

Postcolonial Theory: Bhabha and Fanon

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1. Introduction

Enlightenment had fixed a standard of modernity. By this fixed standard or criteria of 'civilization', classification or categorization of society is started. It sets a certain structure of thought. By these criteria of evaluation, other societies are ranked as 'civilized', 'semi-civilized' or 'barbarian'. For example, 'west'= urban= industrial= developed= good= desirable or the 'non-west'= rural= agricultural= underdeveloped= bad= undesirable. That means, it produces a certain kind of knowledge about a subject and certain attitudes towards it. So, we can say that the idea of 'west' and 'non-west' is basically a construction. The 'west' and 'other' became two sides of a single coin. What each now is, and what the terms we use to describe them mean, depend on the relations which were established between them long ago. The so called uniqueness of the west was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other societies which were very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development and cultures from the European model. The basis of comparison was that fixed standard which was derived from Enlightenment. The difference of these other societies and cultures from the west was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured. It is within the context of these relationships that the idea of 'the west' took on shape and meaning. (Hall, 1992: 278)

Actually, the meaning of a term depends on its difference with other. For example, we know what 'night' means because it is opposite to 'day'. Many psychologists have argued that an infant first learns to think of itself as a separate and unique 'self' by recognizing its separation—its difference—from others. Likewise, national cultures acquire their strong sense of identity by contrasting themselves with other cultures. Similarly, the West's sense of itself, more specifically, its identity is a construction, made through Europe's sense of difference from other world.

With European colonial expansion, and nation-building, these ideas were identified, expanded and reworked. Despite the enormous differences between the colonial enterprises of various European nations, they seem to generate fairly similar stereotypes of 'outsiders'—both those outsiders who roamed far away on the edges of the world, and those who (like the Irish) lurked uncomfortably nearer home. Thus, laziness, aggression, violence, greed, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence and irrationality are attributed by the English, French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese colonists to Turks, Africans, Native Americans, Jews, Indians, the Irish and others. [Loomba: 1998]

Contact with racial "others" was structured by the imperatives of different colonial practices, and the nature of pre-colonial societies. Early colonial discourses

distinguishes between people regarded as barbarous, infidels (such as the inhabitants of Russia, Central Asia, Turkey) and those who were constructed as savage (such as the inhabitants of the Americas and Africa). Peter Hulme identifies 'a central division between colonial discursive practices which relate to occupied territory where the native population has been, or is to be, dispossessed of its land by whatever means' and 'those pertaining to territory where the colonial form is based primarily on the control of trade.....America and India'. [Hulme: 1986; 2-3]

These had played a great role in colonial stereotyping. 'New World Natives' have been projected as birthed by the European encounter with them; accordingly, a discourse of primitivism surrounds them. [Greenblatt: 1991] On the other hand, 'the East' is constructed as barbaric or degenerate.

Colonial writing is important for revealing the ways in which that world system could represent the degradation of other human beings as natural, an innate part of their degenerate or barbarian state. Over determined by stereotype, the characterization of indigenous peoples tended to screen out their agency, diversity, resistance, thinking, voices. It is on the basis that postcolonial theorists refer to the colonized as the colonial other, or simply the other.

Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire, postcolonial literature is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspective. To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature is therefore deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire.

Postcolonialism involves the challenge to colonial ways of knowing, 'writing back' in opposition to such views. It does not define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonization. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognizing that important challenges and changes have already been achieved (McLeod, 2000: 32-33).

A very recent phase of postcolonial scholarship attempts to move beyond easy binaries of colonizer/colonized. Such theorists as Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Trinh Minh-ha, taking a cue from post-structuralist philosophy, have tended to focus their analyses on the role of language and writing specifically in the dissemination, of,

and resistance to, colonial ideologies. Such studies as Bhava's "Location of Culture" seeks to apply this heightened awareness of the ambiguities and undecidabilities of Western thought and writing in general to interrogate the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in colonial discourses. But much before it, in the 1950s there emerged much important work that attempted to record the psychological damage suffered by colonized peoples who internalized these colonial discourses. Among them, the most important was the psychologist Frantz Fanon.

2. Frantz Fanon

Fanon is an important figure in the field of post colonialism. He was born in the French Antilles in 1925 and educated in Martinique and France. His experience of racism while being educated by and working for the French affected him deeply. In Algeria in 1954, he resigned his post as head of Psychiatric Department in Blida-Joinville Hospital and joined with the Algerian rebels fighting against the French occupation of the country. Influenced by the contemporary philosophers and poets such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Aime' Ce'saire, Fanon wrote widely and passionately about the damage French Colonialism had wrecked upon millions of people who suffered its power.

