

THE “I” IN THE DECONSTRUCTION OF FRONTIERS THROUGH MEMORY: POSTCOLONIAL DIASPORAS

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Human beings have always migrated either willingly or by force to conquer new worlds for sociological, economical or political reasons. This paper will focus on migratory flows from South to North in relation to the question of the deconstruction of frontiers and the role played by memory in African and Indian migrant novelists' writings which reflect colonial and postcolonial ideologies. Interestingly, these literatures have had an undeniable psychological, cultural and political impact on entire populations, insofar as the long “colonial night,” as qualified by Ferhat Abbas, has generated among colonisers and colonised reciprocal perceptions expressed through such writings, which have become a significant part of postcolonial literature. The colonial and postcolonial historical process is expressed through literature, giving migrants the possibility of telling their side of the story. It is from such a perspective that this paper will analyse the various migratory themes in order to show how migrant writers from the colonies and ex-colonies succeeded in imposing their interpretation and their vision of a deconstructed world. This imposition is often undertaken through the recollection of their childhood and family memories, real or imagined, creating in this way new geographical world maps. At the heart of this essay lies an analysis concerning how migrant writers have constructed links between their land of exile, Western countries, and their various mother countries. These literary constructions succeeded in breaking up frontiers, thus mapping our postcolonial global world.

Whatever the motivations behind early European migratory flows, the fact is that colonial history is a story of migrations, first North/South, then South/North. Jacques Lacarrière defines migrations as being often “forced civil travels” undertaken by “the exiled, the displaced and the deported” (105-06).

The colonial fact had an impressive impact on the movement of people throughout the world, as Homi Bhabha argues: “the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora” (6-7).

The South/North migrations started with the tragedy of the slave trade, a displacement of millions of men and women from Africa to Europe and the Americas. The second major migratory flow took place in the 20th century when France and England enrolled Africans and Indians to fight for them during the World Wars.¹ In the 1950s, British and French colonial governments encouraged another type of South/North migration, as they needed manual workers for the reconstruction of a devastated Western Europe. A decade later, decolonisation started with a political paradox: the independence of colonised countries did not stop the migration of Africans or Asians who left their newly independent countries towards Europe for economic or political reasons. The new African states were repressive and the oligarchies in place were selfish and greedy. The freed wealth was not shared and corrupt and despotic leaders refused any criticism from intellectuals and protesters. Such a tragic beginning was denounced by novelists such as Ayi Kwei Armah from Ghana, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiong’o from Kenya, or Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni from Algeria. In terms of migratory flows, a relative stability was reached by the end of the 20th century. Nevertheless, at the dawn of the 21st century, a new type of migratory flow developed with young Africans and Asians who started to cross the deserts and the seas to reach Gibraltar or Lampedusa,² with the hope of a better life in Europe. These new desperate economic migrants were joined by political and war migrants asking for political asylum. These postmodern migrants, described as refugees, are referred to as “Harragas,” which means “those who burn the frontiers,” a term coined by the Algerian Boualem Sansal, who used it as a title for one of his novels. Indeed, the tragic lives of such a migration inspired postcolonial novelists such as Malika Mokeddem, Boualem Sansal, Fatou Diome or Calixthe Beyala, who were concerned by such a phenomenon. They felt the need to tell such dramatic stories over the frontiers. The necessity to write about these postmodern life experiences is at the origin of a significant postcolonial migrant literary dramatic theme. In addition to this, migrant writers also tell about their personal lives to heal the trauma of departure and the shock of displacement.

