

Locating London in Prafulla Mohanti's *Through Brown Eyes*

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Abstract

Through Brown Eyes is a classic blend of the myriad ideas of England expressed in travel-autobiographies of the post-colonial migrant genre. The article shows the author navigate the different spaces created by the city in his mind- the childish and dreamy England; picturesque and Wordsworthian England; the cosmopolitan and individualist England; the xenophobic England and the larger-than-life England. These images are not monolithic; they alter over a period of time and are an omnipresent phenomenon that Mohanti has to live with. *Through Brown Eyes* blends admiration with resentment and accommodates elements of ambivalence. The book traces the darker aspects of the West- its racial intolerance, the angst of being alienated in a foreign land and the nostalgia that

grips a lonely immigrant. It brings out the brown man's idea of England as the ethnocentric 'other'. Claiming a kind of equality, Prafulla Mohanti wrests the interpretative initiatives from the West.

Keywords: Prafulla Mohanti, London, Ambivalence, Third Space, Diaspora, Postcolonial

Life writings are, more often than not, exploration of people, spaces and locales. Physical spaces are not just geographical nomenclatures; they are porous sites that eventually develop into veritable 'contact zones'ⁱ where writers undergo an internalized exploration of the locale peripatetically and psychologically. England/London has always been the focal point in postcolonial migrant literature. The country has enticed a whole generation of travellers whose engagements with the place have resulted in a huge repertoire of travel literature. When it comes to matters pertaining to the East, England has a multiplicity of associations- it is the proverbial land of nursery rhymes- "London Bridge is Falling Down", "Pussy cat, pussy cat where have you been", "Little Jack Horner", "Ring-a-ring-a-roses" and many others; it is the land of fairy tales, castles, battles and knights in shining armour; it is the land of moors and cliffs and Dover; it is also "Mother Megalopolis"ⁱⁱ, the Empire, the "Dura desha"ⁱⁱⁱ- the archetypal and enigmatic land of dream come true. From Dean Mahomed's memoir *The First Indian Author in English, Dean Mahomed (1750-1851) in India, Ireland and England*, to T.N.

Mukharji's *A Visit to Europe* (1889); from Suniti Devi's *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1929) to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England* (1959) and Aubrey Menen's pictorial tribute of a great yet candid city *London* (1976), the city has been culturally appropriated to become a converging point of emotions of both positive and negative valence. Travellers on their first look at the city were assaulted with thoughts that contradicted their conceptual formulations regarding it. Here was England- a locale that was real yet mystical, permanent yet transient, harmonious yet conflicted and it is this fascination with the ambivalent city that solidified into the writer's inventive universe as an "imagined community"^{iv}. Hence the discovery, or rather rediscovery became a revelation on many levels which brought along with it an emotional swing, a mental turbulence that has been labeled by post-colonialists as 'ambivalence'^v. And England as a mindscape and landscape stands as the perfect metaphor for ambivalence. The country is reworked from the observer's angle- the sights and sounds of the city metamorphoses from a mere *tour d'horizon* to an inner exploration of the observer's world. The observer/writer's *tour du monde* of the cityscape is a two tiered one- dialectical and eristical^{vi}.

Prafulla Mohanti's¹ *Through Brown Eyes* achieves this as an

1) Born in 1936 in a small village called Nanpur in the eastern state of Odisha, India Prafulla Mohanti is an architect by training and an urban planner by profession. He is a noted painter, artist, and writer. He is an alumnus of Sir JJ School of Arts, Bombay. He went to England in 1960 for higher studies and earned a degree in Town Planning from Leeds College of Arts, UK. He worked

autobiography of the diaspora sort. So ambivalence in the immigrant writer not only results in nostalgia and displacement, it also unmasks the true nature of his country of residence i.e. England. It is interesting to observe how travel writers imagine the world to which they travel, and how their ways of observing and perceiving this world tells the reader not only about that world but also about the writer himself. Also it is interesting to see the strategies that are available to writers, and how these are used in their efforts to describe or imagine the world that they are describing. Diasporic writers often face what G.H. Bantock calls 'the writer's predicament'^{vii}- an amalgamation of individual dilemma and the formulation of a representative perplexity that arises as the writer tries to align his social, cultural and personal identity in an alien land.

Unlike Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England*, Prafulla Mohanti's *Through Brown Eyes* shows us an entirely different picture of England. As a post-colonial diaspora autobiography it acquaints the reader with the nostalgia and the fantasia a man from the East goes through during his stay in the West and the resolution he finally makes to carry on. As a travel writer from the East

for the Greater London Council as an Architect and Town Planner and was elected as a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, before leaving it to devote his time to writing and painting. A prolific writer, some of Mohanti's popular books are *My Village*, *My Life*, *Indian Village Tales*, *Changing Village*, *Changing Life*, and *Through Brown Eyes*. *My Village*, *My Life* was adapted into a documentary by the BBC. His paintings are known for their vibrant colours, moving brush strokes and the depiction of eternity through the abstract and symbolic Shunya (Nothingness). Prafulla Mohanti divides his time between England, the place of his residence and India, the place of his origin.

Mohanti plainly characterizes the city in the form of nostalgia that haunts the *self* each time it is caught in a severe and harsh environment. Besides, it also addresses problems related to *in-between identity* crisis. In the *rites of passage* one comes across a phase called the 'liminality'^{viii} phase. The liminal state is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. One's sense of identity dissolves to some extent, bringing about disorientation. This is the *in-between identity* crisis. Prafulla Mohanti deftly handles his phase of liminality to normalize his thoughts and enhance his self- understanding of the space he inhabits. At the end we see a much relaxed Mohanti shedding light on newer perspectives about London.

Through Brown Eyes, expresses the diasporic writer's dilemma and what post-colonial critics call as the '*arsenal of complexes*'. Besides, it should be remembered that it is also the autobiography of an artist- it is an impressionistic record of events, situations and understanding of an unfamiliar and hostile world. It represents the artist's refusal to compromise with the homogenizing tendencies of a society that no longer fostered a coherent and accepted set of values. The book weaves a paradoxical tale of an individual's experience of isolation in the proverbial land of picture-perfect England. The 'isolation' referred to is in fact a source of strength as well as weakness, "I wandered around Leeds. Wherever I looked I could see only grey- grey buildings, grey churches, and grey skies. A thick layer of dirt had collected over the Victorian Town hall and nobody had bothered to clean it. But when I went

to the school and saw friendly faces I felt optimistic. I decided I must somehow overcome the difficulties and complete the course” (68).

Through Brown Eyes attempts to heal the rift between intellectual abstraction and the ever-present flow of feelings caused in a physical albeit alien domain. Unlike European travel writings, diasporic travelogues stress on the individuality of the traveller and the place visited; they seek to emphasize the uniqueness of poetic utterance along with purely personal expressions of felt experiences. The world thus perceived can be captured only in dissociated images or stream of consciousness musings, or, to be more precise, stream of conscious autobiographical musings. Gilbert Ryle in his book *The Concept of Mind* states that “Novelists, dramatists and biographers had always been satisfied to exhibit people’s motives, thoughts, perturbations and habits by describing their doings, sayings, and imaginings, their grimaces, gestures and tones of voice...”² Quintessentially it is an autobiography that employs artfully what E.W.F. Tomlin terms “The language of thought”^{ix}. The book lives beyond the confines of pages and communicates with the external world an idea of England. It is eristic in nature i.e. it fulfils the concealed aim of presenting the author’s eye-witness accounts objectively and thereby impressing on the minds of the audience the right image and idea of the West.

