



# Moving beyond the Veil: Hybrid Identity in *Miss New India*

Masoume Bae<sup>1\*</sup>, Behzad Pourgharib<sup>2</sup>, Abdolbaghi Rezaei Talarposhti<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M.A. Student, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran.  
Email: [pourgharib\\_lit@yahoo.com](mailto:pourgharib_lit@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran.  
Email: [A\\_rezaei\\_t@yahoo.com](mailto:A_rezaei_t@yahoo.com)

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 05 Mar 2020

Received in revised form 20 June 2020

Accepted 11 July 2020

### Keywords:

Post Colonialism,

Miss New India,

Veil,

Mimicry,

Hybridity

## ABSTRACT

The present study adopts the concept of veil developed by W.E.B. Du Bois to theorize the gap that distances two cultures from one another and renders fragmented the identity of the post-colonial individual. Although Du Bois has mainly discussed the fragmented identity of the black subject, his theory is equally applicable to the colonization and bias experienced by other cultures, such as India. In *Miss New India*, Anjali Bose who is the novel's protagonist, attempts to bridge the cultural gap through mimicking the target culture and fashioning a hybrid identity for herself. The terminology developed by Homi. K. Bhabha is used to expound upon the nature of the struggle dramatized through Anjali Bose. Anjali's mimicry of the American culture is an ironic one, since it consists of acceptance and rejection at the same time. In other words, while she mimics the norms and criteria of the target culture toward which she strives, Anjali is influenced by the culture from which she has come. Therefore, her character is the result of a new hybrid identity that exceeds both cultures and creates a third realm for her.

## 1. Introduction

In her brilliant introduction to Postcolonial theory, Leela Gandhi highlights the limitations as well as the possibilities of this new perspective on human interactions and cultural production. While she claims that most of the shortcomings of the postcolonial turn are related to the academic sphere and the sheer theoretical endeavors, she believes that artistic and cultural productions that result from the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized can be innovative and subversive of the mainstream:

The colonial aftermath is marked by the range of ambivalent cultural moods and formations which accompany periods of transition and translation. It is, in the first place, a celebrated moment of arrival—charged with the rhetoric of independence and the creative euphoria of self-invention (5).

While the tone of the paragraph seems affirmative of the encounter, it must be noted that Gandhi does not fail to see the destructive effects of the point where the east and the west come together. She goes on to show that the both the theoretical and the cultural/artistic products of such an encounter are only true to what they attempt to represent if and only if they show both sides of it: on the one hand, this encounter brings two diverse cultures together, thereby resulting in new cultural, social, artistic and political forms to be born. On the other hand, the rule of power necessitates that one of the cultures – the western one – dominate the other – the eastern one.

Writers who have concerned themselves with the moment and the subsequent results of the colonial encounter can be categorized into two groups. The first group consist of those writers – either from the colonial culture or from that of the colonized – who present a mechanic, static and one-sided picture of such an encounter. To this first group belong many European colonial writers during the 19th and early 20th century. Rudyard Kipling, with his famous poem “The White Man’s Burden” is a representative example. The Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, is another example of this first group who states, in his *Decolonizing the Mind*, for linguistic independence on the part of the African writers in an attempt to create a specifically native, non-European identity to be reflected in their writings. The second group includes those writers who believe that, while the colonial encounter has had devastating consequences for the culture of the colonized, it has also had positive results for both cultures. This second group refrains from presenting clichéd versions of either the colonizer (as pure evil) or the colonized (as helpless victim) and sets out, instead, to show the dynamic nature of such an encounter. The writers in this second group mostly belong to the latter half of the 20th century and include such writers as David Henry Hwang (*M. Butterfly*, 1988) and

\* Corresponding author: [masoumebaee@yahoo.com](mailto:masoumebaee@yahoo.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24200/jsshr.vol8iss03pp50-54>

V.S. Naipaul. Writers in this second group have refrained from demonizing either side of the colonial encounter, instead attempting to show the complex nature of such a phenomenon.

Bharati Mukherjee, the Indian-American writer, enjoys a position that is greatly significant in this regard. On the one hand, Mukherjee comes from an Indian cultural background, but dips herself into a western academic and cultural atmosphere to such an extent that she can no longer be regarded as belonging to either culture. On the other hand, Mukherjee is a woman, which provides her with a perspective outside and beyond that of the patriarchal culture. Such an outsider position allows her a critical glance at both the western and the eastern cultures.

