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**From Alterity to Transculturation:
 Revisiting the Postcolonial Space through Deleuze and Agamben**

Abstract

The concept of alterity in the philosophical constructs of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben have had a longstanding intersectionality with the area of postcolonial studies besides the general appropriation of such ideas as *homo sacer*, “*Muselmann*” and ‘state of exception’ into mainstream postcolonial studies. However, the inadequacy of Agamben’s philosophical structures to nullify the aporias of postcolonial theory requires intervention from the Deleuzoguattarian concepts of deterritorialization, nomadology and the war machine. Agamben’s philosophical scaffolding questions the possibilities of biopolitics that extend to hegemony, but fundamentally functions always on binaries. Deleuzian philosophy on the other hand is emancipated from such binary pursuits and instead employs rhizomatic methods of analyses.

The present paper attempts to bring together the ideas of the two philosophers that merge or intersect with the areas of postcolonial studies into an status of distancing from pure alterity—transculturation. Transcultures are in-between structures or anti-structures that break down formative or normative ideologies. A combination of the two philosophers’ concepts produces an amalgam of the movement from the state of alterity to a state of transculturation. The movement or evolution has been illustrated here across its multiple stages using the illustrations of two works of fiction V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967) and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)—two novels from different chronological periods but possessing similar ontopology to better render the distinction.

Keywords: Agamben, Deleuze, alterity, transculturation, postcolonial, Naipaul, Hamid

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben states that the common singular ground for the absolution of differences within the unified class of the *nouveau petit bourgeois* is the ‘alterity of death’—the only non-immanent experience in a philosophical terrain ascribed to by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. This state of alterity—being or becoming Other—brings together the violent/violator and the violated within the binary paradigm of coloniser/colonised. Within the evidential historicity of the colonial space it has been a veritable identity-structuration of either section to conform to a specific role decreed by contemporary national, historical, sociological or political condition. The fixture, when challenged, morphs into a state of ontological interrogation that questions the validity of such a binary, and in the process produces a nationalist *aletheia*¹. In the binary context of the coloniser and the colonised, the state of alterity can, however, be absolved or rendered obsolete by the intrusion of the transcultural²: essentially the mimicry of and by either class of the other/Other. The observed and ratified ‘minor’, potentially the colonised, imitates and exceeds the ‘major’, i.e. the coloniser, as a means of deterritorializing the dominant ideological status exercised by the latter. Similarly, the coloniser imitates and hybridizes the

colonial lesser in an attempt to commodify and modify the latter. At a point of anticipated dialectical resolution these assemblages transcend the binary drought of inconsistent analogy and are unified in a globalised local perspective of transculture. The alterity of Other-ness is absolved and in its place a hybrid mimic-status is established that extends to a 'bare-life' for both the coloniser and the colonised. The attempted theoretical confluence is of an absolution of the *homo sacer*³ that the postcolonial Otherised subject purports to have a propinquity to and the becoming of Agamben's 'bare life' materially in an individual along the Deleuzian proliferation of a rhizomatic 'lines of flight'⁴.

Continental philosophy has generally maintained an informal distinction from the space of postcolonial studies, maintaining a strictly statutory engagement, except such instances where particular philosophers have made comments relevant to the sphere of postcolonial studies. Within his own philosophic-political space, even "[Agamben] is [...] concerned with the status and treatment of Europe's oppressed others and the legal anomalies and forms of state-sanctioned violence that make such oppression possible" (Bignall and Svirsky 2) rather than the plausible lines of intersection that his ideas have with a postcolonial theoretical space. It is notable that even when Agamben uses the term "*Muselmann*,"⁵ it is, contrary to the apparent religious connotation alluding to oriental or postcolonial spaces, "a person rendered living dead due to treatment rendered in the camp (Auschwitz)" (Ray 11). The primary deterritorialization of the "*Muselmann*" also poses a difficult relationship between the Eurocentric normativity of continental philosophy and the absorption of its colonial spectres into the negativity of this association, thus reducing factual postcolonial identities to near nothings.

