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# REPRESENTATIONS OF IDENTITY IN GITA MEHTA'S *A RIVER SUTRA*, MONGO BETI'S *THE POOR CHRIST OF BOMBA*, AND TANUSHREE PODDER'S *ESCAPE FROM HAREM*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the representations of identity in selected contemporary postcolonial novels, namely, Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, and Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*. The representation of identity is apparent in these works, and it is a determining feature of the colonial insights projected in their literary discourse. Accordingly, the study will examine the peculiarities of national identity and how it corresponds to the facts that the vernacular identity is an ethnical issue which concerns every individual. National ethnicity incarnates the individual dedication and underpinning of their national matters including social and human perspectives. The study aims to accentuate this peculiarity by applying a close reading of the characters' behaviors. Such behaviors embody the sense of national identity which distinguishes one nation from others. This national identity is not relative to any person or institutional party; it is pertinent to every individual, male and female, who strive to represent the particulars of their homeland. National identity goes along with the symbolical depiction of the selected works' characters. The analysis of national identity will draw upon postcolonial theory.

**KEY WORDS**: Ethnicity, Hegemony, Identity, Subaltern, Postcolonialism



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The theme of identity is widely studied in postcolonial literatures. The main concern of identity studies focuses on the way in which individuals or a whole nation expresses itself in a way that distinguishes it from other nations or ethnicities. In general identity involves certain attributes by which we tend to identify a way of life of certain civilizations. It is an inclusive term including all ethnical and social dimensions of the subjective characteristics of people of a specific region or ethnicity. In particular, the concept of identity is used to trace the specific peculiarities of a person or his/her traditional customs and conventions. In this sense, the concept of identity has an inclusive terminology for "advocated policy" representing individuals through specific ethnicity features witch demand us acknowledge the ethnical background of that individual or his/her cultural background (Ashcroft et al. 122).

Therefore, the aim of the current paper is to examine the representations of identity in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, and Tanushree Podder's *Escape from*

*Harem*. These novels represent the theme of identity in several ways. First, they depict the sense of national belonging to the homeland. This includes the characters' national dedicational and reverence to their countries. In addition, they portray the mature development of the characters' identity within their social atmosphere which requires true and authentic assistance. The novel also appropriate the sense of the difference between males and females in the light of national responsibility towards the homeland, and how all men and women should collaborate in achieving stable and prosperous country. Accordingly, this paper will elaborate the theme of identity in the novels by utilizing three concepts. The concept of identity will be the first concept and it is going to be applied to analyze Mehta's *A River Sutra*. The concept of hegemony will be the second concept applied to identify the national reverence of homeland in Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. The third concept is subaltern which is going to be implemented to demonstrate the treatment of women in Podder's *Escape from Harem*. All three concepts will depend on a postcolonial theoretical analysis.

**2. Identity in *A River Sutra***

Mehta's *A River Sutra* is an exquisite Indian English novel. It is a collection of stories addressing the ethnical issues of India. The stories tell different and various accounts of love tales which indicate the romantic nature of human feelings. The Narmada River, for example, is a perfect place to exchange the theme of love among the stories actions. The clearest token of the stories is the narrator anonymity. He is not introduced to the reader during the fictional events. Mehta provides some information regarding the narrator identity but, the information is not detailed enough to know who the narrator is. He appears as a manager of a government in the course of the plot. His joys and pain reveal his sufferings and happiness by which the reader can identify his characterization. The monk Ashok is one of many characters who tell the narrator his love story. Then, the stories precede telling different accounts of the narrator and other characters.

The narrator's identity will be the focus of this section. The narrator anonymous identity does not offer ample information of how to treat his position towards his county or people. Yet, it is enough to trace his national tendencies through his dialogues and words which identify his characterization. At the very beginning of *A River Sutra*, the narrator seems to be worried about the situation of his government. His disturbance comes out of his dissatisfaction with the current state of the government. He contradicts the governmental actions regarding his job: "The Government still pays my wages but I no longer think of myself as a bureaucrat. Bureaucrats belong too much to the world, and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations. I am now a vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect" (1).

