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## **'MOTHER' INDIA AND 'FATHER' ENGLAND – THE TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN LAWRENCE DURRELL'S PIED PIPER OF LOVERS**

**Keywords:** *in-betweenness; Lawrence Durrell; hybrid identity; English death; transnational identity; negotiation of identity.*

**Abstract:** *For Walsh Clifton, the protagonist of Durrell's novel, negotiating a transnational identity will necessarily embed the feminine India on his mother's side and patriarchal England on his father's. This negotiation will take him from the country of his birth – his motherland in colonial India – to the fatherland in England. The writer's own experience as a colonial and his tense relation with England were in part the inspiration for his first novel published in 1935. Consequently, his love-hate relationship with England was fraught with doubts and Durrell called the lifestyle there the 'English death'. Walsh Clifton's ambivalence regarding his colonial identity is revealed through his encounters and interactions with Indians and other Europeans, but more importantly, through his visit to England. Thus, the writer reveals Clifton's alienation and his sense of loss. The collision of his two identities occurs in his motherland and in his fatherland, thus the protagonist is unable to reconcile and reclaim the two homelands. Consequently, he is stuck in a transnational in-between dealing with a ubiquitous conflict.*

### **Introduction**

Lawrence Durrell was well-acquainted with the intricacy of the transnational identity. His personal experience was turned into a source of inspiration for his first novel, *Pied Piper of Lovers*, published in 1935. The protagonist, Walsh Clifton, is hard pressed to define his identity throughout the pages of the novel. The transnational in-between state as the son of a colonial, white, British father and an Indian mother leads to vacillations and uncertainty. In addition, for the protagonist the home he has known at the beginning of the novel – India – is left behind as he is sent to England to be educated. The expectations of the adults are for him to feel that England is his home, and his feelings are not taken into account. As a result, Walsh Clifton feels alienated and feels the loss of his homeland acutely.

*Pied Pipers of Lovers* by Lawrence Durrell is a picaresque novel, episodic, taking great leaps and bounds through the life of its protagonist – Walsh Clifton. The protagonist grows up orphaned of his mother and undergoes transformations, but a pervading feeling of loss, of loneliness, of a lack of understanding or even misunderstandings peppers its pages. The dissatisfaction with his existence is reflected in Walsh Clifton's rebellion against authority and his contrary reactions to society's attempt to impose a certain order or to label him in some way or to limit him to a very specific slot.

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### **In-betweenness**

Homi Bhabha discusses the question of culture as located in the realm of the beyond (Bhabha 1). This is a realm the protagonist of the novel is closely familiarized with:

the beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past . . . we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the beyond: an exploratory, restless movement. (Bhabha 1)

While England might seem like a new horizon, it is also a horizon belonging to his ancestors and by rights, his homeland. The past – his life in India – is left behind spatially and chronologically, yet its memories persist, keeping his identity in limbo. Walsh Clifton is indeed in transit between Mother India and Father England, forever unsure of where he belongs. As a result, he feels included in India since he is a superior being there, but excluded by the Indians that see him as an alien. He feels included in England due to the colour of his skin, but excluded due to his experiences. The resulting disorientation and inability to find a place to call home make him restless. Another of Homi Bhabha's concepts particularly applicable to the quandary of transnational identity in the case of the protagonist is that of in-betweenness:

It is in the emergence of the interstices--the overlap and displacement of domains of difference--that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (2)

Bhabha's argument posits the irreducibility of cultural identities which are not simply inscribed on a subject's identity. The in-betweenness of the subject exists despite conventions of ethnicity that should clearly place him in this or that category. But the cultural traits that exist within the subject do not necessarily limit him, since despite those traits, the subject may identify with parts of his identity rather than with the whole of it. Thus, is Walsh a colonizer – due to his father's identity – or is he a colonized subject – due to his mother's? Does he belong in England or in India? He cannot easily be placed within one of these separate entities and the two parts of his identity cannot be defined independently – of each other or of him. In Walsh Clifton's case, a negotiation of cultural identity occurs and it involves an interaction between those parts that make him either English or Indian. The cultural difference between those two identities makes him all the more confused at times, placing him in a state of war with himself. Only once he accepts the sum of the parts can he leave behind the space of in-betweenness. This liminal space of in-betweenness is where the cultural identity is produced, becoming a site of the hybrid identity:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (Bhabha 2)

The traditional assignation of the Indian and English identity does not function very well for the protagonist since it would only account for parts of who he is. His family and educators expect Clifton to identify with the superior identity – that of England. Instead the protagonist is meant to uneasily navigate his transnational identity through careful negotiations and through painstaking transformations that turn his identity initially in a hybrid one and only, later on, make him into a whole that has embedded, accepted and internalised the parts that make him who he is.

