

Mapping the Cultural Dimension of Hybridity in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*

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Abstract:

The contemporary world faces migration crisis at a global level, especially with respect to certain core geographical loci like India. Several factors like economic recessions, political, religious, and war conflicts shift national prerogatives and push people out in search of a secure 'home' to dwell in. These along with the dominant discourses engendering ambivalence, in circulation, serve either as short term shocks or long term migration tendencies that force mass movement across state and national borders. Such escapist crusades further induce a persistent state of "precarity", to employ Guy Standing's idea, which subsequently becomes their 'lived reality'. The dichotomy between assimilation and antagonism experienced by the migrant resurfaces in his urge to be united with his ethnic roots on one hand and make a forceful headway into the 'new world' on the other. His nostalgia is countered and periodically disrupted by the overpowering urgency of his responsibilities and the feelings of disconnectedness respectively. This paper aims at an elaborate expedition into such conflicting experiences offered by Hari Kunzru in his nuanced work of fiction entitled *The Impressionist*. The qualitative and empirical framework for the research methodology is provided through the ideological arguments presented in the works of prominent cultural theorists like Homi Bhabha, Guy Standing and Susan Banki etc. The course of trajectory that follows the life of the subaltern, Pran Nath is marked by an deep sense of insecurity and an ever looming fear of being identified. He is therefore always shifting identities, places and homes. The relevance of this analysis lies in unveiling the correlation between the complexities propounded by identity and migration in the selected novel.

Keywords: Home, Identity, Migration, Precarity, Post-colonial, Subaltern, Transnationalism

Introduction

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. . . . It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.

—Jacques Lacan, “The Line and The Light”, *Of the Gaze*. (Bhabha, *TLOC* 85)

The above lines serve as an epigraph to Homi K. Bhabha’s seminal essay, “Of Mimicry and Man”. It is under the impression of this statement that Hari Kunzru can be seen to place the protagonist of his novel, *The Impressionist* (2002). Kunzru’s novel is set against the backdrop of colonial India of the early twentieth century and traces the transitional journey of the protagonist, Pran Nath Razdan. The narrative opens in the year of 1903 of colonised India and introduces the reader to a white man named Forrester, posted as a forest officer by the British government in the forests near Agra. It is during the harsh monsoon of that year that Forrester finds shelter in a deserted dacoit’s cave only to be thoroughly captivated by the wild and exotic beauty of a young Indian girl named Amrita. Amrita, who is on her way to Agra to get married, is similarly stuck in the rage of the ferocious monsoon, is separated from her caretakers and finds rescue in the same cave. She is equally fascinated by Forrester’s physical appearance and the two consummate in the abandoned cave. This leads Amrita to be impregnated with Forrester’s child, later born as Pran Nath Razdan.

Pran Nath is born into a high caste Brahmin family of Amar Nath Razdan but is actually conceived as a result of miscegenation between his mother, Amrita, and Forrester. Since the act of their intercourse takes place before she gets married to Amar Nath Razdan, Pran survives as a product of mixed race. He is therefore a bastard child of an Indian woman and a British colonial officer, but his true identity is not revealed until he is fifteen years of age. Pran’s mother dies after giving birth to him and he is raised rather comfortably by Amar Nath. Pran lives a life of luxury and care as all his demands are met and his household is full of servants who are always at his beck and call. His future is until this point promised with security and utmost freedom that he enjoys by the mere virtue of being a son to a wealthy Brahmin. He is not only utterly pampered as he is the only male heir of the Razdan family but is also celebrated amongst all relatives for his spotlessly fair complexion, the “perfect milky hue” of his skin tone (*The Impressionist* 20).

The reader is first acquainted to Pran Nath when he is contemplating rape of one of his servants: “Somehow looking is no longer enough . . . He could grab her and pull her down on the bolsters. There would be a fuss, of course, but his father could smooth it over. She is only a servant, after all” (21). But the female servant of the household who holds testimony to Amrita’s sexual encounter with Forester also holds Pran’s destiny in her hands. She grows increasingly intolerant towards Pran’s untamed sexual misbehaviour towards her daughter and reveals his bastard identity to Amar Nath Razdan and the entire family as an act of vindictiveness. The discovery of Pran’s “hybrid” origin consequently leads to Amar Nath’s demise. Thereafter occurs a rupture in the hitherto easy-going life of Pran as he witnesses a state of sheer helplessness and hopelessness with regards to the security or stability of his present as well as his future. “Precarity”, can be seen to have dawned upon him as he is unceremoniously tossed out into the streets by his relatives who refuse to accept him (Standing, *The Precariat* 3).

