

# Identity Seen by Some of My Favourite Writers: A Brief Essay

Saïd El Kadaoui Moussaoui. Writer and psychologist

*Was it possible to be—to become good at being—not rootless,  
but multiply rooted? Not to suffer from a loss of roots  
but to benefit from an excess of them?  
The self was both its origins and its journey  
This is what literature knew, had always known.  
Literature tried to open the universe, to increase, even if only slightly,  
the sum total of what it was possible for human beings to perceive, understand,  
and so, finally, to be.*

Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*

According to many psychology studies that had dealt with children of migrant families in several countries, the human identity structure is characterised by its dialectical nature and capacity to integrate opposites. This can be seen in works by writers such as Hanif Kureishi and Edward Said, with Kureishi also questioning atavistic customs such as the marriage of convenience in his novels. For individuals to develop the full potential of their identity and avoid being enclosed in a prison identity to which, very often, society seeks to reduce them, professionals dealing with migrants must be aware of the big challenges at hand.

Throughout this article I will attempt to articulate a discourse on identity invoking the two disciplines that have most helped me understand the nature of human behaviour, the two lenses that have contributed most to focusing my gaze on the human being: psychology and literature. I will briefly refer to two main theories on identity provided by psychology and

endeavour to validate them with the contributions of four writers I admire, whose mostly autobiographical stories I will use as clinical vignettes: Hanif Kureishi, Percival Everett, Edward Said and Philip Roth.

In the superb essay *L'enfant entre deux cultures*,<sup>1</sup> a collection of articles by eminent psychologists and psychiatrists, I discovered

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1. *Journal des Psychologues*, 67, May 1989.

that the challenge we have in Catalonia, and also in Spain, concerning the integration of the migrant population and their children had many things in common with the French experience, which is ahead of us both in experience and in the production of an entire theoretical corpus on the complexity of identity.

When studying the children of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Maghrebian immigrants, Vinsonneau and Camilleri (and other authors) postulated a dynamic model of identity, in which they argued that the identity process of social groups, as well as the individual, is constructed in relation to the social environment. What we are — that is, identity — seeks to engage with what we aspire to be — asserted identity — and what others would like us to be (or think that we are) — prescribed identity —. What characterises the identity structure is, therefore, its dialectical nature, and capacity to integrate opposites. The greatest danger is the construction of a prison identity, given that it incarcerates individuals in a very small enclosure of themselves.

Throughout much of his work Hanif Kureishi reflects on the migrant's identity, often trapped between an alienating and excluding gaze and a defensive communal reaction that reduces it to its minimum expression. He speaks of both prison identity and, in his case, of an identity whose nature is dialectical and integrates disparate backgrounds, often presented as opposite.

Here we have some examples of Kureishi's prescribed identity: "My father had been bullied and suffered racism in India and Great Britain. But it didn't make him a victim in his mind. He worked with Pakistanis and didn't endure the kind of persisting and degrading racism that some of us knew at school and on

the street [...]. It seems, at that time, that one would never recover from this disillusionment. I guess this was partly because of racism that cousins and I suffered occurred when we were young. Therefore we came to believe that exclusion and no one would make a space for us."<sup>2</sup>

"And when Dad tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman.

"The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and Pakis and the rest of it."<sup>3</sup>

### *How many sons and daughters of migrants feel guilty when they question some atavistic customs of their parents' countries?*

In my experience, many patients explain these same experiences: they never complain, they are no longer seen as migrants, Moors, Pakis, etc. Here are some examples of the prison identity I mentioned:

Karim, the main character of the novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, talks with Anwar, the father of his friend Jamila, who argues:

'To marry [Jamila] the boy I have selected with my brother,'

'But it's old-fashioned, Uncle, out of date,' I explained. 'No one does that kind of thing now. They just marry the person they're into, if they bother to get married at all.'

