The Whole and Holes of the Human Heart

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Résumé *: La métaphore du « vide de l'âme » n'est pas nouvelle, mais elle représente peut-être l'une des figures de style les plus romantiques et les plus durables. Dans le roman Midnight's Children (Les enfants de minuit) elle reçoit des valences additionnelles qui la recommandent pour une étude sur l'identité et l'altérité. Le personnage principal est dans ce contexte Aadam Aziz, le grand-père relatif du narrateur, situé à la rencontre de l'imaginaire de l'Est avec l'imaginaire de l'Ouest, entre « il y avait autrefois » et l'obsédant « maintenant », entre le désir et la conjoncture.*

Mots-clés*: identité culturelle, altérité, anthropologie*

One can never truly separate the sense of otherness from the self, even when the otherness observed is basically someone else's. We would like now to make space at the front of the stage for cultural encounters and to see how they influence personal experiences. And for this purpose, we call upon Aadam Aziz, the starting point for the story of the *Midnight's Children*.

Aadam leaves his Kashmiri paradise and goes to Germany to study medicine. There he finds out that he is not the first and only man, as his name would imply, and as the arrogance of childhood sometimes imagines. His displacement forces him to abandon any unifying vision of the world and face his own alterity in the eyes of those foreign to him: "Heidelberg, in which, along with medicine and politics, he learned that India – like radium – had been 'discovered' by the Europeans […] and this is what finally separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors." [1]

The experience of border-crossing may be said to have on him the effect of projecting him into solitude. Being displaced physically and spiritually, being torn from a sense of wholeness that is induced by the 'safety' of a familiar space, Aadam is isolated since no longer corresponding to the idea of 'the same'. This marks the appearance of the hole in his heart. However, he believes return is possible and he goes back to be a doctor in Kashmir.

There he suffers a second fall from grace, since he is seen as tainted and bringing the tainting influence with him. The reaction is far from unusual. Wilkie Collins tells us in The Moonstone that the three Brahmins who had to go abroad to bring the precious stone back to the temple will have to spend their whole life as wonderers to purge the unchaste influence. Ulysses has to sacrifice the suitors, the others, before he can return to a proper home. Even the habit of wiping one's feet before entering a house can be seen as a sign of respect and of the desire to keep outside elements away from the private space.

As natural and frequent this practice may be however, it originates in the basically negative representation of the stranger. Tales about other lands where people have several heads or animal features, or walk up-side-down etc. have circulated for a long time and they are early versions of imagined communities. Nowadays, as Rushdie remarks in Shame, there seems to be no place for monsters, but they have been replaced by other creatures, just as frightening as the old ones. Which does not mean that the fear of the invader, of treacherous infiltration or of an alien constraint to change is always unfounded. Recent history is quick to offer several motives to aliment this fear.

As far as the occupied territory is concerned, an extreme form of distancing oneself from the other is trying to select from the native culture only those features that oppose the ones characterizing the cultural 'repertoire' of the colonizer, just as the colonizer was shown to do, in Said's and Todorov's works, in their representation of the colonized. In this context, one of the fields interested in and taking charge of drawing and re-drawing co-ordinates of identity is postcolonialism.

Not surprisingly, considering the meaning of the colonial experience, the focus is on national and cultural identity. To quote Leela Gandhi: "postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past." [2] One may compare the process thus described with the therapy a person might undergo to cope with a trauma, with the invasive nature of one or another type of otherness.

Psychoanalysis and gender studies reveal the human psyche as a very complex matrix, or as a labyrinth in which one is sure to find not one, but several Minotaurs. Postcolonial studies come with an approach that is interrelated with the ones mentioned above, but concentrating instead on the colonial experience and the changes it brought to the identity of peoples and people.

We consider that with Rushdie the accent should be placed on identity only through the prism of otherness. As we have seen, all the perspectives mentioned acknowledge the formative influence that exterior factors have on the human psyche. What we propose is to concentrate our attention on how these influences, whose action is most times met with acceptance and imbibed in the psychological make-up of a person, become obvious when the individual is faced with instances of otherness. It may prove interesting and useful to determine the source for the shock of otherness in the most familiar circumstances and to register the reaction they produce within the individual.