Pran Nath becomes Guy Standing’s “precariat”, someone who becomes “a subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (15). This state of “precarity” continues to exist for Pran Nath through the course of his entire journey. It is henceforth established after the incident of his father’s death that the development of his identity from that point onwards will be determined on the basis of his “hybridity” (Bhabha, *TLOC* 3) and remain ever changing during the course of the narrative as per the demand of the situations he encounters.

It is from here that Pran Nath, who subsequently becomes the “impressionist”, starts his strenuous journey to reinvent himself in order to survive, not once but many times. This paper attempts to trace the trajectory of Pran’s journey suffused with the cultural dimensions that help shape and reshape his “hybrid” identity. During the course of the narrative, Pran Nath assumes different identities including that of the eunuch named Rukhsana; the adopted son of a Scottish missionary couple in India, Robert; and Jonathan Bridgeman, an impersonator of an heir to a rich fortune in England. “Precarity” for Pran actually comes from the state of what Standing calls, “not quite, not yet” (*The Precariat* 21), as he never really achieves a stable identity for himself.

When connected to Homi Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity”, a similar idea is echoed to fit Pran’s situation as Bhabha speaks of the “hybrid” as someone who is “almost the same but not

quite” (“Of Mimicry” 88). Pran Nath, the ‘hybrid-precariat’ searches for a familiar ‘home’ after his family rejects him for being a bastard and eventually throws him out of his ‘home’. In both metaphoric and literal sense, Pran finds ‘home’ when he is evicted from his father’s home and also when he chooses to escape his ‘home-country’ out of sheer disillusionment. His experiences at ‘home’ actually form the triggers for his state of “precarity”.

Movement from Power to Powerlessness

Kunzru opens the novel with an epigraph taken from Rudyard Kipling’s novel, *Kim*:

‘Remember, I can change swiftly. It will all be as it was when I first spoke to thee under Zam-Zammah the great guy —’ (1)

These lines at the beginning of the novel make it evident to the reader that the protagonist will never have a fixed identity. The author, at the very outset, suggests that the chameleon-like protagonist will constantly change and swiftly shift his outward appearance in order to pave his way through the circumstances that he is faced with. Pran is conceived when his mother, Amrita, is miraculously saved in a forest during a rough monsoon flood only to be found by the then in-charge of the forest, Mr Forrester. Forrester, the Englishman is awestruck by her earthy eroticism. The scene of their act of consummation is permeated with exoticism of imperialist perceptions — to Forrester, the naked, mud-smearred body of Amrita lying in a cave of the forest resolves into the vision of a “native mother goddess”, whose “wild tangle of hair” and “black tipped breasts” exude an untamed and intoxicating sexuality that seems so much more real than the “milk-white and rosy-cheeked” girls who populate his fantasies (*TI* 13). Similarly, for Amrita, the paleness of Forrester’s skin becomes an object of enchantment and sexual appetite. The mongrel thus produced as a result of their sexual encounter is Pran Nath Razdan.

Pran’s suffering is a result of the intermingling of the white and black that marks the beginning as well as the end of his journey as he stands rejected at the two most important points of his life. First, he is rejected by his loving family and later by his beloved Astarte, who is the daughter of his professor at Oxford. Astarte, like Forrester is a white woman subsumed by the exoticism of a black man, named Sweets, whom she finds on her trip to France and in turn, rejects Pran for his whiteness. The doomed fate of Pran is prophesied in the initial pages itself, both by the author and the priest who predicts his future to be just as complex as his identity gradually

unveils itself to be. His father dies as Pran shamefully survives representing a “blend of blood, which offends against every tenet of orthodox religion” (39).

It is here that one witnesses Kunzru’s attack on the myth of cultural absolutism, the evident division between “self” and “other”, to use Edward Said’s terms (*Orientalism*, 3). As imperialism spread to other nations, miscegenation became an unavoidable issue with respect to the coloniser-colonised encounter. This convergence that is both genetic and symbolic of the “self” and the “other” generates an entity which belongs neither to the “self” nor the “other”, yet is made of both elements which is the “hybrid”. In this sense, Pran, as a hybrid is a representative of the “precariat”, especially the one defined by Judith Butler as “anything living that can be expunged at will or by accident; and its persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (“Performativity” ii). Pran, the impressionist becomes an apt example of Butler’s idea of the “precariat”, who is ever changing and shifting himself as per the demands of his external environment, which just like his identity never remains consistent. Here, cultural representation becomes ambivalent with no “primordial unity or fixity”, subsequently destabilising colonial binary thinking and oppositional positioning (Bhabha, *TLOC* 1-2). In the novel, Kunzru employs empire as a setting to lay bare his postmodern agenda of a man comprising of rootless provisional identities as discussed in this paper. Peter Childs supports these ideas when he says that in the novel:

the layering of intertextual allusions and self-consciously derivative characters, incidents and narrative modes suggests both an uneasiness with the interstitial, in-between position of the migrant subject and a deep scepticism towards the possibility of producing authentic subjectivities independent of the assumptions and desires of others. (“Hari Kunzru” 63)

