

WLC 2016 : World LUMEN Congress. Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty 2016 |
LUMEN 15th Anniversary Edition

Postcoloniality and Global Affiliation: the International Writer

Angela Stănescu^{a*}

* Corresponding author: Angela Stănescu, angelastanescu@yahoo.com

^a*Valahia University of Targoviste, ROMANIA, angelastanescu@yahoo.com*

Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.09.114>

The present paper explores the discourses of global affiliation and transnational identity informing the professions of personal and artistic self-identification characterising some of the most important representatives of the postcolonial novel in English: V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo. While anatomising in their writing the historical, political, social and cultural resorts of their endemic non-belonging, we aim at analysing the discourse by which they construe and articulate their self-assumed status of ‘international writers’.

© 2016 Published by Future Academy www.FutureAcademy.org.uk

Keywords: Postcolonial; non-belonging; global/transnational identity; international.



1. Introduction

The colonial and postcolonial experience is bound up with cultural dissemination and hybridisation. At the same time, it also engendered, in the case of those who have experienced its effects, a sense of uncertain cultural belonging or national affiliation. In the wake of colonialism, throughout the second half of the 20th century, mass migration to the metropolitan centres of the former British Empire opened up a new era of displacement, cultural relocation and social reconfigurations. At the same time, the postmodern condition itself is essentially characterised not only by an unprecedented global mobility, but also by the globalisation of information and culture. In this latter development, postcolonial writing in English has played a major role. The cross-cultural writing cultivated by writers coming to Britain from all corners of the former empire has opened new prospects for intercultural disseminations and the affirmation of new, pluri-cultural identities. While writing of an ontological homelessness of characterising postcoloniality and postmodernity alike, such migrant authors as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo have also articulated their multiple cultural belonging and affiliations. Emphasising their non-belonging or in-betweenness, they have defined themselves as ‘international writers’, non-affiliated to one single literary culture. The present author proposes a critical analysis of these writers’ discourses of global artistic affiliation and transnational identity, by scrutinising the historical, political, social and cultural resorts of their claim to the status of international writers.

2. V. S. Naipaul and ‘our universal civilisation’

Naipaul (b. 1932) belongs to a generation of aspiring young West-Indian literati who, in the 1950s, migrate to the centre of English culture for the pragmatic ‘reasons of publishing, audience and education’, which exercised a ‘substantial pressure on Caribbean authors of [his] generation to move abroad if they wished to survive as writers’ (Nixon, 1992: 20). Naipaul construes his exile as a personal quest, whose significance goes beyond the socio-cultural factors underlying the colonial writer’s escape to the heart of imperial culture. His personal experience of displacement, first as a colonial subject in Trinidad and later as an expatriate in England and a postcolonial pilgrim to the margins of former empires constitutes the raw material of his writing, which ‘replicates the restlessness, dissatisfactions, migrations of people and rapid social and cultural changes of the present world’ (King, 1996: 5).

He adheres to the Western notions of individualism, in which he discovers the fundamental principles underlying the process of identity formation. His novels are rooted in the nineteenth-century British novelistic tradition of representing the individual negotiating his position within society and his relationship to the values and beliefs defining the collective social consciousness. Endemically distrustful of groups and group ideologies, Naipaul ‘focuses on individuals in societies’ and the ways in which ‘people create themselves and advance in life’ (King, 1996: 2).

He defines himself as a writer detached from any society, free from any partisan loyalties or group affiliations, finding it difficult to anchor himself in any social space which he could truly consider his own. Considered by many an affectation carefully cultivated so as to warrant his objectivity, Naipaul’s detachment is the manifestation of a chronic social disaffection, resulting from his experience of

colonial and postcolonial displacement. Having left the constricting space of his familial and ethnic group in Trinidad, he has never really found a society which he could call his own.

His entire work originates in an encompassing engagement with the history of imperial conquests which 'have altered the world for ever' (King, 1996: 5). The writer's own sense of non-belonging, underlying both his worldview and his writing, becomes emblematic of the homelessness of those unhomed by the Empire. Naipaul's life and creation can be defined as iconic of the problematical imperial legacy: 'And as that walking paradox, that seeming oxymoron, an East Indian West Indian, he is himself the greatest embodiment of that "deep disorder", a writer brilliant but not whole, whose entire career is a mark of imperialism's deforming power' (Gorra, 1997: 71).

