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Cosmopolitanism, Inter-narrativity and Cultural Empathy: Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the common thread running through the three cultural, textual and psychological phenomena of cosmopolitanism, inter-narrativity and cultural empathy. Dismantling all hegemonic discourses, it perceives these as fluid and inclusive. Examining Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) through the theoretical framework of cosmopolitanism as expounded by theorists like Kwame Anthony Appiah and Stuart Hall, it argues for an empathic understanding of diverse cultures and an approach of inter-narrativity in the discourses of epistemology.

[Keywords: Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, cosmopolitanism, inter-narrativity, cultural empathy, Nature of Blood; White Teeth]

The present paper explores cultural, textual and psychological connection in the phenomena of cosmopolitanism, inter-narrativity and cultural empathy, and engages with the politics of authority, authenticity and representation. It problematises the politics of homogeneity/heterogeneity surrounding cosmopolitanism and presents a case for empathetic and inter-narrative epistemology for any discourse of knowledge creation. For the present study, Caryl Phillips' *The Nature of Blood* (1997) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) are used as the vantage ground.

Cosmopolitanism, as described by Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a cultural phenomenon whereby one values diverse cultures without the subjugation or eruption of one's own. Contrary to the homogenising phenomena of humanism (which encouraged colonial hegemonic structures) and globalization (which safeguards the West-centric economic imperialism), cosmopolitanism validates and encourages cultural differences. Although variety and difference are at the core of cosmopolitanism, it values more the fundamental ideal that 'every society should respect human dignity and personal autonomy' (Appiah 268).

Appiah finds cosmopolitanism intrinsic to human civilization and human culture. Rejecting the rubric of 'globalization' (which seems to 'encompass everything, and nothing' (xi)) and multiculturalism ('often designates the disease it purports to cure'(xi)), Appiah settles on 'cosmopolitanism' as a possibility allowing us to 'live together as the global tribe we have become' (Appiah xi). A cosmopolitan takes the world to be a 'shared hometown' (217).

Reading cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis national culture, Appiah states that 'the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different, places that are home to other, different, people' (1996). He says both nationalism and cosmopolitanism as collective identities suppress localism and promote connectivity with strangers. Nations as 'imagined communities' offer Appiah valid bases for cosmopolitan identities. For him nations matter more for people than states and nations are

maintained by 'the shared memories, thick narratives' (243). States, on the other hand, have 'intrinsic value' that 'regulate our lives through forms of coercion that will always require moral justification' (245).

Stuart Hall, known for his work on cultural identity and its various nuances, differentiates between corporate cosmopolitanism and vernacular cosmopolitanism. Where corporate cosmopolitanism stands meaningless for him as it endorses floating-freeness rather than a rootedness of certain type, Hall finds a hope in cosmopolitanism-from-below, i.e. vernacular cosmopolitanism, leading to a natural interaction of diverse cultural forces. It may not be free from the warring forces of opposite cultures, yet it offers an opportunity for 'cosmopolitan warmth' (Appiah, 1996).

Inter-narrativity is a narrative strategy of cutting across diverse cultural, racial and ethnic borders to bring out metonymic identification of experiences. Inter-narrativity functions through juxtaposition and inter-twining of diverse experiences by filling in the fissures and omissions, and observing repetitions to arrive at more reliable truths.

Cultural empathy enables a person to navigate through various cultural borders and rigidities to comprehend diverse systems of cultural syntax and semantics. Psychologist, Carl R. Rogers, in his article 'Empathetic: An Unappreciated Way of Being' understands empathy as:

entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he/she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meaning of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover the feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening.'

Empathy in this sense functions as a tool for psychotherapists in treating the parents. Extending this further to culture, it is employed, here, to understand the cultural garb of human self/selves and is perceived as forming cross-cultural linkages for the co-existence and co-habitation of diverse cultures.

