



Hybridity and Blurred Boundaries- Studying the Cosmopolitan Spirit in Individuals in the Three Texts of The Woman Warrior, My Beautiful Laundrette and The In-Between World of Vikram Lall

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Abstract— This paper aims to understand what being cosmopolitan entails by delving into three texts- *The Woman Warrior*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Each text will discover different aspects of national identity and the contrast it presents to the modern understanding of the term cosmopolitan. The paper will raise questions on what nationalism means in modern society and what outlines nationalist identities and the space it needs to fit in the global landscape.

Keywords— *Diaspora, Displacement, Globalization, Modernity, Nation*



INTRODUCTION

From the existence of Pangaea to a gradual brokenness in the supercontinent that gave rise to multiple small continents, human spirit has come to become fragmented, constricted by the boundaries of the nation they call their 'home'. However, through the crevices of these boundaries, we see a light of commonality and a cosmopolitan spirit shining bright to celebrate the spirit of universal indivisibility. This paper aims to analyze diverse texts that have characters with varying temperaments to understand the idea of blurred boundaries which will seek to appreciate the cosmopolitan spirit that is inherent in every individual. The three texts that will be examined in the paper are- *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *My Beautiful Laundrette* by Hanif Kureishi and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* by M.G.Vassanji. Concerns of nationalism, independence and multicultural background will be delved into, to make sense of individuals' identities as a combination of several factors that is not limited by a nation's boundary but transcend every created division in a functioning society.

Nations are demarcated, restricted severely by boundaries, guarded zealously by several institutions established to continue the legacy of each nation. Despite their allegiance to an institutionalized polity, the indomitable spirit of people rises above this, to be a part of the 'third-space' characterized by a blend of hybridity and finding nativity within. The texts that this paper will examine will show how identity is malleable and unlike the conventional understanding where national identity supersedes any other kinds, individuals with multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds have narratives that find home in the entire map of the globe.

The Woman Warrior, subtitled *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, the first text to be analyzed to understand the cosmopolitan spirit in individuals was written by Kingston in 1975, an outstanding creation that tells the story of a Chinese-America woman through five separate narratives woven beautifully together that influenced the identity of the writer. In the novel, the psyche of the narrator will be understood from her multicultural background and conflicting traditions between new world America and the heritage brought from China. In the

narrator readers see a need to rise above the boundaries of both the nation to create a new identity, an identity that is a blend of features that call to the narrator.

Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* is another tale of diaspora about Asian citizens living in South London as they navigate Thatcher's new economic rules and conditions. This text offers a different perspective to understand how people are beyond boundaries, cosmopolitan even in their economic dealings, struggling towards assimilating the lucrative facets of both, to create a working world that while not having close affinity to traditions doesn't shun them completely. The complexity arises when the two extremes of modernity and tradition spar to define the identity of the characters.

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall by M. G. Vassanji as the name aptly puts talks of the 'in-between' world, a world far beyond the limits of any national boundaries with people uniting to become one in the face of warring ideologies and national heritage. Published in the year 2003, traversing through the rough times of Kenya's independence struggle, it brings to light characters that negotiate spatial differences across continents while imbibing different traditions from different nations, having some commonality in their struggles but being worlds apart despite that. Themes of identity, nationhood and belongingness are inherently present in the novel all under the shadows of multiculturalism and an interconnected world.

In the past, several studies have been undertaken to understand this spirit in individuals/ characters to be cosmopolitan, to be a part of a space where boundaries are blurred and nation-state divisions are not starkly apparent. The three subject texts of the paper have been reviewed time and again by several authors and critics who have come to appreciate the essence of individuals to lean towards being global citizens, in terms of language, traditions, loyalties and principles. As has been suggested by Sangeeta Jhajharia and Mamta Beniwal in their paper titled 'Braving out in the Face of Constraints: The Woman Warrior', in the second part of the novel called the "White Tigers", the Chinese mythology of an avenging female figure that formed a part of Kingston's identity, having travelled oceans became 'new, American' influencing the author in a new way 'through the competing discourses of the emigrant's "invisible world" and "solid America."' Dr. Milon Franz in one of his essays says 'women's memories, like the collective memories of the nation state and of the ethnic or diasporic community, are heterogeneous', not rigidly defined by boundaries which Kingston uses in her novel as a tool to present her identity as she understands it. As Fatima Mujcinovic says in her

paper aptly titled: 'Self-Expression and World-Expression: Critical Multicultural Literacy in Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros',

'Initially disoriented by the tension between her Western education and her rearing in a Chinese household, the young protagonist learns to reconcile these different forms of cultural knowledge while remaining aware that her self-definition will always be complex, fluid and at times contradictory.'

