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“IF ENGLISHNESS DOESN’T DEFINE ME,
REDEFINE ENGLISHNESS”:
CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY
IN THE LONDON CITYSCAPE

The above statement, made by a contemporary novelist, Andrea Levy, aptly illustrates the situation of multiracial writers who are categorized as “black British” rather than “British” only. More importantly, it points to the still prevailing presence of binarism in a highly hybridized and mobile world and the tendency to categorize people according to their ethnic, racial or cultural belonging. Recently, London has been demographically transformed and its “transnational decentredness” has become its most visibly constitutive feature. As John Ball observes in *Imagining London* this city is becoming “more and more global (or transnational) and less and less traditionally – that is, ethnically, racially, or even nationally – English or British” (Ball 2004: 4-5). The experience of other nations and cultures necessarily triggers off changes both in national and local cultures. Mobility becomes the constitutive force in forming identities of places and its inhabitants: “it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation” (Bhabha 1990: 320). London becomes the Third Space, that is an interstitial space, a point of negotiation where other positions emerge and identities are neither one nor the other but something different, free from binarism and organizational categories such as race, gender, or geopolitical locale. Occupied by migrant subjects, the Third Space becomes a form of cultural difference itself. It is “the jarrings of a differentiated cul-

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ture” whose “hybrid counter-energies” (Young 1995: 23) challenge the dominant cultural norms of the centre. For Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial critic, the Third Space, unveils the nature of culture because it

destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open and expanding code [...] [and] challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. (Bhabha 1994: 54)

Common culture provides a sense of communality and belonging for those on the move but, at the same time, it proves to be heterogeneous and changing and the immigrants vary within the borders of the same diaspora. There is no one, unified culture but a hybrid of concurrent cultural behaviour and ideas that exist within the boundaries of national culture. The Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets from Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* presents itself as an amalgam of different entities and not a monolith, and London serves as a meeting point of different national cultures, a site of interactions which transforms its participants. In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* multiculturalism in the English capital seems to be thriving and cultures interact, nevertheless, some stereotypical representations separate the Other from the rest of society and deny them the right to be an integral part of the centre.

On the cultural level the Third Space destabilizes the certainties of national cultures and opens up a space for diversity and hybridity which promote the emergence of new modalities that help to transgress, infringe and exceed the norms of monocultural status quo and transform the racist values and representations of cultures (Goldberg 1997: 10). The endorsement of cultural diversity, its entertainment and encouragement in contemporary world, as Bhabha observes in “The Third Space,” does not exclude its containment and multiculturalism does not secure tolerance because the universalism that paradoxically permits diversity only masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests (Bhabha qtd. in Rutherford 1990: 208). Cultural authority, as Bhabha explains in “The Commitment to Theory,” is ambivalent and operates only when there are two contesting cultures. To quote his arguments:

The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation. And it is the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of enunciation. (Bhabha 1994: 51)

Establishing opposites and “others” facilitates defining one cultural group as superior to another which becomes irreversibly trapped in an inferior position. Bhabha calls for revising the history of critical theory which rests on difference rather than diversity. The cultural can no longer be discussed only with reference to “the signifiatory boundaries of cultures where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated” (Bhabha 1994: 50). The liberation comes, as Bhabha repeats after Frantz Fanon, from cultural uncertainty and signifiatory or representational undecidability. He argues that diversity points to the heterogeneity of particular cultures, whereas difference assumes that cultures are unitary and therefore one culture can be set against the other. Bhabha defines cultural diversity as an epistemological object while cultural difference as a process of signification and enunciation of culture as “knowledgeable.” He states:

Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural ‘contents’ and customs, held in a time-frame of relativism it gives to rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. (Bhabha 1994: 50)

Cultural statements and systems are based on difference when culture is used in political struggle. The emphasis on differences facilitates categorizations and identifications through opposites, thus assuming the homogeneity of competing cultures. Bhabha contests cultural difference because culture neither exists as a single unit nor is dualistic in relation of the Self to the Other (Bhabha 1994: 52). Diversity does not rely on the knowledge of some pre-given cultural contexts but emphasises experience of cultures and their changing, interactive and intertextual character.

