

Другостта: литература и комуникация
Otherness: Literature and Communication

**Self-Othering and Redemptive Narratives
in Literature and the Arts**

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Abstract: In spite of the increased interconnectedness of today's world, brought about by globalization and, more recently, by the digital reconfiguration of our lives due to Covid-19, humankind is still - and paradoxically so - grappling with the legacy of colonial sovereignty. Stigmatization of Otherness has become a fad and labels are stitched with burning needles while we are being swept toward the edge of the whirling falls. New forms of intolerance are looming in the darkest corners of our seemingly civilized world and the door to the outer rings of this mental maze seems to have been boarded up, just like those of the shops during the pandemic. While pointing to the threats of Othering all that is unfamiliar to us, the present paper aims to articulate the strength that resides in the rhetorical portrayal of Otherness by some of the most prominent UK-based writers and artists today, whose stories can move even the most biased of 'readers'. Literature and the arts, I believe, are our last glimmer of hope, and redemption can only be attained through truth and the ancient Greeks' ideal of beautiful goodness ('kalokagathia').

Keywords: storytelling, self-othering, contemporary art & literature, UK, identity crisis, intercultural sensitivity.

*I have no other half. There is no half for me to
complete anything.
There's no empty space here for the other half to fit into.
There is nothing to complete.
Noone scratches the door on the outside to get in.
I always sit on one half of a chair but not to make room
for another on the other half.
I sit on one half of a chair so I can sometimes run away from
that place easily.
And other times I sit on the other half myself. I say to myself.
Imagine you are another.*

(Svetlana Cârsteian) [1]

Introduction

For some good decades now, the cross-border flows of people, goods and ideas have been nourishing a culture of transformation, urging us to embrace diversity and develop intercultural sensitivity. However, we are also witnessing completely opposite manifestations and the prevailing rhetoric appears to promote division rather than unity. From cultural and religious fundamentalism to neo-nationalism and the continuing Western ethnocentrism, the age-old divides seem to be still residing in the mind, giving birth to new conflictual dimensions that feed into our understanding of identity and belonging.

Ever since antiquity, when man was deemed to be a ‘social animal’ by Aristotle or when the stranger in Plato’s *Sophist* debated the ontological problems of being and non-being, the topic of identity has been open to various interpretations, with personal identity at the core of it all. “Who am I?” is a question that has been haunting humanity to this day and, while searching for the ‘I’, we often find ourselves searching for ‘another’ who can validate us. Shaped within this ‘self’ / ‘other’ dialectic, as we open our eyes to another and have him/her as our first point of reference the moment we are born into this world, we embark on a lifetime self-quest: “Identity itself is neither a fixed formula, nor a presumed good, and the challenge of the search bears higher value than the spreading of certain convictions for one’s self and for others”. [2]

Such arduous interrogations are often transposed and passed down in a narrative form and, while stories grant our own survival - “To survive, you must tell stories” [3], they also bring the other to life: “By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are”. [4]

Methodological and theoretical framework

In the continuation of my study I will look at the power of storytelling in artists’ and writers’ attempts at portraying Otherness and the brutality of Othering, but not before providing a basic theoretical background to put things into perspective. Given the complexity of the subject, I adopted an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses philosophy, psycho-sociology, semiotics, art and literature, and my qualitative research is based on cultural fieldwork I carried out between 2013-2019, when I took on the role of Head of Literature, Architecture and the Arts at the Romanian Cultural Institute in London.

The anthropology of Otherness is rooted in the writings of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel [5], for whom ‘the Other’ plays an important part in our thorough understanding of the self. Since “No man is an island, / Entire of itself”, as Brit-

ish poet John Donne asserted more than five centuries ago, Hegel concluded that knowledge of the self cannot be attained through mere introspection but rather by living with and among other selves. After Hegel, more studies touching upon the notions of identity and alterity were taken up by reputable philosophers. To start with, Martin Buber's [6] 'in-betweenness' put relationships at the heart of human existence, Mikhail Bakhtin [7] spoke about identity's dialogic nature, with a focus on the mutual reflection and acceptance of those engaged in interaction, and Martin Heidegger [8] asserted that one's existence or 'Dasein' is the being together - 'Mitsein'. Along similar lines, it is worth mentioning Jean Paul Sartre [9], whose transphenomenality of Being points to the fact that the object of consciousness is always outside and transcendent, as well as Emmanuel Levinas [10] with his research devoted to 'the face of the Other', the undeniable reality of the other's infinity that obliges us and that cannot be reduced to an idea or entity we have control over.

