

# Constructing and deconstructing otherness in migrant literature



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One similarity that exists across Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*, Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* is the ambivalence that their characters feel outside of their motherland. More obviously in Syal's and Kureishi's novel, the characters try to reconstruct their identity so as to escape "other-ing." For Ishiguro, it is his identity as a migrated Japanese writing about his homeland that calls into question definitions of "home." To quote Brian Shaffer, "the focus of Ishiguro's first novel is [...] on the way in which people use other people's stories to conceal yet, paradoxically, to reveal their own" (36-37). The idea of appropriating another person's story to explore one's own is a theme that links the three stories together. Etsuko explores her own guilt toward her dead daughter Keiko through Sachiko and Mariko; Tania explores her ambivalent identity as an Indian that is not from India through the film that she makes of Chila and Sunita; and Karim explores his cultural roots through typically colonialist plays like Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (147). The ambivalence of identity calls into question its construction and subsequently, its deconstruction of cultural stereotypes, whilst foregrounding reconstruction of identity and consequently, deconstruction of one's previous identity. A comparison of these three novels thus reveals the problems associated with migrant writing, and what it means for their identity in a country that supposedly not their own. One problem that the migrants have is their inability to escape preconceived notions of their identity. In one interview, Ishiguro was asked about why he set his novel *The Unconsoled* in central Europe. He replied: People have scrutinized the settings of my books, assuming they're key to the work. In some senses that's true, but it emerged as a major problem. When I set my books in Japan, their relevance seemed

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to be diminished in the eyes of some readers. People seemed to say, ' That's a very interesting thing we've learned about Japanese society', rather than, ' Oh, isn't that indeed how people think and behave – how we behave.' There seemed to be a block about applying my books universally because the setting was so overwhelmingly alien. (160) I quote this at length because it exemplifies the problems that the main characters of Syal and Kureishi face as well. The quote highlights the alienation that a migrant culture faces when read by a dominant (usually White) culture. When an explicitly non-White writer writes about his supposed culture, it is often deemed authentic and natural, whether or not s/he has actually lived there before. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the narrator remarks when Keiko hung herself, that " the English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room" (10). Karim faces a similar dilemma when he is chosen by Shadwell to play Mowgli. Shadwell insists that Karim should speak with an " authentic" (147) Indian accent, as befit his race and the character's race. Shadwell assumes that since Karim was Indian, he must know his " own language" (140), and was shocked that he could not understand " Punjabi or Urdu"(140). Evidently, they are trapped by their explicit ethnic difference, yet clueless as to how they should behave. As Paul White puts it, the migrants " find themselves in situations where they are confronted by an alternative ethnic awareness that labels them and confines them to a stereotyped ' otherness' from which there appears little chance of escape" (3). For the migrants, their ambivalence stem from trying to shed their previous cultural links and assimilating into their new land. It is ironic that they are suddenly in a country that seems to know how they

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should behave and instruct them on what should be natural to them.

Shadwell advises Karim to “ take a rucksack and see India, if that’s the last thing you do in your life” (141), while Tania is treated like voyeuristic “ tourist” (265) in her own country. The result, if they are unable to assimilate, would be Keiko-like death. For Etsuko, Manchester is a place of displacement as it represents an alien country that Keiko failed to blend in with. These non-White characters are in a Catch 22 situation: an assumed identity is forced upon them as they have to struggle with assimilation or be faced with death, whether symbolic or real. In order to escape from their entrapment, they try to negotiate and find a balance between how they are supposed to behave and how they want to behave. On one level, Tania’s film is a betrayal of her friends, but it is also a projection of what she eschews of her ethnic culture. According to Yasmin Hussain, “ Women are often projected in Indian women’s fiction as trapped in the categories of wife, mother and daughter” (55) and the “ conventional woman suffers within the constraints of traditional culture [...] (while) unconventional images of female roles in Indian women’s literature are represented by the mages of suffering of women who violate and question the accepted norms of society”(56).

Despite this, it is important to note that “ these experiences of suffering teach them to subdue their individuality in favour of traditional ways” (56).

