



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SELECTED ARABIC NOVELS
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH**

YAHYA HASSAN YAHYA ALWADHAF

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TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH**

By

YAHYA HASSAN YAHYA ALWADHAF

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

June 2008



**To my parents, my wife and my sons: Yaseen, Abdul Aziz and Zakarya.
To the memory of my dear brother Ali, my uncle Ahmed and my aunt
Fatimah who passed away while I was far away from them paving the road
to my PhD journey.**

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chairman: Noritah Omar, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

The novel genre is not an indigenous Arabic literary form in the contemporary Arabic literature, but an imported and borrowed one that arrived with the European ambitions of domination and expansion. It is a purely twentieth century phenomenon that passed through different stages of its formation. Beginning with translation of Western novels, imitation, and ultimately indigenization, the Arabic novel is a recognized universal genre. One aspect of this recognition is the translation of a considerable number of novels into English and other languages. Up to the year 2001, more than one hundred novels had been translated into English. Unfortunately, this type of novel has no status, still in search for a status both in the Arabic culture and in world literature.

The majority of these novels remained unknown and undiscovered in the critical literary circles both in the Arab world and in the Western literary tradition. Many studies have been conducted on the Arabic novel in translation, nevertheless, in many cases the focus is centered on the Egyptian novel in general and on the



Mahfouzean on particular. This study attempts to locate the contemporary Arabic novel in the main stream of world literature and in particular as part of the genre of postcolonial literature. To achieve this end, the focus is directed on a body of literary texts that had been translated from Arabic into English and have been neglected so far in the postcolonial studies. Four texts have been selected from peripheral places in the Arabic world to be studied and analyzed concentrating on themes and techniques.

Reading through the postcolonial theory as well as the narrative theory, it is argued that Mohamed Abdul Wali, Ghassan Kanafani, Tayeb Salih and Jabra Ibrahim have subscribed significantly to the postcolonial studies by discussing issues such as identity formation, body-land association, resistance, hybridity, mimicry and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Furthermore, they have manipulated a variety of narrative techniques and discursive strategies such as parody, irony, intertextuality to highlight and enrich thematic treatment. This study makes use of the ideas of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Norman Friedman, Mark Schorer among others to examine the postcolonial and technical dimensions of *They Die Strangers*, *Men in the Sun*, *Season of Migration to the North* and *The Ship*.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senate Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah.

**PEMBACAAN PASCA KOLONIAL NOVEL-NOVEL TERPILIH YANG
TELAH DITERJEMAHAN DARI BAHASA ARAB KE BAHASA INGGERIS**

Oleh

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Jenis sastera bentuk “novel” bukanlah jenis tulisan Sastera Arab asal, mahupun juga bukannya tergolong sebagai tulisan Sastera Arab kontemporari, sejajar dengan prosis kolonialisasi. Sastera bentuk “novel” merupakan fenomena abad ke dua-puluh yang telah mengalami beberapa peringkat ciptaan. Bermula dengan penterjemahan ke atas “novel” Barat disusuli peringkat peniruan, diakhiri dengan peringkat dianggap sebahagian sastera Arab, dan justeru kini sebahagian kesusasteraan sejagat. Antara aspek penyesuaian ini adalah penterjemahan banyak karya Arab ke Bahasa Inggeris dan bahasa-bahasa asing yang lain. Sehingga tahun 2001, lebih seratus “novel” bahasa Arab sudahpun diterjemah ke bahasa Inggeris. Walau demikian, novel-novel bahasa Arab yang diterjemah kan, meskipun dianggap sejagat, masih mencari status dalam peradaban Arab.