Here, the narrator's dissatisfaction originates in his repulsion of some governmental procedures. These procedures do not comply with the true and real characteristics of his country. the governmental actions are corrupt to some extent that they would demolish the bright and fair attributes of a good nation. In postcolonial sense, the affirmation of national identities does not only generate from a personal reaction towards certain situation, but also in different manners which emphasize the primacy of the national interest over all; whereby "there is always a risk that critique will be construed as an ad hominem attack, and indeed several critiques … It is their profound intellectual substance, as much as their canonical power, or their typicality, that has prompted my critical engagement" (Chrisman 2). In this way, Chrisman's argumentation of a "risk" refers to the deteriorating identity led by corrupt procedures. Such procedures originate in the individuals' treatment of each other on the basis of personal interests and not on the national collective sense which emphasizes national homeland over anything else.

The narrator depressed case is a fine example of the individuals' relative treatment which does not go along with the national interests. On the contrary, it corresponds to the way in which people favour their economic interests at the expense of other people. Accordingly, people would tend to change their life traditions (the way people treat each other) to cope with other people. The narrator is not contented with his labour conditions, and

consequently, he tends to change his life traditions to keep a good job. In the quotation below, he is very depressed with the present job conditions. Consequently, he thinks of escaping the city and led an austere life in the forest. Living in the forest would be better than any suffering of job loss or treating other corrupt people: "Of course, I was forced to modify tradition, having spent my childhood in Bombay and my career as a civil servant working only in cities. Although my desire to withdraw from the world grew more urgent as I aged, I knew I was simply not equipped to wander into the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots" (1).

The narrator appears despondent and unwilling to treat anybody. This is the essence of social fragmentation. The national integrity with well connected organization needs a comprehensive participation from all people to be equal and supportive of each other. Nevertheless, the postcolonial appropriation of national identity lets a great space for people to recognize their need and their mutual relations. However, the need for integrity and social perfection does not come harmonious. They undergo some decisive moments when people are not all equal. The dilemma of the narrator's job, for example, is an illustrative situation of nation disconnection. He almost loses his job according to simple negative confrontation with the government. Being so, postcolonial conceptualization of identity is "being considered by many to be too burdened with derogatory associations" (Ashcroft et al. 4).

Bill Ashcroft et al.'s concept of derogatory associations entails the personal treatments among people. It defines the way in which people consider their relationships properly. In contrast, it indicates the passive consequences of these relations. If these relations go contradictorily, they would destroy the whole impression of the country i.e., the county's national identity is specified by its people and their relations. In *A River Sutra*, the narrator does not consider his life as perfect or satisfactory. He thinks of a good job to get by his life. After his wife's death, he finally finds a suitable job in natural and historical places which he ever revered and wanted to spend his life in: "Then shortly after my wife passed away I learned of a vacant post at a Government rest house situated on the Narmada River. I had often stayed in such rest houses while touring the countryside on official business. Over time I had even developed an affection for these lonely sanctuaries built by the Moghul emperors across the great expanse of India to shelter the traveler and the pilgrim" (2).

The narrator's search for job is an implication of life stability. But the most obvious reference o identity here is the search for job in his country. The search for labour or job could be difficult or impossible if it is looked for in a different country. Notwithstanding this, the narrator looks for a job in his country which indicates his loss of work opportunity. Furthermore, the narrator loses job opportunity according to his people negative treatment. This is also an indication of passive national identity. The critical nuances of identity in postcolonial theory relate to individuals seeking refuge from the "other's" advent. Thus identity involves a "desire" to preserve the national identity. Consequently, the individuals' "nationalism may be due to the relatively stronger desire to define their cultural identity" (Talib 21). The social dimension of identity influx (change) requires different encounters among people; whereby "replacing any earlier constructions of location and identity, is to establish at least partial control over reality, geography, history, and subjectivity" (Gilbert et al. 165).