For this purpose, we enlist the help of cultural anthropology, since, besides it touching upon psychology, gender matters and postcolonial studies, it also presents us with the most appropriate perspective to follow for the case in point. In the words of Clyde Kluckohn,

> Ordinarily we are unaware of the special lens through which we look at life. It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water. Students who had not yet gone beyond the horizon of their own society could not be expected to perceive custom which was the stuff of their own thinking. Anthropology holds up a great mirror to man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety. [3]

Actually, anthropology was thought originally as a means to understand cultures different from that of the researcher. The attempt was to describe and account for the patterns of behaviour of peoples inhabiting places far away from the homeland of the researcher. Nowadays the situation has changed and the scope of anthropological study has become wider.

One may turn to a guidebook in anthropology and read the following description: "Anthropology, a uniquely holistic discipline, studies human biological and cultural diversity. It attempts to explain similarities and differences in time and space. Culture, which is passed through learning rather than through biological inheritance, is a major reason for human adaptability." [4] What becomes apparent is the importance of culture.

We mentioned previously the cultural encounter from the point of view of postcolonialism and we compared it with a traumatic experience. Similarly, the encounter between the anthropologist and the members of a community has sometimes been described as a confrontation between means of constructing identities, placing a certain amount of pressure on both sides taking part in the experience. On the one hand, the researcher, while trying to enter the group is torn between the wish of being perceived as little as possible as an alien and the actual strive to keep his own identity as much as possible. On the other hand, the members of the community become aware of being seen as others, as different and may either prove reticent to interact or they may alter their behaviour. Therefore, cultural exchanges are never devoid of a sense of otherness that may spring from a variety of factors. It is only natural, considering the complexity of the concept of 'culture'. To exemplify with only one definition by E. B. Tylor: "Culture […] is that complex whole which includes knowledge,

belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" [5]. The matrix of similarities and differences becomes even more complex when confronted with the reality that cultures evolve historically and much of this evolution is due to contacts with other cultures which lead to borrowings, appropriations, and inventions.

Besides the fact that cultures are not isolated, discrete phenomena, one should also be sure not to identify culture with nation. This is one of the central fallacies to be exposed by Salman Rushdie's fiction. "It is so taken for granted that each country embodies its own distinctive culture and society that the terms society and culture are routinely simply appended to the names of nation-states, as when a tourist visits India to understand 'Indian culture' and 'Indian society'." [6] One downside to this mode of perception is that it once more makes generalization much too easy, leading to a luggage of stereotypes to be associated with the inhabitants of a politically delineated space. "Nation is itself a negotiated and highly contested social order, marked by intense conflicts between classes, lifestyles, political ideologies, religious affiliations, regional loyalties, town and country, men and women. There is a good deal of critical debate within democratic nation-states even before migrants, ethnics, or religious minorities enter the picture." [7] It is as though Rushdie modelled his representation of India in *Midnight's Children* on Pnina Werbner's description, since he registers the passage from a joyfully constructed and received image of a unitary nation to its disintegration not only into three political divisions, but under the pressure of internal divergences in interests, perspectives etc.

Moreover, if one were to think of cultures as occupying discrete spaces, one could not account for specific circumstances as those of people inhabiting borderlands, or for the cultural differences existent in one, common space. (Gupta; Ferguson) As such, it is believed that anthropology should reconsider its point of interest and turn its attention to identifying the bases for the differences existing within the same culture. In the words of Anthony P. Cohen: "Anthropology does not have to be something which […] we do to other people. […] The anthropological genius has been proven in describing and interpreting the apparent mysteries of other cultures. It has now to consider more carefully its definitions of 'otherness'." [8] The change would imply a re-consideration of the idea of space and would lay more interest on the way it is constructed, imagined and enforced. It would also prompt the search for new means to account for the transnational groupings of interests – mass-media and popular culture are considered to be of particular interest at this point. To give a random example, it is believed that if one were to compare a businessman from Bombay with one from London, one might find that they have more in common than when comparing the former to a kathak dancer from the same city.

One step in this direction seems to be taken by researchers studying subcultures and the phenomenon of multiculturalism. One special mention should be made about multicultural psychology which stresses the importance of cultural background to the shaping of the individual. [9]

As far as subcultures are concerned, Kottak defines them as "different symbol-based patterns and traditions associated with subgroups in the same complex society" [10] and he states that they originate in differences in ethnicity, class, region and religion. Subcultures have also been associated in the more recent years with tastes and lifestyles. However, the term has become debatable and new concepts are proposed, like neotribe or *Bunde*, to account for the fluidity of certain groups [11]

One of the reasons behind this review of theories concerning identity and otherness, was to show the variety of perspectives and thus the great number of coordinates for the definition of identity – as many sources for the feeling of otherness. A particular importance might be given to the recent developments in anthropology, for they teach us that otherness is

not necessarily connected with obvious differences, but it may also reside in what we take as familiar and it can surprise us in the most common of situations.