Sebilangan besar novel-novel ini masih belum dikenali dan ditemui dalam dunia sastera Arab dan Barat. Kajian-kajian yang sebelum ini dilakukan ke atas novel-novel yang diterjemahkan telah banyak memberi perhatian secara amnya ke atas novel yang ditulis oleh penulis-penulis Mesir seperti Naguib Mahfouz. Kajian ini ingin menempatkan novel Arab kontemporari sebagai sebahagian gugusan besar dalam kesusasteraan dunia, dan khususnya sebahagian dari hasil sastera pasca kolonial. Untuk mencapai matlamat ini, fokus kajian ini tertumpu kepada karya-karya sastera yang telah diterjemahkan dari bahasa Arab ke bahasa Melayu yang masih belum dikaji dari sudut pasca kolonial. Empat teks telah dipilih dari marginal dunia Arab untuk kajian dan analisa terhadap tema dan teknik.

Melalui pembacaan karya-karya ini yang menerapkan teori pasca kolonial dan teori naratif, kajian ini meguhkan bahawa Mohamed Abdul Wali, Ghassan Kanafani, Tayeb Salih dan Jabra Ibrahim telah menggunakan fahaman pasca kolonial apabila membincangkan hal-hal identiti, hubungan jasad-tanah, penentangan, penghibridan, peniraan, dan konflik antara tradisi dan kemodenan. Tambahan lagi penulis-penulis ini telah memanipulasikan pelbagai kaedah naratif dan strategi diskursif seperti parodi, ironi, intertekstualisme untuk mengeketengah dan memperkayakan penggunaan tema. Antara lainnya, kajian ini menggunakan tulisan dan buah fikiran Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Norman Friedman, dan Mark Schorer untuk mengkaji dimensi pasca kolonial dalam novel-novel yang dikaji, iaitu: *They Die Strangers*, *Men in the Sun*, *Season of Migration to the North* dan *The Ship*.

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The thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for the quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

YAHYA HASSAN YAHYA AL-WADHAF

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vii
APPROVAL	x
DECLARATION	xii
 CHAPTER	
 I INTRODUCTION	
Preamble	1
Situating the Genre	5
Statement of the Problem	6
Scope of the Study	8
Conceptual Theory	10
Objectives of the Study	27
Significance of the Study	29
Limitations of the Study	31
Translating World Literature	33
Modern Arabic Literature in Translation	34
Methodology	37
Conclusion	42
 II LITERATURE REVIEW	
Preamble	45
The Beginning of the Arabic Novel	46
The Rise of the Arabic Novel	50
The <i>Nahda</i>	50
The Novel in Egypt(centre): Thematic Issues	53
Class, Gender and Social Criticism in <i>Zaynab</i>	55
Major Themes in Al-Hakim’s Novels	56
Nation, Narration, Allegory and Social Reform	57
Thresholds for East and West Encounters	59
Main Trends in Mahfouz	61
The Novel in the Periphery	63
Yemen: A Historical Background	65
The Novel and its Development in Yemen	66
Mohammed Abdul Wali: Emigration and Narration	72
The Palestinian Novel and the Process of National Formation	74
Ghassan Kanafani and Resistance Literature	75
Exile and Alienation in Jabra’s Fiction	79
Tayeb Salih: The Voice of Exile and Encounter	82
Tayeb Salih’s Major Novels	86
Critical Studies on the Postcolonial Arabic Novel	87
<i>They Die Strangers</i>	92
<i>Men in the Sun</i>	92



