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Identity and Nationalistic Categorization of Literature: A Study of Zulfikar Ghose's Novels

Showkat Hussain

Research Scholar (Ph.D.)

MANUU, Hyderabad.

Abstract:

It has often been observed that the central artistic preoccupation of expatriate, diasporic and exile writers is a search for identity and creation of home calling in memory to build it imaginatively. In the postcolonial transnational situation the variegated mixture of ethnically and racially heterogeneous people has subverted the process of identity formation vis-à-vis landscapes. In spite of this fact the association of identity and belongingness to a place is still a dominant theme in most of the postcolonial diasporic writers. Zulfikar Ghose avoids a direct and realistic portrayal of nationalistic associations and themes. But the themes of importance and remembrance of past, memory and retrieval, loss and reconstruction of home and identity are still there in Ghose's works. The certainty and randomness in the life of Ghose's characters which although is a hallmark of modern life makes them look fascinating to be understood vis-a-vis their identity, memory, and torment. He deliberately avoids setting his novels in his native homeland India/Pakistan and instead keeps South America and its interiors as a backdrop in his novels. Ghose's postmodern stance regarding nationalism and nationalistic boundaries where he refuses to categorize writers within nationalistic confines is supported by the theory of transnationalism which argues that such affiliations have been rendered obsolete. The dilemma of the subject is focused on and the fragmented identity is both as a source of torment in modernistic terms as well as a necessary and positive means to establish and ascertain a poststructuralist and postmodernist articulation of self and identity as perpetually splintered and different. Ghose's attempt in his novels is to present poststructuralist rendering of the concepts of home, nationalism and alienation as situations with no reference to geographical place. Nation as an oppressive tool renders people question their allegiances to it. Ghose' writings follow the argument that exilic identity and culture contain a series of dialectical tensions between nationalism and globalised world; representation of nation and community as oppressive as well as comforting spaces; and the sense of belonging and not belonging.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile, Postmodernism, Identity, Belongingness.

Zulfikar Ghose, a prolific writer of poems, short stories, novels and critical works, was born in Sialkot in 1935, raised in India and now since long living in Texas. He refuses to be categorized as a politically committed writer of a certain ideology or resistance strategy. He is not a usual postcolonial writer who takes up sides in a political sense. His forte lies in the use of language which is lyrical and replete with vivid imagery. The images of Punjab, the sublime beauty of South American landscapes, the wilderness of the jungles of the Amazon etc

collaborate with the most ambitious and experimental form and styles in his works. His *idée fixe* with form, a passion to always make it new and a struggle to find a style which suits his collage of subject matter makes it difficult to put him in a particular category of writers. He is always more concerned with 'how it is said' rather than 'what is said'. His unwavering stance in favour of form as opposed to subject matter and ideas proves contrary to the tastes of the critics of South Asian writers and therefore the apparent reason of the lack of attention towards his works. It is because of his refusal of nationalistic categorization of writers and his apolitical writing Zulfikar Ghose didn't receive much critical attention neither in the West nor in his native land when there are writers who are more concerned about the content and subject matter and have politicized the ethos in their native countries. To his relative obscurity Ghose reasons out this in an interview with Mansoor Abbasi: "if you are an Indian and write a novel set in India, your book will immediately receive the attention of professors teaching post-colonial literature; but if you are a Pakistani writing a novel that is set in Brazil, the same professors are not going to look at it" (116-17). The standards of evaluating the Third World literature are more political than aesthetic because critical debates are in one way or the other connected with colonialism. The emphasis shouldn't be on information, but on the artistic value of a work. Ghose's obscurity and lack of recognition seems to be related to the fact that critics are more ready to praise only those who are Indian nationalists, who are close and sympathetic to Indian traditions and not those who are objective, detached or fault finding. To quote Jussawalla: "Traditionally, once a Brahmin crossed the seas, he lost his position of status. Contemporary criticism merely invokes a similar authoritarianism. The concern with the effort to categorize writers as native sons and expatriates is a function of a narrow, brahmanical point of view (Qtd. in Rahman 9). Zulfikar Ghose refuses to be categorized into labels "...I must repeat that I despise labels. Categories are for clerks in bureaucracies and have nothing to do with art. The worst category invented for writers is the nationalistic one, as though some sort of literary Olympic games were in progress. A writer is interested in the best literature wherever it comes from, and a writer who makes a special place in his reading for the works of his countrymen and women has to be one who is more interested in a who's who type of gossip than he is in his art" (Rahman, *Interview* 9). Ghose finds reason in his refusal to be categorized like Postcolonial in Ann McClintock's essay, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls in the Term 'Postcolonial'", where she says that the use of the word 'post' has "shifted the binary axis of power (Colonizer/Colonized) to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance since it does not distinguish between the beneficiaries of colonialism and the casualties of colonialism" (254). The term postcolonial literature "gives more weight to colonial power than is warranted. It does continue the oppressions of Western hegemonic orders and privileges the Western paradigms as the yardstick" (Parameswaran 313). Therefore, it is no surprise that Ghose's fiction avoids a settled location in which he would like to situate himself. His novels are set in geographical terrains and cultural backdrops that are widely disparate: from rural Punjab or urban Pakistan to London and Putney, from Brazil that he sometimes claims is also India as Rio is Bombay to the Texas of his academic labours. All these places are as much physical locations as imaginative linguistic constructs that serve as settings to

