

Iris Bičakčić

(Trans-)Formation of Cultural Identity  
through Political Violence  
in Postcolonial Literature

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Cultural identity is at the center not only of politics, but of daily life as well. And it is almost always bound up with colonialism- its historical causes, its ideological justifications, its continuing effects- and with struggles against colonialism.”  
(Hogan, 2000: xi)

“Let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day”  
(Andrea Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*: 327).

When Salman Rushdie comments on the central topic explored in *The Satanic Verses*, he says that this novel “celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*” (1991, 394). The same could be said about the literary texts selected and scrutinized in this study, in which the characters struggle with defining their hybrid identities in the face of racism, i.e., colonial and postcolonial political violence. Violence committed both during and after the colonial era figures as one of the catalysts in the process of cultural identity formation of those who belong to cultures that were formerly colonized. Besides violence, many of the characters analyzed here have to fight against the “absolutism of the Pure” in their quest for cultural identity, only to show that in the end, purity does not exist in the postcolonial world and that modern, *transcultural*, hybrid identities do indeed consist of “a bit of this and a bit of that”.

By their nature, postcolonial hybrid identities are associated with social, cultural and political turmoil which at first came as a result of colonial violence, but continued after the official end of the colonial era. In that sense, cultural identities of the colonized peoples are formed and transformed by political violence, which is manifested in its various forms. The analysis of the postcolonial literary texts and the theoretical background offered in the following chapters constitute the main basis on which the topic of (trans)formation of cultural identity through political violence is discussed. The focus of the analysis is on how the characters *react* to this violence and how violence affects their sense of cultural belonging. As the following analysis shows, the characters react differently to violence, but what proves to be the common denominator in all of their stories is the fact that political violence acts as an important formative force in their efforts to build what they perceive to be a stable cultural identity.

The novels selected here were written by writers who come from formerly colonized cultures and who write from a “non-white” perspective with reference to their “black experience” of colonialism. Even though some of the authors were born in Britain as second generation immigrants, they do have cultural roots in former British co-

lonies. Hanif Kureishi has Indian, Caryl Phillips Caribbean, Andrea Levy Jamaican and Diran Adebayo Nigerian cultural roots. That way, writers gain an *insider-outsider* perspective and their novels are written in the center of the former British Empire, but they strongly relate to past events on the periphery and the colonized cultures. These writers belong to what is called Black British literature<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, writers like Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Achmat Dangor (South Africa) and Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), whose characters tell stories from the periphery of the former British Empire, point at the problem of identity formation in postcolonial societies burdened with a colonial legacy. As already mentioned, the focus of the analysis here is on the colonized cultures, but that does not mean that a reciprocal interaction of the colonizers' and colonized cultures did not take place. On the contrary, colonial adventure brought exchange of cultural material both in the colonized territories and in the center of the former Empire. However, for the purposes of this study, the settlers' change of cultural identity is not the subject of analysis, as the selected literary texts deal with the socio-cultural changes that occurred in cultures of the colonized peoples.

The selected novels take place in different geographical regions of the former British colonies, but what they have in common is the issue of identity transformation. The issues surrounding the identity formation process can be found in almost all of the formerly colonized cultures and that there is a striking similarity in the forms of political violence used by the colonial power. This problem is explored in novels that were written in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the reason why novels from this period are analyzed is twofold. Firstly, the novels from this period reflect the new trends in postcolonial literature such as the emergence of the Black British literature written by immigrants and, more importantly, the second generation immigrants, which is very important in understanding the position of the formerly colonized cultures, today's immigrants and British citizens. Secondly, in literature written in these two decades, the topic of cultural identity crisis gained yet another dimension that is crucial for its understanding. This dimension includes the perspective of those who write in the periphery, but who are now able to get an historical and social insight into the intricacies surrounding the issue of cultural identity only three or four decades after the official end of British colonial presence on the African and Asian continent. Most of the African countries gained their independence in the 1960s, so the novels written in the 1980s and the 1990s reflect both the immediate effects of century-long colonial rule and neo-colonial influences, as well as postcolonial tribulations that the former colonies and the newly established states need to overcome. Hence, the time distance is very important in putting violent historical events into perspective and getting a deeper understanding of the effects of colonial violence on the colonized cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Stein (2004) claims that Black British literature "not only deals with the situation of those who came from former colonies and their descendants, but also with the society which they discovered and continue to shape – and with those societies left behind" (xii) and emphasizes that this literature describes "the condition of an ambivalent cultural attachment" (xii).