Therefore we may speak on the one hand of perceiving the other as strange, different or even encrypted and, on the other hand, of a process of making the other strange. Education, cultural background, environment and everything one considers familiar make up one's microuniverse. A sense of 'other' inhabiting that very same space and of a more distant other imagined to inhabit the space beyond the limits of familiarity is always there. The encounter with a person coming from an 'other' space, outside the frontiers of the familiar world is expected to be strange and so the shock of otherness is often anticipated. The intensity of the shock may also be increased if one either has a preconceived idea about the 'insurmountable' differences that are believed to exist between the two, or starts from the assumption that 'people are the same everywhere' only to realise this is a tricky statement. One way of imagining 'far away' spaces as others is to exoticise them, which need not be seen as a negative process: "to exoticise is to exercise the human imagination in a certain way. I contend that it is important to maintain a clear distinction between imaginative ideas on one hand, and the possible political abuses to which imaginative ideas can be put on the other" [and which are, for instance, exposed by Said and Todorov] [12]

Alternatively, the perception of the close 'other' is seen as a basic requirement for dialogue and is, therefore, perceived not as a great source of anxiety or shock. Gurevitch describes this process as involving

> the disengagement of the other's presence from his/her familiar, taken-for-granted identity. The other is thereby rendered "other", that is, opaque and irreducible in his individuality. This suspension of the taken-for-granted understanding opens up the possibility of a creative and critical search to understand the other and allows distinguishing among selves. Without this possibility, the picture of interpersonal communication remains incomplete. […] Every attempt to communicate entails acknowledgement (however implicit) of the other. [13]

The shock of otherness comes, however, with the discovery of the strangeness of persons to whom we have already ascribed a whole, well-determined identity, and who inhabit our familiar universe. An even greater shock may result from the discovery of our own otherness in varied circumstances. Some situations that lead to the perception of strange where we assumed the presence of familiar may be: the perception of a known person in new or unexpected circumstances; one's own displacement from the usual surroundings, like moving to another country; an inner psychological event that leads to a change in perspectives; one's sense of centrality being challenged by other perceptions or by the confrontation with the immensity of the universe, for one. [14] The reactions to these discoveries are usually anger, disappointment, rejection, isolation, or, on a lower key, surprise, re-evaluation, embarrassment, fear.

One of the most clearly portrayed passages from one such perception to another is to be seen in the destiny of Tai, the fisherman. "The fishermen were here first", Salman Rushdie writes [15], and Tai is presented through Aadam Aziz's childhood memories as a source of mysteries, wisdom, a being outside time, a story-teller for whose tales Aadam would defy his parents' rules. However, adult eyes who have seen the West, look upon Tai as a Caliban too fond of drink and they are faced with the latter's anger against the tainting influence of the otherness that Aadam brings back, symbolized by the pigskin doctor's bag. The bag is the apple of discord which turns the two men into antagonistic individuals. Tai succumbs to violent outrage from this moment on, which is only to announce his end as a protester – "he was infuriated by India and Pakistan's struggle over his valley, and walked to Chhamb with the express purpose of standing between the opposing forces and giving them a piece of his mind. Kashmir for the Kashmiris: that was his line. Naturally, they shot him." [16]

Thus, by coming in contact with Aadam's altered perception, Tai activates his defence mechanism, rejecting everything that comes from outside. This extends over to India and Pakistan as well, as much foreigners to him as the German or the British. His anger accumulates and he becomes a victim in the much higher game of imagining and creating spaces. We may conclude from his story that this type of otherness is contagious and the next to catch the 'disease' are the poor who distrust and refuse to acknowledge the 'Westernized' doctor.

In other words, feeling at home neither in Germany, nor in Kashmir, Aadam Aziz sees himself being thrown into an instance of postcolonial-related identity: the hybrid. He becomes neither native, nor foreign. One could say that he is doomed to be foreign, an other, no matter where he is and that is what causes the metaphorical hole in him to deepen. The moment when he realizes that his previous religion and beliefs do not suit him any more is symbolically marked by rubies and diamonds, blood and tears. Aadam has been unhomed and he acknowledges his condition.

