



Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation

'EJLT'

Peer-reviewed Journal
Sohag University Publishing Center

ISSN: 2314-6699

<https://ejlt.journals.ekb.eg/>

Volume 13
Issue 1
July 2024

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**Egyptian Journal of Linguistics and Translation****'EJLT'**

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Volume 13, Issue 1

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The Hybrid *Flâneur* in Teju Cole's *Open City*: A Bhabhian Reading

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Abstract

In Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Julius, the half-Nigerian, half-German psychiatrist is struck by solitude. In his attempt to alleviate that solitude, he takes to *flânerie*, an old tradition which was practised by bourgeois Parisian men in the nineteenth century and which has come to acquire new meanings over time. While traditionally *flânerie* meant leisurely strolling the streets and boulevards of Paris, hence allowing the stroller to engage with the urban space as a voyeur, it has come to encompass the predicaments of the modern and postmodern idler as well. Julius takes to aimless wandering in the city of New York and later extends his *flânerie* to Brussels. Through his aimless wandering, he constantly meets hybrid characters who, like himself, inhabit liminal spaces. New York, becomes the "Open City" of the title, where new meanings are formulated without any final conclusions, and where concepts related to interstitiality and liminality are constantly activated. The following paper aims to examine *flânerie* in Teju Cole's *Open City* from a Bhabhian perspective through applying Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, the third space, mimicry and ambivalence to a novel which takes place first and foremost in intermediary spaces.

Keywords: hybridity, third space, mimicry, ambivalence, Bhabha



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المتسكع ذو الأصول المختلطة (الهجينة) في رواية «المدينة المفتوحة» لتجو كول: قراءة من منظور هومي بابا

مستخلص الدراسة

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في رواية «المدينة المفتوحة» لتجو كول، نجد جوليس، وهو طبيب نفسي ذات أصول نيجيرية وألمانية مختلطة، وقد أصابته حالة من العزلة، وفي محاولته للفكك من برائن تلك العزلة، يبدأ بالتسكع في المدينة. والتسكع تقليد قديم مارسه رجال الطبقة البرجوازية في مدينة باريس في القرن التاسع عشر ولكنه أكتسب معان جديدة على مر الأيام. فبينما كان يُقصد به أن التجول في شوارع مدينة باريس يتيح الفرصة للمتسكع البرجوازي أن يهيم بشوارع المدينة كمتابع متلصص، إلا أن مصطلح التسكع أصبح أكثر شمولاً إذ امتد ليشمل مأزق الإنسان الحداثي وما بعد الحداثي. يبدأ جوليس في التجول بلا هدف في شوارع مدينة نيويورك ثم في شوارع مدينة براسلز بعد ذلك. وفي خلال تجواله الهادف للا شيء يقابل شخصيات ذات أصول مختلطة (أو هجينة) تعيش في أمكنة بيئية. تصبح مدينة نيويورك هي "المدينة المفتوحة" التي يشير إليها عنوان الرواية، فمن خلالها يتم صياغة معان جديدة دون الوصول لاستنتاجات قطعية ويتم أيضا تفعيل المفاهيم البيئية. يهدف هذا البحث لدراسة مفهوم التسكع في رواية «المدينة المفتوحة» لتجو كول من خلال تطبيق مفاهيم هومي بابا النقدية الخاصة بالهجانة، والفضاء الثالث والمحاكاة والتناقض على هذه الرواية التي تدور أحداثها بالأساس في فضاءات بيئية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الهجانة، الفضاء الثالث، المحاكاة، التناقض، هومي بابا

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The Hybrid *Flâneur* in Teju Cole's *Open City*: A Bhabhian Reading

***Flânerie* as a Tradition**

Traditionally, *flânerie* was associated with nineteenth-century Paris, where the bourgeois flâneur (stroller in French) would leisurely stroll the streets and boulevards of the city as a voyeur of that metropolitan space. He is often depicted as both a “leisurely but vigilant urban stroller” and “a self-contained but all-seeing city-dweller” (Wrigley, 2014, p.1). In other words, he is both engaged and disengaged at his own will. He has the time and luxury to interact with the people, but can take his leave when he pleases. The flâneur can restrict himself to reflecting on the aesthetics of geography and urbanity, but can also engage with the people who inhabit that space. Baudelaire's poet, for one, “is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning” (Tester, 2015, p.2). Through observing the crowds and the public spaces, he is able to relieve himself and formulate existential meanings, and aesthetic concepts of the city.