Mukherjee is regarded as one of the most prolific postcolonial woman writers in North America. As an Indian experiencing the immigration and its traumatic circumstances in her own life, her works predominantly manifest the lives of protagonists struggling between cultures. The drama of her protagonists finds its twists and turns in the issues of hybridity, alienation, assimilation and the tensions between Occidental and Oriental cultures. Mukherjee's works have always been regarded as true representatives of postcolonial theory, multiculturalism, American culture, and immigration history. Mukherjee is the author of the remarkable postcolonial trilogy consisting of following titles: *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), and *Miss New India* (2011).

The present paper attempts to study the last of the above novels, *Miss New India*. *Miss New India* is the conclusion to Mukherjee's trilogy where she sheds light upon postcolonial notion of hybridity through the story of an ambitious Indian girl, Anjali Bose, who born into a traditional society full of restrictions and whose aspirations lead her to abandon the homeland in search of a glorious future by reinventing a new American identity.

## 2. Methodology and Approach

The purpose of this study is to examine Homi. K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry in *Miss New India* by Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee, her literary context, her reputation and style, her notable works and their relationship with postcolonial literature are introduced briefly so as to provide some background to the discussion. Then the researcher discusses postcolonial criticism with the main focus upon Homi. K. Bhabha as a key figure in postcolonial studies and introduces his concepts of hybridity and mimicry. W.E.B. Du Bois's theories about the double consciousness of the colonial subject and the veil that separates two cultures is offered as a supplementary discussion to Bhabha's theory. Subsequently, Mukherjee's novel is analyzed based on Bhabha's theoretical framework to show how Mukherjee's protagonists represent postcolonial identity. The researcher investigates the novel with the intention of shedding light on the post colonialist view of identity and cultural encounter. The analyses unfold through the technique of close reading. Textual excerpts are selected and closely discussed with respect to the theoretical framework. Discursive analysis of the words on the page and their connotations serve as another method that can provide the best evidence to either prove or disprove each claim.

### 2.1. Theory and Argument

The situation in which Mukherjee's protagonists find themselves is some sort of in-between-ness with respect to two cultures. This in-between position has long been the topic of theoretical concern by postcolonial thinkers. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, for instance, W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the situation of the African-American individual as being equal to some sort of "two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (8). This double consciousness, Du Bois argues that "the double-aimed struggle" (9) exhausts the subject and prevents him from gaining access to new ways of looking at the world. The present study attempts to argue, however, that the said encounter can also have constructive results for both the colonized and the colonizer.

W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this book, he discusses and supports the rights of the black people and tries to come up with recommendations concerning black education. The point important for the present study, however, is his discussion of the concept of double-consciousness. He refers to the relation between the black individual and his world and talks of the American world as, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (8).

According to Du Bois, the inclusion of two mindsets in one brain is bad, because it turns the black subject into a lost creature who cannot feel one with the world he is living in. The double consciousness results from two perspectives. One perspective belongs to the black man with his specific identity, looking at the world and interpreting phenomena through his own eyes. The second perspective considers the black man as the object which is so subjected to the world view of the white people that he has to look at himself first through the eyes of the white people in order to be able to appear as significant and worthy of attention. While Du Bois refers to these two tendencies as "ideals", they are not of equal value to the black subject. While his black identity and community carries a stigma, his role as an aside to white individuals is safer. While the former is his true self, the latter is imposed on him. The fact that only the latter gives him relative credence to be able to be accepted and live within society causes the destructive double-ness of his situation.

The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde— could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause (9).

Even the black craftsman fails to work wholeheartedly on his art, because his focus is divided between what Du Bois himself calls "the worlds within and without the Veil of Color" (3). While Du Bois believes that "the double-aimed struggle" exhausts the subject, it can be argued that it provides the subject with new ways of looking at the world. Reading between the lines of Du Bois's text, one realizes that the veil that separates the black and the white community is not altogether negative. "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight" (8). The second-sight is only given to those who have lived on the margins and have been able to look

at the society from without. “Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism” (136). In the cases of the three novelists studied here, the result have been revolt, not pretense; radicalism, not hypocrisy.

The veil of color has been and still is, indeed, at work. But recognizing it as a social reality is the first step toward discovering its possibilities. Although Du Bois criticizes the double-consciousness and wishes for a more level social playground, he seems to notice, at times, that cherishing and glorifying the differences, instead of trying to remove distinctions and specificity, can be an alternative to the racial problem.

Within and without the somber veil of color vast social forces have been at work,—efforts for human betterment, movements toward disintegration and despair, tragedies and comedies in social and economic life, and a swaying and lifting and sinking of human hearts which have made this land a land of mingled sorrow and joy, of change and excitement and unrest (123). The theorist who has most aptly theorized this area of new forms expression and new opportunities is Homi K. Bhabha.