	<i>Season of Migration to the North</i>	95
	<i>The Ship</i>	99
	Postcolonialism: Theory and Practice	101
	The Post-Colonial Theory	103
	Postcolonial Matters in Arabic Fiction	107
	Conclusion	114
III	IDENTITY FORMATION AND BODY-LAND ASSOCIATION	
	Preamble	118
	<i>They Die Strangers</i> and the Construction of the Yemeni Novel	119
	The Yemeni Emigration and the Ideology of Return	123
	Emigration: Identity and Alienation	128
	Narrating the Nation in <i>They Die Strangers</i>	140
	Women and Land in <i>They Die Strangers</i>	146
	Misrepresentation of Religion	150
	<i>Men in the Sun</i> : Commitment and Resistance	159
	Identity, Memory, Self and Place in <i>Men in the Sun</i>	166
	<i>Men in the Sun</i> as a National and Political Allegory	185
	Conclusion	193
IV	HYBRIDITY, ASSIMILATION AND MIMICRY: THE EFFECT OF CENTER/PERIPHERY ENCOUNTER	
	Preamble	199
	Writing Back to the Empire: <i>Season</i> as a Resistance Narrative	201
	Hybridity and the Clash between Tradition and Modernity	224
	<i>The Ship</i> and the Journey: Fiction Mimics Life	245
	Hybridity and Ambivalence: <i>The Ship</i> as a Narrative of Mimicry	255
	Conclusion	275
V	CONCLUSION	280
	Recommendations for Future Work	289
	WORKS CITED	292
	APPENDIX	306
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	314
	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	315



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Preamble

Postcolonial studies, which have mainly developed in the United States, Canada, Australia and Britain, primarily discuss writers from English-speaking countries. They rarely include the contributions of writers, novelists and intellectuals from the Arab world-most parts of which were under British colonial influence and hegemony up to the second half of the twentieth-century-and especially from peripheral countries such as Yemen, Palestine and Sudan.

This study argues that writers from such places have addressed issues such as the quest for identity, nationalism, modernization, hybridity, mimicry, resistance, the clash between tradition and modernity and the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Unfortunately, such writings have been mostly neglected if not totally ignored in contemporary postcolonial studies. This sense of marginality, nonetheless, is not only confined to postcolonial studies, but also extends to the whole Arab world. Meanwhile, the Arab world itself has largely focused interest in the novels produced in the Arabic literary centres such as Cairo and Beirut.

Many critical studies have been conducted on the novel genre in contemporary Arabic literature; however, the majority of these studies concentrate on the Egyptian novel in general and on the Mahfouzian style in particular. This sense of



“Egyptiocentricism” has marginalized the status of the Arabic novel outside the Egyptian literary and cultural sites. Furthermore, the Arabic novel in Western literary circles has become synonymous with Naguib Mahfouz. There is some truth in this claim for no one can deny how much the Arabic novel owes to Mahfouz for its domestication and indigenization into the Arabic literary tradition. Nevertheless, there are many other “new” novelistic voices in the Arab world that suffer serious marginalization in literary and critical studies.

Recent years have shown a serious concern with translating Arabic novels into English. More than 100 Arabic novels have been translated into English, according to Halim Barakat, a renowned Arab critic, novelist and sociologist. However, these novels are either marginalized or ignored in terms of criticism. At a conference entitled “The Arab Novel: Visions of Social Reality” conducted at Georgetown’s University Center for Arab Studies, Barakat told a distinguished group of Arab and Arab-American writers, academics, critics and students that Arab novels remain unknown, overlooked and undiscovered in the West (Shalal-Essa). I would like to argue that Arab novels remain unknown and undiscovered even in many parts of Arab world today especially in the peripheries. The literary and cultural hegemony of the Western novel has overridden any interest in the national novel genre.

The novel is not an indigenous form in contemporary Arabic literature, but an imported and borrowed form that arrived with the European colonialism in the 19th and early twentieth centuries of the Arabic world, which stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the (Persian) Gulf and from the Northern Mediterranean to the heart of Africa¹. This is certainly not to say that story telling or narrative in any sense is exclusively European. Yet it is clearly “one result of colonization- when societies

and cultures intermingle- that the literary forms, like the languages, of the colonizers have been adopted” (Walder 12).

Classical Arabic literature is rich in many narrative artistic forms which include oral and written stories. There are works which, like *The Book of Songs* by Al-Asfahani, narrate stories about famous poets and tales of love, and yet others give accounts of wars and battles. There are also religious narratives such as *The Stories of Prophets*. All these have certain narrative elements which influence the existing contemporary narrative fiction, but none of them can be called a novel or even slightly resemble it.