The term, however, has extended over time to incorporate different forms of flâneire, one of which is psychogeography where spaces are able to “envelop us in feelings, direct our movements, change our opinions and our decisions, and maybe even sometimes lead us to sublime, religious experiences” (Bellevue, 2015, p.218). Psychogeography demonstrates how the stroller is able to achieve psychological equilibrium and cathartic release through roaming the city. The influence of the geographical spaces on the stroller's psyche becomes compelling and overwhelming so much so that it brings about psychological relief.

Flânerie for Michel de Certeau “inserts its multitudinous references and citations” into the spaces the flâneur sets foot in, and it also “creates shadows and ambiguities within them” (de Certeau, 1988, p.101). As per de Certeau, the flâneur recreates the entrails and contours of the city as he roams it. He becomes an active voyeur whose gaze inscribes meaning into the

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city. While reflecting on its activities, he comes up with unique interpretations that capture nuances and fine details. His perceptive eyes add layers of meaning and a new angle for analysis.

Flânerie in *Open City*

In *Open City* (2011), Julius, the hero, takes to roaming the city, a routine which he undertakes to counter his busy life at the hospital, and alleviate his feelings of isolation. He starts out with a psychogeographical aim: that of overcoming his solitude through roaming urban spaces and analysing his condition through engaging with the crowds. For him, these interactions are stressless since he interacts with the crowds at his own will, and takes leave when he pleases. Symbiosis with the city becomes his road to healing his ailed self. His flânerie, however, does not stop at that. In fact, like de Certeau's flâneur, Julius reflects on history, geography, politics, culture and memory as he walks the streets of New York and Brussels. He, at once, becomes a thinker, a meditator who interprets whatever he observes from his own perspective. He writes the city through his own gaze. Julius is not a white Parisian bourgeois idler, he is a Nigerian-American with German roots. In his case, "black flânerie" becomes a "form of negotiating and performing the homelessness, dislocation, alienation, and objectification of the Black subject" (Mózes, 2021, p.35). It is in this context that the paper will examine the hero's flânerie from a Bhabhian perspective, exploring how his hybrid identity yields different meanings to his roaming and sets him in third spaces.

Homi Bhabha's Theory: An Overview

Hybridity is central to Bhabha's theory. Instead of embracing the superior/inferior binary and perceiving the two sides of the dyad as separate entities, Bhabha introduces the idea of cultural hybridity. He is against the idea of a pure essentialist cultural identity where, on the one hand, the colonizer is depicted as superior and progressive while on the other hand, the colonized is depicted as inferior and backward. Far from regarding identities as fixed,

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uncontaminated essences defined by a coherent set of essentialist features, Bhabha regards them as dynamic and fluid since they are continuously formulated and reformulated. He regards culture not as a fixed medium, but as a dynamic one where exchanges and negotiations (rather than negations) constantly take place. Unlike Said who worked from the Orient versus the Occident premise, Bhabha tries to move his theory “beyond the debate between discourse and counter-discourse” (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.7). The reason being that Bhabha works from within the postmodernist paradigm to describe the postcolonial condition, hence “re-constellat[ing] it out of its simplistic binary, oppositional logic, into a postmodern one of ambivalence, hybridity and heterogeneity” (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.12). Interestingly, his work is not just about the location of the intellectual within the postcolonial paradigm, but also includes the common man (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.7).

