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Postcolonial Re-reading of the Marginalized Nation in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has changed the perception of both imperialism and colonialism. Since then postcolonial critics and scholars have still challenged not only the concepts such as nation, diaspora or identity, but have also been trying to give voice to formerly oppressed minority groups. Postcolonial critics attempt to refute colonial and patriarchal domination by means of such strategies as re-reading and rewriting of canonical works, including those of the Bard (McLeod, Childs, Loomba and Orkin). Whilst the aforementioned scholars' education often included British literature, which has been used to assert Britain's "cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products" (McLeod 140), the application of the two strategies—especially through rewriting of classical texts—granted them an opportunity to subvert their inferior position and use it for their benefit in order to expose colonial ideology. Therefore, applying the first strategy in the following analysis of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the complex representation of the nation as both imagined and marginalized will be discussed with respect to groups that constitute social hierarchy.

Defining the Nation and Its Margins

For Benedict Anderson (6) the nation is "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". He points out that it is imagined, because one is unable to have an everyday contact with all the other members. In his definition he emphasizes the feeling of unity that can be built among the members of community in whose best interest lies the will to preserve the continuity of time, that is the link between the past, for instance in the form of memories about national heroes, and the future. The first examples of the nation, in his opinion, had been formed by France and the Americas, whilst other Europeans only copied the predecessors' models. Moreover, had it not been for

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the invention of the print—and consequently the spread of vernacular languages—or the decline of feudalism, the formation of the nation would not have been possible.

Ernest Renan (13) in his classical “What Is a Nation?” claims that even though some of the nations such as the English, Irish or Scottish have been formed on the basis of the royal dynasty, “a nation can exist without a dynastic principle, and even nations which have been formed by dynasties can be separated from them without therefore ceasing to exist”, which implies that the nation is not limited to monarchical countries and the change of political system does not disrupt the nation. Renan also emphasizes the importance of other factors, such as religion, race and common (economical) interest.

Notwithstanding Anderson’s imagined communities, in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” Homi K. Bhabha (304) attempts to challenge the historicism of the term nation. As he claims, the historicism most commonly marks the sociological implications of the nation together with its unifying feature. However, the embedded ambivalence of the nation “as a narrative strategy” is not considered. In the narrating process, people are inscribed as pedagogical subjects, caught in the self-generating tradition of the past and performative subjects that are continually forced to confirm their cultural identification, and hence occupy the liminal location in the cultural space. It is through this clash of the pedagogical with the performative character of subjects that the writing of the nation is provided (Bhabha 299). Moreover, Bhabha (302-303, 315-316) stresses the growing number of groups occupying the marginal position in the community, namely *the colonized*, *women* and *the migrant*.

Bhabha (302) also alludes to Foucault’s achievement by stressing that “From Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* we have learned that the most individuated are those subjects who are placed on the margins of the social, so that the tension between law and order may produce the disciplinary or pastoral society”. Furthermore, it is the change in the cultural signification provided by the above-mentioned ambivalence that allows one to question the nation’s borders owing to the marginal position of others fulfilling the performative role in the writing of the nation. Eventually, the margins do not “simply confront the pedagogical, or powerful master-discourse with a contradictory or negating referent” (Bhabha 306). Following Bhabha’s (306) argument the margins, by their negation of pedagogical, do not converse with the dominant narrative, but rather “interrogate its objects by initially withholding its objective”. Therefore, the discourse of the margins unfolds the ambivalence of historical time and thus has an impact on the dominant narrative.

The nation is thus presented as an imagined community while its margins stress the ambivalent and no longer holistic nature. What is more, the liminal location of such marginalized groups as women, the colonized and the

migrant allows one to emphasize the modern view of the nation, which stresses the influence of the margins on the centre.

Shakespeare's Representatives of the Marginalized Nation

Among the characters of *King Lear* one can distinguish several social groups influencing each other—among the representatives of the society one meets the king with his daughters, outcasts and beggars. In order to determine the margins of the nation it is of utmost importance to differentiate the position of different social groups such as the elderly—with Lear and Gloucester representing them—as well as the vagrants and outcasts. The overlapping of the aforementioned categories is indirectly caused by the protagonists' age, especially their own concern about their age that eventually leads to the climax of tragic events resulting in the exile of Kent, Edgar and Cordelia. Furthermore, the marginalization of women due to patriarchal domination presents itself in the lack of the figure of the mother and the final treatment of Lear's daughters.