The advent of independence in the 1960s witnessed the creation of new countries and new frontiers, a political period which shaped our postcolonial political map. Indeed, migrant writers have been disrupting the border lines, using various narrative forms such as autobiographies, autofictions and fiction to tell their inner souls and feelings. Politically and ideologically, migrants from the South have always been

perceived as an entity, referred to as a group by European people. Most migrant novelists, including Bharati Mukherjee, denounce such a perception. The latter confesses: "In Canada, I felt not only that I was not a woman, I was not an individual, I was simply the colour of my skin" (56). Along with other migrant writers, she has shown through her texts that she is an individual, a woman, and a citizen who tells her very personal story in her work *The Holder of the World*, in this way breaking psychological frontiers. Migrant writers succeeded in "deconstructing" this ideological myth of the "group" through their narratives, by telling their being in the first person singular, "I". They always claimed themselves as "subjects", as individual entities. That is why migrants' literature is often expressed through autobiography, a significant literary phenomenon in postcolonial literature. This phenomenon provides new political perspectives, which blur the lines and deconstruct the frontiers as told by Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* and *Joseph Anton*, his latest autobiography.

In today's world the real geographical frontiers are difficult to cross, particularly for ex-colonised people. But the psychological frontiers are certainly crumbling, thanks to the Internet, but also through migrants' literary texts, which express a decompartmentalization of frontiers. Migrant writers have been demonstrating that they belong to a wider geographical and psychological map even though their texts bear postcolonial tensions and frustrations, which are implicitly depicted. The need to refer to the home country as far as the diaspora is concerned is indeed powerful. Though written and published in Europe, these texts conjure up the past through memories of left places in home countries—villages, towns, and cities. For example, India is over present in Salman Rushdie's novels, the Caribbean Islands and India in V.S. Naipaul's *The Bend in the River*, Senegal in Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Algeria in Nina Bouraoui's *Un garçon manqué* and Malika Mokeddem's *La Désirante*, Sierra Leone in Helene Cooper's *The House of Sugar Beach* or Sudan in Jamal Mahjoub's *Nubian Indigo*. Migrant novelists openly claim their dual belonging, and their double vision. Jamal Mahjoub insists on being called "Sudanese-British" ("Jamal Mahjoub") and Nina Bouraoui a French-Algerian novelist. These writers are the recipients of roots and memory, without nostalgia, because they also want to play a determining role in the construction of a postcolonial Western citizenship. If they base themselves within a cultural hybridity, and on a more open political view of the world, it is to claim that they are part of a multiple world, a post-modern space. Such an attitude is summed up as a postcolonial identity, in which they call back the memory of childhood scenes from their home country. They stress an acute sense of the origins, mixed with the reality of their residence in a Western country. The striking element about most of the migrants' texts is that they stress the necessity to inscribe their presence in Western countries without denying their differences. They penetrate into excluding zones where they mix different cultures, so they interact: that is where they blur the frontiers. Such a political and cultural position allows them to integrate their new Western residency. This whole literary and psychological phenomenon bears a political dimension within this postcolonial context. Indeed, the migrant postcolo-

nial narratives generate new identities and new maps through the use of memory, as also demonstrated by J. Nozipo Maraire, an American Zimbabwean, in *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*. This epistolary novel works like a legacy of a Zimbabwean mother to her daughter, who is at Harvard University and who rejects her African traditions in the hope of becoming completely American through the acquisition of Western culture. The Zimbabwean mother believes that such a rejection is a distressing mistake. The novel is critical of such a position, which may lead to schizophrenia. So, the memory of one's roots is recalled for a healthier equilibrium, which would extract the daughter from that "grey zone...neither Black culture nor truly white" (18). This sensitive text is representative of migrant literatures which enforce the representation of postcolonial diaspora in search of "identities and territories," in the sense proposed by Homi Bhabha when he refers to today's internationalism as "an articulation of culture's hybridity" (56).

