

Review

A Critical Study on Ethno-Cultural Denigration and Aimless Quest for Personal Identity in John Ralston Saul's Characterization

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Accepted 5 October 2014

Award-winning novelist, essayist, historian and cultural philosopher, John Ralston Saul has earned substantial recognition as the author of densely plotted novels of contemporary socio-political and moral intrigue and sometimes of black comedy. Most of his characters are engaged in an endless search of their lost personal and cultural identities in “the endless valleys of human society”. In fact, a realistic sense of ethno-cultural denigration is central to all his novels, mainly set in Asian countries. Presenting a close reading of selected novels by John Ralston Saul, the present paper tries to investigate the art of characterization in Saul’s writing and clarify how the mind of each character is pre-occupied with cultural hegemonies as the main force in his / her loss of personal identity.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Cultural denigration; Personal identity; Cultural identity

Cite This Article As: Azari M (2014). A Critical Study on Ethno-Cultural Denigration and Aimless Quest for Personal Identity in John Ralston Saul's Characterization. *Inter. J. Eng. Lit. Cult.* 2(10): 227-229

INTRODUCTION

The president of International PEN, John Ralston Saul (born June 19, 1947) has had a growing impact on cultural, political and economic thought in many countries. Declared a “prophet” by TIME magazine, he is included in the prestigious Utne Reader’s list of the world’s 100 leading thinkers and visionaries. His works have been translated into 22 languages in 30 countries. Born in Ottawa, Saul studied at McGill University in Montreal and at King’s College, London where he earned his PhD in 1972. After helping to set up the national oil

company Petro-Canada, as Assistant to its first Chair, he turned his attention to writing. In fact, in Saul’s microcosms, an individual belongs to many communities and ultimately the world itself can be seen as a community. The present study tries to investigate Saulian characterization as well as his definition of cultural denigration in such microcosms.

Saul’s first novel, *The Birds of Prey* (1997), which was an international best seller, offers a disturbing perspective on the 1968 death of Charles de Gaulle’s

chief of staff, General Ailleret, who allegedly perished in an airplane mishap. Saul's novel suggests that the mishap was a deliberate sabotage. At a dinner party, the novel's protagonist, a mysterious writer named Stone, overhears the pilot's widow allege that the plane accident was the culmination of a plot to kill Ailleret. Intrigued- and, perhaps, romantically drawn to the widow- Stone makes inquiries and begins contacting individuals who might illuminate the widow's charges. Soon enough he finds himself the subject of threats. One of his contacts is murdered and finally Stone finds himself drawn to a risky process of "transcending the self to responsible individual" in a closed, individualist society- France. In fact, Stone has gone through the process of transcending the self, long before his mission in France. He discovered his responsibility to think and act in favor of the wellbeing of society, when he fought the Malaysian war. When Melanie asks the reason for his going to Malaysia, he replies:

I went for very romantic reasons. It was a place where I could isolate my own existence from that of everybody else. You see, establish whether I existed or not. That surrounding war was a decor made up of a people and a world outside my reality. That friction between their fiction which could kill and my reality sharpened the eyes of my own existence. [And I discovered] vast truth beyond the imagination. ... I hold on to all the ideals to see which will survive the trip. (96; ch. 9)

By the end of the novel, Stone sacrifices his own existence to the wellbeing of the community. In fact, with *The Birds of Prey* Saul showed himself to be a promising storyteller with an impressive flair for socio-political drama. Moreover, this novel paved the way for a well-knitted trilogy in which socio-political corruption in a number of Asian countries led to ethno-cultural denigration of a bunch of "farangs".

In his second novel—the first of Saul's trilogy, *Baraka or The Lives, Fortunes and Sacred Honor of Anthony Smith* (1983)—the ambitious oil executive Martin Laing supervises the exchange of leftover Vietnam weapons for access to unexplored oil fields. On the surface, *Baraka* is a raw, exciting story of oil, arms, and guerrilla warfare in Sahara. But the core of the novel is the friendship and love which link Anthony Smith, Martin Laing, and Martin's wife Cosima – and the ambitious autonomy which rip that love apart. It is also about the great cultural confusion which prevails when individual autonomy finds itself in a clash with values of a collectivist society. Set against the background of Morocco, Thailand and Vietnam, John Ralston Saul weaves a tale of an oil prospecting that turns into an arms deal. It is a tale of community survival in a collectivist society in which "the fate of morality is

questioned at a time when large corporations can unleash the dogs of war. His hero and others with him are the victims of a new world where one does not die for an idea, but for a portfolio of shares." -Le Monde (Critical notes on Saul's Fiction)

In fact, *Baraka* is a critical novel of any individualist community in which cultural hegemony plays a major role in the ethno-cultural life of its "in-groups". Idrissi, a Moroccan Muslim, puts an end to all the debates behind the real nature of individualist societies which have no considerations for socio-cultural needs of their people. At his dinner party; "Idrissi shouted at Laing, 'Why don't your people demand nationalization?'" Laing replies in total assurance; "The point is, [USA is] a country of freedom and capitalism." To this statement, Idrissi becomes surprised enough to ask: "Freedom! What freedom is it to let a handful of companies bring their own country to its knees? That's not freedom. That's suicide!... And how are you going to save the world, if you can't save yourselves?" (95; ch. 14).