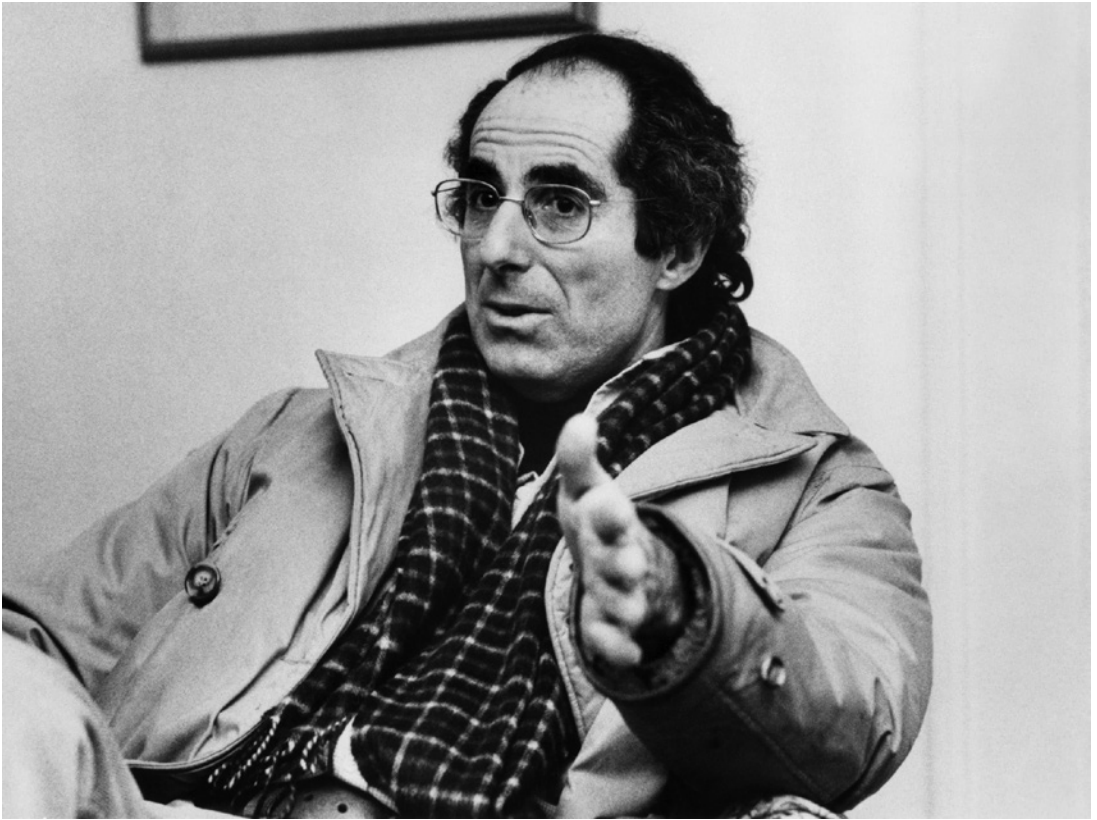
'That is not our way, boy. Our way is firm. She must do what I say or I will die. She will kill me.'<sup>4</sup>

Anwar, as we have seen, alludes to "our way, our culture, our world." How many sons and daughters of migrants feel guilty when

2. *My Ear in His Heart*, New York, Scribner, 2004.

3. *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London, Penguin Books, 1991.

4. *Ibid.*



Philip Roth.

they question some atavistic customs of their parents' countries?

Next, I want to provide an example of Kureishi's dialectical self: "For me and the others of my generation born here, Britain was always where we belonged, even when we were told — often in terms of racial abuse — that this was not so. Far from being a conflict of cultures, our lives seemed to synthesize disparate elements: the pub, two or three languages, rock 'n' roll, Indian films. Our extended families and our British individuality co-mingled."<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, many of our patients have similar experiences. They are capable of linking their different cultures, their different social imaginaries. When they do, they are much better prepared to live in our contemporary world, a more globalised world.

More recent is Hermans' theory of the dialogical self,<sup>6</sup> which similarly highlights the dialectical nature of identity. The identity construction, argues Hermans, is influenced by the often asymmetrical relations between the host country and the source country, as well as

5. *Dreaming and Scheming*, London, Faber and Faber, 2002.

