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Authenticity versus Diversity in *The Rock*

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The Rock is a collection of poems by a most distinguished Saudi scholar of English literature, professor Ezzat Khattab, of King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. It is a specimen of what is known as "World Literature in English" as it differs from the corpus of Anglocentric writings of "English Literature." World Literature in English first ignites in Commonwealth countries writing in English, striving to meet Anglocentric standards of literary excellence for the purpose of attaining canonical recognition (Slemon 105). Among the Commonwealth countries that managed to establish themselves in this context are Canada, Australia and New Zealand. American and South African literary outputs were quick to take license and join in.

World literature in English remains, nevertheless, a permanent source of challenge to English literature. This is not to say that the literatures of the previous countries are directly challenging Anglocentric canonical standards. Rather they seem to fall into their traps, making themselves accomplices in the Anglocentric project. The challenge that dares question an established tradition of literary excellence comes from postcolonial literary theory and criticism. Postcolonialism is a cultural awakening to the suffering of subverted peoples and groups all over the world. In the fields of literary theory and criticism, it encourages the production and discussion of writings of resistance to imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and elitism, highlighting in the meanwhile the political implications of such writings. John Docker asserts that the "challenge of post-colonial literature is that by exposing and attacking anglocentric assumptions directly, it can replace 'English literature' with 'world literature in English'" (445). Significantly, even commonwealth critics begin to realize that "respectability" has "been won at the cost of an almost total [. . .] subservience to a set of critical standards established at the literary centers of Britain and, to some extent, the United States" (Brahms 68).

Indeed, the theory tackles the Anglocentric literary project at its political roots. It exposes how England and other first world countries (including western Europe and the USA), wishing to dominate and control their third and fourth world colonies, have implemented educational policies suitable for the purpose. "The Natives must either be kept down by a sense of our power, or they must willingly submit from a conviction that we are more wise" (qtd. in Viswanathan 436). "Education [thus] becomes a technology of colonialist subjectification" (Ashcroft 426). Teaching the language of the colonizer to the colonial subject has initiated all projects, as an African critic says: "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation" and language "of the spiritual subjugation," (Nugugi Wa Thiong'o 287).

Second comes the process of selecting sympathetic and eager individuals among the colonized and educating them not only in the tongue but also the culture and the literature of the colonizer. These privileged individuals were supposed to formulate an elitist class that would influence the mass in favor of the occupier and help direct and educate them. "In India, British educational elitism assumed the title of 'downward filtration'--a system by which a small group of Indians with a British style education supposedly spread enlightenment to the masses" (Altbach 453).

The third strategy was that of establishing departments of Western literatures in the universities of the occupied country. In India, the British colonial administrators "discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education" (Viswanathan 434). Teaching such literature would allow the colonizer an ideal state of self-representation and glamorize his image in the eyes of the native subject who would be brought into contact with the best in the first world, the intellectual as distinguished from the common layman. The "English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state" (Viswanathan 437). "Making the Englishman known to the native through the products of his mental labour served a valuable purpose in that it removed him from the plane of ongoing colonialist activity--of commercial operation." It "de-actualized and diffused his material presence in the process" (Viswanathan 436). In short, it facilitated control.

On termination of occupation, these three strategies (we can add the media of late to them) continue to exercise their hegemonic and subversive influence in a form that postcolonial theory calls neocolonialism. "Neocolonialism is partly a planned policy of advanced nations to maintain their influence in developing countries, but it is also simply a continuation of past practices." More precisely, it is "the impact of advanced nations on developing areas [. . .] with special reference to their educational systems and intellectual life" (Altbach 452). "Education is perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals, older systems now passing, sometimes imperceptibly, into neo-colonialist configurations" (Ashcroft 426).

Neocolonialism has also extended its influence to engulf countries that have never seen foreign troops on their lands. "Even nations which had never been under colonial domination [. . .] came under Western educational influence because of increased foreign aid and technical assistance" and the "continued use of European languages" (Altbach 454). The hegemonic influence would be of the sort that Gramsci calls "cultural domination [. . .] by consent" (qtd. in Viswanathan 436). In Australia, for example, it "is the strength of neocolonialism that it works through Australians who have internalized anglocentric assumptions, and who propagate them in their teaching" (Docker 445).

Saudi Arabia is one such country that has not experienced colonial domination but been tremendously influenced by neocolonial educational policies of the West. Departments of English language and literature are active in every college and university in the kingdom. The work at hand, the collection of poems entitled The Rock, is a literary output in English by an Arabic speaking scholar and an outcome of the implementation of Western educational policies in Saudi Arabia.