Speaking of the Algerian people “in the moment of liberatory struggle” (Bhabha, 1994, p.38), Bhabha finds that they are

free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference. The native intellectual who identifies the people with the true national culture will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of “dialectical reorganization” and they construct their culture from the national text translated into modern Western forms of information technology, language, and dress. (1994, p.38)

As per Bhabha’s words, even at the very moment of liberation when nationalist feelings were running high, the Algerian cultural identity was not isolated or disconnected from the cultural currents surrounding it. Exposed to a dynamic culture, it was free to shape and reshape itself. Against the notion of a distinct essentialist identity that typically fuels middle-class nationalism, Bhabha believes that even at times of liberation, identities are likely to partake of one another, the reason being that they inhabit a third space:

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It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha, 1994, p.37)

The third space is not just spatial in nature, but is also a temporal domain, where cultural meanings are continuously synthesized, hence formulating a state of in-betweenness: in *Our Neighbours, Ourselves*, Bhabha states that “[t]he realm of the paradoxical, [...] belongs neither to the one nor the Other. It is an interstitial realm of the in-between—a space and time of “thirdness”” (Bhabha, 2011, p.6). As per his words, the third space neither belongs to the colonizer, nor to the colonized, and it is neither spatial, nor temporal, but a mixture of both, hence resulting in a third zone. Its “thirdness” can be attributed to the fact that it can neither fit into the first zone (that of the colonizer) nor the second zone (that of the colonized). The third space becomes “an interstitial moment produced through the negotiation of contradiction and ambivalence” (Bhabha, 2011, p.6).

Mimicry is yet another important aspect of Bhabha's postcolonial theory. It is the colonizer that instigates this mimicry in an attempt to create civilized new subjects, while knowing that the colonized will never really be totally white. The colonized subject tends, wittingly or unwittingly, to adopt, or rather adapt, the colonizer's culture (language, habits, costumes, values, etc.) but never really becomes an exact replica of the colonizer. The reason being that mimicry, according to Bhabha, is characterized by “excess”, “slippage” and “ambivalence” so that the outcome is “almost the same, but not quite” (*Of Mimicry and Man*, 1984, p.127). Bhabha finds that despite attempting to emulate the colonizer, the colonized, in the eyes of the colonizer, will never be regarded as fully British, French, etc. Mimicry as such is not slavish imitation” rather it is “repetition with difference” (Huddart, 2006. p.39), and it is here that the outcome turns into mockery rather than mimicry. The reason being that the

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imitator's performance copies the superior party in a comic and exaggerated manner, which makes it qualify as mockery rather than just plain imitation. At this point, mimicry emerges as both "resemblance and menace" (*Of Mimicry and Man*, 1984, p.127). The threat arises from the fact that the new emerging identity of the comically exaggerated colonized subjects subverts the superiority of the colonizer and undermines it. Far from "the epic intention of the civilizing mission" (*Of mimicry*, 1984, p.126), colonialism "exercises its authority through the figures of farce" (*Of mimicry*, 1984, p.126). In fact, it is this comic edge of mimicry that subverts the colonial discourse which "is serious and solemn, with pretensions to educate and improve" (Huddart, 2006, p.39).

Lagos and Zaria as Third Spaces

Exploring his hybrid identity, Julius, the hero of *Open City*, finds that it all started with his name:

The name Julius linked me to another place and was, with my passport and skin color, one of the intensifiers of my sense of being different, of being set apart, in Nigeria. I had a Yoruba middle name, Olatubosun, which I never used. That name surprised me each time I saw it on my passport or birth certificate, like something that belonged to someone else but had been long held in my keeping. (Cole, 2011, p.78)

His name, along with his skin colour, made Julius feel that he was different no matter how hard he tried to belong to Nigeria. They were the very same reason that made him feel disconnected in New York to which he travelled to study after finishing high school in Nigeria. Born in the States, his status in Nigeria was ambivalent. At high school, Musibau, a warrant officer at the Nigerian military school in Zaria regarded him as "half-Nigerian, a foreigner, and what he saw was swimming classes, summer trips to London, domestic staff; and thus, his anger" (Cole, 2011, p.83). That is why he punished him severely for a trivial reason. Musibau's anger was

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ignited by the fact that Julius seemed more of a privileged foreigner than a regular Nigerian boy.

