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In a short autobiographical note Syed Manzurul Islam described himself as «an immigrant», whose life experience has stretched «between continents, cultures and countries»[1] and whose imagination is still *caught* between past and present, between the fond and often painful memories of his mother country and the challenge of living in the UK. Born in 1953, in a village in the north-eastern part of modern Bangladesh, Manzurul Islam settled in Britain in 1975. In the time span between 1978 and 1986 he studied philosophy, sociology and literature at the University of Essex, and he is currently lecturing on postcolonial literature and creative writing at «Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education» in Cheltenham. His vocation as a writer stemmed from his engagement in «the anti-racist struggle» in the East End of London during the 70s and the 80s and from the awareness that the bare data on racial harassment collected through the interviews for a sociological research project he was carrying out in the London «Banglatown» along Brick Lane did not fully succeed in grasping and giving voice to «the human trauma and the terror

[1] Compare with the following internet site: <http://www.nlb-online.org/mod.php?mod=userpage&menu=32&page_id=153>.

involved in the incidents»[2], which, on the other hand, could be poignantly expressed through literature, as his first collection of short stories, *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields* (1997)[3], testifies.

Manzurul Islam is also the author of an academic volume on the complexity and the traps of cross-cultural encounters entitled *The Ethics of Travel: from Marco Polo to Kafka* (1996)[4], whose main ideas seem to provide the readers with the critical framework for the analysis of his literary pieces.

His solid sociological background, his first-hand experience of the events that characterized the history of the Bangladeshi immigration in Britain since Margaret Thatcher's premiership, and his in-depth knowledge of the critical debate on the fashioning of one's identity through the definition/redefinition of space, contribute to mould Manzurul Islam's unique, multi-faceted perspective on the articulation of the «national vs. ethnic» discourse, a perspective which more popular authors such as Monica Ali, despite her similar cultural background, cannot share. His latest volume entitled *Burrow* (2004)[5] which this paper aims at analyzing, can therefore be read not just as a novel, telling *the life story* of fictional Tapan Ali (the main character), but also as an actual way of *writing* the *History* of the British Bangladeshis in London, of reflecting on their status of closely knit communities, «encapsulated» within the British territory, as sociologist John Eade described them, of addressing the problem of illegal immigration and the way this phenomenon has further problematized the dichotomy *belonging/ not belonging* first and second generations had to grapple with, and of devising new routes, capable of challenging the very concepts of territorialization, partition and boundary

[2] Compare with the same site.
[3] S. M. Islam, *The Mapmakers of Spitalfields*, Leeds 1997.
[4] S. M. Islam, *The Ethics of Travel, from Marco Polo to Kafka*, Manchester 1996.
[5] S. M. Islam, *Burrow*, Leeds 2004.

which lie at the base of the asymmetrical relationship between *center* and *periphery*.

After giving a short outline of the plot, this paper sets out to explore the three, consecutive facets of the «national vs. ethnic» discourse Manzurul Islam deals with in *Burrow*, namely **1)** the binary opposition between the mainstream society and the ethnic community and its articulation in *fixed, non communicative spaces*, **2)** the liminal status of the illegal immigrant and his *ghost space* underground, **3)** the overcoming of the discourse through the discovery of a *"fluctuating" category of space.*

Set in 1977-1978, *Burrow* is mainly focused on the character of Tapan Ali, a «non economic migrant» that had settled in London in order to complete his studies in philosophy, although his grandfather — who was supporting him abroad — believed he was actually enrolled in the faculty of accountancy. After the elderly man passed away, Tapan Ali is left without any financial resources and he would be repatriated if a British friend of his, Adela Richardson (a humorous counterpart of E.M. Forster's Adela Quested), did not offer to marry him in order to legitimate his stay in England. However, when the authorities of the Immigration Office find out the marriage is purely based on convenience, Tapan Ali is confronted with a choice: he can either go back to Bangladesh (now perceived by him as an alien territory, where nobody is waiting for him as his grandfather is dead and having no family left) or become an illegal immigrant.

By choosing the latter, Tapan Ali turns into a «mole» burrowing into the underground of the metropolis and, throughout the volume, the reader follows his travels within the invisible yet perceivable and still restrictive boundaries of a hidden city peopled by ghost-like derelicts, until such time he decides to surface again, at the end of the story.

Let us now proceed with the analysis of the three facets of the «national vs. ethnic» discourse.

1) In *The Ethics of Travel* Manzurul Islam explores the paradox of the «two-cities-under-one-sky» that is peculiar of the colonial and, it might be added, of the British Bangladeshi post-colonial space, a sort of Manichaean world of opposites where «the purity of each identity is never endangered through the leakage of its difference or each other's identity» (43). A similar concept is featured in *Burrow* where the irresolvable dichotomy, the absence of any osmotic relationship between the «mainstream» and the «ethnic» society — which are actually even perceived in hierarchical terms — is signified through the descriptions of London and its encapsulated «Banglatown» provided by the writer. At the very beginning of the novel, in the *Prologue*, Tapan Ali's grandfather portrays England as «the most beautiful land on earth» (7), compared to an Edenic garden full of flowers in bloom which, however, seems to be forbidden to the immigrant, as it is possible to infer from Tapan's recurrent nightmare, in which a horseman, meaningfully called the «gatekeeper», chases away his grandfather pleading on his behalf with the following words «please, honorable custodian. Please, let my grandson enter your beautiful land. I've been a most loyal servant of your people» (10). London is described as the hub of power, its skyscrapers are «the muscles of empire» (23) its buildings are remarkably «white» and they ooze «imperial opulence» (94), while the gaze of the main characters often lingers on the old, domineering Observatory of Greenwich, which seems to watch over the territory in order to prevent any changes and transformations, besides «mark[ing] itself as the centre of time and the world» (94). British Bangladeshi characters display the symptoms of alienation and displacement: their minds and hearts are back «home» (where they long to return) separated from their bodies, in the UK: «this time I'm really going back home» (161), one of them remarks, after another disappointment. When they rarely cross the invisible boundary encircling their enclave, in which they

