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A Postcolonial Approach to Contemporary Refugee Literature: Benjamin Zephaniah's Refugee Boy

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Abstract

Refugee Boy (2001) by Benjamin Zephaniah literalises the refugee experience in contemporary society, reveals the psychology of loss, unbelonging and displacement and helps universalise the traumatic realities of the refugee phenomenon upon innocent people in a 'remote' part of the world through its 14-year-old Eritrean-Ethiopian protagonist. In the novel, in order to be accepted and included into the mainstream 'white' society, the protagonist has a tendency to reshape and reconstitute his identity and personality in relation to what is presented as the proper and the superior. Such a sort of properness and superiority is discursively formed within the framework of the operation of the orientalist mentality and creates an ideal refugee identity, which resembles the case of the colonial subject in contemporary postcolonial fiction. In this context, this article, suggesting that the protagonist of the novel might be considered as a colonial subject, will investigate whether postcolonial theory might critically contribute to the analysis of contemporary refugee literature. This article will also attempt to theorise the process of postcolonial interpellation and explore the relevance of this conceptualisation in terms of articulating the refugee experience through a close reading of the novel.

Keywords: Benjamin Zephaniah, Refugee Boy, Postcolonial Theory, Postcolonial Interpellation, Social Inclusion

Research Paper

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Çağdaş Mülteci Edebiyatına Postkolonyal Bir Yaklaşım: Benjamin Zephaniah'ın Refugee Boy Adlı Romanı

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Öz

Benjamin Zephaniah'ın Refugee Boy (2001) adlı romanı çağdaş toplumda mülteci deneyimini kurgusallaştırır; yurtsuzluk, ait olamama ve kayboluş hâlini yansıtır ve on dört yaşındaki yarı Eritrealı, yarı Etiyopyalı ana karakteri aracılığıyla mülteci olma durumunun dünyanın 'uzak' bir köşesindeki suçsuz insanlar üzerindeki travmatik etkilerinin evrenselleştirilmesine olanak sağlar. Romanda, ana karakter, 'beyaz' toplumun bir parçası olabilmek adına, 'düzgün' ve 'üstün' olarak sunulan doğrular bağlamında kimliğini ve kişiliğini dönüştürme ve şekillendirme yönelimine sahiptir. Bu tür bir 'düzgünlük' ve 'üstünlük', oryantalist algının işleyişi çerçevesinde söylemsel olarak inşa edilir ve postkolonyal edebi eserlerde 'ideal' bir göçmen olmaya çalışan kolonyal öznelerin durumuna benzer bir 'ideal' mülteci kimliği yaratır. Bu argümanları dâhilinde, romanın ana karakterinin kolonyal bir özne olarak da görülebileceğini belirten bu çalışma postkolonyal teorinin çağdaş mülteci edebiyatına ait eserlerin eleştirel analizi noktasında katkı sağlayıp sağlamayacağı konusunu inceleyecektir. Ayrıca, bu çalışma 'postkolonyal eklemlenme' sürecini rasyonalize etmeye çalışacak ve romanın yakın okumasını yaparak 'postkolonyal eklemlenme' kavramının mülteci deneyimini anlamlandırmadaki uygunluğu üzerinde duracaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Benjamin Zephaniah, Refugee Boy, Postkolonyal Teori, Postkolonyal Eklemlenme, Toplumsal Kaynaşma

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1. Introduction

The twenty-first century can be seen as an age of the international refugee 'crisis' because millions of people have had to flee their countries of origin due to political, sociocultural and economic reasons. Many of them, despite their diverse racial, religious or political backgrounds, have shared similar experiences based on physical, emotional and psychological traumas in their homelands. Refugees' common journeys through victimisation, trauma and resettlement have been studied and addressed in various academic fields. Also, policy makers have tried to address practical ways to potentially resolve acute concerns and problems. The academic field of literature is not an exception. Literary works generally tell 'simple' stories of 'common people' in a more or less documentary style and genuinely portray a different aspect of those 'simple' stories through the represented experiences of their characters while they indirectly suggest a human-centred framework/model. The power of literature might help internationalise 'simple' stories of 'common people' and open up a new possibility of informing people in different parts of the world, which might offer world citizens with diverse interests an opportunity to rethink some of the most important concepts in contemporary life concerning humanity such as race, class, gender, the human and the global.