Saul followed *Baraka* with *The Next Best Thing* (1986), another tale of deceit and despair. Its central figure is James Spenser, a man obsessed by beauty—a collector haunted by his almost supernatural response to art. A sophisticated, complex character, he would seem the last man on earth to turn to theft. But his target is exceptional; twenty 11th century Buddha statues from the deserted city of Pagan, Burma—their value, \$1 million each. Teaming up in Thailand with Field—a Canadian expatriate journalist—and Blake—an American Baptist minister-cum-guerrilla leader—Spenser finds himself unwittingly embroiled in a web of cross-cultural conflicts of "farangs" and Thais who engage in bloody rivalries of the guerrilla armies and opium dealers vying for power at any cost. Saul brings ruthless leaders and desperate individuals face to face in a life and death struggle for supremacy in these cross-cultural conflicts, where "Spenser, the esthete, must learn to measure his beliefs in the shadow of this reality" (Marie-Françoise Leclère, Le Point, Paris).

Saul's *The Paradise Eater* (1988), which won the prestigious Premio Letterario Internazionale in Italy, is his last in trilogy and yet another of his tales set in Asia. On the edge of the civilized world lies rotting Bangkok—a once beautiful Oriental jewel of a city, now devoted to a perverse mix of socio-cultural conflicts. It is the kind of community where violence meets innocence and the good die young, if they are lucky. This is John Field's paradise on earth. This novel focuses on former journalist John Field—a Canadian who has been living in Bangkok for twenty years. He has accepted everything about its corrupt reality as well; drug dealing, sexually transmitted diseases, abject poverty and even murder. With a different mindset, from a multicultural community, he is searching for his lost identity in Thailand. Field has become a regular figure of the city's prevalent underworld, replete with squalid bars and gloomy

whorehouses. Despite suffering a seemingly incurable venereal infection, Field enjoys living in this society. He is the first one to discover his ex-wife and her lover being murdered. Recalling the humanity once a part of him, he reluctantly enters a world he knows only too well, to search for whoever killed them. What he discovers in the teeming, sordid streets is a denigrated society out of control—a community of thieves and cynics and the living dead. What he learns will last him the rest of his days.

As mentioned earlier, in Saul's kind of society, an individual belongs to many communities and ultimately the world itself can be seen as a community. John Field in his conversation with Spenser gives the accounts on how westerners came to Thailand and settled in this country:

A lot of us came out here to get away. That wasn't how we put it. We thought we'd come because of Vietnam, but that was just an excuse. It was an American war, eh. Only I'm Canadian. There were lots of Brits, Australians, French, everything. There hadn't been a good excuse to go east since the traders and missionaries were thrown out of most places. When the war ended,... they [remained] here. (*Best 22*; ch. 2)

He further refers to this community as “westerners who are held in soft embrace of the East”, while caring for their original cultural beliefs (23; ch. 2). Of course, within the corrupt socio-political context of Thailand, such a multiplicity of belonging can only be viewed as a reinforcement of more corrupt practices within the Thai society; “Field examined the names on the patient board [in Bangkok Nursing home]. All *farangs*. Mostly Anglo-Saxons. ... The whole thing was reminiscent of the seating plan for an embassy dinner. No. There was no one he wanted to visit” (*The Paradise Eater 14*; ch. 1). Even these “farangs, belonging to both, Thai and Western communities” were engaged in drug trafficking as well. In Crappe's office;

Field went on turning through endless stories of a kilo and a half of heroin seized at the airport while strapped to a German's stomach; five kilos under the seat of a Chinese Thai's car parked outside the French Embassy; one and a half

grams in the pocket of an American student; one kilo in a radio carried by an Italian model; eight kilos in a sofa being moved to the United States along with a junior diplomat's furniture; a plethora of false suitcase bottoms on their way to Honk Kong; ... and, of course, declarations by ministers that the ‘dark influences’ must be wiped out. (122; ch. 7)

In his research on “Globalization and Cultural Identity (1999)”, Tomlinson sketches an implicit reasoning behind the assumption that globalization destroys identities (Held and Mc Grew, 2003: 269- 270). He states that before the era of globalization, there existed local, autonomous, well-defined and distinct, robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical places and cultural experiences. These connections constituted the cultural identity of local communities in such geographical places. And such an identity was something people would simply consider as continuity with the past experiences and an undisturbed existential possession. Identity, then, was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of collective treasure of local communities. But, as studied earlier in Saul's fiction, it was also discovered to be something fragile that needed protection. On the whole, into this world of discrete, but to various degrees vulnerable cultural identities, aimless quest for personal identities become the main concern of many other writers of the present century. And it seems pretty long before modern societies can create a proper situation for inter-cultural negotiations and a unified vision toward varieties based on respect and sameness.

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