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## Analyzing the Notion of Unhomeliness and Othering in Esi Edugyan's Washington Black

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Abstract	Keywords
<p>The present study intends to explore the notion of unhomeliness and the concept of othering experienced by the characters in Esi Edugyan's Washington Black. The selected novel has many characters who have been exploited at the hands of the colonizers. They have to obey their masters willingly or unwillingly. The present research also analyzes the protagonist's bitter experience of elopement and then his search for a home of his own. His struggle also causes him to face identity crisis in a totally strange surroundings. Faith Plantation is being presented as the home for Black slaves where the protagonist himself is brought up and worked with his peers. The past memories, the sufferings of childhood and psychological as well as physical torture at the hands of savage masters are among those unforgettable events which cast an unending shadow of despair, hopelessness and anxiety on the minds of the oppressors. This oppression convinces the oppressed to be "the others" who are destined to be suppressed and exploited. The study follows the parameters of qualitative research and concept of othering is highlighted in the novel through the concept of unhomeliness which is the second most concerned notion of this paper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unhomeliness,</li> <li>• Othering,</li> <li>• Esi Edugyan</li> <li>• Black Slaves</li> <li>• Unhomeliness</li> <li>• Washington Black</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> </ul>

### Introduction:

The present novel introduces before us the psychological sufferings of a ten or eleven year old black slave who was well aware of the binary relationship of master- slave. Since the introduction of postcolonial literature, the colonizers have been presented as masters of everything who owns the colonized and impose their decree upon them. The story is set on Fair Plantation at Barbados. This plantation was the home of that black slaves who had no authority

to live freely in their so-called house given by their White master. The story of the novel further unmask the mental agony confronted by the protagonist Wash during the course of his struggle to lead a better life. Moreover, in an attempt to find a house of his own, he kept on moving from one place to another i.e. from one home to another. The notion of homeliness is connected with freedom. On the other hand, slavery may lead towards the idea of unhomeliness. The same thing happens with the slaves of Fair Plantation who were so overpowered by the idea of having one's own homeland that one of them, Big Kit, remarks, "If you dead, you wake up again in your own homeland, You wake up free" (Edugyan, 2018, p. 9). In reply of this statement, the protagonist Wash, a small boy, relies in these words, "I don't have a homeland, Kit. My homeland here. So I wake up, again, a slave" (Edugyan, 2018, p. 9).

The painful history of brutality of White masters over Black slaves have been a matter of unending discussion since long ago. Different writers through different works have made an effort to mention Afro-American brutality. Mostly Black writers have written about racism and slavery and through their personal experiences, they have been successful in portraying their history more artistically. Being the member of a suppressed class, Wash and the other slaves like him are treated below the level of humanity. As they are not White, they are "the others" who are destined to suffer. The concept of othering has enough potential to form identity among ethnic minorities. This othering is well suited with the power structures as well as the historic symbolic meanings conditioning such identity formation, but problematic in terms of agency (2011).

This very novel is also appreciated by a number of other recognized writers as Attica Locke announces it to be 'a masterpiece'. It is being stated at the back covering of the novel that Washington Black is teemed with all the strangeness and mystery of life. The magazine New Statesman calls it "A gripping tale, made vivid by Esi Edugyan's gifts for language and character, and by the strength of her story." The Times remarks it as "A profoundly humane story about false idols, the fickleness of fortune and whether a slave, once freed, can ever truly be free". John Boyne in Daily Express gives his opinion about the novel as "Washington Black is a gripping adventure and an atmospheric portrayal of 1830 society at both the fringes of the world and the heart of the British Empire". The present work has also made an effort to study how the concept of unhomeliness affects the life of the protagonist and the other slaves.

### **Research Questions:**

The researcher has the aim to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the colonizers' strategies mentioned in the novel *Washington Black* in indoctrinating the native population to their way of thinking?
- ii. How does the sense of unhomeliness forces the protagonist to indulge in a struggle to search for his identity?
- iii. In what ways does Edugyan's *Washington Black* unmask the ideological and psychological operations of "othering"?

### **Research Objectives:**

The current study aims;

- i. To examine the colonizer's strategies mentioned in the novel in indoctrinating the native population to their way of thinking
- ii. To analyze the sense of unhomeliness forcing the protagonist towards the struggle to search for his identity
- iii. To probe into the ways in which Edugyan's *Washington Black* unmask the ideological and psychological operations of othering

### **Significance of the Study:**

The present paper will open the new aura or research on this particular novel. Like other novels of Edugyan, *Washington Black* is also a well-recognized novel which have been short listed for Man Booker prize. The researcher has analyzed only the two selected notions i.e. unhomeliness and the othering. Besides this, the novel has a vast scope of doing research not only from post- colonial point of view but also through the lens of psychoanalysis and Marxism as it compresses in it several concepts like unconscious fears, defense mechanism, commodification and the struggle of suppressed class to survive freely.

