

Post-colonial Reading of Suppressed Voices in House of Sand and Fog by Andre Dubus

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Abstract

Post-colonial theory tries to represent and identify the suppressed voices in literature; the dominant, superior image of the West in the historical and even contemporary texts shapes the voices of the colonized. This study is going to focus on the marginalized voices, that is, those voices which have never been heard. The present study aims at analyzing Dubus's House of Sand and Fog mainly based on the theories of the well-known post-colonial theorists, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. In House of Sand and Fog, Dubus depicts the unfavorable situation of an Iranian immigrant family in America named as Behranis. The author attempts to liberate the suppressed voices in the Capitalistic society by revealing the marginalized voices of the immigrants. This study by focusing on the notions like language, identity, class, race and physical space analyzes the immigrants' situation and it also unveils different forms of superiority through the Capitalistic society.

Keywords: Andre Dubus, House of Sand and Fog, "Orientalism", "Orient", "Occident", "Identity Crisis", "Third Space", "Hybridity".

Introduction

Dubus is best known for his novel, House of Sand and Fog. This book became the New York Times Bestseller, and was adapted for an Academy Award-nominated film, starring Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Connelly. The movie was directed by Vadim Perelman. The novel depicts an Iranian family conflicting with an American woman on a house ownership in Corona. The story unfolds in the summer of 1993 when Kathy Nicolo is evicted from the house she inherited. The reason for eviction is the unpaid taxes which the county unjustly claimed she owed. The house is purchased at a public auction by Genob Sarhang Massoud Amir Behrani. Ultimately the story unfolds a tragedy by Behranis' death and Kathy's suffering in regaining the house.

The significance of this study is that there are no academic discussions related to House of Sand and Fog' novel except for some articles which have analyzed its movie adaptation. No one has focused on the suffering of the novel's characters, in fact these characters cannot culturally find out their identity and their hybrid identity gradually leads them to a crisis of identity. In description of the immigrant's situation Dubus sheds light on the issue of marginalized voices suchlike women voices (Kathy Nicolo) as vulnerable minorities whose voice cannot be heard and is silenced. Andre Dubus, as an American male author who is familiar with Iranian culture, demonstrates the sufferings of an

Oriental immigrant family (the Behranis) in America.

It is important to say that Dubus has chosen a neutral perspective by appointing both Colonel Behrani (an easterner) and Kathy (a westerner) as the narrators of the novel. Dubus also equals the situation of the Oriental woman Nadereh Behrani (Nadi) with the Occidental woman Kathy Nicolo by indicating their afflictions as a common concern. Although he is an American citizen, he illustrates the capitalistic American society in such a way that the voices of women are ignored.

The significance of this study is in its intention to argue the issue of hybrid identities in post-colonial world, how these identities interact and what the reaction of the society is in confrontation with these types. That is why this study aims at applying Said's notions of "Orient" and "Occident" and Bhabha's notions like "Identity Crisis", "Third Space" and "Hybridity".

2. Methodology

Post-colonial theory examines the problems of various cultures; it sheds light on the silent and marginalized voices of the inferior people and their shadowy literature. Many theoreticians have attempted to represent the suppressed voices; among them the study has taken advantage of Edward Said and Homi. K. Bhabha's theories. Bhabha investigates the marginalized voices in his books and essays like *Location of the Culture or Nation and Narration*. According to Sawant (a critic in this field), Postcolonial study enlarges the sphere of literature and it redefines and reconstructs the colonized self. The post-colonial basically means the period starting with national independence in contrast to the colonial rule. Sawant believes that post-colonial theory refers to superiority of the

colonizer's power over the colonized people and the compulsion of admitting the culture of the colonizer as better. "The colonialism is continued in hidden form. The imperial impact is still alive and active today in literature" (Sawant 2). The commentators on colonialism have risen from the colonies to make their voices heard by the people all around the world and create their own discourses about the experience of the colonized and also give the 'subaltern' _ inferior, docile, non-white, non-Westerns _ a voice.