Chila and Sunita represents Hussain’s depictions. Chila is the married woman who is always under patriarchal rule, whilst Sunita, despite being in the “ Uni Women’s Group” (84) has been subsumed under the role of dutiful mother who is remorseful when she has her own life outside the family. By

portraying these sides of her friends in the film, she is making her stand

against stereotyped notions of Indian females and simultaneously

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proclaiming her individuality. Likewise, Karim tries to negotiate his ethnicity by explaining that he is an “Englishman born and bred” (3) but he is overpowered by the White majority who insist on “authenticity” and he ends up being “lathered [...] in the colour of dirt” (146) for his role as Mowgli. Masking Karim’s “cream skin” introduces the notion of hybridity. Whilst being exoticized is the lesser of two evils when compared with being marginalized and forgotten like many postcolonial subalterns, it is similarly threatening to the migrant’s identity. They are confined by being labeled “exotic,” and then euphemized as a “hybrid” product of east meets west. Haroon is perceived by his white followers as an Indian wise man that has answers to the problems of the materialistic West. Yet, his white working-class in-laws are embarrassed by his heritage. Haroon’s brother-in-law, for example, denies his Indian origins by calling him “Harry” because “it was bad enough his being Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too” (33). Hybridity traps them in perpetual other-ness as it emancipates them. As Andrew Smith postulates, “With hybridity, anything is possible for the simple reason that hybridity is about making meaning without the repression of a pre-existing normativity or teleology” (252). In other words, the elastic nature of hybridity emancipates them because it gives them a fixed and stable identity, yet the notion of “other” underlies it. As a result, it seems that the migrant Other cannot escape. Ishiguro is trapped in his Japanese roots, never mind that he migrated at the age of six to England and has lived there since; Tania and Karim are in a purgatory where they are adored for their differences. They are exiled and trapped in an imagined homeland. However, the novels do offer a resolution that is slightly problematic. As Martin says of Tania at the beginning, “the more the

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rest of the world found Tania's background fascinating, the more she rejected it" (107). That the novels conclude with Tania returning to her parents and Karim embracing his ethnic roots is important as it represents a reconciliation of their ethnic and national identities. The conservative conclusions suggest that by retaining connections with the past and recognizing their ethnic identity, they are able to find strength to resist the identities imposed on them by the dominant White culture. Yet, this conclusion is in line with the dominant White's perspective that if you are of a certain ethnic culture, you are supposed to identify with it. While it is questionable whether Tania and Karim's negotiation of their ethnic identity is successful, Jamila and Niki provides another model. Jamila is assertive and educates herself with feminist writers like Angela Davis and Kate Millett. Though she was forced into a traditional arranged marriage, she negotiates her identity and shapes her resistance. As Suresht Renjen Bald expounds, "her radical politics seem to lose out in the face of her father Anwar's hunger strike to coerce her to marry Changez [however] in her compliance is also her resistance [as] her marriage is not consummated" (87). Niki is another strong character. She functions chiefly as Etsuko's rationalizing voice, trying to assuage her mother's guilt by comparing her with women who are passively stuck in unhappy marriages. She tells Etsuko that, "' So many women get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they're just miserable. But they can't pluck up the courage to do anything about it. They'll just go on like that for the rest of their lives'" (89-90). The resistance that these two women exhibit, seems to suggest that the traditional notion of a woman supporting her husband blindly would be her downfall. Extrapolating this example, the best solution in negotiating the migrant's identity would be to <https://assignbuster.com/constructing-and-deconstructing-otherness-in-migrant-literature/>

appropriate dominant views, and then acting within it as opposed to Tania's outward rejection of all things Indian. Despite this, the problem of hybridity would still exist in migrants. The conflict of their ethnicity and nationality will remain as long as the notion of a dominant group exists because this would inevitably divide them into black/white, self/other, superior/inferior – binary oppositions that depend and feed off each other. It is only with the destruction of these binaries that any form of identity construction or reconstruction can be successful. Ishiguro's novel launches us into a discussion of preconceived notions of identity that defines how the migrant minority should behave. He problematizes the link between ethnicity and nationality, and tries to explain that ethnicity does not necessarily equate nationality, nor is it responsible for explaining ethnicity. As South Asian writers writing in their colonizer's country, Syal and Kureishi further complicate this link as they try to challenge the stereotypes imposed on their protagonists. They expose the problems related to blind assimilation to the dominant culture and highlight that that does not work for the minority because they will merely be seen as exotic and a cross between the east and west. This hybridity poses a new dilemma for the migrant Other that is trying to negotiate its ambivalence in a country that is anxious to maintain its dominant culture. Being a hybrid becomes a euphemism for the Other as it continues to render them separate and distinct. Attempts at trying to construct or reconstruct their identity seem futile because they end up pandering to the ideas of the dominant White and continue to remain trapped as a hybrid. In my opinion, it is only when binaries of majority/minority are destroyed before any real solution exists.

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