Prafulla Mohanti is an Indian writer based in England. And it is

2) Gilbert Ryle, 2009. Psychology, *The Concept of Mind*, Routledge, p. 301.

his formative years and the place of birth that form the crux of his autobiography. These are influences that shaped him and the influences that help us see the western world in a new light. Interestingly, Mohanti's autobiography goes a step further and also examines the sordid realities of Indian life, our long and rich cultural heritage, grass-root politics, and an operational democracy, which is beset with gross inequality, populist politics, banal-print capitalism, and widespread illiteracy. In his autobiography we are exposed to a new set of perspectives. The East was often perceived as the 'other'. But paradoxically, in *Through Brown Eyes* it is England that is transformed into the 'other'. This is because the real England that meets the eye is very different from the 'other' England, whose maps and history one is made to memorize in school. Jamaica Kincaid says that her first encounter with England was in the form of a map, in school. She describes it as "laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel..." (31). But then, she goes on to add ironically it also resembled "a leg of mutton" (31). Thus the idea of England for the natives of the East can be said to be 'bookish' or 'mappish'. Post-colonialists hold the view that European texts have become important signifiers of cultural value. Elleke Boehmer elucidates,

The social worlds of Europe, urbanized, orderly, cool, snow-covered, definitively genteel, and laden with the outward trappings of text-based knowledge (bookshelves, maps, spectacles, etc), were always represented as elevated and advanced in relation to the uncouth, disorderly, and so-called text-bereft spaces of the colonial periphery. Representations such as these

were then further reinforced by colonial natives' prescribed reading, where the only texts deemed worthy of attention were European, even if the worlds they described bore little relation to contexts in which they were being consumed.³

And as in every colonized native's case, the European text trappings have also had a strong hold on the author's psyche. The textual England has slipped into the little boy's consciousness imperceptibly. He revels in childish delights singing the rhyme 'Pussy Cat, pussy cat, where have you been?' to his pet cat and asking her in English "Have you been to London to see the Queen?" (9). Prafulla Mohanti's association with 'bilat'^x or England to be specific is established with the village astrologer's prediction: 'He drew diagrams on the mud floor and declared solemnly, "This boy will go to Bilat"' (1). Acquainted with places like 'Kataka' (Cuttack) or 'Kalikata' (Calcutta), the idea of travelling to a foreign land intrigues the child. He studies hard in order to make it to, "...the country where the Gora Sahibs lived" (1). "...They were the Rajas of India" (1), the superlative idea of England had been infused into his thought process right from kindergarten days. Prafulla Mohanti very jocularly says, his father "...used to talk about them as if they were Gods" (13). Likewise, Jamaica Kincaid too recalls that when their teacher in school pointed out "This is England" (32) on the map, she did with an authority, seriousness and adoration that made the little

3) Elleke Boehmer, 2006. Postcolonialism, Patricia Waugh(ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism*, OUP, p. 358.

girl wonder, whether she was talking of the holy city of Jerusalem—“the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good”. That was colonized Antigua. In tiny Nanpur the simple villagers took great pride in serving the ‘sahibs’- “The village headman sent presents of goats, vegetables, fruits and flowers” (13). As a school kid, the author dreams up a very maternal picture of the English Queen - “The whole image of Queen Victoria, the cat and the frightened mouse made me feel close to her as if she was my grandmother” (9). But English history (the Battle of Hastings and the Battle of Waterloo together) presents England as aggressive. In the child’s mind it takes the shape of a little island that’s peopled with hostile and violent individuals relentlessly displaying a belligerent attitude. But the ideas are like quicksilver. The more he becomes aware, the thoughts progressively begin to reinvent themselves. He avidly reads stories like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and poems like Wordsworth’s *Daffodils* and paints a romantic picture of his favourite country as filled with bears, forests and flowers “I visualized England as a land of daffodils, like the yellow mustard fields along the bank of the river” (11). England is ‘seen’ through a series of references and representations in the form of a picture, books, and historical texts. As the author comes into contact with the vast English literary world, he begins to enjoy it all the more. W.H. Davies’s poem *Leisure* becomes his favourite as it represents his own attitude to life—“What is this life if, full of care/ We have no time to stand and stare”. This statement becomes, a leitmotif around

which all his experiences in the foreign land are woven. Because the bookish idea of England is shaken when he actually encounters English life and experiences its sights and sounds. In *On Seeing England for the First Time*, Jamaica Kincaid rightly states that “The space between the idea of something and its reality, is always wide and deep and dark” (37). Thus she makes clear the idea of England by stating that it is a space that lies between the concept and the actuality (the space in question, at this point, being England). Similarly memoirs and travel narratives are organized and articulated around the problematic ‘other’, as envisaged by the author’s eye. And it is through this narrative that the ‘other’ is translated. An oscillation between the idea of England and the nostalgia for home is clearly visible. In some odd way, England and India seem to overlap in the author’s mind. Thus it is natural that the author, towards the end of the book, visualizes India as a, “...beautiful country, with kind and friendly people. You can find everything- blue skies and golden sun, miles of sandy beaches, snow covered mountains, green paddy fields, lakes, rivers, and streams with clear blue water, caves and temples with ancient sculptures, forests with tigers, elephants, and dancing peacocks. I believed what I said to my English friends and longed to go back” (215). It is not unusual to come across writers of the East drawing a very surreal and fictitious picture of England only to paint it with the brush of sarcasm and irony later. Like Mohanti, Jamaica Kincaid, too, shares a similar predicament. Her London is one where,

...the weather was so remarkable because the rain fell gently always, only occasionally in deep gusts, and it coloured the air various shades of grey, each an appealing shade for a dress to be worn when a portrait was being painted; and when it rained at twilight, wonderful things happened: people bumped into each other unexpectedly and that would lead to all sorts of turns of events- a plot, the mere weather caused plots.⁴

One can take a note of the hidden innuendoes and satirical tone aimed at the illusory idea of England. Thus there are two worlds in the narrative- the world of the narrator in which the 'other' is described and the original world of the narrator (which is reflected in the 'other' world). The two worlds are irreconcilable and cannot be brought into harmony with each other. Thus one can see that the idea is more powerful than the reality. The idea of something and its reality are often two completely different things and not compatible. *Through Brown Eyes* is a classic example of what Northrop Frye terms as 'imaginative dystrophy'⁵.

'Arrival' has many hidden layers to it. It elucidates the fact that 'arrival' is a contradiction in terms. "I did not think the sun could shine so brightly in England" (1). On the surface it exposes the reader to the sunny side of English life: clean environment, disciplined life, efficient management of affairs- from transport, to buying a ticket or grocery from the mart. "Everything looked so clean. The trains in India were always crowded and the passengers had to fight to get into them. The seats were so dusty

4) Jamaica Kincaid, 1991. On Seeing England for the First Time, *Transition*, 51, p. 35.