Gilbert et al. assert the subjectivity of changing identity. This identity depends on the national common sense of people and their various behaviours. Accordingly, people are considered the determining forces which shape the cultural impression of the country. In *A River Sutra*, the narrator's encounters with the government and other people provide good instances of national identity. However, when the narrator gets a job, he becomes surprised by the Aryan invasion of India, his homeland. Here the culmination of national identity appears consecutively. The narrator becomes more aware that his country suffered from colonial impacts which make people subjective. People subjectivity, therefore, is a result of colonial influences: "Our bungalow guards are hired from Vano village and enjoy a reputation for fierceness as

descendants of the tribal races that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries in these hills. Indeed the Vano village deity is a stone image of a half-woman with the full breasts of a fertility symbol" (6).

The colonial impacts left their apparent imprints on people life and social collectivism. Achille Mbembe (2001), in *On the Postcolony*, discusses the concept of nation as a consequence of national changes coming out of colonial forces. These forces are made by the colonizers who change the national attributes of certain countries. When colonialists invade any country, they inflict their violent impacts on the colonized. Mbembe further contends that colonial violence involves all the cultural customs of the colonized: "the violence insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness. It does more than penetrate every space: it pursues the colonized even in sleep and dream. It produces a culture; it is a cultural praxis" (175). As a result, the colonized national identity becomes influenced by the colonizer's social or cultural traditions.

Cultural traditions are common in *A River Sutra*. The narrator goes many times to public places with his national Indian customs and fashions, such as turban. He wears his fashionable clothes according to his national identity which distinguishes the Indians from others. Yet, even when he meets Indian people, they become surprised that he still wears Indian customs. As such, the cause of people's astonishment is that they become familiar with the new customs brought by colonialism. The Indian national customs are no longer widely worn by the Indians: "On my head is a turban. tied to it are strings of solitaire diamonds that hang down over my face, hiding me from the appetite of the crowds screaming my name. But it is not only the diamonds that are exciting the crowd. It is also, and more acutely so, their disbelief that I am giving up my health" (15). The change of Indian customs is a result of colonial power. This power belittled the traditional fashion of the narrator's homeland.

In *A River Sutra*, moreover, there are national dedications to customs and traditions. But they are not as authentic as usual. They form a topographic element in the novel's spatial setting and events. Cultural authenticity is no longer common. Things change according to colonial openness. Conventional traditions seem to be neglected. Abigail Guthrie's (2011) focuses on "both pre and post colonization, remains both an ideal aim and a source of cultural pride" (6). In this regard, the pre-colonial traditions change and become worn out in post colonial phases. In postcolonial critiques, the main focus includes the socio-cultural ways of life. People tend to follow their national authenticity, but they fail to keep up with their traditional customs because they are influenced by colonial powers. Simultaneously, the national identity is discussed in terms of aboriginality; whereby the national identity supersedes everything else within national confines. In *Postcolonial Liberalism*, Duncan Ivison (2002) approaches the motif of the "association" of different human groups in certain circumstances. Ivison claims that "the terms of association would have to be ones acceptable to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples – and therein lies the challenge" (72).

Duncan Ivison's discussion of the motif of association is evident in postcolonial discourses. It comprises both national dedication to homeland and the adaptation into new cultural life brought about colonialism. The narrator, for example, embodies a fine exemplification of colonial association in *A River Sutra*. He attends a royal festival to celebrate the king. During the festival, all traditional customs and celebrations held in accordance with national conventions. The narrator himself accompanies his grandmother to celebrate the events. He is aware of the ways in which the national celebrations are organized. He still feels the national traditions in his homeland:

