The Endless Process of Becoming and the Transformation of Identity in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies

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Abstract

The postmodern identity is always in a state of becoming. The permeability of boundaries eradicated the traditional belief in a unified identity. Modernist fiction was dominated by the belief in a unique and stable identity. But postmodernists no longer highlight the centrality of the self. The concepts of wholeness, identity, authenticity and the idea of centeredness are subverted in postmodern fiction. Postmodernism refutes the notion of origin and the possibility of fixing one’s identity. The postmodern self is perceived in terms of fragmentation. Accordingly, identity is an endless process of becoming. Postmodern theorists aborted the search for the nature of the self due to their certainty about the impossibility of obtaining an objective truth about anything. In addition, subjectivity does not exist because it is produced by language which is held to be slippery. Emile Benveniste shows the importance of language in building the self since “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ego in reality, in its reality which is that of being” (“subjectivity in language,” 40).

Amitav Ghosh, in his novel Sea of Poppies, investigates into the construction of identity and the nature of the self. The characters try to transform all the internal and external forces that shape their identities mainly their historical background, their family ties and at last their memories. This transformation takes place in the ship Ibis. Each person escapes from a specific situation in his/her homeland. Mr Zachary Reid flees the American racial discrimination and Paulette is running away from the authoritarian European community in India. Accordingly, Deeti becomes Adii and Kalua transforms into Maddow Colver. The characters’ reconstruction of their identities conveys the resistance to Ghosh’s text to adopt a stable and solid identity. National identity is shaped by fluidity which is best seen through Paulette who despite her French origin, she easily identified with Bengali culture including food, language and the dressing style. The characters are engaged in a process of rediscovery. Paulette runs away from her benefactor’s sexual desires by assimilating with the Indian culture and escaping her European ancestry.

The characters’ identities are put at the margin due to exploitation, migration and colonialism. These outsiders tried to travel from the margin to the centre. In fact, the orphaned Paulette enters the ship disguised as a man, Zachary Reid passes for a white person and Deeti escapes her husband’s funeral pyre and changes her name together with her daughter. The reader notices the ambivalent state of the characters due to their desire to eradicate their memories and past identities and form new ones that help them integrate with their present condition.

Key words: Identity, Postmodernism, Becoming, Masquerade, Transformation, Displacement
1. Introduction

*Sea of Poppies* refers to identity as being shaped by the postcolonial situation of diaspora and migrancy and the postmodern belief in change. In fact, postmodern identity is always in a state of becoming. The permeability of boundaries eradicated the traditional belief in a unified identity. Identity is a referential notion defined by the Structuralist theory as located in culture, Marxist theory links it with ideology while Foucault stresses its formation by discourse. In the Indian English literature, identity is formed by history, nation, religion and other concepts. Thanks to technology and media, the transformation of the self has become an easy process. In light of the postmodern theory, we now speak about the erasure of the subject. In his novel *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh investigates the construction of identity and the nature of the self. The characters try to transform all the internal and external forces that shape their identities mainly their historical background, their family ties and at last their memories. This transformation takes place in the ship Ibis. Ghosh refutes the concept of national identity which is based on the belief in borders. He deconstructs the fixed interpretations of the national and cultural identity.

2. The Theoretical Part

Modernist fiction was dominated by the belief in a unique and stable identity. But postmodernists no longer highlight the centrality of the self. The concepts of wholeness, identity, authenticity and the idea of centeredness are subverted in postmodern fiction. Postmodernism refutes the notion of origin and the possibility of fixing one’s identity. Following Ferdinand De Saussure’s binary oppositions, identity can be defined as relational, where the existence of one person relies on its difference from another. Identity is seen as fixed and unchanging but it is also marked by difference and polarization. Difference is not only a source of heterogeneity but also a means of exclusion and marginalisation. Essentialism imposes a set of characteristics on a particular group. As a matter of fact, all the members of each group are identified according to the same feature and all those who don’t have that characteristic are considered as others.

Unlike Essentialists who tend to establish one aspect of identity such as gender as the dominant one, postmodernists celebrate diversity and instability in order to eliminate marginalization and oppression. The postmodern self is perceived in terms of fragmentation. Accordingly, identity is an endless process of becoming. Postmodern theorists aborted the search for the nature of the self due to their certainty about the impossibility of obtaining an objective truth about anything. In addition, subjectivity does not exist because it is produced by language which is held to be slippery. Emile Benveniste shows the importance of language in building the self since “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ego in reality, in its reality which is that of being” (“subjectivity in language,” 40). Consequently, relying on Derrida’s concept of deferral of meaning, the perception of the self as stable and unified is a mere illusion.
If the Cartesian subject is defined as rational and embodying the centre of the world, Foucault then dislodges the self from its egocentric and domineering position by refuting the claims for unity and asserting its changing nature. Identity is marked by disintegration. Foucault articulates the death of the subject since he conceives it as a mere effect of power. In *The Order of Things* (1973), Foucault demonstrates that the subject is a modern construction “before the end of the eighteenth century, man did not exist […] He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hands less than two hundred years ago.” (308)