Contemporary refugee literature[1] , in this context, symbiotically responds to sociocultural and political circumstances at the present time and, directly or indirectly, narrates current issues such as war and civil war, fundamentalist terrorism, religious extremism, human right violations, and political and racial turmoil. Literary works, which can be classified as part of refugee literature, mostly provide a realistic snapshot of the nature of the refugee 'crisis' and thematise the process of victimisation and dehumanisation experienced by internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the civil war in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East or the Global South. The domestic, sociocultural, political and ideological tendencies of refugee characters in contemporary fiction written by and about refugees help us universalise the refugee experience, reconsider the refugee phenomenon in relation to the broader political and historical framework of social inequalities and injustices and attempt to tackle the situation through the development of progressive, egalitarian and anti-discriminatory theories and practices.

[1] Exit West (2018) by Mohsin Hamid, The Ungrateful Refugee (2019) by Dina Nayeri, The Refugees (2017) by Viet Thanh Nguyen, The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee (2019) by Gulwali Passarlay and By the Sea (2002) by Abdulrazak Gurnah might be considered as the examples of contemporary refugee literature.

Refugee Boy (2001) by Benjamin Zephaniah, in this regard, can be categorised as an example of contemporary refugee literature since it fictionalises the refugee experience in a 'strange' land and exposes the traumatic effects of war and politics upon innocent people through its 14-year-old Eritrean-Ethiopian protagonist, Alem Kelo, who has fled the war and ended up as a refugee in the UK. Written after the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict in the Horn of Africa, Refugee Boy portrays the nature of displacement and the psychology of loss, unbelonging and nothingness and suggests an alternative fictional model for the critical articulation of the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. Despite the fact that the novel seems to be a teen novel in terms of its style and vocabulary, it treats refugee-related issues within the framework of sociocultural inclusion and exclusion strategies, challenges the ideological marginalisation of multiple identities and transnational practices through a non-Eurocentric perspective and gives voice to those who have been underrepresented, silenced and unacknowledged. In the novel, Zephaniah's third person narrative also helps reveal that refugees cannot be considered as a representative of a certain national, religious or cultural group since each of them has diverse personal tendencies and motivations. This rejects a reductionist approach about refugees and asylum seekers and deconstructs their stereotypical representation on different platforms including literature and media:

> I have never been here but I know that England is a nice country, there are some good people here, you must remember that. And back home there are some good people too, not everyone back there wants to fight the war, most people would love to just get on with their lives. So remember, there are good and bad everywhere (20-21).

In the novel, the sociocultural and ideological tendencies of the protagonist, however, resemble those of immigrant characters in postcolonial literary texts, such as Zadie Smith's NW (2012) and Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia (2009), since Alem aspires to fit into the logic of the dominant system in order to be acknowledged and appreciated and to sustain his political existence[2] in a hostile environment. As a refugee seeking asylum in the UK, Alem unconsciously attempts to remould and reconstitute his identity and personality in relation to the narratives of the civilizational superiority of the West and essentially internalises what is discursively presented as 'proper'. His desire to culturally belong

[2] Giorgio Agamben (1998) makes a separation between physical existence and political existence by drawing on a figure from archaic Roman law. Agamben points out that a person who could be killed by anybody and who was not allowed to be part of the dominant community was referred to as homo sacer. In this context, refugees and asylum seekers might be classified as modern homines sacri because they are unable to assert a political and legal claim and are reduced to the status of physical existence.

to the neo-colonial centre through the imitation of 'them' values and norms, in return, reinforces and legitimises existing colonial narratives regarding racial and cultural hierarchies and leads to the perpetuation of the colonial situation in a different context, which reminds the reader of the case of the colonial subject. This suggests that Alem – a fictional representative of the sociocultural reality of refugees in the contemporary world – might be considered as a colonial subject and that postcolonial theory might, thus, help articulate the reproduction of the binary paradigms of the orientalist mentality by refugees through a detailed analysis of Alem's interpellation into the dominant power structure. Considering these arguments, whether postcolonial theory might, in the general sense, be functional and useful for the study of refugee literature will be a foundational notion for my examination of the refugee characters, especially Alem, in the novel[3]. This article will also attempt to conceptualise the process of postcolonial interpellation through institutionalised postcolonial discursive practices in the twenty-first century and investigate how it operates and gradually circumscribes and orientates refugee 'subjects' into grateful minorities having 'ideal' personalities.