More recently, with his phenomenological understanding of oneself as another, Paul Ricoeur indicated that "the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other" [11], while Julia Kristeva took this even further, stating that "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity: the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself". [12] Last but not least, acclaimed German philosopher Jürgen Habermas [13] pondered on the meaning of a 'good life' in one of his most revolutionary studies, tackling the meta-ethical matter of genetic engineering and arguing that individuals should be granted equal freedom to shape their own destinies, possibly even beyond their genetic programming.

But while the above theoretical foray can assist us in our later reflections, Otherness is not the exclusive realm of philosophy. In the 1870s, in one of his impassioned letters sent to publisher-friend Paul Demeny, 19th century French poet Arthur Rimbaud proclaimed *Je est un autre* ("I is another"), endorsing his complex persona and acknowledging the Otherness inherent in himself. In opposition to this self-owned dimension of Otherness, Simone de Beauvoir [14] introduced a new understanding of the term, remapping it to highlight one group's supremacy over another, in her defence of women ('the Others') from their male oppressors. Such default hegemonic identities and the power relations that underlie them have sadly multiplied throughout the years, leading - we could say - to the Othering of anything that doesn't reflect us and our beliefs.

Roughly seen as the process of distinguishing 'I' from 'You' or 'We' from

‘Them’, Othering does not rest on total difference but rather on the juxtaposition of difference and sameness, where too little sameness denies another’s belonging and leads to division. Coined by post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Othering is “a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes. It locates its ‘others’ [...] in the pursuit of that power within which its own subjectivity is established”. [15] By Othering another, we point out their perceived weaknesses to gain the upper hand, portraying ourselves as the superior ‘breed’. And what is important to highlight here is that, in positioning oneself above another, the very difference that divides is not that relevant; instead, what matters is the significance with which the dominant other invests this difference.

Since perceptions of our surroundings are shaped by memory and past experiences, any given object can be invested with as many meanings as the number of people contemplating it. In this, the danger of dichotomies is that “we set up this artificial system for the sake of our box logic and then let it slide into a practical way of looking at the world. This becomes the basis for all sorts of ‘us’ and ‘them’ discriminations – and also the impossibility of creating new perceptions that cut across this divide”. [16] So how do we look at the world through an objective, unstained lens? How can we defuse this tension between Sameness and Otherness when “seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer” [17] himself?

For quite a while, we lived with the hope that ‘the Others’ would gradually be demystified but, contrary to what was expected, the reality turned out to be completely different. Can we even dream of knowing what is distant when people in our immediate proximity have grown into complete strangers? Despite constant attempts to reduce Otherness to similarity, alterity cannot be overcome and, what is more, it should be addressed with utmost lucidity and the realization that our discourse can easily turn into a deadly weapon. “Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind” [18], therefore we should not allow language to box our worlds. Instead, we must dig deeper and come to understand that “we’re all just a bundle of habits shaped by our memories. And to the extent that we control our lives, we do so by gradually altering those habits, which is to say the networks of our memory”. [19] How much of our lives is owned by us remains to be debated, and the looming danger in all this is that rapid technological advancements will estrange us from ourselves and the ones around us even more.

It’s high time we grew out of our tribal clothes but, despite this dawning realization, we live in an age of minorities in which every global, national or regional

conflict is, as it turns out, fuelled by various dimensions of intergroup difference. Black, brown, African, Muslim, gay, feminist, poor, disabled, introverted, oversensitive, (un)vaccinated - these are just some of the labels that reduce complex individuals to a single identifier, be it ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, skin colour, disability, socioeconomic status, (non)compliance to health protocols, personality or otherwise. Through this social polarization, “the Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse”. [20] But what if the history we assimilate was not something abstract, what if we chose to hear the stories of the silenced and rewrite it? It seems that the past was not only erased but the erasure itself was entirely forgotten, as George Orwell prophetically noted in *1984*, and the rise of cancel culture today makes us wonder whether hate crimes are, sooner or later, going to come for us all.