Though Lagos and Zaria figure briefly in the novel, they emerge as third spaces, places where the protagonist grew up but which he was destined to leave for they no longer felt home for him; instead they became places which evoked his anxiety and exilic feelings alike. Interestingly, Cole's novella *Every Day is for the Thief*, which preceded *Open City*, is set in Lagos and "portrays post-independence Nigeria as a failed state bedevilled by socio-economic paralysis where the ruling bourgeoisie has distorted a sense of place and belonging in the masses leading to pervasive feelings of nostalgia and alienation" (Macheso, 2015, p.2). It is in this post-colonial context that the protagonist's homeland no longer becomes home and causes him to feel disconnected and alienated. Similarly, after finishing high school, Julius decides to leave Nigeria as he is unable to adapt and decides to pursue his studies in New York. Sadly, he encounters solitude in that new terrain and attempts to overcome it by loitering along the streets of that new metropolis.

New York as a Third Space

The first line sets the main theme of the novel, that of endless and aimless wandering: "And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city" (Cole, 2011, p.3). In fact, the novel does not have a plot, in the classical sense of the word, where there is a beginning, middle and end. Alternatively, it only follows the hero's roaming, a routine which he undertakes to counter his busy life at the hospital, alleviate his solitude and ease his pent-up sadness, for despite being a psychiatrist, he himself suffers from a psychological ailment for which he seeks cure. These walks have no destination, as he never has a plan in mind, hence their arbitrary nature. Though they are meant to be therapeutic, they take him to unknown destinations and bring about unexpected results. As such, the text can be regarded as a "psychogramme, a record of Julius'

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fluctuating mental states, which are in turn intimately linked to the different parts of the metropolis he traverses” (Stein, 2017, p.145).

In addition to their psychogeographical nature, these quotidian walks become the hero's way of reading the city and inscribing meaning into it from his own point of view. Whatever comes across his way becomes an object of reflection: the buildings, cafes, stores, streets, architecture, crowds, music and songs. These regular walks become more of meditative rather than physical exercises, they become “a journey through a familiar city from a renewed perspective” (Faradji, 2022, p.2).

Interestingly, his *flânerie* was preceded by watching bird migrations leading him to think that the two routines were interconnected (Cole, 2011, p.3-4), for those celestial migrations acted as a trigger or perhaps inspiration for his ventures into the metropolis of New York, a city that is full of different shades and colours, a cosmopolitan terrain, where “each neighbourhood of the (Cole, 2011, p.6) city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a different psychic weight” (Cole, 2011, p.7).

He decides to pay a visit to Professor Saito, an old teacher of his, who is now eighty-nine years old. When he first met him at college where he taught early English Literature, Professor Saito was seventy-seven. At this old age, Saito was now occupying a liminal space too for “he looked like someone who had gone deep into the second infancy” (Cole, 2011, p.11). Hovering between old age and infancy, he belonged to neither, and came to reside in a third space, an interstitial zone, with a hybrid existence. His eyes were weak, but his hearing, like his mind remained sharp, he was “swaddled in blankets” (Cole, 2011, pg.11), and connected to a urine-collecting plastic bag, hence unable to leave his home much.

Even Professor Saito, the American professor, is shown to inhabit a third place. Thus, he shares this space with other characters in the novel who inhabit a liminal zone for racial reasons. Later, as Julius is strolling the streets, he meets a man who looks “Mexican or Central

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American” (Cole, 2011, p.15), and who has just finished a race. He congratulates him, but feels pity for him, for after such a long race, “there were no friends or family present to celebrate his achievement” (Cole, 2011, p.15). Their solitude seemed to connect them, even if momentarily, but more importantly, it is their racial make-up and the intermediary zone which they occupy that create this solitude.