The first transformation that takes place in Pran’s identity is when he is neither aware nor prepared for it. His situation changes instantly from being a wealthy son to a homeless pauper without any family or social affiliations, just because he is stripped of his brahmin identity, and forced to embrace the bastard one. This strikes his psyche very hard as he goes through a series of substantial emotions ranging from shock to anger, gloom, resignation and alienation while wandering alone on the streets. His changed status can be seen in the scene where even the beggars of the streets, whom he usually mocked and tormented, start throwing dung and excrement on him, indicating his newly reduced identity as a very common member of a low social strata.

He is then transported from the brothel to the court of Fatehpur in order to satisfy the sexual desires of the Nawab of the palace by serving him as a ‘eunuch’. His identity is thus reduced from

a high caste brahmin to a homeless bastard and then to a genderless impersonator, Rukhsana. His white complexion that was a matter of pride for him in his early years now becomes a curse as it only serves to attract the sexual appetite of those in power. With the name “Rukhsana” comes another identity, another way of life. The chief eunuch, in the Palace of Fatehpur, tells him: “You may think you are singular. You may think you are incapable of change. But we are all as mutable as the air! Release yourself, release your body and you can be a myriad! An army! There are no names for it, Rukhsana. Names are just foolishness of language, which is a bigger kind of foolishness than most” (82).

Pran comes to the realisation that identity is mutable and can embrace multiple appearances. Pran Nath Razdan at this point is completely subsumed, and “in his place, silent and compliant, emerges Rukhsana” (101). This echoes Judith Butler’s idea, which states that: “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 24). These expressions are discourses and representations that Pran is “interpellated” into, to employ Louis Althusser’s term, as he dons the identity of a eunuch and behaves like one to save his life (“Ideology” 85).

To incorporate the concepts of the “self” and “other” or the “powerful” and “powerless” one can observe a reversal in Pran’s condition in the moment where he transforms from Pran to Rukhsana. At this point, his role gets transformed from being a perpetrator to being a victim, from being the one with uncontrolled power to someone who is absolutely powerless. He holds no power over his choice of sexual orientation and is forced to serve as a eunuch under the constant threat of losing his life which later leads him to escape to Amritsar. The production of the sexual body allows it to be inscribed within a network of normalising powers where a whole regime of knowledge-pleasure is defined and controlled. It is precisely in this knowledge-power nexus determined by the men in the palace of Fatehpur that Pran Nath is captured and conceived as Rukhsana.

Impersonating the English

In the palace of Fatehpur, Pran faces Major Privett-Clampe’s immoral fondness and sexual assaults on him. These attempts disclose the sexually depraved nature of Privett-Clampe to him. But the Major recognises the European element in his blood and supports to develop this element

of Pran's self. Pran thus adorns his next identity of Clive, as a part of the Major's attempt to make him one like the English. Pran is thus educated by him and is shaped into a model of a typical English schoolboy. The impact of this European instruction remains long lasting in Pran's life as it is with the Major that he understands for the first time how his European looks can be appropriately used to make his life easier as opposed to the ill-treatment he has hitherto received for precisely the same reason. His aspiration to acquire an English identity starts from his contact with Major Privett-Clampe. In the words of Guy Standing, there exists a "creative tension between the precariat as a victim, penalised and demonised by mainstream institutions. . . and the precariat as a hero, rejecting those institutions in a concerted act of intellectual and emotional defiance" (*The Precariat 2*). For Pran Nath, his intellectual defiance began with the realisation of the fact that his "self" can be preserved and rather appreciated once he perfects the art of mimicking the ones like him, and he successfully attains mastery at doing so.

The first instance where one can witness him using the colour of his skin to his advantage is at the railway station in Amritsar when he draws favours from the English policemen on duty there. Pran escapes the drudgery in the Palace of Fatehpur and reaches Amritsar on the day of Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Kunzru employs a major incident of Indian history to significantly bring about the arbitrariness of colonial rule which paradoxically serves to be profitable for Pran. This is because, Pran is thought to be of English descent due to his skin colour and thereby receives the identity of a white boy as assumed by the British officials at the railway station. He is allowed to board the train going to Bombay along with other English men and women without any question. The British soldiers take him for a child of one of their colleagues: "They think he is one of them . . . How can they be so blind? How can they not tell?" (Kunzru 185). Not until this time does Pran realise this fact and starts to truly appreciate the European component of his blood by suddenly feeling "the colour streaming off him like sweat" (Kunzru 186).

