

Racial Identity and Postcolonial Discourse in Selected South Asian Novels



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Abstract: *This research paper explores the theme of “Racial Identity and Postcolonial Discourse” in selected South Asian novels. The key aim is to examine the portrayal of racial identity as well as the influence of colonial history in the selected novels: In the Light of What We Know by Zia Haider Rahman, The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid, The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy and A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini. It employs a qualitative method and the data collection was conducted by close reading of the selected novels. These novels were chosen for their diverse representation of South Asian experiences and their relevance to the study's themes. The theoretical framework is based on the concepts of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. The analysis indicated that the selected fictions reveal a perspective which is based on colonized legacies. The Western superiority makes the characters puzzled. The reflection of colonialism in the portrayal of characters is not only in their self perception but also in how they are treated by others and the feelings aroused in them are of dejection and rejection. Particularly, this is the case when the preferred attitude is that Western languages or values are preferred over the local ones, which means that the colonizers still have those attitudes. The study concludes that the colonial history has its way of altering how race and identity is presented in South Asian literature from the early times.*

Keywords: Identity, Race, Postcolonialism, South Asian Literature, Fiction

Introduction

Postcolonialism, as an academic discipline, deals with the cultural traces of imperialism and colonialism (Nayar, 2008). It analyzes the social and political power structures that inspires the histories, cultures and literatures of post-colonial countries (Thamarana, 2015).

Postcolonial theory originated in the mid 20th century, at a time when several countries were gaining their freedoms from their colonial masters. It gives us ways to comprehend the influence colonialism had on both colonized and colonizers (Cheah, 2015). Famous scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha have made significant contributions to

the discourse of Postcolonialism (Hamadi, 2014). Fanon (2016) talks about psychological impact of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized which stresses dehumanization brought about by colonialism.

Said's (1977) “Orientalism” is the pillar of the postcolonial debates. He explores how the Westerners created the knowledge about the East to maintain colonial power. He highlights the fact that Western literary works and scholarship were used to justify colonial rule by conveying Eastern societies as mystical, savage and irrational. Such depiction had a significant impact on the Western concept of the racial identity of the East (Lau, 2005).

According to Bhabha (1997) 'hybridity' as a phenomenon of postcolonial identities. He argues that therefore, these identities do not remain original since they are a product of the intermingling of colonizers' and colonized people's cultures. This idea is extremely important in discovering the ambiguous way of racial identities in the postcolonial societies (Bhalla, 2008).

Postcolonialism has a great impact on the narratives of South Asian fiction. The colonial past of the region, primarily the British era, has deeply impacted its literature (Thamarana, 2015). The themes of identity, displacement, and cultural conflicts are usually the focus of the postcolonial South Asian writers (Olehlová, 2012). The land of colonialism upon racial identity is a recurring notion. Such narratives portray the identity conflicts of characters in postcolonial times.

The racial identity within the South Asian fiction usually reflects the aspects of postcolonial societies (Shariff, 2012). Identity needs of the characters might not be fully satisfied, because the colonialism is still reigning. The literature does represent how the colonial stereotypes and racial hierarchies imposed by the Western colonizers still influence the societal norms and individual self-perception (Gunew, 1997).

The knowledge of racialized identity and postcolonial dialog in South Asian fiction benefits from the theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Said and Bhabha. Their theories of 'Orientalism' and 'hybridity' provide useful instruments for analyzing the presentation of racial identities and colonial history in South Asian fiction. This context allows for the detailed analysis of racial identity in some south Asian novels, looking at how such identities are forged both by the colonial past and contemporary postcolonial setting of the area.

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the portrayal of racial identity in South Asian fiction and its role in shaping characters' experiences and societal interactions.
- 2) To analyze the impact of colonial history on

the representation of race in the selected novels.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Among the insights it offers is a lens through which South Asian racial identity representation can be uncovered. This is critical for the understanding of the literature as well as the societies it reflects. Secondly, the contemporary research study in this case, is concentrated on the influence of colonial history and how this realization that past still defines everything today.

