DOI: https://doi.org/10.3329/Spectrum.v18i1.76357

Cross-border Interrelationship in Rushdie, Ghosh, and Hosseini's Fiction: A Transnationalist Approach

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Abstract

This essay argues that the India-born expatriate writers Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini have built fictional worlds consisting of people of diverse nations, races, colours, and religions in their respective novels- *Midnight's Children* (1981/2006), *The Glass Palace* (2001), and *The Kite Runner* (2003), and many of these immigrant characters maintain sustainable connections with their countries of origin across borders. This study highlights the fact that British colonialism played a crucial role in large-scale movements of people, and many of the postcolonial countries are still struggling with myriad internal and external problems. As a result, countless people of these countries are eager to shift to economically advanced and politically stable countries. Yet, these same people are unable to disconnect from their original society and remain emotionally and psychologically moored to their roots. Drawing on the theoretical apparatus of transnationalism, this essay explores the reasons behind mobility outside one's nation-state and the subsequent economic, political, and social impacts of transnational relationships ensuing from that. The study also examines how the characters adapt themselves to and whether they are permanently secured in a transnational space.

Keywords: Transnational movement, nation-states, colonialism, sustained relationship, integration

Introduction

Salman Rushdie (1947-), born in Bombay, India, has multiple citizenships. Amitav Ghosh (1956-), another Indian writer, was born in Kolkata, spent his childhood in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, and now lives in the USA. Khaled Hosseini (1965-) was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and lived in Iran and France before finding political asylum in the USA in 1980, shortly after the beginning of the Soviet-Afghan war. If we examine their writings, we find that all three of these writers usually prefer to write about characters who explore their national and cultural identity in a cosmopolitan and transnational space. Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (originally published in 1981) uses a transnational panoramic setting for the plot covering the World Wars, postcolonial India, and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. He employs the narrative technique of magical realism to build connections among people breaking the limits of time and place. Besides, his characters travel extensively and thus get involved in a transnational social field and action. On the other hand, Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* (2001) creates a world under the British Empire where people from many races and nationalities are brought together. Here characters move from place to place— Bangladesh, China, Burma, India, Malaya, Singapore, Afghanistan, and a mirage of other places for various reasons. Along the route, they form kinships, forge friendships across different nation-states, and thus engage in transnational activities. In the third text for our transnationalist reading, Hosseini's 2003 novel *The Kite Runner*, the principal characters are from Afghanistan but move across several countries and continents in search of a haven while at the same time remaining attached to their homeland.

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In exploring South Asian writers and their works, researchers have adopted a variety of ways, touching upon such issues as the autobiographical elements in their fiction, the presence of multiple histories and cultures, and the adoption of hybridity by characters as a mechanism for coping. For example, Grekowicz (1996) has found similarities between the multiple cultural experiences of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* and the author's hybridity (pp. 221–22). Another scholar Chandar (2010) has accentuated the motif of 'voyage' frequently used by Ghosh to portray a "kaleidoscopic view" of history and culture (p. 181). Renu (2017) has perceptively analyzed how Ghosh has portrayed in *River of Smoke* (2011), the second book of his Ibis trilogy, characters that are exposed to multiple cultures in the transnational market area in China, known as Canton and to cope with this bizarre situation, characters have internalized a hybridization of cultures and ended up shifting their own identity. In discussing South Asian novelists writing in English, Alam (2021) has pointed out how the authors have deployed their experiences of living in multiple countries in demonstrating the continuous "negotiation" in identities of imaginary characters by placing them in "transnational spaces and situations" (p. 316). In the current essay, the question of negotiated identity is only one of the many complicated issues that arise in a world where people's lives and fates are linked beyond international borders. The study uses the focal point of transnationalism to explore *Midnight's Children (*1981/2006), *The Glass Palace* (2001), and *The Kite Runner* (2003) to delve into the trans-spatial condition of the uprooted characters, such as how colonialism, material concerns, racial identity, and wars drive people to migrate voluntarily, what relationship the floating characters have with their native as well as the settler countries, and what impacts are observed in economic, social, and political spheres because of the movement across nation-states. All these matters are closely associated and need to be seen together to get a holistic picture of the translational life portrayed in the three selected novels.

