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Fractured and Paradoxical — Reading Colonial Hong Kong Identity Through "The World of Suzie Wong"

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Abstract. This paper explores Hong Kong identity during colonialism by applying Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories to Richard Mason's novel "The World of Suzie Wong." The main character, Suzie, is reduced to a fixed stereotype who satisfies the Occident's craving for familiar yet subservient difference by using Baha's fixity, stereotype, and mimicry as the investigative lens. Suzie becomes a metonymic fragment that represents Hong Kong identity as reducible and consumable, with the highly sexualized and infantilized caricature serving as a fetish for the Occidental ego. Then, in order to avoid losing conditional acceptance and protection, she is forced to conform to Western ideals of domesticity through imitation. However, experienced reality brings conflicts and instability that are incompatible with Orientalist ideals, therefore the fanciful Orientalist vision is short-lived. Suzie falls into splitting and ambivalence when she can't live up to the oxymoronic binaries that the Occident expects. Such structural instability attests to how the imposed identity of Hong Kong under colonial rule is neither unified nor sustainable, revealing colonial identity formation as a fragile construct that collapses under lived experience rather than an authentic or viable mode of selfhood.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Hong Kong Identity, Orientalism

1. Introduction

Hong Kong identity has long been in flux and contested. When Hong Kong was a British colony, it was the Orient versus its colonizer's Occident, which led to a forced identity of racialized exoticism and cultural inferiority that the natives had no control over. In Richard Mason's 1957 book "The World of Suzie Wong," the British protagonist Robert finds Hong Kong to be an idealized and romanticized representation of the Orient. He then falls in love with Suzie Wong, a local prostitute and bar girl, because he finds her exotic, sensual, and subservient femininity appealing to his Orientalist and paternalistic sensibilities.

Through the analytical application of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories, "The World of Suzie Wong" demonstrates how colonial discourse imposes a ready-made identity onto Hong Kong — a stereotype that functions as a fetish, reducing Suzie to a metonymic fragment whose compelled mimicry seeks to stabilize an imagined coherence of the city. The subsequent collapse of this fantasy into splitting and ambivalence is of great significance because it reveals Hong Kong identity, under

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colonial rule, not as a unified or essential self, but as a fractured construct produced through external demands for legibility and control.

2. Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theories

It is essential to have a solid knowledge of Homi Bhabha's analytical perspective before delving into Hong Kong's colonizers' imposed identity.

2.1. Fixity and stereotype

In “The Other Question,” he posits that colonial discourse constructs the colonized through fixity, a representational mode that demands racial difference appear rigid, natural, and timeless. Defining fixity as “a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition,” Bhabha explains that its primary vehicle is the stereotype, which he describes as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” [1]. Rather than objective evidence, colonial “truths” are anchored on repetition of the aforementioned stereotypes, and such unstable fixity leads Bhabha to read the stereotype as a fetish, a defensive formation that simultaneously recognizes and disavows the threatening difference of the colonized.

Drawing on Freud, he argues that fetishism is always a play between the affirmation of wholeness/similarity and the anxiety associated with lack and difference, and therefore the stereotype “gives access to an 'identity’ predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence” [1].

To put it more plainly, Bhabha posits that colonial identity is stabilized through the colonizer’s fantasy that allows them to enjoy their sense of superiority while continually warding off the very real fear that their identity is contingent on the Oriental/Occidental binary that is performative, unconforming to complex reality, and thus fragile. From this point, Bhabha extends fetishism into the logic of metonymy, in which the colonized is reduced to a fragment, or as he terms it, “metonymies of presence,” that unjustly represents the whole, with examples like “the Simian Black, [and] the Lying Asiatic” that are intentionally chosen and circulated due them being manageable pieces of Otherness [2]. These metonymies, he insists, are “nonrepressive productions of contradictory and multiple belief,” creating discriminatory identity-effects that cross cultural boundaries and destabilize the authority they attempt to uphold [2].

2.2. Mimicry and splitting

Alongside fetishistic and metonymic reduction, Bhabha theorizes mimicry as one of colonialism’s most ambivalent strategies of control in his seminal work entitled “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” Mimicry produces a subject who is “almost the same, but not quite,” and whose resemblance to the colonizer creates a paradox where governance is enabled yet authority is threatened [2]. As Bhabha writes, mimicry is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other,” yet for it to function, it “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” [2]. Because mimicry produces a subject who is neither fully Other nor fully assimilated, it fixes the colonized as a “partial presence,” defined as both incomplete and virtual, which simultaneously serves and unsettles colonial power [2].