Edward Said has remarked that:

The twenty-century novel in Arabic has a variety of bearers, none of them formally and dynastically prior and useful as, say, in rather directly useful way that Fielding antedates Dickens. Arabic literature before the twentieth century has a rich assortment of narrative forms—*qissa*, *sira*, *hadith*, *khurafa*, *ustura*, *khobar*, *nadira*, *maqama*—of which no one seems to have become, as the European novel did, the major narrative type. (“Introduction” xiii)

The novel is connected with reality. It imitates reality whereas the traditional Arabic narrative forms were just of the romantic type that aimed at entertaining and edifying the public.

The Arabic novel has its roots in the *nahda*² (literary and cultural renaissance), a period which was marked by the French expedition, perhaps bettered called an invasion to Egypt which took place in 1798 and lasted for three years. Prior to the *nahda*, the prominent Arabic literary form was poetry, and there was no remarkable narrative prose that might be considered as significant as the novel or the short story, both of which are representative as well as creative. Narrative fiction was seen by Arab intellectuals as a more appropriate medium for depicting and reflecting the new

transitional movement being made by society so as to cope with what was called the spirit of the age and the rising of classes in Arabic society.

Summoning the authority of the rising classes as well as the spirit of the age, Naguib Mahfouz, Nobel Laureate and father of the contemporary Arabic novel, argues that it is “the spirit of the age” which lies behind the need for narrative. The Iraqi scholar and literary critic, Muhsin Al-Musawi comments on Mahfouz’s opinion saying that:

This age is different from ancient times, for formerly poetry was dominant as an expression of the “legendary” and “spontaneous.” But in an age of science, industry, and facts, there ought to be some other art that could manage as much as possible between the human taste for facts and the old longing for the fanciful. The age came upon the novel as its own poetry. (87)

My involvement with the Arabic novel in translation can be explained in the need to fill a gap that is still vacant in many critical studies about this type of novel. Many critical books have been published regarding the Arabic novel; however, almost all of them fall short of discussing postcoloniality and its presence in Arabic narrative fiction. Therefore, the texts to be discussed in this study are closely related to the idea of literature as resistance as Edward Said has illustrated in his influential study *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). I argue in this study that any significant and responsible critical appreciation of these texts should situate them in their proper place both in terms of their culture and in world literature.

Situating the Genre

My argument in this study is that the Arabic novel is to be situated in the main stream of world literature in general, and in the postcolonial literary scene in particular. To achieve this end the focus is placed on a body of literary texts that have been translated from Arabic into English.

The Arabic novel, as mentioned above, is a direct result of cultural and political contact between the East and the West. The novel is a travelling genre, as suggested by the American critic Mary Layoun in her comparative study, *Travels of a Genre: The Modern Novel and Ideology* (1990). It originated in West-Europe but moved out with the European ambitions for extension and expansion. Moreover, the novel, according to Malcolm Bradbury, is now an international form and includes far more than just British or American fiction. The novel is a novel just like ‘East is East and West is West’ as Kipling contends, no more and no less, whether written in Arabic or English, the language may differ but the basic structure remains the same.

The emergence of the Arabic novel is also closely connected with the advent of the nation-state, a Western form of ruling and governing. An underlying consequence of this form is manifested in the various literary types of novels that are defined by this parameter such as the English novel, the French novel, the Spanish novel and so on and so forth. Similarly, such varieties control and define the Arabic novel which is classified into the Egyptian novel, the Yemeni novel, the Palestinian novel...etc. Another factor that may justify the novel as a postcolonial literary form is the typology of issues and themes it addresses, which will be further discussed in the second chapter.