2.1 Said and "Orientalism"

Post-colonial theory begins basically with Said's *Orientalism*. Edward Said, as one of the most significant figures in post-colonialism, is known as the father of this theory. In his canonical book, *Orientalism*, Said analyzes Western outlooks to the East. He represents *Orientalism* as a crucial ideology constructed by the West which paves the way for theoreticians and critics of this field to deal with how the Eastern culture and Eastern avatar are represented by the West as stereotype, exotic, indeterminate, and inferior "Other". In fact, the essence of "Orientalism", like the essence of any kind of racism, is the ideology that places "we" against the "others" to the extent that "we" are "familiar" but "others" are "exotic". The purpose of creating discourses about a colonized culture is to silence the colonized so that they cannot write or speak freely. The discourses which have been mentioned so far illustrate the colonized people as powerless and if the colonized try to write about themselves, their writing would be considered as illegal, unjust and baseless.

Basically, Said's *Orientalism* has revolutionized post-colonial discourses and theories. It quite reveals unequal position of the West and the East by representing the

dominance of the West over the East. In Said's viewpoint, in colonial period the West has gained dominance over the East just by describing, teaching, ruling, stating and authorizing over it. Said considers the ways of colonizing the East through actions like writing, describing or talking about it.

2.1.1 Edward Said's Notion of Orient/Occident

In the introductory part of his book Said argues that the Orient played an important role in the construction of European cultures as the powerful "Other". He then states that the research subject of his book is Orientalism. Said defines this term as follows: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an anthological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'" (2), and finally it transforms into a powerful political instrument for domination. "Orientalism is a Western style for dominating and having authority over the Orient" (3). He then states that the Western image of the Orient is not the real Orient - Orientalism is not simply the work of European imagination- it is all about power, domination, hegemony and authority. Said claims that Oriental in Western's viewpoint is:

Orientalists or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, 'devoid of energy and initiative,' much given to 'fulsome Hattery,' intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals; Orientalists cannot walk on either a road or a pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the clever European grasps immediately, that roads and pavements are made for walking); Orientalists are inveterate liars, they are 'lethargic and suspicious,' and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race. (38-9)

According to Edward Said, the Europeans divided the world into two parts: the East and the West or the Orient and the Occident or the Uncivilized and the Civilized. This was totally an artificial boundary; and it was laid on the basis of Them and Us or Theirs and Ours. He asserts: "Men have always divided the world up into regions having either real or imagined distinction from each other" (Said 39). Said develops his argument and analysis in three chapters which examine chronological stages in the phenomenon of Orientalism, defined chiefly through the works and views of representative Orientalist scholars. For Said, the relations between "Us" and "Them" differentiate between self and other. This ideology in Orientalism produces stereotypes in which the Orient is considered as timeless, exotic, feminine and strange, while the West is taken into account as progressive, normal, masculine and superior.

2.1.2 Superiority of the Occident and Inferiority of the Orient

Dubus criticizes the domination of the western culture over the east and he illustrates this issue through the novel. The question of the superiority of the West over the East is addressed in Said's Orientalism so many times: "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient ... European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate an even underground self" (3).

The concept of superiority is very palpable when Kathy wrongly pronounces colonel's name not once or twice but many times. The first mistake happens when she goes to Connie Walsh office: "Did you get their names? I don't know, Bahroony or Behmini, something like that. They're

Middle Eastern. Please call them up and tell them to put the roof back together and get out” (Dubus 78). Kathy even does not care about true pronunciation of an Eastern name as if it is not important to her. Pronouncing one’s name accurately is so significant and it shows the speaker’s respect for his/her addressee. Kathy as a western woman is quite aware of such a thing, but she intentionally repeats her mistakes: “He looked from me to Barmeeny” (149). After pronouncing the Behranis’ family name wrongly many times, Lester tells Kathy about their nationality and their name. However, being inattentive to his guidance, Kathy continues pronouncing their name inaccurately over and over: “I tried to remember the right way to pronounce her name, the way Les had said it, but all I could come up with is the way I remembered first hearing it from the carpenter on the roof: Barmeeny. And were they Arab? Or Iranian? And what was the difference? I decided I would try not to call her anything” (189).

