

THE SYMPTOM OF SITUATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THIRD-WORLD LITERATURE: EXPLORING SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

BDK Anandawansa¹ and HAMA Hapugoda²

¹Department of Languages, Faculty of Management, Social Sciences and Humanities,
General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka

²Department of Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages,
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

¹anandawansa@kdu.ac.lk

Abstract-This study claims that Fredric Jameson's (1986) situational consciousness is prevalent in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (2006) to the extent that it is identified as a 'symptomatic deadlock' (Žižek, 1994) from which the postcolonial subject cannot escape in its journey towards liberation from the "colonial project" (Homi K. Bhabha in Upstone, 2007, p.261). This perpetuates the Hegelian 'Master-Slave dialectic' (Hegel, 1977) even today in the third-world, years after Independence. Using content-based analysis of Rushdie's novel and Jameson's article, authors also argue that though Jameson's theory is valid to a certain extent, he fails to consider Gandhian ideology in theorization, for it is Gandhi who understands the symptom, what perpetuates the Master-Slave dialectic and proposes a universality that in its reaction is non-violent in the decolonization process. Jameson's failure to capture the non-violent, reactionary politics of the national allegory in the situational consciousness contests his stance that the only possible reaction in third-world literatures is reactionary violence. As evidence against Jameson, Rushdie's novel ends with a contemplating Saleem, who is composite of what has happened to India as a result of colonialism and embodies this Gandhian universality; the very idea that Jameson's discourse seems to ignore.

Keywords- situational consciousness, symptom, third-world literature, symptomatic deadlock

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Brief Background*

Even decades after political independence from colonial rule, postcolonial subjects¹ are far from liberation from subjectivity and colonial identity. Past traumas exist insofar as they are present, among various forms, in third-world² literatures, calling for an examination of the presence of exteriority in the subject's intimacy/deepest interiority, and of the resultant non-distinction and identity of the exterior and intimate/most interior. This suggests, non-critically and psychoanalytically, the human desire to show/exteriorize intimacy. In third-world literary production, such projections denote issues, confrontations and a subject's intimate sentiments;

1. Refer to individuals who are subject to the conditions of the "colonial project" (Homi K. Bhabha in Upstone, 2007, p.261).

2. Refers to Fredric Jameson's (1986) somewhat polemical category of nations (Ahmad, 1995) that "have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (Jameson, 1986, p.67). Ahmad (1995) further states that since the very base of Jameson's articulation of the category of 'third-world' is polemical, the theoretical perspectives of Jameson's 'third-world literatures' cannot be a justifiable argument. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to identify Jameson's undeniable articulation of 'situational consciousness' with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a 'third-world' text (a text that is of and about the situations of the third-world).

a projection based on *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) that fluctuates between interior/exterior consciousnesses and could be defined cathartic in the form of third-world literatures. The term is synonymous with third-world literatures, which cannot escape from social allegory and in third-world cultural logic there is a dialectic relationship between Hegel's Master and Slave:

“the slave is called upon to labor for the master and to furnish him with all material benefits befitting his supremacy. But this means that, in the end, only the slave knows what reality and the resistance of matter really are; only the slave can attain some true materialistic consciousness of his situation, since it is precisely to that that he is condemned. The Master, however, is condemned to idealism-to the luxury of a placeless freedom in which any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream, like a word unremembered on the tip of the tongue, a nagging doubt which the puzzled mind is unable to formulate” (Jameson, 1986, p.85).

The above creates two realities: for Masters, the view from top is “epistemologically crippling” (Jameson, 1986, p.85) and reduces subject experience to “poverty of individual experience” (Jameson, 1986, p.85) and projections of “private subjectivity” (Jameson, 1986, p.85), all denied to third-world culture, which “must be situational and materialist despite itself” (Jameson, 1986, p.85). What finally counts for the allegorical nature of third-world culture is that the telling of individual story/experience cannot but ultimately involve the entire laborious telling of the collective experience itself.

