

A Critical Analysis of the Eurocentric Dimensions of Ghose's Aesthetic Views

Asma Aftab *

Abstract *The present article has attempted to discuss the essential Eurocentrism of the Anglophone Pakistani writer Zulfikar Ghose that has shaped his subjective identity as well as literary outlook. The argument has used Frantz Fanon's theorization about the colonized intellectual whose exposure to foreign culture engenders anxiety and eventually becomes a pre-condition for his cognitive maturation. However, reading Ghose's prose, we find no traces of any such conflict in his subjective and artistic expression as he chooses to call himself a native-alien with an ambivalence which, turns many times, into an alienation, even outright rejection of his native identity as an Indian-Pakistani. The article concludes that instead of coming to terms with his native subjectivity, Ghose's voice remains Eurocentric as it is predominantly based on an explicit admiration and identification with the dominant English culture and his simultaneous distance from his native culture and its historical memory.*

- Vol. VI, No. I (Winter 2021)
- Pages: 240 – 245
- p- ISSN: 2520-0348
- e-ISSN: 2616-793X
- ISSN-L: 2520-0348

Key Words: Assimilation, Colonized Intellectual, Eurocentrism, Native-Alien

Introduction

The present article is a close and critical analysis of Ghose's writings, his Memoir *The Confessions of a Native-Alien* (1965) and his book of lectures and essays *In the Ring of Pure Light* (2011), which represent his intellectual and artistic outlook combined with his migration to and exposure of western culture that has influenced his subjectivity, both as an individual and an author. The argument assumes that, side by side with his fiction and poetry, Ghose's subjectivity is clearly evidenced in his prose as well as in his speech that he has given in different times, both in the form of interviews as well as lectures/conversations with different people. In this regard, his memoir that he wrote in 1965 has been one significant site of his subjective and artistic outlook from his childhood in Indo-Pak, Sialkot and Mumbai and his eventual migration to England in 1952, something that has left indelible marks on his personal and authorial consciousness.

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Development of a Colonized Intellectual

Fanon, in his famous 1961 work *The Wretched of*

the Earth (2004), talks about different stages of the native intellectual who, under colonial rule, undergoes different stages of his cognitive maturation. Since colonization operates on a distinct binary logic between the so-called superiority of colonial culture and the erstwhile inferiority of the colonized, it is very natural that native intellectuals develop some fascination for the dominant culture of the colonizers and seek to assimilate it. However, this stage of assimilation does not last long as, for Fanon, the colonized intellectual is also mindful of his role in the crucial task of national integration by resisting the colonist's dominant control. Against this backdrop, Fanon emphasizes the gradual transformation and maturation of colonized intellectual as he embodies the collective quest of his people towards some realizable national culture.

It is very pertinent to explain some details of Fanon's theoretical view, especially the first stage of assimilation, in order to understand their relevance in the context of Ghose's dilemma where his intellectual outlook remains seeped in Eurocentric bias and does not seem to develop

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: asmaaftabkhan@gmail.com

by going beyond the first stage of assimilation.

Assimilation as the First Stage

According to Fanon, in the first stage of his cognitive development, the colonized intellectual is tempted to assimilate “the colonizer’s culture” (pp.158-59) and, like “adopted children...endeavor to make European culture his own” (p. 156). Since the primary “inspiration is European”, so his works “correspond point by point with those of his metropolitan counterparts” (p. 159); on the other hand, as the “colonized writer is not integrated with his people”, so he “maintains an outsider’s relationship with them” and prefers to use “techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier” (pp. 159-60). The very word “borrowed” is suggestive of colonized intellectual’s sense of remoteness and alienation from his people and their lived realities, symbolizing his (un)conscious attempt to assimilate the colonist culture and its aesthetical and literary standards. At its most extreme form, the colonized intellectual, as [Hanley \(2006\)](#) argues in the context of Fanon, becomes subject to a crippling sense of guilt and starts considering many aspects of his native culture as inferior and backward. This partly explains the distance and void that inevitably surfaces in his voice and perspective, which eventually undercut his ties with his people and their lived realities.