His evocations of his early years in London are haunted by a sense of emptiness and unrest, of the rootlessness and alienation of exilic existence. 'I was lost. London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go... Here I became no more than an inhabitant of a big city, robbed of loyalties, time passing, taking me away from what I was, thrown more and more into myself, fighting to keep my balance and keep alive the thought of the clear world beyond the brick and asphalt and the chaos of railway lines. All mythical lands faded, and in the big city I was confined to a smaller world than I had ever known. I became my flat, my desk, my name' (Naipaul, 1964: 45).

Indeed, out of the anonymity of exile he made his name, a name which has come to epitomise the very concept of colonial and postcolonial displacement. He discovered a new freedom of expression in the vocation of the traveller and the immediacy of documentary writing. The desire to travel to India sprung from his weariness of England, but above all from his romantic fantasy of reconnecting to the land of his ancestors, of anchoring himself in a recovered myth of origin. But the visit proved a new disillusionment. Naipaul discovered that India could never provide him with a home any more than England could.

He worryingly scrutinises the widening rift between the Western civilisation and an increasingly fundamentalist Islam, chastising the cultural orthodoxies and hypocrisies of those who reject the values of the world's 'universal civilisation', while availing themselves of its benefits. At the beginning of the new millennium, Naipaul's oeuvre has come to epitomise the most encompassing enquiry into the world's millenary history of displacement and 'mingling of peoples'. The Nobel Prize he was awarded in 2001 constitutes the supreme crowning of his achievement, after being knighted in 1990. He is recognised not only as an outstanding novelist, but also an authoritative analyst of Third World history and politics. Yet his reputation still provokes controversy, as the ideas and positions enunciated in his writing have always instigated widely different responses.

Naipaul's cultivation of displacement as an endemic condition of the postcolonial world, as well as a personal predicament has been seen as a self-romanticising ploy meant to fashion his image of an irredeemably rootless, homeless exile, while enjoying the comfortable existence of a metropolitan writer. Whether or not Naipaul's self-image as a displaced, unanchored individual should be taken at face value is an extra-literary argument which cannot have an import on the ideational and aesthetic value of his creation. Throughout his writing, displacement is figured as the defining condition of the colonial and postcolonial subject, the inheritor of a complex history of dislocation through conquest, enslavement, indenture, or migration.

However, his genuinely multifaceted experience of displacement as a postcolonial migrant has been distilled into a larger, universalising truth applicable to postmodern existence in an increasingly globalised world. The deeply private vision of human condition underlying his art is centred on a sense of ontological homelessness: 'His books portray individuals in an inhospitable world' (King, 1996: 206). The Indian cultural critic and theorist Homi Bhabha reads Naipaul's early novels as a celebration of an almost heroic human resilience and confesses that his own 'influential views of hybridity derive from his reading of Naipaul' (King, 1996: 202).

And yet, the overriding thematic focus of his work has come under scrutiny as an overrated personal affectation or as a disingenuous ideological ploy, meant to disguise his putative allegiance to the imperial culture. His avowed sense of ethnic or national non-belonging has been seen as serving 'his reputation as a marginalized figure stripped of affiliations [which has] braced the myth of his detachment' (Nixon, 1992: 17, 15). The credibility of Naipaul's self-assumed exilic status is gauged by projecting his biography against the semantics of terms like exile, emigrant, émigré, expatriate or refugee. Nixon denies Naipaul the status of exile or refugee, terms often invoked in the author's self-portrayal, because his willed expatriation does not meet the defining criterion of coercion or imperilled safety. He construes Naipaul's preference for the term 'exile' as an attempt to subscribe to the elect group of twentieth-century writers in exile, to elevate himself to a position favoured by literary history, from which he 'can trumpet his alienation while implicitly drawing on a secure, reputable tradition of extratraditionalism'. He chooses to define Naipaul as an expatriate or a metropolitan cosmopolitan, contending that he enjoys 'the security of a metropolitan residence and reputation' and that 'in a quite material sense, England provides Naipaul with a home' (Nixon, 1992: 25, 28).