Pran is until now forced to take on different identities to serve the needs of others but hereafter he willingly chooses to indulge in impersonations in order to serve his own needs. His primary need remains that of becoming a part of the elite English community and live a comfortable life, the need to put on, as observed by Franz Fanon, a "white mask" to cover and in turn replace his "non-white" origin. Foucault's idea of power, knowledge and subjectivity can also be employed here to depict how Pran uses his tact of mimicry to gain knowledge of englishness

which indeed renders him powerful. Foucault marks a rupture in history that inaugurates a radically different mode of power than theorised on the juridical model, a power that is productive, not repressive, in nature, one which is “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (“The History” 136).

On his arrival in Bombay, Pran realises that identity is only a matter of pretence. He is taken in as a foster child by a presbyterian missionary couple, the MacFarlanes, upon his arrival in Bombay. The couple considers it to be the “white man’s burden”, to use Rudyard Kipling’s term, to help Pran rid of his impurity and make inculcate in him English manners and fashions. Therefore, during the initial years which he spends with the missionaries, he works consciously on creating an illusion of him being an English boy. He achieves this by accepting an English name ‘Robert’ and by adapting his outward appearance to that of the Europeans. His attempts at striving to become a part of the prevailing culture through the acts of “mimicry” and “mockery” are the very essence of his precarity that stems from lack of trust and safety (Bhabha, “Of Mimicry” 86). Pran’s repeated endeavours to become someone else is reflective of the absence of such frameworks of fraternity as stated above.

The first image the reader comes across, which illustrates the reincarnation of Pran, reflects in his endeavour: “He lights a cigarette, holds it elegantly, instantly transformed from a servant to a cocktail-party guest. To complete the illusion, he leans on the wall beside him, crossing one leg over the other. A fashion plate. A man of leisure” (*TI* 191). His new demeanour is an absolute example of shaping up very convincingly into a new identity and style. Pran’s ability in forming a new identity is also assessed by Elspeth MacFarlane, Pran’s foster mother, who says: “The boy is such a chameleon. Everything he touches, he seems to absorb. When he arrived, he was so gawky, so foreign? Now he has become part of the place” (205).

His foster father, Mr MacFarlane, calls him by an English name ‘Robert’ while Mrs MacFarlane by a Hindu name ‘Chandra’. So, he is ‘Chandra Robert’, indicative of his cultural and racial hybridity. Regarding his mongrel status, Mr MacFarlane says: “For a mongrel, incredibly pure. Really almost too pure. Almost European” (197). In his assessment of the boy’s mongrel heritage based on his intellectual and moral capacities, he surprisingly finds that he is “amazingly quick and eager, almost desperate, to learn” (235). At this point, Pran can be seen to acquire and in fact exploit the newfound knowledge of ‘Englishness’ to his utmost capacity. In this process, he

not only “mimics” but also “mocks” upon his recently acquired knowledge, to use Bhabha’s terminology.

This incident echos Homi Bhabha’s idea that, “It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilising mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that...instances of colonial imitation come” (“Of Mimicry” 86-88). Pran’s mimicry of an Englishman is in the opinion of Bhabha, “a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence” (87). Pran, a colonised subject thus becomes a part of the world of the colonised and mocks the colonised’s assumption of being superior. His presence in the world of the “self” is both “incomplete” and “virtual” at the same time. It is through Pran that Kunzru strives to puncture the beliefs of the colonial “self”. In the words of Bhabha:

It is as if the very emergence of the 'colonial' is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. (88)

Meanwhile, Pran perfects his talents of impersonating Englishmen by introducing himself as a Britisher to other English people. He experiments with his identity by using various English names like Peter Walker, John Johnson, Clive Smith and David Best to convince them. They all indeed end up believing him. Soon, he reinvents himself ceaselessly, talking on a new white identity after another, because he has understood the trick to survive in the world of prejudices. Pran, by this point realises that his only way out of being continuously treated as the inferior “other”, is by being a part of the “self”. His talent for mimicry becomes helpful in achieving this goal for him. But he avoids depth of introspection and becomes “a creature of surface” (250). The novel launches a postcolonial attack on “manichean identity structures and essentialist fetishisation of purity” (“Hari Kunzru” 68). The construction of ‘race’ that structures the colonial relationship allows Pran to exploit its contradictions as his mimicry of the English demonstrates “both the precariousness of a cultural identity that may be acquired and exchanged for another and the equally fabulated quality of racial discriminations” (68).

Against his own fluid moral outlook and flexible lifestyle, inhabiting “his puppets”, the protagonist discovers the fixity of English people. “Their lives are structured like pieces of engineering, railway engines or steamers unpacked and bolted together at the heads of new rivers. Each one is rigid and assured, built according to blueprints of class and membership that are almost noble in their invariance, their stern inflexibility . . . industrial lives” (250-251). But Pran, a model of flexibility, is anti-modern. Before he takes on Jonathan’s identity, “he has a sense of collapse, of scaffolding falling away” and “all the particulars . . . draining away to leave behind nothing but an empty vessel. A husk” (273).