Fanon identifies a strange conflict within the colonized intellectual in this stage, since he is “terrified by the void, the mindlessness and the savagery” of his own people, at one hand, and a hidden desire to “escape this white culture” with its dominance and superiority (p. 157). This conflict manifests itself most characteristically in his desire to “look elsewhere, anywhere” and his “psychology [is] dominated by an exaggerated sensibility, sensitivity, and susceptibility” (p. 157). Fanon calls this response as the “movement of withdrawal” (p. 157), which could bring about a “phase of liberating consciousness” provided the native intellectual is willing to “inflict injury on himself, to actually bleed red blood and free himself from that part of his being already contaminated by the germs of decay” (p. 157). This is what Fanon terms as a creative tension as it ensues anxiety in the heart of native intellectuals. However, seen in this theoretical background, Ghose’s intellectual outlook seems not to achieve this cognitive maturation and

remains caught in the first stage where he is overwhelmed by the dominance and superiority of the white culture. Nor do we find any signs of that subjective anxiety that Fanon sees as a pre-condition enabling him to go beyond this passive stage of assimilation to more active and creative stages of immersion and combat. In the following lines, I have tried to discuss this dimension of Ghose’s intellectual makeup in the context of his selected writings (non-fiction/prose) by arguing how his consciousness remains subordinate to the so-called supremacy of western culture and literature.

Analysis and Discussion

Reading Ghose’s writings, one gets an unambiguous expression of his intrinsic fascination for the Western ways, which has considerably shaped his subjective and intellectual outlook. The main argument that I want to postulate here is that this Eurocentrism in his personal and intellectual outlook is not only a straight negation of his previous claims where he detests and considers nationalist literature as the ‘worst category of literature’ by insisting on, unequivocally, an ideology and label-free aesthetic stance. He assumes an explicit view about any ideological or political signification to literature by refusing to acknowledge, let alone appreciate, the aesthetic and creative dimension of literature as it was produced in the backdrop of colonization and its detrimental effects on many non-western cultures and communities. Instead, his literary and aesthetic worldview is predominantly shaped under the influence of his British “education” and exposure to English culture that, in view of Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, has been “such a *powerful conditioning force* that [he] cannot see [himself] apart from it” (p. 47, Italics mine). It is for this reason that he compliments his father for doing the “best thing to decide to leave India and go to England” ([Ghose, 1965, p. 47](#)) since his life in India during his childhood and adolescence was marked with ‘futility’ and “doing nothing well” whereas his life in England was synonymous with “going to order” (p. 63). For him, it was indeed a “new start” for the entire family to have gone and settled in a place, wherein his words, “toleration and equality prevailed” (p. 51). This feeling of belonging and homeliness is further strengthened when he started to write in English, in the hope that it would win him “attention, love,

recognition”, reaffirming his faith that he “*was not alone; that, writing in English, I was one of England* and not the *alien* my skin demonstrated and my *loneliness* crystallized so clearly” (p. 67, italics mine). Paradoxically, even in certain moments of feeling some sudden and transitory flashes of belonging with India in his past, his voice remains overwhelmed by the “present” with its “rooting of the west in [his] consciousness” (p. 141) as he declares the year – 1960 – as the “year of planting roots” (p. 93) which signifies his intimate sense of belonging to England, especially Keele (from where he got his B.A degree) as it “possessed us [with its]...principle of growth, of building, expanding, altering horizons... [and]...the general *moral pattern*...something of a tradition which would be of *permanent value*” (p. 78).

What is quite paradoxical in such expression of awe and ecstasy that Ghose feels in England is that it has shaped a particular subjective and intellectual outlook to his vision which is not ideology-free as it carries the indelible marks of a Eurocentric humanism with its so-called claims of universality and transcendence. By way of comparison, the awe and inspiration that Ghose feels for Keele and its cultural heritage constitute an intertextual parallel with another Pakistani-American author Sara Suleri when she talks about her sense of breathing in the liberating air of ‘west’s intellection’ at Yale in *Meatless Days* (1989, p. 200). What is notable is the sense of distance and dissociation that both Ghose and Suleri feel from the specific historical and cultural ambience of Pakistan and India by assuming an ambivalent stance about the people and the land of their birth.