Literature Review

Hoene (2014) explored the relationship between music and identity in the context of South Asian literature. The study scrutinized the ways in which music represents a cultural perspective. The findings of the study revealed that how South Asian immigrants in the UK employ music. Music is what holds on to their cultural heritage. In addition, it makes it easier for them to get used to the new surroundings. The scholar has provided examples from novels and poems. It reflects the how music themes are integrated in the play. This study is helpful in clarifying the cultural identity in South Asian literature.

Furthermore, Iqbal (2022) conducted postcolonial cultural research of south Asian literature. In this project the central idea is the national identity. He talks about the influence of the Indian partition on writing. This study reveals how certain historic events shaped writers. The researcher analyzed novels and poetry. It underlines the struggle for identity in these regions. His research is important, as it provides knowledge regarding the historical events in a literature for building up national identity. The study proves useful for the students of postcolonial literature.

In another study, Jain (2017) investigated the South Asian diaspora and postcolonial discourse. The emphasis is on the process of how the communities of South Asia in foreign countries experience the problems of their culture. The scholar investigates literature from group of communities in the diaspora. The paper

exemplified how people articulate their struggles of identity. The article bases on the main theme of cultural clash in the early colonial history. The scholar draws on instances from a number of literary works. They illustrate how the South Asian diaspora authors deal with space of their identity. This research is beneficial in generally depicting the diaspora in literature.

Furthermore, Marinscu (2007) explored identity in British-South-Asian novels. In this study, the focus was on the novelists' depictions of postcolonial identities. The scholar looks at several British-South-Asian authors. The purpose of the study is to investigate the way in which these writers cope with their national heritage. The issues of cultural clash and identity development are addressed by the researcher.

A scholarly article by Singh and Iyer (2016) presents an analysis of the South Asian literature in the context of English language. The authors make a point about non-English fiction' necessity. They asserted that a persisted focus on only English hinders the appreciation of this genre. Their study covers many works in several languages from South Asia. It discloses why these works are vital in composing a vivid picture of the local literature.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research technique. The study relies on this kind of approach because it draws the attention to the meaning and the central ideas of the novels rather than the counting of elements.

The data was collected by means of close-reading of selected literary works. This includes a detailed reading of texts from the chosen novels as the first step. The novels that the researcher has chosen, regardless of how they differ from each other in the perspectives and context they put out, they give a wide diversity of racial identity and postcolonial themes which can be explored.

For the analysis, textual analysis was utilized where by it allowed to explore the words, themes and narrative pattern of the selected works. Through textual analysis, the researcher analyzed and explained how racial identity is

presented and how history of colonialism influences these presentations. Ultimately, this research approach, consisting of close reading and textual analysis within a qualitative framework, is conducive to fulfilling the proposed research objectives. This offers a more concise means to examine and depict beneath the surface racial identity and the phenomenon of postcolonial discourse in South Asian literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study takes insights from Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha concepts regarding Postcolonialism. These two scholars are the well-known representatives in the field of postcolonial studies. Their theories provide directions through which the selected fictions are analyzed.

Said (1977) in his book "Orientalism" challenges the Western view by arguing that the West has always portrayed the Orient as exotic, backward and underdeveloped not based on any kind of evidence, confirming the fact that this picture reflects the colonialist power dynamics. This representation, as explained by Said, reinforces the idea that Western cultures are more advanced so they should be in power rather than the Eastern cultures. When applied in the context of South Asian literature, his concept sheds light on how racial identity is used to build up and depict an individual or a group of people seen through colonial and Western dominance-tinted spectacles. By these means, his perspective widens the scope to comprehend how characters in the South Asian fictions are affected when they are constrained by their own inherited identities.