5) Elleke Boehmer, 1995. *Colonial & Post Colonial Literature*, OUP, p. 205.

that they had to be wiped before sitting down. Here, the seats were upholstered and travel seemed simple” (2). But ‘arrival’ also means arriving at a compromise, which the author is ultimately forced to effect in order to make his stay in England possible. He arrives as a visitor thinking of “England as a land of daffodils, crocuses, passing showers and floating clouds. Men wore bowler hats and carried umbrellas, which they seldom opened. There was no poverty and people were honest and fair, like my friend Tom” (24). Unfortunately he soon arrives at the conclusion that his idea of England was but a pipe dream. In more ways than one, the word ‘arrival’ seems to have the attributes of a hypernym to suggest the broader aspects of an expatriate’s journey. He leaves for England in the monsoon. The rough sea makes him sick, but he tries to keep himself distracted- “The boat was like a small floating England” (24). So, there is an excitement in the air as the P & O Ship docks at Tilbury on a bright July morning, “I opened the port-hole and saw hundreds of seagulls flying around. The water was muddy but the sun was glistening on it” (1). The young architect has travelled far, to finally arrive at the country of his imaginings, which is new and unsullied, “The sky was blue and the air fresh. I felt excited. I was in a new country, the country of my dreams. I had come to England for further qualifications and experience after graduating as an architect from Bombay University” (1). When he steps into the English soil for the first time, the Immigration Officer greets Prafulla Mohanti politely, “I hope you

will be as happy in my country as I was in yours" (1). It is a very interesting observation as it marks the beginning of a journey that is not only bitter-sweet but illusion-shattering too. But the author's initial experiences in the strange land are very enjoyable and pleasant. As soon as he alights from Liverpool street station, the author is immediately struck by a dichotomy between the Western and the Eastern. The architecture reminds him of the Victoria terminus in Bombay but as soon as he steps out into the street, he observes "Instead of brown faces there were white faces everywhere" (3). The neat houses with tiled roofs and trimmed gardens convey a sense of well-being and fulfillment so much absent in India. He is made to feel very welcome by his friend Tom and his mother. The quiet and ordered atmosphere elates the new-comer. Later in the narrative one comes across this silence, which brings a jarring note into the author's harmonious living in the land of childish fantasies. Living in isolation in a little village-Nanpur, the author had never been aware of the existence of such a world. Thus, the first sight of Thames disillusions him, "... I was terribly disappointed. It looked like an Indian canal. I was used to wide rivers with banks of clean white sand" (3). No wonder, it gives the impression of an inland waterway to someone who has been brought up on the notion that rivers meant huge water bodies like the Mahanadi or the Godavari. Similar to Mohanti's is Nirad Chaudhuri's response to the rivers, in 'By The Rivers of England' in his travel- memoir, *A Passage to England*. The rivers in England are a scenic compliment to the

surroundings and pose a contrast to the rivers the author has known all his life. In India people have never tried to bridge the gap between the rivers and themselves. But in England the rivers acquire a kind of 'territoriality'. Unlike the English, for whom rivers are an elemental part of life and civilization, we Indians remain in contact with our water-bodies only through religion. Nirad Chaudhuri's eye for detail and his strong acumen give us the sharp contrast between the two cultures. He finds the English rivers "wild in origin but cultivated in behaviour" (39). But Indian rivers are romanticized and revered. Life, landscape and rivers form an integral part of England to the observer. Mohanti also gives us a glimpse of English life as it is lived at an everyday level. His England is very hostile and insipid in comparison, unlike the rivers-

I thought Surbiton was a good example of suburbia. I had read about London suburbs during my course in architecture. These were the places where people lived and travelled to London every day to work. There were a few blocks of flats, but most people lived in detached or semi-detached houses with front and back gardens. In the mornings I saw the men with brief-cases hurrying to the stations to catch their trains. They returned between five and seven. In the afternoons the streets were deserted and I wandered around admiring the flowers in the carefully laid out gardens (28).

Besides, this section displays a duality in the author's approach towards the peculiarities of English life, because impression here essentially connotes an indistinct notion, remembrance, or belief

regarding the appearance of England. Moreover, the author had impressed upon his mind since early childhood a certain idea and image of England, which is not only paradoxical but ambiguous as well. He does and sees things, which have never been familiar to him. It makes him uncomfortable- "Groups of people were sunbathing in the parks; half-naked young men and women kissed and cuddled..." (3). It is a weird experience for a person coming from an Indian rural setup, "In India people always hide from the sun and there is no free mixing between boys and girls..." (3). Thus, the recollections of his first impressions are very vivid and thorough and add to the author's gamut of experiences-

I sat by the window watching the lingering twilight. I was not prepared for it and found it difficult to go to bed... I was used to sleeping on hard beds made of wood... and in the village I often slept on a straw mat on the mud floor. But the bed Tom had supplied for me was too soft and I felt uncomfortable (27).

His initial days in England are very amusing, "The next morning the birds sang and woke me up. I looked through the window and saw the sun shining again. The grass in the garden looked like a green carpet. I saw the squirrels jumping from branch to branch" (27). The daily routine of the people around him- the well-kept and attractive shops- the pubs- the National Health babies- milk bottles- the honest attitude of common folk- the Royal Parks and the Hyde Park add to the list of lovely surprises.

“The shops were always well-kept with an attractive display of goods. I liked Waltons. The fruit was clean and polished, graded to size, and kept neatly in boxes” (28). The scrupulous and systematic arrangements of sundry chores that actually prove to be quite a hassle for people in India, astonish him,

The local shops and the milkman delivered groceries and milk in proper milk bottles. The laundryman brought the clothes. They put them outside the door and every week collected the money, which was left in envelopes. The door was rarely locked. I thought English people were very honest and wrote to my parents about it (29).

Mohanti’s day out with his friend Tom, proves to be remarkable in more ways than one,

We went from Surbiton to Waterloo by train and then to Piccadilly Circus by Underground. It was a terrifying experience and I felt shut in and unable to breathe. I kept wondering what would happen if the doors did not open or the tunnel collapsed. When we reached Piccadilly Circus I ran up the stairs as quickly as possible, but the noise of the traffic in the streets was overpowering and I found it impossible to talk to Tom while walking on the pavement. There were so many people that I thought I might get separated from Tom and be lost in the crowd. I caught hold of his hand but he drew it away. ‘It’s not done in England’ (30-31).

Beneath the politeness the author pries a touch of impersonality; the order and meticulous nature is in fact a façade. It cleverly conceals a self-centered attitude on life,

At Surbiton station newsvendors cried out, '*Star, News, Standard*'. I read about the Great Train Robbery, children being murdered, and stories of divorce. I was brought up to respect education but in England more importance was given to money. The footballers earned more than the teachers. Church services were thinly attended; football grounds were full (50).

