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Constructing identities in postcolonial theory

Introduction: Identity and the Other

One of the main focuses of postcolonial theory is identity or a certain identity crisis which leads to anti-essentialist ideas of a subject and multiple identity positions. This article presents a short review of identity development from the modern age to the hybridity of postcolonial subjects.

The monolithic identity model which was structured firmly in opposition to its Other is a historical phenomenon related to the period after the French revolution to the 1960s and 1970s. Henceforth we have witnessed a paradigm shift and new techniques in identity formation and consequently, the concept of multiculturalism and multiple identities has become dominant especially since the 1990s with emphasised political correctness.

To be able to theoretically problematize identity² it is necessary to derive its essence from the concept of difference. The concept of the Other, as seen by Hegel and Sartre, means something unknown and strange to dominant subjectivity. Theoreticians, therefore, need to discuss the sustainability of the identity-difference opposition as well as a number of determinants (sexual, racial, class and/or gender) and argue that identity creation becomes a matter of power, and is ultimately conditioned by roles, rights, procedures, positions and possibilities the subject entails. Focusing on sharp binary oppositions between our identities and those of others, which some theorists reject as being excluding, leads to the plurality of identity, which does not mean the termination of identity or its ultimate fluidity or even something that Derrida formulated as yet to come (à-venir). It is about moderate constructivism in identity creation since identity is an “infinite movement”³.

The Europeans in the past had the possibility of a theoretical answer to the Otherness through identity and difference. If the Europeans were to go from the

¹ E-mail: ikardum000@gmail.com

² V. Biti, *Pojmovnik suvremene književne i kulturne teorije*, Zagreb, 2000.

³ K.H. Petersen, A. Rutherford, *Fossil and Psyche*, [in:] B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London 2004, p. 189.

assumption that they and the Other were identical, then they would not take into account the differences between them but would evaluate the Other through the prism of their cultural values. Assuming that the Other was irreversibly different the Europeans would turn again to the point of view of their own culture. Abdul R. Jan Mohamed⁴ points out that a true understanding of the Other is possible only if they could deny the values and ideologies of one's own culture, which is an impossible task. A similar idea is developed by Spivak who calls this the process of "un-learning" from somebody's determinants of understanding the world.⁵

There is no identity without *a relationship*, without diversity and difference, which implies that there is no isolated identity as there is no separate subject. Identity is shaped through becoming a subject, and both identity and subject are just processes⁶. Identities can never be „the sense of a personality armour, or of anything static and unchangeable”⁷.

The “subject” cannot be abolished but it is necessary to re-conceptualize it, or to think of as Stuart Hall who asserts that the subject is “new, displaced or decentred.”⁸ At this point Hall's words can be quoted:

... the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always ‘in process’. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required sustaining it, the identification is, in the end, conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate differences⁹.

Identities are never unique, but fragmented and cracked, multiple constructed through different discourses and views. Once again, Hall says that “... identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being.”¹⁰ Hall emphasizes that identities are always created in relation to their distinctions, the Other without which they

⁴ A. R. Jan Mohamed, *The Economy of Manichean Allegory*, [in:] B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London 2004, p. 18.

⁵ D. Landry, G. MacLean, *The Spivak Reader, Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, London 1996.

⁶ R. Iveković, *Identitet, zajednica i nasilje*, [in:] Treća vol.1, 1998, p. 21.

⁷ E.M. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, London 1968, p. 24.

⁸ S. Hall, P. Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, 1998, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

could not exist, and thus the building of social identity becomes the question of power, what is involved or excluded.

Said also emphasizes that the development and resistance of every culture require the existence of the Other. Identity is constructed because, although it is a repository of distinctive collective experiences, it also includes the construction of "others". The emphasis is on the fact that identity is a dynamic historical, social, intellectual and political process¹¹.