Bhabha (1997) in "The Location of Culture", introduced the notion of 'hybridity'. According to him, the culture of postcolonial is complex and hybrid, as it is an amalgamation of the colonizer and colonized cultures. The blending of cultures in such a manner questions the notion of identity being something which is purely original and cultural, suggesting rather that the identities of the postcolonial era are inevitably mixed. Importantly, his theory of hybridity is a key conception when the analysis of South Asia

fictions is considered, as it opens up the possibility to examine the mixture of the racial identities of the characters and how they overcome such forsaken identity in a post-colonial situation. The imperial history is used in order to understand the complexity of the picture of race the novels present, which illustrates how the characters perceive and act discovering both local and outside influences.

In combination, Said (1977) and Bhabha's (1997) doctrines provides a holistic measure for analyzing South Asian fictions. Said's (1977) illustration of the West's rendition of the East makes us look at racial identity in the narratives from a different angle by possibly revealing how prevalent racial biases and stereotypes are in those texts even if they may not be recognized as such explicitly. Unlike the concept of hybridity provided by Bhabha (1997) which is looked upon as a way to look at and understand the mixed nature of the postcolonial identities, the colonial history keeps holding a deep impact on the formation of individual and collective identities.

Analysis of Racial Identity in South Asian Fiction

In this section of the analysis, the researcher investigates the way through which South Asian writers illustrate racial identity in their writing. The closely knit community of South Asia enables individuals to discover new aspects of themselves which subsequently serves as a basis for their social interactions. Western assertions against the East have always been dominated by the element of 'Other' to the medieval minds that has shaped the ideas generally about the Eastern civilizations, small and primitive (Said 1978). In the context of the novels related to racial identities, this standpoint has shaped how South Asian writers perceive these on their printed pages. The idea of Said's Orientalism is of great consequence in the comprehension of the process of creation what such identities are and in the investigation of possible traces of the times of colonization in reflecting biases and stereotypes of that period.

Religion, culture, history or the linguistic landscape has become the driving element of a

nation as it takes over the dependence over another nation from the colonial era. Bhabha (1997) thinks this idea when he introduces 'hybridity' into the definition of postcolonial identities. In South Asian fiction, this idea is of paramount importance, as part of the characters might find themselves in mixed heritage backgrounds. He also says that Indians are scattered all over the world and they have evolved different identities depending on the cultures they came in contact with. In the light of these scholars' views, the excerpts are analyzed from all the selected fictions. The following excerpt depicts the idea of racial identity.

“Saif, Suleiman, and this boy, three generations of Afghans are now in the service of their saviours. Everywhere in South Asia is a class of men, and in some parts more and more women, working for the white man, to carry his load and do his bidding in these troublesome corners...There will always be locals to buy the foreign peace/ and who can blame fathers whose children are dying of war? These make up the buffer class of native informants” (p.33).

In this passage from *In the Light of What We Know*, Zia Haider Rahman tries to explain how the issue of racial identity is connected to the colonial history of the South Asia. It stresses out the process of Afghans becoming subordinates for their saviors. It also hints out the acute issue of the colonialism affect on race and order of the society.

It is within the context of orientalism that one should place the experience of the figured traveler of the romans. Said (1977) argues that the conventional view of West in pointing to East as mysterious, primitive and necessary to reform. Such point of view has caused the presentation, rather stereotypical, of the Eastern people with the features of underdevelopment, slavishness or clownery. Rahman's novels here show that the white man is linked to Afghan's who work for him according to Said's theorization. The role given characters are exhibited as parts of the structures which began during colonization. The Europeans are superior to the locals who were forced to play the secondary role.

Bhabha's (1997) idea of 'hybridity' which brings forth a perspective on this passage features in a global discourse of mixed races that were born from different cultural backgrounds. Bhabha (1997) argues that postcolonial identities are not of a single ethnic origin but rather through a blend of the two ethnic groups. Humanizing 'the 'buffer class of native informants'' in Rahman's plot is the metaphor for this mixed identity. These people represent the melting of the culture of Afghanistan with a little bit of Western 'defenders' conditions. The case below depicted the after effects of colonial legacies to the identification and social structures of people of South Asia including the inhabitants of India.

