

THEORY OF 'MELTING POT': CULTURAL NEO-IMPERIALISM IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine and explore one of the impressive theories of multiculturalism, the 'Melting Pot' theory proposed by Israel Zangwill in 1909 who referred America as a God's pot. The idea behind this theory is that racial and ethnic groups should move towards the culture and society of the host, giving up their distinctive heritage and come along with a new rainbow society. It also attempts a close examination of Indian novels in English in the light of both support and violation of this theory of multiculturalism. Assimilation refers to the theory of 'Melting Pot' as in the novels of Salman Rushdie, M.G Vassanji or Selvadurai the setting is in India or the characters are drawn from the migrant community in their adopted land and their negative representation only helps to strengthen the white orientation of the establishment. However, multiculturalism draws them not only toward change and reforms, but also toward new challenges between and within them. Acculturation, equivalent of assimilation, means that one group adapts its culture to the cultural ways of the dominant group, usually through the one-way process of socialization. World religions today greatly contribute to a world order (rather disorder) that is multicultural both when viewed as an organic whole, and from within most societies that compose it. Resident or local writers, however great, their literary works, can seldom compete with the much-hyped products of this new class. This is the kind of cultural neo-imperialism heralded in by globalization.

Key Words: Acculturation, Assimilation, heritage, Multiculturalism, Melting pot, Socialization.

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Literature that illustrates multiculturalism has particular, special traits. Multicultural Literature is written by and about people who are immigrants from third world countries and who are grouped as minority in countries like America, England, Canada, Australia, etc. Multicultural literature shows distinctions of cultural forms such as traditions, values, beliefs, rites, folktales, myths and legends. It compares and analyzes such distinctions in different cultures and their integration into the culture of migrated country. Multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations and expand imagination and creativity. Any culture has its own traditions, habits, religions, languages and many other common features.

Coming to the concept of multiculturalism, the term having been originated and popularized in Canada and Australia in about 1970s, it referred to the government policies for imparting equal status to the varied cultural communities for the ease of national governance and reconciliation among various cultural diversities. Multiculturalism is as defined by Harper Collins Dictionary of Sociology 'the acknowledgement and promotion of cultural pluralism, multiculturalism celebrates and seeks to promote cultural variety, for example minority languages. At the same time it focuses on the unequal relationship of minority to mainstream cultures.' (1991)

Multiculturalism theory carries notions of cultural clashes, identity crisis, experiencing inferiority, transculturation, depiction of cultural diversity, consequences of hybridity. The theory of multiculturalism offers alternative analogies for ethnic interaction including salad bowl theory, or, as it is known in Canada, the cultural mosaic. The term 'Salad Bowl' became popular in the theory of multiculturalism. Writing in English and getting published by British publishers gave the writer an advantage over those writing in regional languages or being published locally. The Diaspora writing from the west thus assumes greater importance in the context of globalization.

Multiculturalism is the way in which cultural and ethnic discrepancies may be accommodated in social, political and economic arrangements. It is a two way process of cultural exchange, where the various groups learn from each other, each impacting the other, without totally losing their unique distinctiveness.

Another term 'transculturation' being closer in meaning with multiculturalism, indicates the reciprocal process by which two cultures engage themselves in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other's way. In celebrating transculturalism, Indian texts do not subscribe to either the 'melting pot' or 'salad bowl' theories. The 'melting pot' policy expected all minority groups within the US to erase their national identity and assimilate into the mainstream culture. The 'salad bowl' policy, on the other hand, marginalizes the minorities on the basis of their differences. In both instances, the hegemonic tendencies of the dominant society are visible. These diasporic texts undermine Western superiority by the creation of transcultural identities.

In the postcolonial context, the novel ceases to be a literary artefact. In fact, it becomes a powerful embodiment of the ideologies of the dominant society and plays a crucial role in establishing structures of power. The term complementary identity is frequently used to characterize the immigrant possessing both an ethnic identity and a national identity as an American citizen. To explain this double identity we often use 'salad bowl' as a metaphor. In the 'salad bowl' metaphor each culture retains its own distinct qualities (the different ingredients in the salad), but has a sense of common national identity in the country of habitat (the salad). We also use the term hyphenated to illustrate the double identity e.g. a Norwegian American is a hyphenated American.

The term 'Salad Bowl' became popular in the theory of multiculturalism. The Salad Bowl concept describes America as the bowl consisting of various ingredients that keep their individual characteristics. The immigrants are not being blended together in one 'pot' and losing their identity, but rather they are transforming American society into multicultural one and still keep their identities. Charles Taylor presents his famous concept of 'Politics of Recognition' in the following words:

A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for Recognition. The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today's politics, on behalf of minority or subaltern groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of multiculturalism.

Gradually the 'Melting Pot' theory became popular to indicate the amalgamation of various cultures. The melting pot is an all-inclusive metaphor for a diverse society toward becoming more harmonized where the various factors 'melting together' into a harmonious whole and for a homogeneous society becoming more heterogeneous through the admixture of outside elements with different cultural background with a potential of creating disharmony with the previous culture.

The 'melting-together' metaphor was in use since 1780s. Historically, it is often used to describe the assimilation of immigrants to the United States. The desirability of assimilation and the 'Melting Pot Model' has been reconsidered by proponents of Multiculturalism, who have suggested alternative metaphors to describe the current American society, such as a cultural mosaic, salad bowl, or kaleidoscope in which different cultures mix and co-exist, but remain distinct in some aspects. Others argue that cultural assimilation is important to the maintenance of national unity, and should be promoted. The exact term 'melting pot' came into general usage in the United States after it was used as a metaphor describing a fusion of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities in the 1908 with the publication of the play of the same name.