A succinct definition of transnationalism is necessary at this stage since the fictional texts will be scrutinized using the insights offered by this school of thought. Different scholars have interpreted transnationalism from different points of view. Briggs, McCormick, and Way (2008) have deliberated on the difficulties in defining transnationalism. Its difficulty arises from the fact that originally transnationalism was used to indicate multinational economic ties (Clavin, 2005, p. 433). However, gradually surpassing the economic dimension of the concept, transnationalism has been extended to the immigrant experiences of people and commensurate social, political, and other complexities arising out of such movements. Besides, transnationalism is usually regarded as a direct outcome of globalization and hastened by advanced scientific inventions in telecommunication and transportation (Vertovec, 2009; Lahiri, 2019; Alam, 2021). Although transnationalism shares some common grounds with diaspora studies in dealing with movements across nation-states, they are also different in certain ways. Diaspora is used to refer to communities being forced to evacuate themselves from their own homelands and live as peregrines in other places (Faist, 2010), whereas in transnationalism the movement is voluntary. In our present age of innovative technology and fast communication, the classical term of diaspora is insufficient to explain the long-distance economic, political, social, and cultural interrelationships that migrants maintain with the country of their origin while living in the country of their settlement. Regarding this intricately tangled situation, Faist and Bilecen (2019) have drawn attention to the interdisciplinary qualities of transnationalism and emphasized its dynamic aspects. Given the distinction between diaspora and transnationalism, I have chosen the contemporary theoretical framework of transnationalism in my essay to examine the chosen three literary texts to understand the multifaceted and convoluted cross-border connections they depict.

Role of the Empire

The literary critic Chen (2010) has professed that previously colonialism looked at the other, that is, the colonized people as inferior, but now postcolonial globalization has complicated this figure of the other because of its interconnectedness to all kinds of social formations, such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and transnationalism. Thinking of the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Latin America, and Caribbean countries, we note that the British Empire along with other European imperialistic countries caused mass migrations across national boundaries. Many of these people as well as their descendants now live in Europe and other places in the world while staying in touch with their ancestral home. Broadening this phenomenon by including the contemporary South-North migration, Faist (2019) has called it a late consequence of European domination of the global world. To further elucidate the connection between colonialism and transnationalism, the advanced technology of the West can be marked as a crucial force behind establishing colonies, and scientific innovation in communication can be considered a vector in the rise of transnationalism as well. Therefore, inevitably a study of transnationalism can shed further light on the empire and decolonization. Additionally, Pence and Zimmerman (2012) have indicated that transnationalist studies emerge from postcolonial cultural criticism, but ultimately go beyond it:

> Works following Said's *Orientalism* have demonstrated the racism and ethnocentrism at the heart of European knowledge about the colonized world. Transnational history proceeds from this demonstrated epistemological insufficiency of the European and Eurocentric archives to the necessity of multisite and multiarchival history. (p. 497)

This suggests that to unveil the face of the empire, we need to dig into alternative archives like the postcolonial narratives used in this essay rather than the ones disseminated by colonial discourse.

In Ghosh's 2001 novel *The Glass Palace* the colonially driven transnational movement becomes obvious. The British Empire played a significant role in the trans-local mobility of colonized subjects because it needed workers to run plantations and do menial jobs, like cleaning, carrying things, and other labour-intensive work. This results in large-scale movements outside homelands. The omniscient narrator of the novel refers to such mobility when he remarks:

> Many Indians lived there: the Prince had claimed that there were more Indians than Burmese in Rangoon. The British had brought them there, to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. Apparently, they couldn't find local people to do these jobs. And indeed, why would the Burmese do that kind of work? (Ghosh, p. 49)

Rajkumar Raha is shrewd enough to notice this demand, and he implements a plan to find cheap labourers in poor areas of India to supply to Burma and other states under the British Empire. Some of these workers shift willingly, while some are transported against their will by being forced or sold by their families due to poverty. A great number of these cheap working men live in abject poverty in the plantations. The life beyond the border of their own country fails to provide them with the better life that they sought.