Pran’s further transformation takes place in accommodating himself to the political unrest in Bombay which offers him a chance to steal the identity of an English orphan, Jonathan Bridgeman, and in doing so leaves him at the mercy of a crowd of Indian rioters. Eventually he is seen heading towards England to be educated on this stolen identity. Pran’s transformation is the result of his instinct for self-preservation and analysing the situation quickly which leads him to leave the actual Jonathan back: “Bridgeman, the actual, physical Bridgeman, is already fading. Someone known for a few hours only. Emptied and reinhabited” (285).

While residing in London, it takes little time for Pran to be like an average English boy in all manners, tastes and preferences in order for him to settle and feel comfortable in the society. He does so by taking up a typical hobby like attending dance classes, acquiring acceptable tastes in fashion and day to day life. In this incarnation we notice the full embrace of a new identity so that he manages to merge fully with the character of Bridgeman: “It seems to him that Bridgeman and he have always been the same person” (*TI* 319). He starts feeling like he is the real Jonathan. However, he is always afraid of being exposed and so he decides to bring his English identity to the perfection by becoming more acceptable and average during his stay at Oxford.

Responding to the Centre

The next identity that he masks upon himself is that of Jonathan Bridgeman, the English man who is killed in the night when a riot against the British breaks out in Bombay. Pran then takes his passport, his London address and becomes Jonathan Bridgeman. In introspect, he expresses “how easy it is to slough off one life and take up another! Easy when there is nothing to anchor you” (285). In the author’s conception, to be rootless is thus a necessary ingredient of a

global traveller. Pran arrives in England and remarks upon it as “the mystic Occident! Land of wool and cabbage and lecherous round-eyed girls!” (289). The orientalist position is switched here: the occident is projected as mystic and its women lustful. The journey from the margin to the centre is henceforth completed with this experience for him. Everywhere he sees “the originals of copies he has grown up with, all the absurdities of British India restored to sense by their natural environment” (299).

At this point, the content of his new life is “life itself, an English life” (299). He relaxes into the city, his awareness adjusting itself to the different qualities of London space. He curiously observes that “people have different boundaries from Bombay, different thresholds for invasion and anger . . . feels Englishness begin to stick to him, filming his skin like city grime” (303). In Norfolk school, he learns that “English is sameness, and the comfort of repetition” (314). His understanding of the English world improves, “the white spaces on his map filling up with trails and landmarks” (315). By winter, “he is becoming what he pretends to be,” and begins “to coincide with his shadows” (317). He also sees that the English way is all about being “linear and progressive”, about tradition and good manners. If one follows them, one will be blessed by “social perpetual motion”. If one ignores them, one will “crash into the walls” (323).

The concept of nation and home do not matter to Pran Nath; nor does he show any affiliations with these concepts. Home holds no value, and homesickness is unimportant to him. Before he reaches the English coastline, everyone on the ship talks about “the beauties of Home”. “To the people around him this has meaning” (292), but he does not feel it. In Oxford, Jonathan meets Astarte, his professor’s daughter, and gets closer to her, her father and the subject, Anthropology. Sitting at the same table with the father and daughter, he feels immensely happy and comfortable. It is here that he, for the first time experiences the deep feeling of actually connecting to something tangible. He was hitherto deprived of this feeling until that point in his life. Thereafter he nurses the thought of marrying her. It was after being introduced to her that he dreams of marriage and a comfortable home. But just like his quickly transitioning selfhood, his dreams are also short-lived. Further, in the novel, he leaves for Fotseland, a remote place in Africa, with his professor on an anthropological project. But before he goes, a realisation similar to that of a tourist strikes him: “All he wanted was to come to England and settle into a comfortable life, the life depicted in the postcards pinned above his washstand in Bombay” (253).