60 Statistics, economics, graphs, sociology and history provide scientific knowledge about migrants in terms of number, origin, destination, jobs, integration or non-integration in Western countries. These types of studies fail to inform about their feelings and inner thoughts. So, migrant writers write back to the Empire,³ in order to tell their side of the story. When they inscribe traces of their own lives, they implicitly do it on behalf of all the other migrants. That is why these writers deconstruct the boundaries and the frontiers first by using the "I", from slave narratives to post-colonial writings, and second by calling on their memory. Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African*, published in 1789, is a hallmark in slave narratives providing first-hand informative insights on the treatment of slaves by slave traders.⁵ In this narrative, memory plays a significant role as it allows the slave to remain sane, giving him back his humanity, he who is treated like merchandise. Olaudah Equiano kept deep inside him the memory of his early life when he was a happy child among his family. He saved his inner self, his African personality, thanks to his connection with his roots. Besides, his narrative reminds the reader of the way Africans lived before the horror of deportation. He writes that his people lived in peace before he was captured and transported from the hinterland to the Atlantic shores for the long haul. The first pages of the story are extremely moving because he kept the memory of past Africa alive. By using the "I", Equiano's narrative speaks on behalf of millions of slaves, revealing the disturbed psychology of a kidnapped child from "Eboe."⁶ Olaudah Equiano dates back his birth to 1745 in Essaka, which corresponds to today's South Nigeria. He provides minute details on how he was sold to a captain of the Royal Navy. He remembers the suffering and the distress of becoming part of the greatest human displacement ever, crossing the frontiers. As a "forced displaced traveller", Olaudah Equiano recalls when he was carried on the back of his African smugglers. He remembers the forced walks, the changing of hands and masters, like "a hunted deer" (50). He travelled in fear "sometimes by land, sometimes by water through different countries" (54), crossing borders. This unique first-hand memory testifies to the precise sense of organisation

of African slave-traders in inland Africa. Without them, the slave trade could not reach such a wide scale. African slave-traders are betrayers. African novelists such as Ayi Kwei Armah or Yambo Ouologuem denounce them.⁷ Olaudah Equiano was transported, chained, to the Atlantic coast, where the captured "were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold" (60). The crossing of the Atlantic, the "Middle Passage," was devastating. The uprooting and the departure for the unknown were the worst traumatic human disaster. His vivid memory transmitted the truth of that horror, a crime against humanity.⁸ Having gained his liberty, he acquired the intellectual weapons to fight slavery through the use of the "I" in his adopted England where he became one of the eighteenth century Londonian Black writers, called "St Giles's black birds,"⁹ with Ignatius Sancho and Ottobah Cugoana. The recuperated 'I' destroyed the psychological frontiers, as is the case in other slave narratives: *Roots* by Alex Haley, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *Osiris Rising* by the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah, *Home or Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northrup, and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, in which the whole question of slavery lingers through Celie's story, including a memory of Africa as told by the character Nettie. These narratives are far from emboldening amnesia.

Migrant writers of the 20th and 21st century are all haunted by their past, the crossings of frontiers, revealing here again a trauma, as defined by the critic Cathy Caruth, who explains how such signs become significant in the sense that "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance) stimuli recalling the events" (152). In postcolonial migrant texts memory of past experiences and places reveal such traumas. The stories of Africans forced to go to war against Germany—in Europe, India or Burma—are explicit on such an issue. In *This Earth My Brother*, Kofi Awoonor, from Ghana, describes disturbed migrant soldiers, homesick for their peaceful African villages. And in other novels, such as *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* by Ahmadou Kourouma, or *Mort pour la France* by Doumbi-Fakoly, other types of forced migrations are told, such as the Africans who went to Europe and America to study. The character Amamu in *This Earth My Brother* feels lost on the road of exile, developing a sense of guilt towards his family. The paradox is that the home country is sublimated despite the decay of Africa. Modin in *Why Are We So Blest* and Ast in *Osiris Rising* by Ayi Kwei Armah develop such feelings. That sublimation is at work in *Osiris Rising* as the origins of African-Americans are recalled through the character of Nwt, an African-American grandmother, the guardian of traditions. Nwt tells past stories to her granddaughter Ast, transmitting the knowledge on: "who they are and why" (9). That memory erases the frontiers between America and Africa.