2. The Process of Postcolonial Interpellation

Postmodern capitalism discursively constructs the absolute truth through a set of superior symbols, images and narratives, which function as invisible forms of power and are non-coercively circulated and dictated all around individuals, and sorts individuals into adopting the identity and personality presented as the proper and the natural. This ideological and intellectual hegemony consequently "hails" individuals in social interactions and relationships and practically reproduces the relations of production and, therefore, the hegemonic rule of the dominant class (Althusser, 1971: 173). This process in which an individual is integrated into the social, cultural, political, economic, ideological and intellectual operation of 'power' within the logic of the prevailing mode of production can be referred to as interpellation.

Interpellation basically operates through abstract institutional forms and internalised assumptions which manufacture consent and indirectly dominate and control individuals (Deleuze, 1992; Foucault, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 1994; Nealon, 2018). In the postmodern era, individuals are not forced but asked to think, act or get dressed in accordance with the values and norms of the power me-

[3] Claire Gallien similarly points out that postcolonial theory has a lot to say about refugee literature and that postcolonial scholars should attempt to define a refugee poetics and aesthetics in order to critically articulate the ideologically problematic modes of the representation of refugees in literary texts and to focus on what literature might propose in terms of alternative discourses, voices and imaginaries (2018: 722).

chanisms of the system. Individuals might seem to be free in terms of deciding how they think, act or get dressed; however, they, in reality, prefer to identify themselves with the particular characteristics of the identity formed in relation to the social relations of production. Deleuze (1995) frames this voluntary transformation in the context of a mutation in contemporary capitalism which resulted in a transition from disciplinary society to the society of control: "We're moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication" (174). As a result of the replacement of the institutionalised rigid mechanisms of disciplinary society by different socio-political control mechanisms in postmodern society, individual subjectivities are dynamically deconstructed and reconstituted without direct coercion in order to assure and promote the effective perpetuation of the socio-political hegemony of the money oriented world.

To exemplify, individuals, despite having the freedom of wearing traditional clothes in the workplace, do not usually opt to do so since they would like to create a 'professional' image and present themselves through 'proper' dress codes. In a similar way, individuals, rather than using their local accents, prefer to make use of the 'right' accent in order to sound smarter and not to be judged by others. This desire to adopt what is ideologically determined to be the normal by the powerful functions as a means to gain status, to climb the social ladder and to be socially accepted and included. In other words, in order not to experience otherisation, marginalisation and isolation, individuals voluntarily perform the ideal personality of the dominant power structure which is implicitly disseminated through different apparatuses such as the education system and traditional and digital media. It subsequently helps the powerful exercise their hegemonic power without using force and disciplinary mechanisms and consolidate their own sociocultural, ideological and intellectual narratives at the level of the whole social body.

This process might be said to operate in a similar way for immigrants who are originally from the former colonies of the British Empire and live in the UK today. In order to overcome lack of a stable identity, cultural insignificance and existential crisis, immigrants tend to become part of the mainstream society through the adoption of the proper immigrant identity. This identity, which can actually be seen as reminiscent of the colonial discourse in the twenty-first century, is discursively formed as the embodiment of the absolute truth and passively exerted through the sociocultural practices of the neo-colonial centre. Fitting into the boundaries of the proper immigrant identity, which is promoted on different

platforms helps immigrants become more visible and sustain their political existence in the mainstream 'white' society.

As in the case of 'ordinary individuals' belonging to the majority in a Western country, immigrants in the neo-colonial centre might, to a certain extent, have the freedom of following a traditional lifestyle; however, they seem to have a tendency to voluntarily attempt to 'normalise' their own social and cultural practices and internalise and perform what is constructed as the superior and the proper in order to be appreciated and recognised and to overcome cultural debasement and denigration. To put it in a different way, despite the fact that immigrants might come from different backgrounds, races and ethnicities, they might be accepted and included in direct proportion to their sociocultural, ideological and intellectual interpellation into the neo-colonial centre. Such an interpellation reconstitutes hierarchical sociocultural relations between 'the insider' and 'the outsider' and subsumes the colonial subject into the traditional civilised/uncivilised discourse which constantly reproduces the myth of the civilizational superiority of the West. This is basically what I refer to as the process of postcolonial interpellation.