But home becomes a provisional setting for him, just like all his temporary identities. He is neither committed to any nation nor to the sense of belonging to one. Pran shoves historical concerns to the margin. Whereas in Bombay, the Indian freedom struggle is at its peak, “he is too preoccupied to think about politics, barely registering that around him agitation against the British is growing to a fever pitch” (256). He does not join them. The young nationalists dislike his well-cut suits and newly minted accent, a contrast to their own proud Indian attire of Congress caps, white “kurta-pyjamas” and high-necked “achkans”. When they ask him if he is not going to work for his country, he shakes his head and pushes through them. As they walk past, they insult him by calling “mongrel, English lackey” and shout at him that the day India gets independence, he and all his kind would be swept away. (256)

In England, despite his English life, a part of him remains “inaccessible”. Though he has all the necessary items to pass off as an Englishman, there is still a chunk in him which cannot be fully absorbed into British life (402). Neither an Indian nor a British, he does not know his roots because he has none. His overall attitude to his surrounding world appears in these words: “He felt as if he has found his place in the cricketing world. Neither inside nor outside, participant nor uninvolved spectator, he becomes a minor recording god, observing the actions of others with dispassionate concentration, marking them down as dots or little figures . . . Not taking sides, he views the affairs of men at a distance” (334). He craves ‘invisibility’ because his power lies in it. When “everyone is clamouring to be noticed, he is careful to clamour just enough to fit in, but no more” (345). If he “makes himself invisible to others, shape-shifting, changing names and keeping his motives hidden, he does so no less to himself. Secrecy hints at depth, and this is what people fantasize about when they see him” (250).

On his way to Fotseland, with Professor Chapel, Jonathan intends to propose to Astarte on their journey to France. Instead, Astarte introduces him to a black man, named ‘Sweets’. She prefers Sweets as he is different, “exotic and strong” (414). In contrast to him stands Jonathan, one she knows everything about because he is exactly like everybody else: “You do the same things as everybody else and you say the same things as everybody else” (415). She does not like being English. Jonathan, she perceives is “the most conventional person” who likes “following rules from birth to marriage to death”. But she, on the other hand, wants “passion, primitive emotion”, and blacks have the soul that lures her. “English people... we haven’t got soul.” Soul, according to her, or as Sweets tells her, means “music and suffering” (415).

Subversion of Power

It is due to Pran's chameleon-like skills that he manages to become almost common and invisible within the multitude of English students. As Jonathan, his imitation of the 'English' is almost complete in all conventions and aspects. Yet, he is turned down by the woman he loves as she considers him to be "too English" and deprived of the suffering and musical soul of a black. In his continual attempts to showcase himself eagerly as a white, he hides his mongrel origin behind the colour of his skin. Astarte loves it when Sweets touches her white bare shoulder. She thereby discards 'sameness', 'comfort of repetition' and 'whiteness' and instead, she falls for difference: suffering and blackness. Jonathan tries to reveal his true identity when he says to her that he may not be "as black as him", but he is blacker than she thinks. But she dismisses his attempts as insignificant in appeal when compared to Sweets.

Since his meeting with the Major in India, Pran had followed the "English blood", copied everything white in culture, but to his sheer shock, it is the same whiteness that gets rejected by Astarte. Even though he enjoys his hybrid status and uses it to his benefit, he now realises the flip side of it. Pran, thus endeavours to evade his hybridity and hide it from the world as well as from himself. It is at this point that his mimicry becomes a space which is neither transactional nor conflictual. In fact, he has no 'true' identity because the 'English life' which he calls 'life itself' is not an original but a copy. In this situation, he cannot claim his hybrid self either. The protagonist is in crisis as the opposition between mimicry and originality is destroyed, and the hierarchical relation between sameness and difference overturned.

During his expedition to Fotseland, Jonathan, as an ethnographer, discerns that the pursuit of knowledge for an ethnographer gets mixed up with Empire's policy: "... the patriotic purpose of an ethnographic study is to collect information that will allow us to govern more effectively" (429). He has to do the census job "for God and England and the Empire and Civilisation and Progress and Uplift and Morality and Honour" (462). But he cannot "feel the words". That is precisely the reason behind his inability to gather the will to count the people. He nevertheless engages in the task but before he finishes with the counting, the Fotses become hostile and kill all of them except Jonathan.

An old man, a sorcerer, proclaims that Jonathan “is possessed by a European spirit” (475). This spirit is subsequently taken out of him: “the thing he thought was himself is plucked out and flung away” (477). The novel, according to Peter Childs, reproduces the hollowness and absurdity of the rituals on which colonial power depends; yet, for the individuals who are enmeshed in this structure — flattened into symbols and cyphers — it seems that identity may only be affirmed through the endless reproduction of such performances (“Hari Kunzru” 69). Indeed, as Pran’s carefully constructed persona begins to dissolve in the African desert, he dreams that “cables and wires are strung between every object and person in the darkness around him, forming a single interconnected mechanism”, in which he is also implicated and whose complexity outstrips his attempts to understand it (TI 469).

In reference to Kipling’s famous lines from his poem, “The Ballad of East and West”, one can see Pran realise at this point in the narrative that: “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” All his attempts, therefore, at being one with the English are immediately thwarted and he is cleansed of all the impressions that he had put on until that point. Standing holds that, “to be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (*The Precariat* 16) and Pran reaches the point of this realisation once his cleaning takes place.