Correspondingly, economic concerns and worldly matters are prime facets of transnational connections, as colonialism is intrinsically connected with materialistic ventures. In *The Glass Palace* (2001), the British themselves first come to Burma to trade and by the time King Thebaw is on the throne, the British merchants have become so powerful that only a slight disagreement about paying custom duties with a British timber company leads to the dethronement and exile of the royal family from Mandalay to Ratnagiri, which is miles away from Burma and is situated between Bombay and Goa. The British fleet invades Burma on 14 November 1885

and the war lasts for only fourteen days. The narrator makes a point of listing the origin of its soldiers, emphasizing the racial composition of the British army:

> There were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the great majority – about two-thirds – were Indian sepoys…The Hazaras, recruited from the Afghan border, had proved their worth to the British over decades of warfare, in India and abroad. (Ghosh, p. 26)

The protagonist, Rajkumar Raha, opts for economic transnationalism, too. His family is originally from Chittagong, which is now in Bangladesh. When his parents and siblings die after contracting a fatal disease, he decides not to return to Chittagong and to pursue a career in Burma because Burma, which is later named Myanmar, was once a place known as the Golden Land to the rest of the world for its abundant riches.

Rajkumar does not stay in contact with his relatives in Chittagong; nonetheless, he lives in a space that is affected by multi-stranded transnational social relationships. In Burma, he associates himself with people of various origins. In Mandalay, Rajkumar meets Ma Cho who is well-known for hiring migrant Indians. Rajkumar is often described as "a kalaa [black] from across the sea – an Indian". Ma Cho herself has a mixed parentage in her origin but she is "more Burmese than Indian in appearance" (Ghosh, 2001, pp. 3, 5). She has a lover called Saya John who is originally from China, but after living in many countries, he is now in Burma. Together they form a cosmopolitanism of proletariats or working-class people coming from different nations and races in the fiction. But some of them also participate in cross-border interrelationships; for instance, Saya John has a child called Matthew who lives in Singapore with Matthew's maternal relatives. Matthew comes to visit his father in Burma during the holidays. Rajkumar marries a Burmese girl, Dolly, and by the time the novel ends, he has relatives in both Burma and India. Thus, Rajkumar and Saya John are quintessential prototypes of people who maintain close connections with relations and friends in more than one territory. Thus, in their cases, we see that sometimes transnational ties encompass more than two countries. To explicate his own transcultural and cosmopolitan identity, Saya John enlightens Rajkumar:

> …I am, like you, an orphan, a foundling. I was brought up by Catholic priests, in a town called Malacca. These men were from everywhere – Portugal, Macao, Goa. They gave me my name – John Martins, which was not what it has become. They used to call me Joao, but I changed this later to John. They spoke many languages, those priests, and from the Goans I learnt a few Indian words. When I was old enough to work I went to Singapore, where I was for a while an orderly in a military hospital. The soldiers there were mainly Indians and they asked me this very question: how is it that you, who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, you are a *dhobi ka kutta* – a washerman's dog – *na gharka na ghatka* – you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I'd say, yes, that is exactly what I am. (Ghosh, p. 10)

Saya John's life story sums up, in a nutshell, the lives of most migrants in the colonial era when Europe conquered and dominated the rest of the world. Not only Saya John and Rajkumar but also characters from the second and third generations in this novel are conditioned by these economic transnational relationships.