It may well be that Naipaul is psychologically pre-disposed to what Auerbach calls 'willed homelessness', like James Joyce's embracement of exile as a liberation of the mind from the bondage and orthodoxy of home, which nevertheless cements the artist's compulsion 'to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race'. As Nixon concedes, 'Naipaul's "almost genetic" uprootedness', which he ascribes to the world he depicts, inheres in the original trauma of his transported forebears, whose Caribbean descendants can be considered '*deracinés pur sang*'...The writers' alertness to their personal upheavals as symbolically connected to ancestral movements is often accompanied by a sense of tri-regional affiliations: to the West Indies, England and either Africa or India.' However, the critic debunks 'Naipaul's success in fashioning and sustaining an autobiographical persona who is accepted at face value as a permanent exile, a refugee, a homeless citizen of the world' (Nixon, 1992: 19-20, 17).

Naipaul's self-definition as a displaced writer who does not 'have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community; one [who] is entirely an individual' (Gorra, 1997: 72) suggests a non-partisanship which is contested by his detractors but sanctioned by many Western critics, as warranting his unbiased treatment of the Third World. Beyond any conflicting political positions, there is no doubt that 'Naipaul's work has complexities that confuse 'either-or distinctions', that his writing 'gets its strengths from indulging in contradictions, having the best of many worlds' (King, 1996: 206).

Naipaul's multiregional affiliation, both to the former imperial margin and to the English literary tradition remains the incontestable truth of his writing. The true allegiance defining Naipaul's oeuvre is to his writing and his elevated idea of the mission of literature, which transgresses ethnic, national and cultural boundaries. The grafting of his colonial sensibility and material on the tradition of English literature, which he has appropriated and enriched with numerous dialogical possibilities, is the major achievement of Naipaul's career, which 'takes on the aura of a mission whose goal has been to find a way to make one part of the world readable to another' (Mustafa, 1995: 1).

His affiliation is to what he calls 'our universal civilisation', a phrase suggestive of his artistic internationalism. There is wide agreement as to Naipaul's indebtedness to Dickens, which he has frequently acknowledged in his books. The endemic homelessness of his protagonists has been associated with Shakespeare's philosophy of the 'unaccommodated man', the archetypal condition decried by the un-housed Lear, which may justify the conclusion that Naipaul 'is heir to such universalizing writers as Dickens and Shakespeare' (King, 1996). The fascination of the Naipaulian text resides in its munificent humanism and hybridising cultural synthesis. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, Naipaul expresses his longstanding desire to inscribe his hybrid heritage in a work of cultural synthesis: 'Ever since I had begun to identify my subjects I had hoped to arrive, in a book, at a synthesis of the worlds and cultures that made me...I felt in this history I had made such a synthesis'. His entire work is informed by his aspiration to map out the syncretism of what he calls 'the worlds I contained within myself' (Naipaul, 1987: 144).

If Naipaul's peripatetic literary geography inscribes a dark saga of 'what Georg Lukacs called the "transcendental homelessness" of a world without the possibility of wholeness' (Gorra, 1997: 100), it also strives towards a wholesome, integrative humanist tradition, embodied by his self-professed status of an unaffiliated writer. His work brilliantly achieves what Graham Greene conceives as any writer's task – to 'illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world that we all share' (Gorra, 1997: 71).

3. Salman Rushdie: the ontology of cultural translation

Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) is another writer whose artistic identity is bound up with the cultural legacy of the British Empire, whose cosmopolitan background justifies his self-identification as an 'international writer'. Like Naipaul before him, he was knighted in 2007. His KBE sanctions his adoptive country's recognition of his outstanding achievement and value in the service of English letters. Most of his novels are set in his native Bombay, the cosmopolitan, multicultural city, whose hybridity has always fuelled his imagination and permeated his entire work. Rushdie benefited from a bicultural upbringing and education from an early age, as part of a cosmopolitan family who favoured a bilingual environment for the children. Even before being sent to a public school in Britain at the age of 14, he straddled two cultural and linguistic universes. Exchanging his beloved Bombay for the cultural glamour of London, he embarks on the process of cultural translation, which he considers the core of his worldview and creative energy.

His personal and literary destiny was marked by the infamous fatwa pronounced against him in 1988 by the Ayatollah Khomeini, in response to *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which triggered the most tragic *succès de scandale* of postmodern literature. This rapidly developed into a worldwide debate on

the freedom of literary expression. Since then, Rushdie has invested much effort in defending his art and creed, insisting on the distinction between ideology and literature, and the writer's function as the embodiment of a borderless public conscience. In fact, Rushdie's subsequent book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), a seemingly apolitical children's book dedicated to his son, allegorises a defence of the storyteller's freedom and a celebration of the planetary 'ocean of stories'. This is ultimately a metaphor for the hybrid essence of world literature, safeguarded by an archetypal storyteller, who reclaims the planetary freedom of stories. Yet another work proclaiming the inherently universal identity of the postmodern and postcolonial writer is *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), a collection of Rushdie's essays, articles, reviews and criticism to date, which inscribes the intellectual resorts and itineraries of his migrant imagination and creative energy, as well as a revealing, self-reflexive anatomy and defence of his artistic creed.

