

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Adnan Mahmutović, *Ways of Being Free: Authenticity and Community in Selected Works of Rushdie, Ondaatje, and Okri* (Rodopi, 2012)

Adnan Mahmutović's study *Ways of Being Free: Authenticity and Community in Selected Works of Rushdie, Ondaatje, and Okri* comes as book number 194 in Costerus New Series published by Amsterdam's Rodopi. Mahmutović singles out Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and Ben Okri as belonging to the generation of postcolonial writers 'writing back to the imperial centre', to quote Rushdie himself, who have a 'strong connection to the former British empire' (1). As the author explains in 'Ways of Being Free: Introduction', their writing back is doublefold: directed at both the political colonising centre and the margin they left behind, yet to whose ex-centric history they are still inextricably linked. In his detailed and comprehensive study Mahmutović chose to focus on three novels: Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1993) – that is, the novels which, as products of this peculiar position of double writing back, brought the authors the prestigious Man Booker Prize in the 1980s and 1990s and thus served to underline a perhaps even more peculiar position of being well received in the Anglo-American centre, in the canon of the coloniser, while at the same time striving to ascertain their postcolonial identity.

Mahmutović's study is divided in two parts, each again preceded by an introduction. The first part, titled 'War Is Everything's Father: History and Death as Causes of Existential Angst', analyses the chosen novels in two rounds of three essays each. In *Midnight's Children*, the author examines the concepts of change and changelessness as well as death as a drive to meaningful experience; in *The Famished Road*, the road of existential struggle and ideological reappropriation through death; and in *The English Patient*, history and the 'nervous condition' in the first essay, and the concept of becoming 'dead-to-the-world' in the second. Approaching these topics, Mahmutović engages existentialist thought – taken in all its heterogeneity – and its influences on the postcolonial discourse, especially discourse on political violence, national formation and culture, uprooting from the past and the issue of community. Evoking Sartre, Heidegger, Camus, and Fanon, the author maintains that existential crises and the issues of estrangement and strangeness in these novels lead to the exploration of freedom, of the conceptions of what freedom means and the articulation of authenticity as a way of being free.

What brings about these identity crises and existential *angst* are 'both violent history and death' (23), claims the author and thus contextualises his writing. For the characters in the novels, 'thrown or fallen into inhospitable world(s) in whose making they have not participated', 'the disbanding of traditional communities, nation building, international war, religious and ethnic conflicts' (23) are just some of the factors that pushed their world out of joint. Communities as social spaces, troubled when the characters are born into them and left behind when they leave to be alienated, prove to be shaped by authoritative and hostile powers that 'seek to make each person submissive, obedient, exploitable, disposable, and finally, in fact, dead' (25).

A hope of antidote to this particular *angst* comes in the form of a struggle to re-establish one's world, 'to convert the given situations into new possibilities of personal development' (99), to find a way of being free and authentic. The second part of this insightful study, briefly titled 'Authenticity', discusses this idea as understood in the form of

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two strong desires: communalism and individualism. The identity of individuals as indivisible social atoms the author sees as defined in opposition to social commitment *per se*, while communalism finds its foundation in ‘a need to preserve essential relations, meanings and habits’ (101). Three more essays that follow reveal the forces behind the construction of individual versus communal identity, both stemming from the perception that ‘authenticity is something that was lost or stolen or hidden and that needs to be won back’ (101) through various forms of social action. In this respect, *The English Patient* is read as an existential experiment of finding singular ways of being free and forming a community that articulates and embraces difference. Such singular freedom has to be confirmed and asserted in community, without turning that community into mutual exploitation. In *Midnight’s Children* the protagonist’s authenticity is explored in the context of politically charged times and seen as a struggle ‘against a plethora of conflicting forms of power in the postcolonial subcontinent’ (105) leading from communalism to the comic absurd. Mahmutović sees Okri’s strategy in *The Famished Road* as focused on dramatising, through the protagonist, Azaro, ‘a revolutionary spirit’, the implications of choices and actions within oppressive historical circumstances. In all of these novels, he maintains, the possibility of communal bonding has to be found that is not binding or oppressive, that does not lead to any form of exploitation and that sustains personal growth without hindering personal responsibility.

Mahmutović posits that, as ‘challenging and innovative contributions to critical negotiations of their postcolonial histories’ (2), the three novels by immigrant writers Rushdie, Okri and Ondaatje undoubtedly reinstate the authors’ double position. As insiders, they possess the profound knowledge of their native histories which entails the birth-acquired right to speak and write about the mechanisms of oppression and subversion at the hands of the centre. Being outsiders, their uprootedness provides them with a different perspective on the complex burden of the excessive meaning of history, the freedom from which is not so easily attainable by their characters. Although Rushdie’s, Okri’s and Ondaatje’s oeuvre has been thoroughly and extensively written about in the context of postcolonial discontents and specifically in relation to the issue of (crisis of) identity, Adnan Mahmutović opts for a perceptive, clearly contextualised and well researched approach. Analysing these canonical postcolonial literary texts in all their postcolonial hybridity but from a fresh angle, Adnan Mahmutović offers an astute reading of existential *angst* as a postcolonial condition transformed into a process of rethinking freedom, authenticity and community which would ultimately – one can and should hope – ‘open the universe a little more’.

Nina Muždeka