The specificity of migrants' literature is its diversity in terms of themes concerning the frontiers. For migrant people, the happiness of living in the West interacts with

the disillusion of being rejected by European people who are often hostile towards them. The narratives of Hanif Kureishi, Rachid Boudjedra, Michael Ondaatje, Alain Mabanckou, Helen Cooper, Leonora Miano, Fatou Diome, Victor Bouadjo or Malika Mokedem include such themes. They corroborate their transculturality by disrupting the binary frontiers imposed by the colonial ideology thoroughly analysed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*.¹⁰ These writers of the margin find their solace through the opening of psychological frontiers due to their “métissage,” their hybridity, as claimed by Henri Lopès, who says: “finally, being métis is a chance because the marriage of cultures is fruitful” (49).¹¹ Their hybridity and their claim for diversity within their presence in Europe impose their very centrality. These texts create a new postcolonial society based on a new mentality. They demand more openness, more tolerance: qualities defended by Paul Gilroy who believes that today, frontiers are fleeting and evanescent (406). Migrant writers, referred to as writers of the periphery, evoke constantly their imaginary round trip journeys, as does Alain Mabanckou who labels himself as “a writer and a migratory bird” (“Les mots de Proust”)¹² as beautifully depicted in his latest novel *Lumières de Pointe-Noire*, where the migrant novelist reveals that he is haunted by his birthplace in Congo. I think that it is in this sense that Derek Wright develops the notion that such texts are written from “transit zones or interspaces between worlds” (5), where surely there is a “creative cross-fertilization of ideas” (5). A voluntary desire to belong to a plural open world does exist, as claimed by the Algerian novelist Nina Bouraoui, who refuses to be labelled or boxed, which becomes “a violence” (36) for her. So, the characteristics of migrant writers are inspired by their multiple identities expressed in texts written in European languages with an urge for universality. In *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, the main character does exactly that when he asserts: “All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps” (261). Migrant writers claim that they are both from “elsewhere” and from “here”, urging for the existence of a global village. Dany Lafférière, from Haiti, develops such a perspective, as he cannot erase his past memory: “I want to hear the song of the world and I refuse the ghetto” (“Je veux entendre”).¹³ There is a defiant refusal of “communitarism”, of being “ghettoed”, which appears in their implicit wish not to create split personalities, but hybrid ones. Migrant writers do that by constantly recalling their origins, their sources, their memory, which are part and parcel of their personality and their inner being. For example, the family’s past history is integrated in their texts, becoming part of their present. Hanif Kureishi, who belongs to the second generation of migrant postcolonial writers, looks back into the colonial past of his parents, after having tried to wipe out his Pakistani side, to become fully British. The problem is that British people kept reminding him of his Pakistani origins, that frontier. In *The Rainbow Sign*, he discusses that in-between place in British society. Therefore, in order to survive racist aggressions, he decided to reintegrate his family past through a photo of his father taken in his uncle’s house in Pakistan. That photo helped him to construct fragments of that past in order to connect with his other identity. He created an imagined memory to save his inner

self and reconnect with his dual memory. His trips to Pakistan became significant as they helped him to accept himself as a migrant writer, with a hybrid culture, even if he remains profoundly a Londoner. He constructed his memory through his family stories and through History, which linger in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, or in *Intimacy*. In the latter, even though the story takes place in London, the character Jay often refers to the mythical house of his uncle in Pakistan: "In Lahore my uncle lives in one part of the house with his sons, three brothers, male friends, and anyone else who feels like staying a couple of years" (60). Jay tries to highlight the difference between English family life and the Pakistani one, in order to interplay with both. Hanif Kureishi's "route" bears reconciliation and acceptance of his father's colonial identity, a move that reinforces his personal postcolonial identity. A similar experience can be traced in the writings of Jamal Mahjoub, who confirmed to me his dual state in an interview: "I feel that I need to challenge on both sides of national identity: I feel if I pretend I was not half English, I would be ignoring the historical part, which led me being which means ignoring colonialism. So I am the child of a particular moment of history which informs who I am, informs all the context of the writing I do" (15).¹⁴ Henri Lopès experienced the same feelings when he was desperately trying to erase his white part. The Sudanese Tayeb Salih explores through memory the question of hybridity and the relations North/South in *Season of Migration to the North*, by disjoining the borders. In this respect the memory of these writers plays a linking role between their recognised countries, in this way wiping out the official frontiers.