Precisely, the above-mentioned passage represents the fact that historical colonialism plays a role in the setting and the essence of how characters are introduced into the plot. Here the interpretation goes in line with Said's and Bhabha's theory, where the true meaning of colonization and its consequences on races identity in South Asian literature is explored.

"When I first arrived, I looked around me at the Gothic buildings –younger, I later learned, than many of this city, but made through acid treatment and ingenious stonemasonry to look older – and thought, this is a dream come true. Princeton inspired in me the feeling that my life was a film and I was the star and everything was possible. I have access to this beautiful campus, I thought, to professors who are titans in their field and fellow tudents who are philosopher-kings in the making" (p.3)

Here, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Mohsin Hamid features the protagonist's perception of Princeton University and thus greater issues of racial identity and post colonialism in South Asian literature.

Said's (1977) views are reflected in this excerpt. The character's wonder at the oldness of the Gothic-styled structures found on the campus of Princeton resembles the manner in which East Asian individuals examine Western institutions as well as the culture. There is a feeling of respect, as a result of the fact of the historical background of the West superiority and a representation of the West communities as more

appeal or cultural. This depicts how the colonial history has Western society seen as superior in the eyes of the Middle East. Said (1977) postulates this concept.

Besides Orientalism, this excerpt can also be further analyzed with the approach of hybridity (Bhabha, 1997). The representation of the protagonist at a Princeton University, an American college, symbolically shows his bicultural experience, consisting of his South Indian identity adapting the Western culture. Such experience of being a leading character in his own life movie at Princeton signals his own merging of the East and the West—his Eastern background and Western desire and principles. By implying that there are no pure identities in the context of postcolonial society, filled by the meeting of cultures of the colonizer and the colonized, Bhabha was referring to this statement.

To be sure, this excerpt from Hamid's novel illustrates the extent to which colonial dependence influenced the main character's thoughts about who he is and his place in the modern Western society. It does have similarities with Said and Bhabha, which is clear as in South Asian fiction, racial identities are shown that arise out of the influence of both foreign and local factors and also there is the effect of the colonial history on identity formation.

"Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral...They were made to stand separately...Not with the rest of the family...Nobody would look at them" (p.4)" (p.3)

In *The God Of Small Things* by Arundati Roy, what makes the portrait of Ammu, Estha, and Rahel leaving their family to attend a funeral so distinct is that they leave their family and travel to another town. Being separated is mirror of the race disparity as well as the societal culture in Indian fiction.

Instead of that old East-West divide, Said (1977) focuses on both internal and external societal divisions. Said (1977) postulates that the division of people in this context is usually rooted in the historical relationships that one

group use against the other to assert its authority. In this case, however, it is the South Asian community norms which enforce their own specific hierarchy that excludes particular people or groups.

Bhabha's (1997) theory of hybridity is another point to think so. The characters' dissociation is then reflected as a consequence of their identities which are mixed driving them from the traditional social schemes. This shows the fact that Bhabha theorizes how postcolonial identities may turn out to be complicated thereby people finding it difficult to identify with the given society.

The excerpt from Roy's novel reveals the intersectional character of race and social identity in the literature of Asia. They are not the part of the funeral ritual which is the sign of devices from the societal norms and hierarchy. It is consistent with the theorization of Said and Bhabha on the perspective of the determinants of historical and cultural backgrounds on the personal identity of the people in South Asia.

“Sucking marrow from a bone, he said to the girl, “But you mustn’t blame her. She is quiet. A blessing, really, because, wallah, if a person hasn’t got much to say she might as well be stingy with words. We are city people, you and I, but she is dehati. A village girl... (p.200)”

The excerpt from Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, illustrates division between being urban and non-urban people which is the same like the separation of white and native American people in the Western society.

The Orientalism by Said (1977) reveals the significance of the relationship between the East and the West but is not limited to it either. The word 'dehati' used here for village girl is used to clarify the difference between those who belong to the villages and those among whom the city dwellers reside. This supposes the division of society and its views, where people who live in a town consider themselves rather as a high level caste. Said (1977) postulates that these kind of divisions are to be parts of a broader stories of power and identity.