Contemporary postcolonial fiction might help reinforce this conceptualisation since it is usually inspired by material life and therefore reflects and mediates an imagined totality of sociocultural, economic and political circumstances in their specific historical forms. NW (2012) by Zadie Smith, for instance, fictionalises the postcolonial interpellation of Keisha Blake into the dominant logic of the mainstream 'white' society. As a black woman born into a working-class family in London, Keisha interiorises the social, ideological and moral truths and norms of the neo-colonial centre and performs the requirements of 'an iconic immigrant' in order to overcome her sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness and nothingness. This consequently secures visibility and respect and helps her actualise herself as an upper-middle person in the dominant social order. In a similar way, in The Buddha of Suburbia (1990) by Hanif Kureishi, Karim Amir, a mixed-race teenager, assumes that he will become more 'legitimate' and respected and fit into the ideal immigrant identity when he mimics those 'proper' 'white' Londoners. He, thus, internalises the practices and forms of knowledge of the Establishment and would like to belong to the neo-colonial centre socially and culturally. This sort of interpellation within a postcolonial framework functions as an illusory means to enjoy a position of self-esteem, appreciation, acknowledgement and honour and subsequently delegitimises his own 'real' identity and subordinates him to the reproduction of existing power relations.

3. Postcolonial Interpellation in Refugee Boy

In Refugee Boy, the case of Alem, the protagonist, is not different from that of immigrant characters in the above-mentioned postcolonial literary texts, and his pathological obsession with thinking and acting in accordance with whatever is presented as the ideal and the proper by the orientalist discourse leads him to relocate and redefine his personality and intellectuality. The internalised assumption that he might be granted asylum when he becomes a 'proper' person and does not cause any problems results in his gradual interpellation into the dominant logic of the neo-colonial centre. As a refugee, Alem voluntarily embraces 'the proper refugee identity', which inaccurately creates a new social and cultural reality for him, and associates himself with the particular characteristics of that identity in order to be tolerated, recognised and included. His interpellation into the boundaries of the dominant system within a postcolonial framework might essentially be split into two distinct types: a) sociocultural interpellation and b) ideological interpellation. This section of the article will, in this context, attempt to articulate the operation of the two types of postcolonial interpellation through a close reading of the novel.

In the novel, Alem's father takes him to London for holiday for the celebration of his fourteenth birthday. They visit London for sightseeing; during the visit, Alem's father constantly asks Alem to speak 'proper' English (15). When Alem makes mistakes while speaking English, he corrects his son's English and feels sorry for him (20). When they visit Oxford Street and Piccadilly Circle, Alem's father, for example, tries to put on the best upper-class accent he could (8). The reason why speaking English in a 'proper' way is so significant for the refugee characters might be about the fact that the language of the 'insider' is constructed as the symbolic embodiment of refinement, civilisation and sophistication whereas the language of the 'outsider' is debased and aligned with negative characteristics, which is actually the residual aspect of the monologic discourse of orientalism. Their attempt to be excellent in English is functional for them in terms of sounding intellectually sophisticated and credible, creating a dialogical space between themselves and those in the dominant metropolitan centre and securing cultural capital for inclusion and mobility.

Despite the fact that Alem is not forced to master 'proper' English, he prefers to improve his English through individual effort and initiative in order not to confront his otherness which is constantly perpetuated by prevailing assumptions regarding cultural hierarchies. This preference is not an explicit consequence of a systematic oppression mechanism but of social/neighbourhood pressure. To

exemplify, in one episode, the teacher tries to help him boost his confidence and asks a few questions; however, Alem becomes confused and repeats what Christopher loudly whispers to him because his level of English is not at an advanced level yet and he does not, therefore, feel confident: "I'm sorry, I'm just a wanker" (127). The whole class, afterwards, roars with laughter and mocks him, which makes him feel ashamed of himself and urges him to improve his level of English mainly through the replication of the other boys (97). When Alem becomes fluent at English, his relationship with his classmates starts to 'normalise' since his classmates perceive him as a 'familiar' person. In this context, through mastery of English, Alem, in a way, gets rid of his otherised and precarious status, becomes the recognisable other and establishes his political existence as a refugee. Such an indirect 'normalisation' process by means of the acceptance of the superiority of anything Western – the proper – interpellates him into the neo-colonial centre socioculturally.