Salman Rushdie's place in migrant postcolonial literature is anchored in various spaces: India, Pakistan, Britain and America. The British Salman Rushdie is haunted by his early years in the Indian sub-continent throughout his entire fictional work, including his autobiography. The memory of Bombay constructs his postcolonial British personality as described in *Joseph Anton*. Salman Rushdie reconstructs the experience of living under the threat of Khomeini's fatwa—a situation that made him realise the absurdity of the frontiers, as he could have been assassinated anywhere. Nevertheless, in this autobiography his childhood memories play a tremendous healing role. The sufferings and the difficult political world make Joseph Anton/Salman Rushdie return to his happy childhood scene life in Bombay. This is without doubt an indicator of postcolonial fatwa trauma. There is clearly a need to tell about those early years in the India of his childhood where tolerance was part of the scene. It is more than a glance back to his Indian side, a major source for his literary inspiration. His Oxford years are also remembered, because at the time, he believed in a future of progress and democracy. Salman Rushdie demonstrates that and as such shows that Britain and India are part of the creation of his postcolonial hybrid cultural personality; both countries become one country. In *Joseph Anton* the narrator proclaims: "He thought of Nuruddin Farah carrying Somalia in his heart wherever he travelled, and was proud that he had managed to write his book from the private India he carried everywhere with him" (483). That is the force of migrant writers, carrying multiple

worlds within themselves. A similar feeling of faithfulness to the mother country can be read in V.S. Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival*. An obvious erasure of the official frontiers is at work, which leaves room for a wider and more open postcolonial world.

Helen Cooper, exiled from Liberia, published her memoirs, in which she asserts her existence through her personal story by using the "I." She remembers her childhood and tells about the consequences of the civil war on her life. Memory past and recent of a nation, of a family, of herself, runs through her narrative, which reveals why they had fled Monrovia. Nostalgia of bygone days, anger, frustration and the hardships of integrating a country of exile, the United States of America, fill the whole autobiography. She says that their plane towards exile "engulfed them in its foreignness" (192), but crossing the frontiers was liberation. Writing about her home country, living again those years in Liberia through words was necessary to finding peace as an exiled person, and to living in peace in America. This migrant text helped

64 to melt the frontiers in order to live in harmony. For her it "wasn't hard to reconnect with the fourteen-year-old that I was—or even the seven-, the eight-, nine-, or ten-year-old. It was like taking a walk down memory lane" (Cooper n.p.).¹⁴ One can see here that the emotional memory is crucial for a reconstruction of oneself, admitting and accepting dual belongings.

The new migrants are the "harragas" portrayed in novels by Boualem Sansal and Malika Mokeddem. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Fatou Diome summarises the whole tragedy of those enforced young and less young Africans who cross borders and frontiers in order to survive. The issues of European frontiers and the new slave routes are summarised in this extract:

Enclosed, walled in
Prisoner of a land once blessed
But which has only its hunger to rock

Passports, certificates of residence, visas
And the rest, which is not said
Are the new chains of slavery

Bank account number
Address and origins
Modern apartheid criteria

...