Our arguments here can also be connected to that

of Homi K.Bhabha and his concept of hybridity. The gap between urban and rural communities in developing economies causes with some having mixed identities who are adapting to both subtle environment and realities. This reflects the notion of postcolonial identities being emerging through the cultural hybridity of their engagement with different influences. This novel shows how complicated belonging to society and the race could be in South Asian literature. City and village individuality is a reflection of greater societal differences. This is how the works of Said (1977) and Bhabha (1997) are expressed in the above excerpt which is reflecting their ideas on historical and cultural influences, individuals and their identity perception especially in South Asia.

Impact of Colonial History on Race Representation in South Asian Fiction

In this part, the role of colonial legacy on depiction of race in South Asian literature is mainly discussed. Said's (1977) Orientalism is a framework which aids in understanding of Western colonialism expressed in the way Eastern cultures and races are portrayed. The point that Said makes is about how the Western society tends to portray the Eastern societies as exotic and as feeble. This has determined the manner in which the races are represented in South Asian fictional world, sometimes it is based on the colonial Europe's biases and stereotypes.

However, Bhabha's hybridity is another major consideration in this discussion. Bhabha (1997) asserts that the postcolonial identities involve a hybridity between the local culture and influences of the foreign culture. This is quite obvious in South Asian fiction where the characters are associating dual cultural identities. Mixed representation is exactly that, a consequence of the colonial past where intermingling of two dominant cultures during the colonization period gave rise to the complex racial identities.

“I didn’t get a single knowing look from anyone around the table, a glance to say that I was British too. But there was another presumption that was harder to bear, one of class” (p.30)

In *In the Light of What We Know* by Zia Haider Rahman, the narrator's own case provides the view point of racial and class identity in the context of Britain. The scenario demonstrates the fact that the colonial period leaves a mark on race as well as its existence in South Asian narration.

Even living in Britain, the protagonist is not seen as one of 'Britishers'. This confirms Said's (1977) belief on such exclusion of East by West only reinforces the East as 'the Other.' Postcolonialism has inevitably created a mentality among the South Asians that they often do not feel like they belong to Western societies, even if they have been citizens for a long time, or if they have indeed re-identified themselves.

The main character's identity - which comprises South Asian culture within the context of the national British culture - is not easily accepted and recognized by his environment. This captures Bhabha's (1997) understanding that post-colonial identities are hybrid and fashioned through the inter-mixing of cultures. Nevertheless, the issues of hybrid identities are challenging in nations where the colonial legacy is still felt strongly.

As a matter of fiction, the passage from the novel by Rahman pinpoints the way in which the influence of colonialism as a major factor in portraying class and race relations in South Asian fictional writing. It portrays individuals with South Asian backgrounds who are constantly struggling to find their identity in Western societies where there is still mention of a colonial period which results in exclusion.

“When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners...My team did not wait for me; by the time I entered customs hall they had already collected their suitcases and left. As a consequence, I rode to Manhattan that very evening very much alone” (p. 86)

This passage from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid relates what the main character's experience is of being treated as uncivilized. It is an aspect of the

impact of colonial past on the race portrayal. Said's (1977) perspective is relevant here. In contrary, the protagonist, belongs to American team but his identity does not confirm him as an American. Coming to immigration is the remaining consequence of the mentioned “colonialism” and such individuals appearing in Western countries are still perceived “as foreigners”. According to Said's (1977), such kind of classifications are residual efforts from the colonial past, with the East always being seen as something unusual that was apart from the West all the time.

Bhabha's (1997) concept of hybridity likewise significant for getting the gist of it. The main character's persona has been the result of his interplay of an Indian origin and present professional life in the United States. Consequently, the immigrant acclamation at the border is not confined to an inclusive environment. However, he is referred as only as a visible foreigner, telling the severity and difficulty faced by people with multiple identities in the postcolonial era.

To be concise, the above-mentioned excerpt highlights the way through which colonialism influences the performances in South Asia. Being an observer of the main character's inner conflict during his search for a fitting identity while being simultaneously drawn back to the West, where he finds himself as an outsider despite various ties to that world, the story illustrates this well.