strived to recreate a familiar environment, they often experience feelings of uneasiness, «as though they were entering a hostile, foreign territory» (41) that seems to repel them, to push them back towards that portion of ground they have been allocated and that a series of barricades (34) both *protects* from the racist attacks so common in the late 70s and, at the same time, *limits*, *restricts.*

2) The second facet of the discourse can be once more introduced through a quotation from *The Ethics of Travel* referred, this time, to Kafka and to one of what Manzurul Islam defines as the «lines of escape» the writer devised for his character Gregory Samsa, «entrapped within the spaces of power» (39): losing his human features and becoming an animal. In his liminal condition of an illegal immigrant, incapable of both blending in and going back to his mother country (albeit in his mind). Tapan Ali apparently solves the tension between «national» and «ethnic» and the above explored mutual exclusion of non communicative spaces by undergoing a metamorphosis into a «mole» which will enable him to discover a third dimension, a *third space* beyond the conflicting sides of the surface: the underground. He is given a map of «the city under the city» (97) (thus mimicking the colonial logic of territorial possession and its paraphernalia), a blueprint of a London that finally seems to *belong* to the Bangladeshi immigrant, who apparently succeeds in crossing boundaries and in defining himself not just through his relationship with the British, but also through the association with other groups, such as the Chinese and the Jews, that share a common destiny in this «invisible city» (97). The *fixity* which was the characteristic of the previously explored facet of the discourse is replaced by Tapan Ali's constant *movement* underneath the city, by his frequently changing the apartment where he resides during the day, in order not to be discovered and expelled by the Immigration Officers. This solution, however, soon proves to be

ephemeral. The conquered space is nothing but a vacuum between cultures, a city of deterritorialized ghosts who cannot surface in the daylight and cannot act to change the texture of society; moreover the freedom they enjoy is, once again, limited by the invisible boundary of the London «Banglatown», in which they are actually still and even more confined: «From now on, [Tapan], you can move *freely* anywhere you like *within this map*» (121). It is remarkable to notice that as Tapan Ali plunges into the «invisible city» of the illegal immigrants, his individual and cultural identity is progressively cancelled, starting from the erasure of his name («Tapan would be nameless; he would not exist as far as the world was concerned» — 73), to the metamorphosis into a mole, to the regression to a primitive primate doomed to extinction:

> What does an illegal immigrant look like? Was he already showing the tell-tale marks of a criminal type: arms elongating, forehead turning low and narrow, ears enlarging, and jaws jutting out alarmingly with large canine teeth? (78)

The reference to the «large canine teeth» anticipates the last dehumanizing transformation Tapan Ali undergoes in his becoming an illegal immigrant: Count Dracula (122, 208), the *undead* suspended between life and death whose image cannot be reflected in a mirror, and in whose characterization as a «bloodsucker» the fear of immigrants as parasites of the British society finds its most threatening representation.

3) The third and final facet on the «national vs. ethnic» discourse explored by Syed Manzurul Islam actually implies its overcoming and constitutes the writer's most interesting contribution towards the shaping of a world in which binary oppositions of mutual exclusion can be definitely recomposed.

At the end of the volume Tapan Ali decides to face his destiny of an illegal immigrant thus surfacing from the city of ghosts, as he remarks with the following words: «I'm fed up

with tunnels, underground, burrowing, hidings and dark places. I say to hell with moles. I want to surface. I want light» (260).

The impenetrable garden of Eden that England was at the beginning of the novel eventually turns into a territory which can be regarded as a home, as a place where one of the elderly British Bangladeshis decides to be buried, thus going back to the womb of a land that is now perceived almost as a mother and not anymore as the mere center of power: «he was giving his bones to this land, bones that would be played as flutes, their harmony making this land less foreign, and more their own» (273). The immobility of space, the idea of wandering within fixed circuits, the process of deterritorialization that have been noticed so far, are now replaced by a more *flexible* concept of space, corresponding to a more *fluid* identity of the main character, who is now free from the shackles of having to belong to *one* nation, and can «walk non stop for […] hours […] drawing energy from this *melting space*, from *his* city» (283). In *The Ethics of Travel* it is possible to read that, not differently from Tapan Ali in his *ghost city*, Kafka's Gregory Samsa has been traveling among the «mapped» and «gridded route». «On this route», Manzurul Islam continues, «the more one travels, the more one is entrapped»; what one has to wish for, on the other hand, is «to travel along other routes, to other places of impassable height which are not yet traced on any map» (41). It is not by chance, therefore, that towards the end of the volume Tapan Ali, the burrowing «mole», feels he can fly, thus turning in his imagination at first into a paradoxical «flying mole» and then into a bird. It is not by chance that in the very final page of the volume, when the Immigration Officers are about to capture the protagonist, the story line is somehow suspended, closing onto the image of a sea-gull «hovering and circling so full of joy», belonging to the two «fluctuating» spaces of the sea and the air that are free and refuse to be mapped.

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