This paper investigates this inescapable third-world *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) in Indian expatriate writer Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (2006), which represents the symptomatic behaviour of the postcolonial subject's inability to move beyond the 'symptomatic deadlock' (Žižek, 1994) of nationalistic allegory from which postcolonial nations and their consciousness cannot escape, ultimately foregrounding the perpetuation of the Master-Slave debate. This suggests that the postcolonial world is far from liberation from the Master and his “colonial project” (Homi K. Bhabha in Upstone, 2007, p.261), a symptomatic condition that continues to the unfruitful present, years after political independence from the British.

B. Research Statement

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* reveals the symptom of situational consciousness (Jameson, 1986) in Asian Literature, whose cultural allegory is symbolic of its subject's 'symptomatic deadlock' from which it cannot escape, justifying eventually, that the Hegelian 'Master-Slave dialectic' (Hegel, 1977) is very much still at work, symbolizing the continuation of the “colonial project” (Homi K. Bhabha in Upstone, 2007, p.261).

C. Research Objectives

To discuss the symptom of *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in the hope of highlighting broader situational consciousness that projects characteristics, frailties and challenges of Asian Literature and the postcolonial subject.

II. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The study involves *Midnight's Children*, written by Salman Rushdie, and uses content-based analysis to discuss the novel and arrive at findings and conclusions. Theoretical perspectives include *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) in third-world literature, Hegelian 'Master-Slave dialectic' (Hegel, 1977), all placed within Bhabha's “colonial project” (Homi K. Bhabha in Upstone, 2007, p.261).

III. RESULTS

Jameson's (1986) *situational consciousness* is most evident with its national allegory in *Midnight's Children*, which the authors argue displays a 'symptomatic deadlock' (Žižek, 1994) of third-world literatures that needs to be overcome for its own emancipation. Further, Jameson's theorization does not discuss the possible alternative to reactionary violence as exemplified by Gandhian non-violent ideology, which negated the 'symptom'. Thus, Jameson fails to understand Gandhian universality. In short, after all the triumphs and trials that he faces in the span of the novel's presentation, Saleem the chief

protagonist in *Midnight's Children* 'reacts' non-violently and is shown by the end of the novel to be in universal hope for the future- a very Gandhian reaction to the postcolonial traumas of the *situational consciousness* of national allegory. This is despite the fact that the said traumas have had an impact on Saleem's psycho-social and political existence.

IV. DISCUSSION

The Inescapable Symptom of National Allegory as the Dominant Situational Consciousness in third-world literatures: The 'symptom' in Lacanian psychoanalysis is a universal phenomenon. He claimed:

"Marx 'invented the symptom' by means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain 'pathological' imbalance which belies the universalism of bourgeois 'rights and duties'. This imbalance, far from announcing the 'imperfect realization' of these universal principles - that is, an insufficiency to be abolished by further development - functions as their constitutive moment: the 'symptom' is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus" (Žižek, 2009, p.16).

The symptom, then, is a particular subversion within an existing symbolic order, a point at which a system 'fails'. Yet its very presence 'completes' it. This dialectic is central to Žižekian thought and while Lacan continued to modify the term throughout his career, Žižek argues that just about anything can be symptomatic. In *sublime Object of Ideology* (2009), he states:

"[I]n the final years of Lacan's teaching we find a kind of universalization of the symptom: almost everything that is becomes in a way symptom, so that finally even woman is determined as the symptom of man. We can even say that "symptom" is Lacan's final answer to the eternal philosophical question "Why is there something instead of nothing?"—this "something" which "is" instead of nothing is indeed the symptom" (Žižek, 2009, pp. 77).

