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TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES AND IMAGINARY LANDS

Begüm TUĞLU*

Abstract

The conception of identity has been studied through many different branches of humanities, in terms of language, ideology, psychoanalysis, sociology or history just to name a few. All theories come close in defining identity as an ever transforming, fluctuating and instable concept. The term multiculturalism, which is usually preferred in trying to define the state of different cultures in the attempt of existing together, seems to be insufficient when it comes to the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Even though transnationalism was introduced by Randolph Bourne in the early twentieth century, its broader significance did not reveal itself in English literature until the final decades of the century. This study aims to explore the concept of transnationalism and its effect on the process of identity formation within different novels to demonstrate how individuals living in a globalized world construct a unique sense of identity while carrying certain features in common through this process. Within this frame, I intend to refer to Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*, Deborah Maggoch's *Hot Water Man*, Ruth Praver Jhabvola's *Heat and Dust* and Hanan Al-Shayks's *Only in London* to exemplify how transnational identities are narrated in English novels.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Identity, Cultural Studies.

Introduction

As the world gradually evolves into one wide country without borders, so do the terms nation and identity evolve into new concepts which need to be redefined. In the aftermath of a post-colonial world, with the increasing effect of globalism, the notions of the past which tied individuals to one culture such as race, colour or language are not sufficient enough for one to attribute a certain identity to a certain nation. New identities "emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism and local culture" (Bucholtz, 2002: 525). Therefore, the first question one asks in newly acquainted friendships "where are you from?" loses importance, thus, shaking the prejudicial concept in our minds that one person has to belong to a certain nation. For without a clear understanding of where an individual belongs, one does not have any set of norms in mind to place the individual into. The individuals of a globalized world cannot determine this place as there are no more clear borders to define the characteristics of citizens of a nation apart. In the introduction of *A Fluid Sense of Self: The Politics of Transnational Identity in Anglo-phone Literatures* it is argued that "the nation-state can no longer serve as primary means of identification of selfhood" (2010: 11). The borders of the nations are blurred, concurrently blurring the ethnical certainty of identities which belong to them. Furthermore, it is written that "such identities are not unified or stable, but are fluid entities which constantly push at the boundaries of the nation-state, thereby re-defining themselves and the nation-state simultaneously" (2010: 11). Since the concept of multiculturalism is not satisfactory in defining these identities, there emerges a necessity of a new term in order to explain them. Şebnem Toplu (2011) asserts in *Growing up Transnational* that transnationalism comes to the rescue at this point, "in the sense of the reconstruction of self along with the reconstruction of space in an alien culture: having to adapt both the self and its perception of society" (162). The term itself suggests a new transcendent concept through which one can explore individuals living "in" or "out" of their own borders of nationality. Benedict Anderson (1983) further argues if this "nationality" is even possible in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* writing that "national imagination" is "at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity" which can "fuse the world inside" the transnational identities "with the world outside" (30). Yet, this ambiguity of not having clear cut national borders and national identities naturally has a possible consequence of creating (un)belonging individuals who have multiple cultures yet remain without a culture at the same time. In order to establish their own identities, these individuals have to decide between different cultures. Thus, in spite of the attempt of globalism and transnationalism to remove the boundaries in the world, individuals always tend to produce new ones to be able to know who exactly they are. Since "individuals *imagine* their relationship to the nation" (Takacs, 1999: 593, emphasis mine), these imaginary

* Ege University, tuglubegum@gmail.com

boundaries help the individuals to establish an identity of their own within “aspects of colonial mimicry, transnational power-relations, and of diasporic self-invention” (Schultermandl & Toplu, 2010: 21).