Being the central focus of the present essay, it is necessary to chart the theoretical possibilities of colonial-/postcolonialism in Agamben's philosophy. As Simone Bignall and Marcelo Svirsky have noted in *Agamben and Colonialism*,

Agamben maintains a relative silence about colonialism and appears disinclined to engage with those anti-colonial and post-colonial writers and activists whose experiences of exclusion and abandonment as *homo sacer* have not rendered them utterly debilitated and, indeed, whose work articulates a range of critical subject positions defined in active response to imperial Europe's exclusionary politics. (Bignall and Svirsky 3)

However, despite this deliberate distancing from the space of colonial/postcolonial thought, Agamben's philosophical concepts and frameworks have allowed for the expansion of critical thinking about "the political exclusions and abandonments characteristic of colonial situations" (4). Agamben's writings on the '*homo sacer*' and the 'state of exception' in particular have been brought to contestation to support or contradict "critical analyses of colonial processes and the social, political and legal structures they both produce and rely upon" (4). Robert Eaglestone (2002) argues that 'the colony' might provide a more appropriate paradigm or nomenclature for modernity than does 'the camp' in Agamben's philosophical parlance. Appropriating another line of thought, with regard to the consideration of "to what extent we are to read the colonial as an iteration of the modern", Nasser Hussain approves Agamben's "astute precision" in presenting the concept of the "relation of exception [...] by which something is included solely through its exclusion" (Hussain 7, 20-1). The latter line of thought involving a politics of exclusion, and thereby Othering, is significant for colonial/postcolonial thought with its rabid penchant for binaries that essentially fragment thought from the initiation itself.

Achille Mbembe, one of the earlier theorists, albeit within the contemporary fold, who makes the transition from Agamben to Deleuze and shows the paths of intersection between alterity and transculturation, has prolifically portrayed the viability of a transcultural condition over stratified alterity. The ‘nothingness’ that Mbembe introduces in the context of the ‘postcolony’ in *On the Postcolony* (2001) are diffused negations, “absences of those presences that are no longer so and that one remembers (the past), and absence of those others that are yet to come and are anticipated (the future)” (Mbembe 16). Furthermore, Achille Mbembe, notable for his bringing together of Agamben and Deleuze with postcolonial studies in multiple works, has noted the following, drawing upon the theorisation of the *homo sacer* and ‘necropolitics’: “it is notably in the colony and under the apartheid regime that there comes into being a peculiar terror formation [...] The most original feature of this terror formation is its concatenation of biopower, the state of exception and the state of siege” (Mbembe 22). In conclusion, Mbembe states, “in modern philosophical thought and European political practice and imaginary, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of power outside the law” (23). However, the absences that are almost established as negative markers in Mbembe’s work could very well be understood in the context of the Other, the altered, who proceeds to a transcendental stage-process of transculturation.

However, the primary failure of Agamben in expanding the idea of a postcolonial sensibility has its roots in the homogeneity with which he envisages his theoretical and philosophical manoeuvres. While Deleuze integrates a poststructural sensibility in his thought, whether it concerns nomadology, rhizome or becoming, Agamben’s states of exception and alterity are singularly repressive in their Eurocentricity. The limitation of Agamben’s locating of the Other has also been accentuated by Marcelo Svirsky with resounding éclat: “Agamben’s paradigm of exception is limited if considered in isolation from a local political culture and its formative history. In itself [...] the paradigm might appear to omit crucial aspects of social, cultural and political life that define the historical background in which legal and political measures are implemented” (Svirsky 54). Agamben’s aversion to employ a culturally neutral position augurs even the designation of his chosen figure of the “*Muselmann*” to be brought within a colonial fold, which crucially leads to the process of transculturation as a necessary policy of reprisal. The Deleuzian rhizome, traversing non-binary hyperspaces, becomes the method through which a postcolonial redemption becomes applicable on an otherwise Euro-subscribing methodology. Although literary illustrations of the phenomenon are remarkably rare beyond the sphere of the contemporary, Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967) and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) are two such examples that help chart the trajectory of alterity to transculturation across two distinct generations of postcolonialism. The novels have been published with a chronological distance of exactly four decades that have been rich with the establishment of neo-colonial hegemonic powers, the Vietnam War, the fall of Soviet Russia and the subsequent disintegration of states, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, and most importantly, the September 11, 2001 attacks and America’s ‘war against terror’—events that have reshaped and added to the idea of postcoloniality substantially since the advent of the concept in mid-twentieth century.