Primacy/Supremacy of European Tradition

One unambiguous expression of Ghose’s Eurocentric bias can be seen in his extensive reading and veneration of western literature with its big names that he calls as ‘illustrious dead’ including Flaubert, Conrad, Eliot, Beckett, Nabokov and Proust, who have shaped much of his thinking and literary taste (Ghose, 1965, p. 3). With an almost complete exclusion of any writer from the Third world, he admits that the writers who have primarily influenced him are all western (with one or two exceptions of South-American writers) whose creative and artistic views continue to shape his faith in the

unquestioned superiority of Western canon (Dasenbrock & Jussawalla, p. 42).

Under the indomitable western influence on his aesthetic worldview, Ghose thinks that for those who write in the English language, “the European tradition is the primary one” (Ghose, 2011, p. 4). Despite admitting the fallibility of the notion of tradition in T.S Eliot (1921) after an almost century’s lapse, he seems not to acknowledge the robust presence of many indigenous literary and artistic traditions, running parallel to the European/Western tradition. Instead, he simply refers to the existence of a “global tradition” (p. 4) without making a slight mention of many alternatives, even counter literary and cultural traditions which have constituted the present-day aesthetics. In his absolute veneration of the western literary tradition as primary and supreme, he fails to see the vacuousness in the so-called universality of the western tradition that, in the words of renowned Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1995), is nothing but a mere “synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe” and has miserably failed to “extend its horizon...to include all the world” (p. 60).

This narrow conception of literary tradition in Ghose’s outlook is further problematized when we see that for him, “great tradition” does or cannot transcend the parameters defined by Eliot in his conception of literature and tradition. He makes it quite explicit in his interview with Aldama (2004) when he says that “the question before an English-language writer in the second half of the 20th century and later is: what can the imagination accomplish in prose *after* James Joyce and in verse *after* T. S. Eliot?” (p. 3, italics mine).

Exclusion of the Third-World Counter Canon

Despite his extensive readings of numerous writers, Ghose’s aesthetics are the telling evidence of his willful ignorance of the literary and intellectual projects were using the famous postcolonial phrase, ‘empire writes back’ to the center and creates a unique trajectory of literary, artistic and cultural projects of decolonization in their specific historical and political contexts. Likewise, Ghose’s constant and countless references to a host of Euro-American writers and their literary works do not contain or concede to the historical experience of colonization and imperialism and the subsequent

emergence of a Third-World counter-canon as theorized by [Fanon and Ngugi Wa Thiongo \(1995\)](#) etc. Paradoxically, even in mentioning the “works of great beauty that have originated from a non-European background” (such as Russian or South-American), his emphasis remains merely on a narrowly formalist appraisal and appreciation of these works without acknowledging the political power and cultural appeal of postcolonial literature produced in Asia and Africa and their historical and aesthetic currency in the present-day literary and cultural milieu.

Likewise, he refuses to admit the historical depth and cultural density of third-world writings with their “dissent, protest and resistance” whose contribution is characterized with what Edward [Said \(2002\)](#) has termed as a “new geographical consciousness” where Europe was no more the center of one’s world/view, but a mere part of it (p. 471).

One gets an unambiguous expression of this narrow and partial understanding of literary tradition in his lectures where he advises the young Pakistani poets about the art of writing English poetry and, in so doing, exposes his subjective outlook about poetry-writing. Though he encourages the young poets to be experimental in their form and language, he vehemently rejects the use of some “quaint little phrases” such as a few Urdu words like “*yaars*” and “*gulmohar*” trees in their English poetry by considering them nothing but “fake authenticity” as he declares: “ethnic dressing up is an awful form of sentimentality” ([Ghose, 2011, p. 14](#)). In rejecting the use of indigenous words and phrases as sentimental and fake, he seems to debunk all traces of aesthetic and cultural intimacy and indebtedness that one inevitably has with one’s historical and geographical realities. Using Said’s succinct angle, it is symptomatic of the intellectual servitude that teaches one “to respect distant norms and values more than [one’s] own” (2002, pp. 392-93) and fails him to conceive and achieve an independent yet culture-specific cognitive perspective as a first and must step for an organic bond with one’s culture and history.