Transitional Identities and The Problem of Homelands

In several novels dealing with the issue of transnationalism, these boundaries take the shape of the “imaginary homelands” whereas in others it takes the form of an “imaginary host land”. I argue that transnational identities are shaped according to the individual’s own imagination and desire to belong to a certain culture. Since each transnational character has a unique sense of a hybrid culture, each character has to undergo this process of self re-creation. Therefore, “the notion of “self” (which are ‘imaginary roles’) and the notion of ‘home’ (which is made up of ‘imaginary landscapes’) are in a dialectical relationship with each other” (Dascalu 2007: 102). Stuart Hall (1996) argues in his *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* that identity “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth [...] This second view of cultural identity is much less familiar, and more unsettling. If identity does not proceed, in a straight, unbroken line, from some fixed origin, how are we to understand its formation?” (226)

To further answer this question of Hall’s within this frame, one can turn to Salman Rushdie’s declaration in his *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie writes that “India” is “a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions” and he “tried to make it as imaginatively true as [he] could” (1991: 10) for he can narrate India only through his own dim childhood memories. Nevertheless, Rushdie defends himself by reminding the reader that “imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect, and I knew that my India may only have been one to which I [...] willingly admit I belonged” (1991: 10). From Rushdie’s narrative experience, one can clearly understand that “home” is produced through the imagination of the past. This “home” however can be anywhere in a globalized world. Thus, the place to which an individual feels a sense of belonging, which turns into an “imaginary home”, constitutes an “imaginary identity”. Stuart Hall (1996) asserts that “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). In novels which transnational characters are forged into being; this production of imaginary identities becomes clear. The protagonists of these novels “learn [...] that only by embracing a fluid sense of self can they reach a sense of belonging amidst this hyper-mobility” (Schultermandl & Toplu, 2010: 13). As to why these characters tend to recreate their own identities one can suggest that since they cannot adapt to both cultural influences at once these characters yield to the one they see fit for their existence. The imaginary recreation of identity is either in favour of the home country or the host, or in some cases it shifts between the two; thus, paving the way to “reimagining of notions of home, belonging and identity as well as opening up new ways of identifying” for transnational identities (McLeod, 2004: 163). In order to demonstrate this formation of transnational identities, this study takes into focus the works of Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*, Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore*, Deborah Maggoch’s *Hot Water Man*, Ruth Praver Jhabwola’s *Heat and Dust* and Hanan Al-Shayks’s *Only in London* to exemplify how transnational identities are narrated in English novels.

A Native in a Foreign Land: Punjabi English Identity in *Anita and Me*

Considering the characters in transnational novels who create an imaginary homeland as Rushdie would have applauded one may assume that this imagination is based on the idealized version of the home country. A suggestive novel in this context is Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* which “employ[s] the realistic childhood initiation plot to examine questions of ethnicity and identity” (Head, 2002: 172). In Syal’s novel the reader witnesses Meena’s initial failure in recognizing her difference from the white society. Associating her own identity with the “bad girl” Anita, Meena never realizes that she is an “other”. Anita is “a kindred spirit, another mad bad girl trapped inside a superficially obedient body” just like Meena (Syal, 2010: 150) and Meena never sees any crucial difference between Anita and herself. Meena realizes that she can never be like Anita only when she confronts Sam, who happens to be Meena and Anita’s mutual ultimate “boy friend” image. From then on, the village of Tollington turns into a microcosmic representation of England and through the pen of Syal reveals how the average white English society views immigrants. To be more blunt, one can turn to Sam’s extremely racist comments on the subject “Give everything away to some darkies we’ve never met. We don’t give a toss for nobody else. This is our patch. Not some wogs’ handout” (Syal, 2010: 193). Thus, Sam turns into an embodiment of hatred towards the “others” in the society, in Meena’s case, towards British Punjabi’s; not to mention Sam and his gang’s attacks on a defenceless Indian man. It is clear that whether intentionally or not, Sam fails to accept Meena’s identity as an “English” individual. Dominic Head (2002) writes that “by defining colonial places and people as ‘British’ they were made subordinate to England and to the English, whilst being held, simultaneously, as different” (124). Therefore, Sam’s inability to accept Meena’s “Englishness” can be rooted in the prejudicial attitude of colonialism; for “colonialism was imagining the enemy, the other, introducing a racialized element”

(Stephens, 2003: 176). In any case, "attack being the best form of defence" (Syal, 2010: 52) Sam portrays a realistic representation of a racist young English man. Meena, on the other hand, does not realize that she is an outsider until the end of the novel where she finally utters "I am the others, Sam" (Syal, 2010: 314, emphasis original).