explore the idea of a “home” that never was and an identity that is ever in the process of becoming.

It has often been observed that the central artistic preoccupation of expatriate, diasporic and exile writers is a search for identity and creation of home calling in memory to build it imaginatively. In the case of many exilic writers like James Joyce, V. S. Naipaul, Ngugi Wa Thiango, Katherine Masefield, and other postcolonial writers “the flight into exile was followed by the painstaking reconstruction in fiction of the home in near-autobiographical form” (Gurr 17). In an exilic experience whether forced or a voluntary one time proves to be a great healer. Once the impact of shock of uprooting and transfer are over, the process of identity seeking, establishing new roots and starting anew begins. In the postcolonial transnational situation the variegated mixture of ethnically and racially heterogeneous people has subverted the process of identity formation vis-à-vis landscapes. In spite of this fact the association of identity and belongingness to a place is still a dominant theme in most of the postcolonial diasporic writers. Much more than a geographical phenomenon identity seems to be a generational phenomenon which passes on from one person to another like the ownership of a place. Identity, despite a lot of vagueness in the term, refers to the bondings and activities which to a large extent formulate the self conception or self realization of an individual or a group. It is a kind of a moral commitment and a scheme of interaction by which individuals orient themselves in the social world.

The fluidity, changeability, and hybridity of identity make it hard to fix it as the basis of any entitlement. The term ‘identity’ encompasses religious, indigenous, linguistic, gendered dimensions for self-understanding. It refers to a stable sense of ‘self’ maintained over a period of time. Duncan Bell understands identity as “the relatively stable—though not essentialist— sense of ‘self’ that either an individual or a group (or both) maintain over time” (5). Identity whether individual or social “refers to the attachments that people have to particular communities, ways of life, sets of beliefs, or practices that play a central role in their self-conception or self-understanding. When people claim that a practice, a place, or an activity is important to their identity, they usually mean that it reflects something important about their sense of who they are or that they cannot realize something important about themselves without access to it. When they claim that an ascriptive characteristic, such as their race, gender, or ethnicity, is central to their identity, they mean that they understand themselves partly in terms of this characteristic” (Eisenberg 18).

Zulfikar Ghose claims as also by various other critics that he unlike other postcolonial diasporic writers avoids the subject matter to be the prime focus in his novels as expected by western market places and their readers. Usually the postcolonial writers write about homeland, while away from home and idealizing the landscape while apparently taking sides with particular socio-political ideologies. Ghose avoids a direct and realistic portrayal of nationalistic associations and themes. “Of all the categories into which literature is divided, the worst is the nationalistic one, especially among writers in the English language, which is the language of

many nations” (Ghose, *Beckett's* 5). But the themes of importance and remembrance of past, memory and retrieval, loss and reconstruction of home and identity are still there in Ghose’s works. Like Joyce Ghose also writes in self imposed exile from his native land when it comes to settings of his novels, but the memories of places and people provide a raw material for his fiction. He deliberately avoids setting his novels in his native homeland India/Pakistan and instead keeps South America and its interiors as a backdrop in his novels.