Belonging or identity is central to the project of cosmopolitanism. Obsessed identities leading to something 'staunchly supranational,' 'staunchly illiberal' and 'uniformitarian' result in what Appiah calls 'ruthless cosmopolitanism' or 'toxic cosmopolitanism' (220) and they should be rejected. Another extreme form of cosmopolitanism is seen as 'rootless cosmopolitanism' that leads to 'floating-freeness' or 'airy nothingness' of identity and is of no consequence for human society. Respect for individual choices as well as cultural differences are two basic tenets of cosmopolitanism. Ruthless cosmopolitanism ignores the former and the rootless one is detrimental to the latter. Therefore, both Appiah and Hall endorse 'rooted cosmopolitanism'. Appiah, recounting his own identity, asserts:

Growing up with [Ghanaian] father and an English mother, who was both deeply connected to our family in England and fully rooted in Ghana... I never found it hard to live with many such loyalties. Our community was Asante, was Ghana, was Africa, but it was also... England, the Methodist Church, the Third world: and, in his final words of love and guidance, my father insisted that it was also all humanity (Appiah 214).

Stuart Hall (2004) finds the Caribbean society intrinsically a cosmopolitan world, where all the citizens are outsiders. Both Caryl Phillips and Zadie Smith share their Caribbean roots as well as English belonging. Phillips finds his multiple belongings rather liberating and has consciously safeguarded his multiple/fluid/ambiguous identity which he views as 'unique, complicated, open

to inspection and reexamination, and binding... [him] not just to a particular tribe, clan, or race, but to the human race' (2004).

Caryl Phillips in the creation of a fictional world deploys such an empathetic sensibility in bringing closer and inter-twining the inter-narratives of various marginalities at the terrain of race, ethnicity and gender. It is the same emphatic cultural sensibility that enables the half Jamaican and half English writer, Zadie Smith to explore the inter-twining family histories of Clara (half Jamaican) and Archie Jones (English), and Samad and Alansa (both Bangladeshi Muslim migrant) and their immigrant experiences in England. Hence, they both repudiate literary tribalism that raises questions related to authority, authenticity and representation, and dwell in a kind of literary cosmopolitanism.

The juxtaposition of the Jewish Holocaust and slavery by the black writer, Caryl Phillips, forms a case for an empathetic and inter-narrative understanding of trauma. *The Nature of Blood* (1997) attempts not only intertextuality, but by paralleling, juxtaposing and intertwining the anti-Semitism and black-racism, exploits 'inter-narrativity' to comprehend the motif of the functioning of power-thirsty colonizing forces.

Caryl Phillips, himself being subjected to racism, as a child growing in the Northern England, and carrying multiple identities/cross border affiliations, confesses finding an inter-narrative outlet in the programmes depicting the Jewish Holocaust. He writes in *The European Tribe*:

As a child in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them. [...] I vicariously channelled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience.

Recalling what Frantz Fanon was told by his philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you," he says 'I always pay attention.' (*The European Tribe* 54)

Phillips, after seeing a documentary on Nazi occupation of Anne Frank's Holland, kept wondering 'If white people could do so to white people, then what the hell would they do to me?' (*The European Tribe* 56-7) And so he paid attention. Phillips in *The Nature of Blood* indicts and chides Othello for not paying attention to the Ghetto existence of Jews in Portbuffole, which becomes one of the reasons of the fall of Othello. In intertwining the self-defeating narrative of Othello and the simultaneous colonial existence of Jews in the State of Venice and the Portbuffole narrative of Servadio and his allies, Phillips exposes the functioning of the State in protecting the majority ruling class, and the marginalization and victimization of the minorities, whatever be the pretext – racial or ethnic.

This polyphony of diverse narrative voices, *The Nature of Blood* (1997), comprises five narratives: the first is of Stephen Stern's (a German Jewish doctor) who abandons his birthplace and family (including his wife and daughter) to find a 'home' (Promised Land) in Israel for the Jews and later struggling with the memory of loss; the second is of Eva Stern's (a Holocaust survivor and Stephen Stern's niece) that reflects the delicacy of rehabilitation for the victims of the Holocaust, who dangle between love and betrayal, memory and forgetting, dreams and nightmares; the third renders the Othello-like-figure trying to move from the periphery to the centre and consequently suffering the anxieties of an immigrant; the fourth manifests Margot Stern's facing the double victimization on account of being at the margins, racially and gender-wise; and the fifth is of Ethiopian black Jew Malka's migratory experience in Israel exposing all the claims of founding an ethnic nation for the people of one race, and revealing the all-pervasive nature of evil converting victims into victimizers on the assumption of

power. All these narratives although are located in different spaces and temporalities yet they refract and are refracted through one another.