Persecution as a Caveat for Transnational Conditions

Racial and religious persecution are well-known primary reasons for migration. In *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie (1981/2006), the independence of the Indian subcontinent, based on the partition on religious grounds, does not work well for all people and leads to a complex transnational movement across the borders of India

and Pakistan. The differences in religions become a catalyst in the communal conflict, with the minority group facing maltreatment. Muslims become the target of the Indian government as Rushdie's narrative illustrates. Aadam Aziz is a patriot and dislikes the idea of Pakistan from the beginning. But when his son-in-law's property is almost appropriated by the Indian government, they feel that India does not think of them as its own people. In Saleem Sinai's words, "[their] eyes were too blue: Kashmiri-blue…." (Rushdie, p. 171), so, they had to fight for their assets and citizenship of India because of twofold reasons – one was their Muslim faith and the other was their Kashmiri origin. Hence, Saleem's disillusioned grandmother's frustrated response to all this: "'What is left in this India?' Reverend Mother asked, hand slicing air. 'Go, leave it all, go to Pakistan'" (Rushdie, p. 189). People thus can easily become pariahs in their own country in a chaotic time like the partition. Consequently, this family becomes scattered across two states – India and Pakistan – after the end of colonialism and is forced by circumstances to maintain a transnational relationship.

However, migration does not guarantee a resolution to all problems rather at times migrants become vulnerable to racial bigotry. Many of Ghosh's (2001) characters, despite living in different lands for generations, are not immune to xenophobia, greed, and political turmoil. The Rahas in *The Glass Palace* have to deracinate themselves from Myanmar, sell their business and property, and relocate to India. The tension between different races, whose amalgamation created a cosmopolitan space previously, had already been in Myanmar for a long time. When racial and political tension culminates in riots in Rangoon, people are slaughtered on the road in broad daylight because of having an origin other than the Burmese. Rajkumar thinks of Burma as his home, however, the Burmese look at him as an outsider.

In *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Hosseini, too, the strain among different tribes and races of Afghanistan leads to systematic racism and religious tyranny. As a result, the oppressed people prefer to emigrate rather than stay in their motherland. One of these minority tribes is Hazara, and they face racial repression and religious discrimination regularly. Hassan and Ali are frequently bullied by local children because they are considered low-caste due to their Hazara blood. Amir is aware of the abuse of Hassan and his tribe's people, but he does not know the whole history of oppression because no educational institution in Afghanistan teaches it. Although Amir and Hassan grew up together in the same house in Kabul, the differences between their history, ethnicity, and religion are undeniable and unchangeable to people in Afghanistan. Finally, Amir decides to rescue Hassan's son, Sohrab, from the Taliban soldier Assef's abuse by bringing him from Afghanistan to the USA.

Political Consciousness of Transnational People

Many of the characters of the chosen fiction develop a new kind of political awareness after being exposed to a transnational life. Life outside one's national territory, aside from instilling ideological consciousness, opens fresh political opportunities for people. In *Midnight's Children* (1981/2006), Rushdie's protagonist Saleem does not live outside India at first, but the author makes use of Saleem's supernatural power of knowing things to give readers a continuous commentary on the political affairs within India and beyond its border, filtered through this little boy's point of view. Saleem's uncle, Major General Zulfikar used to be a loyal and successful officer under the British government in India. But he happily embarks upon a political career in Pakistan when he relocates there after the Partition of 1947. The murky political state of a new-born country like Pakistan proves to be a fertile land for his political ambition. Major General Zulfikar arranges regular political

gatherings at his place where the guests conspire to orchestrate a coup against the current government and establish a military regime.

An analysis of *The Glass Palace* (2001) also reveals that life beyond the rules and laws of one's own nation-state can implant nationalist ideological seeds in one's mind. An example of this can be seen in the character of Uma. She is originally from a moderately conservative family but is married to a person with a European education and the job of a Collector under the British imperial government. When her husband takes his own life because he feels betrayed by his British lords, she starts travelling with the pension money as a widow of a government employee. While staying in the UK and the USA, she makes acquaintances with people who are actively engaged with the liberation movement in their own countries.