In the screen play for 'My Beautiful Laundrette', Kureishi creates a world of characters within London that is away from its reality finding home in South Asia while maintaining an ever-present link with the Britain of that time. As editor, Adil Bhat puts it, the narrative is 'laced with the complexities of postcolonial racial identity that travels through the borders.' Defined as a 'cosmopolitan film', Kureishi in his work has created characters that are a blend of different cultures, trying to negotiate a home for themselves by navigating other factors like sexuality, race and economic perspectives.

As Jairus Omuteche says 'The nature of diasporic identities and belonging that M. G. Vassanji represents in his novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, are informed by the impacts of the planetary movements and displacements that were a direct result of this European imperialism.' Planetary movements present a picture where the world is one whole and people are an integral part of it, changing and creating dynamic identities for themselves. As a bildungsroman, the novel follows the trajectory of the lives of many characters as they conciliate their familial expectations with the modern country of Kenya just having attained independence. As James O'rao from the University of Nairobi says in his paper which has been titled- 'Nationalism, Subversive History and Citizenship: The Quest for Identity in the Postcolonial Nation in M.G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*,' "'an individual speaker's utterance is not just coming from an isolated, decontextualized voice' but rather manifests various cultures and discourses in which it participates'. Identities of characters are shown to be a consequential creation of various factors coming together, an appropriation of cosmopolitan attitude in people which is intrinsically present.

By studying the texts in this context, one can understand how nation is an imagined creation and people in reality can't be held by it. Humans have an innate spirit of oneness that is manifested later through their actions and words despite being bound by the rules of various independent nations that consider themselves the sole

power in a position to dictate the actions of its citizens. Due to an ever present sense of being cosmopolitan, individuals try to associate with people from all over, learning and acquiring varied traditions blending it with the legacy they are born with. Exploring this aspect helps in empathizing with the way people of a diaspora behave, their ways of associating with people, engaging in cross border relationships and creating an environment where there is space for new identities that are not dedicated to a nation to evolve and thrive. Reading the texts from a cosmopolitan perspective helps in questioning the ideas of nationalism and a person's supposed loyalty, whether it should be to the country they are born in, the country their family originates from or an altogether new space that is an amalgamation of the two as a part of the identity of the individual.

In *The Woman Warrior*, there are several instances that depict how characters are cosmopolitan despite the rigidity of the boundaries surrounding them. The subtitle of the novel has 'Ghosts' in it, a term that could be understood to represent the transcendental spirit of these unidentified individuals, similar to the spirit of the narrator that can't be bound either by the ancient Chinese traditions or the American dream that is always forward looking. Like ghosts that meander past boundaries, the narrator's spirit traverses different eras and nations to establish uniqueness for itself. In the first story called –'No Name Woman', Kingston says 'Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.' This is the beginning of a 'double consciousness' that is a new space characterized by multiculturalism that is a key factor responsible for the critical growth of the narrator. In her mother's story of her aunt, she believes that her mother is taking away her freedom of speech by imposing their Chinese customs – 'a ready tongue is an evil'. Language is an important aspect of her growing up in a background of dual cultures. In the last story called 'A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe', language is used as a motif to represent conflict between nations which coincide in individuals to co-exist. While initially, the narrator attributes her weakness of English speech to her Chinese tradition, she gradually realizes the import of it in her life, and how it has helped her retain her individuality in a significantly different reality. In her self-fashioning, hybridity finds a meaning where Chinese culture and American modernity combine to create a space where as a woman she can use her own voice. In the story 'White Tigers', she narrates the tale of an avenging Chinese woman who takes up the role of a warrior, otherwise limited to the men of the society. In presenting this tale of infinite courage, the narrator presents a new

mix, one that is modernized but that of an ancient myth. The very act of writing the novel can be seen as a symbol of hybridity and a study in the ever expanding cosmopolitan attitude wherein the writer talks of Chinese folklores and traditions from a different time in a foreign language, that of English far removed from the stories it has set to narrate. The stories are thus not limited to the country where it originated but through the spirit of the writer and her work becomes absorbed in the literature of the world.

A complex novel, *The Woman Warrior* seeks to represent the marginalization of women in any space and their incessant struggle to carve a space for themselves and thereby a common spirit that links women from all over, regardless of their nation. The story 'At the Western Palace' ends with a promise 'Brave Orchid's daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them', a promise that is common amongst women and daughters all over the world. The indomitable spirit of these women know no nation and these characters find themselves placed in the same context which they try to overcome all over the world.