According to Layoun, the novel is a textual and cultural “site” which is full of implications about the society in which it is written and constructed (8). Thus, it is natural for readers to assume that the novel reflects peoples’ views, beliefs, concerns and thoughts. Such social reality as represented relies much on the novelist’s ability and mastery of the craft of fiction. The contemporary literary theory provides us with the tools and instruments that enable us to examine and explore such textual sites. In many cases the theory lets the texts speak for themselves rather than imposing on us the need to look for the hidden ice-berg³ as Hemingway puts it in stating his own views about the novel and the craft of fiction.

Statement of the Problem

The Arabic novel is purely a twentieth-century phenomenon, whose rise was intricately linked to many political, cultural and historical factors that were involved in the movement of Arabic society towards modernity. In pre-modern times cultural and literary products were mainly religious except for poetry. However, due to many factors such as colonialism, exposure to European culture and translation; literature like other aspects of life was affected by such factors. Therefore, new genres appeared as a result. Being the most popular form, the novel was received and adopted by many artists from different parts of the newly established nation states in what is now known as the Arab world.

The Arabic novel made its first appearance in Egypt which was and still is the cultural centre of all Arabs. Beginning with the translation of Western novels, then imitation, experimentation and domestication, the Arabic novel has now gained

worldwide recognition. Currently, there are lots of Arabic works that have been translated into many European and other languages from all over the world.

Despite this recognition, the Arabic novel still suffers from the lack of a well-defined position in the universal literary and cultural landscape. The novels from the West and East are transitional, according to Walid Hamraneh, (an Arab critic), yet the Western ones have “a status”, while the Arabic novels are “in search of a status” (5), both within their own cultural and literary context, history, and within world literature. This lack of status becomes sufficiently evident, when we examine some relatively recent postcolonial publications such as *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995), and *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts* (2000). Whereas many other “national” literatures such as the Caribbean, Indian, Australian, Irish as well as the African (even the African-American) have been established and recognized as postcolonial, the case is not the same when it comes to Arabic literature.

In the Western literary tradition, the Arabic novel is synonymous with Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel laureate for literature in 1988. The Arabic novel owes much of its development and recognition to Mahfouz, who has become an “established literary and artistic institution” (Al Musawi 22), not only in Egypt, but also in the rest of the Arab World. Nonetheless, there are still many new and powerful voices whose writings can be seen as significant contributions to human heritage. Such writers as Mohammed Abdul Wali (Yemen), Ghassan Kanafani (Palestine), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (Palestine/Iraq) and Tayeb Salih (Sudan) have produced significant works, but these works are neglected in terms of critical and academic investigation. Writing from and about such peripheral places as Yemen, Sudan and Palestine, these

intellectuals have tackled many issues related to identity formation, cultural hybridization and national formation and they have appropriated various narrative techniques. Based on my readings, the work of these writers has not been approached from a simultaneous postcolonial and structural perspective. Accordingly, this study seeks to achieve this task by adopting an eclectic approach.

Scope of the Study

The term “Arabic” that will be used in this study refers to the culture and society in which these novels were written. The literary genre involved in this study is the novel. Defined as an extended, fictional narrative prose which may relate to realistic characters, settings and events, the Arabic novel has been the subject of numerous studies, particularly in Egypt which served as the centre of enlightenment during the *Nahda* period (rebirth or renaissance), and even today. First and foremost, the multiple meanings and the ways they are communicated by the narrative strategies is the main area in which this study will operate. The historical period covered in this study is from the 1960s to the 1980s, a period referred to by literary historians as the “Age of Conflicting Ideologies” (Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature* 16). This is the period in which the novels considered in this study were written.

Compared with the earlier periods of contemporary Arabic literature, these three decades were very significant in shaping the Arab literary scene with the changes that swept the socio-political atmosphere of the Arab world. Many radical changes happened which directly affected the Arab lands. The disintegration of the direct colonial powers is but one example. The rise of ‘*Nassrism*, the ‘*Bathesim*, two forms of a Marxist inspired Arab socialism, and Islamic fundamentalism were key features

of this period. Along with the horrific wars with Israel, the removal of old regimes and the ascendancy of new ones, these historical changes had a great impact on the literary scene. This impact is reflected in the themes addressed by the Arab novelists of the time. Thus, narratives of alienation, exile, war, and displacement and power relations characterize the content of many novels of that period.