6. H. J. M. Hermans, "Voicing the self: from information processing to dialogical interchange", *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 1, 1996, pp. 31-50.

by the experiences of racism, discrimination and othering (a practice consisting of always relating to otherness and difference to mark distance).

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A good way of understanding the concept of othering is provided by Percival Everett's novel *Erasure*. The literary critic Alberto Manguel wrote a brief summary of the novel: "*Erasure* was published in 2001. The narrator is a certain Thelonious Monk Ellison, a name that combines that of the famous jazz musician and the equally famous writer of the novel *Invisible Man*. Thelonious is a writer of 'difficult' literature, inspired (like Everett's) by the classics, and whose books not only do not sell but nobody wants to publish them anymore. Neither do things go well in his private life: his mother suffers Alzheimer's, his brother has not yet defined his sexual identity, his sister must confront religious extremists in the clinic where she performs abortions. Just as Thelonious must face all these difficulties, a certain Juanita Mae Jenkins, the author of a melodramatic 'Afro-American' novel, with its jumble of commonplaces (of which Everett gives us hilarious examples) that implicitly prolong ancestral racist notions, is crowned as the great star of the American literary world. To take revenge (on the public, on literature, on the implacable fate that Greeks call Moira), Thelonious, under the pseudonym of Stag R. Leigh, constructs an even more conventional novel than Jenkins', which his agent sells for

a gigantic advance to Random House. To top it all, this novel, entitled *Fuck* (the publishers wanted it to be called *Ma Pafology*, so that it was less offensive) is submitted for a prestigious literary prize for which Thelonious forms part of the jury; if he wins, poor Thelonious will have to reward himself for a literature he abhors. *Erasure* concludes with Newton's famous answer to those who asked about the reasons for the law of gravity: '*Hypotheses non fingo.*' Thelonious (and Everett) do not seek to explain anything."<sup>7</sup>

Here is an excerpt from *Erasure*:

'The line is, you're not black enough,' my agent said.

'What's that mean, Yul? How do they even know I'm black? Why does it matter?'

'We've been over this before. They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they've seen you. They know because you're black, for crying out loud.'

'What, do I have to have my characters comb their afros and be called niggers for these people?'

'It wouldn't hurt.'

Many of the patients with whom I work, adolescents and young people mainly, finally submit themselves to the stereotyped viewpoint of society and identify with some images projected onto them, thereby truncating the richness of their identity.

According to the theory of the dialogical self, we are influenced by different voices: those of our parents, our peers, our source or host country, our school, and so on. What is called a *polyphony process* must occur within us. In other words, different voices dialoguing with each other (in order to develop a complex identity). In contrast, the *expropriation process* means the dominance of one voice that defeats the other different voices (resulting in a trun-

7. A. Manguel, "En busca del éxito a través de una novela vergonzosa", *El País*, 20 August 2015.

cated identity, as well as identification with the stereotype).

In his autobiographical book *Out of Place*, Edward Said beautifully describes this polyphony process with the following words: “I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the forms of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I’d like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That scepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.”<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, Philip Roth, in his also autobiographical book *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography*, speaks of the process of expropriation, of a voice that seeks to defeat the other, shaping an identity always on the

defensive when he talks about the reaction of the Jewish establishment to one of his stories: “I still don’t think it was innocent of me to have been as astonished as I was at twenty-six when I found myself up against to most antagonistic social opposition of my life, and not from gentiles at one or the other end of the class spectrum but from angry middle-class and establishment Jews, and an eminent number of rabbis, accusing me of being anti-Semitic and self-hating. I had begun to foresee this as part of the struggle to write, and yet it was to be central to it.”<sup>9</sup>

*Many patients, adolescents and young people mainly, finally submit themselves to the stereotyped viewpoint of society and identify with some images projected onto them, thereby truncating the richness of their identity*

Let’s make the most of this knowledge that both psychology and literature offer us to build relationships with our young people that foster the development of their full potential so that, in this way, they acquire a dialectical, polyphonic identity. And we professionals who look after the migrant population should be aware of the big challenge at hand.

8. E. Said, *Out of Place*, New York, Vintage, 2000.

9. P. Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography*, New York, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1988.



Albert Camus.