

## **Postcolonial Literature**

### **Lecture 14**

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Welcome back to the lecture series on postcolonial literature. We had ended our previous lecture by discussing Rabindranath Tagore's and Frantz Fanon's criticism of the idea of nation-state, which by the second half of the twentieth century had become the norm in the parts of the world once colonised by the European powers. In conclusion, I had suggested that the criticism of Tagore and Fanon of nation and nationalism compels us to look beyond the present political norm of the nation-states. We will make this attempt today by exploring the work of Homi Bhabha and see if we can arrive at an alternative understanding of postcolonial human community beyond the category of nation-state.

Our starting point in this exploration will be the concept of hybridity which plays a central role in Bhabha's work and we will then move on to the concept of mimicry and finally revisit the idea of nation as a human community. But before we delve into the writings of Bhabha, a few words about his biography. Homi Bhabha was born in 1949 in the Parsi community of Bombay. He completed his graduation from the Bombay University before moving on to the University of Oxford as a postgraduate student. He started his teaching career in the United Kingdom but subsequently moved to America where he now holds the Anne F. Rothenberg chair professorship in humanities in the University of Harvard. Bhabha is often regarded as part of the "Holy Trinity" in the field of postcolonial studies with the other two figures being Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. His most influential work of postcolonial theory is the collection of essays titled *The Location of Culture* which was originally published in 1994. Though Bhabha has subsequently authored a number of other important works including "The Black Savant and the Dark Princess", "On Global Memory", and "Beyond Photography" he is

primarily known for *The Location of Culture* and in today's lecture we will be exclusively focussing on this particular collection of essays to understand the theoretical position that Bhabha takes.

Now in our earlier discussion on the colonial discourse, we have seen how colonialism is constructed by the Europeans as a civilizing mission in which the "superior" culture of the metropolitan West comes in contact with the "inferior" culture of the colonised periphery. This superior/inferior binary indicates that in spite of the colonial contact the culture and civilization of the Western coloniser and of the colonised East are perceived as two distinct and separate entities. And this perception is most clearly evident in the opening lines of Rudyard Kipling poem "The Ballad of East and West": "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet".

This notion of distinct cultural essences separating the coloniser and the colonised also informs the kind of middle class nationalist discourse that we have studied earlier from within the Indian context. Indeed, the cyclical pattern of fall and recovery that underlines this nationalist discourse is pivoted on the notion of distinctive and pure cultural identities. As we have seen earlier, the lament of someone like MK Gandhi for instance is that India under the colonial influence has lost its distinctive culture and its native inhabitants are busy imitating the culture of the colonisers which is completely alien to them. In the cyclical pattern underlying the Gandhian nationalist discourse, the notion of return and recovery therefore signifies a reverting back to the civilizational values of a precolonial past which represents an era of cultural purity.

Against this idea of a pure culture which can be distinguished and kept separated from another foreign culture, and which can be reverted back to, Bhabha proposes the idea of cultural hybridity. Now since Bhabha's concept of hybridity is complex and at the same time central to the field of postcolonial studies, let us go through it carefully. In order to understand Bhabha's

theory of cultural hybridity we need to understand that for Bhabha culture is not a static entity, or an essence that can be fixed in time and space. Culture for Bhabha is something which is fluid, something which is perpetually in motion. It is a melting pot of several disparate elements which are regularly being added and which are regularly transforming our cultural identities. So for Bhabha there is no pure Indianness or Africanness or Britishness that can be grasped, studied or even returned to.

To understand what I mean here, let us consider the example of the famous European anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski who travelled in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the islands of Papua New Guinea to study the natives in their “original” setting. Malinowski’s writings on these natives represent them as the possessor of a distinct culture which has remained uncontaminated by any foreign influence and if we look at this picture of Malinowski sitting with Papuan islanders it is easy to believe both in the pure uncontaminated nature of their aboriginal culture and the distinction separating them from the culture of white man sitting between them. But, as we know, Bhabha would contend that such a notion of pure and uncontaminated culture is a myth. All culture is characterised by its mixed-ness which Bhabha refers to by the word hybridity.

But how can the culture of these remote Papuan islanders be contaminated in any way? Well another modern day anthropologist James Clifford, explains in his essay “Travelling Cultures” that Malinowski’s portrayal of the Papuan culture as pure, static, unchanging and uncontaminated is an illusion and such illusions about pure uncontaminated cultures are carefully constructed not only by Malinowski but almost by all anthropologists writing about their field studies on dwellers of spaces far removed from the West. The illusion is created for instance by stressing on the isolation of the field which the anthropologists study. This for instance is done by leaving away details about how the western anthropologist himself or herself travels to that distant location, because a detailed account of that travel will immediately

destroy the notion of isolation and cultural uncontaminatedness by connecting the anthropological field with the metropolitan centre. In other words, if the anthropologist managed to find his or her way to the field of study then that field cannot but be connected to other places and consequently its culture cannot but be influenced by and mixed with other cultures.

The notion of cultural isolation and uncontaminated cultural purity also crumbles if we remember that the anthropologist is communicating with the inhabitants of his field of study in some way or the other. So there is definitely some sort of translation going on through which the anthropologist understands the culture of the native inhabitants and vice versa. If a culture is all sealed up and isolated, then the very possibility of such a translation and communication has to be ruled out.