Fanon's publications include two polemical books—"Black Skin, White Masks" (trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto [1952] 1986) and "The Wretched of the Earth" (trans. Constance Farrington, Penguin [1961] 1967). The books deal angrily with the mechanics of colonialism and its effects on those it ensnared. In "Black Skin, White Masks" Fanon examined mainly the psychological effects of colonialism, by drawing upon his experience as a psychoanalyst. In a narrative both inspiring and distressing, Fanon looked at the cost to the individual who lives in a world where due to the color of his or her skin, he or she is rendered peculiar, an object of derision, and an aberration. In the chapter "The Fact of Blackness" he remembers how he felt when in France white strangers pointed out his blackness, his difference with derogatory phrases such as 'dirty nigger!' or 'look, a Negro!':

"On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad to the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematisation. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together [Black skin, White masks; p.112-13].

In this scenario, Fanon's identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power. He is forced to see himself not as a human subject, with his own wants and needs as indicated at the end of the quotation, but an object, a peculiarity at the mercy of a group that identifies him as inferior, less than fully-human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations. The violence of this 'revision' of his identity is conveyed powerfully in the image of amputation [McLeod, 2000: 20]. Fanon feels

abbreviated, violated, imprisoned by a way of seeing him that denies him the right to define his own identity as a subject. Identity is something that the French make for him, and in so doing they commit a violence that splits his very sense of self. The power of description, of naming, is not to be underestimated. The relationship between language and power is far-reaching and fundamental.

The book, *Black Skin, White Masks* explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonized subject who is forced into the internalization of the self as an 'other'. The 'Negro' is deemed to epitomize everything that the colonizing French are not. The colonizers are civilized, rational, intelligent: the 'Negro' remains 'other' to all these qualities against which colonizing peoples derive their sense of superiority and normality. *Black Skin, White Masks* depicts those colonized by French Imperialism doomed to hold a traumatic belief in their own inferiority. One response to such trauma is to strive to escape it by embracing the 'civilized' ideals of the French 'motherland'. But however hard the colonized try to accept the education, values and language of France—to don the White mask of civilization that will cover up the 'uncivilized' nature indexed by their black skins—they are never accepted on equal terms. 'The white world', writes Fanon, 'the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man' [Black Skin, White Masks, p.114]. That imaginative distinction that differentiates between 'man' (self) with 'black man' (other) is an important, devastating part of the armory of colonial domination, one that imprisons the mind that as securely as chains imprison the body.

Many years before Said, Frantz Fanon had concluded his indictment of colonialism by pronouncing that it was Europe that 'is literally the creation of the Third World' in the sense that it is material wealth and labour from the colonies, 'the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians and the yellow races' that have fuelled the 'opulence' of Europe [1963: 76-81]. Colonialism, he contends, can produce all manner of problems—including an inferiority complex that can lead to a desire to be white, a desire to marry a white person, passivity in the face of whites, extreme self-hatred, and a host of other debilitating mental states. The black man is in fact "phobogenic"—inheriting phobias from generation to generation (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 154).

For Fanon, the end of colonialism meant not just political and economic change, but psychological change too. Colonialism is destroyed only once this way of thinking about identity is successfully challenged.

3. Homi K. Bhabha

Bhabha has become one of the leading voices in Post colonialism since the early 1980s. His work is very difficult to understand at a first reading for his complex written style. Arif Dirlik (1994) argues that Bhabha is "something of a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation" [cited in McLeod, 2000: 51] and attacks his incomprehensibility. Surely, Bhabha is difficult to read, but he is not completely incomprehensible and his ideas can be some of the most thought-provoking within post-

colonialism. The purpose of looking at Bhabha's work is to construct a working knowledge of his concepts of 'ambivalence' and 'mimicry' in the operations of colonial discourses.

Bhabha argues that colonialism is informed by a series of assumptions which aim to legitimate its view of other lands and peoples. In his book "The Location of Culture" (1994), Bhabha writes, 'The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' [p.70]. Hence, as we have seen the emergence of colonial stereotypes that represent colonized peoples in various derogatory ways. However, in an inspired departure from Said's concept of Orientalism, Bhabha argues that this important aim is never fully met. This is because the 'discourse of colonialism' does not function according to plan because it is always pulling in two contrary directions at once.

On the one hand, the discourse of colonialism would have it that the Oriental or the 'colonized subject' is a radically strange creature whose bizarre and eccentric nature is the cause for both curiosity and concern. The colonized are considered the 'other' of the Westerner or the 'colonizing subject', essentially outside of western culture and civilization. Yet, on the other hand, the discourse of colonialism attempts to domesticate colonized subject and abolish their radical 'otherness', bringing them inside western understanding through the Orientalist project of constructing knowledge about them. The construction of 'otherness' is thus split by the contradictory positioning of the colonized simultaneously inside and outside of Western knowledge. To put it in Bhabha's words, 'colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible' [p.70-71]

