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Postcolonial Transnational Indian Novel in English: A Study of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Abhinaba Chatterjee

Abstract:

The transnational postcolonial novel imbibes the theme of migrancy and hybridity that chutnifies Western and Eastern forms as also the bigotry of national ideologies seeks to bridge the schism created by the vast difference between the experience of place and the cultural perspective and language available to it. In the space of transnationalism, cultures undergo a dialectical interplay and create interlayered and mixed identities. This process necessitates the

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reconception and incorporation of cultural and linguistic differences into our historical sense of identity.

KEYWORDS: *Transnationalism, hybridity, identity, migration, globalization*

Indian literature in English contains the anguish for a home and its very character of fleetingness in a world of exiles, frontiers and refugees. The question of belonging is defined not only against the backdrop of immigrant experiences in the West but also as a part of the anomalies of arbitrary borders and non-places of super-modernity.

Postcolonialism has always marked its literature with the notion of hybridity. Homi Bhabha uses the term to discuss colonial or postcolonial appropriations of cultural artifacts from the colonizer. Colonial hybridity diminishes the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, and this erosion of difference undermines the colonizer's claim to superiority.

Bhabha's discussion of hybridity, which focuses on unconscious responses to strict hierarchies, does not satisfactorily describe the possible range of transnational texts by twentieth century writers such as Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh but it does explain some of the novel's central concerns. Transnational fiction's alternate worlds provide a different kind of physicality for experimental fusions into which the individual may sink his roots. Bhabha's accounts of the source of hybridity, however – the power of the reader to interpret and sometimes distort a text's meaning – is essential. His emphasis on interpretation suggests the multifarious and participatory role of transnational readership.

In part because of the limitations inherent in the notions of hybridity, critical attention has increasingly turned to the figure of cosmopolitan, a type Revathi Krishnaswamy describes as the

"itinerant intellectual", "an international figure who at once feels at home nowhere and everywhere."

Transnationalist discourse, in Michael Peter Smith's formulation, "insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and communication circuits and social practices." As BrendahYeoh, Karen Lai, Michael Charney, and Tong CheeKiong put it, "transnationalism draws attention to what it negates – that is, the continued significance of the national." Transnationalism, in other words, tries to have it both ways: to cross borders and to acknowledge them, to fuse separate places and to recognize their separation. The local nation and the global transnational maintain an ongoing dialogue. Transnational writers, who claim active participation in more than one nation, provide a rooted approach to the problems posed by cultural synthesis. Rather than "negating" nationalism, their transnationalism co-opts and redefines it, drawing on the identity-building techniques of nationalist movements to provide alternative identities not simply for members of diasporas or migrants from a single location but for what Rushdie calls a "community of displaced persons", each one of whom is simultaneously rooted in a place of origin and in the imaginary world of transnationality. This essay discusses two transnational novels – Salman Rushdie's "*The Satanic Verse"* and Amitav Ghosh's*"The Shadow Lines*", using imaginary worlds to address practical and theoretical problems of migrancy.

Rushdie includes repressed voices from the non-Europeanworld in order to foreground the cultural and historicalperspectives external to Europeemploys a markedly different method, in "*The Satanic Verses*". Rushdie puts forth his cultural knowledge to generate a dialecticalinterplay between the voices from the non-European world and the dominant European discourse. Describing his position as atransnational subject, Rushdie says:

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> It may be that writers in my position, exiles oremigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some senseof loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, evenat the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.But if we do look back, we must also do so in theknowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation fromIndia almost inevitably means that we will not becapable of reclaiming precisely the thing that waslost; that we will, in short, create fictions, notactual cities or villages, but invisible ones,imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. ("Imaginary Homelands" 10)

The Satanic Verses by focusing on issues of migrancy, faith and belonging towards negotiating a newhistorical voice and leveling a challenge against master narratives of legitimacy and authority,including Islamic fundamentalism, Indian nationalism and British neocolonialism, has become a touchstone in discussions of postcolonial hybridity.Its complex structure follows severalstorylines, generally ordered around the two main characters, Saladin and Gibreel. The immigrant grapples with the choice between assimilation and isolation in his or her new location andfights to find a niche within the dominant political, cultural and social structures of their hostnation. He or she must also engage with the binaries within these dominant structures thatpotentially position them as "other" and, as in *The Satanic Verses,* dismantle these binariestowards a position of newness — a hybrid subjectivity that can inaugurate a new historicalvoice. However, this needs to occur while remaining heterogeneous, thus retaining difference if they are not to be wholly assimilated. Saladin's transformation forces him to experience another side of Britain, its institutionalized racism and the treatment of anyone seen as"other" — thus, the immigrants, refugees, and exiles living in London. For Gibreel, his transformation forces him to experience another side of religion, which, under the pressure ofhis

loss of faith, is full of doubt. Gibreel is unable to reconcile himself with his loss of faithand commits suicide in the end. Saladin, however, is able to humanize himself and come to terms with his hybrid subjectivity. He is an 'other' in England because of his Indianness and an 'other' in India because of his Britishness. However, in the end, without eclipsing or suppressing either site of difference in himself, he is able to enter a new subjectivity that dismantles the binaries that make him one thing or the other. Thus, using the migrant experience and the metaphor of transformation, the text creates a space and time in which otherness is able to emerge while retaining its difference.