In his novel *Triple Mirror of the Self* Ghose through the narrator shows the “conflict with which the self is confronted, that is, how far we ourselves are ultimately fictions in rewriting or reconstructing the self via memory and imagination. While the act of constructing the past has a markedly fictive dimension to it, Ghose makes us challenge the concept of self as a fixed entity in an era of worldwide cultural intersections” (Butt 113). The broken and fractured identity which Ghose experienced himself, when he left his roots for the West, is imaginatively transformed into this novel. The very first fracture in his identity happened when his family left Sialkot to move to Bombay where his father changed the family name ‘Ghaus’ into Ghose to succumb to the demands of adaptation and blending. In his autobiography *The Confessions of a Native Alien* he expresses this dilemma of identity and belongingness. He describes himself as a Native-Alien in Europe as well as in the Indo-Pakistan of his early life. He stands as an “Indo-Pakistani born before Pakistan existed, moved to Bombay, then England” and the feeling of (un)belonging and fluid identity explains the “schizophrenic theme of much of [his] thinking” (Ghose, *Confessions* 1-2).

The Triple Mirror of the Self although uses a form of antirealism unlike *The Murder of Aziz Khan* has a subject matter that is specifically Indian. The fictiveness of one place is underscored by the real one and vice versa. The transparency of real places like Bombay is destabilized by fictitious places like Suxavat and at the same time the presence of real places establishes the connection with the imaginative ones. The novel thematizes the notions of identity and individual quests that are part of the author’s consciousness. Ghose in a mixture of memory, fiction and imagination tries to reconstruct reality of home and identity. In *The Triple Mirror of the Self*, which is an ongoing process of quest for self and identity, Ghose through the use of memory involves the self that lived in India, the migrant who leaves for England, and the author who writes as the multiple phases/parts of the process. Corroborating this division is Shimomura (one of the several selves of the narrator) when he says that “the startling intimation that while [his] mind and body were inevitably interdependent there was a third aspect to the self, being, which could assume a detached existence, as though it resided on a shore now become foreign” (Ghose, *The Triple* 124).

The recent deterritorialized writers from South Asia and mostly from India try to write about and interpret the land of their origin which they have happily left behind. Ghose, although consciously tried to make his works go beyond a specific locality (here his native land India/Pakistan), but the aura of his transcended roots is still attached to them. It is brave of him “to forsake what could have been a comfortable niche among post colonial writers”

(Kanaganayakam 5). In spite of his efforts and belief not to set his novels in his native South Asian locales, there are many critics who see parallels between his life and fiction, “given that his experience has been defined by exile and that he has never felt a specific attachment – definable through language, religion, or a clear nationality, for example – to any South Asian location. His work emphasizes the author’s biographical deracination, the homelessness that is after all characteristic of his life” (Brouillette 189). He himself travels between East and West and in his case between Pakistan and America, but unlike other postcolonial writers, he does not directly set and talk about his native land and culture which he has lost. He even declared this in an interview with Reed Way Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla, that “All I do is to record some images that present themselves and then attempt to discover the imagery that must follow to complete a formal structure that is pleasing to my imagination” (185).

Ghose’s postmodern stance regarding nationalism and nationalistic boundaries where he refuses to categorize writers within nationalistic confines is supported by the theory of transnationalism which argues that such affiliations have been, according to Timothy Brennan, “rendered obsolete by the international realities of multinational corporations and the telecommunications industry” (45). His postmodernist view of loss, alienation and fragmentation which celebrates fragmentation and loss of order and here emphasis is given to the fragmented sign and consequently on the fragmented self. The dilemma of the subject is focused on and the fragmented identity is both as a source of torment in modernistic terms as well as a necessary and positive means to establish and ascertain a poststructuralist and postmodernist articulation of self and identity as perpetually splintered and different. Ghose’s attempt is to present poststructuralist rendering of the concepts of home, nationalism and alienation as situations with no reference to geographical place. Nation as an oppressive tool renders people question their allegiances to it. In the poststructuralist notion an exile should abandon the quest for home. Language is prime weapon of Ghose to recreate ‘reality’.

Ghose puts his characters through perilous journeys and exotic terrains resulting in epiphanies of identity and modes of belonging. Like other contemporary writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh who place their characters in global terrains, Ghose also puts his characters in fantastic places and situations questing for their identity. The characters suffer from inner conflicts related to their multicultural, hybrid identity. Therefore the question of changing names comes in. The unusualness of names in a particular culture makes the characters, like Ghose himself, to change names only to try to fit into the demands of the culture. The phenomenon of polygenesis, where there is a continual self-refashioning of identity is initiated by divergent socio-cultural and political forces. In such situations identity is always in a state of flux and evolutionary process of (re)establishing. The specificities of location, culture, nationhood and identity get decentralized when an individual occupies an in-between space. The constant tussle between the monolithic ascriptions of identity and a hybrid fluidity determines the torment in a diasporic individual. The resulting sense of alienation and not-belonging leads to inner conflicts and uncertainties about belonging and home. Given the story of Zulfikar Ghose’s

life identity, longing, memory, deracination, exile, and alienation have been his dominant themes. But unlike other South Asian immigrant writers, his works are situated on a global plane which gets reflected in the settings of his later novels.