In “DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation” Bhabha expands his argumentation on the inappropriateness of understanding cultural difference as “the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of national community” (Bhabha 1990: 232). He operates in a conceptual world where conventional stabilities of cultures and subjects have disappeared. Culture is not an envelope, a closed totality of ideas and behaviours, but “a form of intervention” and negotiation participating in “a logic of supplementary subversion” (Bhabha 1990: 232). The critic says:

The question of cultural difference faces us with a disposition of knowledges or a distribution of practices that exist besides each other, abseits designating a form of social contradiction or antagonism that has to be *negotiated* rather than sublated. (Bhabha 1990: 232; emphasis mine)

The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the knowledge of a particular culture, to disturb it and produce other spaces of signification with new meanings and strategies of identification. Bhabha refers to the people as to a rhetorical strategy, the “subject” of a process of signification and a historical “object” of a nationalist pedagogy that emerges from the “double narrative moment” of “the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical” and “the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (Bhabha 1990: 297). By introducing the notion of the performative Bhabha contests the easy temptations of static identities and disturbs the idea of a community’s self-sameness. The double structure of identity frees it from the fixity of “the people-as-one” (Bhabha 1990: 301) and stereotypes, opens it to creativity and a dialogic process of “becoming” (as opposed to the pre-set and unchangeable “being”) and provides both “a theoretical position and a narrative authority for marginal voices and minority discourse” (Bhabha 1990: 301). The stability and linearity of the pedagogical are disturbed by the performative that blurs polarized categories and introduces a temporality of in-between. With the disrupted horizontality of cultural identity and a narrative open to external influences, the nation is no longer “the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the ‘horizontal’ view of society” but in its ambivalent and uncertain representation it reveals “the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (Bhabha 1990: 300).

Cultural identification of the postcolonial immigrants inhabiting the metropolis can no longer be identifiable as stable and solid because subjects emerge from “the abyss of enunciation,” to quote after Homi Bhabha, where the subject splits and the pedagogical and the performative are agonistically articulated (Bhabha 1990: 304). In V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* Singh comes to London full of hopes for some meaning and authentic action, but he quickly becomes disillusioned with the city: instead of the wholeness and meaning he wished to find here, he experiences a deeper fragmentation of his personality. For colonial immigrants their national and cultural identity becomes a feeble entity which fails to attain solidity and is even threatened with dissolution when set against the cultural identity of the metropolis:

Those of us who came to it lost some our solidity; we were trapped into fixed, flat postures. And, in this growing dissociation between ourselves and the city in which we walked, scores of separate meetings, not linked even by ourselves, who became nothing more than perceivers: everyone reduced, reciprocally, to a succession of such meetings, so that first experience and then the personality divided

bewilderingly into compartments. Each person concealed his own darkness. (Nai-paul 2002: 27)

The postcolonial subjects bear the burden of two-dimensional identities – one narrated in the pedagogical of their native country and the other ascribed by western discourse –and find themselves in an in-between position. The rigid and horizontal character of the pedagogical is necessarily destabilized as the performative is subject to different national, racial and cultural alliances. Controversially, defining fragmented pedagogical identities of non-Western subjects as signifiers of postcolonial subjectivities may be used to satisfy the residual Western desire to affirm the stability of the pedagogical identity and refusal to acknowledge the temporal multicultural influences in shaping the western narrative. For Bhabha essentialism is “the ultimate evil” (Gardner 2002: 10), while the marginal position may prove to be productive and affect not only the pedagogical narrative of native identities but also western discourse which needs to respond to shifting social powers. The immigrants’ culture is created out of the performative and heterogeneity characterizing the postcolonial environment of the metropolis.