Diaspora and migration are associated with colonialism and its aftermath. To escape colonialism’s shaping of their selves, the characters in the novel decided to belong to a new nation. Displacement is one of the most important themes in Ghosh’s novels. The reader notices the ambivalent state of the characters due to their desire to eradicate their memories and past identities and form new ones that help them integrate with their present condition. This fact reflects the postmodern concern with meaninglessness and absurdity of existence. The characters try to transform all the internal and external forces that shape their identities mainly their historical background, their family ties and at last their memories. This transformation takes place in the ship Ibis. Each person escapes from a specific situation in his or her homeland. Mr Zachary Reid flees the American racial discrimination and Paulette is running away from the authoritarian European community in India. Accordingly, Deeti becomes Adii and Kalua transforms into Maddow Colver. The reconstruction of identity conveys the resistance of Ghosh’s text to adopt a stable and solid identity.

The other is represented according to stereotypical images which enact the colonizer as the object of knowledge. In their missionary zeal to civilize the other, the imperialists fix their identity as superior and civilized. Western thought is based on fixing a centre and excluding the margin. The white man is seen as the norm for universal humanity while the other is an inferior being with a shattered identity. The denial of an autonomous identity for the colonized fuelled his desire to possess one through the imitation of the colonizer. The colonized’s identity is described as being ambiguous and unstable. Western civilization’s grand narratives, including the longing for fixing identity, which in fact entails otherness and injustice no longer, maintain their credibility.

To overcome and to undermine the binary between the self and the other, Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), stresses the emergence of a liminal state, which is a new form of identity posited in-between cultures and which refers to the impurity of both cultures. Homi Bhabha emphasized the loss of fixity in identity. Liminality aims at reversing the conventional stereotypes which are used to distinguish between the educated and civilised colonizer and the savage and backward colonised. In-betweeness is a cross-cultural exchange between the centre and the periphery. The colonial subject hybridizes Western assumptions in order to challenge the colonial rule and to assert the importance of the indigenous culture.

Hybridity is a subversion of the dominant forces. The concept of hybridity leads to the impossibility of the postcolonial subject to return to cultural purity. Bhabha points to the impossibility to fix identity and to the necessity for a cultural exchange which will contribute to the creation of a liminal state. Homi Bhabha talks about the impossibility to redefine subjectivity since the quest to recall a transparent national past on which to set an authentic
national identity is impossible. After independence, many authors stressed the necessity to reformulate the indigenous identity which had been erased by colonialism.

3. Masquerade in Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*:

In *Sea of Poppies*, identity is shaped by social, economic and political powers. Indian English literature rejects Western values and norms. Consequently, in Ghosh’s novel the victims of colonialism possess the central position unlike white Westerners. The process of colonization is apparent through Mr. Burnham’ and Zachary Reids’ conversation highlights the superiority of Europe:

Isn’t that what the mastery of the White man means for the lesser races? As I see it, Reid, the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider, Reid, the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more freely than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of any dark tyrant? (79)

Also, Mr. Justice Kendalbushe views the British Raj in India as a divine mission and calls them the upholder of civilization. Neel Rattan Halder talks about the colonizers as ‘new Brahmins’ to reveal their purity and superiority. However, there are some characters who disregard the superiority of the Europeans and Captain Chillingworth is one of them. He dismantles the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized by arguing that “we are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you that will never be forgiven by history.” (262)

Postmodern novels celebrate difference and blur all the hierarchical oppositions. This is exactly the case of Ghosh’s novel in which the characters’ relationships rise above race, class and origins. The different migrants deconstructed the barriers that divided them and forged new ties. Deeti claims that:

On the boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and every one is the same: it’s like taking a boat to the Temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings- Jahaz bhai and Jahaz bahens to each other. There is no difference between us. (356)

The ship helped them to emerge as new selves. They experience the birth of new identities called ‘Jahaz-bhai’ and ‘jahaz-bahens.’ To Deeti “all the old ties were immaterial now that sea had washed away their past.” (431)

National identity is shaped by fluidity which is best seen through Paulette who despite her French origin, she identified easily with Bengali culture including food, language and the dressing style. Ghosh analyses the effects of colonialism on people. The characters are engaged in a process of rediscovery. Paulette runs away from her benefactor’s sexual desires by assimilating with the Indian culture and escaping her European ancestry. Ghosh describes her attempt to conceal her identity as the following:
She had also disguised her appearance in a number of other ways: her feet were lacquered with bright vermilion \textit{alta}; her hands and arms were covered with intricate, henna designs that left very little of skin visible; and under the cover of her veil, the line of her jaw was obscured by large, tasseled earrings… (359)

Paulette transcended the traditional belief in women as submissive and passive. She resisted the established gender identity and reclaimed the concepts of rationality and autonomy. She transformed into a woman who fights oppression and longs to establish her selfhood. Paulette represents the image of the bold woman who manages to overcome all the troubles that faced her. She succeeded to assimilate with the new alien culture and design a new identity. Women characters not only participate in social life but also they are so involved in decision making. In Ghosh’s fiction, women play leading roles. Despite the fact that their roles are limited, female characters control most of the events in the novel. Ghosh exposes the patriarchal oppressive rule and women suffering as a result. Deeti is victim of the patriarchal traditional society which imposes sati in the funeral pyre of her husband.