Self-Othering in Contemporary Writings and Art

Given all of the above, any sort of encounter between people today seems trapped in a period of disruption and unpredictability, hence the need to be constantly alerted to the deep crevasses of thought opening up beneath our feet. While pondering the present and ruminating on the future in this volatile context, literature and the arts surface as the highest forms of hope in our quest for a better, vividly aware world. And, as a firm believer in the power of art and culture to transcend borders and shift mentalities, legitimised not only by a great passion for cultural exchange but also by the invaluable, hands-on experience of living and working in one of the world’s most diverse cities, I wish to advance the agenda of salvation through cultural immersion by touching upon the work of few foreign writers and artists who have made England their home.

“London is a Mother herself” is the message that pops up on my phone’s screen as I write this. “Whose mother?”, I ask my friend who has just returned to adoptive Britain after moving back to his homeland a year ago. “Everyone’s mother”, comes his reply. I pause for a moment while his words settle in and remember the many lessons in diversity and acceptance this city has taught me, many of which channelled through various forms of artistic expression and through meaningful encounters with their creators. Below, a selection curated for the occasion.

What all of these creators have in common and something I wish to emphasize here is the manner in which they ‘Other’ themselves to epitomize the spiritual path we should all be treading if we are to see and hear the walking wounded. Through their admirable work, they raise our consciousness and “bring us closer

to the ‘Other’. By becoming a highly visible ‘Other’, the dehumanizing effect of ‘Othering’ can be gradually reduced, revealing the people and personalities beneath the masks that have for so long cast minority groups as faceless entities”. [21]

RASHEED ARAEEN

Born and bred in Pakistan, Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935) trained in civil engineering before moving to London in the 1960s, soon becoming a pioneer of minimalist sculpture. An influential artist, writer and curator, Araeen’s work, which spans many different media, has often challenged Eurocentric views and championed social justice by focusing on the long-overdue recognition of minority artists on Britain’s art scene.

While many art organizations continue to be driven by obvious political agendas, Araeen’s own experience as an immigrant artist pervaded his whole existence: “My life in Britain has been my struggle against the establishment. It took many forms – within art, outside art, in writing, in performances, in writing letters to the prime minister”. [22] Of the many ambitious projects he developed throughout his lifetime, one in particular distinguishes itself to reinforce my arguments: *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, the 1989 exhibition at London’s Hayward Gallery. Vehemently criticized by some of the leading art critics at the time, the show - mapped out by Araeen years before its opening, was a landmark initiative through which stereotypes related to artists of Afro-Asian descent were dismantled. Following this ground-breaking project, ‘the Others’ regained their rightful place in art history, proving themselves worthy of attention in modern art circles and debates.

MONA HATOUM

Born in Beirut in 1952, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum was exiled to London at the outbreak of the civil war. Her multimedia practice, centred around powerful evocations of displacement and unrest, soon brought her to fame and paved the way for further explorations into the workings of Otherness. In one of her interviews, Hatoum outlined her artistic quest to make sense of the individual’s relationship with politics: “The concerns in my work are as much about the facts of my origins as they are a reflection on or an insight into the Western institutional and power structures I have found myself existing in”. [23]

Of all her works, one in particular caught my attention some years ago. Entitled *Grater Divide* and created in 2002, it is a large-scale cheese grater that takes on the guise of a room divider, a household item that is normally meant to offer privacy. Through the artist’s masterful interpretation of it, however, the

kitchen utensil becomes a screen for concealment and division, its razor-sharp surface imbuing it with a sense of menace.