“That whole week Baby Kochamma ...I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them out with her red pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments. She had made them practice an English car song for the way back...” (p.21).

Here, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* portrays a scene where Baby Kochamma insists English over Malayalam. The passage is symbolic of which colonial history continues to have a role of race and language identity in fiction from South Asia. One of the key elements of Chacko's internalized racism is the fact that English is his preferred language, whereas the

local language, Malayalam, is looked down upon. This is clearly seen in his comments, which align with Said's (1977) ideas about how colonialism imposed Western standards and languages as superior. This is brought about the downplaying at the local culture and mother tongue, which one can see in the character of Ms. Baby Kochamma, who is forced to use English.

To pick up the other important point, the concept of hybridity by Bhabha (1997) is also applicable here. Recently freed twin sisters are being asked to use English, a language of the British who were their rulers instead of their own Malayali. Such phenomenon occurs, which obviously is a result of strong comprehending identity problems of postcolonial states. Colonization brings along a sense of necessity among its people to be more civilized or modern by adapting elements of the colonizers' culture.

“Mariam did surmise...Mariam did understand. It was the way Nana uttered the word—not so much saying it as spitting it at her—that made Mariam feel the full sting of it. She understood then what Nana meant, that a harami was an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance” (pp.3-4)

Here in the novel by Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam understands her true identity as a 'harami', a child who was born out of wedlock and she is the product of a union between her mother and someone who was not her husband. Understanding this results in her identity reformation and shared connections and illustrates that the history of the society, which is triggered by the contexts, creates the core of our experiences.

The causes of 'harami' phenomena are not related to colonialism in a direct way. However, the development of cultural norms and stereotypes in postcolonial societies was indeed contributed by life under colonialism. Possibly, the colonials just reproduced the harsh social stratifications and ethical principles; this modus operandi is still in effect today in the way people

see their fellow citizens and treat them (Said, 1977).

Bhabha's (1997) idea is also one of the factors that contribute to the exposure of the situation of the post-colonial life. Maryam is in a confusing position just as her lineage does not fit the vase of the religion's customs and rules. She is torn between these worlds and that part of her which denied her neither complete rejection nor embrace. This feature shows the Bhabha's sense of uncertainty that arose in the postcolonial societies, where identities undergo dramatic changes.

As the text above revealed, Hosseini's novel clearly portrays how social traditions made by people which is dealing with cultural roots as well as heritages, dictate individual characters' identity recognition and self-acknowledgement in South Asian fictional writings. Mariam's life since she was born an illegitimate, has been a reflection of how the social structures might prevail in personal and social identities over time.

Conclusion

The analysis of *In the Light of What We Know* by Zia Haider Rahman, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, revealed that hybrid cultural and historical contexts govern the formation of racial and social identities in South Asian fictions. These novels represent the damage that the colonialism left over social functions. The analysis also revealed that these fictions emphasize the personality of the protagonists which have grown up in the western environment. Roy's novel is particularly concerned with how societal divisions within the South Asian nation, and those divisions have a serious effect on the identity of individuals.

The excerpts from the selected fictions constitute the basis for the findings that colonialism had a significant influence on race representation in modern South Asian fictions. *In the Light of What We Know* accentuates the protagonist's predicament that is the inability to recognize him as British since he originates from and qualifies for different nations. This

demonstrates the colonial mindset which separates us from them on the basis of race and ethnical origin, even though the protagonist's education is highly competitive. *The God of Small Things* shows the trend that is popular among the community who consider English language an advantage and that is why they prefer using it due to the imperial history that sees western languages and concepts such as culture as more advanced than local alternatives. Ultimately, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* characterizes that how highly organized communities which are greatly molded by the historical contexts determine people identities and belonging and in today's world the example of this is Mariam's is her being called an illegitimate. Furthermore, colonial history has left heavy impression on the representation of race in South Asian fiction therefore, it shapes the behavior.

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