The fragmentation of the protagonist’s biography into: “a disjointed series of subject positions — each of which disturbs the stability of the conventional elements through which selfhood is constructed — does offer the liberating vision of identity as a ‘continuum’ that is also an incessant process of becoming” (251). The novel symbolically ends with the travel-motif, “For now the journey is everything. He has no thoughts of arriving anywhere . . . Tomorrow he will travel on” (481). The end is, just another beginning for the protagonist. His mobility and his identity changes remind the reader of the typical traveller in a global world where the identity of the traveller seldom remains fixed, solid and stable. He is always on the move, physically and culturally. So, his identity is like a commodity in a consumer society, changing his nature from one moment to the next with the nature of consumption, thereby disrupting the feelings of self-continuity and wholeness.

He is always in a recurrent state of dissolution rather than in the construction of a stable identity. He does not have any sustained self to connect meaningfully with others, culture, history

or nation. At the most, he can engage with the world merely by imitating one or the other personality, and not with his own self which is “as mutable as the air” (250). The only thing left in him is the potential to put on the mask of identity. To allude to Jean Baudrillard’s idea, Pran is a fragmented subject, just like a ‘simulation’ without any referents: “Better, he thinks, to live an unexamined life. Otherwise, you run the risk of not living at all” (250).

Pran is seen to travel from one place to another, not only within the boundary of colonial India (Agra, Amritsar, Fatehpur, Amritsar and Bombay), but also to England (Norfolk public school and Oxford), then to Paris, and finally ends in Fotsé, a remote place in West Africa. He takes up different identities on his journey, and his ‘travels’ or rather ‘forced movement’ takes place against the historical and cultural landscape of the imperial backdrop. Kunzru not only draws a caricature of the British empire from the margin but also destabilises both the colonial and colonised selves as well as the notion of pure race. In an interview, he conveys the main subject of his novel:

The thing that is entirely consistent through the book is this question of what remains the same for a person through all possible circumstances, and what changes. How much of yourself and your sense of yourself are dependent on context — time and place, the cultural furniture of what’s around you — and how much is innate. (Kunzru, Interview: 2007)

Here he suggests that every man has the potential to take on any identity. At the most, identity is like a dress that can be put on and off according to one’s convenience, time and situation. The impossibility of Pran having a sustained identity hints at the postmodern fluid self of a transnational globe-trotter in an era that starts during the Empire and proliferates after its supposed end. Pran is neither an insider nor an outsider and lives on the borders of the Empire and colonised India.

The novel thus endeavours to destroy fixed boundaries of identity and stresses fluidity rather than fixity, changeability rather than stasis. Pran’s cross-national mobility is different from that of a tourist who leaves home for a particular destination for the sake of pleasure to return home; or an indentured labourer who migrates to earn his livelihood; or a slave who is forcibly uprooted; or a colonial man who travels to conquer or exploit, for whom home is a source of power and authority. He is not rooted anywhere as the change of place for him, both within and outside his ethnic boundaries, brings new personas and new ‘identities’. His transitory sense of the world of objects hinders the realisation of self-continuity and wholeness. The multiplication of sites and

spaces produces a sense of homelessness and discontinuities in his experience of himself and others.

Murat Aydemir suggests that Kunzru avoids ‘*vraisemblance*’, Aydemir’s term for realistic credibility in order to allow his picaro-like protagonist to perform the “course of the narrative through effortless impersonations of various ethnic, social and sexual identities” (“Impressions” 201). In the opinion of Inge E. Boer, the word ‘impressionist’ can be considered to have two broad meanings. First, of a painter who expresses the general impression of a scene or an object and excludes minute details or elaborate finish; also, a writer who applies this method. The second of a comedian who imitates or impersonates well-known personalities. “The two functions of ‘impressionism’ are performative and perceptual” (201). The first meaning fits Pran, the protagonist with many names, who performs impersonations of various ethnic, social, and sexual identities. These include those of Pran Nath Razdan, an arrogant son of a nationalist Kashmiri family in Agra; Rukshana, a eunuch in the harem of Fatehpur’s Mughal court; Robert, living in Bombay with the missionary family MacFarlane; and Jonathan Bridgeman, who, after attending public school at Chopham Hall in Norfolk, moves to Oxford to join professor Chapel as his research assistant on an ethnographic study of the Fotse tribe of West Africa (Boer et al., *Uncertain* 201- 203).

In an effort to deal with these "in-between" categories of competing cultural differences, Bhabha attempts to shed light upon the "liminal" negotiation of cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender, and cultural traditions which can be applied in the context of the novel: “It is in the emergence of the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference — that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (*TLOC* 2). In other words, Bhabha argues that cultural identities cannot be ascribed to pre-established cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. Nor can the ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ be viewed as separate entities that define themselves independently. Instead, “Bhabha suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a ‘space’ of mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference” (*TLOC* 23).