Many other characters also tried to cope with the new environment. Zachary wanted to integrate with the laskari group. He easily coped with their speech “as if his oddly patterned speech had unloosed his own tongue” (16) and changed his eating habits “to a Laskari fare of karibat and kedgeree- spicy skillygales of rice, lentils and pickles, mixed on occasion with little bits of fish, fresh or dry….he soon grew to like the unfamiliar flavours”( 23).

The novel is about the political and economic situations that triggered the emigration of Indian ‘girmityas’ or indentured laborers to the Mauritius islands. The labor migration increased during the British rule. Ghosh’s novel is interested in the desperate situation of the Indian indentured laborers who were victims of the abolition of slavery which was replaced by cheap labor. Monsieur d’Epinay, the French landowner told Zachary Reid “tell Mr Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed” (21).

The experience of Indenture has been the most remarkable Indian migration for years. Amitav’s novel is interested in the themes of indenture and identity transformation. Prior to the nineteenth century, travelling outside India was restricted to pilgrimage and trade. The indentured emigration is the first significant diasporic movement. The abolition of slavery and the Chinese policies’ opposition to the opium trade led to the emergence of the \textit{girmityas} migration. The missionary capitalist Benjamin Brightwell Burnhum considers the indentured emigration as the emancipation of the Asians. He states that “when the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it-the Asiatick” (74). The indentured workers came from the poppy growing regions of India. They were victims of exploitation because they worked with low wages.

Ibis brought together people from India, Britain, China and North America. We can notice English sailors like Mr Doughty and Mr Crowle, and the American Zachary Reid and Indian lascars like Subedar Bhyro Singh and Serang Ali. The fact that Indian farmers were obliged to grow poppy instead of useful crops caused poverty and famine. The British
encouraged Indian peasants to illegally cultivate and export opium to China which led to the corruption of Chinese people who became addicted to opium. Ghosh speaks about the British Raj’s annihilation of the Indian’s agrarian economy:

The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples. (202)

The Opium war between China and India is apparent through Mr. Doughty who says “(T)he trouble, you know, is that Johnny Chinaman thinks he can return to the good old days, before he got his taste for opium. But there’s no going back – just won’t hoga” (112). The Opium is a symbol of the British Raj’s oppression. Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, a leading merchant of the East India Company, explains to Zachary “that British rule in India could not be sustained without opium... the Company’s annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of . . . the United States” (115). The Opium war is mentioned in the novel through the character Deeti who was drugged on her wedding night with opium by her mother-in-law. As a consequence, Kabutri, Deeti’s daughter, is “fathered not by the husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, slack-jawed brother-in-law” (39). Her husband “usually remained in a state of torpid, opium-induced somnolence by the time he fell on his bed” (36). Deeti escaped the Sati ritual after her husband’s death and became a servant on the Ibis. She constructed a new identity. She becomes Aditi. She:

Did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling, of joy mixed with resignation, crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes in rebirth, to her next life: she had shed the body of the old Deeti…and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose. (178)

The Ibis is a gathering of various people such as American sailors, Indian and Bengali lascars, coolies, opium cultivators, policemen, sahibs and prisoners. While Ibis is marked by fear and despair, many characters view it as a source of change and transformation of their previous identities. Faced with an unknown future, the grimitiyas decided to lose their sense of belonging. The intimacy felt by women toward each other proved that it’s hard to maintain boundaries. Their old selves are deemed to failure. Ghosh speaks about the unity between the immigrants as the following: “from now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings -jabazbbais and jabazbadens- to each other. There’ll be no differences between us” (328).

4. Conclusion

Diversity has become the most significant character of the ship. The displacement the character undergoes triggered a new sense of belonging. Deeti and Kalua hide their actual identity because they wanted to live a new life. Deeti changed her name:

It was on her lips to identify herself as Kabutari-ki-ma, the name by which she had been known ever since her daughter’s birth... her proper, given name was the first to come to
mind and since it had never been used by anyone, it was as good as any. Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi. (233).

The characters’ identities are put at the margin due to exploitation, migration and colonialism. These outsiders tried to travel from the margin to the centre. In fact, the orphaned Paulette enters the ship disguised as a man, Zachary Reid passes for a white person and Deeti escapes her husband’s funeral pyre and changes her name together with her daughter.
References


