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Multiculturalism: The Post-Colonial Redefinition of Cultural Relations

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Abstract

In post-colonial times, the cultural relations among different communities have undergone certain changes. Theoretically, the colonial cultural categories such as majority/minority have ceased to exist in the post-colonial time. In the context of such change, the discourse of multiculturalism has been in much focus in the recent decades that probes into the relations between and among cultural groups within the geography of a modern nation-state. It has established itself as a theory in literary and cultural discourses related to the discussion and understanding of the multiethnic postcolonial societies. The theory has global relevance and it can be put to good use to understand the conflicts taking place in different places of the world.

This paper aims to discuss the emergence of the discourse of multiculturalism, its major concerns and the theoretical positions of the major philosophers and thinkers of multiculturalism.

Keywords: post-colonial, multiculturalism, politics of recognition, politics of difference, equality, cultural hegemony, marginalization.

Multiculturalism has emerged as a much needed and relevant discourse of critical enquiry in contemporary times. It calls for equal recognition and rights for the racially, culturally and ethnically different people who are always kept in the margin by the powerful cultural groups. According to Duncan Ivison, multiculturalism “refers to a broad array of theories, attitudes, beliefs, norms, practices and policies that seek to provide public recognition and support for accommodation of non-dominant ethnocultural groups” (2). The main tenets of multiculturalism are “ideas of tolerance and respect for difference” (Brooker 165). In the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the last quarter of it, multiculturalism gained much importance as a discourse of examining the various issues and problems of the multiethnic postcolonial societies.

The thinkers began postulating on the issues of difference emerging out of cultural heterogeneity of the people in any given society in the 1950s and 1960s. The cultural and ethnic minorities, particularly in or from the postcolonial countries wanted to make their presence known to the world as distinct cultural groups, different in many ways from the dominant and hegemonic cultures. Such desire to assert their difference inevitably entailed questions of belonging, citizenship, equality, national integrity etc. The issues of difference gained momentum with movements of lesser or greater magnitude depending on the perceived injustices

by the minorities in different countries. Such turn of events that began to thwart the interests of the dominant and imposing cultures led very soon to some historic announcements and policy framing in the 1970s and 1980s in nations like Canada, Australia, the U.S.A. and England to protect the previously ignored or suppressed interests of the minorities.

Multiculturalism emerged against the excesses of monoculturalism in the West. This movement became stronger after the decolonisation of several nation-states from European regimes and became an important part of the postcolonial discourse. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the developed countries became the site of unprecedented settlements of immigrant population from the colonised nations, the loopholes of monoculturalism became apparent as the hegemonic cultures were faced with the uneasy situation of hosting those whom they had previously suppressed. R. Radhakrishnan's observation on this situation in the contexts of Europe and America deserves mention here:

If colonialism in its heyday instituted a hegemonic awareness of Us-Them divide, in the postcolonial situation 'they' are 'here' with 'us' in the very heart of metropolitan contemporaneity: ... a variety of 'ethnic' and immigrant life-worlds within the heartland of Euro-America. In the context of the USA, whose internal history of racism and xenophobia is different from that of colonialism, the problem of immigration has to do with people of color: not just 'black' or 'native' Americans, but a whole continuum of alterities — yellow, brown, and so on. (32)

The Eurocentrism in terms of race, ethnicity and intellectual spheres of life began to buckle as the settler communities did not give up their original culture and thus, in a way, refused to

assimilate with the dominant's culture that professes a mono-world view to facilitate the superiority of the whites.

The monocultural ideology of melting pot that maintained the dominant's culture as the "high culture" (Goldberg 5) into which the ethnic and immigrant minority cultures were expected to melt down was rejected by the minorities. The other practices of monoculturalism like coercive assimilation and Anglo-conformity were also questioned due to their inherent lapses. With the passage of time and arousing of the consciousness of the long subjugated minority cultures, the hegemony of monoculturalism, under which "other cultures are suppressed or persuaded to wither away and the dominant culture eventually becomes the only culture" (Watson 3), gradually experienced its wane giving way to the new phenomenon of multiculturalism.

In the postcolonial set up of the 1950s and 1960s, all hegemonic and unaccommodative principles and practices of the Europeans began to be challenged for assuming that the "ethnics would surrender their various heritages to join the dominant culture" (Gupta 29). Minority cultures thought of such practices as tactics to render them culturally, politically and economically weak and marginalised. One of the most insulting as well as suppressing facts about monoculturalism finds expression in the words of David Theo Goldberg when he points out that monoculturalism "denies as culture — as embodying and reflecting worthy values — any expression that fails to fit its mold of 'high culture'" (5). The resilience of the minorities in the postcolonial situation after suffering the ignominy of being 'worthless' for considerable time compelled the social and political thinkers to direct their attention to the new and emerging situation where the monocultural assimilation faced rejection. This new post colonial development has been succinctly put by Ali Rattansi as:

‘Assimilation’ came to be regarded as difficult, if not impossible, on three grounds: supposed racial distinctiveness which, in practice, related to superficial physiological differences such as skin colour but which seemed to signify an insuperable biological and cultural barrier ... secondly, the obvious hostility exhibited by the host ‘white’ populations to the ‘coloureds’; and finally, the unwillingness of the migrant communities themselves to simply give up all facets of their cultural distinctiveness — for example, language and religion — and somehow become the same as the host populations in all cultural respects. (10)

The multicultural campaign was boosted by the countercultural movement that swept America and Europe in the 1960s in that it created a positive impetus in the minds of the people to welcome the idea of the plurality of individual or group identity, in other words the ideology of pluralism. However, pluralism too could not live up to the expectations created by the new social conditioning of the post colonial experience. Under the calls for equal accommodation, recognition and rights at an equal footing with the dominant cultural groups the atmosphere congenial for multiculturalism as a new social norm was created where the main engagement was the “renegotiation of socio-cultural space” (Goldberg 9).