Pure Alterity: The Space of Imitation in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*

The protagonist of V.S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men*, Ralph Singh, is one of the better apparatus from the juncture of hybridisation of postcoloniality for exemplifying the shift from a decolonised Other to a localized individual in an altered state that traverses

transculturation and the movement back to the roots. The progressive states of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the postcolonial subject, i.e. Ralph Singh, allows for a study of the effect of alterity transmogrifying into transculturation. The rendering of binary allocations for the postcolonial subject is extended also upon the geomorphic space of its appropriation which, in this instance, is the Caribbean island of Isabella. The nomenclature for the island carries with itself a colonial appendage and yet is applied on a geographical space that is determinedly within the purview of a former colony. The protagonist has undergone a similar transition of nominal identity: he attempts to dissolve his Indian origins by adopting a name that should act as suitable camouflage. However, despite the coloniser's hegemonic attempts to induce a phonetic ideology of alterity that distinguishes one's nationalist, geographical or genealogical being as the Other, the impact and threat of transgression is always real, an act which is reinforced later in the novel by the conspicuous event of the *Asvamedh* performed by Ralph's father, executed on the horse that is 'owned' by a vanguard of the island's colonial history, the Deschampsneufs family. The providential factor is unconsciously allocated by Naipaul almost entirely to the phonetic alterity—a mimesis of audible identifiers that determine individuals and colonial legacies while consciously placing the binary of the colonial superior and inferior—that is possibly countered solely by the presence of a transgressive, transdisciplinary and transcultural phenomenon of traversing smooth spaces.

Ralph Singh, in Naipaul's portrayal, subscribes largely to the modern democratic normative suggested by Agamben, an embodiment of the attempt to liberate *zoē*, whereas Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, discussed later, is the completion of the very task that Ralph sets out to achieve. The postcolonial subject's necessity to shred the restriction imposed upon the *zoē* by the *bios*⁶ is understood in the context of Agamben's personal description of the schema of modern democracy:

If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*. Hence, too, modern democracy's specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place—"bare life"—that marked their subjection. ("Introduction to *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*" 411)

The alterity that the postcolonial subject is susceptible to is aggrandised by the emancipation of the *zoē* and the deletion of the *bios* from binary considerations—the binary here can be interpretively construed when applied to the coloniser/colonised binary too. The colonised could amply be viewed as the *zoē*, whereas the bio-politics of the coloniser/former coloniser acts as the *bios* that restricts shifting spaces. In order to evade subjection to a similar binary, the altered individual, formerly colonised, has to resort to transculturation that either creates or destroys the desired identity.

Although Ralph Singh has access to a specific historicity that gives him national origins and an identity that is consistent and conforming to the idea of the diaspora, he opts for an eventual disruption of the same. At various points of his life, he is attracted to things which he associates with his genealogical markers, such as the imaginary liaison with Indian, specifically Aryan, culture, and the progressive alignment towards the sense of belonging that he feels commiserate with his Caribbean-identity—which too deserts him, certifying him as a nomad. The nomad, being one without a consistent or definite identity,

either cultural, social or national, produces a possible state of exception for the self to distinguish itself from the Other/s, and

rather than building on a continuous relation [between identity, history and politics] such a micropolitical history making proceeds by ruptures: retaining the legacies of the colonial past as a disjunctive, virtual presence available for creative actualization in the present. It is in this sense that [...] the postcolonial present/future emerges as an undetermined potentiality, expressive of, but not specified by the colonial past from which it is drawn. (Burns and Kaiser 14)

Agamben notes, on the concept of alterity that is vested in the *different* individual that “the definitive annihilation of [the postcolonial] man [signifying alterity] in the proper sense, however, must also entail the disappearance of human language, and its substitution by mimetic or sonic signals” (*The Open* 10). And although this definite stage of the disappearance of language is never realised in the novel, the imitator who had once threatened to disrupt the originator’s status through appropriation is eventually located back within the fold of subordination. Ralph Singh’s ‘downfall’, although poetically narrated by Naipaul in a manner similar to a Greek tragedy, is the transcultural absorption of the altered individual. In this case, the individual is reduced to an adapted entity without a distinct being, merely imitating his way into a transcultural existence. Effectively, Ralph Singh is the perpetual Other: he possesses no language, nationality or culture that he can claim to be his own—he is a nomad who opted to traverse the striated⁷ instead of smooth spaces⁸. And, to conclude the theoretical framework established earlier, Ralph Singh is unable to sustain his created postcolonial identity and thereby refutes his own transculturality—an effect which is absent in the next work of fiction discussed.