Towards hybridity

Individual identity is built from ideology or traditional patterns of thought, as well as from individual action. In the religious identity for example, one's values, self-perception, and elections are rooted in a particular religious tradition, and people identify with others who share their beliefs. Secular identity is completely rational while moral or cultural values are adopted selectively, and this identity often develops into an archetypal identity, such as an English gentleman. Lately, such traditional identities seem to allow a small spectrum of individual action and force passive acceptance of constraints and conventions. Identity is today more perceived as an active process in which a person has all the freedom to choose values and understandings and must not mix individual self-determination and culturally-defined identity models¹².

Bhabha writes about identity and warns that a subject and its identity has an ideological or a discursive effect which must not be equated with a politically passive identity:

The importance and disturbance of placing the 'gaze' outside the intimation of individual identity are that it emphasizes the fact that the position of the human subject is neither Inside (the psyche) nor Outside (in the social). Identity is an intersubjective, performative act that refuses the division of public/private, psyche / social. It is not a 'self' *given* to consciousness, but a 'coming-to-consciousness' of the self through the realm of symbolic otherness – language, the social system, the unconscious¹³.

In the 1990s political correctness emphasized the concept of cultural diversity, but postcolonial theorists considered this cultural diversity stance as putting all

¹¹ E. Said, *Orientalizam*, Zagreb, 1999, pp. 423-424.

¹² A. Aghapour, *Identity and Religion of the Status Quo: The Rushdie Affair in the West*, [in:] „Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences“, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 1-18.

¹³ H. Bhabha, *Unpacking my library...again*, [in:] I. Chambers, L. Curti (ed): *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London 1996, p. 206.

their experiences under a common identification term through the prism of the dominant Eurocentric paradigm. Claiming that there is only one “British” or “Asian” culture and identity means neglecting their heterogeneity whether it is racial, class, gender, religious or caste. It would be wrong to talk about the collision of cultures because we would be forgetting cultural interactions and fusions, and we should not point out the assimilation of cultures from ex-colonies but advocate integration. Maybe, the term Third World does not mean only countries that share colonial past and neo-colonial economic dependence on former imperial centres but it implies extremely diverse cultures that speak with their voices. The similarities can be traced between Rushdie's thesis on “a new Empire within Britain”¹⁴ and the migrants who make the imported empire and Frederick Jameson who writes about “an internal Third World”¹⁵ in the United States and the inner voices of the Third World, for example, in black women's literature or Chicano literature.

Many postcolonial writers have come to canonized literary centres and thus have become displaced and forced to live in the simultaneous existence of different cultures and influences. Their cultural identity is realized through historical, racial, metaphysical diversity and for this purpose they have developed a search for roots, origins, myths, and ancestors. In their writing history has been reconstructed through collage, fragments, memory, and myth. Home, belonging, spiritual possession of a landscape in which the postcolonial writers were or even imagined to be were being sought. The difficulties encountered in the process of creating new roots are often overcome by rooting in the process of writing which becomes home, and self-determination. Writing becomes their identity.

Lawrence Grossberg in his essay¹⁶ defines several terms relevant to the study of identity and it is a primary *difference* or attitude of negativity in which the subordinated term “(...marginalized other or subaltern) is a necessary and internal force of destabilization existing within the identity of the dominant term”¹⁷, and fragmentation is the confirmation of multiple identities and identity positions¹⁸, which once again summarizes Bhabha's idea of contamination of dominant theories. This turn towards the hybridity of identities is a new perspective which is particularly vital in the postcolonial theory. Grossberg

¹⁴ S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: essays and criticism 1981-1991*, London 1991, p.129.

¹⁵ T. Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, Houndmills 1989.

¹⁶ S. Hall, P. Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, 1998, p. 87.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 90.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 91.

addresses hybridity to describe a kind of border existence between at least two opposing identities, and this is again bound to the idea of the “third space” whose geography becomes a border that is inhabited by postcolonial identity. Hybridity, in this case, implies that this identity is defined by its unique space which prevents the formation of static sites of belonging but establishes mobility, uncertainty, and multiplicity of border crossing¹⁹.