If the above is true, this leads to understand that the symptom is an inherent matter that exists in the unconscious of a subject and may have an impact on one's

performance and existence in the world. Moreover, it would be possible to explain that the symptom becomes more of a subjective existence than a plausible contingency and that there is no manner of possible cure for it, which makes it more like an inherent disease. It is possible for the subject him/herself to overcome this limitation by identifying this symptomatic existence and then with conscious effort redeeming oneself from it. Lacan says: "... if the symptom is a metaphor, it is not a metaphor to say so, any more than to say that man's desire is a metonymy. For the symptom is a metaphor, whether one likes to admit it or not, just as desire is a metonymy³, even if man scoffs at the idea" (Lacan, 2006, p.439).

In order to understand the 'symptom' of the 'postcolonial world' (Said 1978; 1986) in Rushdie's novel, it is necessary to make a fundamental placement: the Hegelian 'Master-Slave dialectic' (Hegel, 1977; Fanon, 1963) is far from being resolved. More clearly, the 'discomfort' generated in the aftermath of colonialism, for both parties of the colonial divide, leaves existential and unresolved questions of human consciousness that cannot be ignored (Fanon, 1963; also Satre's view in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*). Such issues reflect in postcolonial works of literature across Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and evidence from these texts suggests that the colonial mindset is still very much a debate today as then. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is of no exception. The subject in this sense is far from liberation from past traumas, and political independence has only managed to unleash further unexpected tyrannies on the postcolonial subject (Fanon, 1963) who faces an existential situation.

Midnight's Children, like most postcolonial novels (we shall use the word 'third-world' instead of postcolonial from now to comply with the argument of this paper) deals with the immediate pre/post colonial conditions and symptoms. In this sense, it is probably the best example that portrays the above situation, displaying a particular *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) that is symptomatic of a rise in 'what-is-there-instead-of-

3. There is a distinction between metaphor and metonymy in Lacanian discourse and in later readings of his work in political terms; the main difference being that metaphor suppresses, while metonymy combines. "Metonymy is based on the word-to-word...connection" (Lacan, 2006, p.421) and then "one word for another: this is the formula of metaphor" (Lacan, 2006, p.422). Thus, when we think of 'boat', 'sail' is metonymy, and 'crown' stands for the 'king' and is metaphor.

colonialism': ethnic nationalism, the subversive element that arises like the Marxian symptom (mentioned earlier) in postcolonial societies. This symptom, evident in the novel's context, is an inherent part of the characters (postcolonial subjects) at play. For instance, the protagonist, Saleem Sinai is in a quasi-fictional plot that explores the historical and political transformation of power from the imperial to Indian nationals. Saleem, along with the other 'gifted' midnight's children, are organic (Gramscian) representations of the subversive element that India proposes to have after its Independence. Rushdie states, the midnight's children can be seen as

"the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. No: illness is neither here nor there" (Rushdie, 2006, p.278).

This 'hope' which was the "last throw" (Rushdie, 2006, p.278) is the collective rule or universal solidarity Rushdie proposes for India's true emancipation from colonization, inclusive of Saleem, Shiva and other children both Hindu and Muslim alike. Yet, the children do not survive in the immediate aftermath of political Independence, followed by the Indira Ghandian emergency which persecutes and kills almost all the 'gifted' children, through means of Shiva, whose jealousy against Saleem (symbolically resonant of the larger Indian national problem between Hindus and Muslims) becomes the biggest betrayal and murder of India's future. This *situational consciousness* of national allegory, symptomatic of the rise of violence shows how postcolonial nations,

"once 'abandoned' by their Colonial Masters and... taken over by unsuccessful indigenous rulers, have encountered symptomatic political development within themselves 'as finite limitations of their existence' as they have emerged and are ideologically embedded in a historically affected consciousness" (Hapugoda, 2015, p.59).

The end result of this ideological attempt demands "total submission and tolerance of individuals during the process to regain the lost superiority of the past" (Hapugoda, 2015, p.64). However, one must also note that colonialism's *situational consciousness* is not always

externalized in violence as Jameson presumes, but may also be internalized to the extent that "there is nothing but self-destruction" (Anandawansa & Hapugoda, 2017, p.88) as evidenced in Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997).