Anne Frank's Diary and the testimonies of the Holocaust survivors form the backbone of Phillips' rewriting of the Holocaust. At the same time, it is also an attempt of understanding the personal trauma by a person subjected to displacement and racism and having a shameful ancestry in slavery. His re-creation of Shakespeare's *Othello* is a direct outcome of his own experiences, his readings of immigrant experiences of the black in white society as well as the slave narratives. Taking history as an inter-narrative thread, Phillips invokes the events of Portbuffole of fifteenth century and before, as a harbinger of the twentieth century Holocaust and the naiveté and tragedy of *Othello* as a seminal example of many immigrants falling apart in a colonial and imperial state like Venice. Such re-visioning and contextualizing suggest the possibility and indispensability of endless revisions of history and canonical texts so as to see the various facets of reality without letting one aspect of it become universal.

Phillips juxtaposes Shakespeare's *Othello* with another play of his *The Merchant of Venice* to see the inter-narrative connections for a better comprehension of the Venetian society. He finds this society thriving on slave trade. Shylock in his speech asserts:

You have among you many a purchas'd slave
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts

(The Merchant of Venice 407)

Othello himself is being addressed as 'an old black ram,' 'a Barbary horse' and 'a lascivious Moor,' (*Othello*) yet he turns a blind eye to the imperialist nature of society. He forgets that Venice is exploiting his military talent against the impending Turk invasion. Once the threat is over *Othello* ends in 'European death' – suicide.

To answer a logical objection why such a culturally superior civilization would trust a foreigner with its external security, Phillips' concedes that it is 'an insecure and fractured' (Armstrong 2002) neurotic society which has preferred to employ a foreigner like him to command their army against the Turk because this helps this Venetian Republic in preventing 'the development of Venetian-born military dictatorship' (*The Nature of Blood 117*). This tactic is often used 'to humiliate and break outstanding Venetian soldiers so they did not rise above their station' (117). Preference of Cassio to Iago as *Othello*'s lieutenant also reflects the same.

Phillips taps the rich seam of memory to revoke the past *Othello* is denied by Shakespeare. Phillips' *Othello*, unlike that of Shakespeare's, is an immigrant who is born of royal blood before regressing into slavery and then an achiever of military excellence before becoming the commanding head of Venetian army. He invents for *Othello* a native wife and a child that he has left behind him in Africa. He renders *Othello* through the 'magical eye' of a guilt-ridden and memory-haunted black immigrant who leaves behind his wife and son to move to the centre of civilisation; whose tragedy is not caused by the green eyed monster – masculine jealousy, thwarted ambition or malevolent intent but by an alien's desperation for assimilation with the colonial centre.

Phillips delineates the entire narrative of the persecution of Jews of Portobuffole for allegedly killing a Christian child for their religious activities through the descriptive third person point of view with historical and factual details. Contradictions become manifest as soon as this text is juxtaposed with the narrative of *Othello*. The validity of the confession, on the basis of which the Jews are convicted, is under suspicion. One, it is acquired through inhuman torture and two, the evidence does not include the witness of the guards of the Ghetto, who are supposed to guard it all the time and are encountered by *Othello* during his early morning excursion in the Ghetto. This contradictory narrative is further played off against the first person

narrative of Servadio, which may probably be the interrogative voice of his conscience or his own defensive speech in the court given in parenthetical italicized sentences and it proves the last nail in the coffin. Servadio not only confesses to have respected the Christian traditions and have made charitable contributions towards Christian institutions but also accuses them for their ungratefulness, conspiracy and connivance.

Phillips converts Servadio into a hero, a martyr when he walks to and endures the death fire, though Phillips cautiously abstains from converting his two companions into the same. It reminisces of Phillips' critical scrutiny of *A Merchant of Venice* where he finds Shylock his hero and the text anti-Semitic in spirit. Servadio's presence is tolerated in Venice for financial reasons and he would himself restrict it to that to avoid any unwarranted trouble for himself. Servadio, never pleading for mercy, can be seen as the heroic and self-righteous counter-self of the Shakespearean greedy and revengeful Shylock.

Phillips intertwines the scientific accuracy and precision of definitions/non-fiction with the fictional narratives by defining Othello, Venice, Suicide and Ghetto. Phillips' defining of Othello as a narrative woven from a love story published in Venice in 1566 in Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* reflects that for Shakespeare a different frame of reference was available for dramatically interpreting the narrative and for the contemporary writers an altogether different frame of reference.