Meena lives in an imaginary world in which she is colour blind, not realizing that "colour plays a crucial role in the legitimacy of identity in London" (McLeod, 2004: 182). She has a right to claim the right to be acknowledged as a "native" British girl since she even "sings Punjabi with a Birmingham accent!" (Syal, 2010: 114). She can only reconcile with her Indian roots with her grandmother who proves to be an oriental image of a wise old sorceress. Her grandmother is the only connection to make Meena realize that her own ethnic roots could be powerful, too. She cherishes her grandmother's abilities as "magical", not aware that she is borrowing the Orientalist eye of the English people in the process in idealizing the mysterious powers of the East. Regardless, Meena lacks a basis on which she can establish an identity purely based on Indian roots, despite her parents' endless efforts of carrying out their traditions with foods, family gatherings and "Dwali", their version of "Christmas" (Syal, 2010: 91). Moreover, she is under the influence of a dominant society from which she cannot escape. If she does not produce a reality and an identity solely reserved for herself, she cannot exist, being lost within two cultures she cannot belong to. Therefore, she imagines an alternative reality of a "homeland" in order to overcome "the cultural rootlessness she is trying to move beyond" (Head, 2002: 173). This could also be an explanation for her lying habit throughout the novel. This habit is just a reflection of her narrative talent; she writes her own reality, her own culture; thus producing her own identity, what Noula Papayiannis (2011) would call her "own reinterpretation and reinvention of the diasporic culture" (83).

The Autograph Man: Chinese English Identity and the Problem of Belonging

Another novel exemplifying this creation of an imaginary identity is Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*. Alex-Li Tandem, whose "hybrid first name" is a declaration of a dual culture, "is constantly trying to determine his own identity, to write his own self" (Sell 63), "so as to create himself auto-graphically through shifting notions of place" (Schultermandl & Toplu, 2010: 21). However, Alex's surname Tandem seems to compensate for the duality in his name, for "Tandem" means "together working as one". Just as the two wheels of a Tandem bicycle, both cultures of China and Judaism, plus the English culture, seem to fit in like pieces of a puzzle within his own identity. Notwithstanding, Half-Chinese and half-Jewish, Alex-Li can never really relate to each of the labels of identity thrown over his shoulders. He is not a devoted Jew, yet his constant attempts to divide the whole world into "Jewish or Goyish" is an experimentation of his Jewish identity; nor he has any clue on Chinese culture yet his obsession with Kitty Alexander's autograph, an actress in the film *The Girl from Peking* (Smith, 2003: 63), is kind of a salute to his Chinese roots on his father's side. The fact that Kitty Alexander who plays a Chinese girl is actually an American star with a Russian and Italian descent is Smith's powerful talent of allusion to a transnational world in which no individual remains a descent of a pure blood line of one single race.

Alex-Li lives in London, a multicultural city with invisible borders for strangers, especially for those who are physically different. In a manner of speaking, Alex-Li is a young British man, playing the role of a Chinese one, for the closest he can get to the Chinese culture is through Kitty's film; which is again an imagination of another creator, the director, who chooses a transnational woman to play the leading role of a Chinese woman. Jonathan P.A. Sell (2010) argues that "Smith's idea of identity [...] views human interaction as a 'performance' by an actor responding to environment and audience" (64). Portraying characters such as Alex-Li and Kitty Alexander, Smith seems to give enough evidence to prove transnational identity is similar to a work of fiction. Alex-Li Tandem does not know the stage directions for neither Jewish roles nor Chinese roles, thus, he acts according to the lines he writes. The manifestation of his identity is revealed through his books "The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem" and "The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem". He writes and performs his own imaginative identity for multiple cultures in one body are bound to be composed into one unique identity, otherwise "the feeling of 'simultaneously belonging and not belonging' [...] can prove to be disabling" (Head, 2002: 158).