Kathy insists on calling the Behranis’ name mistakenly with different pronunciations every time. For this reason, Mrs. Behrani tells Kathy the true pronunciation of her name: “It is Behrani” (Dubus 192). But, be that as it may, Kathy calls them erroneously again and considers them as Arabs: “I thought of Mrs. Bahroony, the weeping little Arab woman and her love of the Italian people” (205). This condition proves what Said asserts about the Occidental outlook towards the Orient and the generalization of all eastern nations to Arabs. Regarding the following quotation taken from Orientalism, “On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things” (Said 49). From Said’s

standpoint, the attitude of the Occident toward the Orient is too dark and negative. Their hatred for the Oriental people grows as they face rich Arab people who have gained their money from the oil market without enough education or technological advancement.

2.2 Homi K. Bhabha’s Theories

Following Edward Said, another influential figure in post-colonial studies is Homi K. Bhabha. He has introduced some crucial terms such as: “Hybridity”, “Third space”, “Identity Crisis” and etc. It is noteworthy that Said focused mostly on the role of the colonizer but Bhabha emphasizes on the role of both the colonizer and the colonized. In fact, Bhabha’s theories have changed the study of colonialism. David Huddart who is an associate professor and the author of Homi K. Bhabha asserts that Bhabha works on post-structuralism for cultural difference. In fact, Bhabha takes advantage of post-structuralist approaches in his work and applies them to colonialism, thus he produces “colonial discourse analysis” (Huddart 1-3). Thus, Bhabha theories will be applied to display the relation between the colonizers and the colonized is more complicated than the relation between the colonial domination and anticolonial resistance.

2.2.1 Bhabha’s notion of “Hybridity”

Bhabha draws his attention to the continuous process of hybridity. For Bhabha, the cultures are not in hybrid form. He believes that cultures are the result of the efforts for the continuous change of ‘cultural hybridities’. In fact, hybridity is the process by which the dominant colonial authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonized (the other) into a singular universal framework; however, he produces something new and different by transforming the original case. In fact, the

importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, thus hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different and new, a new area of representation. In Bhabha's view, the notion of hybridity is about the fact that in any specific political struggle, the new sites are always being opened up, and if you continue referring those new sites to old principles, then you are not actually able to participate in them entirely, productively and innovatively.

The importance of hybridity is primarily due to the distinctions which the colonial discourses make among the pure cultures. In Bhabha's viewpoint, the dominant colonial separates the world into self and other just to legitimate the inequalities in its system. Bhabha invites deliberation about self and other to reverse its value so virtuously colonizer changes to inferior but it would not be a practical approach as there is no reality. Bhabha's theories shed light on this fact that colonialism is something more than the problem of domination of a superior to inferior. In fact, he focuses on the unbelievable resistances through history of the world and also unexpected anxieties that locates the colonizer in opposition to his obvious superiority.

2.2.2 Bhabha's notion of "Identity Crisis"

Postcolonial critics all over the world have focused on the immigrants' problems, including their difficulty in shaping new identities which eventually led to the emergence of identity crisis in post-colonial communities. The importance of the issue of identity is to the extent that Sheoran asserts "the major themes in the works written in the postcolonial period have been the fragmentation and identity crisis

experienced by the once colonized peoples and the important impacts of colonialism on the indigenous" (1).

Numerous immigrants mostly from the third world and Middle Eastern countries attempt to overcome their crisis of identity in order to have stability in a western society. The crisis of identity appears when the individual, on account of the coordination with other groups, is left without lucrative image. With regard to the domination of the colonizer, the colonized's effort is to consolidate and reclaim their human rights. Accordingly, the notion of identity plays a central role for the immigrants. In his book, *Identity in Modern Society*, Brend Simon contends that: "Identity is fashionable. Everyone wants to have one, many promise to provide one ... most of us would agree that identity is responsible for how we feel about ourselves and that a lack of identity or an identity crisis jeopardizes our well-being or even our physical existence" (1).