To kill some time, Julius enters a bookshop and it is there that he remembers that he wanted to purchase a book written by one of his patients, whom he refers to as V. She is an assistant professor at New York University and a member of the Delaware tribe, who suffers from depression due to her research work on Cornelis Van Tienhoven, a notorious seventeenth-century official known for his excessive brutality against the native Americans in New Amsterdam. Her book *The Monster of New Amsterdam* detailed the horrors that the natives had to suffer at the hands of that “monster” as per the title of the book. It became clear to him that her depression was due to “the emotional toll of these studies” (Cole, 2011, p.26) so much so that she became completely displaced: “she couldn’t be sure whether that activity on the opposite bank had anything to do with her, or whether, in fact, there was any activity at all” (Cole, 2011, p.26-27). The weight of her native American heritage and the opposite bank to which she constantly looked at dislocated her, hence thrusting her, like Julius, into a third space.

In the course of the novel, he attends a poetry night, where the Polish poet’s “English was fluent, but the thick accent, and the elongated vowels and thickly rolled *r*’s, gave it a halting quality, as though he were translating each line in his mind before speaking” (Cole, 2011, p.43). He later meets a Haitian bootblack and detects “the faint trace of a Caribbean French accent in his clear, quiet baritone” (Cole, 2011, p.71). Though they are mostly fluent, the English language for these characters falls under mimicry. They are not native speakers of the language and their accent directly gives them away. No matter how hard they try, they will never pass for Americans and their use of the English language turns into mimicry which verges on

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mockery. This escalates in the subway scene, where a thirteen-year-old girl and her ten-year-old brother start making signs with their fingers and laughing at Julius. The girl's brother who was wearing a Chinese peasant's hat was already:

mimicking slanted eyes and exaggerated bows (Cole, 2011, p.31). The girl asked Julius if he was a gangster: "He's black, said the girl, but he's not dressed like a gangster. I bet he's a gangster, her brother said. I bet he is. Hey mister, are you a gangster? They continued flicking their fingers at me for several minutes. Twenty yards away, their parents talked with each other, oblivious. (2011, p.32)

The children were mimicking/mockng the Chinese, and interchangeably mimicked/mockng Julius, accusing him of being a gangster on account of his skin colour. Julius, the African-American psychiatrist who is fluent in English, mimics the colonizer and is ironically mimicked and mocked by those children, while their parents turn a blind eye, wittingly or unwittingly, to their children's behaviour. In his attempt to assimilate, he is confronted with "prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes" which remain "barriers to assimilation" (Abd El Salam, 2023, p.200). As per Bhabha's theory, hard as they try, the colonized subjects will never fully resemble the white colonizer. Their new hybridized identities will never be the same as that of the colonizer, so much so that their adoption of the latter's ways will only remain mimicry to be mocked at any juncture. Cole here shows how mimicry is mocked by the colonizer to highlight its slippery, ambivalent and perhaps also its precarious nature.

In the same vein, Julius takes to mimicking *flânerie* itself, a tradition which was initially practised by the white Parisian, bourgeois male and which is now being reclaimed by Julius, a hybrid hero. In mimicking this tradition, he adds new meanings to it, so much so that the traditional concept is mockingly appropriated. It loses some of its original meanings and connotations and acquires new ones, thus becoming ambivalent and verging on mockery. Whereas it originally concerned the idle Parisian *flâneur* who roamed about to pass the time

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and dapple with the affairs of the crowds every now and then, Julius takes to flânerie for therapeutic reasons to ease his solitude.