The East Talks Back: The Representation of Indian English Identities in Hot Water Man and Heat and Dust

These imaginative cultures and identities are not exclusively reserved for second generation immigrants living in Britain. It is also a characteristic of transnational characters in search of an identity outside the British culture. Two intriguing novels in this perspective are Ruth P. Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* and Deborah Moggach's *Hot Water Man*. Both novels share traits in common in the sense that characters adapt to the culture of an Oriental fantasy, an imagination of the East within Western minds. "The point, here, is that the identification of cultural difference does not necessarily entail the attempt to understand or embrace it: the reverse process of 'making exotic' may equally result" (Head, 2002: 161). Within this sense, in

Heat and Dust, Olivia a proper English woman and her husband Douglas move to India for business matters. Nonetheless, this business affair turns into a journey in which the couple transcends into their new identities. Olivia, who witnesses the effects of colonialism on India, is not satisfied by her own imperial culture. Consequently, Olivia starts to experience this new environment of hers and finds out that India has more to give her than her own husband. She not only tries to dress like an Indian woman, but also she tries to eat and act like them. Similarly, she tastes the love in hot Indian air filled with dust. The Nawab, the extremely rich and infamous Indian master, proves to be an Oriental fantasy for Olivia. Sutarna Gosh and Lu Wang (2003) write in their article that "life histories" influence "specific imaginations, nostalgias and fantasies of a migrant life" (277-78). Thus, she finds in the Nawab a different kind of culture, a different kind of relationship outside her conventional perception of life creating her own imaginative world of fantasy. As a twist of faith the Nawab also gives her a child which Douglas fails to do. This new role, now combined with motherhood, is chosen by Olivia, created by her own desires in order to fit in a new culture in which she is bound to live with the influence of her affair with Nahab.

Apart from Olivia, another young English woman in a "hot foreign" land is Christine. Married to Donald whose grandfather had fought in a war in India back in old days, Christine has to move to India for her husband's business affairs. Christine, similar to Olivia, is also without a child and unsuccessfully tries to get pregnant. Another similar element in Olivia and Christine's characters is that they both try to adapt to their new environment. In Christine's case this adaptation to a new identity is in an extreme point; "Look at your wife" Shamime orders to Donald, "I think she's going native" (Moggach, 1983: 31). In Christine's case, the idealized "replica" of the Indian culture "supplants the original" culture of the individual if one is to define Christine's character by Dominic Head's terms on cultural identity (2002: 120). Christine starts to eat, dress and act like native women, and in the end even accepts the holiness of an Indian shrine, the Hot Water Man, as it answered her prayers; thus, producing a new transnational identity for herself. She chooses the Indian culture over her own for she feels the regretful frustration of her country's colonial past; "Colonialism is four letter - is a nasty word to her" (Moggach, 1983: 149). "The English were so closed, hemmed in by their fixed beliefs" (Moggach, 1983: 196) writes Deborah Moggach, attributing Christine an ability to criticize her own culture from a perspective of an outsider. She rejects the norms of the "British Wives' Association" (Moggach, 1983: 55) rejecting their sole duty to act as foreign wives who have nothing to do but to stay stubbornly English in a foreign land as "Alien, English plants" asking herself if "would they ever root themselves in this foreign soil?" or would she "wilt" the same as them (Moggach, 1983: 127). Considering that her English prayers are answered through an Indian man under an Indian shrine, one can infer that Christine has bloomed in India instead of wilting; therefore it can be argued that she has created her identity through her idealized imagination of an Oriental culture. Thus, the host land becomes a homeland not only for Olivia but also for Christine.

In this context, I carry on with the concept of an "imaginary host land" in *Hot Water Man*, as the transnational character Shamime lives in such a world. She has a "hybrid identity; that is, a self fluctuating between two homes, added to the ongoing fluidity of identity through time and space" (Toplu, 2011: 159). "I don't fit here anymore" (Moggach, 1983: 78) she utters in explaining how rich Indian families send their girls abroad for education yet bring them back for arranged marriages, setting them free in order to cage them back again. "I'm a hybrid" she exclaims, "Don't you see, I'm on neither side. Or both" (Moggach, 1983: 79). She seems to have a double identity as she is a "hybrid" production of both cultures, yet in reality she actually tends to act like a European woman, therefore giving power to her European identity. In spite of the fact that she comes to terms with her Indian traditional customs by marriage at the end of the novel, Shamime will still remain a European woman in her heart, for she idealizes the lifestyle of women in European countries.