Juxtaposing the definition of Suicide, that is treated as a mortal sin by saint Thomas Aquinas, with that of burning of the Jews of Portbufole and the Nazi concentration camps, reflects the enormity of both the latter crimes of mass destruction.

All imperialist spaces are 'arranged racially' (Andrew Armstrong 2002) and reworking this arrangement of space becomes significant for rewriting history. The colonial discourse thrives on a binary and hierarchical arrangement of space and the postcolonial discourse attempts at creating liminal spaces and contact zones for making the cultural interaction visible.

Defining the Ghetto just after Venice can be read as implying that the beautiful façade of an imperial state first catches the eye of an outsider and grim reality appears only on an increased proximity. Like all other mythical colonising powers, Venice is renowned for its artistic splendour and the economic and political power of its system of governance. But equally true is the neurosis that it shares with such powers. For Phillips, Venetian ghettos are the prototypes of the cultural/ideological spaces that the state or authority creates to instill discipline or rather suppress any possibilities of uprising. These 'marshy and unwholesome site[s]... subject[ed] to serious overpopulation ... exercise a debilitating effect on the self-confidence of their inhabitants' (*The Nature of Blood* 161).

This multilayered narrative of Phillips, thus, not only cuts across the racial, ethnic and gender boundaries but at the same time employs multiplicities of narrative structures to delineate this saga of personal and historical trauma.

Zadie Smith's focus on the intertwining family histories of diverse racial and ethnic groups in *White Teeth* offers a ground for the exploration of cross-cultural communication and communion. Appiah believes that cosmopolitanism follows the ideals of 'universal concern and respect for legitimate difference' (xiii) and these being in a situation of clash at times, Appiah concedes that 'cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge' (xiii). *White Teeth*, exploring the cosmopolitan society of London, which it has become as a result of immigration and its history of slavery and slave trade, offers itself as a site of excavating the potential possibilities and challenges a cosmopolitan society may entail. This cosmopolitan world is populated by Bangladeshi immigrants (Samad Iqbal, Alansa and Neena), Jamaican half-castes (Clara and Irie) and English people (Archibald Jones, Maxine and Chalfens family).

Apart from being friends, their lives are intertwined by family ties: Clara is married to Archibald and Irie is their daughter; Samad Iqbal is married to Alansa, and Magid and Millat are their twin sons; Neena Iqbal is Samad's niece and is in a lesbian relationship with Maxine.

Both the immigrant families – Samad and Clara have their histories. Samad's past goes back to his great grandfather Mangal Pandey, the hero of first Indian mutiny as per the colonial accounts and of the first Indian National Movement for freedom as per the propositions of Indian nationalist. Clara's past lies in the slavery of Jamaica and her mother's student-mistress relationship with an English Captain resulting in Clara's birth and fatherless upbringing.

The 'root canal' of Archibald and Samad's friendship goes back to their being struck as British soldiers somewhere in Russia during the Second World War. It is a friendship that converts into family friendship and continues without bumps until the end.

It is significant to note that the novel is not as much about the English characters as it is about the immigrants in the English society. Of course, the fact still remains that if immigrants are affected, the natives cannot remain unaffected. It is the immigrants who, in the midst of contemporary events, are struggling to, at times irrationally, safeguard their religion and culture. Samad, who himself could never be a devout Muslim – he does not fast during Ramadaan, he is smitten with lust for Irie's music teacher – Poppy Burt-Jones – at school and consequently, is given to masturbation – desires both his sons to be committed Muslims. The result is atheism in the case of Magid and fundamentalism, in the case of Millat, who joins a fundamentalist Muslim organization KEVIN (The Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation).

The second generation of the immigrants is the lost generation – a generation, on the one hand, trying to find their roots to formulate their identity, and on the other, looking for definite purpose of their lives. The problem occurs because the parental generation wishes to impose its own choices on their children. While at school all three – Magid, Millat and Irie – refuse to listen to their parents while asked to not to celebrate Christian Harvest Festival. Magid, who is supposedly more intelligent of the twins and elder by twenty minutes, is secretly deported to Bangladesh in the hope of rescuing him from the corruption of the alien Christian culture and allowing him to grow as a devout Muslim. Magid's departure brings in havoc in Iqbal's family. Alansa refuses to speak to Samad directly and Millat regresses into marijuana, women and fundamentalism. Millat is caught between his own desires – carnal and otherwise and his commitment to Islam. This furthers his personal trauma, which Irie perceives as something caused by Magid by preceding Millat by twenty minutes in birth. She seconds Magid by twenty five minutes by first having sexual union with Millat and then with Magid at an interval of twenty five minutes. Irie gets pregnant and has to give birth to a child with anonymous father – a confusion between Millat or Magid.

