



essay

The Colonial Impulse: Resistance to Colonization in American Fiction During the Cold War

by Ahsan Chowdhury

"I saw it as a family in which the colonial impulse had marked each member of the family."
Didion, the story teller in Joan Didion's Democracy

POSTMODERN society is generally believed to be congenial to multiple subjectivity. The average worker today (a dubious category in itself) is no longer so average. Apart from belonging to the working class (either union or non-union), he could belong to any number of communities of interests, which might have nothing to do with labor. The post-industrial and post-capitalist society would seem to generate an infinite number of subjectivities compared with the peasant societies (Sarup, 49). But my reading of some postmodern and cold war novels has left me wondering about the precariousness of maintaining a fluid subjectivity or, better still, subjective positionalities in the face of the encroachment of mediated narratives of the self, constantly being foisted on the struggling and oppressed subjects. In the same context I would like to argue that in these novels the subjects are constantly under the threat of colonization by the dominant "Other(s)", that "Other" being characters, state apparatuses, and discourses, narratives and even cultural plots, and also that the success of these novels depends to a great extent on the strategies employed to counter the colonization project and thereby maintain the fluidity of subjectivity as well as narration. I will attempt to trace the opposing processes of colonization and decolonization in Didion's Democracy, Morrison's Paradise, and Coover's The Public Burning.

Why do I have to bring in notions like the "big Other" and the "small other" and also the seemingly even far fetched one of colonialism and orientalism in a discussion about postmodern American fiction, the product of a post-industrial and post-capitalist society? The reason I do so is mostly because the society just mentioned is a post-cold war society as well, a fact which makes the issue of subjectivity more problematic and relevant to the scope and focus of not only psychoanalytic criticism but also postcolonial and multicultural criticism. The discourse(s) of the cold war were geared toward creating ideologically pure subjects on both sides of the divide, the full blooded American versus the "Homo Sovieticus". Therefore differences were denied and carefully weeded out in the interest of homogeneity. And consequently it was not a time when multiple identities were privileged, if you were an intellectual and felt the need to assert your intellectual integrity in the face of the constraint to be a good American or a good communist you had no choice but

My reading of some postmodern and cold war novels has left me wondering about the precariousness of maintaining a fluid subjectivity or, better still, subjective positionalities in the face of the encroachment of mediated narratives of the self, constantly being foisted on the struggling and oppressed subjects. In the same context I would like to argue that in these novels the subjects are constantly under the threat of colonization by the dominant "Other(s)", that "Other" being characters, state apparatuses, and discourses.

to become a marginal subject unless you wanted to defect to the other side and become a tame "dissident." This is where the Lacanian notion of the "big Other" and the "small other" comes in handy. In the three step development of the human subject, Lacan puts a lot of emphasis on the so called "mirror stage", when the young child becomes aware of his own separateness from the larger world around him, and also of his own integratedness. So the mirror stage has two aspects, one is what Lacan describes as "lack". It is actually a linguistic notion, which points out the nature of words, when we talk about a chair we actually talk about its absence. The mirror in which the child sees himself for the first time need not be a literal mirror, it is actually the mother's or the father's eyes in which the child sees itself. This is the beginning of the process of identification, the child becomes aware of what s/he is by finding out what s/he is not (Barry 114). In this instant the child is the small other and the parent is the big Other. These "others" need not only be persons but they can also be language or discourse and experiences. Post colonialism finds this idea very useful to explain and challenge the colonial position. The colonizer is the big other who finds the small other or the colonized useful in both what he is (idle, sensuous, prelogical, feminine, savage etc all that the colonizer is not) as well as in what he is not (efficient, rational, masculine, moral, having an universal agenda, all that the colonizer is). The presence of the subaltern colonized subject is useful in maintaining social homogeneity, something high on the agenda of the proponents and exponents of the cold war. But I think that it is still a very powerful issue in post coldwar western politics, altho of the Pan-American subjectivity: white, male, Christian/pseudo-Christian, free enterprise/capitalist. As a result, it has nothing to do with the eastern metaphor of the sea of stories that is comprised of numerous stories, each having its own center and needing no ultimate central position. In the words of the narrator of Rushdie's Haroun and the Sea of Stories: "He [Haroun] looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breath-