African generation of globalisation
Attracted then filtered, parked, rejected, desolate
We are the "In spite of us" travellers. (217)

Fatou Diome's title implicitly refers to the slave trade. These texts show that despite new regulations concerning migratory flows, the "Harragas" cross the official frontiers, disturbing politicians and Heads of State because for these dispossessed

travellers, the frontiers should disappear to permit them to live decently anywhere possible in the world. The phenomenon of the "Harragas" is growing, as the press keeps reporting.¹⁵ These forced desperate travellers attempt to escape weariness due to psychological and economic problems. They flee a postcolonial African scourge, crossing the desert and the seas, in this way deconstructing those frontiers that are thought impassable by European states.

The "history of postcolonial migrations" (7) has revolutionised the image of the Africans from a mass of postcolonial people to postcolonial individual subjects who express their singularity by using the subject "I", succeeding in this way in annihilating the geographical frontiers and the psychological borders. By doing so, postcolonial migrant writers demonstrate that the frontiers are artificial, political, and nationalistic. They have shown, through their narratives and through their memories and nostalgia, that the frontiers did not exist anymore in their mind, even if the frontiers do exist for the states. As these migrants belong to a new generation, that of the "post-colony", they raise key issues such as those of identity and recognition. Indeed, the interesting element for these migrant writers is that they are changing and improving the mentalities, not only of the migrants, but also of the Europeans who are accepting today that their societies are indeed changing, that they are not monolithic anymore and that they have to accept the consequences of colonialism and the "enigma of arrival", to use the title of one of V.S. Naipaul's novels. The migrant novelists speak first, but not only, for themselves, as they also do it for the whole African diaspora, creating a rich and significant migrant postcolonial literature. Migrant literatures open new avenues for the perception of our global world, precisely because migrant novelists do not give any importance to barriers, to borders or to frontiers. In these texts, the writers' situation as displaced individuals makes them look back at what they have left behind, in order to include it in their present, which "is not simply transitory" (313) as Homi Bhabha argues, but permanent. Migrant writings are negotiating the postcolonial space by providing new possibilities through the remembrance of the past, which they include in their present, in order to assert it. Migrant writers stress the cultural plurality of this postcolonial world. It is through the restoration process of memory which plays a therapeutic role as it helps to build a more balanced world, and the various cultural translations, that these writers have broken the frontiers, confirming to a certain extent what Gaston Bachelard wrote in his reflection on space and self that "greatness progresses in the world, as the interior self deepens" (178). In these texts memory plays a therapeutic role and inscribes at the same time a significant construction of a "counter-discursive rather than homologous view of the world" (193), which gives to all migrant writers the opportunity to encourage serious changes in the perception of human beings who are multiple, diverse and who should be more open. Migrant writers defend such a vision and such a dream as their views contradict surely Western culturally racialised societies.

NOTES

1. See also the film-documentary on the situation of Black Africans in France and their role during the two World Wars, at <http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid1422553060001>
2. On the 3rd October, hundreds of young migrants (“Harragas”) lost their lives when their boat capsized near Lampedusa.
3. Expression coined by Salman Rushdie and used as a title for Bill Ashcroft’s critical book.
4. All quotations refer to the 1995 Penguin edition.
5. As, for example, this collection of interviews of slaves undertaken in the 1930s and published in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.
6. The province of Eboe is part of today’s Nigeria.
7. In novels such as *Two Thousand Seasons* by Ayi Kwei Armah or *Le Devoir de violence* by Yambo Ouologuem.
- 66 8. Many studies have been published on that period of history; as, for example, Boubacar, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*.
9. These writers used to meet at St Giles Circus in London. See Dathorne.
10. English translation of *Les Damnés de la terre*.
11. “Je me suis dit qu’être métis était finalement une chance. Le mariage des cultures est fécondant.” My translation.
12. My translation.
13. My translation.
14. This quotation is in the “Discussion questions” at the end of the novel.
15. See, for example : http://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/video-plus-de-200-migrants-eu-phiriques-franchissent-la-frontiere-entre-le-maroc-et-l-espagne_541711.html

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