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's story is this ethnic nationalism, riots and disturbances that weaves through his life and is symbolic of the 'symptomatic deadlock' (Žižek, 1994) of national allegory that cannot be traversed as a *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) in third-world literatures. The transition from British colonialism to independence, partitioning of British India and subsequent unrest, Hindu-Islamist violence and incidents of religious rivalry, and the birth of Pakistan constitute the inescapable *situational consciousness* in *Midnight's Children*, and are also the centrifugal themes in Rushdie's other works, i.e. *Shame* (1995), where one blushes "for what has happened in...the assertion of a new nation. Sufiya could well be blushing for the incorrigible past of...Pakistan...with its implied trappings of power and therefore violence" (Anandawansa, 2014, p.145).

Apart from Indian postcolonial writers, the inescapable symptom of national allegory is also resonant in Sri Lankan/African writers of fiction, whose works seem to dwell in similar contextual national allegory particular to those contexts, proving that the umbilical cord attached to colonial past and its atrocities is its very symptom.

In *Midnight's Children*, the political/military coups, corruption and religious conflicts, combined with magical-realistic sub-plots, explore tensions, traumas and triumphs protagonists face amidst this situational consciousness (Jameson, 1986) of India's pre and post-independent, nationalistic debates and struggles, where several historical, political incidents i.e. Sanjay Ghandi's 'cleansing' of the Jama Masjid slum, the Indira-Ghandi emergency are brought in. Protagonists grapple with these incidents, directly/indirectly, justifying the inescapable presence of national allegory in Rushdie's fiction, representative of third-world literatures, which becomes the 'fantasmatic other' (a matter that qualifies to be investigated separately) for readership in the West, the latter being the reason why, most likely, Rushdie as an expatriate writer is much acclaimed in the West.

Fact juxtaposes with fantasy when Rushdie makes Saleem and other children born at midnight of Indian Independence, capable of special powers: the magical feat itself in fantasy being means of taking the negated

history (subversive element of a colony) in its nationalistic consciousness. Saleem, with his telepathic powers, gathers a conference of *Midnight's Children*, parodying India's consciousness in its early statehood on cultural, linguistic, religious and political differences, history and politics of the independent nation state with debates between Ghandhi, Nehru and Jinna. The use of fantasy is political (Rothenberg & Foster, 2003) and is the promising *situational consciousness* that is the only hope for India in the aftermath of colonial rule. Yet, this *situational consciousness* in the form of national allegory leads not to a unified whole of a diverse linguistic and religious India, which would be its triumph, but to a partitioned India; the very opposite which led to Independence. The question to be asked then is, is there a way out for third-world from colonial rule, other than falling back to the nationalist discourse, which embraces a far more primitive nature within its journey towards modernity? It is important at this point of the 'symptomatic deadlock' (Žižek, 1994) to return to the out right but erudite Marxian statement on the situation of India, where Marx states that the "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society" (Marx, 2007, p.219).

This Marxian view of what happened in India completely overturning its native, non-industrial, religion and caste-based labour-divisional structure in the villages with which Indians have lived for many years prior to British colonization, is the 'history' marked. India's history, as it stands at present in actuality is the after effects of the implementation of the material foundations of Western society in India that has been so detrimental to it, even in the aftermath of (political) Independence. This inescapable 'planted history' and its consequences on the postcolonial subject are in discussion in *Midnight's Children*, which shows the signs, deadlocks and symptoms particular to the postcolonial subject.