The silence and loneliness begin to have a numbing effect on him. There is no one to talk to or share experiences with. The regimented life affects the soul of the artist. As the days go by, the author gets exposed to the other side of London, which is egocentric, racially torn and discriminating, "Later on, when I moved around London, I saw notices in estate agents' windows: 'No blacks, no Irish, no children, no dogs'" (35). The London traffic and the journey by underground train asphyxiate him, "They were always full and I had to stand all the way. The journey took nearly one hour and when I arrived wearing all my new clothes I felt so exhausted..." (35). People in England seem to be always in a tearing hurry. They not only rush to catch trains and trams and buses, but they also rush toward and away from each other- another peculiarity of English life that baffles the newly arrived.

Mohanti's first job as an architect at the Town Planning Institute brings him face to face with partisan office politics, "To my dismay my first job was to design a lavatory. Plumbing was not my favourite subject but I was being paid for my work and I could not refuse... I thought I would be spending the rest of my life designing lavatories" (36). He fails to get the required and much deserved promotion and resigns. He realizes that he isn't

the only one; there are a number of similar hapless employees too, "I met a couple of young Indian architects doing work similar to mine. Like my office, instead of designing they were simply assembling, providing space to accommodate prefabricated fittings" (36). Nevertheless the author writes with a note of hope, as he tries to preoccupy himself with the greenery around him and the concerts and theatres as well. The foliage, which at first seems monotonous, gradually reveals an element of variety to the artist in Mohanti. Bach becomes his favourite much to the surprise of Englishmen, who find his compositions difficult to appreciate. According to the writer, Bach's music touched his "inner self" (42) due to its "spiritual content" (42). Sudden showers and winter bring in a sense of desolation and along with it the longing for the warm Indian sun. Meanwhile, he does enjoy the sight of snow- the white flakes falling gracefully and enveloping the entire city giving it a surreal look. The observations made by the author are not only graphic but also full of meaning. It is as if he is trying to peer through the veneer of people and things he comes across, to justify his previous imaginings on the land of his dreams,

We visited some expensive department stores. The customers were well-fed and well-dressed. There seem to be so much wealth in London but so much poverty in India. How could the British get so rich, I wondered. They stayed in India for two hundred and fifty years but did nothing to develop India. Tom said, "The British gave India the railways. They were the rulers. They went to India to build their empire, not to develop India" (32-33).

Indeed, the sun does not shine always and the magic begins to wear off, gradually. The description of various nuances of Englishness i.e. his visit to the church, the concept of Christmas and giving gifts, the unusual food and dressing habits is detailed and humorous. He finds the atmosphere inside the church claustrophobic: the absence of music, colour and congregation depresses him. Temples in India bustle with life and silence is an anathema to the Indian way of offering prayers. The sight of Jesus nailed to the cross distresses him. The idea of suffering as a symbol of godhood is a shock for a man who equates God with love and life. The admittance of shoes and leather accessories into St. Paul's Cathedral comes as a sort of culture-shock. He finds it revolting and unhygienic. For an Indian the concept of kingship is peculiarly connotative- magnificent, spectacular, full of pomp and ceremony. So, when as a tourist Prafulla Mohanti gets a glimpse of the Buckingham Palace, it proves to be very disappointing—

...I was expecting something spectacular. The kings, queens, and emperors of ancient India lived in magnificent palaces and I could not imagine the Queen of the British Empire could live in such an insignificant building (31).

During his stay with Tom and his family, the author comes across many out-of-the-world experiences. He loathes the idea of taking a bath in a tub, but at the same time appreciates the English people's sense of health and hygiene. Similarly, he finds the 'dog-in-the-kitchen' idea very polluting; even if it's a pet. As the cold

season sets in, the use of extra layers of warm clothes intimidates him. Mohanti comically describes his new image as that of a “brown sahib” (34) complete with a scarf and a trilby,

I went to Kingston to buy suitable clothes and travelled by trolley-bus... I was advised to go to Hepworths and told how to get there. It was a small shop and the manager treated me as a special customer. He reminded me of the tailors in Bombay who treated every customer as special. I bought myself a suit, a raincoat with a lining, and a pair of woolen trousers. I had to make my Indian shoes waterproof by sticking rubber soles on them... Tom's mother advised me to wear a hat to protect myself from the rain and the cold. She gave me a scarf and a trilby hat. I looked at myself in the mirror. I liked my new image of a 'brown sahib' but only for a while. I soon realized it was not really me and started wearing my Indian-style clothes (33-34).

The charm of looking like the ‘white sahib’ quickly wears off. The incident reminds one of Gandhi’s experiments and Nehru’s fetish for the western wear. The ‘chimney pot hat’, the suit from Bond Street put on by Gandhiji and the ‘English dandy’ image of Nehru- all hint at the efforts made by the West to make the East conform to its way of life and living, but in vain. Again, the expression “Brown Sahib” deserves attention. It indicates the heavy western (usually British) influence on the colonized race’s culture and its thinking processes. Wearing a trilby, a coat, and trousers is a sign of being “elite”; the Indian/Eastern way of dressing is uncouth and dirty-- this was one of the many Oriental perceptions of the West. ‘Brown’ is a many-layered leitmotif in

Mohanti's autobiography. On the first level- it symbolizes bigotry as a formidable aspect of Western pretence; secondly, it gives shape to the ambivalence in the form of the "brown man's burden"- the brown man is a cross between his native self and his westernized self, a more complex form of the simple 'baboo' which was another 'exotic' creation of the British bureaucracy; thirdly, it articulates the problem of acculturation; fourthly, it speaks of the West's outlook towards the East as it projects a utopian idea of England, in the form of cultural imperialism, the angst of feeling *dispossessed* as V.S. Naipaul says and last but not the least it signifies the colonization of the body, mind, spirit, cultural ethos and the thinking of the conquered community. In his essay 'Brown Sahib's Burden', Venkat Lakshminarayan gives a very fitting comment on this idea of the 'Brown Sahib'. He says,

The new sahibs had forgotten that it was the Brown that generated a glorious civilization with some of the greatest contributions to the arts, sciences, philosophy and spirituality that towards the betterment of the human race... Ordinary brown people had an understanding of these but they were marginalized in the intellectual discourse and would not be listened to. The new sahibs forgot their past and began to deny their present. While aping their white masters they began to believe that nothing good could come out of their own, any good ought to come out of elsewhere. Where else, but from the land of the white! Brown indeed has become a burden to these new sahibs.