Amid all of those crowds, Julius realizes that he needs to find some sort of solid footing, and to cling to a certain story: “Generations rushed through the eye of the needle, and I, one of the still legible crowd, entered the subway. I wanted to find the line that connected me to my own part in these stories” (Cole, 2011, p.59). It is this sense of loss that causes him to wander. Wandering resonates with his sense of displacement and lack of direction. In Zaria and Lagos, he does not belong and in New York, he feels alienated and displaced. Seen as a “foreign wanderer, [he is] betwixt and between belonging and displacement” (Haaland, 2007, p.155). He, thus, inhabits a third space, an ambivalent liminal zone that is characteristically tumultuous. Like de Certeau’s flâneur, he attempts to read the city and find his own story within its streets and people. His contemplation is related to his desire to come to terms with his identity and interpret its essence in a new terrain. His identity, however, cannot be pinned down to one narrow translation and the terrain he roams is slippery and elusive, for it is a “third space”.

Brussels as a Third Space

Julius decides to spend his three-week vacation in Brussels to extend his flânerie to a new terrain. There he finds a cosmopolitan city: “this was the European reality now, in which borders were flexible” (Cole, 2011, p.98). In a telephone shop, the ongoing calls in the booths to Colombia, Egypt, Senegal, Brazil, France and Germany confirmed the cosmopolitan nature of the city. In this shop, he is introduced to the Moroccan Farouq who works at the counter. Farouq turns out to be a well-read man with strong views on literature, history and philosophy, and who speaks French, Arabic, English and has a working knowledge of Spanish. He was studying to be a translator between Arabic, English and French. Interestingly, Farouq strongly believed that people could coexist despite their differences. The telephone shop came to embody his idea and resemble it in microcosm. He said to Julius: “It happens here, on this

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small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale” (Cole, 2011, p.113). What Farouq had in mind was accepting difference as such for its own value and not in any Orientalist way. In this vein, he found that from a European perspective: “Difference as Orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no” (Cole, 2011, p.104). Fully accepting the other, and regarding them as worthy in their own right rather than appropriating them from an Orientalist perspective is what Farouq had in mind; it is only “[w]hen difference is accentuated and expressed” that “discriminatory practices and conflicts are challenged and mutual tolerance is encouraged” since trying to smother differences is “impractical and illiberal” (Ahmed, 2023, p.33).

Violence in the Third Space

The “open city” of the title, be it New York, Brussels or even Zaria or Lagos, becomes a place where new meanings are negotiated, it becomes a metaphor for any metropolis that is constantly revisited by hybrid beings and mixed identities. Far from attaining peace of mind, the hybrid characters who inhabit third spaces experience confusion, restlessness and ambivalence. The reason why Julius started those walks in the first place was to “assuage [his] feelings of isolation” (Cole, 2011, p.6). Everywhere he went, he was being hunted down by that feeling: “Above ground I was with thousands of others in their solitude, but in the subway, standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us reenacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified” (Cole, 2011, p.7).

Even in the presence of others, Julius’s solitude escalates, in fact it becomes more of a collective feeling for it is shared by all the passengers who are described as suffering from “unacknowledged traumas”, traumas that are hushed up and silenced, but still linger in those liminal spaces where their weight can be easily sensed. In Brussels, he had the same feeling: “my sense of being entirely alone in the city intensified (Cole, 2011, p.108). His flânerie seems unable to rid him of the sickness he carries around, instead it seems to augment it, and the

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“streets animate [his] mental life, forcing him into a state of chronic anxiety” (Gamso, 2019, p.61).

The Third space is not only a place where feelings of solitude and loneliness are intensified, but it is also a place where anxiety, violence and ambivalence lurk. In fact, violence becomes one of the features of this third space through which Julius roams. In the novel, it comes to take different shapes and forms ranging from bullying to beating and rape. Bullying, for example, can be easily detected in the subway scene where the girl and her brother mimicked Julius's gestures on account of his blackness.