His situation seems to be heightened by the nature of his job. As Rushdie writes about another doctor, Omar Khayyam Shakil from Shame: "What's a doctor, after all? – A legitimized voyeur, a stranger whom we permit to poke fingers and even hands into places where we would not permit most people to insert so much as a finger-tip, who gazes on what we take most trouble to hide a sitter-at-bedsides, an outsider admitted to our most intimate moments (birthdeathetc.), anonymous, a minor character, yet also, paradoxically, central, especially at the crisis…" [17] [emphasis ours]

As for the hole, it soon finds an exterior counterpart, the hole in the sheet, through which the young doctor is allowed to examine the mysterious patient Naseem, the daughter of Ghani, the landowner. Since the space in the sheet is continually filled by parts of the woman's body in a game of puzzle that captures the heart of doctor Aziz, the latter comes to believe, in a quite romantic way, that the hole within himself may also be filled by the presence of the woman. However, this is quite soon proved not to be so – starting with their second night as a married couple – and the differences of culture prove to be more powerful. From this moment on their marriage becomes a 'battlefield' on which each struggles for power and resists the other's influence.

So as to deal with both sides of the story, one may first rest on the particularity of the woman's status in a colonial society. It is by now a matter of common understanding that the feminist and postcolonial studies seem to have common features as far as their aims and points of interest are concerned. "…patriarchal subjugation of women is analogous to colonial subjugation of indigenous populations. And the resultant devaluation of women and colonized peoples poses very similar problems for both groups in terms of achieving an independent personal and group identity; gaining access to political power and economic opportunities; and finding ways to think, speak, and create that are not dominated by the ideology of the oppressor." [18]

Starting from this assumption, a look at the colonized woman reveals her as doubly subjected, first to the colonizing authority and second to a patriarchal society. As far as Naseem is concerned, she is shaped by tradition. Her body is not to be shown to strangers, not even to the doctor called to cure her illness. A perforated sheet is used to allow access to the ailing part only. Still, in time, this is revealed to be a game of seduction meant for Aadam Aziz, in which the fragmentation of her body only increases the air of mystery that surrounds her. This is the first clue that she belongs to a world in which time is of lesser consequence than following the succession of a ritual, for example. Her first appearance is also a mark of the fact that she is shaped by a patriarchal society, since she does not have a voice of her own. The rules of the encounter between the doctor and the patient are not set by any of them, but

by a third person, the father. Furthermore, Naseem is presented as Ghani, the landowner's daughter, therefore in relation with her father.

By marriage, the girl enters a new stage in her life. Her husband, Aadam Aziz, the doctor, has been influenced by the Western society he lived in for a while. Signs of incompatibility appear as early as their second night as husband and wife and they involve their different views on sexuality, propriety, gender-specific roles within the family and in society, religion, foreign influences, etc. Aadam tries to change her, eventually commanding: "Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman." [19] But she rejects what she feels to be the otherness within her husband. The choice she is offered is only illusive, since it is actually a passage from one imposed set of rules, from one ready-made conceptualization of the world to another. Accordingly, she decides to fight back and to protect what is by now deeply rooted within herself. Thus, marriage becomes a battlefield, and home - Naseem's gradually conquered territory. She excludes her husband from the kitchen, from the pantry; she builds a fortress around herself and comes to be called the Reverend Mother.

In conclusion, Naseem's encounter with otherness determines her to go to an extreme by accentuating those features that belong to her self before marriage. Just as Purushottam, the sadhu, believes that "a death makes the living see themselves too clearly: after they have been in its presence, they become exaggerated." [20], in this case the encounter with a different perspective leads the girl to obstinately cling to what she was taught to be the right thing. From this point of view, her reaction does not differ much from that of Tai, and Aadam find that he has to be a stranger in his home as well. A relevant moment is when, after some years, he finds the sheet of his courtship in a trunk:

> white and folded and glowing faintly in the dawn – my grandfather drew out, from the tin trunk of the past, a stained and perforated sheet, and discovered that the hole had grown; that there were other, smaller holes in the surrounding fabric; and in the grip of a wild nostalgic rage he shook his wife awake and astounded her by yelling, as he waved her history under her nose:
> 'Moth-eaten! Look, Begum: moth-eaten! You forgot to put in any naphthalene balls!' [21]

Both Tai and Naseem use religion as motivation for their reaction and reservoir of means to counteract Aadam's ideas and presence, more exactly, they use religious tradition with its code about what is allowed and what is haram, what is proper and what is devious. Although the problems both perceivers have with the doctor go beyond matters of faith, it is no less than the authority of God they use to fight him. The pigskin bag, the substances he uses to cure people, the perspective he has on marital life are all selected and made to stand for who he is, transforming him thus from a complex human being into a sum of disparate elements.

