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Homi Bhabha's Minority Concerns in *The Location of Culture*

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ABSTRACT:

The world today is caught in communal fears and fires of fundamentalism, attacks of terror and incidents of communal rioting have become its regular feature. The political set-up in India and elsewhere in the world has failed to adequately address the social crises sparked off by histories of cultural difference. The very concept of ethnically or culturally homogeneous nation – states has taken the most disastrous forms including ethnic cleansing, forced population transfers and religion – based divisions and partitions of nations. Amidst all this what is more threatening is the demolition of minorities to second – class citizenship.

The contemporary nature of Homi K. Bhabha's critique of 'cultural hybridity' with inputs from Frantz Fanon's audacious discourse against racism offers cultural re- visioning that goes

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beyond the polarities of majority and minority, the center and the periphery. While safeguarding the minority's 'right to difference in equality' it focuses on articulation of cultural differences by initiating new signs of identity and sites of collaboration amongst diverse communities promoting social solidarity.

KEY WORDS: *Hybridity, minority cultures,*

Postcolonial literature arose both during and after the struggles of independence from colonial rule in many nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin also use the term postcolonial in a comprehensive sense, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day, on account of the continuity of preoccupations between the colonial and postcolonial periods (Habib 739). Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha are the major theorists of the postcolonial discourse who have addressed various forms of 'internal colonization' experienced by the minorities, the displaced, the marginalised and women through their theories.

Fanon's book *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) explores the psychological effects of racism and colonialism. His *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), translated as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) portrays the reality that a unified nation crumbles into pre-colonial antagonisms based on race and tribe after the decolonization period. Homi K. Bhabha's literary criticism too focuses on the undermining of binary oppositions and power relations which are prevalent in the postcolonial period too. Though the concept of "hybridity" is central to Bhabha's work but under the garb of it, one can trace Bhabha's concern for the minorities and the unrest that surrounds them. He is so inspired by Fanon that he talks at length about Fanon's crusade against racism and quotes him abundantly in his seminal text, *The Location of Culture* (1994).

Remembering Fanon is always a process of intense discovery for Bhabha, he feels that by revisiting memories of the history of race and racism Fanon has prompted both the master and slave towards an act of introspection: "It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create

the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (Bhabha 90). For Bhabha, the racist tendencies are quite palpable in the present times too and he amply discusses in the midst of his discourse the insecurities and uncertainties that hamper ‘the right to difference in equality’ of the Aboriginal people of Australia or the Muslims and other minorities in India and the rest of the world.

Bhabha has reconceived concepts of cultural hybridity and social liminality in his work, *The Location of Culture*. The richness of Bhabha’s work lies in the ease with which he supports and intersperses his critical discourse with anecdotes, instances and themes from the diverse world of literature, architecture and politics. Bhabha’s openness lies in challenging the notions of identity, culture and nation as coherent and unified entities, his world is more fluid and unsettling. The critique of hybridity incorporates a state of “in-betweenness,” as a person straddles between diverse cultures and communities. Bhabha’s literary criticism celebrates the re-creation of the self in the world of travel and rejoices in the resettlement of the borderline community of migrants.

Growing up in Bombay as a middle-class Parsi – a member of a small Zoroastrian – Persian minority in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim context, Bhabha himself had to experience the tensions between the different cultures that later became the narrative of his life, and the defining characteristic of his work. Educated both in India and at Oxford University, Bhabha cherished his everyday life that was lived in that rich cultural mix of languages and lifestyles. He was fascinated by ‘writers who were off center’ and themes and topics that were unread so far. Always curious to explore ‘the pertinence of what lay in an oblique or alien relation to the forces of centering’ (Bhabha x –xi), Bhabha clarifies his stand on the same in the Preface to his work:

I do not mean, in any sense to glorify margins and peripheries. However, I do want to make graphic what it means to survive, to produce, to labor and to create, within a world-system whose major economic impulses and cultural investments are pointed in a direction away from you, your country or your people. Such neglect can be a deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary, and it spurs you to resist the polarities of power and prejudice, to reach beyond and behind the invidious narratives of center and periphery. (Bhabha xi)

Bhabha shares in *The Location of Culture* about his admiration of the fiction of Indo-Caribbean writer, V.S. Naipaul as the characters of Naipaul's fiction are vernacular cosmopolitans who keep moving between cultural traditions, and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language (xiii). Bhabha is in favour of regional movements of people within nation-states and he criticizes the parochial approach of certain political groups like Shiv Sena who try to threaten the enlightened cosmopolitanism long associated with the cities like Mumbai: "In my home state of Maharashtra the Shiv Sena party turned against the Muslim minority as 'foreigners' in riots of the late 1980s, only after they had targeted 'economic refugees' from Southern India who came to seek jobs in Bombay a decade earlier" (xxii).