taking complexity; and Iff [short for Ifrit, or Genie] explained that these were the streams of story, that each colored strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as well the stories that had ever been told, and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Stories was in fact the biggest library in the universe. And because the stories were held here in fluid form they retained the ability to change, to become a new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories; so unlike a library of books, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was much more than a storeroom of years. It was not dead but alive (72)." The key idea here being the ability to join up with "other" stories, instead of suppressing them. If we look at any one of the passages from Uncle Sam's torrential speech, it is not too difficult to detect the various layers of narratives. For instance: "In the name of the great Jehovah and the continental Congress, I have passed the Rubicon-Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish, I'm in for a fight, I'll go my death on a fight, and with a firm reliance on the perfection of divine Protestants, a fight I must have, or else I'll have to be salted down to save my spilling! You hear me over thar, you washed-up varmints? This is the hope of the world talking to you! I'm Sam Slick the Yankee peddler- I can ride on a flash of lightnin', catch a thunderbolt in my fist, swaller niggers whole, and out-inscrutabilize the heathen Chinese (TPB Prologue 7)". This segment is interesting because of the ideological and racial elements layered together. The rational or supposedly rational discourse of the American Continental Congress is yoked with the angry Jehovah of the likes of Cotton Mather and Increase Mather. The heathen Chinese actually reflects the influx of Oriental refugees during and after the Second World War. The discourse of America as the hope of the world took a renewed significance after the 2nd World War, as the hope of unchallenged western dominance and the world order represented by it, was challenged by "irrational" upheavals in the orient and the end of the American monopoly over nuclear power. In other words this segment reflects the ideology of the cold war, essentialistic, homogenizing, confrontational, containing. It is "ori-

entalizing" and colonizing as well. In was my crisis: to accept what I already knew. That there was no author, no director, and the audience had no memories-they got reinvented every day! I'd thought: perhaps there is not even a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness! Perhaps we are all pretending! I'd been rather amazed at myself, having thought like this. Years of debate and adversary politics had schooled me toward a faith in denouement, and so in cause and consequence... It all served to confirm an old belief of mine that all men contain all views, right and left, theistic and atheistic, monadic and pluralistic; and only an artificial -call it political commitment to consistency hold them to steadfast singular positions. Is Nixon about to embrace the notion of subjective positionalities in the place of monadic subjectivity? The answer lies in the following segment: [...] There was something wrong with this black and white view, just as with the contrary idea held by the big-city Brahmins and ghetto provincials that only the cities were civilized the rest of the country untamed and barbarous. What was missing was the middle ingredient, the place in between where all the real motion took place now that the old frontier was gone: the suburbs, the waystops for transients, and thus the true America. My America. Dwight Eisenhower and Julius Rosenberg will never understand each other, but I could understand amend contain both. The middle ground is the "other", the 3rd, the alternative, Nixon stumbles on it, but immediately he "contains" it and negates its altogether This a good example of how Nixon discovers the space of the other, but soon colonizes it instead of using it as spring board of the freedom of the other. Nixon comes close to realizing the importance of maintaining the multiplicity of subject-positionality, but what he fails to understand is that one can remain committed to a certain subject position or several at the same time without necessarily having to go into a confrontation with any one of them. This is where empathy and solidarity comes in handy. Nixon actually enters the mind of the other, Ethel and experiences whatever she had experienced almost at first hand. Nixon and Ethel make love in the "3rd space" so to speak" and Nixon exclaims: Oh what a mind! I hardly recognized it! It was full

of hidden memories, astonishing thoughts, I've never seen it like this before, a vast moving darkness and brilliant flickering pictures, new and strange, called forth by the charged explorations of our mouths and hands. Some were frightening: "girls knocked down by fire hoses, men gassed in trenches and run down by police on galloping horses, villagers buried in bomb rubble, lives blighted by disease and poverty, children monstrously deformed by radiation or eaten up by vermin- yet it was all some how exiting, I reveled in all this experience and knew it to be good. I grasped Ethel's bottom and saw the face of a child. He seemed to live in a great city. I couldn't tell if he was black or white, Mexican, Italian, or Polish, but it didn't matter. I shared his dreams: he was a poet, a scientist, a great teacher, and proud craftsman. He was America it self (TPB 438). Unfortunately Nixon has insulated his subjectivity with the unreal discourse of America; it's popular cultural stories in the shape of movies, books, and even sales pitches. In the end Nixon fails to connect and loses the empathic channel.

