

In the Name of God

the Most Compassionate, the Merciful



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Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English Language

M.A. Thesis

The House(s) of Dreams: A Comparative Study of the Fiction of
Arundhati Roy and Meena Alexander

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و آنچه خود داشت ز بیگانه تمنا می کرد

سالها دل طلب جام جم از ما می کرد

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To All My Dear Ones

Abstract

Anglophone novel represents the contemporary India, the India after the colonial rule. Roy and Alexander, as two distinguished writers of postcoloniality, voice the aftermath of colonialism in their works. Identity, as one of major postcolonial issues, has a double thrust in their writings: the self and the nation. Roy and Alexander attempt to narrate identity through spaces of history and culture; they represent neocolonialism as a corollary of internal colonization and imperial othering. Accordingly, their novels become histories translated into fictions which in turn mirror the anxiety of identity, mixed with troubled dreams, distorted self-images, the sense of loss, seclusion and exclusion. Focusing on Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Alexander's *Nampally Road*, *Manhattan Music*, this study explores postcolonial identity in the light of colonial history. Employing Homi K. Bhabha's, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's and Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theories, it discusses the legacy of the colonial past and the postcolonial disruption in the Indian conception of selfhood, cultural imperialism, cultural displacement and diaspora. The latter, occurring as a result of migration and the subsequent exile, due to the intermixture and cross-cultural negotiations among the characters, has controversial reverberations in the works under discussion. These works reveal a split in the identity of the characters and hence the impossible reciprocal recognition between the self and the other. Besides, since the works are written by Indian women writers, the status of women as invisible subalterns is also

addressed. Overall, the study is a venture to delve into the postcolonial Indian identity through the windows of history and memory after the Indian Independence. It conceives of these works, as belonging to the resistance literature, as cultural reworkings and reinterpretations.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander, the Anglophone novel, identity, postcoloniality, neocolonialism, diaspora.

Table of Contents

Title	Page
Chapter One: Introduction	
1-1 Thesis Statement.....	1
1-2 Methodology and Research Questions.....	3
1-3 Definition of Key Terms.....	5
1-4 Review of Literature.....	8
Chapter Two: Critical Forum	
2-1 Introduction.....	12
2-2 Coloniality and postcoloniality.....	13
2-3 Nationhood.....	24
2-4 Location of Identity.....	31
Chapter Three: Revisiting Colonial Legacy in Arundhati Roy's <i>The God of Small Things</i>	
3-1 Introduction.....	35
3-2 Caste and Class.....	40
3-3 Neocolonialism.....	47

Title	page
3-4 Women as Subaltern.....	52
3-5 Of Culture and Colonialism.....	56

Chapter Four: Postcolonial National Space in Arundhati Roy’s *Nampally*

Road

4-1 Introduction.....	62
4-2 Nation and Narration.....	63
4-3 The Split Discourse of the Nation.....	69
4-4 Liminality of the Nation-space.....	73

Chapter Five: The Shock of Recognition: Postcolonial Woman-space in Meena

Alexander’s Manhattan Music

5-1 Introduction.....	76
5-2 The Uncanny Migratory Experience.....	79
5-3 Transnationalism and Diaspora.....	86
5-4 Ethnicity, Resistance, and Postcolonial Identity.....	94

Chapter Six: Roy and Alexander: Warranting Indian English Novel

6-1 Introduction.....	96
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Title	page
6-2 The issue of language and Empowerment.....	96
6-3 Memory and Space.....	101
6-4 History and Postcolonial Identity.....	104

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7-1 Conclusion.....	108
7-2 Suggestions for Further Research.....	110

Works Cited

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GSTH: The God of Small Things

NR: Nampally Road

MM: Manhattan Music

FL: Fault Lines

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1-1 Thesis Statement

A multitude of postcolonial Indian novelists interrogate the postcolonial condition in their fiction. The history of postcolonial Indian novel, as exemplified in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road* and *Manhattan Music*, which are the focus of this study, reveals various forms of oppressions in the colonial and postcolonial history. To investigate these novels, it is inevitable to consider Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977), which discusses the "orientalized orient" and cultural presentations and discourses which inscribe the positional superiority and inferiority relationship between the West and the East. Indeed, the identity-fracturing discourses of colonialism have grown

complex after the postcolonial era since colonial history has turned into a haunted past and the dreams of the real India have become imagined myths.

The study, first, surveys the critical theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Spivak, and Frantz Fanon, and then analyzes the works under discussion through those spectacles. Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity of cultures and identity and his proposition of the narrated identity of the nation as ongoing process can be best applied to Roy's and Alexander's novels. In these terms, *The God of Small Things* addresses interracial marriages, multilingual society and colonial legacy in the linguistic obsession of the characters. It shows how the repressed experiences of childhood return to paralyze the everyday life. In the course of Alexander's novels, the issues of migratory experience, internal colonization, doomed cross-cultural love, nationalism and uncanny postcolonial art are dealt with.

The second major critic of this study is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak whose body of theories involves Marxism, feminism, and psychoanalysis. Her criticism predominantly centers on cultural self-representation, the "study of subaltern in the context of the decolonization" (Ray 245), the role of capitalism, and multiculturalism. *The God of Small Things* is an incarnation of a class-distinct society where racism, sexism and social injustice prevail. It is the narrative of unvoiced subalterns whose memories clash in divided spaces. In *Nampally Road* literature enters the arena of politics and addresses the ways of resisting and unlearning racist exercises to establish an ethical relationship between the self and

the other. *Manhattan Music*, also, through performative art which turns into an strategic essentialism in the course of the novel, attempts to create a new myth of survival by rewriting the Indian myth in the context of postcoloniality.