As Homi Bhabha aptly observes contemporary national and cultural belonging in particular is provisional and multiple and often goes beyond a binary structure of oppositions possible in homogenous societies. Difference – mostly racial and ethnic – remains the irreducible axis of social organization and a means to marginalize the not-white and not-English individuals. Sameness and difference are applied as conjunctive and disjunctive tools of social stratification that enable some to enjoy a position in the centre, while others remain on the peripheries and receive unequal treatment. The isolated world of the Bangladeshi community shown in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* seems to operate on some clear-cut categorizations. The cultural practices and traditions of this community are set against western values and kept separate. At a surface level it may seem that the social organization shown in *Brick Lane* is based on difference: the white centre versus the periphery, western versus eastern codes of behaviour, modernity versus tradition. The immigrants live in diasporas – their own microcosm separate from the centre – and once they are outside “their territory” they are identified through their appearance that makes them stand out as different. However, the world of the Bangladeshi community does not operate on a difference facilitating clear categorizations. Ali tries to show a culture which is not unitary or stable but constantly changing, where generalizations are not applicable to cultural identities.

London becomes her Third Space in that it opens up new sites; however their productivity is brought into question. To quote after Bhabha: “if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively” (Bhabha qtd. in Rutherford 1990: 216). Ali’s main character, Nazneen, reverses her position within the patriarchal discourse but she does not negotiate it and thus fails to make a durable and meaningful change. Therefore, the narrative is not entirely free from the conventional divisions which difference entails.

Zadie Smith’s hotchpotch of races, nationalities and religions presented in *White Teeth* aims at facilitating the escape from clear-cut divisions and inclusion of “cultural others” in the multicultural London cityscape. The local enters the global not only as a result of massive movements of peoples but also as the effect of the Other entering the global market, as exemplified by the “Fushion Fashion” shop in *Brick Lane* or national festivals and cuisine in *White Teeth*. The tendency to locate the “other” culture within the grid of the host culture is marked by an attempt to homogenize the Other and enable referentiality even in the case of highly hyphenated subjects. However borders between us and them appear to be blurred, the Same/Other dichotomy seems to prevail and otherness and difference are denied a place. The second generation faces the same hostility as their parents and grandparents who came on the SS Empire Windrush in 1948, thus proving the impossibility of belonging. They are separated from the rest of society and denied the right to be its integral part. Bred out of “native” and English environments children develop hybridized identities and experience a schizophrenic feeling of belonging in two places. They develop their own hybrid cultural mix to reconcile different traditions, cultures and religions they experience. Smith puts to rest the myth of pure difference but hybridity, which stems from the in-between position of British-born subjects, is not praised without questioning. The writer shows an attempt to encourage and accommodate cultural diversity in the school scene where religious and secular celebrations from different traditions enter the British canon as a part of “the school’s ongoing commitment to religious diversity” (Smith 2001: 126-131). The nature of Englishness needs to be reshaped and written into the multicultural cityscape present in contemporary Britain, characterised by the interconnectedness of cultures, intermixing of nations and races and fluidity of identities. Nevertheless, no matter how much identity is hybridized, it cannot be free from social constructions of gender, race and nationality and Smith proves Edward Said’s point that

the construction of identities [...] involves establishing opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from 'us.' Each age and society re-creates its 'Others.' (Said 1995: 332)

On the cultural level the Third Space destabilizes the certainties of national cultures and opens up a space for diversity and hybridity: for the descendants of immigrants their culture is being created *now* and out of heterogeneity and multiplicity. However, on the personal level the in-between position confuses and destabilises cultural identities.