> Our establishment was so famous for the rigor of its training that our most brilliant courtesans were sometimes invited by an important king to sing and dance when he was entertaining the Viceroy of India himself. My grandmother was in great demand for such occasions. I can still feel the touch of my grandmother's soft, scented hand stroking my forehead as I lay with my head in her lap, while she described how she had trembled as she

> waited for the court minister to give her the cue to enter those huge audience chambers with the king on one throne, the viceroy on another grander one, this mighty retinue flanking him down the length of the chamber. (136)

In addition, the narrator's celebrations are not influenced by any colonial traditions. They are still pure and authentic. His accompany of his mother is also an allusion to the national heritage relating to social events. Furthermore, the narrator does not go out of his social traditions. However, these traditions are confined and specific to his social celebrations. They do not share any other events i.e., the public and work life is not a subject of national traditions. When the narrator becomes a friend of many people, including Professor Shanker, he finds himself changes. When he was younger a little bit, he would enjoy national celebrations and traditional customs. In contrast, when he grows older, he finds the absence of his friends boring. He needs them to be with his side. Here, the nature of his work changed his social relations. His social identity, furthermore, changed according to his new social relations: "I had not suspected that i would feel so lonely while they were away. I found I missed the noisy lunches with the young archaeologists and their infectious enthusiasm when describing the progress of their excavations. I found I missed Professor Shankar and the pleasure of talking to a companion who shared my own background of government service" (220). The narrator's changing state denotes his changing identity. Such identity changes in accordance with a change to a national homeland.

### 3. Hegemony in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*

Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* hinges on the story of a stark revelation of the deception, hypocrisy, blasphemy and moral decadence that characterizes the Bomba-a small village set in the colonial Cameroun, microcosmic of Africa, brimming with Catholic missionaries. In the heart of the story is a Father, a reverend Father; and at first the Father had a genuinely good intention. And that is: to transform the bestial nature of the African into a civilized ways and manners of the white Europeans. Then the father gets it all wrong. Since the new practices are alien to the people, they would never deem it necessary to be part of it, this strange religion. In fact, the whole idea of Father's approach to Christianity is intriguing to the natives.

The central point in the novel is the sixta, a place reserved and designed for the grooming of young girls until they are ripe for marriage. Such practice is strongly ridiculed and condemned by Mongo Beti, because (to him, as deeply expressed in the novel) it opens the door of promiscuity and all sort of sexual vices to the people – the innocent young men and women of Bomba. Their girls delight in opportunity open to them through sex. For them, it appears the only remedy to their plight; sex, then, becomes for them a means of escape. If there is any strong factor responsible for the sixta girls' sexual degradation, it is their unjustifiable exposure to hard labour; as if they were mere slaves, they are exposed to all kinds of forced duties. In this way, therefore, their uncalled for sexual acts is a sort of escape, from boredom, from slavery, and from bondage (sexual and spiritual).[1]

Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* abounds with postcolonial motifs and themes. The main subject of postcolonialism in the novel is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony refers to the cultural or colonial practices exerted by the colonizer to subjugate the colonized in an exploitive way. The means of colonial subjugation is various and multiple. The hegemonic practices, therefore, are the powerful tools utilized to change the colonized identity. Accordingly, hegemony represents the powerful aspect of identity and its colonial meanings. This section focuses on the concept of hegemony in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* exercised by colonial missionaries.

The concept of hegemony is exemplified in the Christian missionaries in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Hegemony is used by Christian invaders. The implication of hegemony entails the cultural colonial practice over the colonized black. The European whites invade Bomba, Cameroon. The invasion of this village is an incarnation of the Africa invasion.