Uma discerns the sufferings of her country's people by conversing with the liberation workers from Ireland and America and becomes aware that many people from the Indian subcontinent are involved in political activism in India while living abroad. Thus, the narrative indicates that the transnational people actively influence the political scenario of the country of their origin. In this regard, it is important to recognize that transnationalist forces can strengthen nationalism. As Clavin (2005) has propounded:

> This subject in turn touches on one of the central paradoxes of transnationalist studies: that transnational ties can dissolve some national barriers while simultaneously strengthening or creating others ... transnational communities more generally can be conceived as strengthening rather than weakening the power of states and the influence of particular interest groups within them. (p. 431)

Therefore, the distance from the British Empire and the sense of protection in a foreign country like America allow expatriate Indians to be braver, more independent, and more conscious of their rights. Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) have noted that the intricate textures of migration webs are often shaped and mobilized by conflicting principles. The preoccupations of transnational communities are influenced by state policies and constraints. Breaking away from her conservative background, Uma also eventually became an active intellectual member of the emancipation movement. She travels a lot to see the condition of people in Burma, India, and Malaya; then she gives public speeches, joins the Congress, and works for women and other downtrodden people.

Politics also triggers transnational mobility in Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2003), where we see that many of the people in the Afghan diaspora community in America emigrate because of the sudden siege of power and political mayhem in Afghanistan. Peace lasted for a short time after the coup in 1978 and the political realm soon became unstable. With the invasion by the Russian Army in 1979, Afghanistan became a war-stricken country. Through the ordeal of escaping life-threatening situations and finding a new home in a relatively politically stable country, Afghan people forge the mental prowess to envisage the schisms and conflicts in the Afghan political sphere. Their diasporic condition leans towards transnationalism when, despite great distances, international laws, and borders, the immigrants are connected to a virtual parallel world with their ancestral home. Electronic media, such as the internet, television, newspapers, and magazines, facilitate transnational networks by relaying news of the native country to those abroad. In this manner, the migrants diligently follow the political activities in their homeland, make accurate predictions, and express their frustrations over the increasingly deteriorated conditions back home. Amir describes his horror of seeing the Taliban in real life by comparing this experience with watching them in the media. The already emigrated Afghans also try their best to help their close ones from back home with migration to an innocuous place.

Integration into Another Nation-State

Assimilation and integration into one's country of settlement are other major issues in transnationalism. Kearney (1995) has discussed the movement of people, information, capital, and objects across a globalized and transnational world from an anthropological point of view and commented that such flows are necessary for dynamic communities and the identity formation of their members. Hosseini (2003) delineates in *The Kite Runner* that the Afghani people live a life of multiculturalism in America compelled by necessity, but their life is filled with nostalgia. While the older generation of people struggles to adapt themselves to the American lifestyle to survive, they also maintain a close relationship with other Afghans and try to retain as many Afghan norms and rituals as possible. However, for the younger generation, it takes a transcultural turn where the new way of life mixes so closely with the old customs and beliefs that it becomes a hybrid cultural experience for them. America, the land of multiculturalism, becomes the sanctuary for these expatriates. The narrator articulates:

> The previous Thursday, the first day of spring, had been the Afghan New Year's Day – the Sawl-e-Nau – and Afghans in the Bay Area had planned celebrations throughout the East Bay and the peninsula. (Hosseini, p. 317)

Amir very fittingly pronounces, "You can take Afghans out of Paghman, but you can't take Paghman out of Afghans" (Hosseini, p. 318). However, as Vertovec (2009) has observed:

> This needn't mean they are not becoming integrated in their places of settlement. Belonging, loyalty, and sense of attachment are not parts of a zero-sum game based on a single place. That is, the "more transnational" a person is does not automatically mean he or she is "less integrated", and the "less integrated" one does not necessarily prompt or strengthen "more transnational" patterns of association. (p. 78)