Bhabha believes that globalization must always begin at home. In today's times when the boundaries and territories of the global world are expanding, Bhabha feels that we as active citizens must vigilantly guard against the state's strategies of exclusion and discrimination in the midst of its promises of formal equality and procedural democracy (xxi). He quotes from a lecture on Human Rights delivered in 1945 by the great African-American vernacular cosmopolitan, W.E.B. Du Bois to suggest that the essence of the global predicament is to be found in 'the problem of minorities':

We must conceive of colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as . . . [part of] the local problems of London, Paris and New York. [Here in America,] in the organized and dominant states of the world, there are groups of people who occupy the *quasi-colonial status*: laborers who are settled in the slums of large cities; groups like Negroes in the United States who are segregated physically and discriminated spiritually in law and custom. . . All these people occupy what is really a [quasi] colonial status and make the kernel and substance of the problem of minorities. (Bhabha xviii)

Bhabha urges that the state must owe philosophical, social and political responsibility for conceiving minoritization as 'the quasi- colonial' condition (xviii). The homeless underclass who survive on the pavements and slums of great cities like Mumbai, Paris, London, Hong Kong are the responsibility of the state because globalization should first begin at home and then surpass national borders and boundaries. Bhabha quotes few lines from the poem *Under Dadar Bridge*

written by a Dalit poet named Prakash Jadhav to bring home the idea that the quest of this 'homeless underclass' stretches far beyond the polarities of cast, creed and religion:

Hey, Ma, tell me my religion. Who am I?
What am I?
You are not a Hindu or a Muslim!
You are an abandoned spark of the
World's lusty fires.
Religion? This is where I stuff religion! . . . (xxiv)

Hence, Bhabha proposes that we need to remap our territories to include new citizens or the citizens whose presence has been annihilated or marginalized. Bhabha takes this thesis a little further by discussing Article 27, one of the two main implementing conventions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which supports the rights of the minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language. Such rights on the one hand offer liberty to the minorities to freely practice their own culture as well as religion but on the other hand it thwarts the process of assimilation of the minorities into the mainstream. According to Bhabha despite all good intentions, such rights neglect the 'inter-cultural' assimilations and collaborations. Bhabha warns us that the very existence of unassimilated minorities would prove to be a threat to national unity. Therefore, he suggests that the provisions relating to the rights of the minorities should not be so applied as to encourage the emergence of new minority groups (xxiii). He quotes from Freud later in the text to validate his point: "it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness" (Bhabha 214). The theorist makes it clear that minoritarian affiliations or solidarities arise in response to the failures and limits of democratic representation.

For Bhabha, the solution lies in moving away from the singularities of class, race or gender and delving into the 'in-between spaces' between cultures that authorize cultural hybridities and serve as 'terrains for elaborating strategies of selfhood' (Bhabha 2). Bhabha further discusses the views of Renee Green, the African – American artist who uses architecture as a reference point to lay emphasis on the role of liminal or interstitial spaces that bridge

distances in a building. And similarly, such liminal spaces in a society offer sites of collaboration amongst communities. Let's see how Renee Green explains the same concept:

I used architecture literally as a reference, using the attic, the boiler room, and the stairwell to make associations between certain binary divisions such as higher and lower and heaven and hell. The stairwell became a liminal space, a pathway between the upper and lower areas, each of which was annotated with plaques referring to blackness and whiteness. (Bhabha 5)

As Renee Green's stairwell connotes a pathway between upper and lower, black and white, a kind of connective tissue that constructs the difference between polarities. Further the hither and thither of the stairwell prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities (5). Similarly Bhabha's critique of cultural hybridity constructs a pathway between racial polarities and questions binary divisions. But on the other hand if a firm boundary is maintained between races, religions and territories, the narcissistic wound is bound to remain unhealed and there will occur and reoccur cases and experiences of aggressivity being projected on the 'other'. Bhabha shares Fanon's analysis that everyday life exhibits a 'constellation of delirium' that affects the normal social relations of the subjects. The Negro, a slave to his inferiority and a White man with his overpowering sense of superiority behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation (62). The epistemic violence that exists between the two is detrimental to both. Bhabha states that Fanon may yearn for the total transformation of man and society, but he too speaks from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality (57). The distinctive force of Fanon's vision according to Bhabha comes from the tradition of the oppressed. Though, the colonial state of emergency deeply disturbed the social and psychic representation of the human subjects but the same 'state of emergency is also always a state of emergence' (59). Bhabha quotes from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to explain Fanon's hunger for humanism under whose influence all hostilities must break down:

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? . . . At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. (Bhabha 87)

Bhabha agrees with Du Bois that a minority discovers its political force and aesthetic form only when it gets an opportunity to articulate across and alongside communities of difference, in acts of affiliations and coalitions. Once again Bhabha quotes his mentor – theorist Fanon to repose his

belief that the space of cultural interstices introduces invention into existence and an agency of empowerment is truly located in ‘a world of reciprocal recognitions’ :

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here –and – now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my *negating activities* [Bhabha’s emphasis] insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world- that is world of reciprocal recognitions.

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.

In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom. (Qtd. in Bhabha 12).

Both Fanon and Bhabha recognize the crucial importance of the subordinated people to assert their indigenous cultural traditions but at the same time they are well aware of the dangers ‘of the fixity and fetishism of identities’ (13):

Even then, it’s still a struggle for power between various groups within ethnic groups about what’s being said and who’s saying what, who’s representing who? What is a community anyway? What is a black community? What is a Latino community? I have trouble with thinking of all these things as monolithic fixed categories. (Bhabha 4)

Bhabha explains that no doubt the conditions of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations is un-homely in the first glance but for the traveler of this zone the world first shrinks and then expands enormously taking him beyond himself in order to return in a spirit of revision and reconstruction. Hence, Bhabha’s theory of hybridity can contribute to practical social change ushering in an era where a circuit of signs, gestures and dialogues effort towards bridging the world and the home.

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