So as Malinowski's case suggests, no culture is isolated enough to maintain any sort of purity or an uncontaminated essence that has remained static over time. The alternative to this idea of a static culture that Bhabha suggests is that of culture as an ever-unfolding process. Rather than being characterised by an unchangeable essence it is characterised by change, flux and transformation and most importantly by mixed-ness or interconnectedness which Bhabha terms hybridity.

So how does this notion of cultural hybridity impact our understanding of the postcolonial condition. Let us consider the British colonial subjugation of India for instance. If, as Bhabha suggests, cultures are dynamic processes characterised by change, flux and hybridity then the binary of a superior culture of the British colonisers and an inferior culture of the subjugated Indians break down. To talk about superior Britishness or inferior Indianness would mean talking about static, unchangeable cultural essences. But as we have seen in our discussion of cultural hybridity, culture is not about such fixed essences but is about ever changing and ever

transforming processes. However, the colonial discourse cannot admit this because the notion of a superior and exalted Britishness is at the core of its justification of colonialism as a civilising mission. The moment it is pointed out that there is no inherent essence of British culture the illusion of the civilising mission disappears and colonialism is revealed just as it is – an exploitation of other people's land and resources through brute force.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that much of what the coloniser projected as the superiority of their cultural identity, including the superiority that they ascribed to their white skin colour, emerged only gradually during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, during the eighteenth century the European colonisers had a much more fluid sense cultural identity and their approach to India was not marked by a belief in the binary of superior Britishness and inferior Indianness. As Ashis Nandy points out in his book *The Intimate Enemy*, prior to 1830s most British colonisers in India lived the life of Indians, often marrying Indian wives and even offering “pujas” to Indian gods and goddesses. So as you can see the British colonisers did not bring with them any readymade idea of an exalted Britishness. Such an illusion of a static cultural essence only developed later to provide a justification for the material exploitation that colonialism involved. Consequently, the idea of a static Indianness which is inferior to Britishness was also a construction of this same colonial process.

Now here I would like to introduce you to another very important concept in Bhabha which is referred to as mimicry. According to Bhabha the attempt to stabilise the cultural flux and hybridity that characterised the relation between the coloniser and the colonised and to structure it in terms of a superior Britishness and inferior Indianness binary led to a very interesting consequence. As I have said, the construction of the idea of a superior British or Western culture was crucial in defining colonisation as a civilising mission, and the logic of this civilising mission was to culturally educate the subjugated natives so that they could attain the same level of civilization as that of the colonisers. In other words, the civilising mission was

about making the colonised more and more like the coloniser. This project is most clearly stated in the 1835 Minutes of Macaulay where he states that the colonial government should spend on English education in India so as to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”.

The problem with this effort to create a class of colonised people who are exactly like the coloniser is that if the project were ever to succeed then it will erase the assumed cultural gap between the “superior” coloniser and the “inferior” colonised and thereby undermine the colonial rule itself. So according to Bhabha, though the coloniser wants the colonised to mimic him he never really expects the later to catch up. The mimic men of the colonial periphery are therefore, from the perspective of the coloniser, ever to remain people who are “not quite, not white”. But Bhabha points out that this very idea of a lesser human being mimicking the superior coloniser also turns the act into a sort of mockery of the superior coloniser’s culture. It is something like a jester or a clown picking up the manners of a suave gentleman and then repeating it after him in the most exaggerated and comic manner. This possibility of comically undermining the coloniser and his superior civilizational position through a partial repetition is what Bhabha refers to as the menace of mimicry.

But now let us again return to the notion of cultural hybridity and how it impacts the concept of a nation-state. I think it has already become obvious to you that a notion of culture as a changeable and dynamic process, characterised by hybridity of various elements, is fundamentally inimical to the idea of nationalism and the socio-political structure of a nation-state. This is because the idea of nation is ultimately defined by a cultural essence which is unique to the people who are resident within its political boundaries and which has remained unchanged for ages and will continue to remain so in the future. So with nation we are back again at the problematic idea of static cultural essences.

But if we are to do without static cultural essences and think through the lens of cultural hybridity then what kind of social organisation other than the nation-state can we conceive? Well the answer is perhaps best given by Salman Rushdie in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” where he urges us to look at ourselves not as grounded in any one particular national culture or another but as displaced beings who are living a life of an exile. The world around us is seeing an ever growing number of human displacement and human movement due to war, natural calamities, political persecutions, economic aspirations so the condition of being in exile is gradually becoming more and more common. But according to Rushdie even if we are not physically displaced, all of us are displaced in time from the glorious national past that we might want to go back to.

Such a mode of thinking might rob us of our national identities that we have been taught to cherish since childhood, but Rushdie argues that this is compensated by the fact that we then become an heir to all the cultures in the world and we can fashion our own cultural identity by mixing the disparate elements that the world as a whole offer to us. Our cultural identity then becomes a dynamic process of transformation and gives us far more agency to shape ourselves, compared to the straightjacket of national culture. So with Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity we gradually move from nationalism to the idea of cosmopolitanism. And we will discuss this in more details when we explore the poems of Derek Walcott in our next lecture. Thank you.