Facing the yet unanswered question of what is there to fall back to except *situational consciousness* of nationalism (Jameson, 1986), critics (Jameson, 1986; Ahmad, 1995) state the political category that necessarily follows colonial/imperial experience is emphasis on 'the nation', where nationalism becomes the "peculiarly valorized ideology" (Ahmad, 1995, p.78). Due to this privileging of national ideology, theoretically, "all third-world texts are necessarily...to be read as...national allegories" (Jameson,

1986, p.69), and it is seen as an essential task of the third-world novel "to give appropriate form to the *national experience*" (Ahmad, 1991, p.1461). Rushdie's fiction contains no less of this ideology than any other British-Indian author. In fact, from "dreams of nationhood" (Carey-Abrioux, 1998, p.69) to the ultimate "myth of a nation state" (Almond, 2003, p.1143), Rushdie brings out "religious nationalism" (Almond, 2003, p.1142), the "life of a nation in formation...the history of a nation, its coming into being and development" (Innes, 2007, p.132) in *Midnight's Children*. All this shows the "colorful heterogeneity" (Luburić-Cvijanović & Muždeka, 2016, p.438) that India possessed in Nehru's vision of a unified India, devoid of any caste and religious sectarianism, only to be 'failed' states (India and Pakistan) in political 'liberation' from the 'colonial Master' (Žižek, 2014). What is particular to the postcolonial ideology of 'nation' in Rushdie's fiction is far more a psychologically grappling entity for its subjects, for the problem of postcolonialism is crucial. Žižek (2002) states that postcolonial studies

"...tend to translate it into the multiculturalist problematic of the colonized minorities' right to narrate their victimizing experience, of the power mechanisms that repress otherness, so that, at the end of the day, we learn that the root of postcolonial exploitation is our intolerance toward the Other and, furthermore, that this intolerance itself is rooted in our intolerance toward the "Stranger in Ourselves," in our inability to confront what we repressed in and of ourselves. The politico-economic struggle is thus imperceptibly transformed into a pseudopschoanalytic drama of the subject unable to confront its inner traumas" (Žižek, 2002, pp.545-46; Almond, 2012, p.6).

Although critics (Carey-Abrioux, 1998; Almond, 2003; Innes, 2007) have shown 'nation' or 'nationhood' to be one of the many ideologically loaded elements in Rushdie's novels, the characters therein, with their dramatic, pseudo-psychoanalytic experiences, ever changing realities and inner traumas, are caught in "that fluctuating movement" (Fanon, 1963, p.226) which the people "are just giving shape to" (Fanon, 1963, p.226). This movement defines the "truths of a nation [which] are in the first place its realities" (Fanon, 1963, p.224), and the situation is synonymous with Ahmad's (1995) assertion of placing the very 'national allegory' (Jameson, 1986) as the basic premise or starting point for 'liberation':

“if this ‘Third-World’ is *constituted* by the singular ‘experience of colonialism and imperialism’, and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this ‘experience’? In fact there is *nothing* else to narrate. For if societies here are defined not by relations of production but by relations of intranational domination; if they are forever suspended outside the sphere of conflict between capitalism (First World) and socialism (Second World); if the motivating force for history here is neither class formation and class struggle nor the multiplicities of intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region, and so on, but the unitary ‘experience’ of national oppression (if one is merely the object of history, the Hegelian slave), then what else can one narrate but that national oppression?” (Ahmad, 1995, p.102).

Ahmad (1995) further challenges Jameson (1986) when he states that the latter, due to his binary categorical imperative of Otherness between the First and Third-Worlds “freezes and dehistoricizes the global space within which struggles between these great motivating forces actually take place” (Ahmad, 1995, p.81). In other words, the Ghandian ideology⁴ that insists on the erasure of caste and its social stratification/discrimination in a socialist perspective, where all work towards social development (the failed midnight’s children’s body politic) is assimilated into one enormous heterogeneity and singled out as a “Hegelian metaphor of the master-slave relation” (Ahmad, 1995, p.81) by Jameson’s theory.

