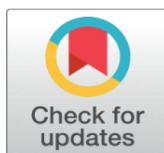
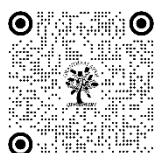


IDENTITY AT THE INTERFACE OF COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL: A SHIFTING DIASPORIC PARADIGM IN HARI KUNZRU'S THE IMPRESSIONIST (2002)

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ABSTRACT

The protagonist of Hari Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist* (2002) goes through multiple identities experiencing intercultural and cross-cultural conflicts at a difficult trajectory of history. Being a mixed-race colonial subject Pran Nath's identity is never stable and absolute as he steers towards a self-discovery at the interface of colonial and postcolonial. The constant process of identity formation makes him a bildungsroman hero pointing out a shift in the diasporic paradigm. In the increasingly global world, the diasporic subject has come a long way from a marginalized exile to a self-neutralized hero. This paper interrogates the essentialist model of distinctive diasporic culture in the host country and argues that individual identity formation endures a difficult process even in the unique original culture of Diaspora.

Keywords: Identity, Shift, Culture, Colonial, Postcolonial

1. INTRODUCTION

Murat Aydemir comments about the Betty Trask award and Somerset Mugham award-winning novel *The Impressionist* (2002) that, "The narrative tries out, tries on, different conceptualisations of inter- or cross-cultural identity" (Aydemir 205). These intercultural and cross-cultural conflicts are demonstrated through its diverse and wide range of geographical settings and concurrence of the colonial and postcolonial in the protagonist's life as the new "citizen of the world" (Found in Dogangun n.p). The protagonist of Hari Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist* picks up multiple identities and constantly shifts his identity from one to another. Being a mixed race Pran Nath's identity is never stable and absolute, but he steers towards a self-discovery. This constant process of identity formation makes him a bildungsroman hero pointing out a shift in the diasporic paradigm. In the increasingly global world, the diasporic subject has come a long way from a marginalised exile to a self-neutralized hero. This paper interrogates the essentialist model of distinctive diasporic culture in the host country and argues that individual identity formation endures a difficult process even in the distinctive original culture of Diaspora.

The narrative of *The Impressionist* (2002) indicates the drawbacks of the classical Biblical concept of Diaspora. The literary corpus of the nineteenth century delineates diaspora elements such as displacement, rootlessness, homeland,

nationality, identity, memory, nostalgia etc. based on the classical concept of diaspora. The turn of the twentieth century saw globalization as one of the viable motions, especially, in the field of economy that translated into social and political changes as well. The changing migration pattern and the economic, social and political loosening in the global-cosmopolitan world shifted the perspective of diaspora studies. At the fundamental level diasporic mediation is based on the consequences of migration, but migration itself has diasporic experiences, hence, opens further interpretation of space and identity and thereby providing new insights into diaspora studies.

Anglo-Indian Pran Nath went through a long process of transformation before he self-actualized. Kunzru himself as an Anglo-Indian observes the English culture both as a racial insider and an outsider. Kunzru deviates from the interest of contemporary writers in the same genre as Zadie Smith, and Monica Ali who mostly dealt with a second-generation identity crisis of ethnic immigrants in the British Empire. Kunzru has presented a biracial colonial character entering the post-colonial. The concerns of the biracial immigrants so far have not been addressed until and unless writers like Kunzru picked up the issue of indeterminate identity and the related existential crisis. Kunzru along with Kureishi, Khan Din, Helen Walsh and Zadie Smith sets a trend of portraying the biracial South Asian identity crisis. Twentieth-century trajectory of the colonial and the post-colonial generates the need to investigate the complexities of identity and belonging in a world where the nation-state territories are blurred and the conventional diasporic paradigm is getting shifted towards a new direction.

In his first publication *The Impressionist* (2002) Kunzru starts his literary journey of exploring complex identities. He admitted in his interview given to Frederick Luis Aldama "In *The Impressionist* I decided that this was a very personal project. It was a project that I needed to undertake to examine certain things about where I came from and what I felt my position in the world was" (Kunzru & Aldama 112). This indicates that his "half-baked" character Pran Nath has something to do with his personal life. Being the son of an Indian father and an Anglo mother Kunzru has the vision and view of both an insider and an outsider. Kunzru has not written *The Impressionist* as a colonial or postcolonial history, rather it is about the life and living of a colonial character entering the post-colonial. The protagonist Pran Nath's travelling from one landscape to another is symbolic of his transformation from one identity to another. Ruth Maxey opines that the indeterminate racial standing of protagonists like Pran Nath imparts a transitional subtlety (Maxey 121-122).

Kunzru has set the story in the ambience of globalisation and in the Indian and British contexts. Kunzru relies on the British literary canon to portray his protagonist Pran Nath Razdan as "His protean qualities are reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's titular Kim, but he also resembles Virginia Woolf's Orlando, passing through different phases of colonial and postcolonial Indian history ... the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and political intrigues in Nawab's court at Fatehpur" (Khadeeja Khalid n.p.). Pran Nath Razdan moves from one situation to another, changing identities to remain undetected. In changing his names and identity from Pran Nath, Rukhsana, Robert, Chandra, and Pretty Bobby to Jonathan Bridgeman he is almost like Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine who was first Jyoti, then Jasmine, Jane and Jase. Both were given different roles and names by others during their migrancy. Pran Nath was born to an Indian mother and an English colonialist father in an exceptional and unforeseen condition. He started his life quite lavishly and elegantly in the wealthy Agra family of his stepfather. But later he was orphaned as an outcast at the age of fifteen when his identity was revealed to his stepfather.