### **Delimitation:**

The present research has made an effort to examine the aspects of postcolonialism i.e. unhomeliness and othering. The idea of unhomeliness incorporated in the psychological self of the black slaves is examined through the mirror of Bhabha's concept. On the other hand, "the othering" is explored by keeping in view Said' opinion of the other. In this context different characters are analyzed who are forced to accept the authority of their masters. This binary relationship of master- slave causes the slaves to develop the notion of unhomeliness. The main focus of the study is not on the slavery and racism as it is a vast terminology in itself. The researcher has only tried to explore the characters' especially the protagonist's suffering not only as a slave but also as a small boy of ten or eleven. Both the concepts of unhomeliness and othering cause the characters to shed off the agony of being inferior only through praying for their death and reincarnate in a free society. The detailed examination of this very conception is at the key to this work.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The present article aims at analyzing the concept of unhomeliness proposed by Homi K. Bhabha who put forward the concept of hybridity. According to him, unhomeliness is an aspect of hybridity. Moreover, he calls hybrid identity as unhomely identity (1994). He further mentions that unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and you find yourself in a state of incredulous terror (Bhabha, 1992). To deal with the second part of the article, the researcher has taken into account the concept of "othering". This notion was coined by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. He represents "the others" to be the marginalized class. The colonizers, being proud of their superiority, consider it their right to classify the colonized as others. They consider that they have the authority to view other people as inferior and uncivil. So this paper will analyze the key concept of orientalism i.e. Othering. Likewise, about the concept of "othering", Bhabha says that the other should not be taken as a submissive force. He is of the view that the dominant culture has some oppositional relationship with "the other". He further connects the binary oppositions with post colonialism and he says that we should try to shun these binaries so they may not limit our thinking related to ideology and culture.

### **Literature Review:**

Bhabha wrote a collection of essays titled as *The Location of Culture* in which he suggests that the process of making modernity and the past is continual and partial, and that political action (which would include writing theory, in his argument), can be effective if not total. The pleasure of his work, as well as its difficulty, lies in his refusal to simplify cultures or endorse easy assumptions. (1995). Farahbakhsh discusses that Bhabha has coined several concepts about culture that try to undermine the binary oppositions and dividing the world into self and other. The concepts which he constructs, including hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, liminality, the unhomely, the uncanny and the subaltern have had a great impact on postcolonial discourse (2016). Backtracks also employed Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness in his article as a theoretical framework to analyze the concepts like migration, journey, loss and memory.

He further associates it with the notion of displacement and alienation that marks modern existence (Taylor, 2006).

Bhabha in his article "The World and the Home" points out that "In the stirrings of the unhomey, another world becomes visible" (1992, p. 141). This quote suggests that the notion of unhomeliness opens up the door to a new visible world. Likewise, Tyson in his *Critical Theory Today* analyzes the idea of postcolonial identity, hybridity, unhomeliness etc. He mentions that the trauma of the cultural displacement is referred by Bhabha and others as unhomeliness (2006). Spivak introduced his theory of subalternity raises the question "Can subaltern speak?" he borrowed this term "Subaltern" from Gramsci to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society (Gramsci, 2004). Spivak concluded his essay with the statement "Subaltern cannot speak" as they are not listened to when they make an effort to speak (1988).

This concept of subaltern also refers to the colonized classes which are being termed as "others". Tyson calls subalterns "the people of inferior status" (2006, p. 425). Some other researchers have also examined the concept of othering in the context of African literature. "To use Derridean terminology, Africa is a shifting sign that bears the 'traces' of the other or others" (Kalua, 2009, p. 26). Othering is a key concept under Orientalism, first came to be known in 1977 when a Middle Eastern scholar named Edward Said wrote and published a book titled "Orientalism" (2017). According to Said, Orientalism refers to "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1977).