Only in London: Arabic English Identities and the Problem of Freedom

A similar idealization can be seen in Hanan Al-Shayk's *Only in London*. Lamis, a young Arab woman in search of her freedom in London, finds the answer in the English identity. She not only tries to learn English language for she thinks this is the only way to "produce" a true English identity but also engages in a relationship with an Englishman, Nicholas, who stands as a representative of an ideal husband for her; playing a much different role of a husband when compared to her perception of an Iraqi husband. As a consequence of all her efforts, at the very end of the novel the reader understands that Lamis has finally transcended her own identity; broadening it into a new form. "What concerned Lamis was the feeling that she belonged in England" (Al-Shaykh, 2002: 262) writes Al-Shaykh indicating that the sense of belonging is a key element in identity and Lamis has created her own affinity within this sense. Lamis' "identity is always postured after some *ideal fiction* of 'pure identity' and being" (Vigo, 2011: 142, emphasis mine). Suitably, when the English teacher says "you've taken England as your second home" Lamis immediately replies "No, as my first home" (Al-Shaykh, 2002: 53). Lamis wants "to stretch the boundaries" (Al-Shaykh, 2002: 55)

just in accordance with the term transnationalism and when she finally “see[s] London from above” (263) she finally completes her individuation process. She has removed the ties of her ethnic cultural identity over her imaginative identity which she has produced for herself in order to exist in London. Likewise, another transnational character in the novel, Samir who has a suicidal past because of the negligence, if not offensive, behaviour of his family towards his homosexual identity finds himself in the free environment of London, finally having “a chance to reveal his homosexuality in London and creates his own means of freedom” (Toplu, 2011: 171). Furthermore, “London was freedom. It was your right to do anything, anytime” (Al-Shaykh, 2002: 149) writes Al-Shaykh in her novel, giving the reason why Lamis, Samir and Amira chose to produce themselves and recreate their identities to be able to exist within this new “free” culture.

African English Identities and the Problem of Locating a Homeland in *A Distant Shore*

Another novel in this context of producing identities in order to fit into an “imaginary host land” and turning it into “home” is *A Distant Shore* by Caryl Phillips. As the reader witnesses Gabriel’s transformation into Solomon, trying to purify his soul with an ironically “angelic” name suggesting white Anglican roots, s/he confronts the journey of a transnational character recreating his own identity for survival in its most extreme form. The difference between two cultures within one body means life or death to Gabriel. “I can never go back home” (Phillips, 2004: 198) he utters in despair indicating that he has no other chance but to recreate his identity to live among the English who never accept anyone outside their mental “borders”. Phillips writes Gabriel’s “identity as something that he has created himself, as an imaginary object. Happiness or unhappiness is determined within that imaginary object” (Dascalu, 2007: 107).

Moreover, no matter how hard Gabriel changes and adapts to his new transnational identity, the English society does not accept him. He is killed by a couple of youngsters whose only purpose is to get rid of “outsiders” who come into their “country to sponge off the welfare state” (Phillips, 2004: 170). Interestingly, Gabriel is not the only one who idealizes England as an imaginary host land, more than ready to accept it as a home and produce a new identity all over again in the process. Said, Gabriel’s inmate is in prison only because of his skin colour, nevertheless, he still believes in the ultimate British democracy, which does not exist except in his own mind, cultivated by the colonial education of the British in the first place. “[I]n England freedom is everything” (Phillips, 2004: 78) he utters, as if ironically criticizing Gabriel’s unjust death in this “free” country. Said continues to portray an ideal image of England, proving why the “imaginary host land” carries such an importance to transnational characters. “Is it true” he asks to the policeman “Is it true that in England you can smell freedom in the air?” (Phillips, 2004: 79). This devastating comments of Said are taken as “pathetic” jokes by the policemen who only answers Said’s cries for help with “noisy cannibal” (Phillips, 2004: 81). This state is explained by Josaine Ranguin (2010) in her article “Borderland Strangers in Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*” in following words; “[i]mmigrants are allured by idealized images of England, while Britons are depicted as facing a new image of Britain they are finding difficult to apprehend” (198).