Postcolonial literary theory and criticism criticize Western educational policies, expose their political motivations and call for resistance. In its idealist nationalist phase, the theory of resistance encourages a return to a pure past and a revival of authentic cultural roots to rebuild identity. In his assessment of Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi, Chidi Amuta seems committed to this strain in postcolonial theory. He finds that "Fanon never

totally discountenanced the insight which the past could provide in the process of national liberation," despite "his emphasis on the present and the immediate" (160). In the case of Cabral, Amuta discovers a "belief in the instrumentality of culture in the national liberation struggle," and how the "culture of the rural peasantry" represents "the authentic culture of African peoples [. . .] that can inform genuine national liberation" (161). In the background of "the Mau Mau armed struggle which the Kenyan peasants and nationalists had to wage against British colonialism," Amuta believes that Ngugi "may have derived the prominence which he has continued to give to the cultural aspect of the Mau Mau struggle" from "the old songs" which are also "reshaped [. . .] to meet the new needs of their struggle" (162).

In its more realistic phase, the theory becomes "hybrid" and realizes that "diversity" replaces "authenticity." Helen Tiffin confirms that postcolonial "cultures are inevitably hybridised" and "it is not possible to create or recreate national and regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise" (95). In the words of Jenny Sharpe: "None of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice" (99). Colonialism and neocolonialism have made an impact and created states of cultural amalgamation that cannot be reversed, erased or escaped. Writings of resistance have to face and accept this fact. Diana Brydon calls the process "literary contamination" and regards it as a "bringing of differences together into a creative contact" (136). Homi Bhabha calls this position the "Third Space" of "culture's hybridity" and contests that "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity" (209-08).

The resignation to the principle of hybridity does not negate that of resistance in postcolonial writings. It has simply made its expression more subtle. Gareth Griffiths believes that "discursive features" of resistance are "founded not in the closed and limited construction of a pure authentic sign but in endless and excessive transformation of the subject positions possible within the hybridised" (241). Aesthetically speaking, literary works by the colonized in the language of the colonizer have come to challenge the mastery of motherland texts, undermine their literary and

critical assumptions as well as provide alternate literary stances to their presumed excellence. World literature in English now competes with English literature over global awards including the Nobel prize. Politically speaking, the imperialistic weapons of intellectual subversion have also become tools of resistance that can write back to the colonizer in his own language, speak to him in his own terms and question his subversive maneuvers that have enabled him to dominate. Jenny Sharpe calls "the colonial subject who can answer the colonizers back" the "mimic man" and describes him as "a contradictory figure who simultaneously reinforces colonial authority and disturbs it" (100-99).

The Rock as a representative piece of World literature in English is a case that speaks of colonization "by consent." The Arabic scholar adopts stances of English poetry and expresses himself as an English poet does or would do. Steeped in English literary references and allusions, his poems prove that "authenticity" is impossible after neocolonial contacts. Merging English literary heritage with local cultural elements, the poems testify to the principle of "diversity" in intellectual enterprises. Politically speaking, the work also reflects the postcolonial assertion that colonialism's subversive policies have become tools of resistance. The poems expose political injustice in some parts of the Arab world. Ironically, the English language that the colonizer has striven to make first tongue in the world is used now to contradict his political interests in the Middle East. Neocolonialism has provided the colonial subject with tools of opposition that would enable him to make his voice heard all over the world.

The poems in The Rock are not simply there for oppositional purposes. They actually embody the deeper and more significant process of cultural amalgamation where a mind conditioned by cross cultural contacts can no longer acquire cultural "authenticity" or return to a "pure" past. Its author's mind has deeply internalized English literary heritage as to show more affinity with English poetry than with its own cultural roots. Indeed, it does not enter into a process of assimilating native elements without scrutinizing them from its own new, culturally--"diverse" perspective. Its handling of English heritage proves to be richly varied, deeply complex and materializes in two distinct forms. One is indirect echoing of English poetry that reflects a state of unconscious assimilation. Another is of

deliberate invocation of English poems that alternates in response to them between adopting their points of view or rejecting them, significantly taking rejection sometimes to the point of political opposition.