The Elderly

Stephen Greenblatt (93) refers to customs of deference, such as removing the hat or asking for blessing, as signs of recognition of one's wealth, caste or age. The elderly occupied a privileged position in the society since they were responsible for sustenance of paternal order of society: "the old in each generation formed a link with the old of the preceding generation and so, by contiguity, reached back to the ideal, sanctioned order at the origin of time" (Greenblatt 93). However, the late Middle Ages and the early modern period maintained the need to control the young. Fear of unjust treatment once the older generation retired and passed down their properties is central to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Therefore, the ambivalent position that is occupied by the elderly is both liminal and privileged. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century it was a moral obligation of fathers, in their own opinion, to shape their offspring's characters and the development of one's most valuable trait, namely compliance. Since both Lear and Gloucester misjudged their children's character traits, the age becomes the reason and excuse for their decline in social hierarchy. For instance, unjustified claim to authority by the Earl of Gloucester is exploited by Edmund and used as an excuse to convince his father of Edgar's plot to murder him. In a letter, allegedly written, by Edgar, Gloucester reads:

This policy, and reverence of age, makes
the world bitter to the best of our time: keeps our fortunes
from us, till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an

idle and fond bondage, in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways not as it hath power, but as it is suffer'd [...] (1:2, 35)¹

Furthermore, the conflict between the former King and his daughters escalates due to the changes in Lear's behaviour instigated by his fear of deterioration. He still assumes his patriarchal position and expects the same privileges after having retired and is reluctant to share his authority with Regan and Goneril, to whom he passed his former kingdom.

Nonetheless, the very existence of the dynasty, even in the form of feudal relations between characters, is significant for the metaphor of nation, as Ernest Renan (12) points out: "a nation is above all a dynasty, representing an earlier conquest, one which was first of all accepted, and then forgotten by the mass of the people". Among other factors prompting the formation of the nation, such as religion, language and race, or simply the will to unite, Renan (8-21) claims that it is the dynasty that helps to construct the feeling of unity. However, at the same time he emphasizes the importance of peoples forgetting the establishment of dynasty—often through invasion—which is too often asserted through the use of violence. In this context, the fact that Shakespeare's tragedy does not unfold the history of Lear's coronation is of utmost importance because of the King's own presupposed authority of the monarch. Thus, in Lear's own opinion his demand for keeping an attending army in the number of a hundred is relevant irrespective of his weakened position; however, having rightfully performed the protagonist's test of love and having taken his paternal authority from him, his daughters assume his former space and ridicule his attempt to preserve previous state of affairs.

GONERIL: [...] idle old man
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away, now by my life,
Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd [...] (1:3, 39-40)

Therefore, the moment Lear divides his kingdom as a dowry for his daughters the character is instantly deprived of his metonymic connotation with the crown. What is interesting is that the monarch's resignation is not directly related to his daughters' marriages, but rather to his own age:

LEAR: Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know, that we have divided
In three our Kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent,

¹ As the edition of the play I am using does not use continuous line numbers I am providing act and scene number alongside with page number.

To shake all cares and business from our old age,
 Conferring them on younger strength, while we
 Unburthen'd crawl toward death.[...]
 Tell me my daughters
 (Since now we will divest us both of rule,
 Interest of territory, cares of state)
 Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
 That we, our largest bounty may extend
 Where Nature doth with merit challenge. (1:1, 24)

Furthermore, the fact that no legal measures are taken to secure the King's paternal position implicates the gravity of the love test carried out by the former monarch as is similarly argued by Greenblatt (97): "Lear, who has, as he thinks, given all to this children demands all from them. In place of a contract, he has substituted the love test". His perplexing lack of legal protection combined with his expectation of privileges lead other characters to ascribe Lear's faulty behavior to his geriatric deterioration:

GONERIL: You see how full of changes his age is, the
 observation we have made of it hath not been little; he
 always lov'd our sister most, and with what poor judge-
 ment he hath now cast her off, appears too grossly.
 REGAN: 'Tis the infirmity of his age, yet he hath ever but
 slenderly known himself. (1:1, 32-33)