Many of Rushdie's books dwell on cultural disseminations and the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. *East, West* (1994) is a collection of short stories about both spaces, seen from the middle ground of their intersection rather than as a binary pair. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), he depicts a globalising world, rocking to the universal rhythms of rock music and musicians engaged in dispelling the lingering shadows of racism and nationalism. His novel of 2001, *Fury*, stages an intellectual debate on cultural globalisation, unfolding on both sides of the Atlantic, in the hectic internationalism of London and New York. Rushdie's preoccupation with globalisation and its discourses is implicitly an affirmation of the global, transnational identity of the postmodern artist.

Rushdie's iconoclastic discourse and aesthetics continue to provoke critical controversy. His intra- and inter-cultural politics has come under attack from those who contend that he is a metropolitan *enfant terrible*, whose cosmopolitan ontology pays lip service to the cultural hegemony of the West, while downplaying and carnivalizing the fledgling national constructions of the Third World. It is an accusation as undeserved as the critiques levelled against Naipaul, which proves 'how a perverse reading can turn the text against itself, making a 'prison' of what is offered as an imaginative adventure' (Grant, 1999: 21).

Rushdie's unsparing metaphors of postcolonial disorder have been misconstrued as a commodification of Third World images, intended for the exotic tastes of Western cultural consumerism. This metaphor of the global cultural marketplace challenges Rushdie's claim to a transnational appurtenance and intellectual universalism, which, as in the case of Naipaul's homelessness, is interpreted as a hypocritical disavowal of his roots: 'One did not have to belong, one could simply float, effortlessly, through a supermarket of packaged and commodified cultures, ready to be consumed' (Ahmad, 1992: 128).

In response to these rigid, agonistic distinctions, Rushdie contends that 'those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us' (Rushdie, 1991: 12). Ultimately, his only political allegiance is to the ideology of the novel. Like the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* (1980), Rushdie remains 'handcuffed' to the history of the multiple worlds which his postcolonial identity has had to swallow in order to feel complete. He is a scholar of history turned novelist, whose art thrives on literary archaeology. He shares the conviction expressed by Naipaul – who offers the counter-example of a

novelist turned historian – that for the postcolonial subject there is no escape from historicity. Yet both writers find an escape in the freedom of their assumed artistic internationalism.

For Rushdie, the work of fiction represents the ultimate medium for mapping out the ever shifting boundaries of historical and geopolitical realities. Therefore he contends that the novelist's role is to write 'books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world'. Defining imagination as 'the process by which we make pictures of the world', Rushdie concludes that it 'is one of the keys to our humanity' (Rushdie, 1991: 100, 143).

Rushdie's often satiric laughter is accompanied by an amused, benign faith in humanity's potential for transgressing the boundaries of ideological control and political divisiveness. What he creates is a self-regenerating universe, in which the displacement of any entity pre-supposes its replacement and advancement. Rushdie's beneficent vision of 'becoming, renewal and freedom' is bound up with his cosmopolitan outlook on a world radically transformed by global mobility, which has had to adjust to the reality of displacement and make a virtue of necessity. His novels are what Elleke Boehmer calls 'migrant metaphors', interrogating the global social phenomena of individual and mass displacement, migration, cultural hybridisation and globalisation.

Unlike Naipaul, Rushdie casts a more lenient eye on the positive outcomes of intercultural contact and mobility, extolling the fecundity of cultural dialogue, exchange and synthesis. While scrutinising the endemic homelessness of the postcolonial migrant, he sees it as more of an empowering rather than disabling condition. He does not see himself as a homeless writer, as Naipaul does. He prefers to call himself a migrant, a term whose meaning he enriches with complex positive connotations: 'Migration offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age. The very word metaphor, with its roots in the Greek words for bearing across, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants – borne across humans – are metaphorical beings in their essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us' (Rushdie, 1991: 278).