Brown also denotes something quintessentially English. Jamaica Kincaid uses the idea of a 'brown felt hat' as a metaphor for the

charm of English life in 'On Seeing England for the First Time'. Her father uses a brown felt hat and it is one of his most prized possessions. Felt is certainly the right kind of material for a hat to protect one from the scorching Antiguan sun. But the picture of an Englishman in a brown felt hat was alluring enough for the native Antiguan and he just couldn't resist wearing one himself. The only difference being, Prafulla Mohanti gives up the 'brown sahib' image to retain his individuality. But Kincaid's father becomes too obsessed with it to give it up. The result was wearing the wrong hat in a hot climate all his life. It almost becomes a central part of his character, she says- "it was the first thing he put 'on' in the morning as he stepped out of bed and the last thing he took off before he stepped back into bed at night." Thus we can speculate that 'Brown' has an entire array of experiences and connotations attached to it. It not only signifies the East but paradoxically is innately British. The passage from brown hat to brown skin and *vice versa* stands as a classic testimony to the ambivalence on both sides. Homi Bhabha in the keynote essay *Of Mimicry and Man* (1985) states that,

The colonial system required that the colonized aspire to remake themselves in the image of the European, to become at once secondary to the colonizer and also (necessarily) other to what they were before. Yet, as they were not in fact European, or indeed white, there was always a slippage or *hybridization*, however subtle in the meanings that they thus worked to

reiterate.⁶

But all said and done, the country is not without its bewitching charms. The author describes English life with the gusto of a traveller out to savour fresh experiences of a new found land,

Tom's mother lived in a small village surrounded by green fields. It had a church, a pub, and a shop. The houses were grouped around the village green which had a pond with ducks swimming on it. Willow trees drooped over its bank. Her cottage was small, like a doll's house, with everything neatly arranged" (40).

When he sees farm workers going to the fields and cows grazing, it reminds him of Nanpur. He finds the typical English pub, "... full of smoke and noise" (42) and the English beer too bitter for his taste. Similarly, the good organization in public transport is a happy surprise for the author, as travel by train or bus becomes a safe option. Simultaneously, commuting long distances to work turns out to be irksome. A perceptive man, he finds English country life exhilarating and takes long walks,

The countryside was beautiful, with cornfields, hedges, ponds, and streams. I put my raincoat on the grass and lay down. I saw the blackbirds hopping and rabbits running from field to field. I stopped at hedges and picked blackberries. Wild flowers bloomed along the path and at a distance the church tower gave the undulating countryside a distinct character (39).

6) Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 356.

He does not ignore the country's beauty or the scenic seasonal changes on the environment, "I thought how beautiful England was and wanted to capture its spirit in my sketches" (39). Autumn adds a lot of bright colour to the otherwise dour cityscape. The reddish-brown and yellow surroundings with the blue sky above infuse positive feelings. Ice-creams, television, tasting of English beef and pork, the frequent use of 'please', 'sorry' and 'thank-you' (50) without the slightest sincerity, all add to the repertoire of fresh 'English' experiences; "As I was getting into the train an Englishwoman pushed me with her shoulders, said 'sorry'. And hurried inside to occupy the only vacant seat" (50). Nevertheless he enjoys the new experiences for a while.

Christmas in England with Tom and colleagues gives an insight into the celebration without any real involvement or feelings. He finds it very mechanical and too formal. It is the only time in the year to remember friends and relatives and send them cards. Affections are measured accordingly. The parties are neither entertaining nor interesting. They are thronged by the eating and drinking chatterati of the town. Prafulla Mohanti makes an interesting observation-"It was a time to be nice to everybody, but after Christmas the smiling faces became gloomy again" (44). Nevertheless, he enjoys the festival: decorating the tree with ornaments, hanging cards in the living room, opening crackers and gifts with Tom's family. The huge stuffed turkey on the dinner table makes him uncomfortable. So does the Christmas pudding. He finds the 'brandy-pouring' ceremony an utter waste. But he eventually

settles down to have a good time. For any Hindu the idea of eating beef/pork is sacrilege. When the author is confronted with the dilemma of incorporating beef into his eating habit, he takes refuge in excuses "I convinced myself that beef in England came from English cattle, which were not holy like Indian cattle" (47). His approach is apologetic: "Since I was not a strict vegetarian and ate lamb, I could eat beef" (47). He adapts and acclimatizes to the place as later he admits that it made his stay in England much more comfortable and easy. He liked the taste.

Another extremely English custom that the author found a bit difficult to cope with was the idea of 'privacy'. He found it strange to be living in an apartment and not knowing the next-door neighbour. Too much curiosity about the life of others is a violation of propriety. The Christian dictum of loving one's neighbour, suddenly seemed so out of place. Even after a year, the writer fails to comprehend the English mind. But, while on his way to the office, as he observes his fellow commuters, his previous convictions prove to be very wrong. The people hide their faces behind newspapers and hardly talk amongst each other. But they seem to be gifted with the art of gossiping without being too intimate. Being an Indian, the author sometimes feels like an object on display when Englishmen stare at him or pass embarrassing remarks in social gatherings. He finds it pretty rude for people who seem to be so reticent about matters relating to their own lives. The love for football and the neglect towards Church and the elderly appall the Indian in

Mohanti- “I had come to England to study modern architecture but I had found nothing but apathy” (51). The architect and the artist within him suffer. He is left to draw only straight lines “using T- squares and set- squares” (41). His freedom to express becomes restricted. His talents remain dormant. So he starts to paint in order to unwind and liberate his soul from the oppressively monotonous routine. Suddenly, the British, known for their strict adherence to decorum and aesthetics appear imaginatively pathetic and visionless. Disheartened, he decides to leave England. The thought of a second English winter depresses him.

But the thought of an uncertain future in Orissa compels him to accept the offer from the Leeds School of Town Planning. He returns to England and his life takes a new direction. But xenophobia, then gaining momentum in the suburbs, disrupts the tranquility in the life of the artist. From admittance in colleges to taking up rent, the man comes face to face with the seedy and foul face of England. It is shocking and traumatizing for someone who has been told that as an artist, he belongs to the entire universe. Alone in a strange surrounding facing racial prejudice, he feels humiliated and vulnerable. “I felt like an untouchable” (67), he says. The line reminds one of the poignant sentences in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*, “My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me”. Mohanti’s encounter with his brown-ness is akin to what Fanon espouses,

'Are you black?
'No, I'm brown.
'Light or dark?
'Is the colour of my skin important?'
'I'm sorry, the room is gone.' (64)

Frantz Fanon's statement, "White men consider themselves superior to black men"⁷, and black men internalizing this inferiority and donning white masks by undergoing a transformation called the 'Crisis of Europe', is not at all wrong. The crisis of Europe pertains to aping the European man and cultivating a Euro-reason. Prafulla Mohanti's search for lodgings in Leeds in the early 1960s begins in such a fashion. It leads to the eventual collapse of the concept of a dreamland and 'Leeds' conveys an air of desolation. The experience was, and still is, common for all black and ethnic communities living in Britain. But there is something peculiarly shocking about this particular account. It is in many ways reminiscent of the writer's journey through the 'Slough of Despond'. The morbid and grey setting seems to reflect the state the writer is in. The blue sky and the green atmosphere disappear in the haze and smoke of the industrial fumes. Dirt, filth and grime replace the unsoiled and fresh look of the metropolis, "I had no idea that people in England lived in such unhealthy conditions" (73). He graphically describes the population inhabiting the town. It is a "city of contrasts"(72)- well-dressed couples in

7) Frantz Fanon, 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, p. 3.

chauffeur-driven cars as opposed to ragamuffins; fighting and quarreling youth; Victorian buildings like the famous 'Queen's Hotel' resplendent with ornamented architecture and well-kept gardens juxtaposed with "back-to-back houses without proper ventilation, sanitation, or washing facilities" (73). Sheffield turns out to be a town enveloped in black dust and sulphur vapours. As a member of the Town Planning School, he tries to present before the authorities the problems of the townsfolk. But he is met with diffidence and discouragement everywhere. His housing projects become the object of much negative comment. He incurs the displeasure of his interviewers when he argues about their lack of far-sight in town and house planning; and receives extremely poor marks in his exams. Originality in Indian pupils is not appreciated—"People don't like new ideas in England", his Polish teacher tells him (75). A unique feature that is evident in Mohanti's writings is that he keeps oscillating between the two poles. His love- hate relationship with England gives one the impression of a Hamletian dilemma. For instance, his first perception of his new surroundings is that of a dull and lifeless place full of sick and urinating men; yet he finds Leeds "a perfect example of a Victorian city with a great sense of unity" (72). It does seem strange to a reader to understand this complexity in the author's mind. The decrepit city has a romantic charm, too, in his view—"spectacular views of the roofs and chimneys of industrial Leeds" changing character "in mist, snow, and at night when the lights are on" (78). One can label it as optimism or sheer determination.