While identifying England with positive characteristics and qualities, Alem, perhaps unconsciously, degrades and demonises his own roots and identity. This should, of course, be grasped within the framework of orientalist epistemological formations because it entrenches existing orientalist narratives and norms and leads to the internalisation of dichotomised cultural differences based on the civilised and the uncivilised. This subsequently creates a situation in which Alem develops an inferiority complex, which has social, cultural and intellectual aspects, and strives to compensate for his insecurity, unbelonging and low self-worth through mimicking the sociocultural and ideological rituals of the dominant social order. To exemplify, Alem is not surprised at the fact that everything is so orderly and well-organised in England (11), and becomes happy and feels proud when he visits all the places he has seen in the books such as Marble Arch, Piccadilly Circus, Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London (15). In another episode, he eats spaghetti[4] in a posh restaurant and thinks that the spaghetti he has eaten in London tastes much better than the spaghetti back home. Despite wondering the country of the origin of spaghetti, he cannot even pluck up his courage and ask it to the waiter in order not to feel intellectually inferior (19). After living with his foster family, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald, he imitates their lifestyle which he perceives to be the superior. In order to make a good impression in court, he, for instance, puts on a smart suit before his trial and asks the Fitzgerald family whether he looks nice or not (136).

[4] This is probably a result of the colonisation of Eritrea by the Kingdom of Italy, which officially lasted from 1890 to 1947.

Alem's hunger to learn what others think of him and to prove himself as a 'proper' person within the context of the perceived realities and truths of the centre is metonymically the direct result of his hunger for appreciation, recognition, visibility and self-actualisation. His acceptance of Western standards and values as a means to measure the significance of his existence actually leads him to voluntarily restructure his identity and perform the proper refugee identity ascribed by the dominant society, which, in return, ensures tolerance and inclusion: "This is the lad … Alem's been a wonderful lad, everybody likes him, no trouble at all – I wish there were more like him" (28). This is, thus, another example of the sociocultural aspect of postcolonial interpellation in the novel and explicitly reinforces the argument that refugee narratives reproduce the coloniality of power in a different context as a consequence of their postcolonial dimension.

The fact that Alem might become part of the neo-colonial centre in proportion to his ability to fit into the proper refugee identity also reveals the changing logic of the concept of racism in contemporary society. Unlike traditional racist arguments based on the racial superiority of one group over another, the relatively recent form of racism in postmodern capitalism – neo-racism – has a primarily cultural rationale and articulates the perceived differences through cultural elements rather than biologically-determined arguments. To put it in another way, racism differentiates races as the superior and the inferior while neo-racism differentiates cultures as the superior and the inferior (Balibar 1991; Salecl 1994). In this regard, the progressive and refined culture is of European origin and the backward and primitive culture is that of the periphery, which is, no doubt, an extension of the ideological hegemony of the colonial discourse. However, despite having similar dynamics to racism, neo-racism might be said to be ironically more inclusive because it might, to a certain extent, pave the way for those from marginalised cultures to be accepted into the dominant culture. Reforming and reshaping their identities and personalities in order to be the culturally proper, therefore, function as a marker of belonging and ensure integration into the mainstream 'white' society as in the case of Alem. Such a sort of 'control' mechanism in postmodern capitalism manifests that 'whiteness' is no longer a racial or biological category and that anyone who would contribute to and reproduce the reification of the sociocultural, ideological and economic hegemony of the Establishment would be welcomed.

