's very unusual to my ears", he smiled (p.43) The author sympathises with the young man when having no support from anyone and feeling lonely in this world he cannot get a permission to stay in the UK and finds himself on the bottom where it is dangerous and suspicious to speak good English. Because of his otherness he has to hide his education.

Another major issue touched upon in the novel is being the Other in India due to being homosexual. India is one of the countries where homosexuality is not discussed very openly. Till this day many of the homosexual men are pressured by their families into arranges marriages where the brides have no idea about the situation. Ritwik chooses a different path and decides that studies abroad would bring him the desired freedom to be himself openly, "…even to be a new person. Maybe" (ibid.). Despite that he soon finds out that having one-night-stands is much more complicated and dangerous in London than in the close, mostly still in the closet gay community in India: "It has its unerring, delicious shiver as always, but also an inchoate fear of the unknown: who knows, this is not Calcutta, this is the country of psychopathic serial killers, of thousands of AIDS-infected people, of twisted criminals the papers write about almost every day. What if he is one of those?" (p.49) Sadly the protagonist's fears are not without any ground. His late-night rendezvous with men are the reason he is killed: "In an instant they are on him…They kick him while he is lying down, random kicks, aimed nowhere in particular…There is one on his ribs that takes all his breath away; try how hard he may, he cannot breathe anymore. As he chokes, he feels little popping explosions of light, a thousand lights, of dull, unnameable colour, behind his eyes." (p.396). He is killed with a knife for his otherness "…and his thin blood trickles out onto this dark corner of a back street that will be forever England." (p.397).

Mirza Waheed touches upon the same topic – being the Other at home – in the novel *The Collaborator*. The author depicts the 1990s and the isolation of "the forgotten last village before the border" that

divides India and Pakistan represented by the isolation of the eponymous narrator. The narrator and protagonist does not have a name as in this case this situation could have occurred to any young man in Kashmir. Contrary to the previous novel the protagonist does not go anywhere from his native place. He wants to, but cannot leave his parents who he loves so much. All the friends have left to fight for the independence of Kashmir from the Indian rule and soon the main character finds himself alone in the village, alone among grown-ups who ultimately leave as well going nowhere. "As my dear friends thought, I had read too many books – by which they meant a few more than the school syllabus – and that had compromised my ability to rebel, to take up arms. I didn't have balls, they must've thought, therefore I wasn't fit – and they were right perhaps -therefore I didn't cross the line, and ended up staying behind." (p.17) "Months have passed since I was last in the village street, back when everyone left, leaving us all alone in this militarized wilderness." (p.11) "Someone else also disappeared, or just left the village." (p.198)

The main character does understand that he is different, but still he asks his best friend's father why they didn't tell him to join them and gets an answer: "…we spared your life as well, my dear. You wouldn't have coped, never. It takes guts to do all this, you know, big guts? You, with your books and -how do I say? -silly ideas, you wouldn't have been a good example, you wouldn't make a good a good mujahid, never!" (p.158)

Otherness of the main character is in everything: he is alone without anyone of his age, he collaborates with the military men who he hates, but tries to conceal it to survive and not to hurt his parents." I knew and my father knew too, in that very first moment, in that very first meeting with the Captain, that we had to do exactly what we were told." (p.256) The reminiscences of his friends, of their games and their talks on different issues are interwoven into the plot and they make the situation more tragic. "After swimming in the chilly water, we would lie down on the thick carpet of grass for ages, looking at the really, really blue sky and conjuring up odd names for clouds that hung low over our valley before drifting to another one across the mountains." (p.7)

The protagonist has a home, he is not unrooted as the above mentioned heroes. However, his home has been transformed into the unhomely: "The unhomely because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place. 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 the public spheres. […] in that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (Bhabha, 1992:141). People are being killed all around him. He has to collect ID cards and weapon of those who were killed on the battle field in order not to be killed. The writer is very expressive when he describes the inexperienced boy looking for documents among the corpses which are in a horrible condition and only crows become fatter and fatter. For them it is a feast: "On my way up, I see the crows after a long time and remember how even they have changed now. Fat old crows, they have turned into ugly hideous things – their youthful black turned to a fading grey, their feathers waning, shedding, to reveal dreadful bristled bodies…. I realized that my evasive aerial companions were, in fact, losing their blackness. They were turning ashen, cloudy versions of their former stark selves… They just look like large flying insects now…The scavenging dark bastards!"(p.291)It is very hard to call it a home after seeing all these horrors in the places where he used to play with his friends and enjoy his young man's life.

The boy is desperate about it all but cannot escape from this situation: "But here I am, in my valley, and here are these poor fellows, lost for ever, murdered, beyond grief, beyond redemption, beyond brutality. Here I still am, unable to decide what to do now. Do I run away, flee with Ma and Baba, cross into Pakistan finally, or try to bury these poor boys – one by one, part by part, limb by limb, smile by smile, grin by grin -offer my fateha, and then leave?" (p.260) This enumeration makes the reader's hair stand on its head. And the reader realises that the boy is strong and ready to fight, to fight but in his own way, he is ready to rebel. "I light the fire….Flesh, bones, hair, clothes, leather, rot, blood, combs, photographs, letters… they all burn in the big fire I've cooked up, the fire I watch now, my fire, my only act, my only decision in years, my fire…" (p.298) At the end of the novel the boy sets all the corpses on fire and

rebels against the situation he and his native place are in. The reader is left with the feeling that fire will purify the surrounding, erase the horrors and lead to the improvement of the life.

To sum up, there undoubtedly is more than one way of otherness represented in the Indian diasporic writing and the examples mentioned above fully confirm that. It is not even necessary to leave one-s native village to be looked at as the Other. Although the novels depict absolutely different characters, what unites them is otherness and difficulty to find their own way in life to feel happy. The heroes are willingly or not taken out of the surrounding they are accustomed to and try their best to adjust experiencing loneliness, nostalgia, dislocation, unrootedness, hybridity of identity and trauma on the way. In general, the main characteristics of the modern Other is that he/she is different and does not fit in the society. The Other can be a separate person, standing alone against the rest, or a group of people, struggling together, having to communicate because of the same or similar country of origin. The fact that Indian-origin authors write about this topic indicates its topicality and complexity.

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