Further Dimensions of Situational Consciousness:

While Jameson’s note on the national allegorical effect of third-world texts is already discussed, he also marks a radical split that distinctively sets apart third-world cultural productions from those of the First World (West). Jameson (1986) explains that the cultural productions of the third-world mingle the private and public, the poetic and political; a difference he metaphorically explains as a “pistol shot in the middle of a concert” (Jameson, 1986, p.69). The emphasis being that third-world literary texts

lose ‘aesthetic value’ due to ‘contamination’ with national, cultural politics. What Jameson’s first-world outlook does not understand is that such ‘contamination’ is inevitable in third-world literatures. This is so, since the ‘horror’ inflicted on the symbolic order of these nations during subjugation to colonial administration/rule ‘disturbed’ and ‘interfered’ with the subjects’ private and public, poetic and political/secular lives, leaving them in the aftermath, in a state where the personal, poetic or any literary expression is the political.

Saleem Sinai, born at the dawn of Independence and destined to break into a million pieces (representing the many citizens of India) upon his death, is the ultimate embodiment of the entirety of India within himself. Although an individual, within him, due to his special ability of connecting with the other midnight’s children, there is literally no distinction between the private and public. In fact, his struggle in the novel seems to be his personal fight to maintain this balance between the one and the many, the private and the public. He explains this complexity of life in the following words:

“...[N]ow, seated hunched over paper in a pool of Anglepoised light, I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I’ve gone which would not have happened if I had not come [...] each ‘I’, every one of the now six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you’ll have to swallow a world” (Rushdie, 2006, p.535).

The ‘confusion’ of a people who once lived under the tentacles of imperialism is also expressed in the following words, where correspondences between supposed first-world elements in rigid polarity seem to be an inescapable third-world symptom:

“As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form—or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes” (Rushdie, 2006, p.417).

4. Watch Richard Attenborough’s film *Ghandi* (1982) which reinvigorates the life of a Mahatma Ghandhi, who in the words of General George C. Marshall, the then American Secretary of State is “the spokesman for the conscience of all mankind. He was a man who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires” (Ghandi [movie], 1982).

Thus, how ‘unintelligible’ it may be to the first-world mind, children born on the stroke of midnight of Indian Independence have “the privilege and the curse...to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy...be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace” (Rushdie, 2006, p.647).

From the perspective of a postcolonial subject, it is quite tragic that this “pistol shot in the middle of the concert” (Jameson, 1986, p.69), which is the symptom of colonial subjects especially in the aftermath of political liberation, and the externalization of the internalized *situational consciousness* in the literatures of the third-world, is also the Other. It is the Asian *fantasmatic*, the objet petit a or the never-in-their-past-experienced reality of the first-world readership, which highlights the symptom of the Master as well, for the attraction symbolizes the latter’s symptom too; of not being able to de-imperialize their mindset from the atrocities of the imperialism, they themselves created. In this sense, the Hegelian ‘Master-Slave dialectic’ (Hegel, 1977; Fanon, 1963), with its inescapable dependent syndrome is mutually obvious, and is possibly a grey area that has lost attention in Jameson’s (1986) theorization.

V. CONCLUSION

Rushdie’s work, placed within the larger framework of India’s position as a third-world nation, cannot escape the postcolonial consciousness of national allegory; a *situational consciousness* visible in Asian third-world literature in general, which is in stark contrast against the literatures of the First-World. Yet, in the nationalist allegory lies the stepping stone from which the oppressed subject can rise from the colonial atrocities inflicted upon the colonized subjects. It is this very *situational consciousness* (Jameson 1986) through which the third-world symptom must emancipate, possibly by means of a much powerful force than that of the colonial oppressors, if it requires to escape from the deadlock conditions. Saleem, the chief protagonist, remains envisioned at the end of the novel, despite the series of turbulent events that span across his life (illegitimate birth being the son of a ruling White and poverty-stricken Indian woman, identity switch at birth, marriage to Parvati-the-witch, being legal father to Shiva’s child, etc.). This signifies the unflinching absorption of all that happens (possibly a hint at the path for our own ‘liberation’). The massive ‘hurdles’, personal, social and cultural that have incurred on Indian

society and its individuals as a result of colonialism and its impact, is the grappling *situational consciousness* (Jameson, 1986) with which they have to live with and hopefully rise from.

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