Rushdie's view of migration is inseparable from the concept of cultural translation, construed as a trans-cultural process of exchange and transformation, which involves both loss and gain. He suggests that what is gained is the displacement of rigid, anachronistic old forms by enriched, hybridised new entities. The migrant is seen as 'a translated man', whose value resides in the novelty and indeterminacy of his in-betweenness: 'I, too, am a translated man. I have been borne across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion...that something can also be gained' (Rushdie, 1983: 29).

This 'something' to be gained is hybridity, the corollary of intercultural translation, an interstitial space of identity which Rushdie associates with a state of grace, liberated from the inherently ideological boundaries of race, nation, nationality, state or religion. If for Naipaul home is ultimately nowhere, for Rushdie home is potentially everywhere. Rushdie's anatomy of hybrid identity promotes the life-enhancing newness of hyphenated identities, such as Indo-Anglian or Anglo-Indian. Interstitial identities, which Rushdie has chosen to represent. His writing aims to mirror a changing world, increasingly shaped by the 'migrant sensibility' of those who have made the world their home: 'the effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new kinds of human beings: people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places' (Rushdie, 1991: 124).

His hybrid fictions themselves become such a 'third space' of a global cultural imaginary, bridging the mental continents of East and West in startling juxtapositions of geographies, histories, races, ethnicities, traditions and religions. His totalising myth of hybridity is intended to demythologise and displace all monologic myths of cultural, racial, ethnic or religious purity. That is why, in the third space mapped out by his texts, he conflates the mythologies and iconology of Hinduism, Islamism, Sufism and Christianity, attempting to integrate them into a global, universal story, which dissolves sectarianism in the flow of the universal transcendental imagination.

Rushdie's stylistic versatility encompasses the most diverse epic traditions of East and West, from *Mahabharata* and the *Arabian Nights* to Rabelais, Boccaccio and Cervantes. His writing grafts the elemental forms of oral storytelling on the complex narrative forms of Sterne, Fielding, Dickens, Proust, Joyce, Gunter Grass and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in a textual synthesis of the canonical narrative models of the eighteenth century novel, Victorian realism, French naturalism, European modernism, mid-Atlantic postmodernism and South American magic realism. Critics have drawn attention to 'the less obvious but no less pervasive influence of other writers', such as Shakespeare, Defoe, Swift, Fielding, Blake, Dickens, Kafka, Bulgakov, Yeats, Beckett, Ted Hughes, contending that from them Rushdie 'has derived perspectives that are deeply set at thematic and even structural level, as well as traceable verbally in the work' (Grant, 1999: 23).

The temporal and spatial scope of this universal inspiration opens onto a text which telescopes diverse narrative cultures in the here and now of a global meta-story. He proudly proclaims his belonging to the 'polyglot family tree' of fiction: 'we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form...and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his own parents.' (Rushdie, 1991: 124) With such a mongrelised family tree, how could he define himself otherwise than an 'international writer'? His claim to an international ancestry is best illustrated by the 'Ocean of Stories' metaphor: 'a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a tapestry of breath-taking complexity; and If explained that these were the Streams of Story, that each coloured strand represented and contained a single tale. Different parts of the Ocean contained different sorts of stories, and as all the stories that had ever been told and many that were still in the process of being invented could be found here, the Ocean of the Streams of Story was in fact the biggest library in the universe.' (Rushdie, 1991: 20-21) The image is equally symbolic of the freely floating home of a 'global citizen' and 'international artist'.

4. Timothy Mo: beyond cultural boundaries

Timothy Mo's thematic concern with cultural contact, hybridity and multiculturalism are contiguous with the dual identity of a writer of mixed heredity and cultural ancestry. His hybrid identity resides not only in his experience of British colonialism in his native Hong Kong and that of an immigrant to London, as in the case of Naipaul and Rushdie, but in the more literal hybridity inherent in his mixed parentage. As the mixed-raced child of an English mother and Cantonese father, he can be regarded as more profoundly shaped by the experience of hybridity. While other bicultural writers derive their sense of hybridity from geographic, socio-historical or cultural dislocations and contaminations, Mo's

sense of a hybrid identity is more literally inscribed in his hybrid genetic inheritance. He lived in Hong Kong until the age of ten and was educated both in Chinese and English traditions. He received a Chinese education at the Convent of the Precious blood, a school run by Cantonese nuns, then attended Quarry Bay, an international school where English was used. He was brought to England at the age of ten, where he attended Prep School in Finchley and then Mill Hill School, both in north London. He read History at St John's College, Oxford.