Yet such structural instability causes splitting, a condition in which colonial discourse and the colonial subject become divided between contradictory knowledge. Drawing on Fanon, Bhabha

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notes how the racialized subject experiences a fracturing into “two, three places,” as the corporeal schema crumbles under the pressures of the stereotyping process, which forces the colonized subject to inhabit multiple, conflicting modes of recognition at once [1]. Thus, splitting reveals the coexistence of several contradictory beliefs: one official, one private; or, to use Bhabhabi's terminology, one that acknowledges difference and one that rejects it. The result is colonial ambivalence, the tendency of authority to oscillate “from mimicry—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to menace—a difference that is almost total but not quite,” thus revealing that the colonial project is internally fissured [2]. Though representations of the Other are tools of domination, they are ironically sources of anxiety that continually produce the instability they attempted to contain.

3. Colonial stereotyping in The World of Suzie Wong

3.1. Suzie as a fetishized object

Colonial stereotyping in “The World of Suzie Wong” first emerges as a compensatory response to Robert Lomax’s hostility toward Western women, whose perceived vanity, self-consciousness, and independence undermine his sense of masculine authority. He admits that Asian women “aroused in me feelings which… had found expression in another form,” feelings his girlfriend Stella “had never aroused,” before denouncing her as a “silly, vain, self-conscious bitch” and insisting that Asian women possess “an innocence that you’ve lost” [3]. The problem, then, is not difference but equality: Western femininity appears too psychologically comparable to sustain Robert’s desired hierarchy. As Gina Marchetti observes, colonial romance often frames the Caucasian woman as “independent and potentially dangerous,” while Eastern femininity reassures by restoring a conservative racial–gender order [4]. The novel therefore positions Suzie’s social marginality as structurally useful.

3.2. Infantilization and reduction

Defined as “a social outcast engaged in a dirty job; a bad girl who could never get married,” she is removed from respectable frameworks that might generate parity, and becomes available to be recast as compliant, grateful, and emotionally readable [3]. Said’s claim that Oriental women are repeatedly imagined as “creatures of a male power-fantasy… more or less stupid, and above all… willing” clarifies the mechanism: Suzie's rejection stabilizes her difference rather than just highlighting it, turning inequality into an emotive assurance that closeness won't undermine authority and disposability into attractiveness [4].

Subsequently, Suzie’s difference is then stabilized through servility, infantilized innocence, and the lack of intellect, all of them epistemic reductions that convert colonial asymmetry into comfort. Initially offering herself to Robert exclusively at a discounted rate, she later offers to “stay for nothing” (no payment) [3]. At the moment, her intimacy turns from negotiation to unilateral sacrifice, allowing dominance to register naturalized affection. A parallel logic runs through Suzie’s infantilization. In a scene where Suzie listens “in disbelief” to a tape-recorder with her voice for the first time, she collapses in giggling delight [3]. Her unguarded playfulness portrayed Robert as an amused witness due to her naiveness rather than an annoyed and challenged interlocutor who looks down upon her lack of culturedness. Scholar Mary Louise Pratt argues that such a posture of benign intimacy, in which authority is exercised through apparent softness — "innocence and passivity” — masks unequal power [4]. Yet, Suzie’s difference goes beyond the aforementioned into eroticized

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epistemic inequality. Confessing that Suzie's "lack of education and her illiteracy were one of her greatest charms," Robert further describes his pleasure like a "pedagogue who watches a pupil's mind opening under his guidance," and later even crowns her an "intellectual virgin" [3]. Robert is able to achieve superiority when illiteracy is re-coded as malleability, whereas Suzie's lack of literacy makes her legible. When combined, the aforementioned reductive characteristics create a colonized subject whose worth depends on her ability to be controlled since she is emotionally straightforward, cognitively flexible, and powerless to oppose the colonial authority that wants her..

3.3 Fetishism and the "virginity of heart"

The cumulative stabilization of Suzie shown above paradoxically reveals the limits of colonial fixity, because while these strategies render differences legible and manageable, they cannot resolve the subsequent issue of anxiety that colonial authority produces and depends on.

Homi Bhabha contends that because the colonial stereotype is haunted by what it aims to exclude, it is never only a stable representation but rather an unstable creation that needs to be obsessively reproduced. Fixity gives way to fetish at this point. Drawing on Freud, Bhabha describes fetishism as a system of disavowal that both acknowledges and denies a frightening reality. This structure is encapsulated by the logic that is familiar with [1].

In colonial discourse, such a paradoxical mechanism is essential to colonial identity. The colonizing power must recognize difference to dominate its subject, but it must also deny that difference as it threatens understanding and control. Thus, fetishism is not simply desire; it is in actuality a form of psychic defense, functioning to transform anxiety into pleasure by way of masking contradiction underneath a fantasy of coherence.