### **Mother India**

Walsh Clifton's identity is constructed within the text as a result of his birth in India out of a colonial father and a colonized mother. The beyond in which he exists is a place of limbo – Durrell constructs an Anglo-Indian protagonist whose skin and hair identify him as English, but whose eyes betray his Indian ancestry. Could it be that the eyes are the only sign of this racial identity, so that the way in which he sees the world is akin to the perspective of the colonized subject rather than the colonial one? India itself is created as a beyond in terms of it being seen as the Colonial Centre's Other, but to the protagonist it is, in fact, England that constitutes the beyond and India that embodies the home. All he has known is his life in the Colony, yet he is sent 'home' to England.

As he reaches Dover by ship, he hears the other passengers calling it and England "white as white" (Durrell 110) – but this signals his exclusion, rather than inclusion. He is not white as white. There's impurity in him in terms of his racial ancestry and this is a fact that he recognizes and internalizes in spite of his young age. Moreover, he does not identify with the white passengers on the ship, but with the Indian ayah – small and gentle-looking (Durrell 111) – by virtue of this commonality of birthplaces beyond the border of England proper. His nationality might be English, but he is not. He feels "sick with an undefined regret" (Durrell 111), knowing that he has left behind India and the beauty of the hills. He identifies with the ayah who is also of the hills. Walsh would have liked to converse longer with her about places that "already seemed remote" (Durrell 111). Despite his identification with her, with the colonized space left behind and with the motherland of India, the ayah rejects this identification: "she seemed to regard him as yet another of the alien race with whom she had nothing in common save the coincidence of a common dwelling; a birthplace and a country for her, for him no more than a temporary house" (Durrell 111). In one fell swoop Walsh's belonging to India is contested. As a temporary house, India loses its significance as a home with which he may identify. Orphaned at birth, Walsh loses one more of the coordinates that provided a stabilizing influence for his identity. In essence, he is orphaned once more. To the ayah, Walsh represents the racial Other, the alien race, even as he identifies with her race. 'Mother' India is metaphorically killed. Yet 'Father' England seems unreal. It might lie there ready for the claiming, but that is not sufficient: he "tried to

feel really glad that he was within sight of such an exciting place as England, but the mood was unreal” (Durrell 111).

On the previous page, the passengers exclaiming “white as white” and showing their eagerness are likened to

a company of weary crusaders, blinded by the desert suns, rough of skin and infirm of body, to whom the ubiquitous mud of the London kennels was more than welcome after a long sojourn in Moorish deserts, and the green forests of Hampstead a divine blessing after the parched deserts of another continent. Perhaps there was something a little touching about it all. (Durrell 110)

The passengers were returning from a Colony that had been conquered, and which shared a warm climate with the deserts. However, Walsh does not share a commonality of experience with them. For him, this is the first time he sets eyes on England. As such, he cannot show the same kind of eagerness for a land that he has not known and with which he does not identify. All Walsh has known lies behind him based on an arbitrary decision taken by his father and aunt, that he needed an English education. He kindly concedes that the passengers’ eagerness to return home is understandable and touching, yet it does not affect him. Indeed, Walsh blames himself for the lack of enthusiasm and for not sharing their sentiments: “he felt galled by his own lack of excitement: by his own apathy. Was it right that he should remain in a solemn detachment, unable to respond to a moment which was supremely important in his life?” (Durrell 110).

### **Father England**

The child recognizes the momentous occasion of translocating to what is expected to become his new homeland for what it is. Yet, he is not ready to accept a new homeland. Walsh’s discomfort is shared by his aunt Brenda, who, nevertheless, attempts through misplaced efforts to encourage him: “I think it’s jolly kind of Dad to let you come home to be educated. It’s expensive you know. Everyone can’t send their sons home to school” (Durrell 112). By calling England home, aunt Brenda reassigns Walsh’s identity from the colony to the colonial centre, not realizing that for the child this reassignment is distressing. The result of aunt Brenda’s words are feelings of guilt for his ingratitude: “He had begun to feel that the gift must be acknowledged from within himself, by some reciprocal offering of brain and vitality. Its significance worried him, like some huge growing obligation” (Durrell 112).

However, this was not the first time that England is called home. Back in India, in his conversations with the Abbis family and Mr. Sowerby, home is used to refer to England, but Walsh’s reaction was even then indicative of his ambivalent feelings: “the word ‘home’. Walsh found it a peculiarly inspiring word, but applied to England it meant less than nothing” (Durrell 55). Before school starts, the import of behaving and speaking correctly is imparted to him by his aunt who criticizes his negligent deportment by comparing him to the locals in India: “He wondered whether he would feel happier when he had become a bit more English, and when he ventured to put the remark into words,

Brenda said: ‘Damme, child, you are English. The way you go on anyone would think you were a native’” (Durrell 117).