"A Valediction" is a poem that directly invokes an English metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century in its title, a Victorian poet of the nineteenth century in its thematic orientation, both modern thinkers of the West as well as ancient Arab literary figures in its contemplative mood. This rich and rare combination of literary elements highlights the uniqueness of World literature in English and accentuates its innovative power that challenges English literary heritage. Introducing all options at the start, the Saudi poet chooses to echo Alfred Tennyson the Victorian poet in his poem "Ulysses." Both poets place the emotional crisis of the coming to an end of an active vocational life in a classic frame of reference by falling back on Homer's Odysseus. Yet it is obvious that the Saudi Ulysses has more in common with the Victorian than with the Homeric figure. The current poem voices its leave-taking from the work site in images of sailing: "unfurl your old / Banners and sail to some unknown distinct island, / Where Sirens are said to entice / The haggard warriors of old" (14-17). Though the Victorian poem makes no reference to the Sirens, its Ulysses, like the retired professor in the Saudi poem, departs to an "untravelling world whose margin fades / Forever and forever" and hopes to "touch the happy Isle" (19-21,63). In short, both figures undertake acts of sailing to unknown realms in quest of relief from the crisis of vocational retirement. Both also derive another sense of consolation from reminiscing on old memories of corroborant comradeship. The Saudi poet asserts that "old warriors / [. . .] were [. . .] / One mind, one heart, one determination" (28,30,31), and the Victorian poet recalls how he and his comrades were "One equal temper of heroic hearts" (63).

The concept of time and process in the collection is a case of unconscious assimilation of English literary stances and reveals the influence of Western existential thinking. "The Last Meeting" is both Keatsian and Browningsque in its apprehension of transience, fear of mutability and reliance on existential means to counteract their effect. The poem discloses this philosophical outlook in its anticipation of the coming and the passing away of a farewell scene and its desire to freeze its

precious moments in time to prolong pleasure: "If it were to come, would to God / It be always coming / Would to God it were permanence" (4,5,9). The lines seem to be directly invoking Browning's "The Last Ride Together." The Victorian speaker in a farewell scene takes a last horse-ride with his beloved and says: "What if we still ride on, we two / With life forever old yet new [. . .] / The instant made eternity" (105-06, 108). In a less deliberate manner, the lines seem reminiscent of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that reveals attraction to the figures on the surface of the urn because they represent static moments in time and partake of eternity. "Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare [. . .] / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair" (15,16,20).

In a poem called "An Apology," the poet directly invokes the English Romantic poet Percy B. Shelley and in particular his "Ode to the West Wind" to help him resolve an emotional crisis. Shelley exclaims in the presence of the west wind: "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being" and calls it a "[d]estroyer and preserver" (1,15). He finds this double function of the wind instrumental to an upcoming state of well being: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind" (70). The complex role of the West Wind inspires the Saudi poet into a deliberate act of borrowing. Rather than invoking the West Wind, he asks for the Shelleyan one in particular. The "[. . .] squint of the / Eyes revives Shelley's westwind" in his mind while traveling away from his homeland (14,15). The result would be a "return to the gates of paradise" to ask the beloved for "real forgiveness" (18,19). The wind resumes in the Saudi poem its Shelleyan function of simultaneous destruction of an old order of life and preservation of elements that would allow regeneration. It will help eliminate an unpleasant conflict that has obstructed a smooth flow of a love relationship and will, consequently, preserve and regenerate love.

The "Tsunami" poem shows an unconscious echoing of the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth in the image of high waves that drown the world and result in some kind of apocalyptic revelation. The "Tsunami" poem describes the deluge as a "tidal geological dance" performed by the ocean in response to a "knock" that "came from deep, deep / Down the lava of life and death" (4,1,2). In book five of the Prelude Wordsworth describes the deluge in the dream of the Arab in

similar terms: "the water of the deep / Gathering upon us [. . .] / With the fleet waters of a drowning world" (bk.5; 130,131,137). Both poems depict the overpowering waves in terms of light, nimble, agile moves, but the "Tsunami" excels Wordsworth in envisioning a tidal dance. The outcome of both cases also shows affinity. The "devastating human trauma" in "Tsunami" is an apocalypse of global trance" (12). Similarly, the drowning of the natural world in Wordsworth is an apocalyptic triumph of the power of the imagination recognized by Wordsworth's critics, like Geoffrey Hartman.

The "Tsunami" poem is significant in another respect. Besides its power to recall and excel an akin experience in a major Romantic poem, it speaks for the principle of "diversity" in postcolonial literary writings. The poem demonstrates a capacity to merge local cultural elements with literary allusions to English literature. Interestingly, the treatment of the local in this collection of poems shows a scrutinizing handling of the tradition that underscores the postcolonial assertion of the difficulty of maintaining "authentic" cultural ties or returning to a "pure" past after neocolonial contacts. The poems' response to local cultural concepts varies between calling them into question and embracing their assertions.