In "The World of Suzie Wong," the failure of stereotype alone to guarantee stability creates the precise conditions under which colonial authority turns inward, seeking ever more purified and intimate substitutes capable of sustaining its illusion of control. This turn inward toward "purified" difference is realized through Robert's invention of Suzie's "virginity of heart," a fetish-object that allows him to keep desiring a prostitute without confronting what her sexuality signifies [3].

Even as he registers her material sexual history—"undestroyed by two thousand or however-many-it-was men"—he isolates an imagined remainder, "the part of her they'd never touched," and names it "virginity," relocating purity from the body to an inviolable moral essence [3].

The effect is not ignorance but managed contradiction: Suzie's past is acknowledged precisely in order to be neutralized, rendered survivable through a symbolic substitution that converts sexual experience into emotional innocence. Thus Robert can treat intimacy as "the moment of beginning," imagining that "nobody had touched [her] before" because she has been "cleansed by a miracle," and can accept her confession—"I know it is not true—but I feel it is true"—as evidence not of fiction but of restored authenticity [3].

Here, virginity serves less as a claim about Suzie and more as a mechanism that protects her uniqueness: it maintains mastery by turning a sexually commodified subject into an impossible object—experienced but untouched, available yet pure—whose coherence can be held, admired, and possessed. It also denies contamination without denying history.

3.4 Suzie as a metonymic fragment

Once the stereotype has been secured through fetishistic disavowal, colonial representation proceeds by reduction: Suzie Wong is no longer apprehended as a social subject but as a metonymic fragment through which Hong Kong itself becomes readable.

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As “The World of Suzie Wong” unfolds, Suzie’s exoticized beauty, sexual availability, and affective simplicity function as what Bhabha terms a “metonymy of presence,” a partial and manageable sign that is made to stand in for a complex totality [2]. Robert’s perception of the city repeatedly filters through this fragmentary logic. His lyrical description of Hong Kong as a “great glittering jewel heap… fringed by the emeralds, rubies, and sapphires of neon” aestheticizes the city into a consumable surface, mirroring the way Suzie herself is rendered luminous yet depthless—beautiful, segmented, and apprehensible at a glance [3].

This metonymic economy operates affectively as well as spatially: Robert initially generalizes Suzie’s imagined “innocence of heart” outward, marvelling that from “the barren soil of commercial sex” could spring “kindness, tenderness, generosity, love,” as though Suzie’s fetishized purity authorizes a moral reading of Hong Kong at large [3].

When that fantasy collapses, the movement reverses with equal force. Disenchantment with Suzie metastasizes into disenchantment with Wanchai and its inhabitants, whose “good manners” are recast as a “deceptive oriental façade,” revealing how the city’s meaning has always been mediated through her figure [3].

As a result, Hong Kong is only recognized through the rise and fall of a single female sign; it is never seen on its own terms. The myth of Suzie Wong has been frequently internalized as a symbolic shorthand for Hong Kong itself, as researchers like Luk & Rice and McDonogh & Wong have shown, confirming that this reduction is structural rather than incidental [5].

In addition to allowing colonial authorities to condense the city's diversity into a readable image, metonymy guarantees that when the fragment breaks, the coherence of Hong Kong's imposed identity also breaks.

4. Mimicry and splitting in Suzie Wong

Once Suzie has been fetishized and reduced to a metonymic fragment, mimicry becomes the only mode through which she can remain visible within the colonial order. As Homi K. Bhabha argues, mimicry is not voluntary imitation but a structural condition: the colonized subject is recognized only insofar as she performs the fantasy that stabilizes colonial authority. This asymmetry is explicit in Western mythologies of Oriental femininity, where, as academic Craig Loomis observes, “the Oriental woman is doing very little… she simply radiates her natural Orientalness, and the rest happens,” and where her responsiveness to the Western man is imagined not only as obligation but as desire [6].

In “The World of Suzie Wong,” Suzie’s behavior repeatedly demonstrates this compulsion. When she claims Robert publicly, expresses jealousy at his actions, and seeks exclusivity — all forms of intimacy that conforms to western assertion, he immediately expresses his disapproval and even recoils as he reads her as possessive and destabilizing.

However, when she engages in self-erasure by offering herself at no financial cost and exists to solely “look after” him after her son dies, he rewards her with recognition and affection [3].

The extremity of this enforced loyalty becomes unmistakable in the barroom stabbing, where Suzie nearly kills another prostitute for spreading rumors about Robert’s sexual practices. By insisting her anger stems from his stained reputation as that “dirt doesn’t show” on her, Suzie risked incarceration to protect his dignity [3].