The second meaning of the impressionist appears in the novel when Pran sees an actual impressionist’s performance in France. In a moment of rare self-reflection, he identifies with the performer and notices that “in between each impression, just at the moment when one person falls

away and the next has yet to take possession, the impressionist is completely blank. There is nothing there at all” (*TI* 419). With so many identities, he breaks boundaries and finds himself in a mess. Pran’s saddest moment is when he feels completely blank at the point of transition between two identities. But his pain comes across as comic relief instead because he is only an impersonator and likewise is his pain. He is merely an impersonator, who has no real identity, retrospections or flashbacks to bother him. The novelist intentionally does not allow Pran’s culturally determined self-impressions to grow into a sustained self.

In this sense, Pran as the epitome of ‘the impressionist’ can be considered to be an apt depiction of the postmodernist self. The modern ‘self’ basis its relationship to work, class position or family, but the ‘self’ in a postmodern society is made up of many fragments. The postmodern being avoids stable identity and commitment, and the problem is not how to construct or assemble an identity, ‘but how to prevent it from sticking.’ Regarding the question of fragmentation, Bauman contends that modernity is characterised by pilgrims who seek predefined goals while post-modernity, in contrast, is characterised by a diverse range of ‘strollers’, ‘players’, ‘tourists’ and ‘vagabonds’. “Well constructed identity and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability. The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building but avoidance of fixation” (Bauman, “From Pilgrim” 24).

To avoid indulgence in self-reflection is a direct attack on the authority of reason as an instrument of enlightenment. As Pran penetrates in the setting of his location, he is in a state of perpetual self-avoidance. In such a situation it becomes redundant to talk of having a self or self-autonomy. He has no personality of himself to obliterate and therefore through his talent of mimicry he only creates himself in the image of others. Yet he lets in only what is of use to him and does not let anything become an indispensable part of himself. His quest for English also turns out to be merely a ‘cultural furniture’ for comfortable adjustment. His surface appearance thus becomes a reality for him. Yet, Astarte’s rejection puts him in a state of collapse.

It suggests the gap that exists in his discourse of the surface. It hints at something that lies beneath the surface. In introspection, he is found to confess: “This terrible blurring is what happens when boundaries are breached . . . It becomes impossible to tell what is valuable and what is not” (*TI* 417). Pran, in the middle of the Empire, absorbs British culture almost totally under the guise of Jonathan. Yet the dismissal of his beloved makes him stand at the periphery again. At this point,

the universe of this ‘impressionist’ and the supposed order and uniformity of the British empire are both shattered.

One can thus observe that where the self is silent, there cannot be any self-representation. So, the narrative comes out as anti-essentialist and anti-hierarchical as it deconstructs a series of binaries: order-disorder, depth-surface, pure-impure, original-mimic, power-impotence, self-other, being-nothingness. Pran Nath is just like the postmodern individual “characterised by an absence of strong singular identity”, “a floating individual with no distinct reference points or parameters”, favouring “dispersion over concentration, the unrehearsed rather than the carefully organized”, “without any need of universalistic claims or ideological consistency”, “the disintegrating patchwork of a persona, with a disparate personality and a potentially confused identity” (Rosenau, *Post Modernism* 54-55).

In the end, the act that the Fotse priest performed on Pran, the act of emptying out the European spirit, may be read as an emptying out of the polarity. He earlier talks of being “a creature of surface”, but once that spirit is taken out, “he is an abyss” (*TI* 477). What remains is “a monstrous disorder”. After the European spirit is plucked out, nothing is left except the journey and it is the journey in the end that is everything. Kunzru strives to indicate that travelling is about having no ‘I’, which means there is no self and hence no other. He has no ‘I’ and no ‘other’ identity to be ‘whole’ with his own self and from here he discovers his reality which lies in the constant search through his journey. In the middle of the African desert, which is devoid of any cultural masks, Pran comes face to face with his emptiness and many possibilities. However, one speculates he will continue to put on new identities.

Pran can neither be fully reduced to one or the other as he switches from one identity to the second smoothly — nor fully independent from the cultural habitat since the impressionist’s every incarnation is determined by the constraints and possibilities of each culture. He consumes what he wants and when he wants, changing from one minute to the next. His exorcism of the European spirit may mean he is free from the binary opposition of the coloniser and colonised, even from the hybrid position of the two. The man one meets at the end of the narrative, despite that ‘monstrous disorder’, is a calm person, who has nothing to do with European or Indian culture, empire or ethnic essence. The man is no longer someone indulging in mimicry, but one who has found a way out of the ‘white yet not white’ situation.

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