As an afterthought, one can say that this multifaceted character of a place, though paradoxical, appeals to South Asian minds, because their pluralist culture views life in a holistic rather than in a bipolar manner.

The atmosphere, which was once bright and sunny, turns grey and finally metamorphoses into something deeper and darker. In 'East End' he encounters the disparities dividing the East and West; and the sense of being discriminated is all the more pronounced. The swing in the writer's point of view is perceptible in this case also. He believes East End to be full of honest and friendly people. He acquires the coveted '*bilati*' qualification but is yet to carve a niche for himself as an entity in their society. He observes life pulsating around him as an outsider. East End and West End are worlds apart. A chasm between the haves and the have-nots becomes visible. Mohanti notices the rift between the prim and proper London and the racially tense, poverty-ridden world of the immigrants. He joins the G.L.C (Greater London Council), which in spite of all its negative attributes, gives him a "sense of belonging" (110). A better qualified architect, he is employed at the lowest grade—"It was unthinkable for an Indian to be working as a senior officer" (111). Everywhere he goes identification is required. The question of identity becomes a question relating to his very existence in England—"I knew there was something wrong with the system..." (111). Home and village are ever present in the writer's sub-conscious. Wistful, he returns to India. "After the slums of East End, New Delhi looked like a garden city,

with tree-lined avenues and monumental government buildings. The sun was shining and the sky was blue. I felt happy” (114). It is weird but true that human nature is the same everywhere. Biases and prejudices are an essential part of man’s make-up. The Delhi trip makes the writer realize this. The Indians, who looked so affable and welcoming in England, prove to be hypocritical and selfish. His Indian counterparts become jealous of his English degree. This poses a hindrance to his acquiring a decent job as an architect with the Planning Commission. “I felt I was being treated as an outsider” (114). All the love and sense of duty for one’s motherland goes up in smoke. Political contacts and monetary influence are needed to gain a position in any organization. All the professionals who come back to their homeland to settle down after obtaining a foreign degree face this problem. Red-tapism in India is characterized by inefficiency and mismanagement of resources and time. The law enforcers and the ministers have a very callous attitude towards growth and welfare. Though Mohanti is offered a job at the Planning Commission, he is unable to cope with the shallow work ethic. The corrupt system suffocates him. He feels lost in his own country where people are busy aping the West blindly. Disillusioned, he leaves for England and decides to fulfill his dreams by straddling across the two continents. Once again a sense of despondency sweeps over him. Even though the atmosphere in East End is gloomy, his work at the office gives him a sense of purpose. He puts it beautifully—“A part of me was

in India, suffering with the villagers and the other was here, struggling to find an identity" (122).

"Paki"

"Hit him"

"It is not nice to abuse people"

"Yaah" (135)

This horrific incident leaves Prafulla Mohanti stunned. He spends many a sleepless night speculating on his life engulfed by a miasma of fear. When he tries to speak out or share his agony, people become reticent. Nobody wants to accept the fact that racial bias had become so prevalent in England. The hostility towards immigrants is appalling—"Don't these West Indians show off? I think they suffer from an inferiority complex" (137). The non-British staffs of any office/ institution are made to work hard and are treated like beggars at the same time. They seem to have forfeited their right to justice. He meets in the course of his stay, people who have changed their names (his friend Pankaj Mukherjee is now Peter Martin), in order to ward off hostility and discrimination in British society. The writer is disturbed at such events because "in India it is taken for granted that the British are just, honest, and fair" (141). An artist, he feels it demeaning to indulge in the act of currying favour to win a promotion. He feels trapped in G.L.C. The thought of stagnation bothers him. It looks like life is passing him by. After four enervating years, he quits G.L.C and begins to take up the cause of the poor and

downtrodden in India. But the village problems take up too much of his time. There's little respite and he longs for the peace and isolation of his London life. In Nanpur, he is unable to reflect and express his self through creative work.

Dancing becomes a second mode of self-realization and attainment of tranquility. Like his paintings, his dance gestures and movements acquire an abstract quality. According to the artist, music and costumes restrict the free flow of self-expression. He is able to create a contemplative ambience for himself and the spectators as well, when he performs at the Institute of Contemporary Art and The Place. He develops this at a time when it is needed most. He imparts dancing lessons to all the children in the area. It affords psychological succour to him. Regrettably, it is during this time that he becomes a victim of blatant racial iniquity and is hit and abused by a group of anti-socials while on his way home in Wapping,

“Indians and Pakis stink of curries”

“Hit him! Hit him!”

“I saw a hand coming towards me” (159).

The atrocious act leaves him scarred for a long time. He cries whenever he goes to see his doctor. The very sight of East End causes panic in him. Nightmares haunt his days and nights. The scene makes it obvious that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is inherently exploitative, hierarchical and conflictual. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon says,

“Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (48). Once again, the need for love and security takes him back to his parents at Nanpur. Living in terror and apprehension becomes a natural part of his life. It became difficult on his part even to walk along the once scenic and solitary streets of Wapping. But he isn't the only one to bear the brunt of racial fanaticism. Every immigrant has fallen a prey to it in various ways; be it a piece of fascist literature, petty crimes like stone-throwing or snatching, or physical assault. The romantic image of East End is ultimately shattered. In the view of the author, it helps him “to understand life in England and played an important role in my development as an artist and writer” (168). In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon says,

I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me on the basis of colour prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason. It was up to the white man to be more rational than I. Out of the necessities of my struggle I had chosen the method of regression, but the fact remained that it was an unfamiliar weapon; here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I wade in the irrational (93).

This is exactly the mental dilemma that Mohanti faces in East End. Like Fanon, he finds the internalization of anger very crucial to his psychological orientation and in enabling him to assert his

self-determination on the situation. He sees the world going from bad to worse. For him Pimlico is a place where the cream and the crust of the city reside side by side. But life isn't congenial. The sense of decadence is highlighted through the iconic representation of annihilation. The racial hostility continues to haunt him. The once disciplined foreigners seem so devious and extremist-

“The door is locked”, I said
“It's the other door”
“I didn't see any other door”
“Jesus, are you blind?”, he said
“Why are you shouting?”
“Fuck off, you Indian nit”, he said and left. (185)

The scene in the park, where the author sits down to write a letter and becomes the object of despicable insults [“Go away you Paki bastard”] (202), is revolting indeed. The disavowal that greets him from all sides saddens him. The grit and mental resilience does not allow him to concede defeat. “I have learned to live alone with myself in a dream surrounded by violence and racial tension” (208).

