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Identity, Post-Colonialism and Writing in Peter Carey's Novel *My Life as a Fake* (2003)*

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In the "Author's Note" to his novel *My Life as a Fake*, Peter Carey explains that he was inspired by Ern Malley, a character invented by two talented Australian anti-Modernist poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart in the 1940's. These authors wanted to play a literary trick on Max Harris, editor of the *Angry Penguins* journal (Harris had published poems allegedly written by Ern Malley), and to express their anti-modernist attitudes to literature. Peter Carey, qualifying himself as a 'real' commentator on his own book *My Life as a Fake*, argues that

> [...] I believed in Ern Malley. In all simplicity and faith I believed such a person existed, and I believed it for many months before the newspapers threw their banner headline at me. For me Ern Malley embodies the true sorrow and pathos of our time [...] And I believe he really walked down Princess Street somewhere in Melbourne. (Carey 2003:278).

As can be seen from the above quotation, in this note pretending to be a convincing commentary on 'real' life and historical events, Carey mystifies this convincingness by arguing, in the last sentence, that he still believes in the existence of the fictional character Ern Malley. Thus, rather than becoming a real and serious commentary on the author's motivation for writing the novel, the "Author's Note" becomes a mystification and implies Carey's treatment of the relationship between reality and fiction, life and art, and past and present.

The convincingness of the narrated events is relativised and further mystified by the title itself, suggesting falsification, mystification and constructiveness rather than truth related to the physical identity of the characters. In his novel *My Life as a Fake*, Carey further develops the narrative strategy of establishing and subsequently mystifying, undermining and relativising physical, personal, national and cultural identities. He reveals the process of their construction in various discourses (literature, life, art, politics) in the context of various relationships often symbolically related to post-colonial discourse and the connotations associated with it.

All the main characters are inter-connected not only through their personal, physical and emotional relationships, but also through literary and geographic associations. Sarah Wode-Douglass, daughter of a prominent high-class and

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intellectual literary couple and one of the main narrators, has an Australian mother, and Christopher Chubb is an Australian writer living in Malaysia. Along with John Slater, Sarah's parents' family friend, most of the characters are directly involved in various kinds of writing, either fiction or its criticism. All are, however, displaced in different parts of the world and in different cultural contexts. Sarah, as the editor of a British literary journal, and John Slater, as an author well known among British literary circles, both hold displaced, marginal and yet central positions. Displaced and marginal because they often live outside Europe, and yet central because they become associated with one of the centers of the world's cultural production and former colonial capital of the world, that is London. This casts them into the position of certain "cultural colonizers", and through their depiction Carey further treats the relationship between dependence and independence, center and margin, colonizer and colonized, which is further extended to the treatment of the relationships between life and art, past and present, originality and falsity. Sarah's cultural propaganda through bringing literary journals to Malaysia symbolically evokes the idea of cultural colonization. She herself calls her mission "*my own bloody imperial business*" (12).

Her "central" position is further enhanced by her status as one of the main narrators telling Christopher Chubb's life story. At the same time, however, she holds a marginal, or at least less important position in connection with her relationship with Slater, who manipulates her into becoming a listener to the story of her parents' tragic life. Sarah thus becomes an object of his emotional manipulation, which finally brings her to Malaysia to meet Christopher Chubb, the main focus of her and Carey's narrative attention. On the other hand, the process of construction and development of Chubb's position and identity is slightly different. The statement "*Poor old Chubb*" (18), as the narrator comments, "*came from the dreary lower-middle-class suburbs*" (18), as Slater adds, qualify Chubb as occupying a marginal social position to be improved by the act of "imagination" and mystification of his own identity through the hoax affair in Australia. He is finally deprived of this position having fame associated with his status as a successful writer in Australia after the authorship and alleged obscenity trial in that country. Seen in this context, Australia does not evoke a metaphor of marginality in its relationship to its coloniser, that is Britain, but of its centrality as a coloniser in its own right, especially in connection with its social system and atmosphere stimulating racial prejudices. It is not only Chubb who loses his privileged status of centrality after the court verdict, but also Weiss, the editor of an Australian journal who had published Chubb's poetry under a different name and identity. It is also Weiss whose central position changes to a marginal one, not only socially being branded as criminal through being convicted of publishing obscenity but also racially since the atmosphere in Australia stimulates prejudice against his Jewish background. As pointed out above, in this context Australia does not hold the position of a marginal, oppressed and colonised country, but it also acquires the status of coloniser, and its legal system becomes a metaphor of rationality enhanced not only by

the metaphor of law, but also by the manifestation of rationality in the institution's (cf. the court's) attempt to associate identity with a stable essence. This can be seen in the court and its decision — its main interest is not to judge the quality of poetry (which is impossible to judge by 'rational laws', that is by a court), but to find the 'essence' of obscenity as manifested in isolated words taken out of context as well as in the stable, however faked, the identity of its author (cf. Chubb under the name of Bob McCorkle). In addition, this status of Australia as a coloniser is further emphasised by the character of the headmaster of a prestigious English School in Malaysia, and the school itself represents a symbol of (cultural) colonisation of Malaysia by Australia. The Australian headmaster's appearance and behavior evoke the authority of a coloniser guarding its property with force:

> [...] what appeared before him was a tall man wearing an Australian slouch hat. With the man was a Scotch terrier. When Chubb stood and waved the terrier ran back to his master, yapping fearfully. The man approached slowly through the scaly shadows, slapping a leash against his leg. He emerged in a patch of blinding sunlight which revealed a very large revolver in his hand. (180)

Christopher Chubb's position is even more paradoxical in this context. The process of the construction of his identity symbolises the process of both the construction and misconstruction of any identity, which is personal, cultural and national. The process of such a construction of identity points out the relativity of essentialism associated with the construction of the image of coloniser and colonised. In the social context, Chubb is unimportant, marginal, a low-class character whose status is further emphasised by the court's final verdict, and finally by his physical displacement and marginal position in Malaysia and Malaysian society. In addition, his status of a marginal character is further emphasised by the image of absence associated with the various roles he has. It is his role of a father without a child and without certainty about his biological fatherhood; a lover and husband without a partner or wife; a traveller without a home; a writer without identity and, finally, without the work itself since without the fixed, clear, known, verifiable identity of an author, without "biological essence", his authorship is officially rejected and considered to be non-existent.

According to Stuart Hall, who comments on the process of representation, construction of identity and enunciation in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora",

> Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write — the positions of enunciation [..]. The subject who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and

> authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim [...] We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in "context", positioned. (Hall 1993: 392).

In Hall's view,

> cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark [..]. The past [...] is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture which are made within the discourses of history and culture (Hall 1993: 395).

Carey's depiction of identity thus seems to be close to Hall's understanding of it, as it is fluid, culturally biased and contextual, hardly essential(ist) but closely connected to representation through language.

Place and Displacement

Not only Christopher Chubb, but also Sarah Douglass and John Slater often travel and live outside their home countries, which evokes a metaphor of displacement through which Carey points out a problematic nature of the idea of colonization. In their seminal study of post-colonial literatures entitled *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practise in Post-Colonial Literatures,* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (and Bill Ashcroft again in his later study on post-colonial transformation) emphasise the role of place and the use of language, its connection to power as major literary and methodological instruments of post-colonial literature, its resistance to dominant culture in the former book, and transformation in Ashcroft's own book. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989: 8-9).

In these authors' view,

> The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. There are two distinct processes by which it does this. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (1989:38)

These authors further argue that

> uses of language as untranslated words do have an important function in inscribing difference. They signify certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation. In this sense they are directly metonymic of that cultural difference which is imputed by the linguistic variation. In fact they are a specific form of metonymic figure: the synecdoche (1989:53).

The place and displacement as central concerns of the post-colonial authors along with the use of language as a sign of both difference and resistance play a significant role in Bill Ashcroft's important book *Post-Colonial Transformation,* in which he adapts these ideas and further relates them to his theory of post-colonial transformation. As mentioned above, the major characters in Carey's novel are displaced from their Australian setting and absent from their original cultural milieu. The metaphors of displacement and absence commented on above provide Carey with the opportunity to point out the problematic nature of identity and the idea of colonisation, all in the context of his interest in literary/linguistic representation of reality. In Ashcroft's view,

> the distinctive act of the cross-cultural text is to inscribe difference and absence as a corollary of cultural identity. Consequently, whenever a strategy of appropriation is used, that is, a strategy which appropriates the dominant language and inflects it in a way which transforms it into a cultural vehicle for the writer, there is an installation of difference at the very site of the meaning event (Ashcroft 2001:76).

Most of Carey's characters occupy the position of displaced characters, characters working on the margins or outside their collective identity and cultural milieu for different reasons and with different results, by the operation of which their role changes from the role of colonized, marginalised characters to the role of colonisers. Sarah becomes displaced from her Australian background (her mother is Australian) and becomes integrated, central, that is to become part of the colonising British culture by adopting its language, values and status of coloniser, and also through disseminating British culture in different parts of the world, especially in Asia. Christopher Chubb, however, abandons his, in his view snobbish and nationalist, perhaps even racist Australian culture, that is to say, the position of coloniser which he has acquired by his literary success, and comes to occupy the blank space of a traveller and doubly displaced, diasporic person in Malaysia, since he finally becomes an outcast and marginal character not only in Australia, but also in Malaysia by not becoming fully integrated.