The hybridity of Rushdie's novel extends far beyond the superficial pastiche of boutique multiculturalism, however, in part because culture is only one of the subjects of hybridization. Rushdie attacks purity itself, whether cultural, moral or genetic. Rushdie writes in "Is Nothing Sacred?" that fiction "tells us there are no answers; or rather, it tells us that answers are easier to come by, and less reliable, than questions." This idea of a reliable question – privileging not only doubt over faith but also inquiry over knowability – makes *The Satanic Verses* a programmatically empowering text, designed to teach its readers to question even its own internal authority.

The hybridity of *The Satanic Verses* is not simply the "both/and" unification of opposites beloved of postcolonial critics. The novel blurs the boundaries between established opposites like England and India, self and other, and good and evil. Through the problematization of the absolute distinction between the God and the Devil, Rushdie is indicting a whole epistemological system based on binary oppositions. Each character has some vital element in common with or directly opposed to almost every other character in the novel's proliferating plot threads,

establishing a complex pattern of relationships in which simple oppositions only conceal the character's similarities.

The narrator's multiple personae – God, devil, Rushdie – reflect the multiple selves of the other characters. The variety and complexity of selves varies from character to character: Mirza Saeed consists of a city self and a country self, whereas Chamcha is the "Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice". But humanity in the novel is synonymous with multiplicity. When Sufyan says that Chamcha must choose between Lucretius and Ovid, continuous versus discontinuous change, he implies that the one impossible option is stasis.

While globalization provides a key context to exploring Rushdie's fiction, it is no secret that in the age of globalization there has been an unprecedented reversion tolocal, fundamentalist, and fiercely anti-internationalist interests. "Honor Killings" in Pakistan and Afghanistan arecaused by fierce adherence to a "traditional" code of conduct.The Hindu-Muslim conflict in India and the ethnic cleansing in Kashmir are caused by reversion to religious and regional sentiments.

Despite the glories of migration, imperial ideology marksimmigrants as inferior. As a strategy to debunk their marginal status, immigrants then generate a "position for reconstruction". Saladin Chamcha is an embodiment of the reconstructed position of the immigrant. For the immigrant, there remain "old selves, old selves erased in part but not fully. So what you get are these fragmented,multifaceted, multicultural selves" (Marzorati 44).Significantly, The Satanic Verses is the embodiment of a world in which boundaries have been blurred to create a palimpsest from which one facet of the self has been partially erased inorder to make room for the other, and the reader, as Rushdie articulates, is cast into "the world

beyond the looking glass, where nonsense is the only sense".Thus, Rushdie consciously explores a radical sense of otherness, which is heightened for immigrants as a consequence of displacement.

As opposed to the irresolvability of polarities in "*Shame*", "*The Satanic Verses*" embodies the mix of contemporary-historical and mythical-religious contexts. The various layers that compose identity, the simultaneous production of good and evil, different historical periods, different locations, different personalities, and various states of consciousness interact with one another in the novel.

The formerly colonized population of South Asia constitutes a space in which conflicting discourses have been written and read. In the present circumstances, the populace of India and other parts of South Asia has an ambivalent rolein their complicity with and resistance to the forces that jeopardize their existence. Amitav Ghosh explores this ambivalence in all its complexity in "*The Shadow Lines*"

The ability of Ghosh's texts to draw on variouscultural traditions, along with his own diasporic subjectivity as an Indian of Burmese origin who was raised in Bangladesh, Iran, Sri Lanka, has done his writing in Egypt, and now does itin the U.S., corresponds well with the subjects of emigration,exile, and cultural displacement addressed in his work. His diasporic subjectivity and the subject matter of his fiction have led many critics to see him as a blossoming postcolonial writer. Ghosh's work is a crucial component of Western literarystudies classified as "Postcolonial Studies."

In "*The Shadow Lines*", Ghosh interrogates the authenticity of colonial and nationalist historiography by, onthe one hand, emphasizing the fictions that people create in their lives, and,

on the other, recording the vivid and verifiable details of individual memories that do not necessarily correspond with the documented version of history.