The picture of a pluralistic England vanishes; and the writer is reminded of the fact that every civilization has cracks within-social and religious. Class system is an essential aspect of the English social order. It is divided into the Royal Family, the aristocrats and the landed gentry, the middle class and the working class. The working class in turn is sub-divided into skilled labourers and manual workers. The glamour and the

opulence is just a veneer that conceals the debilitated face of western duplicity. This finds its vindication in his friend Tom's view that the British went to India to build their empire not to develop it. It is as if the author has been running after a mirage. England, the land of the 'bilati' Queen, turns out to be as chimerical as the fictive Shangri-La. And its inhabitants are petty dissenters who participate in gutless activities. Once upon a time, the thought of living in London had been so exciting and overwhelming; but now,

London was a lonely place and there were times when I wanted to be with friends. I soon realized it was not possible for me to see them immediately. I was expected to discuss convenient times and dates, like seeing my doctor. It was difficult for me to guess the right time to telephone without disturbing their sleep, a meal, or a favourite television programme. I did not have a telephone in my room and the public telephones were invariably out of order; so in the end I telephoned very few friends and lived in a world of my own (122).

Sour experiences like vulgar notices outside office buildings—'No blacks, no Irish, no children, no dogs'; comments on physical appearance like it is necessary to have blue eyes to win favours and commissions, changes the writer's outlook. He did not have an idea as to the so many denominations of Christianity: Methodists, Baptists, Anglicans, and Christian Scientists. His Irish friend opens his eyes to the tensions between the Catholics and the Protestants. That there could exist such a dirty edge to cosmopolitan London, comes to him as a bitter surprise ["...I saw

in the Strand several people sleeping on the pavement near the ventilation grills to keep themselves warm”] (105). He also sees people lying down with only newspapers and cardboards as wraps. So when he is slung out of a cab, or spat at, or savagely beaten up, or has a letter he is writing stolen from him in a park in central London, the disgrace and shame that attaches itself to the ‘culture’ that spawns such acts seems all the greater. No ‘Dixon of Dock Green’ (43), ever comes to his rescue. Mohanti has pointed things to say about everything and everyone he sees, from the need to meditate before being able to get to sleep on the soggy beds of Surbiton, to the cautionary anecdote on Kaliyug, the Age of Destruction and the mythical story of King Parikhit, with which he finishes. The story tells the tale of the quirks of destiny, “When the snake arrived at the palace he found the king guarded by the holy men and he could not enter. He saw a man carrying a basket of fruit for the king. The snake gave him some money and asked him to carry a fruit. The man took the fruit and the snake hid inside it. It was the most colourful and attractive fruit in the basket and as soon as the king saw it he picked it up to eat. The snake bit him. The king died instantly, turning into ashes” (222). The story in reality sums up the author’s journey from the nondescript village of Nanpur to the metropolitan London. The ‘snake’ personifies all that London connotes for the author, an idea similar to what Occidentalists viewed about the West, “soul-less, decadent, money grubbing, cold, faithless, glitzy and glamorous”. It is the land of “frivolous cosmopolitanism” and

“unfeeling parasites”. Mohanti as the king swallows the fruit (the ‘other’ idea of England) only to be rudely bitten and poisoned by what Ian Buruma and Avishai Marglit term ‘Westoxification’. When he was approaching his hundredth year, Nirad Chaudhuri wrote in his last book, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*: “... in 1970, when I came to England never to return to my country ... my premonitions of decadence in England finally became a conviction gaining with the years an accelerated force.”⁸ There is little doubt that this statement is strongly reminiscent of Mohanti’s final idea of England. It is a classic example of how distortion and illusion conspire to relate events from the author’s life story exactly the way these events apparently occur. *Through Brown Eyes* looks back on intimately lived personal experience involving unfamiliarly familiar people, places, issues and events. But the tone of the book is serious, the mood is one of disquietude and the atmosphere is one of dilemma. The dilemma is identified historically and socially on two levels: The first dilemma relates to identification and distance; the second to alienation and affiliation. Mohanti, on reaching London, fails to identify with the alien world and thus distances himself from it to the point of alienation only to affiliate himself with his hostile surroundings through art. Thus at no point in the autobiography do we find the writer ruffled by tensions of life and living. There is an atmosphere of settled poise about the author’s *self*. Thus

8) Amit Chaudhuri, 2001. *Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri*, The Hindu, Sunday, <http://www.hindu.com/2001/07/29/stories/1329046c.htm>.

Jamaica Kincaid writes with a sense of moving nostalgia,

I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure, not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me small, whenever I heard the word 'England': awe at its existence, small because I was not from it. I did not know very much of anything then- certainly not what a blessing it was that I was unable to draw a map of England correctly.⁹

The statement beautifully sums up what it means to be the 'other'- the pain, the identity crisis, the fear of rootlessness, the angst. Moreover, it is a moving portrait of how man from the East has become fragmented and is leading as the great maestro Pablo Picasso said a 'cubist' existence- torn between different identities only to become a whole under the British patriarchy. Throughout his stay in England Mohanti fights this 'erasure' using his artistic sensibility, "But I only feel at home in India and England. When am in England I want to go back to India and when am in India I want to return to England. But as soon as I arrive at London Airport I am made to feel an outsider when the immigration officer checks my passport and asks, 'Do you live here?' But London provides me with a solitude and isolation necessary for my work. I have learned to live alone with myself in a dream surrounded by violence and racial tension. As I paint, write, arrange exhibitions, meet friends, go to theatres and cinemas,

9) Kincaid, *On Seeing England for the First Time*, p. 34.

and from time to time watch a little television, I become involved with life in England" (208). India and England merge in the author's psyche to form a distinct world. It complements the author's notion about his own art, "I do not see the arts as separate but as interrelated. My painting, writing, dancing, and architecture complement each other. Painting and dancing help me to understand colour and movement in writing; architecture gives me a sense of discipline and an understanding of form and structure. Writing for me is like painting with words. But as an art form, painting is purer than writing" (158). England deepens his understanding of life and brings him closer to a purer life i.e. his roots back in India. And the autobiographer uses the *language of thought* to achieve this. The prose of thought is not prose that lacks emotive ambience; it is prose charged with emotions most suited to conceptual or dialectical expressions. The Idea of England requires the prose of thought to make the writer's arguments not only 'fitting' but 'sincere' as well. E.W.F. Tomlin says, "the language of thought is ordinary language. Ordinary language is already mobilized. If this were not so, the thinker would find himself unable to argue his case intelligibly, and his readers would fail to grasp the case he was presenting."¹⁰ The language of *Through Brown Eyes* exhibits what Collingwood described as a "disposition to improvise and create, to treat language as something not fixed and rigid but infinitely flexible

10) *A Pelican Guide to English Literature*, by Boris Ford, p.231.

and full of life”¹¹.