Violence does not subside, in fact it keeps escalating. In one episode, Julius gets badly injured after being brutally beaten-up by three black boys, who had acknowledged him earlier with a glance “a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being “brothers” (Cole, 2011, p.212). Their blows and kicks were interspersed with laughter and profanities, and they left him devastated on the ground after taking his wallet and phone, and disappeared into Harlem. During another walk, he is confronted with a burial ground that has been covered by offices, shops and streets: “Into this earth had been interred the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves, but then the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground” (Cole, 2011, p.220). The brutality of slavery has been interred and silenced as it were, but it keeps surfacing and erupting. It can be detected in the bullying seen in the underground, it can be detected in the eruptions of violence among blacks themselves, and it can be detected in another scene where Moji blames Julius for raping her many years ago when they were in their teenage years. On that night, they were both drunk, and the incident has remained with her “like a stain or a scar” (Cole, 2011, p.244). She also blamed him for pretending throughout those years that nothing has happened. The abruptness of this violent memory takes the reader by surprise. Moji speaks about the pain, and bitterness she had to live

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with throughout those years, but Julius is silent and does not respond to her; he neither denies nor confirms her accusation. The ambivalence of this episode resonates with the ambivalence of Bhabha's third space.

Thus, the third space does not turn out to be a peaceful liminal zone, but rather one of confusion, turbulence, anxiety, loss and imminent violence. Despite the seemingly calm mood of those walks, violence lurks beneath the surface and lashes out unexpectedly. Violence is no longer one-sided, instigated by the white man against the blacks, but erupts among the blacks themselves who have been constantly exposed to discrimination, and who bear the brunt of a long history of colonialism, hence their hybrid identities.

Cole and Bhabha as Hybrid Characters in Third Spaces

According to Bhabha, diasporic writers carry within themselves the historical and political contingencies of their age. They are hybrid characters who have come to inhabit third spaces. Those third spaces become places of constant negotiation "in the emergence of the interstices, the overlap and displacement of domains of difference (Satchidanandan, 2002, p.52)". Bhabha the Indian intellectual who has migrated to the West for better education and work opportunities, and Teju Cole the Nigerian-born writer emerge as hybrid identities roaming third spaces. What they are left with is just constant negotiation, dialogue and debate, an interstitial position, where there are no resolutions. Their liminal positions always yield new possibilities, but are also likely to produce anxiety and solitude.

Homi Bhabha is a living example of both hybridity and mimicry. Born in 1949 in Bombay, India, where he graduated in the University of Bombay, he was to pursue his post-graduate studies at Oxford, and was to eventually settle in the United States where he became Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. Learning the language of the colonizer and eventually moving to the land of the colonizer does not mean that he snugly fits into that

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culture; he is set apart by his skin colour, name and accent, and thus inhabits a third space, an in-between zone, where he constantly negotiates meanings and where he always mimics.

Like Bhabha, Teju Cole inhabits an interstitial zone. Born in 1975 in Michigan to Nigerian immigrant parents, he was raised up in Nigeria by his mother, while his father continued his studies at Western Michigan University (WMU). He was to stay in Nigeria until he completed high school, then he was to pursue his studies in the United States. He received a master's degree in art history in England and was to return once more to the United States to obtain another master's degree from Columbia University. Cole "was both, a migrant (with an American passport), and a returning expat (who had spent almost no time in the US) – thereby inhabiting two mutually exclusive, porous categories" (Stein, 2017, p.144-5). He is an amalgam, a mixture of both cultures. Like Bhabha, despite speaking English fluently and acquiring several degrees from renowned Western Universities, Cole's skin colour, name, and accent set him apart from the white man. Thus, like Bhabha he is a hybrid identity living in a liminal space. In fact, Julius, the hero of the novel, shares a great deal with Cole, hence making the novel verge on being semi-autobiographical. Within this framework, Homi Bhabha and Teju Cole are hybrid writers who inhabit third spaces: "Once the reader removes this mask, he discovers the face of the Third-World intellectual lurking behind it. He also mimics; he also uses the English language; he has also chosen the First World location" (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.13), and in this case mimicry becomes the intellectual's "strategy of protest, of consolidating his position, of trying to negotiate possibilities of a dialogue or debate?" (Chakrabarti, 2021, p.13).