Is it no wonder, then that as an old man he takes to going into temples (Hindu or Muslim, it does not seem to matter), stick in his hand, raging against the people gathered around some shrine or another. It could be his way of rebelling against people's tendency to turn their faces to the abstraction of a higher plane and minimize the importance of the individual being. And Rushdie accentuates the tragic irony of Aadam's protest by projecting his death against a religious event: the theft of the single hair from Muhammad's head kept in a temple in Kashmir. While the whole Muslim community is in mourning and the army is engaged in finding the lost item, Aadam's death remains of minimal importance and with minimal consequences, even on his family.

To sum up, the doctor's journey into a deeper and deeper sense of not belonging anywhere is pursued in steps. The first step is his journey to Germany, where in the spirit of a truly Eurocentric sense of history, he is faced with the belief that life begins for the colonized from their encounter with the colonizer.

As a parenthesis, if one considers such restrictive representations of the world, one cannot help but notice that even the terms pre- and post-colonial, place the experience of the encounter with the West on a position of reference. Furthermore, the basic definition of postcolonial criticism itself is based on the same awareness. According to Lois Tyson, for instance,

> the dynamic psychological and social interplay between what ex-colonial populations consider their native, indigenous, pre-colonial cultures and the British culture that was imposed upon them constitutes a large portion of the field of study for postcolonial critics. For postcolonial cultures include both a merger of and antagonism between the culture of the colonized and that of the colonizer, which, at this point in time, are difficult to identify and separate into discrete entities, so complete was the British intrusion into the government, education, cultural values, and daily lives of its colonial subjects. [22]

The conclusion has to be that there is no going back, which Aadam eventually realises. The reason for postcolonial studies to try and at least find a sort of equilibrium between the two interacting and overlapping cultures, some of the ways being: raising awareness of the limited, one-sided nature of earlier representations, supporting the voice that is gained by the previously silent subject, and, perhaps most of all, bringing to the fore the multitude of voices and experiences that characterize a postcolonial space – to mention only a few aspects.

Rushdie qualifies in a way for this project by exposing not only the anonymizing tendency of 'Western' representations, or their basic binary nature, but the massing or fragmenting constructs produced by 'Eastern' representatives as well. In Midnight's Children, Tai and Naseem are equally guilty of reducing the complex array of features that make up Aadam Aziz as an individual to those characteristics which are felt as strange, foreign, other. While coming back to Kashmir and his confrontation with Tai is the second step in the latter's journey into otherness, the marriage with Naseem and the mirage of the perforated sheet bring the disappointment that pushes him on a third step of his journey.

Notes

[1] Rushdie, S. *Midnight's Children*, Pan Books, London, 1982, p. 11
[2] *Postcolonial Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p. 4
[3] apud. Kottak, Conrad Philip, *Mirror for Humanity. A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York, 1996, p. xvi
[4] idem, p. 19
[5] idem, p. 21
[6] Gupta, Akhil; James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 7 No. 1 (Feb., 1992), p. 6
[7] Werbner, Pnina, "The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested Postcolonial Purifications." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 7 No. 1 (Mar., 2001), p. 142
[8] "The Social Anthropology of Britain, and the Question of 'Otherness'." *Anthropology Today* Vol. 2 No. 6 (Dec., 1986), p. 3
[9] cf. Mio, J. S.; L. Barker-Hackett; J. Tumambing, *Multicultural Psychology: Understanding Our Diverse Communities*, McGraw Hill, Boston, 2006
[10] op.cit., p. 19
[11] cf. Longhurst, B., *Popular Music and Society*. Polity, Cambridge, 2007, p. 246-264 or Bennett, A.; B. Shank; J. Toynbee (eds.) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 107-113
[12] Shapiro, Ron, "In Defence of Exoticism: Rescuing the Literary Imagination." *'New Exoticisms'. Changing Patterns in the Construction of Otherness*, Ed. Isabel Santaolalla, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 2000, p. 43
[13] "The Other Side of Dialogue: On Making the Other Strange and the Experience of Otherness." *The American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 93 No. 5 (Mar., 1988), p. 1179
[14] ibidem
[15] op.cit., p. 92

[16] idem, p. 37
[17] *Shame*, Pan Books, London, 1984, p. 49
[18] Tyson, Lois, *Critical Theory Today*, Princeton U.P., 1995, p. 370
[19] Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight's Children*, Pan Books, London, 1982, p. 34
[20] idem, p. 178
[21] idem, p. 111
[22] op.cit., p. 363-4

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