Another transnational character in *A Distant Shore* who stretches the limits of his identity in order to survive in England is Mahmood. After refusing to habitually raise his hand to his wife, Mahmood realizes that his own culture is not fit for him. He cannot act according to both his nature and his culture. Thus, “he made a decision. He had seen many photographs that the men in England sent back to the village” (Phillips, 2004: 201). Mahmood makes his decision based on the photographs, the idealized images of England which draw a picture of a country in which everything has a Midas touch. “He imagined that there would be no problem finding a well-paid job of some description, and after he had saved some money his ambition was to go to university, hopefully to study law or medicine” (Phillips, 2004: 202). Yet, “Mahmood’s small English town will simply not exist” (Phillips, 2004: 202) as there can never exist a stable identity trying to survive stuck in between the two harsh cultures.

***Destiny*: The Effect of Globalism in Transnational Identities**

This argument of perceiving transnational identities as imaginary and idealized preferences of existence can be refuted in the sense that identities are not produced but they are rather under the influence of the dominant society. In order to disclaim this argument I would give the instances of all transnational characters who live under a dominant culture yet still choose to shift between cultures according to their own imaginations whether it be the dominant culture or their ethnic roots. Tim Parks’ innovative novel *Destiny*, stands as a well case to illustrate this comment. With references to Andreotti, a name linked to communism in Italy therefore related to Globalism and its effects, Parks opens up his novel with the striking argument that “national character does not exist” (Parks, 2000: 8), declaring that nation-state lines are not enough to create specific characters anymore but characters transcend borderlines in order to recreate themselves. The concept of identity in *Destiny* is executed “as a political performance in everyday social interactions” (Schultermandt & Toplu, 2010: 13). Parks starts off by setting the example of Karen who

happens to be half black with an “English mind” and a “foreign smell” (Parks, 2000: 69). Karen may have a darker skin yet she certainly carries an English mind which carries her out of the borders of a sole ethnic culture into an English one. Moreover, he defends his argument through Marco, the schizophrenic son of the problematic couple in the novel. Parks writes through Chris Burton, the protagonist of the novel that he “was always being mistaken for what [he] was not, German in Italy, American in England” (Parks, 2000: 136) explaining how national definitions of people are insufficient in attributing certain features to an individual. He further carries this argument into a whole new level with the next generation of transnational characters, in this case, his son Marco; “Marco had the uncanny knack of being taken entirely for English in England, entirely for Italian in Italy (Parks, 2000: 136). Marco has the ability to shift between his different identities according to his own will. He even shifts the language according to his parents. He immediately stops speaking Italian, his mother’s tongue and starts speaking English, his father’s tongue, for instance, when he tries to establish an alliance with his father. He uses “[i]dioms his mother used, spoken in his father’s language” (Parks, 2000: 155). Nevertheless, Marco cannot handle this shift between his dual identities. His inevitable death at the very beginning may be signalling the impossibility of having two identities simultaneously acting in one body, yet it also empowers the idea of transnationalism in which a character does not try to act out two cultures at once, but rather creates a buffering imaginative identity which will enable one to survive through such a borderline experience.

Conclusion

A globalized world without borders demands identities without limits. Transnationalism offers a definition for individuals who have stretched out the limits of race, culture and language. In this context, individuals who try to exist under the influence of multiple cultures produce their own concepts of identity, each unique to their own perception of their hybrid culture. These new forms of identity derive from either an “imaginary homeland” which provides a hope for the suppressed individuals in search of a power from their ethnic roots or from an “imaginary host land” which takes the form of a utopia in which individuals can live in an ultimate state of happiness. Sadly, neither of these lands exists, thus leaving the individuals with no other chance but to re-create their own identities in order to survive with what they are left with.

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