In the course of the novel, when asked by Julius about Taher Ben Jelloun, the Moroccan writer, Farouq, the Moroccan intellectual who works in a telephone shop, says that he prefers Mohamed Choukri. According to Farouq, Ben Jelloun produced his corpus in French, the language of the colonizer and lived in France (in exile) and hence acquired a kind of "poeticity"

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(Cole, 2011, p.104), while Choukri wrote in Classical Arabic and “never left the street” (Cole, 2011, p.104). The difference between the two writers can be read in light of Bhabha’s theory. Farouq insinuated that Jelloun “pandered to Western publishers” and hence “the social function of his fiction was suspect” (Cole, 2011, p.103). According to Farouq, Western publishers are only interested in publishing the works of writers who are “into oriental fantasy”, and countries like Morocco and India exist to serve this oriental fantasy in the Western imaginary (Cole, 2011, p.104).

According to Farouq, writers who produce their corpus in a foreign tongue and choose to reside in the West aim at winning the favour of Western publishers. By contrast, Bhabha regards them as living examples of mixed identities. The fact that they live in the West only means that they live in third spaces that are neither totally Western nor Eastern. Those realms become an arena where negotiations and recreations constantly take place. In those liminal spaces, discursive formulations and cultural meanings are not fixed. They are constantly reshaped, hence yielding new definitions which remain in flux. Liminal spaces belong neither to the colonizer nor to the colonized; they remain interstitial zones of in-betweenness, contradiction, heterogeneity and ambivalence.

Interestingly, in the course of the novel, Gustav Mahler the Jewish-Austrian composer who travelled to New York, like Julius, becomes a “double for Julius’s open-bordered cosmopolitanism” (Epstein, 2019, p.413). In fact, their fates seem to be intertwined in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Julius enters the records store, where Mahler’s symphony is playing. He is entranced by it and sinks “into reverie” (Cole, 2011, p.17), and towards the very end of the novel, he ponders Mahler’s fate, “the darkneses that surrounded him, the various reminders of frailty and mortality” (Cole, 2011, p.250). Mahler’s path is fused with that of Julius throughout the course of the novel; both of them fit into Bhabha’s definition of hybridity: Mahler, like Julius, is a Jewish-Austrian, who carries the burden of his mixed

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identity. Nothing better than his music testifies to his in-betweenness for it is an infusion of Jewish melodies into European music. His attempt to grapple with cosmopolitanism becomes a mirror of Julius's endeavours throughout the novel. It is no wonder that both were flâneurs, for Mahler, like Julius, "sought solace" in long walks (Epstein, 2019, p.412).

Conclusion

In Bhabhian terms, Julius the half-Nigerian, half-German immigrant occupies an in-between space, a liminal zone that is difficult to pin down, a realm that is characterized by heterogeneity and ambivalence. Julius's restlessness and his pent-up solitude are manifestations of the tumultuous nature of the third space he is destined to occupy due to his mixed race. He seeks solace in those long walks only to fall into the trap of mimicry; in attempting to mimic the Parisian flâneur, Julius mocks the tradition of flâneire for it is not undertaken as a pastime activity with occasional engagement with the crowds, but is clearly undertaken for therapeutic reasons. Loitering along the streets of New York, and Brussels become Julius's means of reflecting on his condition and of reading himself through the city, while simultaneously inscribing new meanings into his interpretation of the metropolis. His reflections provide new insights about the third space where he is destined to reside. These insights, however, are rooted in his hybridity and fully coloured by its racial manifestations. Ironically, the streets seem to intensify his solitude, but what is worse is that the course of the novel is interrupted by sporadic eruptions of violence, hence demonstrating that the seeming quiescence of these walks conceals a great deal of unrest underneath. As such, the third space does not simply designate a spatial domain, but is more of a temporal domain infused with psychological anxiety.

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