Up to this point, the identity that Walsh had created for himself in India as the son of a colonial was set on different coordinates. The six-year-old self of the protagonist is very full of his own importance:

he began to consider himself a person of great importance. In the first place he possessed a name which was very uncommon, and a source of secret pride and delight to him; he was no common John or Harry, but, if you please, Walsh Clifton, a name which gave him plain indications of caste and to which he had prefixed the magic title of Master: only in secret, however, for he dreaded being snubbed if he chanced precociously to utter it aloud. (Durrell 25)

He was white and fair in a space filled with colonized subjects of darker complexions, he felt superior, entitled, and more knowledgeable; he had a sense of his power and position acquired through sensorial and experiential observation of the treatment received by his father in the Colonies. The harsh reality of a colonial returning to England signified the need to discard those rules that made his life meaningful before. The first encounters Walsh and his aunt Brenda have with the English mark their re-entrance and entrance into the normal space of the Empire where the mere colour of the skin no longer signals their immediately recognizable superiority. The treatment received at the hands of the porter is worrisome and marks a harsh awakening to the reality of England – someone who was their social inferior and who should have shown them deference, in reality treats them with contempt, believing them foreigners and taking it as his right to behave thusly “as becomes Englishmen who detect inferiority in anyone” (Durrell 112).

England is thus defamiliarized for the readers not only through the lens provided by the viewpoint of a child, but also through those provided by Brenda’s feelings of inadequacy, fright, disappointment, alarm, shame and annoyance (Durrell 112-113). Walsh is the first to admit to himself that England – besides being an unfamiliar place and not his home – was “a different dimension, a different space” to which he was not accustomed: “How cramped England was!” (Durrell 112). A lack of communication occurs between Walsh and his aunt at this point in the narrative, mostly because neither of them wants to confess the feelings they are harbouring:

They lived nervously for a few days, as wild creatures accustoming themselves to a new environment. They pretended to each other that without doubt there was no place quite like London: and that they would rather be here, at the hub of the universe, than anywhere else in the world. But they were a little shy and distrustful of each other. (Durrell 114)

Both characters need reassurance and both fail to provide it for each other. London’s salience is set on a universal level, seemingly becoming the centre of the world. Nevertheless, it was not a place either of them wanted to be, yet their pretence is veiled by a very thin façade.

The distinction between India and England was made initially through familiarity with one and unfamiliarity with the other. Walsh was aware that the life he had led in

India was one of freedom, but he did not know what school life in England would have meant. Yet, once he had arrived in England he repeats the following mantra: “We’re not free anymore. We’re not free anymore” (Durrell 135). Nevertheless, India did not harbour only positive experiences for him. In fact, his close acquaintance with death dated back to his very birthday, when his mother had passed away. Later on, crossing the grounds of a graveyard he discovers the

monstrous sight of this ankle-bone jutting surprisingly from the layers of ash that the rain had moistened, gave the idea of death a defined and unforgettable identity; for a few weeks after that he had been worried by all manner of morbid speculations and doubts; mortality, and the frailty of mortality, had weighed very heavily upon him. (Durrell 52)

The human remains he witnesses become a symbol of death and they bring closer to home the reality of the ephemeral existence we lead. The finite quality of life is again confronted with the arrival of his grandmother: “With the summer came Grandmamma, and with Grandmamma came the plague; both calamities, coming as they did, at exactly the same time, became indissolubly linked together in the boy's mind as a double-headed evil; a two-fold catastrophe which was, inescapably, one.” (Durrell 133) The two remain associated in his mind – overhearing his grandmother talk about the worms that take ten years to eat through a coffin and consume a corpse becomes a mantra that reminds Walsh of the caducity of life. The child is traumatized and finds himself “for the first time in his life . . . afraid to go up alone to his room at bed-time” (Durrell 135). Later on, when he is studying in a boarding school he experiences a prophetic dream of his father’s death, caused by a King cobra bite: hearing once again his grandmother’s mantra: “You know, it takes ten years. . .” (Durrell 163). The dream comes true the very next day, marking the end Walsh’s stay at the school.