Before we move on to the literal as well as metaphorical colonization of Nixon by uncle Sam, let us talk briefly of the Black Out episode which takes place as soon as Uncle Sam takes off his pants. A universal darkness of the people descends. It is actually the revelation of the collective otherness of the people that has been so far covered up by the discursial drapery of Uncle Sam. The people grope around blindly and encounter all the horrors they have been brought up to expect from the other. Now they find out that all along these horrors had been lurking in their own minds: "My GOD! IT'S A CREEPING SOCIALIST!"

"A FIVE PERCENTER!"
"THE FIFTH COLUMN!"
"THE ANTICHRIST!"

The caps could suggest the sensational captions of the coldwar comics like Captain America where you come across all these panicky white, middle class men and women running higgledy piggledy in the Times Square looking terrified at the darkling sky framing some galactic monstrosity, snarling and looming above them. Some one in the crazed crowd cries for light. I find it really ironic, because it is the withdrawal of Uncle Sam's discourse, the product of enlightenment, that brings

out all these monsters. In other words light/darkness opposition is deconstructed. The enlightenment discourse is actually a darkness that hides the grotesque other in the self. What Ron Sukenick calls "Colonialization" in 98.5 takes place with a vengeance at the end of the novel. Nixon is buggered by the madcap Uncle Sam. He is literally colonized, and contained by the discursial phallus of the goatish Uncle Sam: "Come here boy," he said, smiling frostily and jabbing his recruitment finger at me with one hand, unbuttoning his striped Pantaloons with the other: I want you." This puts the tradition of recruitment by Uncle Sam into a whole new perspective. The relationship between Uncle Sam and Nixon takes a radical step when the Uncle says: "You're forty years old son: time you was weaned!" Nixon is being violently expurgated of those experiences of the other he has been having, and is finally and irrevocably colon-zed. Now he comes to realize the meaning of the vacant look in the eyes of poor Eisenhower. Is the freedom of choosing subjective positions then finally defeated and contained in TPB? Not necessarily, there are the dissident others who exist in the margins and defend this notion. The man with the 3D spectacles who tries to escape goat himself, is a good example. We are told that there have been many like him who have tried to do the same before him, so it suggests a way out, maybe not any concerted effort but certainly a strong presence of otherness that could even step in to stop this public display of state sanctioned madness. Coover might not agree with the position taken up by the Rosenbergs but he has the empathic impulse to try to save them. The teachers who resign from their jobs and are praised by Einstein, Einstein himself, Picasso, Faulkner, and many others who are mentioned or hinted at are also resistant and resisting others not to be subdued by Uncle Sam. In all three novels just discussed, there is one thing in common, that language is either reappropriated by the colonized subjects to tell the counter narratives of their subjectivities, or language itself becomes a rebellious other. This happens overtly in The Public Burning where the messages on the electric display board are constantly scrambled by some mysterious power. But it is not the Phantom who's responsible, it is language it self which does the scrambling. If we remember the Lacanian notion that the human subjectivity is structured like language, then it follows that the human subject should also be able to scramble any artificial narrative imposed on it and keep moving through an infinite number of positionalities.

Ahsan Chowdhury is a Fulbright Scholar doing research at Virginia Commonwealth University.

literary news

From Arundhati Roy's Landscape a New Story Teller Emerges

by Binoo K. John

SHORT stories like poems are considered 'non-perishables' by the English publishing industry. They just stay on the shelves, unmoving, unruffled, mute testimonies to the fads of the book-reading elite.

Bucking the trend, New Delhi-based academic and author Susan Visvanathan has recently sold her collection of short stories to publishing giant Flamingo in England. This makes her yet another promising writer to be tagged on to the seemingly endless array of Indo-Anglian authors who have captured the imagination of the publishers the world over.