Homi. K. Bhabha, the accomplished postcolonial thinker, plays an important role in the development of the postcolonial studies regarding the concept of identity. He has focused on the possible threats, as well as opportunities, of colonization for the identity of the colonized being under the oppression of the colonizers. His concept of hybridity refers to the identity crisis of the colonized who is not able to form a sense of belonging with respect to anywhere. However, this hybrid nature is not an altogether unoriginal one, since through mimicry, which is the imitation of the colonizer’s manners by the colonized, the latter is able to form a new identity that exceeds both cultures.

Bhabha has been chosen as the theorist whose ideas are applied in the present study. The reason for such a choice shall be made clear in the following lines. Suffice it to say, however, that Bhabha is one of the few post-colonial thinkers who takes the question of the theorist’s own positionality seriously and is, therefore, able to refrain from demonizing the phenomenon he studies. Unlike many former and contemporary thinkers (discussed above), Bhabha neither eulogizes the colonial and the post-colonial encounter as aesthetically productive, nor condemns it as absolutely devastating. On the other hand, he mixes high European theory with genuine, first-hand experience in order coin terms (such as hybridity and mimicry) that highlight the complexity of a phenomenon through showing its pros and cons at the same time.

According to Bhabha, theory develops out of a personal experience and encounter with life. It is only through an outsider position (what Bhabha calls “another space or time”) which the theorist is able to cast a critical look upon the phenomena he sets out to problematize. He defines some sort of order for experience and the theory that results from it: first, an individual encounters a situation that creates a question in his mind. Then, he sets out to define that situation or organize it in a way so as to be able to define it. The “struggle” against a set of conditions leads the theorist to question the inherited values, structures, frames and traditions in an attempt to dig deeper and detect the malfunctioning cogs within the whole system. As Bhabha makes clear, it is only through such a personal, yet estranging, experience that one can distance oneself from a set of conditions and give voice to what has been silenced. In this regard, Homi K. Bhabha is a most fitting candidate for theorizing the concept of hybridity, since through personal experience, he has had access to (at least) two cultures. This fact enables him to move beyond both cultures and cast a critical look upon them as well as arrive at a mixture of the two: a hybrid development.

In *the Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines hybridity as “a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (13). This internal difference that partakes of two extremes and results in a third space is called hybridity. The hybrid identity belongs to an outcast who cannot associate with neither extreme from which he or she feels banished. Yet, this in-between position allows her a set of critical tools. A hybrid individual or subject mixes two nations, “unifying previously scattered or dispersed dialects, colloquialisms, and oral traditions. They reach beyond the standard set of materials proper to a local sense of group cohesion, and make assimilationist gestures which abruptly break the mold of national languages” (*Nation and Narration* 234). The hybrid identity, thus assimilates the culture of the colonizer into the culture of the colonized (to which she belongs) thereby breaking “the mold” of the official cultures.

Discussing the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Bhabha offers an enlightening example of how a hybrid act can undermine the power of the official position and create an alternative reality that is inaccessible to the colonizer. The hybridity, which is called ‘eclecticism’ in the following extract, finds voice in the very title of the novel:

The eclecticism of Jes Grew even resonates in the title *Mumbo Jumbo*, which, according to the etymology that Reed prints in his preface, is a hybrid phrase, an amalgam of several Mandingo expressions, themselves incorrectly transcribed and employed by the English as a synonym for anything that sounds portentous, but is really meaningless. Yet even here, the phrase shows how collection submits to contagion. In attempting to ‘collect’ these two primitive words and make them ‘mean’ something foreign, the English colonialist becomes the victim of the word’s own contagion: its original Mandingo roots are still in force, and alongside the dictionary definition of ‘meaningless language’, the word still insists on another meaning (ibid 246).

Therefore, the attempt at attaching new meanings to word backfires: the new meanings are associated with the word. However, unlike what the colonialist hopes for, the old meanings are not extracted from the word, but find new existence along the new denotation. This dual existence results in an alternative connotations that are available to the colonized, since he is the only one who has access to the both senses of the word. However, one must be wary not to confuse hybridity with simple, straightforward mixture. It is not a linear process through which two previously ordered and organized identities meet, intermingle and create a third entity. The process of hybridity does not resemble that of dialectics, where the thesis and the antithesis clash so as to result in a synthesis.

Hybridity is never simply a question of the admixture of pre-given identities or essences. Hybridity is the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life; it is an instance of iteration, in the minority discourse, of the time of the arbitrary sign — ‘the minus in the origin’ — through which all forms of cultural meaning are open to translation because their enunciation resists totalization (314).