The relativism, hybridity and problematic nature of the essentialist concept of any identity is pointed out by Carey's depiction of several characters in the book, even of Chubb's family when he is living with them. His alleged daughter's father's identity is not proved, nor is her mother's identity, who

seems to be a hybrid of Australian-Russian, Polish and Jewish identities (Carey 2003:89). The Chinese woman substituting for Noussette's mother in Malaysia in the role of Chubb's partner is in fact Chinese, although all are adapted to the Malaysian cultural background and setting. Thus Chubb's family represents a hybrid and diasporic model, again problematising the notion of cultural identity based on essentialism. This hybridity is further enhanced by the use of another symbolic means, language itself, which points out both the problematic nature of identity and the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. For example, Chubb narrates one part of his life story in the following way: "When people drifted nervously back to the big house, her bapa asked questions but they were too distressed to understand. Soon an old woman entered and this turned out to be the pawang" (Carey 2003: 206).

This use of Malayan words, and later the way of speaking, indicates Chubb's displaced and diasporic status, his symbolic resistance to essentialism, the rationality of qualifications, his resistance against colonial domination, and his transformation from coloniser (being Australian) to the symbolic, however passive, rebel. In contrast to Sarah and Slater, and in contradiction with the rationalist, consumerist and pragmatic standards of Western societies, he does not intend to become a commercial, that is a dominant and influential author and to sell his book; and his use of the language qualifies him as doubly displaced from both the contexts, that is from the context of the Australian coloniser and the Malaysian (that is central) culture.

In Bill Ashcroft's view,

> In the case of diasporic peoples, 'place' might not refer to a location at all, since the formative link between identity and its actual location might have been irredeemably severed. But all constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question: 'Where do I belong?' The place of a diasporic person's 'belonging' may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community, in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief, including nostalgia for a distant homeland. (Ashcroft 2001:125).

Ashcroft, in the above quotation, questions the notion of place and its connection to cultural identity, and prefers to emphasise smaller communities such as the family, which become the symbolic centers of cultural hybridity. In Carey's novel, all the characters meet in Malaysia, Asia, which becomes a symbolic place and a centre in which the whole (post) colonial discourse and relationships between place and identity are treated. Malaysia in this novel becomes both colonised by the British and the Australians but also a coloniser of the non-Malaysian population, Chinese, for example. It also becomes a symbolic place of cultural hybridity as represented by the Sikhs, Tamils and Chinese, but all integrated in the Malaysian culture and resisting the Australians, Europeans and other peoples and cultures. Thus, Carey's depiction of place and its connection to cultural identity reveals the problematic status of both personal and especially

cultural identity, which is never stable, fixed, or essential, but rather fluid, fragmentary, unstable and formed by the particular cultural context the places and regions have developed into in the course of history. This notion of identity is therefore closer to Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as quoted above, rather than to the essentialist concept of it.

Writing: Life and Art

Carey's depiction of Chubb, his daughter Noussette, but also of Sarah, Slater and the other characters show the process of construction of both the narrative and identity, and the relationship between life and art, original and fake, between the author, literary work and the reader, which all invoke post-structuralist themes. Since Carey's construction of Chubb and other characters refers to the process of construction of both literary and 'real' characters, and, on the allegorical level, to the construction of various national identities, by referring to the process of construction his work becomes metafictional. By metafictional I mean the term as defined and used in Patricia Waugh's book entitled *Metafiction: the Theory and Practise of Self-Conscious Fiction*, namely, it is a narrative strategy that self-consciously focuses the reader's attention onto the fictitiousness of presented events, to the language representing reality and to the process of construction of the narrative itself. In Waugh's view, metafiction is

> fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 1984:2).

Metafictional elements significantly contribute to the constitution of both the allegorical level and the postmodern character of Carey's novel. By allegory I do not mean a traditional allegory as a genre with didactic and moralizing intent, but a systematic use of imagery, symbolism and motifs constituting a postmodern, fragmented allegory disseminated throughout the text and mostly dealing with the relationship between life and art, reality and fiction, and the process of construction of the narrative through language. This understanding of allegory is expressed in Craig Owens' essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism". In Owens' view,

> In allegorical structure […] one text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest […]. Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning […]. Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its

> interpreter […]. He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement (Owens 1992: 54).