AKRAM KHAN

Akram Hossain Khan by his full name (b. 1974) is an English dancer and choreographer of Bangladeshi descent, whose family migrated to London during the armed conflict preceding the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. He is widely recognized internationally for his deeply moving work, in which arresting stories speak about complex, disquieting topics such as home or the identity crisis facing contemporary man.

Xenos, one of his latest works that had its premiere in 2018, took its name from the Greek word meaning stranger or foreigner. Dedicated to the countless Indian soldiers that fought the British Empire's battles in World War I, it is a work of utmost relevance for our troubled times and the current political climate. In an interview for *Contra Journal*, Khan explained: "It is about being a foreigner: a foreigner in your own body, in your home, in the playground, a foreigner among your friends and within your own country, the world that you are in. I think we're all foreigners right now. [...] Displacement became a place where I felt placed, so home was in my body; home was not a place. I constantly felt I was in borrowed space, or that I was not welcome in the space". [24]

ELIF SHAFAK

Writer, political scientist and fervent activist, award-winning novelist Elif Shafak was born in Strasbourg in 1971, to Turkish parents. Brought up in Turkey, where she also spent many of her later years, she travelled the world and chose several other lands as her temporary home. After shorter or longer periods working and studying in Spain, Germany and America, Shafak was compelled to emigrate to the UK, since her writings stirred adverse reactions from the Turkish authorities. While being praised for her work's "vision, bravery and compassion" (*The New York Times Book Review*), her native country accused her of "insulting Turkishness" and she was threatened with imprisonment. This, however, did not deter her from speaking her truth.

As a keen admirer of both writer and thinker Shafak, I eagerly anticipated the release of her latest novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, this year. Hailed by critics as her best novel yet to be published, it is an exquisite book that delves deep into some of humanity's most pressing problems such as war, partition or ethnic violence. A love letter to Cyprus, an island divided between its Greek (Christian) majority and Turkish (Muslim) minority, it's a poignant story told

from afar and yet so intimate: it is narrated from the shores of another island (the UK), which became the author's second home.

In an online discussion with American author Siri Hustvedt, Shafak explained her original approach in writing this book: "How do you tell the story of a place that has experienced such violence and such a division without yourself falling into the trap of nationalism or tribalism as a storyteller? I could not find that angle, that opening into the book until I found the voice of the fig tree". [25] Dug up from their native soil and taken across the borders by immigrants in search of a better fate elsewhere, fig trees - or any other tress, for that matter - might be the best teachers in a world split apart by humans who think they own the absolute truth. Shafak's narrator attests to this in a beautiful rendering of his family's enduring communion: "Trees are never lonely. Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected". [26]

Drawing on her own experience as a cultured nomad and the likely instances in which she was the witness (or subject) of unjust acts of Othering, Shafak becomes the voice of universal Otherness. Hence, by relying on a neutral narrator to tell her story in *The Island of Missing Trees*, she subtly and powerfully impersonates herself as another, not only addressing the Turkish Cypriots or Greek Cypriots but the whole of humanity with its age-old divisions. Shafak aims at changing the view of the mainstreams to the minorities they are othering. She tends towards the conceptions of cosmopolitan and the global village. Shafak aims at changing the view of the mainstreams to the minorities they are othering. She tends towards the conceptions of cosmopolitan and the global village.

When intolerance lurks around every corner, we need to choose our storytellers wisely or else we risk their beheading. "In today's global information age, victory often depends not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins" [27], noted American analyst John Arquilla with great flair. I urge you, reader, to listen to these winning stories I have proposed here and pass them on.

Concluding remarks

While literature and the arts were widely seen by the Romantics as the 'new religion' that granted salvation, the narratives they oftentimes mediate today are powerful examples of activism on the counter-Othering front. Now, more than ever before, writers and artists play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of Otherness and, as closed viral borders keep us confined to our small worlds, their creative manifestos might be our last resorts in keeping an open mind to the harsh

realities surrounding us. Under the guise of entertainment, which is not just their default setting but also the new obsession of the masses, artistic (and literary) endeavours can tell the most brutal truths. They can tell beautifully what people do not want to hear, just like the main character in Leos Carax's latest film, *Annette*, proves it. When asked why he became a comedian, he replies without hesitation: "It's the only way to tell the truth without getting killed."