[1] For plot summary archive, please visit this link African Reviews: http://sodiqyusuf.blogspot.com/2012/03/on-mongo-betis-poor-christ-of-bomba.html

European countries invade African countries for different purposes. In the opening of the novel, the scene of the adoption and familiarity with Christianity is obvious. Children of Bomba become familiar with the Christian faith, especially the belief in trinity. Christian missionaries sent their priests to teach Bomba's children the principal faith of Christian God:

> Surely it isn't any blasphemy... oh no! it even fills me with joy to think that perhaps it was Providence, the Holy Ghost himself, who whispered this advice in the father's ear, 'Tell them that Jesus Christ and the Reverend Father are all one.' Especially when our village children, looking at the picture of Christ surrounded by boys, were astonished at his likeness to our Father. Same beard, same soutane, same cord around the waist. And they cried out, 'But Jesus Christ is just like the Father!' And the Father assured them that Christ and himself were all one. And since then all the boys of my village call the Father 'Jesus Christ.' (3)

The missionary Christianity reveals religious God for the villagers who are not familiar enough with the fundamental of Christianity. The common villagers are partially aware of Christianity and they do not pose any questions regarding the fundamentals of Christianity. However, children do not have any idea about Christianity. They tend to ask and arouse questions about Christianity and the God who is worshipped in Christianity. Therefore, Christian missionaries practice their religious teachings in the village urging children to become familiar with Christianity.

The religious practices of Christianity are colonial agents used to adapt the colonized blacks into the new European culture. In postcolonial theory, the concept of hegemony is used repeatedly. It distinguishes colonial systems and their agendas as applied to colonized territories. In a broader sense, the concept refers to the colonizer's ability to apply a suppressive methodology in order to occupy certain regional boundaries. In particular, it refers to a special process implemented by the colonizer in order to gain power over the colonized. In *Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis and Burton: Power Play of Empire*, Ben Grant (2009) tackles the racial aspect of colonial hegemony: "if the trope of a racialized space institutes clear borders between different races, the temporal nonetheless returns as an ambivalent factor in the institution of these boundaries: by positing the negro as inferior, by which is meant backward" (102).

Ben Grant's conceptualization of the colonized includes racial segregation. This segregation relates to the cultural clash between the colonized and the colonizer. The missionaries try to teach the colonized blacks the birth of Jesus Christ of a virgin or "unmarried" mother. When the missionaries begin their colonial hegemony, they exert colonial segregation on the basis of religious backgrounds: "Whereas the Father Superior, heavens above! I'm sure he'll blow up again tomorrow, at our vey first stop, over his old subject of unmarried mothers. That business will really drive him mad one day, poor Father Drumont! Sometimes I really feel sorry for him. He's tried everything to arouse our bewildered villagers to a sense of the situation of the unmarried mother" (8). In addition, hegemony spreads over through education. The European build schools to teach children their new Christian faith: "There is a little school here which teaches children up to the second preparatory year, after which they come to us at Bomba. The place is run by two monitors who were trained at the Bomba mission. they had done their best to ensure that the Mass will be sung tomorrow and I'm sure they prepared a good welcome for the Father, but i didn't see it because i arrived long after" (63).

Christian teachings prove sufficient examples of cultural hegemony. Here, the cultural hegemony engages society and religion. This is because society and religion are influenced by the advent of colonial missionaries in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. This colonial practice relates to the hegemonic prototypical enterprise engaged in by the whites. By the same token, through hegemony, "the destabilizing process set in motion by colonial mimicry produces a set of deceptive, even derisive, 'resemblances' that implicitly question the homogenizing practices of colonial discourse" (Huggan 22). Being that so, Huggan argues for the aftermath of hegemony in colonial literature.

In the course of *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, people become more attentive to Christians. Before the advent of white Christians, people did not use to listen carefully to the religious sermons. But when the Christians came, people paid much attention to the missionary's priest, Father, speeches. It is an implicit reference to the blacks changing social identity at the hands of missionary colonial hegemony. The following quotation exemplifies such hegemony: "The audience listened to him in complete silence, without a murmur of disapproval, even a cough. The same people who always coughed throughout the Mass now listened as if to the Messiah himself. It was impossible to judge how they were reacting to him" (76).