Through Brown Eyes can be read as an allegory about philosophical spaces in the life of an expatriate. It is an autobiography with a difference because it talks about cultural and social alienation of, in Coetzee’s words, ‘*unsettled settlers*’. These ‘unsettled settlers’ are a creed that believe in embracing a “...generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance of authoritarianism, and a love of freedom”^{xi}. Mohanti provides both an international awareness as well as a perspective that is culture-specific. He is himself a product of a strong local culture, yet his life experiences and creative efforts inhabit a much wider imaginative universe. Nirad Chaudhuri’s *A Passage to England* is a kind of fictive bridge between two disparate cultures; Prafulla Mohanti’s autobiography highlights the widening chasm between the East and the West. Nirad Chaudhuri’s England is more like a window through which one observes a beautiful country with detachment. But Prafulla Mohanti’s England is like encountering a mirage that shatters the dream-like vision of England thus bringing us into contact with the harsh world of reality. The most fascinating thing about *Through Brown Eyes* is the innocence with which the author describes his admiration for England; its people and all things that England stands for. Nevertheless, the cultural identification

11) Robin George Collingwood, 2005. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, James Connelly, Giuseppina D’Oro, (ed.), Oxford University Press, p. 214.

in case of Mohanti is very well-defined. He sees the English as the 'other'. The idea of England undergoes a metamorphosis; it is now viewed from the angle of ethnocentricity- "I was not able to distinguish between American English and British English. Neither could I tell the difference between an Englishman, a European or an American. They all looked the same. I rarely saw them walking in the streets. They went about in their cars..." (22). As Boehmer says of Homi Bhabha-

He is especially concerned with migrant and minority groups and how they apparently translate and hybridize the metropolitan space even as they adapt to it- how they incorporate sum of it cultural forms at the same time they are incorporated into it. His concept of the third space describes this area of cultural interaction and mutual intervention in metropolitan urban spaces as it relates in particular to migrant and Third World communities in interaction with one another agreeing on certain issues, diverging on others.¹²

The autobiographical novel is the perfect example of intercultural competence. The author tries to escape the bonds of his roots to reach a state of cultural relativism during his stay in an alien country. He doesn't want to be clouded by the innate perceptions and reactions that have been an intrinsic part of the Indian mind. Franz Boas defines cultural relativism as "the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other

12) Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 356.

groups, to members of the group itself, and of each individual to himself.”¹³ When people are oppressed by foreign forces, they often take refuge in their inner life; a life that is pure and simple, that will provide them with a sense of freedom from corruption of power and sophistry. Elleke Boehmer talks about Homi Bhabha’s shift of attention from the “ambivalent colonial space, to exploring the creative, but also unstable and ambivalent interstices and interfaces of metropolitan cultures”¹⁴. Mohanti’s London is a city that is seen to be in a state of flux. From an imagined space it metamorphoses into a space that is ambiguous, that challenges the very primacy of western narratives. His narration of London depicts it as a site of domination and resistance as well. He is stifled by the oppressive spirit of the metropolis yet he successfully resists its stereotypes and its equivocal nature. Through the lens of brown eyes London’s temporal space is explored as an ambivalent nation afflicted with a “...problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies...”¹⁵ Thus *Through Brown Eyes* becomes the perfect example of a diasporic narrative that traces the interventionist trajectory of a nation whose “cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation...”¹⁶ Prafulla Mohanti becomes the spokesperson of

13) Franz Boas, 1963. *The Mind of Primitive Man*, New York: Collier Books, p. 149.

14) Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 356.

15) Homi K. Bhabha. (ed.), 2008. Introduction: Narrating the Nation, *Nation and Narration*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, p. 2.

16) Homi K. Bhabha. 2003. *Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences*, Bill Ashcroft, et

this unstable and ambivalent 'interstices and interfaces' of metropolitan cultures in his autobiography and London becomes a *third space*- a point of artistic intersection where the East and the West converge to relate and interact on diverging issues. *Through Brown Eyes* becomes the vehicle that conveys an immigrant's dissension- against being labeled as "...the colonialist Self or the colonized Other..."¹⁷ He, through his experiences talks about the mutability of the artist's psyche that can withstand the onslaught of being the 'other' and transform itself to create new identities and new personas to adapt to an uncertain environment.

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17) Homi Bhabha, 1994. Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, p. 45.

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Notes

- ⁱ 'Contact zone' pertains to that social space where "disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 4).
- ⁱⁱ Nirad Chaudhuri's description of England in his travelogue, *A Passage to England*, "Mother Megalopolis of our era" (Orient Paperbacks, 1998), 65.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Odiya phrase for 'faraway land'.
- ^{iv} The term and concept 'imagined community' was coined by Benedict Anderson and in his book *Imagined Communities*, he says that sometimes one also sees "... 'national imagination' at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside" (London: Verso, 2006), 30. This idea is applicable to *Through Brown Eyes* in its entirety.
- ^v Homi Bhabha is of the opinion that ambivalence fractures colonial dominance. It disrupts the power structure that holds the colonizer superior. Through ambivalence the colonized is able to mock at the colonized and all that it stands for because "In the ambivalent world of the "not quite/not white," on the margins of metropolitan desire, the founding objects of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objetstrouves* of the colonial discourse- the part-objects of presence" (132); for further reference see Bhabha, Homi. (Spring, 1984). *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis, The MIT Press, Vol. 28, October, pp. 125-133.
- ^{vi} I borrow the two terms from E.W.F. Tomlin's essay 'The Language of Thought', to elucidate the point that travellers to London not only engaged with it on a dialogic basis but there was also a hidden agenda behind their very aim of deciphering and critiquing the city. Both the elements act in tandem to bring about a state of equilibrium as regards the contradictory idea of the place (Tomlin, E.W.F. "The Language of Thought", In *From James to Eliot: The New Pelican Guide*, Vol 7, edited by Boris Ford, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1961), 312-330.
- ^{vii} The term has been used by G.H. Bantock in the introduction to 'The Social and Cultural Background' in *From James to Eliot, Vol.7. The New Pelican Guide* ed. Boris Ford, (Penguin Books, 1983), 13.

viii "...The liminal phase is the period between states, during which people have left one place or state but haven't yet entered or joined the next", says the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (Van Gennep was the first to use the term 'Rite of Passage' in his book with the same name which was published in 1909). Taken from the chapter "Rites of Passage: Separation, Transition, Incorporation" by Rita Bornstein, *Legitimacy in the Academic Presidency: From Entrance to Exit* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 168.

ix The phrase has been used by E.W.F. Tomlin as a chapter in *From James to Eliot, Vol.7. The New Pelican Guide*. Edited by Boris Ford, (Penguin Books, 1983), 312.

x The Odiya word for foreign county.

xi The statement is Alan Paton's definition of Liberalism, taken from his autobiography *Journey Continued: An Autobiography*, extracted from the essay 'Multiculturalism and Ethnicity in Alan Paton's Fiction' by M.Z. Malaba, ed. Davis Geoffrey V., et.al, *Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a 'Post'-Colonial World*, (Rodopi, The Netherlands, 2005), 283.