Identity crisis appears when the immigrants cannot construct their selfhood in the society. It needs to bear in mind that in *House of Sand and Fog*, the issue of identity crisis is revealed when Colonel Behrani denies the positive self-image. The construction of the Behranis' identity can result from what should be included as the self and excluded as the 'other'. The self is the positive aspect of the immigrants' identity and the 'other' is the negative part.

The dilemma of the Behranis is pictured through the novel as they are in search of their identity. Colonel Behrani comes from Iran _a Middle Eastern country_ and his identity is eastern but for finding his place in America he tries to acquire an American identity. In confrontation with threats of Lester as a westerner and as a member of the colonizer country, Colonel finds no

solution but using his American identity card in order to save his family: "This is my home, sir. I am an American citizen" (Dubus 166).

Colonel Behrani is one of the victims of colonial politics, racial segregation and displacement. Knowing this fact, Lester Burdon abuses and threatens their new position thus: "The policeman walks out onto the step, but I can do no more than look at him. You have a family. I'd be thinking more about them if I were you. I have more than one contact at Immigration. People get deported every single day. There are a lot of things I can do, Colonel" (Dubus 168).

It can be concluded that the construction of identity is an ongoing process and the result is unpredictable. Searching for a stable identity is one of the most significant subjects in today's postcolonial debates. The identity crisis of the colonized is one of the consequences of colonialism and its policy. The identity crisis reveals the fact that the individuals who were colonized during a period of time are unable to find their real and primary identities. As a matter of fact, they find themselves between the past and the present. They feel they are separated from the past and are not adjoined the present.

2.2.3 Bhabha's notion of "Third Space"

Many postcolonial theorists have studied the third world literature and the beyond to examine the life of the hybrid people. Bhabha's ideas and thoughts are considered as a landmark for the postcolonial thinkers. His theories have been used to scrutinize the signs of colonialism in literary texts. For Bhabha, a literary text is more than a mere text; it is a discourse from which a body of knowledge can be drawn, thus his theory manifests how different characters of a literary work are involved with colonial

issues and what happens to their identity construction.

As it was depicted through *House of Sand and Fog*, the in-betweenness of the Behranis makes them experience a hard life in diaspora. As a matter of fact, they are unable not only to match themselves with the new culture completely, but also to leave their Iranian identity; accordingly, they do not have a fixed cultural identity. They are in a vague space where the Iranian and American cultures interact.

The Behranis' Iranian identity like their national tradition is somewhat internalized. Their confrontation with a new culture makes their original identity be undergone some changes but at the same time, they are not able to discard their true identity. In fact, they form their new identity in the "Third Space" in order to be able to live in a new place with a different culture. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the claims about the innate originality or purity of cultures are invalid and culture has no fixity.

3. Discussion

3.1 Postcolonial Investigation of Social and Cultural Aspects in *House of Sand and Fog*

House of Sand and Fog is the true example of cultural diversities. The novel indicates the problems of immigrants and their cultural resistance in the face of new culture. In an interview, Homi Bhabha regards the diversity of cultures as a positive notion: "the diversity of cultures is a good and positive thing and ought to be encouraged" ("Interview" 208). He adds that "It is a common place of plural, democratic societies to say that they can encourage and accommodate cultural diversity" (208). In fact, Bhabha believes that multiple identities appear in challenging ways, both positively and

negatively, progressively or regressively and sometimes even incommensurably. So, "... no culture is full unto itself ... there are other cultures which contradict its authority, but also because its own symbol-forming activity ... always underscores the claim to an originary, holistic, organic identity" (208-10).

