CHAPTER 3
MULTICULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXTS: PHILOSOPHY’S SELF AND OTHER

Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture. As Nadine Gordimer’s and Isak Dinesen’s writings show, however, this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one’s very being, precisely because one’s culture is what formed that being.

JanMohamed, “The Economy” 84

What is the primary difference between a romantic metaphysical definition of self/other and an ideological one? How might the question be configured if one analyzes a postcolonial subjectivity? The quoted lines from Abdul JanMohamed’s “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature” may help. It reflects the thoughts of multiculturalists who seek an ideological definition of the self for a postcolonial subject, a definition that determines not only the politics but the very metaphysical “being” of the participant. JanMohamed, a determined realist, advances a hard-nosed stance on the significance of “being” in relation to “Otherness”; he maintains that a “thorough comprehension of Otherness” is “virtually impossible” since it entails the “task of negating one’s very being.” These observations regarding postcolonialism lead to vexing problems for multiculturalism’s pledge to honor an authentically diverse ethnic literary canon. For if JanMohamed is right and we are completely formed by our culture, how then does the literature of an oppressed culture rise up and authentically determine itself against the force of a dominant culture? Concepts of otherness easily become entangled with those of determinism here. Indeed, this particular entanglement frequently engages, and should engage, critics not only in postcolonial and multicultural
discussions of the canon but also in the more general accounts of authenticity, race, identity, gender, and so on. Hence, determinism and otherness deserve a close investigation in this context.

Although the already extensive analytical history related to these two terms attests to their centrality, some popular contemporary versions surprisingly appear to be built from incompletely examined claims. Moreover, these concepts are generally spelled out in a climate of ideological critique that discounts the resistive value of a metaphysical or romantic vocabulary. And it is from within this dialectical clash between ideology and romanticism, I will soon suggest, that the driving force of multiculturalism arises. Beginning, then, with an exploration of JanMohamed’s essay in relation to multiculturalism, I hope to reveal how the exclusive deployment of ideological critique has unnecessarily impoverished a broader canonical debate on postcolonial identity, one that should include a romantic, metaphysical vocabulary. My claim is that multiculturalism and postcolonial theory need the more assertive understanding of immediate reality that arises from metaphysics; in turn, the insights gathered from that domain will encourage cross-cultural communication. Certain forms of postcolonial theory have become so rigidly ideological that the crucial romantic underpinnings of agency, identity, and reason have been eclipsed. This gap in current theory could be filled with a number of romantic or metaphysical theorists. For the concerns of this essay, I will reassess these philosophical questions in relation to Coleridge’s thoughts on perception and subjectivity, some of which I have discussed earlier. However, as I have also mentioned, my intention is to revisit Coleridge’s key quotations several times, each time within a new context, a new problematic. In this case, I will use familiar Coleridge quotations to show, by contrast, that many of today’s strident, but quite common, theoretical positions should only exert a moderate critical influence. In brief, I am seeking a renewed look at the balance between Romanticism and postcolonial theory under the contemporary conditions of multiculturalism. After detailing how the frequently veiled shortcomings of some postcolonial ideological concepts operate, I will offer an alternative: an ideological-metaphysical hybrid generated from a romantic interpretation of otherness.

My epigraph from JanMohamed suggests that in order to know someone who has been historically oppressed we must first clear away all that makes us different from that person. If not, we will mirror only ourselves, experience only our own ideology. In an effort to avoid miscommunication, then, we must strip ourselves of the ideology that forms us. In other words, considered en masse, an individual’s particular ideological and cultural influences actually and completely add up to what we call a