His meteoric and freshly original novelistic career took off in the 70s, adding new vigour to the already established and continually evolving tradition of multicultural fiction, a literary phenomenon 'transforming the literary geography of contemporary in British literature' (Ho, 2000: 3). His fiction capitalises on the momentum of the postcolonial novel created by the bicultural writers of Naipaul's generation, who 'bear witness to the changing cultural formations of the post-colonial world' (Ho, 2000: 2). What he shares with his own and the previous generation of immigrant writers is a sense of double belonging, in that 'their personal and ancestral histories begin in ethnic cultures outside Britain', engendering native cultural affiliations and sensitivities which are 'complicated by exposure, often through education, to British institutions and discourses of learning'. His novels, like those of Naipaul and Rushdie, compare, contrast and mediate 'their perceptions of Britain from afar' (Ho, 2000: 6) and the actual experience of British society and culture entailed by their relocation in the imperial metropolis. Mo's representations of a world of cultural transgressions have secured him a prominent place among the most intriguing of the 'bicultural or pluri-cultural novelists...drawing on a mixture of traditions and a variety of cultural experience' (Bradbury, 2001: 473).

The reversed literary colonisation of British fiction, already initiated by Caribbean and Indo-Anglian writers, is expanded by Mo's claim to a space for Chinese colonial identity in the increasingly multi-ethnic literary landscape of the postcolonial momentum in English letters. The publication of Mo's first two novels 'stands as one of the significant landmarks in contemporary British literature', as it interweaves a new ethnic and cultural strand in the community of bicultural writers who 'speak not only of distant shores and locations, but clearly signal their presence in British society.' Due to his mixed ancestry and bicultural vantage point, Mo enriches the panoply of postcolonial novelists, thus 'creating an alternative fiction fuelled by the dynamics of their trans-national and cross-cultural provenance', as his 'early novels added an ethnic Chinese contour to the new literary map of British fiction' (Ho, 2000: 7-8).

For Mo, as for other postcolonial writers, the experience of migration entails, besides the disorientation of cultural displacement and difference, an ambiguous and paradoxical position as an outsider to both cultures, as an in-between individual renegotiating his allegiance to either space. The interstitial position and equidistant detachment of such writers 'enable critical vantages on their ethnic cultures of origin', as well as on the metropolitan culture. Mo's novels anatomise the dynamic processes of mutual 'othering' between the migrant and the host culture, their construction of difference and reassessment of national and cultural identity. This major thematic concern is emphatically stated in an interview: 'What I write about is the clash of cultures' (Jaggi, 2000). He explores the history of Anglo-Chinese cultural contact, from the dawn of English colonialism to the post-war developments in his native Hong Kong or the massive post-war wave of Asian migration to

Britain. He renders the psycho-cultural mechanisms of othering, of construing difference, as well as the readjustments of identity formation in a pluralistic society, and his work 'helps to institute post-imperial Britain's emergence as a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation' (Ho, 2000: 12). In Bradbury's definition, Mo becomes 'plainly a novelist of two empires, Chinese and British', whose 'early work captured some of the crossing-points with a sharp comic vision, then, more recently, with huge epic sweep' (Bradbury, 2001).

Thus, his novels deal with the fascinating possibilities of intercultural dialogism and exchange, with its constructions and misconstructions of Self and Other. One of the central themes of his writing is, besides displacement and alterity, 'that of identity, specifically the formations of identities and the contest, within specific cultural milieus, of majority and marginal identities' (Ho, 2000: 13). These interrogations are also riddled with perplexities and confusions often left unresolved, with tensions which, in Bruce King's view, 'include a heightened awareness of difference partly to assert identity' (King, 1996: 3). This awareness marks Mo's own articulation of identity. His bicultural parentage and unique experience of Britishness provides him with a keen insight into the often contradictory tensions of biculturalism. Mo confesses that although he has an English mother and he has been living in Britain since he was a child, he 'feel[s] so much more at home in an Asian street [where] people smile, everybody's about [his] size' (Jaggi, 2000). This clash between national and ethnic affiliations becomes a major theme in his works. Mo candidly comments on this somewhat uneasy truce of bicultural self-identifications, magically sublimated in his art: 'If I am with English people, I feel a little white man, while with my Chinese family I feel an Asian. But as a novelist the parts have combined' (Jaggi, 2000).