One of the social problems revealed through the novel is about the feeling of superiority of the American's toward Behranis. Homi Bhabha refers to this observation as humiliation. This kind of observation is not only restricted to the period of writing the novel, rather it has been experienced by the easterners all along the history. Douglas Little in his book *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*, proves this fact. The so called book briefly recalls Said's Orientalism.

The difference between the work of Said and that of Douglas Little is that Said pays special attention to the attitudes of the West toward Arabs, Persians and Muslims as violent, stereotypical and unintelligent people, but Douglas Little engages in close explanation of American policy in the Middle East since 1945. Throughout the book, the author mentions that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Americans considered the people of the Middle East as savages, uneducated and decadent. He adds that this viewpoint was expanded through the publication of *National Geographic* magazine by indicating the Muslims as "exotic". Concerning the issue of exoticism, it is worth mentioning that before Said, Mark Twain, in his travel to the Middle East which was recorded in his book *Innocents Abroad*, has observed the so-called exoticism among the easterners as unprogressive and ignorant. He takes the language and behavior of other passengers into consideration. Finally, Twain and his pilgrims start to look at their own life and

they see themselves as Others see them: "The people stared at us everywhere, and we stared at them. We generally made them feel rather small, too, before we got done with them, because we bore down on them with America's greatness until we crushed them" (Twain 402).

This vision is the beginning of the creation of binary oppositions between the East and the West. Twain finds out that he and other Americans are considered as native denizens. Then, he identifies those who are staring, as the "Others" and foreigners. He looks at himself from a different perspective. Thus, he gains domination and superiority. This feeling is exactly what Kathy Nicolo has toward Iranian family. At the beginning of the novel Nicolo thinks they are Arabs and when Lester says that they are Persians she does not care and continues looking at them as the Middle Eastern Arab people. It should be noted that this vision recalls colonial and oriental discourse, that is to say, looking at the East as a big Arabian and unprogressive area.

3.2. Marginalized Voices

According to Eldering and Knorth, marginalization refers to a process by which a person gets away from the conventional institutions in a society (e.g., family, school, labor market). Thus, they argue that the immigrant families are in a state of disparity when they arrive in the new country. The family members face problems of adjustment and have to deal with different culture and society (154).

Dubus's novel displays cultural clashes and the issue of marginalization in America and the repression of others' voices related both to the immigrants like the Iranian Behrani's family and to the American citizens like Kathy Nicolo. Dubus's novel indicates how the capitalist system in the United States suppresses not only the 'Others' known as

the 'Orient' but also the Occidents have been trapped in a capitalistic system as their voices go largely unheard when they speak about their rights.

Although the pressure over the Behranis in their new place in America gradually chokes their voice, Dubus in *House of Sand and Fog* helps them to liberate their voices. Later, however, he gives the opportunity to Kathy Nicolo to narrate her own story as an American citizen, in this way, Dubus, as an Occident, creates a story in which both the immigrant and the woman find an outlet to voice their concerns. Dubus reveals how the rules of the capitalistic society perpetuate the violent suppression of the "other". There are many scenes throughout the novel that confirm the humiliation of the immigrants by the Occidents. It sheds light on the fact that the immigrants are not accepted as new members of the society. It is notable that although the Behranis are the citizens of the United States, they are not treated as the American citizens; indeed, they are considered as violent production of the oppressors. This fact is evident even by the first sentence of the novel where Colonel's headman calls him camel: "THE FAT ONE, THE RADISH TOREZ, HE CALLS ME CAMEL BECAUSE I AM PERSIAN" (Dubus 15).

In fact, Dubus highlights the Behranis' silence by narrating their situation before and after migration. At the beginning of the novel, Colonel explains the terrible conditions of his career that is, gathering trash with other eastern fellow workers on a highway under the burning sun. While in Iran he was a high-ranking Air force colonel. The point is that his military skills and his previous status do not matter in America and the only definite thing is his identity as an Iranian or better to say as the 'Other'. Colonel unsuccessfully attempts to regain his respect and his prior status.