Theorists argue that the identity of postcolonial societies is created based on differences between the centre and the periphery, on the binary opposition “Self-Other”. Such Manichean aesthetics and binary oppositions are not reciprocal, but they always underline the hierarchical relationships in which the colonized is trapped in the position imposed by the superior colonizer. Postcolonial writers want to avoid such dichotomies and offer hybridity which does not privilege anyone, though they are aware of power issues and mutual influence, which makes any exclusionary approach difficult to implement. Rushdie often writes about the conflict between the world of migrants and the world of national affiliation, but even though he seems to prefer cosmopolitan levitation beyond rootedness, Spivak does not think that cosmopolitan challenge to national culture is a challenge in which it is easy to take the side²⁰. Critical reference should be made to a too literal understanding of representation in identity issues. Claiming that only a member and a resident of a native country can know and speak about their situation and experience is repressive because the presentation is always problematic and ambivalent. Identitarianism, although powerful, can sometimes be quite dangerous²¹.

What Iain Chambers²² warns about is the need to re-examine the concept of culture as a place of belonging in favour of the idea of culture as a process of transition and becoming. New discourses need to be heard in which the physical immutability of home is not important but fruitful wandering in search of imaginative homes.

Conclusion

Rushdie as a prominent postcolonial writer examines why in Britain, as in many other countries, such a wide difference and insistence on difference, even racism, between people of different skin colour is present. He thinks that this may be due to the idea of the Other, the opposite twin in the mirror, the negative image of us that helps us with being our opposition to understand who we are:

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 91-92.

²⁰ G.C. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London 1993, p. 222.

²¹ G.C. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching...*, p. 54.

²² I. Chambers, L., Curti (ed), *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, London 1996, p. 53.

“God cannot be defined without the Devil, Jekyll is meaningless without Hyde”²³. Still, he puts things in their place and claims that racism was a way of legitimizing a generous slave trade. Although racism certainly exists, Rushdie is a bit romantic but no less attracted to the idea that texts can somewhat correct the situation:

We live in ideas. Through images, we seek to understand our world. And through images, we sometimes seek to subjugate and dominate others. But picture-making, imagining can also be a process of celebration, even of liberation. New images can chase out the old²⁴.

The era of binary oppositions so dear to nationalist and imperialist ventures has passed. Instead, the old authority can not only be replaced by the new one, but by those emerging new frontiers, types, nations, and essentials which appear rapidly in a globalized world and this provokes and challenges a fundamentally static notion of identity that formed the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism²⁵. However, the world is faced with a new project and that is globalization. Will identities in this environment of ongoing matrixes of power, hierarchy, and differences thrive or not, we have yet to see.

²³ S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands...*, p. 144.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 146-147.

²⁵ Said, E.: *Orijentalizam*, p. 57.

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Streszczenie

Jednym z typowych wyzwań badaczy teorii postkolonialnej jest tożsamość, czy raczej kryzys tożsamości. Nie znaczy to jednak, że tożsamość jest marginalizowana czy omijana. Przeciwnie, uwzględnia się bowiem nowe podejścia związane z jej kształtowaniem i istotą w kontekście tekstów i teorii literackich. Niepodważalnym wydaje się być fakt, że tożsamość nie jest statyczną sumą różnych elementów składowych, gdyż podlega ona dynamicznym procesom. Celem przedstawionego artykułu, jest ukazanie rozwoju tożsamości, jako kategorii wywodzącej się z modernizmu, aż do nowych postulatów hybrydowości w teorii postkolonialnej.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura, teoria postkolonialna, tożsamość, binarne opozycje, hybrydowość

Abstract

One of the main issues that postcolonial theory faces the public with is identity or a certain identity crisis which nevertheless does not imply its abolition or marginalization but a new field of relationships within existing postulates which concern its formation and significance in the context of literary works and theory. What remains unquestionable is that identity is not a static sum of different elements but a very dynamic process. This paper is aimed at showing the development of identity as a category dating from the modernity to new postulates of hybridity in postcolonial theory.

Keywords: literature, postcolonial theory, identity, binary oppositions, hybridity