In short, transnationalism gives place to a hybrid cultural identity among the community of immigrants who live a transnational life. In another essay, Vertovec (2001) conceded that the identities of migrants are negotiated in a transnational world and hence transnationalism and identity issues are frequently placed side by side. All in all, transnationalism produces psychological fragmentation in many of the people who live in outbound nations forsaking their place of origin. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir is happy to be far away from his birthplace and considers "San Francisco [as] the city I now call home" (Hosseini, p. 1), but his past in Afghanistan occasionally makes him feel torn apart as the past is always there in the consciousness. This duality in the mind of migrants is a transnational fact.

As part of transcultural incorporation, in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981/2006), Saleem's sister also alters herself in Pakistan and becomes extremely pious, forsaking her grandfather's liberal teaching. Here, she goes by the name of Jamila, a more Muslim-sounding name than the nickname Brass Monkey used at home in India (Rushdie, pp. 405–406). It seems the migrant people understand intuitively that the sooner they adapt themselves to the new environment and adopt the cultural practices of this new land, the better they will be accepted. Jamila becomes "Pakistan's Angel" and "Bulbul-of-the-faith" for her beautiful singing, and in Saleem's words, "[W]e had left Bombay, but we gained reflected glory" (Rushdie, p. 425). Nonetheless, Saleem feels like a misfit in Pakistan and he notices how his family is acting like a chameleon by trying to suppress their roots in India. In the narrator's voice:

> Saleem's parents said, "We must all become new people"; in the land of the pure, purity became our ideal. But Saleem was forever tainted with Bombayness…although Ayub Khan and Bhutto were forging an alliance with China (which had so recently been our enemy), Ahmed and Amina would listen to no criticisms of their home; and my father bought a towel factory. (Rushdie, p. 431)

In this way, most of the Sinais try desperately to integrate and adapt to their country of settlement.

Congruently, language acquisition and multilingualism are prerequisites for integration. Many of the major and minor characters who live a transnational life in *The Glass Palace* (2001) learn multiple languages. They do not learn these languages from any educational institution. The Burmese that Saya John speaks is heavily accented and the English Rajkumar utters is imperfect, but their dialect works effectively for practical communication purposes. They pick up functional words from different languages along the road while transacting and working with people from different nations. The second generation of Rajkumar's family is not only multilingual but they also receive double names in two languages – Burmese and Bengali. This phenomenon foregrounds the sense of dual and multiple identities of migrants discussed by the theorists of transnationalism.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the analysis of the three novels, *Midnight's Children* (1981/2006)*, The Glass Palace* (2001), *and The Kite Runner* (2003), has shed some light on their authors' concerns regarding transnational issues. The movement and relationships of many characters across several nation-states display polygonal transnational behaviours. This study has revealed that the development of technology has reduced geographical distances and, in turn, the interrelationship between countries has become intense and more complicated. Besides, from a postcolonial perspective, the world has already undergone a contraction due to the colonial reign. Nowadays, innumerable people from once colonized countries often prefer to settle in the countries that previously colonized them.

People migrate willingly to escape from poverty, racism, religious persecution, and war. Some of them not only plan their relocation but also execute sustainable dealings with families, and friends across international perimetres, such as helping close relatives and friends migrate to a more economically advanced and politically nonviolent country as we find in *The Kite Runner*. However, similar to the case of the Raha family and their kith and kin in *The Glass Palace*, transnational life fails to provide security and permanent prosperity to the Sinais and the Zulfikers in *Midnight's Children*. To sum up, viable linkage outside a sovereign territory affects people's lives, their political ideologies, and their social and cultural values. Further study of other novels by Rushdie, Ghosh, and Hosseini can intensify and illuminate our comprehension of the transnationally constructed identities of their fictional characters.

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