The Melting Pot is a play by Israel Zangwill, first staged in 1908. In *The Melting Pot*, Israel Zangwill combined a romantic denouement with a utopian celebration of complete cultural intermixing. The play was an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, set in New York City. It depicts the life of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family, the Quixanos. David Quixano has survived a pogrom, which killed his mother and sister. He wishes to forget this horrible event. He composes an 'American Symphony' and wants to look forward to a society free of ethnic divisions and hatred, which is called 'The Crucible' expressing his hope for a world in which all ethnicity crumbled into one. He falls in love with a beautiful Russian Christian immigrant named Vera. The dramatic peak of the play is the moment when David meets Vera's father, who turns out to be the Russian officer responsible for the annihilation of David's family. Vera's father admits his guilt, the symphony is performed to accolades, David and Vera live happily ever after as the curtain falls. David says, 'Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame!' (1908:87) Although the idea of 'melting' as a metaphor for ethnic assimilation had been used before, Zangwill's play popularized the term 'melting pot' as a symbol for this occurrence in American society.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the metaphor of a 'crucible' or 'smelting pot' was used to describe the fusion of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. It was used together with concepts of the United States as an ideal republic and a 'city upon a hill' or new promised land. It was a metaphor for the idealized process of immigration and colonization by which different nationalities, cultures and races were to blend into a new, virtuous community, and it was connected to utopian visions of the emergence of an American 'new man'. While 'melting' was in common use the exact term 'melting pot' came into general usage in 1908, after the premiere of the play *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill.

In 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his private journal of America as the Utopian product of a culturally and racially mixed 'smelting pot', but only in 1912 were his remarks first published. In his writing, Emerson explicitly welcomed the racial intermixing of whites and non-whites, a highly controversial view during his lifetime. The first use in American literature of the concept of immigrants 'melting' into the receiving culture is found in the writings of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur who writes in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), 'Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.'

In the United States, where the term melting pot is still commonly used, the ideas of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism have, in some circles, taken precedence over the idea of assimilation. Alternate models where immigrants retain their native cultures such as the 'salad bowl' the 'symphony' are more often used by sociologists to describe how cultures and ethnicities mix in the United States. Nonetheless, the term assimilation is still used to describe the ways in which immigrants and their descendants adapt, such as by increasingly using the national language of the host society as their first language.

The melting pot is but one metaphor for the immigrant experience, the transition from one country to another. Other common metaphors that focus on the negative sides of the immigrant experience are those describing the immigrants as 'uprooted' and 'transplanted' in a strange country. They are living between two worlds, and 'crippled by divided hearts and confused by two souls.' Such metaphors imply that the immigrant experience is one of alienation and estrangement and focus on a dichotomy between the old and the new homeland. However, these metaphors have been reconsidered. Today they are often replaced by terms suggesting that immigrants have the advantage of drawing upon two cultural traditions, two ways of thought, and being at home in 'a double landscape'. In this way the immigrant experience has been transformed into an enriching ethnic experience. The relationship is not one of dichotomy but rather one of harmony and complementation.

Multiculturalism, in Indian context, may be interpreted chiefly in term of amalgamation of many cultures where none dominates the other. It can also be summed up as recognition to the diversity by means of codification that contributes to the equality of all cultures within one culture, one point of space. The Post-Independence India witnessed tremendous changes in the country along socio- political and economic dimensions. The participation of the minorities in the political processes suddenly acquired great impetus. The expansion of education and the rise of corporate set ups further minimized the cultural distinction between the majority and the minorities. The sharing of rituals and

participation in the festivals of the people belonging to alien cultures became a common finding in the country. The interpenetration of the cultures led to the homogenization of various cultures and consequently the birth of a new culture that was the result of this commingling of faiths and beliefs and the sharing of the festivities.

Indian experience and experiments in this field is evident in the novels of Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, M.G Vassanji and Selvadurai where the background is India or the characters are drawn from the migrant community in their adopted land and their negative representation only helps to strengthen the white orientation of the establishment. Resident or local writers, however great, their literary works, can seldom compete with the much-hyped products of this new class.

This is the kind of cultural neo-imperialism heralded in by globalization. Many of today's academics that employ the term, cultural imperialism, are heavily informed by the work of Foucault, Derrida, Said, and other poststructuralist and post-colonialist theorists. Within the realm of postcolonial discourse, cultural imperialism can be seen as the cultural legacy of colonialism, or forms of social action contributing to the continuation of Western hegemony. To some outside of the realm of this discourse, the term is critiqued as being unclear, unfocused, or contradictory in nature. Cultural neo-imperialism can refer to either the forced acculturation of a subject population, or to the voluntary embracing of a foreign culture by individuals who do so of their own free will.

For Salman Rushdie, an Indian-born British writer of Muslim extraction currently living in America, it seems only natural that his ongoing fictional project should have targeted questions of self-definition and self-location (in its various forms as dis-location, mis-location and re-location). He confesses, his works record 'an attempt to come to terms with the various component parts of myself—countries, memories, histories, families, gods.' Given his stellar position within the hyphenated space spanning diverse cultures, Rushdie's work is precariously poised between both the Western and the Eastern literary traditions, and resorts to what Caren Kaplan calls 'Mythologised narrativisations of displacement' (1996) as practices of cultural identification.

It is a movement in these countries which esteems the cultural background of all the diverse groups of people and promotes integration of everyone into a common vessel. Ali Rattansi writes:

Immigrants were encouraged to “integrate” rather than required to assimilate. This meant that they were to be enabled to retain elements of their “home culture”, and ethnic community associations were seen as important vehicles of integration. (1993:252)

It is therefore required to distinguish and differentiate between cultural neo-imperialism as an attitude of superiority, and the position of a multicultural melting pot stand.

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