In Ghose's novels the psychological dislocation is more dominant than the physical/geographical one. The identity of most of the Post colonial writers and the characters in their works is conditioned by the 'home shore' and 'new shore' where the characters sense a feeling of 'inbetweenness' or 'nowhereness'. But Ghose refuses to idealise any locale as his background and place of origin. The refusal of pigeonholing into nationalistic or other labels, Ghose couldn't completely shun away the roots and the places where they are in his earlier works. His novels like *The Murder of Aziz Khan*, his early poetry and his autobiography *The Confessions of a Native Alien* deal with his early life in South Asia and the ouster from there. Therefore the claims of people like Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock that Ghose completely ignored the experience of exile and the nostalgia for his homeland is not completely true. With the publication of the Trilogy *The Incredible Brazilian*, he shifted his fictional attention from India/Pakistan to South America and even opted the most noted genre of South America i.e., magic realism for his fictional endeavours. Kanaganayakam lauds Ghose for being experimental and original enough "to forsake what could have been a comfortable niche among post colonial writers" (*Structures* 5). The oddity and uniqueness of Ghose is emphasized by Jussawalla and Dasenbrock claiming that Ghose "evades most of our accepted ways of talking about and grouping contemporary literature" and his works "steadily moved away from typical concerns and themes of contemporary South Asian writing in English or of Commonwealth writing in general" (181). Ghose wants to transcend the pigeonholed subject matter of diasporic, postcolonial, limited and local and give his writings a universal and permanent appeal. "... it is not that Ghose's works are simply not related to his own background, or that they eschew all reference to the author's biography in favour of total absorption in another world or culture. In fact their representation of South America is often more ironic than literal, more allegorical than strictly representational" (Brouillette 150).

Unlike other postcolonial writers writing about the issues of identity and loss of roots, Ghose doesn't offer a realistic and sentimentalized account of his land of origin, but has in metaphysical terms tried to highlight the universal predicaments of life – of loss and torment and a perpetual exile, if not geographical but spiritual and mental. Although Ghose tried to avoid writing about realistic subjective themes and only follows reality through language, but even then the realization of self is there, which is supported by Ghose himself in comments when he says: "I was talking about the idea of place [in *The Brazilian Trilogy*]. The attraction of self to a certain landscape certain images in [the *Brazilian Trilogy*] have to do with memories of having been to particular parts of Brazil, but one can say that I was unconsciously trying to create the idea of the human soul seeing a glimpse from time to time of paradise and longing to be there" (Ghose, *Zulfikar* 179). But unlike other postcolonial writers who challenge the dominance of English language, Ghose counters the contemporary market trends of writing and evaluating Postcolonial literature. He claims that his origin is in no way necessary as a parallel to evaluate

his writings. For him “home is in my mind, my imagination, home is the English language and what I can do with it and what I can read in it” (Ghose, *Conversation* 17). For him life and background of the writer is not necessary to locate the literary value of a text but emphasizes on a more critical stance. Ghose’s refusal to follow popular market niches and instead focus on an aesthetic tradition can be “interpreted as an explicit reaction to his own racialization at the hands of his critical public” (Brouillette 104). In his novels a semblance of reality is created to involve people in a search for origins and an exploration of the self. The people involved are reduced to fatal ploys, who under the pressures of circumstances, fulfill their individual destiny, which in many cases is repetitive and bizarrely inherited.

To sum up it can be said that Zulfikar Ghose is a writer who transcends categories and exemplifies the complex nature of the Pakistani-American experience. He is not a spokesperson of one particular nation, culture, or community. His breadth of work is prodigious: he has authored novels, poetry, literary criticism and essays. His early novels are concerned directly with recent India and Pakistan history, while the later, experimental ones, although not set there, explore issues such as the politics of nationalism, post-colonialism, and the relationship between language and reality.

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