The things take a definite shape when this religious obsession of Samad's has to face the scientific fundamentalism of Chalfen's family. The school principal makes an arrangement by which Millat, Irie and Joshua Chalfen have to study together with Chalfen's. Marcus Chalfen is researching on cancer and oncogenes and trying to get his FutureMouse, a genetically timed mouse, patented. Joyce Chalfen is by and large a housewife and had done a little work on gardening. She in spite of her scientific attitude, Chalfens use their name as noun, adjective and verb – Chalfen, Chalfen this and chalfen that, chalfenism etc., repudiates lesbianism.

Caryl Phillips, commenting on *White Teeth* writes: 'The "mongrel" nation that is Britain is still waiting to find a way to stare into the mirror and accept the ebb and flow of history that has produced this fortuitously diverse condition and its concomitant pain [...] *White Teeth* squires up to the two questions which gnaw at the very roots of our modern condition: Who are we? Why are we here?'

How do we respond to the questions of identity and belonging when there are other more pressing concerns in the present cosmopolitan world? Should it be an obsession like Samad: 'I'm a Muslim and a Man and a Son and a Believer' (121)? Or should it be like Irie who in her frustration finds Samad's obsession with their identities and past untenable. Talking about an alternatively existing reality, she says:

[For other people] every single fucking day is not this battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be [...] No mosque. May be a little church. Hardly any sin. Plenty of forgiveness. No attics. No shit in attics. No skeletons in cupboards. No great-grandfathers (515).

Pointing to Samad's fixation with his great-grandfather, Mangal Pandey, she goes on: 'Samad is the only person in here who knows the inside bloody leg measurement of his great-grandfather. And you know why [others] don't know? Because it doesn't fucking matter. As far as they are concerned, it's the past' (515).

Irie forgets that past does matter and it matters the most for the peoples who have had a history of colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust. She herself insists on going back to the Caribbean to search for her roots and finds the relationship of her grandmother Hortense Bowden and Captain Durham without any obligations to any roots or ideologies of any kind:

This well-wooded and watered place. Where things sprang from the soil riotously and without supervision, and a young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complications, both of them fresh and untainted and without past or dictated future – a place where things simply *were* (402).

Allowing the cultures simply as they are and letting them interact with each other without any kind of imposition or manipulation could possibly be the answer for all ideological conflicts. Such interactions would automatically develop a cultural empathy amongst human beings. The relationship of Archie and Samad is a testimony to this. Their evenings at o'Connel are without the involvement of any pork or drinks. It is for this reason only that Abdul Michael, in spite of objections from his customers, agrees to put up a picture of Mangal Pandey in his Café.

At the climax of the novel, the conflict finally turns into religion versus science and subordination of animals for human good versus the protection of animal rights. Both, Millat with his KEVIN gang, and Hortense, with her Jehovah party, perceive in the experimentation of Marcus Chelfen, who is supported by Magid in this enterprise, an attempt of usurping God's place. Marcus's son Joshua finds his father's design against the rights of animals and turns into a vegetarian and comes to dismantle Marcus's experiment with his organization – FATE (Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation). In *White Teeth*, although things conclude unsatisfactorily on a happy note in a Hollywood or Indian Hindi cinema style, it does not take away the potential possibility of the damage that such conflicts may produce. Hence, when an individual's autonomy is violated and cultural obsessions are imposed, things not only become chaotic temporarily, but become detrimental to the project of cosmopolitanism.

To conclude, Cosmopolitanism is the reality of the present day world no matter how much one wishes otherwise. Both cosmopolitanism and inter-narrativity offer contact zones of interstitial activity. This activity will be constructive if maintained through cultural empathy. If not so, the warring forces of fundamentalism will convert the society into a chaotic space, suppressing the minorities and minority cultures and ethnicities into the ghettos formed around racial and ethnic identities.

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