Her defense is instructive as his actions are brutal manifestations of colonial mentality. In order to maintain the colonizer's symbolic dominance, Suzie internalizes the colonial illusion to such an extent that she policies it on his behalf and even jeopardizes her own safety and morals. The issue of mimicry is then shown to be coercive and unsustainable since it requires the colonized to become

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fantastical with improbable traits, such as being fiercely loyal and self-effacing, degraded but protecting, and disposable but indispensable at the same time. The unreasonable demands of colonial fantasy itself create these contradictions rather than Suzie, setting the stage for the division and ambivalence that will eventually shatter the archetype from within.

5. Splitting and ambivalence in colonial desire

Once mimicry proves unsustainable, colonial desire resolves its contradictions through splitting and ambivalence, revealing the stereotype not as stable knowledge but as a reactive mechanism for managing illegibility.

This process crystallizes in Robert's violent outburst before the painting of Suzie, a moment triggered not by confirmed betrayal but by uncertainty. Suzie's unexplained absence renders her unreadable, and that gap is immediately filled by stereotype: Robert assumes "reversion to type," concluding that "you couldn't keep a good whore down," and insisting that for Suzie even ordinary abuse would be insufficient [3].

Crucially, this judgment precedes knowledge. Only afterward does he discover the bloodied garment and realize that Suzie had been gravely ill, suffering alone so as not to burden him. The misrecognition is devastating precisely because it is structural. Faced with ambiguity, Robert does not suspend judgment; he restores coherence by dividing Suzie into irreconcilable figures—pure and corrupt, exceptional and disposable, beloved and reviled. Splitting thus emerges not as emotional volatility but as a representational failure: the colonial fantasy cannot tolerate opacity, and when meaning falters, it defaults to degradation.

This instability reaches its limit in Robert's ambivalence toward marriage, which functions as the novel's final test of whether colonial fantasy can be stabilized into permanence. Suzie would become a societal issue after marriage, requiring the sexualized and enigmatic East to become commonplace, understandable, and domestic. Therefore, Robert's hesitancy conveys more than just self-doubt; it also indicates an unconscious realization that the fantasy cannot endure integration. Pressed for reasons, he admits that his explanations "sounded superficial," conceding that he had "left out the most important reason of all," a reason he himself "did not know" how to articulate [3]. This failure of articulation marks the point at which colonial desire can no longer rationalize itself once endurance is introduced. As critic Loomis observes, by marrying Suzie—by domesticating what she symbolizes—Lomax "breaks the spell," replacing the dream-world of temporary visitation with cultural collision and punishment [6]. Marriage thus exposes the contradiction the colonial imagination cannot resolve: the Oriental woman must remain elusive to function as desire, yet must be made stable to function as identity.

Even when marriage occurs, it produces displacement rather than coherence. Suzie remains socially unassimilable—dismissed as a "social handicap"—while Robert remains imaginatively divided, and the relationship is exiled from the west rather than normalized, confirming that the fantasy can neither be abandoned nor sustained [3]. This failure has wider ramifications for the identity of the city since Suzie has previously served as a metonymic stand-in for Hong Kong. Consolidating Hong Kong into a cohesive colonial identity is as impossible as domesticating Suzie without destroying the imagination that drives her. These oxymoronic dichotomies, which represent conflicting needs for closeness and distance, as well as mysteriousness and manageability, shatter Hong Kong identity by exposing the city's lack of a fundamental or even cohesive self during colonial control. After Suzie and Robert's marital illusion collapsed, Hong Kong became a shattered construct brought about by outside demands for readability and control that lived reality could never meet [7-10].

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6. Conclusion

Taken together, “The World of Suzie Wong” exposes the structural impossibility of colonial identity-making itself. Through fetish, metonymy, mimicry, and finally splitting, the novel reveals that colonial discourse does not misrepresent Hong Kong accidentally, but must continually fracture it in order to govern it. Suzie Wong’s transformation from fixity to fetish, then from metonymy to threat traces the narrative arc of colonial fantasy as it moves from desire for superiority to anxiety, and eventually collapse.

Despite the colonial imagination trying to stabilize difference, each attempt paradoxically generates new contradictions which force it to go back and forth between recognition and denial. Unfortunately, she serves as a condensed representation of Hong Kong throughout the book, and her narrative instability reflects the city's own oxymoronic situation under colonial administration. The story demonstrates that Hong Kong cannot be logically contained inside the representational frameworks placed upon it because it is unable to reconcile these problematic binary conflicts, which culminate in a marriage that displaces rather than integrates, domesticates but exiles. Therefore, Hong Kong is a shattered creation whose instability is a structural result of colonial authority, contrary to what the colonial west likes to say or believe.

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