"Tsunami" challenges the local traditional way of interpreting natural phenomenal disaster as a retaliatory act for moral degeneration in the human world. "No ill feeling, no avenging urge" had caused the tragedy (5). This challenge, however, never impinges on orthodox faith. Supposing that local traditions might have originated in some religious assertions, the lines open up gates of assessing such assertions rather than discarding them. They interpret the "devastating human trauma" as an "apocalypse of global trance" (11,12). The theological connotations of the word apocalypse suggest some heavenly-ordained revelation implied in the disastrous phenomenon. Such ordination is not necessarily retaliatory in nature as the common local tradition would have it. It might as well be of a contrary nature. The poem does not elaborate. Leaving the apocalyptic revelation unspecified stimulates meditation of the event, broadens perception of the situation and elicits a contemplative response to a beautifully portrayed tragic scene.

"Queries of a Palestinian Lonely Child" recalls William Blake's **Songs of Innocence** and in particular his "Chimney Sweeper." The English Romantic poet's depiction of the child's innocent, unaware power to expose corruption in political institutions is echoed in the Saudi poem that runs:

The big man came to me again
In the darkness this night.
Took away my toys to give
To his children, he said.
[.]
He didn't smile.
Why didn't he smile?
I was scared, mother.
Where's my father, where?
Is he still there in heaven?
[.]
Are you there to see him?
[.]
Mother, I want to sleep.
[.]
To sleep. . . Sleeee . . . eep. (4-7,9-13,15,18,20)

The syllabic play on the word "sleep" immediately invokes Blake's child's inability to pronounce the "s" letter in the word "sweep" (3). Blake's poem relates:

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"
So your Chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep. (1-4)

The child, in Blake's poem, is employed to sweep chimneys soon after his mother's death. Like the child in the English poem, the Palestinian child is also denied innocent play. Moreover, he literally lost both parents, the father that departed earlier to heaven and the mother that the child searches for in the poem and cannot locate.

Another poem of lashing criticism at political injustice is "One Last Laugh." It invokes Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" to describe a contemporary politician. The ancient Egyptian tyrant in Shelley's poem is a sculptured figure on a pedestal discovered half eroded in the desert. "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair" (10,11). His boastful words are inscribed on the pedestal of the statue. The artist of the past has also succeeded in capturing the tyrant's odious pride in the expression of the "visage, whose frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read" (4-6). The contemporary politician is not a statue of the past. He is threateningly alive: "I'm Sharon, king of this land, / Look at my destruction and despair. / My glories need no pedestals" (1-3). His sin is more vicious than pride at territorial expansion. Excelling in his line of evil, the contemporary politician boasts not of constructed kingdoms but of "destruction." His "good is pure evil," therefore his evil remains inconceivable (12,13). Unlike Shelley's tyrant, he remains undecipherable. "My myopic eyes, my frowning lips / Can never be interpreted" (6,7). He mocks the CIA's attempts to uncover his destructive plans and regards its progenitors as "insipid interferers" (10).

The opposition to the West in The Rock is not always political. Frequently, it takes a cultural turn. A poem in the collection, entitled "The Sick Rose," invokes the Blakean poem only to deconstruct its ideological context. If William Blake's symbolic rose, his delicate woman, loses her innocence through a secretive, unhealthy passion, the current woman meets a better destiny, a healthier love. She retains her innocence and does not fall sick. Consequently, she comes to epitomize the real rose that discards Blake's from the species: "His was not a rose, / Mine is not sick" (3,4). The ultimate objective of the piece seems to be a repudiation of the Blakean psychological insights into physical love and a reduction of his poem to a metaphor: "Neither she nor I are Blakeans [. . .] / What to do with a metaphor?" (1,5).

The inquisitive and transformative handling of Western ideological concerns extends to The Rock's treatment of local cultural concepts. "The Pearl" is another poem that draws on traditional cultural heritage embracing and enriching, rather than repudiating, its assertions this stance. The poem utilizes a common cultural saying to enrich its own symbolic

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texture. The culturally renowned "pearl of the mind," commonly indicative of a mentally fostered preoccupation with someone, develops in this poem an intimate emotional relevance when transformed into a "pearl of the heart" (2). The metaphor thus becomes fittingly representative of a cherished daughter who is about to quit the parental home to matrimonial life. But the actual pearl preserved in the shell symbolically stands for the girl in another subtly refined context beyond parental emotional fondness: "The undivulged secret, / The holy mystery" of a virgin's life (9-10).

The Rock thus demonstrates a wide range of responses to both Western ideology and local heritage. It draws heavily on both and scrutinizes their elements before committing itself to either or. Each side has had its share of query, inspection and challenge; of adoption, rejection or transformation. The variety is indicative of the principles of "diversity" and "hybridity" in postcolonial cultural matrix. It confirms the latter contestations of the theory that recognize "authenticity" and "purity" as difficult idealist responses to one's own roots despite the urge for resistance.

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