Scaling up to a macro level in this analysis of subtle persuasion and awareness-building in and through various cultural and artistic forms, 'soft power', a term coined by Joseph Nye in the 1980s, best serves the purpose of the present study. Widely associated with cultural diplomacy, soft power has shown us that smaller states in particular "would never be able to use coercion to affect the behaviour of others" without employing it, thus having "the opportunity to attract other actors to emulate their position and inspire them to take collective action". [28] When voiced within the borders of a domineering Other, identity and alterity are permanently (de) and (re) constructed and, in so doing, narrators infuse both personal and collective significance into the past, projecting real and imaginary life worlds. In other words, "Subject to challenge both from without (i.e. others) and from within (i.e. multiple, conflicting selves), these worlds are not fully coherent and are ever evolving. Whenever narrators launch a story, they open themselves to reconstrual. For better and for worse, everyday narrative practices confront interlocutors with unanticipated emotions and ideas and ultimately with unanticipated selves". [29] However, this is not to say that an accurate knowledge of the world eludes us due to such (apparently) subjective representations. After all, we must constantly stay alert and fine-tune our perception according to the complexity of the matters we wish to fully grasp.

In a beautiful talk on the truth(fullness) of art and its meaning today, Sir Roger Scruton noted: "In the face of sorrow, imperfection and the fleetingness of our affections and joys, we ask ourselves 'Why?' We need reassurance, we look to art for the proof that life in this world is meaningful and that suffering is not the pointless thing that it so often appears to be but the necessary part of a larger and redeeming whole". [30] Born out of love and laying bare the authentic soul, some of the most beautiful writings and artworks of all times have emerged as a response to acts of extreme cruelty and unfairness, shining "a light in the totalitarian darkness", in Scruton's own words. By entrusting ourselves to the workings of the creative mind, we could gain a broader understanding and appreciation of all that was once unapproachable or misunderstood. It is, most probably, the safest bet if we wish to ever get beyond our epistemological tribes and embrace the world. For indeed, "by art alone we are able to get outside ourselves, to know

what another sees of this universe which for him is not ours, the landscapes of which would remain as unknown to us as those of the moon". [31]

More than any other human endeavour today, art and literature can assist us in the mapping of countries yet to come, to paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari [32], of more compassionate and resilient countries and territories whose past will be remembered so the unborn future can be healed. Therefore, this paper has argued that no matter how incredibly difficult or impossible it might be to undo the wrongdoings of imperialist others or to alter one's preordained circumstances, muffled life histories can be successfully (re)claimed by the world's top creatives whose work is striking and influential enough for inclusion in the larger canon. Also, as long as the utter lack of intercultural sensitivity continues to be a global problem and new forms of exploitation are fuelled by international inequalities, we need more and more success stories to dismantle ingrained forms of discrimination and pervade the mainstream rhetoric of Otherness in favour of Sameness.

**As we found ourselves humming Pink Floyd's 'Time' while writing this paper, you might wish to do the same and turn up the volume.*

References and notes

- [1] One of Romania's strongest poetic voices, Svetlana Cârstea (b. 1969) is also an acclaimed journalist, translator and cultural manager. These lines that serve as our motto are part of her latest volume of poetry, *Sînt alta (I Am Another)*, published in spring 2021 and received to wide acclaim by readers and critics alike. Translated by the author of the present paper, the above fragment was presented at this year's "Romania Rocks" Romanian-British Literature Festival in London, as part of a poetry event Gabriela Mocan curated and hosted for the Romanian Cultural Institute. Alongside few other selections from the book, the fragment made its way to English-speaking audiences and readers for the very first time. In the poet's own words, these words (found at page 33 in the original volume) "speak about limits and, despite all appearances, about a feeling of being complete in your own incompleteness. And they're also about always having the Other inside and not outside yourself." For more information on the UK event please visit: <http://www.icr-london.co.uk/article/feast-of-words-romanian-women-poets.html>. Retrieved on 06.01.2022.
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