The Rationale for choosing and analyzing the theme of postcoloniality through the literary productions of a number of writers is that such an approach will afford a more systematic and extensive treatment of the theme than would otherwise be possible if the study was confined to a single author. Moreover, the choice of the writers was dictated by two vital factors: first all the four novelists considered here were situated within the Arab national liberation struggle, second these writers exercised and continue to exercise seminal influence thematically and generically on most of the contemporary writers either in their respective societies or on other Arab writers by and large.

The scope of this study is confined to the Arabic novel in the geographical peripheral areas known as Yemen, Palestine and Sudan. The Arabic novels in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have been excluded from this study because these countries are known as cultural centres for all Arabs. The Arabic cultural and literary renaissance began in these countries earlier than other parts of the Arab world. The Arabic novels from North Africa and *Maghreb* (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania) are also excluded because of the immense influence of French literary thinking in this area which caused novels written in those countries to be affiliated with Francophone literature.

Conceptual Theory

Throughout this study, I use some concepts from postcolonial and narrative theories to examine and investigate the thematic and technical aspects of the novels selected for this study. Postcolonial theory initially emerged as a way to read the literary texts written by “others” outside the literary centre in the West. The theory came about because the Western theory, developed in the West for Western literatures, did not possess the language necessary to grasp and analyze the ideas emerging in Third World literatures.

In this study, much space is given to the analysis of the thematic concerns of the writers whose novels are selected for analysis. Literary works are believed to have functions and to deliver messages. No doubt that each novel tells a story but the story is not important per se, rather its importance lies in the fact that it has an idea, a meaning and a moral. As stated by the Malaysian novelist, scholar and literary critic, Mohammad Affandi Hassan that “A novel no longer narrates but articulates ideas and thoughts...The *Quran* never merely tells a story. Stories are used to state an idea and or a thought...” (qtd. in Zariat and Maimunah 4).

For our purposes, this ‘idea or thought’ is called a theme. In theory, a theme is an abstract concept which refers to the purpose of a literary text. Any work of art is intended to communicate a message, a code which can be called a theme. This means that themes do not reside in texts in any obvious way, but they are constructed by the readers. (Schober and Krutz 1). Norman Friedman in his influential book, *Form and Meaning in Fiction* (1975), argues that the theme concept is one of those shifting terms in contemporary criticism. For the old-fashioned critic it means a message or a

moral, while for the new critic it means total meaning or form. It can also refer variously to the basic problem, issue or a question embodied in the work about the individual, society or the world. Rebecca Lukens maintains that “theme must be about either society, human nature or the human condition.” (Schober and Krutz 2). Investigating these themes with a postcolonial perspective will help locate these texts as postcolonial ones. As stated by Ashcroft et al: “The idea of the postcolonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing” (*Empire* 11).

The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in the Post-Colonial Literatures(1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin is a canonical work in postcolonial studies that traces the recovery of cultures through language and literatures after their experiences of cultural denigration by imperialism and colonialism. The theories and approaches outlined in *The Empire Writes Back* are central to my study. As suggested by the editors of *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (1995), that “postcolonial literatures are a result of interactions between the imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices” (Ashcroft et al., *Post-Colonial Studies* 1). My intention, here, is to go beyond the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized, to focus on narratives that construe a postcolonial stance within and after this immediate encounter. Inspired by the critical theories of such scholars as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Fredric Jameson, thematic issues related to identity formation, nationalism, body-politics, centre/periphery opposition, and subaltern are to be examined. Hybridity and its attendant issues of ambivalence, assimilation and mimicry form the corner stone of this study.