As a consequence of his actions, throughout his journey the royal protagonist is accompanied by representatives of other marginalized groups, namely beggars and outcasts. In addition, the former King, because of his own experience of vagrancy and paternal issues, sympathizes with the banished Edgar. As Kim Mi-Su (87) rightly points out: "Lear projects himself onto the naked beggar and finds his fate in Poor Tom. After giving all of his possessions to his daughter, Lear himself has begun to feel literally like a beggar". Thus, as Lear's fears are realized due to his retirement, his situation becomes more parallel to that of the beggar than of the king.

Vagrants and Outcasts

The character of Poor Tom in *King Lear* was a milestone shift in the representation of beggars by Tudor playwrights. According to William C. Carroll (180), the portrayal of beggars in the drama of the period was divided into two different types, namely "the genuine, unnamed poor" and "the histrionic counterfeiter". The distinction between the two becomes blurred for the first time owing to Edgar disguising as a beggar in *King Lear* (Carroll 180).

In his analysis, Carroll draws parallels between the disguised Edgar and Tom of Bedlam. From the historical point of view, Bedlam was a mental facility for the poor, especially vagrants (Carroll, Mi-Su). Thus, the change in Edgar's behaviour implying insanity should not be surprising if he was to be treated credibly. As Kim Mi-Su (85) emphasizes in his dissertation "Men on the Road: Beggars and Vagrants in Early Modern Drama" the Bard, in contrast with other authors like Harman, did not portray vagrants as *Other*, but is rather sympathetic towards them: "By placing a representative rogue character in a sympathetic context, Shakespeare revises the images of beggars and thereby questions the stereotypical perspective of vagrants in rogue books. In other words, Shakespeare does not validate the ideology of Harman, but demystifies it to draw empathy for vagrants". Nevertheless, the aforementioned character is able to draw empathy from the audience only because of the knowledge of his prior unfair treatment, which was the banishment from the kingdom. Thus, in *King Lear* his decentralized position contributes to the vision of the nation in which this character serves as a performative subject challenging the already established margins.

What is more, Anderson (145) points out that one of the key factors in creating national unity is language: "it shows that from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community". What is therefore paramount at this moment of discussion is that one is not naturally born into the nation but can "be invited" into it. In the light of this constructive character of the nation the invitation of poor vagrant Tom into the community by Gloucester is significant. Opportunities that are created—be it Gloucester's journey as a blinded man with the unknown beggar or the banishment of Kent—allow the characters of differing social status to travel together. Eventually, it is the former vagrant Edgar that is offered by the Earl of Albany the kingdom after the demise of the royal dynasty.

Furthermore, as Kim Mi-Su (1) points out, the social position of Lear can be compared to the position of the beggar: "Lear's 'nothingness' bears a close resemblance to the vagrant poor in the early modern England, who underwent a turbulent experience of identities when they could not hold onto their occupation, belongings, and their home". The former King's identity suddenly comes close to the one of a vagrant (Mi-Su 87).

The other group whose position is equally liminal to the one of vagrants are outcasts and Kent serves as its representative, banished by Lear for speaking out the bitter truth and refusal to perform his theatrical role:

Since thou hast sought to make us break our vows,
[...] take thy reward.
Five days we do allot thee for provision,

To shield thee from disasters of the world,
 And on the sixth to turn thy hated back
 Upon our kingdom; if on the tenth day following,
 Thy banish'd trunk be found in our Dominions,
 The moment is thy death, away. (1:1, 28-29)

Furthermore, as has already been mentioned, Edgar's situation can be treated as a combination of issues of both vagrancy and banishment. Edgar's primary motivation is to survive and he "decides to beg as a wandering lunatic" (Mi-Su 86). However, his initially marginal position is promoted to monarchical authority, signifying the fluidity of what was first established as liminal.

Women in a Patriarchal World

The absence of the figure of the mother and the limited presence of female protagonists in *King Lear* are crucial. While the female characters' position as King's offspring should correspond to one another, they are placed in opposition. The situation of Lear's youngest daughter is dissimilar to the older women's—Goneril and Regan—who are strong and compete for the attention of the same man, Edmund. All female protagonists occupy marginalized position in the patriarchal society despite the differences in their portrayal.