This is the beginning of Pran Nath's bildungsroman journey towards self-education. Pran Nath transforms his identity one after another as an opportunist at first but later he realized an unexplained vacuum in his 'self'. His journey shows that his colonial existence is gradually shifting towards a postcolonial existence. First, he has to become Rukhsana in a brothel and dress up in women's attire, and exercise seductive skills. Then he changes his identity to Clive, gratifying a British Major's perverted fancy. His next identity is that of a foster boy of a Scottish couple named Reverend Andrew and Mrs Elspeth Macfarlane. He also works in the red-light area of Bombay as *Pretty Bobby*, an errand-runner. Soon after, political violence lands him in a situation where he steals the passport of an ill-fated Englishman -Jonathan Bridgeman. This is an impromptu opportunity for him to replace and reshape his identity. Pran begins travelling to Southampton by Boat as Jonathan Bridgeman and turns himself into a "flimsy and hollow non-character" (Aydemir 200). He ventures skilfully anything and everything like a chameleon in London, at Oxford first then moving to the expatriate community of black Americans in Paris and finally to a despairing voyage to research on a tribe of Africa. Despite Meadows's criticism of *The Impressionist* as having no cogent setting and character (Found in Aydemir), it can be argued that Kunzru has managed to draw a shifting diasporic paradigm through the agility in transforming the identity and problematizing what it means to be Indian or black or white, and the layers in between.

The execution of all his identities looks refreshing and viable, but they can fall to a catastrophic end at any point. Each of his identities exemplifies different concepts of identity- nomadism, hybridity, travesty, and mimicry (Aydemir 204). Besides exploring these postcolonial concepts in the discourse of diaspora Kunzru attacks the colonial suspension of the existence of different identities. He argues against colonial obstinacy in the acceptance of anything other than the identity of 'other'. Pran Nath thereby complicates the conventional idea of diaspora which is based on the notions of roots and belongings, space and territoriality. Contemporary shifts in the diasporic paradigm emerge as an embryonic threat to sedentary "stable, culturally homogenous historically unchanging" (Sibley108) territory. This is seen when he despite being a colonial was accepted in British society and permitted to attend a reputed boarding school and the most prestigious university in London, Oxford for his whiteness but not his friend Gertler who was a Jew. Later Pran Nath while working on his anthropological research project on an African tribe, Fotse under the supervision of Professor Chapel, a racist realizes that though his (Pran Nath's) whiteness provided him an extra edge to his acceptability and initial stability as colonial 'other', in the discriminatory social practice he surrenders his identity as a colonial subject. Finally, Pran Nath has his epiphanic moment when he realizes that he has been playing the identity of others, gradually losing his own as Bhaba opines, "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history-subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement-that we learn our most enduring lessons" (Bhaba 172). The narrative of Pran Nath's shifting identity within the boundary and across the boundary complicates the classical concept of the Diaspora.

The classical or conventional diaspora paradigm is based on the notion of homeland and host land and an essentialist model of identity which is primarily based on the notion of nation-state. Pran Nath's "deterritorialized and spatially unbounded" (Okley 151) status poses a question mark to the conventional concept of Diaspora developed from the perspective of "sedentary western societies" (Found in Toninato 2). He begins as a haughty, conceited manipulator and ends up as a migrant wayfarer with a caravan of camels. In between he tries desperately to fit in as a true Englishman in the unaccustomed culture of London. But he cannot escape his internal conflict while attempting to scrap his biracial identity and become a true British to impress his first love, Lily Parry. Then his rejection by Astarte Chapel for a Negro posits him in a situation to question himself about his real identity. Despite his attempts to assimilate he fails to formulate his identity as a colonial subject and ends up with no identity. Kunzru draws the character of Pran Nath "as a modern-day Odysseus, embarking on a quest for identity and belonging that spans continents and epochs, with no clear destination in sight" (Singh 51).

Through his character Pran Nath, Kuzru displays the postmodern saliency of being apathetic about the purity of identity asserting the fluidity of postmodern identity. Kuzru along with his third-generation writers like Mohsin Hamid, Meera Syal, Sunetra Gupta, H.M. Naqvi, and Kamila Shamsie try to endorse this new shift in diaspora paradigm legitimizing the sustenance of marginalized people, cultures, and societies. With an amalgamation of globalization and migration Kuzru's *The Impressionist* reflects the Tölöyanian theorization of a 'new' diaspora indicating rapid and major changes in the discourse. Kunzru's protagonist Pran Nath like a true cosmopolitan is free from fixities in the global economy and culture. His migration carves out a distinct space in the diasporic discourse. However, his epiphanic realization of having no identity indicates the bleak areas of the concept of global identity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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