### **Not a Damned Englander Yet**

Before his father’s death, however, there are several other instances that illustrate the marking moments of his life and the lessons he internalizes. The lesson he learns from Ruth at 15 also follows him around his life – he is no longer going to be ashamed – not only about his ancestry but about his corporeality as well. A teacher at his school – Binhook – offers him books to read, while his roommate provides a sounding board for his ideas, criticizing or praising his thoughts. Thus, Binhook notices in him a downtrodden quality and his tendency towards a solitary existence. His schoolwork and defiance in terms of participating in sports are conveyed to his father who sends him a letter whose last paragraph was imbued with all the things that Walsh had begun to despise about the English identity that was being superimposed on the Indian one: “the awful ignorance of the Empire Builder, the would-be altruist, the dreary stupidity if the ‘team spirit’” (Durrell 160). However, as the reader observes towards the end of the novel, it is his meeting with Ruth that influences him most. During the only happy time spent in England mentioned by Walsh – at a sea side cottage – he meets Ruth and her brother Gordon. She provides him with a motto to follow NO SHAME since she had theorized that Gordon and herself were nearer to the earth and more savage living through

sensory impacts and she believed Walsh to be similar to them (Durrell 149). Gordon on the other hand appreciates Walsh's authenticity, integrity and naturalness:

You're not a damned Englander yet. . . . They haven't got you yet. . . . But you're English. Yes. At least that's my nationality, but I don't stand for any of the things that your Englishman stands for. And you don't yet. They haven't spoiled you yet. . . . (Durrell 150)

Gordon's words point to a sort of collaborative effort on the part of school, religion and society, efforts that were as yet unsuccessful in Walsh's case in turning him into a conformist. It is in fact his in-betweenness – living between India and England, between the colonial and the colonized – that safeguards him.

### **Splintered Mirrors and Distorted Images**

The same in-betweenness that saves Clifton in Gordon's view also provides raw evidence of the suffering the ambivalent identity causes:

I could have been almost anything but what I am – a bundle of splintered mirrors reflecting all the distorted images of other people's minds a bundle of fears and indecisions . . . he lay down with his head between his arms, his face in the damp grass. The rich, woman-smells of the earth came up to his nostrils, bitter and soothing. 'Benediction, O my mother' . . . A great wave of agony gripped him, and he cried out in anguish, his back aching under the torture of sobs, his limbs humped loose about the earth, his fingers twisted in grass. It was not for his father, not for Brenda, but for the humiliation of himself, his own misery and his own blindness – the error of searching for something he would never be able to find. (Durrell 168)

Thus, he identifies himself with the broken images created by other people's imaginations, full of fear and indecision, distorted, in agony. He realizes that working towards achieving goals others set up for him is unsustainable. The mother he calls to, however, could be his birth mother, could be India, or simply mother earth. Either way, he longs for a return to the womb, which is an impossibility. The only possible return is to a tomb. A song he composes and sells towards the end of the novel is entitled *Never Came Back*, highlighting the fact that his return to India too is an impossible dream. He is however able to return to Ruth, but this only occurs after he learns to accept his own corporeality and after experiencing intercourse for the first time. This is a moment when once again his identity is questioned by Isobel: "What are you? . . . Vegetable? Mineral? What would you have me be? The son of man! . . . What was he? What was anyone? . . . Just another clot of restless lava in flux; a manifestation of a process. I get glibly poetical at this time o'night, Isobel" (Durrell 226). Once again, the construction of identity is achieved through questions others pose. It is – in fact – not Walsh's initiative to define himself. The impulse comes from without, not from within. He questions back – asking for a clue as to what identity he is to assume. The novel ends with a letter he sends his roommate, Turnbull, in which he reveals that coming to England functioned as a release as well, a release that was a long way coming – "Somehow this country, this bare stooping down, has released me, though from what and how I cannot tell. I have had these experiences before somewhere. I feel I've been imprisoned for a long time. I begin to feel

the earth under my thighs and loins again” (Durrell 252). This release from his captivity occurs only after meeting Ruth and the doctor who had helped deliver him once more.

### **Conclusions**

The new horizon provided by England and belonging to his ancestors is a homeland in which Walsh Clifton is supposed to create a life for himself, a future. India stands for the past for the memories he had created there. While India is left behind spatially and chronologically, its influence renders the transnational identity into a state that persists. India is also the land of freedom, while England curtails that freedom. The transition from Mother India and Father England cannot be painless. The education received in England is meant to lead him out of the state of ignorance in which he lives.<sup>1</sup> Walsh Clifton is not brought out of that state, instead he resents the effort made by others to educate him and the decisions taken by his family for him. It simply brings to the fore the differences between feminine India on his mother’s side and patriarchal England on his father’s. The education provided in England exacerbates his state of in-betweenness and his doubts. The lifestyle in England was called the ‘English death’ by Durrell which is another aspect that is revealed through Clifton’s alienation and his sense of loss. It takes years of negotiating the transnational identity for Clifton to reach a semblance of peace and to realize that a return to India is not possible for him. Once he accepts he is a sum of his parts and internalises both his motherland in colonial India and his fatherland in England and renounces the love-hate relationship with England he is able to become whole.

### **Works Cited**

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<sup>1</sup> Educate comes from the Latin *ex ducere* which means to bring out, to lead forth.