While one sees nothing problematic in such views of [Ghose \(1965,2011\)](#) in a surface reading, they become essentially biased when placed in the context of the central argument about the Eurocentrism of Ghose’s aesthetics combined

with an almost total absence of any intellectual anxiety that Fanon sees as a pre-requisite for the cognitive maturation of a colonized intellectual. Even his advice in matters of poetry-writing unmasks his faulty views about the nature of the artistic process, which is based on a singular and scanty identification with the so-called notions of universality, impersonal objectivity and transcendence of English humanist tradition. Moreover, his views about the nature of art, creative process and the function of a writer are typically Eurocentric as he advises the aspiring poets to “remain objective”, resonating with Eliot’s rhapsodic insistence on the “continual self-extinction” and “impersonality” of the writer and views the intervention of one’s subjective and communal voice as “portentious pontification” ([Ghose, 2011, p. 92](#)).

Contrary to his suggestion, one comes across a host of postcolonial writers and their use of many words and phrases from their indigenous languages, which are, in fact, powerful metaphors of their sense of belonging to their indigenous cultures. For example, in contemporary Native American literature, we see a conscious use of multiple objects such as ‘spiders’, ‘powwow’ or ‘regalia’ etc., as they become the metaphors of the unique subjective and communal sensibility of the poet and his people. Moreover, these writers deliberately leave many words from their indigenous language untranslated by creating a metonymic gap that has the effect of abrogating and subverting ([Ashcroft et al., 2000, pp.137-38](#)) the erstwhile European tradition with its west-centric words and worldview.

Partial View of Literary Tradition

In the same way, Ghose’s perspective about the primacy and priority of English literary tradition is diametrically opposed to many contemporary thinkers, notably Fanon, Said and Ngugi, for whom Eliot’s definition of tradition does not possess the same “old authority” and “same cogency” owing to the revolutionary change in the literary and intellectual outlook of contemporary times ([Said, 2002, p. 380](#)). One counter expression to Ghose’s limited understanding of literary tradition can be seen in the Caribbean poet David Dabydeen’s convincing argument about the dilemma of many non-western poets and writers who, while staying in England, we’re facing the pressure to

Conclusion: A Short-Sighted and Truncated Aesthetic Worldview

The article concludes that, unlike Fanon's native intellectual, Ghose seems not to transcend from the first and the most preliminary stage of assimilation, characterized by his awe and inspiration for the western culture and his eventual alienation and distance from the land of his birth and its culture. Moreover, he subscribes to a truncated and myopic view of literature and aesthetics when he isolates it from the material and lived dimensions of the writers and their concrete history and culture. Given the conspicuous distance from the vital springs of one's culture and history as the inexhaustible source of creative energy and stimulus for one's art and intellect, Ghose's art, like contemporary postmodern aesthetics, remains nothing more than a "self-indulgent exercise" ([Aldama p. 4](#)) as

he himself admits his sense of frustration – even despondency that is leaving aside three or four decent poems, the rest in his collection "deserves to be burned" ([Kanaaganayakam, p. 184](#)). His prolific aesthetic and creative projects have not given him any sense of satisfaction as they are based upon a narrow and mistaken premise that Said has termed as "the *murmur of mere prose*" (2002, p. 147, italics mine). It has furthered him from the concrete and historically valid realities of his people and the land of his birth which, according to [Fanon \(2004\)](#), shape the cognitive outlook of intellectuals and furnish their vision with depth and insight. On the other hand, his denial to accept and acknowledge the subjective, historical, social and cultural richness and diversity of literature outside western literary tradition has failed him to appreciate the many-windowed monument of literature and aesthetics elsewhere in the world.

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