Carey's use of postmodern narrative techniques including metafiction, mixing of genres, intertextuality and self-reflexivity points out the process of construction of identity, its connection to the cultural context, the relationship between fiction and reality, and art and life. This technique reveals the power of language in the process of constitution of both narrative and identity. At the same time, postmodern narrative techniques express the undermining potential that is connected with the idea of resistance, colonisation and transformation in post-colonial discourse. On the basic narrative level, Carey's main emphasis is on the process of storytelling itself and on its power in the construction of both reality and cultural background. All the major characters are various kinds of writers who swap their positions from tellers to listeners, during the process of which they use language both to create and to manipulate physical reality and its construction. The mixing of genres in Carey's novel not only questions the relationship between fiction and reality, but it also attacks the literary process itself from within by problematising the credibility of the mimetic representation of reality. Like real historical personalities and writers such as Harold Stewart and James McAuley, who created the fictional identity of Ern Malley, Christopher Chubb also creates the fictional character of Bob McCorkle and sends the editor poetry which is qualified as highly artistically valuable. Carey, however, literalises the fictional event through the depiction of Bob McCorkle since, on the basic narrative level of the novel, McCorkle appears to be a "real" character and starts to haunt his creator, that is Christopher Chubb. This narrative act blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional and brings two different worlds, that is the worlds of fiction and reality, and two different ontological levels - real/physical and fictional/imaginative - together. Once the difference between them is blurred and eradicated they appear as equivalents. The symbolic meaning of equivalence alludes to the interchangeability of physical, fantastic, literary and other worlds and "realities". The plot construction with several embedded narratives oscillates between horror (as at the beginning of the book, an extract quoted from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), detective story and fairy tale. As in Mary Shelley's novel, also in Carey's novel a monster created by its inventor (Bob McCorkle was created by Christopher Chubb) begins to pursue the creator. McCorkle steals Chubb's baby, escapes and is haunted in turn by Chubb later. These narrative constructions are reminiscent of the horror, fantasy and detective story genres full of bizarre situations that are enriched by fairy tale elements; for instance, McCorkle as Kay reincarnated into a fantastic character living in Malaysia.

Such a plot construction and the idea of "the search" further acquire allegorical status implying other post-structuralist connotations associated with the connection between life and art, language, representation and reality.

McCorkle's search becomes not only a search for his father, that is for his creator, but also for an identity that was stolen from him by Chubb when he invented McCorkle. The literalisation of McCorkle's identity and life means the act of granting fiction the importance and status of a real entity, which is closely connected with the idea of the construction of reality through narration. Reality thus becomes 'realised', real through the process of narration. The vivification of McCorkle also implies the importance and independence of imagination and creation, which are otherwise literature and art. Chubb's search is a symbolic search not only for his child, his daughter, but also for his lost identity of a father in the symbolic role of colonizer, producer and author. And his narrative that turns out to be his life story narrated to Sarah actually becomes the subject matter of the book he has written in Malaysia and which he is hiding. The book's content is hardly mentioned but, as Sarah in the role of listener and later the author (since she is recording and retelling Chubb's story in Carey's novel) feels, it seems to be the product of a genius she wants to discover for her poetry magazine and European readership. Chubb is finally brutally murdered by his 'family', that is by his daughter Noussette and the Chinese woman living with him. What finally remains is not only Chubb's manuscript protected by these women who believe in McCorkle's authorship of the book, but also Sarah's metanarrative about all the events that may form another book. In other words, what is finally left is "the book", that is fiction which becomes reality through the process of narration published in Carey's novel. Symbolic representation of authors of books and other texts in Carey's novel recalls Roland Barthes' idea of the death of the author, that is the importance of the literary text, art and the process of narration rather than the importance of the author.

Conclusion

In his novel *My Life as a Fake*, Peter Carey uses imagery of travelling, displacement and marginality along with postmodern narrative strategies such as blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional, the use of metafiction, and postmodern allegory to deal with both post-colonial issues such as construction of identity and post-structuralist issues, such as writing, construction of literary characters, the difference between life and art, and the relationship between the writer, the literary work and the author. Through his depiction of characters with mixed and fragmented identities as well as through his use of the metaphor of displacement and travelling, he points out the complicated process of the formation of biological and cultural identity, and he simultaneously undermines the essentialist concept of identity. His depiction of characters, plot and imagery supporting the construction of relative, fragmentary and hybrid identity of his characters is close to Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity rather than to essentialist and unified concept of it. In addition, Carey's symbolic depiction of the process of colonisation reveals its relative nature in connection with the transformation of the colonised to coloniser. Finally, Carey's use of postmodern narrative strategies, especially metafiction

and post-modern allegory, enables him to treat the relationship between life and art, fiction and reality, the difference between them and between the real and fictional worlds, and to emphasise the power of imagination and storytelling. At the same time, the undermining potential of these postmodern narrative strategies supports the idea of relativisation associated with the construction of cultural identity and its essentialist concept.

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