For the hybrid identity to have subversive power and force, it has to include some sort of “perplexity” unavailable to the position of power. Far from being a straightforward process, hybridity is an “open” phenomenon by means of which entities enter into a constant loop of becoming.

Similar to the term hybridity, mimicry brings to mind a set of familiar definitions, theories and ideas which, although not rejected altogether, are accepted alongside an endless series of new definitions that can be used with respect to the term. In the *Location of Culture*, Bhabha defines mimicry most succinctly as “secret art of revenge” (56). This very brief definition has great significance. Firstly, mimicry is “secret”. Secrecy is one point which differentiates between mimicry (as used by Bhabha) and simple acting, imitation or mockery. When the colonized mimics the colonizer, he does so not with the intention of openly letting the colonizer know that he is being set as an example. To mimic a person belonging to the position of power openly means to follow that person. However, the element of secrecy gives a subversive quality to the process of mimicry. Secondly, mimicry is an “art”. Art, as opposed to economics, politics and so on, is useless. The person who engages in art does so with the intention of having aesthetic pleasure, not so as to gain something. Therefore, it can be argued that mimicry is artistic and playful. The colonized is not mimicking the colonizer in order to save his life, but so as to have fun and to show that he is capable of being the same as the colonizer. Thirdly, mimicry is a “revenge”. It is done with the intention of getting the better of the colonizer and regaining access to the position of power of which the colonized is divested.

Bhabha makes clear that mimicry does not exclusively belong to the colonized. He asserts that “mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85). The colonizer mimics the colonized in the first place in order to be able to exert power over him. However, if the colonized intends to subvert the power of the colonizer and restore his position, he needs to make “an ironic compromise” (86).

There is yet another quality to mimicry that distinguishes it from other forms of imitation, such as outright mockery. This quality is “the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same but not quite)” (86). In other words, the person who mimics is not overtly poking fun at the colonizer, neither is he giving credence to the behavior of the colonizer but reverently imitating him. The colonizer engages in a mimicry that is “at one resemblance and menace” (86). This ambivalent quality of mimicry is what gives it special subversive power.

## 2.2. Hybrid Identity in *Miss New India*

Almost every page of *Miss New India* dramatizes the clash and the encounter between the two cultures between which Anjali Bose finds herself. The very beginning of the novel shows the struggle between two cultures from an unconventional point of view. Rather than giving voice to the Indian-American who sets out to have herself realized by the official culture of the United States, the novel starts through giving the reader an account of what Americans went through within the Indian culture. In the second half of the past century, young Americans—the disillusioned, the reckless, and the hopeful—began streaming into India. They came overland in painted vans, on dust-choked, diesel-spouting buses, and on the hard benches of third-class railroad cars, wearing Indian clothes, eating Indian street food and drinking the people's water. The disaffected children of American affluence: college dropouts, draft dodgers, romantics, druggies, and common criminals; musicians, hedonists, and starry-eyed self-discoverers. These weren't the aloof and scornful British administrators or the roustabout traders of earlier centuries. You could see them at dawn or dusk, pounding out their kurtas on flat stones along the riverbank like any dhobi or housemaid. These rich Westerners—the Aussies, the Canadians, the Germans, the Finns, but especially the Americans—the ones who stayed a few months, then years—lived like poor villagers; these rich Western kids sometimes re-sorted to begging and got sick, and others died from beggars' diseases (1).

As can be seen, the disillusioned American youth stream into India so as to partake of the alternative opportunities the Indian culture has to offer. The American is compared to the “scornful British” as being open to the Indian culture. While the British enter India merely in order to tame the Indian into obedience, the American youth (according to the above paragraph) come and accept the traditions of the Indian culture. However, this attention to the Indian culture does not arise from a genuine interest in Indians, but is a further affirmation of the American spirit: openness to new things and multiculturalism. This ironic beginning highlights the concept of hybrid identity. The Americans mimic the Indian culture, but no matter how hard they try, they cannot turn into actual Indians. They are, at best, exiles from both cultures who fashion a hybrid identity and either get sick of Indians' diseases or die. By extension, the same process happens to the Indian youth who attempt to dispense with their original traditions and turn toward the American culture. Neither completely removed from their original culture, nor totally part of the target culture toward which they turn, such Indians form hybrid identities and occupy the space between the two cultures.