To begin with, Cordelia's position is akin to that of Kent—similarly to him her exile is precipitated by the bitter truth that has offended the King by, what Greenblatt (90) refers to as, an antitheatrical gesture: "when Cordelia resists Lear's paternal demand, she does so in an antitheatrical gesture, a refusal to perform: the theater and family are simultaneously at stake". Furthermore, when she employs rationality rather than emotions as was expected from females, the character is punished and the actual reason is her failure to comply to the association of women with nature as contrasted with men's connotation with rationality and knowledge. Coppélia Kahn in her essay "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*" focuses not only on the complexity of the absence of maternal figure in the family, but also on the intricacy of father-daughter relations. Lear's incestuous desire for his daughters is pointed out since "Cordelia is supposed to show that she loves her father not only more than her sisters do but, as she rightly sees, more than she loves her future husband" (Kahn 40). Eventually, the role Cordelia plays in Lear's mind commences to resemble the one of the mother.

In "The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs" Stephen Greenblatt (112) points out that the other reason that has led to Cordelia's decline in social status is that "Lear apparently cannot perceive the difference between his eldest daughters' blatant hypocrisy and his youngest daughter's truth". That the father would ask his offspring to compete for their dowry and

inheritance was not uncommon among the Elizabethans. After failing her love test the disinherited daughter is devoid of all paternal care:

LEAR: Thou hast her France, let her be thine, for we
 Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
 That face of hers again, therefore be gone,
 Without our grace, our love, our benison:
 Come noble Burgundy. (1:1, 32)

Her position in life depends on men who are to provide for her, and when Lear simply gives her to the King of France, the advancement in social status is not what was expected. As a consequence of Lear's actions her space in hierarchy is lifted to the Queen of France, in contrast to Kent who is banished from the kingdom.

Cordelia's virtue lies within her compassion towards her father's fate, especially after having been disinherited:

'Faith once or twice she heav'd the name of
 father,
 Pantingly forth as if it press'd her heart,
 Cried sisters, sisters, shame of Ladies, sisters;
 Kent, father, sisters, what i'the storm i' th' night;
 Let pity not be believ'd, there she shook
 The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
 And clamour moisten'd her; then away she started,
 To deal with grief alone. (4:3, 104)

According to Kahn (47), "Like the Virgin Mary, she intercedes magically, her empathy and pity coaxing mercy from nature". In this way she welcomes the closest role to that of a matriarchal figure.

The other female protagonists, Regan and Goneril, are strong and become entangled in highly competitive relations when they vie for dowry and subsequently for the same man, which contributes to their tragic demise. Although both sisters are seduced by Edmund, it is not the implication of their unfaithfulness to their husbands that is scolded, but rather the extension of manipulation that the women resort to. For instance, Regan appeals to the Steward's sense of morality in order to gain information as she is firmly convinced that because her husband passed away she should be given precedence to her sister:

Why should she write to Edmund? Might not you
 Transport her purposes by word? Belike,
 Some things, I know not what. I'll love thee much
 Let me unseal the letter. [...]

I know your Lady does not love her husband,
 I am sure of that: and at her late being here,
 She gave strange ocellades, and most speaking looks
 To noble Edmund. I know you are of her bosom. (4:5, 107)

The plot to poison the other sister to be with Edmund culminated in the death of both characters. Yet, Goneril is not better than her sister as she is responsible, together with the bastard son of Gloucester, for the death of Cordelia. Both Regan and Goneril have to resort to intrigues and violence in order to sustain their quasi-authority. However, Cristina León Alfar (80) claims that this is exactly the proof of their strive to challenge the absolutist power of the king: "For the tyranny Goneril and Regan perform comes out of Shakespeare's portrayal of the early modern system of government that takes its authority from God and answers only to God, as a way to mystify the monarch's absolute right to rule". Therefore, even after being placed in the authoritative patriarchal position the two women occupy the liminal place in the society. In fact, such a disgraceful behaviour of heroines was not uncommon in the drama of the period, as Helen Wilcox claims. In her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century" she (28) points out that "these women and their contemporaries suffered physically, socially and psychologically as a result of what was considered the inheritance of Eve". A woman's lack of independence recurs in her inability to control her fate, which was predestined by the patriarchal figure either of the father or the husband: "girls were also the objects of a sustained cultural scrutiny that focused on the critical passage from the authority of the father or guardian to the authority of the husband" (Greenblatt 84).