So, on the one hand, stereotypes translate the unfamiliar into coherent terms by seeming to account for the strangeness of other peoples: the Irish are inevitably stupid; the Chinese are always inscrutable; the Arabs essentially are violent. The distance between the colonizers and the colonized is lessened, as the colonized are brought within the boundaries of Western knowledge. But, on the other hand, colonial stereotypes also function contrariwise to maintain this sense of distance. Bhabha argues that the negative Orientalist stereotype is an unstable category which marks the conceptual limit of colonial presence and identity. It is fundamentally threatening as the banished or underground 'Other' of the European self, and insofar as it embodies the contradictory expulsions of colonial fantasy and phobia, it actualizes a potentially disruptive site of pleasure and anxiety. In Bhabha's words: "**Stereotyping is not only the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjections, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and fantasmic knowledges.....**"[Bhabha, 1986: 169]. The colonizers must never admit that other peoples are not really very different from themselves, as this would undercut the legitimacy of colonialism.

Probing Said's argument that Western representation of the East based primarily on fantasies, desires and imaginings, Bhabha points out that the fantasies of the colonial stereotypes often appears as horrors. The discourse of colonialism is frequently populated with 'terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy' [Bhabha, 1994: 72]. Any attempt to subdue the radical otherness of the colonized is perpetually offset by the alarming fantasies that are projected onto them. This indicates how, in the discourse of colonialism, colonized subjects are split between contrary positions [McLeod, 2000]. They are domesticated, harmless, and knowable; but also at the same time wild, harmful, mysterious.

Bhabha argues that, as a consequence, in colonialist representations the colonized subject is always in motion, sliding ambivalently between the polarities of similarity and difference; he or she simply will not stand still. Because of this slippery motion, stereotypes are deployed as a means to arrest the ambivalence of the colonized subject by describing him or her in static terms. But this fixing of the colonized's subject position always fails to secure the colonized subject into place. Hence, stereotypes must be frequently repeated in an anxious, imperfect attempt to secure the colonized subject in the discourse of colonialism. As Bhabha argues, 'the same old stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish must be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time' [Bhabha, 1994: 77]. The repetition of colonial stereotype is an attempt to secure the colonized in a fixed position, but also an acknowledgement that this can never be achieved.

McLeod has summed up that Bhabha's 'discourse of colonialism' is characterized by both ambivalence and anxious repetition. In trying to do two things at once—construing the colonized as both similar to and the other of the colonizers—it ends up doing neither properly. Although the aim is to fix knowledge about other peoples once and for all, this goal is always deferred. The best it can do is set in motion the anxious repetition of the colonized subject's stereotypical attributes that attempt to fix it in a stable position. But the very fact that stereotypes must be endlessly repeated reveals that this fixity is never achieved [McLeod, 2000: 54].

In his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man', Bhabha builds on these ideas and explores how the ambivalence of colonized subject becomes a direct threat to the authorities of the colonizers through the effects of 'mimicry'. Bhabha describes mimicry as 'one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' [Bhabha, 1994:85]. He focuses on the fact that in colonized nations such as India, the British authorities required native peoples to work on their behalf and thus had to teach them the English Language. These figures are described as 'mimic men' who learn to act English but do not look English or accepted as such. As Bhabha puts it: 'to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English' [p. 87].

However, this mimic men are not he disempowered, slavish individuals required by the British in India. Bhabha argues that they are invested with the power to menace the

colonizers because they threaten to disclose the ambivalence of the discourse of colonialism which the use of stereotypes anxiously tries to conceal. Hearing their language returning through the mouths of the colonized, the colonizers are faced with the marrying threat of resemblance between colonizer and colonized. This threatens to collapse the Orientalist structure of knowledge in which such oppositional distinctions are made. The ambivalent position of the colonized mimic men in relation to the colonizers—‘almost the same but not quite’ (p.89)—is, in Bhabha’s thinking, a source of anti-colonial resistance in that it presents an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of the discourse of colonialism. By speaking English, the colonized have not succumbed to the power of the colonized. Contrariwise, they challenge the representations which attempt to fix and define them.

According to McLeod (2000), “this is a different assertion to Said’s model of Orientalism, which does not consider how colonial discourses generate the possibilities of their own critique. Previously, the notion of mimicry had been seen as a condition of the colonized’s subservience and crisis, the measure of their powerlessness. But Bhabha offers a much more positive, active and insurgent model of mimicry. So, by revealing that the discourse of colonialism is forever embattled and split by ambivalence and mimicry, always doomed to failure in its attempt to represent the colonized, Bhabha avoids the criticisms of Said’s work by attending to the ways in which colonial discourses are problematised by the very people they claim to represent” [McLeod, 2000: 55].

Bhabha’s theory is not free from criticism. He deals with the discourse of colonialism at a very abstract level. As Nicholas Thomas argues, Bhabha’s work is weakened by its ‘generalizing strategy’ (Thomas, 1994: 43). Also, Bhabha’s writing is notoriously difficult because he willfully writes at an abstruse, highly theoretical level—often it is hard to see the intellectual wood for the linguistic trees (McLeod, 2000: 55-56).

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