Ambiguities: The Space of Transculturation in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Mohsin Hamid’s Booker-shortlisted novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) presents a reverse diasporic narrative of a third-world migrant, Changez, who has secured a nomadic war machine⁹ equivalent status in the United States—arguably the space of referral for the dilution of alterity and the absorption of transculturation. The novel traces the development of the character, modelled on the author himself, from his late-teens to his twenties, a Princeton-graduate living a comfortable life in America until the September 11, 2001 attacks. The ‘event’¹⁰ of the new millennium has quite possibly had more influence on contemporary postcolonial trends than other instances of seemingly parallel levity. The character progresses from his South Asian origins to secure the sociological construct of the ‘American dream’—an ideological accessory to aggrandize the methods of alterity and Othering for the benefit of American political identity—and spirals back to his origins sans the weight of a borrowed nationalism. Although Hamid insists on a narrative favouring a political awakening, it is a pertinent instance to showcase the application of the move from alterity to transculturation. The protagonist is placed within a prismatic view of a postcolonial lens that convolutes liminal identities. Instead, when the same biological entity/individual returns following his outbound diaspora, he is aided with a superior sense of transition and transmogrification. And unlike Naipaul’s protagonist who displays an affinity for a sedentary lifestyle, Hamid’s protagonist embodies a truer postcolonial movement from alterity to transculturation.

To emphasize the trajectory of transculturation, Changez, the apt instance of an individual subscribing to Agamben's 'bare life'—sans all forms of superfluity—is also the potential *ubermensch* of the postcolonial diasporic generation. Changez is a non-American Other when he arrives at Princeton. The postcolonial subject's arrival at the seat of neo-colonial power is of relevance as the process of transculturation affected through mimicry could be exemplified through the protagonist's development while absorbing the American societal system. The first stage of this transculturation is the affirmative adoption of the colonisers' model of education which resonates the preceding literary histories of the education of Friday and Caliban by Robinson Crusoe and Prospero respectively as well as the historical narratives of missionaries. While the former individuals were involved in the exchange of mere language and the latter the distribution of ideology, for Changez it is the possibility to mimic and hybridise not his self but the position of the hegemonic population that he is potentially mimicking for his exposure to both neo-colonial language and discourses are essentially completed before his arrival to America. The conforming of a space in between the third world and the neo-colonial power is a 'state of exception'¹¹ with its "possibility of the rule of law becoming suspended" (Murray 185).

The alterity to which the postcolonial is subject to creates an uncertain sense of non-identity. Changez iterates: "my own identity was so fragile" (Hamid 148). Quite like the minoritarian entity in Deleuze the postcolonial too is in a complex imbroglio, "it has no sense of belonging" (Colebrook 120). However, the sociological deterrence ordained by a lack of cogent identity is not a drawback in terms of Changez's political engagement: a posited Deleuzian trope. The postcolonial subject in a neo-colonial space is perennially entrusted with "the always renewed potential to become new in relative, context-specific ways [as is] essential for reconceptualising postcolonialism as a transformative practice that transcends the legacies of colonialism and engenders new forms of aesthetic practice and political engagement" (Burns and Kaiser 15). Contrasted with Naipaul's portrayal of the character of Ralph Singh, Changez appropriates an identity sans the effects of alterity and *bios*. The latter has been suffused with substantial neo-colonial institutional education and lifestyle, and his exposure to the culture of this neo-colonial power is akin to that of Ralph Singh. But whereas Ralph Singh capitulates to his condition created by apparent postcolonial 'short-sightedness', Changez returns to Pakistan with his credentials and his sense of becoming intact—his being, becoming, ontological and ontopological identities are adequately preserved despite the sense of alterity that he had been exposed to following the event of 9/11. The emergence of this postnational individual following an exposure to the idea of a global postcolonialisation is essentially fermented by the idea of transculturation as posited against alterity.