Othering refers to the act of downgrading so-called inferior human beings by emphasising their strangeness. This term usually comes to play when someone of a high rank or someone who believes that he/she is more superior to others starts to see them as inferior, mostly because they are not similar to him/her (Radzi & Kamarulzaman, 2017, p. 214). Othering is an interdisciplinary notion that refers, among other things, to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgments of superiority and inferiority between in-groups and out groups ("us" and "them"), and within groups (Derwin, 2015). Canales in his article "Othering: Toward an understanding of difference" gave two different forms of othering. The first form is Exclusionary Othering which utilizes the power within relationships for domination and subordination, whereas Inclusionary Othering attempts to utilize power within relationships for transformation and coalition building. The implications of this framework for nursing practice are addressed (2000). Being published in 2018, no work has yet been done on this novel. Only some of the reviews give an idea of what the novel is about and what are the core issues discussed in this literary text.

Esi Edugyan has written three novels and a collection of essays. She wrote her first novel in 2004 titled as *The Second Life* of Samuel Tyne. "This novel undertakes an excavation of the history of Black people in Alberta, thus performing an intervention into Canadian cultural memory designed to bring to light Black memories and experience" (Cuder-Domínguez, 2014). By linking narrative and social geographies, the paper written by Davis situates the works of black women writers in the Americas as part of a tradition of the counter-novel, involved in acts of boundary crossing and cultural and textual unmanageability" (2007).

Her second novel *Half-Blood Blues* (2011) is about a lost non-Jewish Jazz musician who is 20 years old and is caught in Paris in 1940. The plot of the story moves towards the Second World War. "This is a story about friendship, betrayal, loyalty, and the possibility of redemption through music. To read *Half-Blood Blues* is to hear jazz and the ache of regret through prose" (Mengiste, 2013). According to McKibbin, the second novel of Edugyan "In particular, explores the implications of mixture for the original "pure" categories being violated—specifically, those categories that were understood to define German people and culture" (2014).

Her non-fiction work *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home* (2014) includes an effort to find the answer of the question “Who we are?” and “Where we really come from?” This text searches for the identity of a person. It also gives an overview of Edugyan’s experience of travelling and dwelling in different areas. Its main aim is to find out the meaning of home and its role in our lives. Edugyan’s last novel *Washington Black* (2018) which is the main focus of this paper as well, is about slavery, racism and its aftermaths on the lives of the characters. The story also moves from the sufferings of slavery to the abolishment of slavery but in spite of being free, the memory of exploitation of blacks at the hands of White ruthless masters still haunts the protagonist, *Washington Black*’s memory. A review has also been written on *Washington Black* titled as “Book Review on Esi Edugyan’s *Washington Black*”. In it the writer reviews that in the story when a slave commits suicide, Erasmus Wilde, their White master orders the overseer to cut the head of the dead slave to set an example before the other slaves that if the head of a slave is cut off even after his death he cannot be reborn in his motherland and be free (Jadhav, 2019).

### **Methodology:**

In the present study, the researcher has followed the parameters of qualitative research which are descriptive in nature. The main focus is on the text *Washington Black*. The research involves the thorough reading and analysis of the characters and the texts. To support the presented ideas, many textual evidences have been interpreted through the mirror of Post-colonialism and its different concepts i.e. unhomeliness and the othering. The relevant passages have been analyzed to support the proposed arguments and assertions. The available works of Esi Edugyan, the reviews and commentaries published in national and international press regarding the selected fiction of the author have been utilized as a support to understand the research findings. The interview of Esi Edugyan available in written form or on the web have also been quoted to give a clear glimpse of author’s mind and intentions and to reach a specific conclusion.

### **Data/Content Analysis:**

The present study in this section analyzes different textual references to explore the above mentioned intentions of the researcher.

“I might have been Ten, Eleven years old\_\_ I cannot say for certain\_\_ when my first master died . . . He had outlived a mad king, outlived the slave trade itself” (2018, p. 3).

The novel opens with the above mentioned lines. These lines unmask the binary relationship present between the colonizers and the colonized i.e. master- slave or king- subject. Authority and superiority are associated with the words like Master and king. On the contrary, slave and subject highlights submissiveness and inferiority. Slaves are “the others” representing the suppressed class as also mentioned by Said.

“I remember crouching on my bare heels in the stony dirt of Faith Plantation . . . Together silent we watched as the overseers shouldered the coffin down from the Great House”  
(p. 3).

The mention of the Great House is quite ironical as the name of the house was Great House but it had no room for the black slaves. They were forced to live on their working place called Fair Plantation. This plantation is like the house for them. But still the characters have the feeling of unhomeliness as Tyson mentions Bhabha’s view “Being unhomed is not the same as being homeless. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself” (2014). Likewise, the black slaves had the feeling of unhomeliness even their own house given by their masters.