Frantz Fanon, another postcolonial critic of this study, analyzes the "subject and production of identity" (Malpas76). He regards the "constitution of the self through a desiring intersubjectivity" (68). The desire of the other in *The God of Small Things* is projected in the desire of the characters for the language of the other (British English) which is associated with aristocracy, nobility and refinement. In a similar vein, in *Nampally Road* this desire is conspicuous both in the fetishization of the objects from imperial countries and in the governmental strategies which popularize the consumer culture. Also, *Manhattan Music* echoes how the "colonial subject is caught in the oppressor's gaze, is split, distorted, breached, and disturbed, unable to reconcile her or his self-image with the images that are projected back by others" (69).

Therefore, the study, in the light of critical theories in Roy's and Alexander's novels, endeavors to shed light on the postcolonial condition of Indian people whose contradictory dreams reflect and inflect new spaces to define their nationality as well as their identity.

1-2 Methodology and Research Questions

The project analyzes, in seven chapters, the Indian post-independence history, nationality and identity in Roy's and Alexander's works. The first chapter presents the review of literature. The second chapter is an introduction to the critical forum of the study which includes the postcolonial theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon. The third chapter focuses on Roy's *The God of Small Things* and examines the repercussions of colonialism in post-independence India. It probes the questions of postcoloniality, subalternity, and hybrid identity within the scope of the novel. Focusing on Alexander's *Nampally Road*, the fourth chapter, discusses the identity of the nation as narrated and demonstrates how Alexander responds to the issue of postcolonial identity. In the fifth chapter, Alexander's *Manhattan Music* is analyzed in terms of diaspora and transnationalism. In chapter six, the two writers' approaches to postcolonial condition and the complexity of self-constitution are discussed comparatively so that the achievement of each writer in these areas can be evaluated. In short, chapter seven concludes the discussion and presents the further area of research.

Below are some of the main questions the study attempts to answer throughout the thesis:

1. How are identity and history interrelated?
2. How do Roy and Alexander's conceptions of history differ?
3. What is the modality of memory transcribed into the novels discussed?
4. How power and language are reflected in the novels under study?

1-3 Definition of Key Terms

Colonialism: is the discourse “of conquest and domination” (Loomba 2). It signifies “the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history” (2). As a grand narrative, this discourse with its civilizing mission structuralizes the colonized world in complicated strata. It expresses "distinctions and discriminations" between the colonizer and the colonized, assuming "the colonized as lacking the same level of humanity and human rights" (McLeod 2). Thus, through this "unequal imaginative distinctions," "if the colonizers were deemed civilized, then the colonized were declared barbaric; if the colonizers were thought of as rational, reasonable, cultured, learned, then the colonized were dismissed as illogical, awkward, naïve, ignorant" (2). This set of colonial relations, imposing models of identity, authorizes the colonial difference and inequality.

Postcolonialism: sets "propositions about the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies" (Said 15). This impact consists of "the nature and consequences of colonial education and the links between western knowledge and colonial power" (15). It "is concerned with the appropriation of dominant languages, discourses and forms of narrative, the struggle over the representations of place, history, race, and ethnicity" (15). Postcolonial practice in the relations of domination and subordination involves "a theoretical and political positions which embodies an active concept of intervention within oppressive

circumstances" (Seiwoong 8). Therefore, the main goals of postcolonial studies can be referred to as "resistance, transformation, antagonism, disobedience, and ultimately the end to all forms of intercultural domination" (8).

Representation: in postcolonial literary theories denotes colonial representation, rendering the colonized linguistically, culturally and politically. The process of representation entails an inevitable theatricality, that is, there can be no neutral depiction and what is represented is not truth but representations made possible through the language which is "a highly organized and encoded system, which employs many devices to express, indicate, exchange messages and information, represent and so forth" (Said 22). Hence, every representation meshes into the web of many other representations, holding a universe of discourse with a history and tradition. This discourse of representation with its linguistic and philosophical limitations and "their potential to mask real social and political inequalities" (26) signify destructive consequences on the lives of disempowered groups.

Identity: in literary modern and postmodern theories finds a subjective edge which makes it associate with incompleteness and split between consciousnesses and the unconscious. It is shaped by the ever-inadequate reciprocal recognition of the self and the other. In postcolonial theories, the question of identity revolves around the constructed identity of the colonial subject who is caught up in the desire of the other. Thus, identity is constituted "through the interactions with others that take place in the realm of culture of the other, and if that culture is itself

as disjointed as it is in the colonial and postcolonial world then identity too will necessarily be fragmentary" (Malpas 70).

Race: is an umbrella term for human race but its defining and categorizing has created divergent social realities which set a hegemonic relationship between the assumed superior and the oppressed inferior. The subalternist and racist mindset, throughout the world, has resulted in colonialism, slavery and genocide. Since race deals with the culture of a group, the notions of class and gender, which are other forms of division between self/other and authentic/unauthentic, come into existence. Frantz Fanon believes that "race, gender and sexuality are social and linguistic constructs rather than stable, biological foundations" (Fanon, *Black Skin* xiv). The controversial question of racial differences, leading to racism, brings about a hierarchized society which is necessary to scrutinize in order to comprehend British Colonialism.

Diaspora: is the narrative of postcolonial migration. Etymologically, it "derives from the Greek (dia meaning over; sperion meaning to sow or scatter)" and "invokes images of multiple journeys (Huddart 181). While it was originally used to refer specifically to the exile of the Jews from Palestine, more recently the term has been adopted and adapted by postcolonial scholars and artists to refer to the forced and voluntary migrations set in motion by empire" (152). Associated with "movements through and between locations and even with dislocation" (151), the cultural displacement incites nostalgia, desire to return back and a sense of