*Miss New India* is an account of one such person who aspires toward absolute American-ness. The description given for Anjali Bose at the beginning of the novel, highlights her estrangement from the mainstream society of her origin:

At nineteen, Anjali Bose was a tall girl, one hundred and seventy-three centimeters—five foot eight—taller than most boys in her college. [...] She smiled readily and when she did, she could light up a room like a halogen lamp. The conventional form of Indian femininity projects itself through long-lashed, kohl-rimmed, startled black eyes. Modest women know to glance upward from a slightly bowed head. Anjali did not take in the world with saucer-eyed passivity. Her light, greenish eyes were set off by high cheekbones and prominent brows. Her face resolved itself along a long jaw and generous mouth, with full lips and prominent teeth (7).

She is physically different from what a conventional Indian girl would look like. She is taller than many boys and has an assertive, open personality that reminds the reader greatly of the description of American youth at the start of the novel. She is not a passive receiver of what is given to her (which is a normal, acceptable character trait among traditional Indian women). Her facial features (green eyes, prominent teeth, generous mouth, resolved face, etc.) reflect her personality in a significant manner. To use Bhabha's vocabulary, she is characterized with a hybrid identity that equips her with an air of naturalness. This difference, however, does not appeal to parents who serve as representatives of the tradition from which she strives to distance herself:

Her parents, looking to the day they would have to marry her off, worried openly about her overly assertive features. But the rare foreigners who passed through town, health workers or financial aid consultants for international agencies, found her looks striking and her boldness charming (ibid).

However, what appears unappealing to parents, is accepted and even favorable to foreigners who admire her worldly manner and cosmopolitan characteristics. This gap or difference between the expectations of her parents and those of foreigners with whom she meets can be theorized in terms of Du Bois's notion of the veil. The naturalness of her behavior and appearance does not mean, however, that Anjali originally belongs to some western culture. Quite the contrary, she consciously adopts and mimics the culture of the western, American individuals:

Speaking to them, she sometimes claimed a touch of Burmese or Nepali ancestry. She told many stories, all of them plausible, some of them perhaps even true. She always made an outstanding first impression (ibid).

Outstanding for, and with respect to, Americans and American norms and criteria. Anjali judges her own culture as being inflexible. Indian culture is unable to exceed boundaries and create new identities, while “Americans can do that, she thought: make friends of village Muslims” (14). However, this endeavor to live up to western cultural expectations is far from a fulfilling one. Anjali has to be on the lookout all the time so as not to sound unoriginal. She needs to constantly stifle her natural instincts and correct herself so that she wouldn’t appear ignorant: “Normally she would have nodded and smiled, afraid to show her ignorance” (38).

The conclusion to the novel is significant in that it wraps up the whole action of the novel. The reader who has read Anjali’s experience of cultural displacement first hand, realizes that she has lost a lot in order to be able to gain something new. However, other characters within the novel – including the narrator who finishes the novel – do not have access to this negative aspect of the encounter and, therefore, glorify it: “she was just one in a billion, but each of us had it in us to be another one in a billion. He said she, and a friend, would come to his corporate management class and give a little talk. If we were ready to listen, and to act, she had lessons to teach us” (326).

### 3. Conclusions

*Miss New India* by Bharati Mukherjee shows the dilemma of the eastern subject at the point of encountering western norms and criteria. Anjali Bose who is a westernized Indian aspires toward breaking with her inherited traditional values and adopting wholly new, American ones. Her struggle drives her toward a hybrid identity between the Indian and the American culture. As Homi k. Bhabha has shown, the colonized subaltern adopts the technique of mimicry in order, both, to live up to western expectations and to indirectly criticize western values and ideals. The colonized subject who mimics the western norms develops, step by step, a hybrid identity that estranges her from the original culture from which she has sprung. Yet it does not affiliate her with the target culture either. This double estrangement results from the unbridgeable gap between two cultures that can be described in terms of W.E.B. Du Bois’s veil. This veil that separates the two cultures prevents the colonized subject from becoming an original member of the target culture. In the end, the colonized subject whose character has been fragmented due to a hybrid identity treads the space between both cultures. The positive and constructive aspect to this double estrangement is that she can, now that she has been exile from her home and her destination, adopt a critical glance upon both cultures.

### REFERENCES

- Bhabha, H.K. (2004). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, Print.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1990). *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, Print.
- DuBois, W.E.B. (2018). *The Souls of Black Folk*. La Vergne: Dreamscape Media, Internet resource.
- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, Print.
- Mukherjee, B. (2011). *Miss New India*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Print.
- Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, Print.

#### How to Cite this Article:

Masoume Bae, Behzad Pourgharib, & Abdolbaghi Rezaei Talarposhti. Moving beyond the Veil: Hybrid Identity in *Miss New India*, *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research* 8(3) (2020) 50–54.