Conclusion: 'Altered states and Becoming'

The altered subject in the postcolonial sphere is no longer the oppressed subject who echoes the master in ideology. Instead of the oppressor-oppressed relationship in modern democracies, with their penchant for 'bare life', one finds a globalised localisation, a hybridity that is defiant of the binaries. This transitional establishment of an essential 'being' for the postcolonial subject ensures a crossing of thresholds. While V.S. Naipaul and Mohsin Hamid successfully portrays the transculturation of the postcolonial subject, it is notable that both the portrayals also follow the trajectory of the protagonist as an alienated, Other-individual from the formerly colonial third-world who has to absorb or adapt into the former colonisers' spaces. The necessary mimicry is disconsolate and melancholic in both instances—disintegrating the ethos of nationalism that itself is of European origins—and leads to a psychological hunger for the 'bare life' of one's origins.

Rather than limiting itself to a Holocaust-specific or Euro-centric historicity, and by consistently delimiting itself, “Deleuzian thought [...] offers a theory of temporal progression that engenders the new, establishes historical memory as a virtual, pure past caught up in a ceaseless creative evolution, and reconceptualises identity, difference, relationality, and locatedness” (Burns and Kaiser 15). This is in stark contrast with an idea of postcoloniality derived from Agamben. Agamben’s idea of the alterity is aporetic because it ceases to answer to the continuity of the subject beyond the domain of Otherisation. Deleuze, on the contrary, introduces a concept that seeks to acculturate the distinctions embedded within this alterity by discussing the possibilities of the nomadic war machine—the paradigm of transculturation. While the two literary works used to analyse the postcolonial utilisations of Agamben and Deleuze, it is notable that both works can be plausibly brought under a unified postcolonial theoretical whole if considered in parallel intensity following a transcultural study hybridising the two philosophers. Effectively, the postcolonial subject is considerably altered in a predetermined position, reducing the possibilities of becoming that could be otherwise employed. However, despite the constraints of a system of binaries, the ‘twice removed’ analyses of the postcolonial subject in the contemporary world may be ensured continuity through the process of active transculturation and globalised assertion rather than mere Othering through alterity.

NOTES

¹ Used in the Heideggerian sense of the term: “as ‘disclosedness’ (*Erschlossenheit*), or ‘unconcealment’ (*Unverborgenheit*)” (Beistegui 21).

² Transculture/transculturalism, and its derivative transculturation, may be defined as “seeing oneself in the other” (Cuccioletta) by “seeing many sides of every question without abandoning conviction, and allowing for a chameleon sense of self without losing one’s cultural center” (Slimbach).

³ “Conceptually, he [*homo sacer*] is the site of a conjunction of a passive capacity (“can be killed”) with a passive incapacity (“cannot be sacrificed”) [...] he is locked out of the politico-legal order’s protection” (Schütz 95).

⁴ “An expression central to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and their politics of becoming, indicating transformations and differentiations that are always possible because no system can ever circumscribe its elements to the point of preventing their escape” (Boundas 363).

⁵ “Meaning literally “the Muslim”, *Muselman* was a name given to those inhabitants of the camps who, due to their brutal treatment by the SS, had ceased to respond and interact with their environment” (Maxwell 134).

⁶ “*zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (“Introduction to *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*” 406).

⁷ “Space designed for a sedentary lifestyle, where movement concerns the relationship between points or nodes which are imported onto it from a higher plane or another dimension” (Young 300).

⁸ “‘Smooth space’ haunts and can disrupt the striations of conventional space, and unfolds through an ‘infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction’ that creates shifting mosaics of space-times out of the heterogeneous blocks of different milieus” (Lorraine 257).

⁹The nomadic war machine is a Deleuzian hybrid combining the nomad who “reterritorialise upon the line and trajectory of their deterritorialization” (Boundas 432) and a war machine “that is innovative, as opposed to those modelled on the state and which are rigid and bureaucratic” (Welchman 603).

¹⁰An event is “the site itself, with all its immanently present yet structurally unrepresentable elements, plus the signifier making the site one” (Deranty 192). The *post*-colonial event is a site itself, immanently accessible to the colonial past. Either of the states therefore exist in alterity to each other, and the trans-signifying event is tasked with marking a departure, *vis-à-vis* 9/11.

¹¹ “The term “state of exception”, which first appears in *Homo Sacer* and is greatly expanded in the book of that name, identifies the ways in which politics and law are completely intertwined. The relationship between law and politics has always understood the judiciary as maintaining autonomy yet, as Agamben suggests, the very idea of politics is about the possibility of the rule of law becoming suspended in the state of exception” (Murray 185).

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