Nevertheless, the attitude of Lear towards his daughters is not flawless. The unreasonable banishment of the youngest daughter as well as his expectation of patriarchal authority lead to the deterioration in, and even reversal of, relations between the family members. Disappointed, Lear does not hesitate to express his disapproval to his daughter's spouse, as he says:

[to Albany]: Hear Nature, hear dear Goddess, hear:
 Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
 To make this creature fruitful:
 Into her womb convey sterility,
 Dry up in her the organs of increase,
 And from her derogate body never spring
 A babe to honour her. If she must teem,
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her.
 Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
 With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
 Turn all her mother's pains and benefits

To laughter, and contempt: that she may feel,
 How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is,
 To have a thankless child. Away, away. (1:4, 48-49)

Significant is the fact that even though the words are directed to the Duke of Albany, they resemble a curse addressed to Nature, which may serve as a metaphor for God, but also as addressed to “divine law of nature” that could make a woman infertile. One cannot help but notice the connection with, or even reference to, the male/female duality. Therefore, women’s subaltern position due to the connotation with the body and nature is opposed to the male, and hence superior position owing to the association with the mind and culture. Furthermore, the absence of the figure of the mother in the play indicates the dysfunction of the family as the smallest unit of community. Following Margaret Mahler (qtd. in Bordo 59), as she points out: “our true psychological birth comes when we begin to experience our separateness from the mother, when we begin to individuate from her”, one may claim that the lack of this maternal protagonist could have a positive influence on the independence of the daughters; however, the mother’s absence is not explained, which entails the opposite effect.

The Marginalized and Imagined Nation in *King Lear*

To conclude, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* portrays the diverse social margins that help to construct the nation. The play’s interwoven complex relations between the groups suffering from marginalization delineate how they influence each other, as Lear, discriminated due to his age, wrongfully disinherits his beloved daughter. However, it is the King’s own concern about his age which leads his daughters to believe in his mental decline that induces his loss of respect and authority. Similarly, Edmund’s traitorous intrigue can result in Edgar’s exile only because Gloucester has already been worried about the passing over of power. The conflict between the daughters and the former King escalates after the disinheritance of Cordelia, being punished for the failure to prove her affection to Lear.

On the contrary, since the division of kingdom the competitive context in which Regan and Goneril are placed in by their father forces them to perform their role to confirm their position. Their stubbornness to preserve the newly inherited authority ends in the abuse of power combined with extreme cruelty. The fact that beggars travel together with the far more privileged representatives of higher social class and share the experience of exile and vagrancy is significant in the play for such a situation portrays the fluidity of social margins. Overlapping categories help to construct as well as improve the nation, since its

borders blur or evolve under the influence of the margins. Therefore, the vision of the nation is at first constructed on the basis of the royal dynasty, irrespective of the fact that it unfolds the story of only two generations.

The aforementioned marginalized social groups suffer from both discrimination and oppression on the grounds of challenged gerontological authoritative social order combined with an unwillingness to resign from one's power as well as its abuse in order to preserve the higher position in the society. Women are also situated on a liminal location as their wellbeing depends solely either on the figure of the father or that of the husband. Ultimately, the suppressed emotions (or actions) of the individuals newly located in the liminal position in the society result in the downfall of the royal dynasty.

The nation in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is imagined, since the play encloses only a limited number of personas, and it should be emphasized that not all the characters know each other. In time of transition of power, the feeling of unity that is built between the representatives of selected social groups initiates their mutual journey. Even though the future of the kingdom no longer lies in the hands of the royal family, the final scene announces the feeling of solidarity between the members in the form of empathy towards the borders of the nation. Eventually, authorities of representatives of the *pedagogical* subjects in the persona of the elderly and the patriarchal figure are substituted by the *performative* subjects with evolved attitude towards vagrants.

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