The indeterminacy of subjects positioned in the Third Space is analogous to the open character of cosmopolitanism, that is a historical phenomenon which responds to the need "to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition" (Pollock et al. 2002: 1; 4). And those who are deprived of the comfort of national belonging represent the spirit of cosmopolitical community. The conjunctural features of cosmopolitanism, its local specificity and universal enlightenment provide a site for contesting the pedagogical and performative identity of postcolonial migrants. As Pnina Werbner, a social anthropologist, explains cosmopolitanism

begins from membership in morally and emotionally significant communities (families, ethnic groups) while espousing notions of toleration and openness to the world, the transcendence of ethnic difference and the moral responsibility for and incorporation of the other. (Werbner 2006: 497)

Communities open their pedagogical narratives to non-diasporic influences not in order to adapt them to the dominant discourse but to incorporate the Other within its borders. Bhabha proposes cosmopolitan communities "envisioned in *marginality*," a border zone which "provides an ethical entitlement to, and enactment of, the sense of community" (Bhabha in Castle 2001: 42; italics in original). It is through the performative mode "that the rules or norms of connections are established *in practice*" (Bhabha in Dennis and Khan 2000: 47; italics in original). To vernacularize is to "dialectize" translation, "to be on the border, *in between*, introducing the global-cosmopolitan 'action at a distance' into the very grounds – now displaced – of the domestic" (Bhabha in Castle 2001: 42; italics in original). In the era of highly mobile communities and globalized world "Englishness" is detached from places and attached to values, common to many individuals regardless their

racial, religious or ethnic backgrounds, defined by connectedness rather than race. The English are no longer white and fair haired, as expected abroad (Levy 2000: 22), but heterogeneous, hybrid and bearing multiple markers. A new meaning of Englishness is inscribed to embrace the plenitude of hybridized and hyphenated identities of subjects often born of different traditions. Assuming the constructed nature of identities, the nature of Englishness needs to be reshaped and written into the multicultural London cityscape, characterised by the interconnectedness of cultures, intermixing of nations and races and fluidity of identities. The narrative becomes “a machine of cultural representation and reproduction” (Stein 2004: 42), a mirror of social and cultural changes.

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„JEŚLI NIE DEFINIUJE MNIE ANGIELSKOŚĆ, ZDEFINIUJMY JĄ PONOWNIE” –
RÓŻNICA KULTUROWA I RÓŻNORODNOŚĆ W LONDYŃSKIM
KRAJOBRAZIE MIEJSKIM

Streszczenie

Dychotomia: Tożsamy/Inny niezmiennie określa pozycję wypowiadającego się podmiotu, stawiając go albo w centrum, albo na jego obrzeżach. Punktem wyjściowym dla przedstawionych w niniejszym artykule rozważań są teorie badacza postkolonialnego Homiego K. Bhabhy. Bhabha podkreśla udział kultury w wytwarzaniu narodu i proponuje kulturową konstrukcję pojęcia narodowości jako „formy afiliacji społecznej i tekstualnej”, jego zaś mieszkańców definiuje jako „historyczne ‘przedmioty’ pedagogiki nacjonalistycznej [...] i ‘podmioty’ procesu nadawania znaczenia”, a więc nośniki przeszłości i teraźniejszości. Jak pokazują przywołane w analizie brytyjskie pisarki Monica Ali (w *Brick Lane*) i Zadie Smith (w *Białych Zębach*), kategoryzowanie jednostek i grup ze względu na ich przynależność etniczną, rasową czy kulturową nie ma już przełożenia na binarne opozycje i politykę różnicy ukazaną w *Marionetkach* V.S. Naipaula. Nałożenie się różnorodnych, niejednokrotnie przeciwstawnych indeksów sprawia, że trudno zastosować esencjonalizm do wysoce hybrydyzowanych jednostek. Kultura Innego została przeszczepiona na grunt centrum, które dotąd było uważane przez Tożsamego za homogeniczne.

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Key words: cultural identity, hybrid/hybridity, diaspora, Third Space, cosmopolitanism, Homi K. Bhabha.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość kulturowa, hybryda/hybrydowość, diaspora, Trzecia Przestrzeń, kosmopolitanizm, Homi K. Bhabha.