Several times throughout the novel, Colonel repeats his full name in order to allow his voice to be heard. He says to his boss that:

I was colonel, Mr. Torez. I was colonel in the Imperial Air Force. Do you know this, Mr. Torez? I was a colonel. He hands to me my garbage spear and looks me in my eyes. He says to me, to Genob Sarhang Massoud Amir Behrani: 'Okay, Colonel, but today I'm Señor General. Comprende?' to Mr. Torez I say: 'In my country I could have ordered him beaten.' Sí, Camello? In Mendez's country he would have beaten you himself. (Dubus 16)

Moreover, the repressed voices of immigrants are more addressed when Colonel figures out that he and his family have to speak English to thereby their voice can be heard in America. He even advises Nadi and Esmail to speak solely in English. Colonel thinks that speaking English is the only way to refuse the repression and pressure upon his family in their new society; however, as the novel progresses and when his son is killed by two young officers whom he calls as "torturers", Colonel finds out that speaking the language of the host country will not help to liberate the Behranis' voice. As a matter of fact, it just reinforces the domination of the colonizer's culture over the colonized.

Dubus carefully indicates the colonial actions of two deputies who shot Esmail. In fact, they managed to silence his voice. Esmail's purpose was to help his father; he tried to protect themselves against the Occidents. Even after shooting Colonel's son, deputies did not try to call the ambulance; it seems that they did not worry about the oriental boy: "One of the Deputies ... began to pull on protective gloves... The deputy near Lester had finished pulling on his glove, but instead of starting first aid, he bent down to pick up the gun at his feet"

(322). The harshness of the deputies' action is to the extent that Lester as a native westerner says "Goddamn you, the kid's bleeding to death" (322). This statement proves Homi Bhabha's idea about the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized after their interaction, as Bertens asserts:

For Bhabha, the encounter of colonizer and colonized always affects both. Colonialism, with the displacements and terrible uncertainties that it brings, is such a radically unsettling 'affective experience of marginality' (Bhabha 1992: 438) ... the colonizer cannot escape a complex and paradoxical relationship with the colonized. (207)

4. Conclusion

This article by focusing on the issue of marginalized voices explored the unheard voices of the immigrants and the American citizens whose identity are in crisis. In this study the novel *House of Sand and Fog*, based on the theories of two great post-colonial theoreticians; Edward Said and Homi Bhabha has been analyzed. By applying Said notions of "Orient" and "Occident" and Bhabha's "Hybridity", "Identity Crisis" and "Third Space" the oriental discourse has the opportunity to be presented. Andre Dubus' novel is not only successful for depicting the silenced voices of the immigrants in America but also because of creating a real image of a society that chokes the voices of its citizens.

This study has proved, Bhabha's claim about the issue of "diversity of cultures" and "Third space" and it revealed how at the point of interacting Iranian and American cultures a new space creates in which both groups impress each other and in this situation their viewpoint has been changed as they no longer hate each other in this new situation both Iranian and American

families found that the true values of life are not those materialistic values which the capitalistic society imposed on them. Thus at the end of the novel colonel considers Kathy as a 'blessing bird' not a 'whore', he is regretful and he does not want the house anymore, the house has lost its value for him. Even Lester as a westerner and a native American who has always looked the Behranis as inferior, at last prays for Esmail's healing. Kathy also has the same recognition, as Dubus narrates "she speaks of not caring about this house any longer" (215). Kathy figures out that all her attempts failed to regain the house. For this reason, she considers her house as a weird, strange place. At the end of the novel she does not claim for the house ownership, because the house has lost its meaning to her.

In *House of Sand and Fog*, Dubus created an opportunity to give voice to the marginalized 'Others' including the oriental immigrants and the native American women. In his narration, Dubus actually recovers the voices that were silenced during the history. Dubus accuses the oppressors of silencing and mutilating the immigrants and their females who are suppressed by patriarchal power or the marginalized Other (Kathy) who is silenced by the laws of capitalistic system. This novel displays the way Dubus empowers those who have been silenced by the colonial, capitalistic oppressors.

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