The author creates a realm that melds pre-Independence India, Britain in the Second World War, and post-Independence India. Deploying this realm as one of intermingling cultural and political paradigms, and ideologies as well as of overlapping geographical divides, Ghosh undertakes the task of establishing the futility of all sorts of barriers, or "shadow lines." As one of the Subaltern Studies scholars, Shail Mayaram, reminds us, during the Partition of India various state authorities rigidified borders and boundaries that wereonce flexible, and people were coerced to opt for one nation orthe other, India or Pakistan, or one religious identity or the other, Hindu or Muslim. And in many cases the choice was imposed on them. There are other novels in Indo-Englishfiction that belong to the Partition genre: Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1965), Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974), Balachandra Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1970), and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*(1988). *The Shadow Lines*, however, is especially notable because itdelineates the agonies and ruptures of that period in such poignant detail. It also underlines the challenge of cultural dislocations, ambiguous citizenship, and highlights the illusions of militant nationalisms. The unnamed narrator's nationalist grandmother, Tha'mma, articulates an unambiguous understanding of the central role of violence in the making of nations in "*The Shadow Lines*" when she talks about, the creation of Britain:

> It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and

> how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? (77-8)

And yet, as Ghosh shows, the nation is rendered all the more threatening when the war that leads to its construction is internecine and does not bind Muslim to Hindu or Bengali to Kashmiri but rather sunders Bengali from Bengali, Kashmiri fromKashmiri. Such an irregular war polarizes these ethnic groups into Hindus and Muslims who are required to disaffirm their cultural, linguistic, and social unities. As one of the characters in Ghosh's novel wonders, "And then I think to myself 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? It's a mirage; the whole thing is amirage. How can anyone divide a memory?" (247).

Already before her “homecoming” Tha’mma does not understand what a border in reality signifies, or that her birthplace does not determine her nationality. It is even more difficult for her to grasp that she could not go to Dhaka, which after the partition is in Bangladesh, as easily as in the past before the country was divided. Upon her arrival in Dhaka she cannot believe that this is the same place she used to know. The city has changed but for the part where the house of the uncle stood whom the grandmother visits to bring him to Calcutta. The car carrying them crosses a bridge to reach the part of the city where the house of the uncle stood that separates the familiar from the unfamiliar turns into a kind of trespassing, as their visit is seen as an encroachment. As a consequence, they are involved in a deadly riot in which her nephew, Tridib,

as well as the old uncle along with his rickshaw-driver, are killed. The bridge is ambiguous, it brings people together, but it also distinguishes them.

Locating authority in the self is an especially convenient position for the migrant or exiled writer, since internal authority is perhaps the only portable kind. Both Rushdie's and Ghosh's approach to cultural and narrative authority is not only pluralistic: despite their Indian roots, they are explicitly adapted to the transnational setting. When readers share the experience of privilege and exclusion, they become part of the new diaspora of transnational literati.

The linguistic and cultural dislocation generated by the experience of migration can become part of the process of reinterpreting the repressive frameworks of colonialism, nationalism, proto-nationalism, patriarchy, and universalism that essentialize the identities of postcolonial and transnational subjects and lend moral justification to the attack on native societies and kindle religious and nationalist bigotry process because, as the displaced group is assimilated, its native language and culture become devalued. The schism created by this dislocation is bridged when formerly repressed voices from the non-European world are raised in order to foreground the cultural and historical perspectives external to Europe. One of the ways of including this perspective is to encourage a rewriting of history that incorporates profound religious, cultural, and linguistic differences into the text, and narrates the history of the nationalist struggle in a form which negates colonial historiography (Rushdie 1981, 1988; Ghosh 1988). Salman Rushdie revives the genre of myth in his writings in order to challenge determinant concepts, univocal meanings, and recoverable origins to subvert the conventions of historical time. He chutnifies Western and Eastern forms in order to meld myth and reality, and the genres of media and languages. Similarly, in "*The Shadow Lines*", Amitav Ghosh not only

questions the divides created by the bigotry of nationalist ideologies, but also makes audible the voices of common people that do not necessarily correspond with the documented version of history. This kind of radical politics of postcolonialism seeks to bridge the schism created by the vast difference between the experience of place and the cultural perspective and language available to it. In the space of transnationalism, cultures undergo a dialectical interplay and create inter-layered and mixed identities. This process necessitates the reconception and incorporation of cultural and linguistic differences into our historical sense of identity. My transnational identity gives me a means of questioning elements not just of my native culture, but of Western culture as well.

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About the Author:

Abhinaba Chatterjee is an M. Phil from the University of Delhi (DU). His email is abhinaba0000@gmail.com