Considering these arguments, Alem's gradual ideological interpellation, which corresponds to the reconstitution of his own mindset in accordance with the arguments of the British colonial heritage and the current political Establishment,

also helps him reshape the unstable sense of who he is and where he belongs to, move beyond his displaced subjectivity and ideologically actualise himself as an 'insider'. Alem's acceptance of the fact that the UK will support his application for asylum because of its historical tendency to support those in a desperate situation is central to understanding this process. Despite potentially offering an opportunity for his sociocultural inclusion as a refugee in London, such an expectation, on a broader perspective, presents refugees as helpless, vulnerable and passive victims while justifying the active, benevolent and powerful role of Britain, and indirectly leads the refugee characters in the novel to consolidate the binary paradigms of the monologic discourse of orientalism. The argument that survival and emancipation are only possible through the intervention of the West is a revelation of the reproduction of the so-called dependency complex and, therefore, the hierarchical relation between the centre and the periphery, which subsequently results in the disempowerment of the refugee characters within a politically-correct humanitarian discourse.

To give an example, in one episode, Alem's father sends a letter to Alem and says that there are many organisations in England which are very passionate about understanding and helping people escaping from wars. Despite apparently revealing the inhumane conditions in the war zone, the content of the letter, however, describes the happenings in the region with dark and negative qualities like a colonial text and implicitly emphasises the significance of solidarity and humanitarian action:

> Today I found the arm of a man lying at the side of a street. No body, just one arm. And I found myself asking trivial questions like, "Is this an Ethiopian or an Eritrean arm?". Could you believe it? … War is eating away at our souls, young man, it is terrible … When I came back I found that your auntie's house had been looted and burnt … The organisation of EAST as fallen apart … our only surviving branch is in London. (106-107)

Such a representation of the region – the East[5] – reminds the reader of the colonial depiction of the predicament of victims, thereby discursively debasing the Orient while locating the Occident to a politically and morally superior position. In another episode, the applications of Alem Kelo and his father for asylum are rejected and the friends of Alem – Robert, Buch and Asher – decide to start a campaign. Although Alem's father thinks that the issue should not be politicised, the campaign starts and a petition with more than six thousand signatures is handed down to a local MP. One sentence in the petition is significant since it

[5] It does not refer to a certain geographical location; instead, it refers to anywhere which is not part of what is discursively presented to be the sociocultural boundaries of the 'West'.

fictionally exposes the responsiveness of the UK in terms of mobilising humanitarian action towards the suffering of unfortunate others: "As British subjects, we believe that it is our duty to offer them protection until it is safe for them to return to their homeland" (247). At the end of the novel, Alem is awarded asylum and he states that he is grateful and thankful to Britain: "I shall repay all which this country has given me" (285). What creates the indebtedness of Alem – an example of his ideological interpellation– is the intervention of the UK on behalf of the unfortunate and its 'effective' action through its own political and juridical institutions as part of its moral 'responsibility'. This creates grateful refugees as in the case of grateful immigrants in postcolonial fiction and essentially literalises the operation of the discursive hegemony of the colonial discourse in contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

Refugee Boy, which can be classified as an example of contemporary refugee literature, fictionally offers an insight into the refugee experience and portrays the interpellation process of refugees into the logic of the mainstream 'white' society in a Western country through its protagonist who can be seen a fictional representative of refugees in the contemporary world. As a refugee, Alem's hunger to fit into the proper refugee identity in order to be appreciated, acknowledged and included in the neo-colonial centre leads him to internalise the discursive formation of the normal within the context of the narratives of the orientalist discourse and to accordingly remould and reshape his identity and personality. Such a tendency indirectly legitimises and reproduces the colonial situation in a different context and reminds us of the case of the colonial subject in contemporary postcolonial fiction. Drawing on postcolonial theory might, for that reason, be useful for the articulation of the experiences of Alem since existing colonial narratives function as an invisible form of power and sort Alem into a grateful refugee whose actions and arguments constantly perpetuates institutionalised postcolonial discursive practices and the civilizational superiority of the West. Despite the fact that his sociocultural and ideological interpellation into dominant power structures within a postcolonial framework – postcolonial interpellation – might relatively ensure tolerance, acceptance and inclusion, it is actually an apolitical and defiant tendency which implicitly glorifies the moral and historical 'responsibility' of the centre as part of the discursive continuity of orientalist epistemological formations.

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