Colonial politics exerted upon colonized nations is profoundly played out in postcolonial hegemony. This is because "politics is tempered with sarcasm; the threat of censorship influences the way he approaches his political and social themes" (Parekh 145). Political sarcasm comprises the departure of the colonizers whites in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Nevertheless, the whites left their positive impacts upon the colonized blacks. In the novel's last sections, the narrator expresses sincere feelings towards the Father's departure who taught the village good manners: "So, that's the end! He [Father] has really gone and I'll never see him again. I can't stop weeping. The dear Reverend Father has really gone. God! I can hardly grasp it. Now, under my father's roof in my own village, I must search my conscience tonight, as he taught me" (212).

**4. Subaltern in *Escape from Harem***

*Escape from Harem* is a Mughal saga of romance, revenge, and retribution. The book's tales vary between women stories and Southeast Asian tales of eastern taste. The tales also carry out a meaningful representation of female identity in a misogyny or patriarchal society. This section will apply the concept of subaltern to shed light on the female identity in *Escape from Harem*. Specifically, the concept of subaltern identifies the female inferiority to male mainstream.

In *Escape from Harem*, Jahangir (a major character in the novel) has long experience with one of the women. He loved her but could not attain her for long time. When he manages to marry her, her father and brother are given distinctive ranks in the royal family: "*the entire city was agog with excitement. Jahangir was* marrying the woman he had been pursuing for the past four years. in his excitement he promised the sun and the moon to his bride. her father, Mirza Ghias Baig, the Itmad-ud-Daula, was given a praise in rank and her brother Asaf Khan was elevated to an important position in the royal court (italics in original)" (29). Here, the marriage of Jahangir to that woman indicates the exploitation of women as inferior to men in patriarchal societies.

Women's inferiority negotiates the theme of women as "subjects" of men. This leads us to another perception of women's position, "If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away" (Spivak, 2003: 73). Furthermore, women's subjectivity is implied, especially in "insurgency" contexts, because "'the subject' implied by the texts of insurgency, packaged with an insurgent-consciousness, does not freeze into an 'object of investigation', or, worse, yet, a model for imitation" (Spivak, 2010: 82).

In *Escape from Harem*, women are also exploited in domestic and political affairs. Jahanara, for example, helps Shahjahan in both the political matters of the state and the household affairs:

> As for Jahanara, she was entrusted with the duties of running the harem and supervising all the work. It was a job generally assigned to dowagers, or the chief queen. From dawn to dusk, the girl dealt with different kinds of problems. Shahjahan depended on her sagacity and consulted her on many state matters. At an age when she should have led a carefree life, she was burdened with enormous responsibilities. (163)

To connect this last point, the affirmation of subaltern identity amidst social power describes the absurdity of female individuality. By the same token, subaltern identity reveals a "reinterpretation of colonial experiences influenced by local, national and international postcolonial contexts and

circumstances" (Trovao 261-262). Notwithstanding this, maintaining the subaltern identity in colonial circumstances degrades the essence of identity itself. Accordingly, women identity in *Escape from Harem* is doubly conceived through political and domestic responsibilities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has studied the representations of identity in Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, and Podder's *Escape from Harem*. The thematic dimensions of identity are tackled within social and political circumstances. The study's main focus has been on the postcolonial representations of identity. This is because postcolonialism has a close affinity with studying identity in colonial and ethnical literary texts.

Accordingly, the thematic implications of identity are studied through examining the concept of identity in Mehta's *A River Sutra*. In this novel, the concept of identity reveals the way in which the narrator's identity changes consistently in the course of the events. In Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, the changing identity is studied through the concept of hegemony which refers to the colonial powers used by the colonizer to subjugate the colonized. The concept of subaltern is also applied to analyze women inferiority in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*. In this novel, female identity appears weak in comparison to male mainstream in the light of political affairs. Thus, the study has provided different aspects of postcolonial identity.

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