“A man who has belonged to another learns very early to observe a master’s eye; what I saw in this man’s terrified me. He owned me, as he owned all those I lived among, not only our lives but also our deaths, and that pleased him too much” (p. 4-5).

The concept of identity crisis is prominent in these lines. The sense of belonging to someone else snatches away your self-identity from you. The awareness of the fact that you possess neither your life nor your death leads you to face identity crisis as you are a commodity owned by someone else. You are a slave so you are “the other” as well.

“I was around five years old when I angered the quarters woman and was sent to live in the brutal hut below the dead palm tree, Kit’s hut” (p. 6).

It highlights that the protagonist had been facing the agony of unhomeliness since childhood. He was moved from one home to another which ensures that he had no proper house of himself. Big Kit was like his mother but was not his mother in reality.

“Death was a door. I think that is what she wished me to understand. She did not fear it. She was of an ancient faith rooted in the high river lands of Africa, and in that faith the dead were reborn, whole back in their homelands, to walk again free” (p. 8).

These very lines present the mental agony of the slaves which they were facing due to the torture of their White masters. “She” in the lines refers to Big Kit who had the faith that only after death, they can reincarnate in their own homeland where they could live as an independent being. This wish to die shows her greatest desire to have a home of her own. She is even willing to die for that cause.

“Clean your feet”, he said. “Both of you. Either of you leave footprints on his marble, you’ll be sorry” (p. 17).

Here the lines portray the alienation of slaves. They are being treated as “the other” who are not allowed to either infect or impact the boundary line drawn by the White master. They are alienated and in turn limited to the space allotted to them.

“What a smell in here.” . . . “I did always find that lot insufferable, the Blacks. All their hymns and sermons. I should sooner suffer a chanel house than visit good Felicia Black’s dinner table yet again” (p. 76).

The intense hatred of the Whites for the Blacks can be seen clearly in the given lines. Here the concept of othering is prevalent. A white man thinks of a black one as insufferable. As they do not belong to their race or class, they are declared intolerable.

We would also, however, find ourselves subject to the laws of American freedom. “Freedom, Wash, is a word with different meaning to different people,” he said as though I did not know the truth of thid better than he. (p. 154)

The following lines talk about the idea of freedom. Whenever the freedom is talked about, the feeling of being at home is associated with it. When the word “home” is pronounced, the idea of freedom and protection click in your mind instantly. In the lines, Titch who is the brother Wash’s master is talking about being a subject to American freedom. This very phrase has a very ironic interpretation as the Americans (The Whites) believe in considering everyone as their subject and treat them as a subject in the disguise of granting them freedom.

“I had been so frightened then; these words has reduced my boyhood to a further terror. The memory of that fear entered me now like a shadow. I had been nothing but an object to Erasmus Wilde, nothing but an expression of his wealth in the world. My escape was his diminishment; I understood what he had lost was respect\_\_ that is, power”. (2018)

This quotation is narrated by the protagonist. He elopes with Titch and his master Wilde gives an ad declaring that whoever able to capture his eloped slave, will be rewarded with money. Wash thinks that he has enraged his master who considers his escape the loss of his respect and power. This is the strategy employed by the colonizers to make possible efforts to capture even their escaped slaves.

“I became a boy without identity, a walking shadow, and with each new month I fell deeper into strangeness. For there could be no belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere: a disfigured black boy with a scientific turn of mind”. (p. 230-231)

The above mentioned lines unveil before us the problem of identity crisis which has been faced by the protagonist. Even after getting freedom, he remains unable to gain any proper identity in the society. The phrase ‘boy without identity’ highlights the mental agony of Wash and also his keen desire to have a particular identity of his own.

### **Conclusion:**

The theory of post- colonialism has been described with the view point of different theorists. All of them coined one or the other term in order to ensure their participation in proposing the particular theory. As a vast theory, it is difficult to be compressed it on only a few pages. So, the researcher has selected the two main concepts of this theory i.e. unhomeliness by Bhabha and Othering by Said. The colonizers have been utilizing different techniques to oppress other classes. Same is the case with the novel *Washington Black* in which the masters resort to multiple strategies like exploitation, oppression, bloodshed, killing, hanging and brutality in an effort to have a superior power over their slaves and to incorporate fear of their savage rulers in them.

The protagonist of the novel has been engaged in slavery and confronting unhomeliness since his childhood. Even after elopement from this slavery, he remains unable to find a home of his own which causes him to face identity crisis. The novel also unmasks the ideological and psychological concept of othering. This concept is forced in to the psychological selves of the black slaves so much as they develop the ideology of being inferior who neither the right to live nor to die according to their own desires.

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