In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the laundrette that Omar and Johnny set to run in South London is in itself a cosmopolitan space, a place where London and Pakistan become one without inhibitions. In the text, readers encounter a scene where 'Omar and Johnny are making love vigorously', two distinct identities conjoining as a result of their inner spirit calling to the other individual. Throughout the entire script, readers are struck by how it is only people having Pakistani origin who succeed in this highly capitalized society run by the principles of Thatcher. In one of his statement, Nasser, Omar's uncle says 'In this damn country which we hate and love, you can get anything you want.' Despite his traditional values which he exercises at home, he shows the capacity of being adept at using the opportunities the new country has to offer. This shows how individuals can thrive in unfamiliar situations, just by virtue of their cosmopolitan spirit that compels them to succeed in the new environment that tests their identities. The two strands of Pakistani and English culture become one in Omar, in an increasingly hybrid London where multiple ethnicities reside. Johnny, despite being surrounded by white middle-class people, finds his affinity to Omar, a person of Pakistani origin showing how people and their relationships can be across countries and penetrate the constructed and defined boundaries of nations, including those of the colonized and colonizing nation. In their relationship, Omar and Johnny are intimately aligning to the supposed 'other', an act showing the all-encompassing

nature that is found in humans to be a part of the entire whole of existence. A source of tension in the text is Johnny's past and his transitioning as an accepting youth. Papa says 'The boy who came here one day dressed as a fascist with a quarter inch of hair?' a stereotypical representation of Johnny as an English boy against the Pakistani immigrants. However, he grows up to be an individual different from his friends, establishing a relationship with a boy from Pakistan, their relationship a testament to the world coalescing into one small space in their characters.

The title of the third text *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* has a very important key phrase which is 'in-between', a space that is neither here nor there. The space is a representation of the internal spirit of the characters that are created in the novel. The book has in its opening passages the straightforward line –'I simply crave to tell my story' being an active agent who is not relegated to the fringes of the political discourse between the colonialists and the Africans and yearns to narrate as an active self and not object, a self that has seen several countries. Immediately following the incident of the narrator's whirlwind relationship with Sophia, readers are introduced to a traditional Punjabi girl whom he is expected to marry and he follows through with the decision. While with one of them he experiences passion, with the latter he experiences a companionable friendship. These two contrasting characters and their relationship with the narrator show how his spirit is cosmopolitan in its very essence, surpassing the stereotypical expectations associated with him and emerging as a global being. This is similar for Deepa, Lall's sister who has a passionate relationship with Njoroge but is forced under familial pressure to marry Dilip with whom she leads an overtly satisfactory life. The Mau Mau oath that the narrator takes with Njoroge- 'You must take an oath. I will take an oath.' shows how as an individual he goes beyond the traditions of the nation his family comes from to actually be a part of Kenya and provides his support for their independence in his child-like manner, a step that is taken more strongly by the politically-inclined Mahesh Uncle, having agency of his own as an adult. All the cities of Kenya, Pakistan and the new world of Canada seem to find a representation in the narrator and his thoughts, his writings with no inclination towards representing any higher than the other. Another aspect is that of language which is used to represent relationships. The Javeris, who 'branched out across five continents' are a representation of the spirit of the characters, spread across continents to reach an individual's ultimate peak. Terms like 'dadaji' 'bhaiya' all take the characters back to their Asian roots as do their excited exclamations like 'Badmaash'. While they have

adopted the new language, the language of a new land where they find themselves based, the characters often go back to their roots to express their true emotions or to reach out to people they share an emotional bond with showing how people are indeed global beings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three texts show how nationalism and national loyalty while important aspects of an individual's identity don't limit the innate spirit in people to surpass any national boundary and become cosmopolitan beings in the true sense of the term. Identities are formed as a result of several factors that come into play but deep down individuals show a spirit that brings all humanity into one common space, a global arena, undivided by politics, boundaries or ideologies. The boundaries are not only blurred but also receding in these characters. The act of storytelling thus becomes so compelling because the characters know no bounds and present their struggles as a part of the global phenomenon. With globalization becoming a reality in the current world, this idea is becoming more dominant, of people becoming one and the power of restrictive society becoming limited to curb the cosmopolitan spirit in individuals. While global citizenry seems a far off situation, the world is showing a gradual and consistent move towards becoming one home for all to create a feeling of belongingness for everyone. The three texts are works of wonderful creation, showing far away narratives which are yet linked in their aim to create home in the multiplicity of people and nations. Therefore in art, just like people, the world all comes to be one, cosmopolitan and cutting across boundaries.

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