"Something Barely Remembered" is a collection of 15 short stories, four of which were published earlier. The collection will be published by Indialnk towards the end of the year in India and in England by Flamingo or its subsidiaries early next year.

"The stories are mostly concerned with the way Malayalees feel at home wherever they are. It could also be called a collection of travel stories which look at mental spaces," Visvanathan, who teaches sociology at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, told IANS.

Visvanathan had a habit of writing one or two short stories every year "to carve out my own rational identity." After Indialnk gave the thumbs up to four of her stories last year, the social anthropologist decided to bury herself in a fictional world and wrote 11 stories in one year to complete her collection.

After Roy's "God of Small Things" became a worldwide bestseller translated into 14 languages, Indian writers are looked at with a bit of awe. Writers like Jha, U.S.-based Jhumpa Lahiri whose just released "Interpreter of Maladies" is getting rave reviews, Amit Chaudhuri who has already written three novels, Ruchira Mukherjee who debuted last year with 'Toad in My Garden', Pankaj Mishra, whose novel 'Benaras' will be released later this year, are all part of the new phalanx of Indo-Anglian writers.

Though novelists and short story writers exist on different planes, it is tempting to dig out similarities between Visvanathan and novelist-activist Arundhati Roy. Both belong to the Kottayam region in central Kerala, both found inspiration for their tales from there, both are "out of the church" as Visvanathan refers to her situation, and both have by coincidence taken the Indialnk-David Goodwin (agent)-Flamingo route to the British literary world.

The similarities end there. If Roy's tales are powered by the intensity and brilliance of her prose, Visvanathan

borrows from her study of society and rituals.

Visvanathan is already 100 pages into her first novel which is set in Delhi and should relieve her out of the tag of belonging to the 'Kottayam school' of English writing.

Not to be missed, Visvanathan is actually quite a stranger to the world of fiction writing. She feathers her intellectual nest with insights and jargon from social anthropology. She announced her arrival with the 'The Christians of Kerala' (Oxford, 1993), an anthropological study of the rituals and

beliefs of Jacobite Syrian Christians.

Last year came Visvanathan's "Ethnography of Mysticism," (Institute of Advance Studies, Shimla) which according to her was an effort to find out whether "we sociologists can understand the mystical space".

Visvanathan has a lot to live up to. At some level her short stories are bound to be compared to the recent major Indian novels, notably Raj Kamal Jha's "A Blue Bedspring".

Indo-Anglian writing has been on an upward spiral ever since Roy won the Booker Prize three years ago, not to count the influence that Salman Rushdie's writings have had.

After Roy's "God of Small Things" became a worldwide bestseller translated into 14 languages, Indian writers are looked at with a bit of awe. Writers like Jha, U.S.-based Jhumpa Lahiri whose just released "Interpreter of Maladies" is getting rave reviews, Amit Chaudhuri who has already written three novels, Ruchira Mukherjee who debuted last year with 'Toad in My Garden', Pankaj Mishra, whose novel 'Benaras' will be released later this year, are all part of the new phalanx of Indo-Anglian writers.

Lahiri who now writes regularly for the New Yorker magazine told the California newspaper India-West about her short-story collection last month: "I just try to bring a person to life." Visvanathan should agree to that.

— India Abroad News Service

poem

Achilles' Heels

by Nafisa Jamal

Leaning on the balcony rails
With a piece of cake
Freshly baked
Held securely between thumb and index finger
I felt the wind lifting my hair
Playing havoc with untamed curls
Releasing tension, letting free
Pent up emotions
Gushing forth
Left me bereft of protective indifference.
I became a speck, a nonentity
Akin the dissolving clouds hanging overhead
Time stood still, and all things else
Till a dragging sound
Made me turn
And look at the girl whose fate I shared
Who could not walk proper
Because of her Cancer.



How cruel, reminders can sometimes be
Ruining moments of perfect glee!
I pondered as I turned my back
To all that I loved with soul and heart
And entered our numbered, limited territory
Clutching cold and colder reality.

(The writer, is an Assistant Professor of the Dept. of English Dhaka University she had recently been to Houston for the treatment of cancer and stayed at Surrey House Medical Center Hotel where this poem was composed.)