Mo's novels describe the vagaries of postcolonial identity and the quest for cultural identification of protagonists defined by 'plural ethno-cultural allegiances' and situated 'on the margins of structures in the grip of a dominant and inherited tradition' (Ho, 2000: 17). Following in the footsteps of Naipaul and Rushdie, he has repeatedly emphasised his claims to objectivity and critical detachment, which transgresses racial, ethnic or cultural divisions by an integrative perspective on the essentially human. His representations of people, ideas and places distil with sympathy the universals of human condition, reflected through individuals in whose 'foibles and folly, he sees the absurdity innate in the human desire to order the ineluctable chaos of their lives' (Ho, 2000: 25).

Like other bicultural writers, Mo attempts a redefinition of the concept of Britishness, while discouraging any restrictive labelling of his work in terms of ethnic concerns and addressability. Like them, he insists on being viewed as an international writer or, by virtue of the nationality conferred by his metropolitan residence and of his mainstream readership, as a British writer. Since his debut, Mo 'has vigorously contested the public reception of him as a Chinese writer, or an insider to Chinese culture', insisting 'that his ethnicity is not the issue'. His protestations against ethnic and culture-oriented categorisations parallel Naipaul's annoyed rejection of the Caribbean label. Mo has, often with a disarming disingenuousness, 'frequently disclaimed any privileged knowledge of Chinese culture and community' (Ho, 2000), claiming that his fiction is concerned more with the essential processes of human constructions of identity than with any specific anthropological archaeology of a particular cultural or historical context. Mo's statements on his own work resemble Naipaul's tendency to challenge and disconcert his critics.

His refutation of any claim to insider knowledge is carried to an extreme when he states: 'I know nothing about Chinese culture. It is as hard for me to write about things Chinese as it must have been for Paul Scott or for J. G. Farrell to write about India. I'm a Brit.' (Ho, 2000) This is the kind of disavowal of any one-sided affiliation which has become the hallmark of the 'international writer' claimed by Naipaul, Rushdie and Mo alike. Mo prizes, like Naipaul, the concept of individual freedom promoted by Western human liberalism, more than the Eastern belief in the pre-emptive authority of the communal will of the group, usually represented by the clannish family.

Just as Naipaul's public persona focuses on his almost metaphysical sense of displacement, Mo fashions the image of a privileged, bicultural connoisseur, lucidly negotiating the tensions of his dual cultural inheritance: 'Mo, in his self-fashioning, is the paradoxical subject who crosses and yet insists on boundaries' and who 'asserts the individual's right to choose his identity and cultural affiliation' (Ho, 2000). Like Naipaul and Rushdie, Mo also sees his Britishness as affiliation to a predominantly English literary tradition.

5. Conclusions

Irrespective of their culturally specific illustrations and treatment of cultural hybridization, envisioned as the defining human condition in the context of postmodernity and postcoloniality, the main value of the work of Naipaul, Rushdie and Mo resides not only in portraying the universally human reality of historically constructed identities, but also in their implicit redefinition of the concept of Englishness. Like many other bicultural or pluri-cultural metropolitan writers, they see in their artistic appropriation and idiosyncratic refashioning of English the very epitome of their post-imperial empowerment and 'engagement in the literary practice and politics of English' (Ho, 2000). Ultimately, their universal, transnational writing enriches the polyphonic energies of postmodern discourses of global identity. Their trans-national projections of artistic identity do not only reflect the new facets of Britishness, but also help inscribe the cross-cultural, dialogic discourses inherent to the increasing globalisation of literature and the writer's global affiliation. The constructions of difference they explore have the paradoxical effect of driving home the inalienable truths of our shared humanity and global citizenship.

References

- Ahmad, A. (1992). *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.
- Bradbury, M. (2001). *The Modern British Novel*. London: Penguin.
- Gorra, M. (1997). *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie*. Chicago University Press.
- Grant, D. (1999). *Salman Rushdie*. London: Northcote House.
- Ho, E.Y.L. (2000). *Timothy Mo*. Manchester University Press.
- Jaggi, M. (2000). Interview with Timothy Mo'. *The Guardian*. 7 October 2000.
- King, B. (Ed.). (1996). *New National and Post-colonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mustafa, F. (1995). *V. S. Naipaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Naipaul, V.S. (1964). *An Area of Darkness: An Experience of India*. London: André Deutsch.
- Naipaul, V.S. (1987). *The Enigma of Arrival*. London: Penguin Books.
- Nixon, R. (1992). *London Calling. V. S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rushdie, S. (1983). *Shame*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books.