Multicultural society may refer to, as C.W. Watson opines, “a state, a nation, a country, a region or even simply a bounded geographical location such as a town or a school — composed of people who belong to different cultures” (1-2). Here each culture is a distinct one and does not need to assimilate into the so called mainstream culture for its identity. All those who hail from those cultural and ethnic groups that are different from the culture of the dominants are treated as equals in the public space. They are offered equal accommodation, opportunity and recognition as distinct cultural entity having unique ethno-cultural practices that are worthy to be valued and

preserved. It is for such reasons that culture that offers the “lived structures of values, beliefs and obligations that we need” (Kelly 8) remains the primary subject of the multicultural enquiry. Besides culture, the multiculturalists are also interested in the idea of equality and its prevalence in a society as this is equality that testifies whether a multicultural society is really characterised by multiculturalism or not. Identity and recognition remain two other vital issues of serious concern for the multiculturalists.

Edward Said has opined in his *Reflections on Exile* that “No country on earth is made up of homogenous natives; each has its immigrants, its internal ‘Others’, and each society, very much like the world we live in, is a hybrid” (396). Said hinted at the cultural heterogeneity of the post colonial times and societies which has created the situations of cultural discriminations and non-recognition. Further, the “deterritorialisation of culture” (Papastergiadis 77) as a consequence of globalisation has aggravated the situations by heightening the sense of identity. The thinkers engaged in the discourse of multiculturalism have addressed one or the other of these issues of contemporary relevance. A brief discussion of their theoretical postulations will make it clear how culture and identity along with their kindred ideas have brought about a paradigm shift to cultural relations in the post-colonial multicultural discourse.

Will Kymlicka can be termed as the pioneer of the theory of multiculturalism. Societal-culture, that advocates for multinationalism, rights of the indigenous people and polyethnicity, is the base for his multiculturalism. He discusses two categories of cultural diversity resulting from the “national minorities” and “ethnic group” (10). In the context of contemporary cultural heterogeneity, Kymlicka writes in his *Multicultural Citizenship*, “One source of cultural diversity is the coexistence within a given state of more than one nation, where ‘nation’ means a historical community ... occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and culture.

A 'nation' in this sociological sense is closely related to the idea of a 'people' or a 'culture'" (11). Questioning the applicability of the word nation-state to the nations having multiple cultures Kymlicka observes that the national minorities of such nations "typically wish to maintain themselves as distinct societies alongside the majority culture ... to ensure their survival as distinct societies" (10). He is of the view that immigration results in the formation of an ethnic group. The settler ethnic groups also, as Kymlicka observes, "wish to integrate into the larger society, and to be accepted as full members of it. While they often seek greater recognition of their ethnic identity, their aim is ... to modify the institutions and laws of the mainstream society to make them more accommodating of cultural differences" (10-11).

Kymlicka remarks that any polyethnic country practising cultural pluralism can be described as multicultural when the citizens relate their belongingness to different cultures or immigrant communities and allowed to uphold their original cultures as "an important aspect of personal identity and political life" (18). As a liberal multiculturalist, he has argued for the rights of the minorities. His multiculturalism is mainly concerned with the compatible and peaceful coexistence of people belonging to different cultures where no culture intrudes into another culture. The state, in his view, has to play its role for promoting individual autonomy and creating a suitable environment where culture, particularly that of the minorities, can survive and flourish. He is against the role of the state that "promotes certain cultural identities, and thereby disadvantages others" (108). He is mainly concerned with societal culture which "provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres" (76). Such societal culture in his opinion can stand through the challenges of the forces that aim at homogenising or assimilating all cultures into one mainstream culture.

Charles Taylor, another multicultural critic, lays emphasis on the centrality of recognition in the discourse of identity. He observes, “the demand (for recognition) comes to the fore in a number of ways in today’s politics, on behalf of minority or ‘subaltern’ groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of ‘multiculturalism’” (25). Recognition is the most important element for the formation of one’s identity. For Taylor, identity is “a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as human beings” (25). It is determined by recognition, nonrecognition or misrecognition. Taylor writes in this context:

identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (25)

Taylor has great faith on democracy and holds that equal recognition of people of different cultures and equal dignity of all human beings have been made possible by modern democracy as, “Democracy has ushered in a politics of equal recognition, which has taken various forms over the years, and has now returned in the form of demands for the equal status of cultures and of genders” (27). For him, identity and recognition are related as human identity, in the real sense of the word, is dialogical in nature. According to him, we human beings define our “identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (32-33).

The rejection, in contemporary times, of the earlier hierarchical system of social positions to define people's honour that established social inequalities, has led to the idea of equal dignity of all human beings and the emergence of the modern notion of identity. In Taylor's opinion, the modern concept of identity has led to the emergence of a politics of difference that acknowledges the distinct nature of the individual or the cultural groups instead of compelling the less powerful cultures to forget their distinctiveness and merge with the majority. Taylor observes:

Everyone should be recognized for his or her unique identity. But recognition here means something else ... with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. (38)

For Taylor, the politics of recognition calls for the acceptance of difference in an individual or cultural group as it is this recognition of difference that allows one to define one's identity. Taylor also talks about multicultural curricula of educational institutes by observing that demands are made "to alter, enlarge, or scrap the 'canon' of accredited authors on the grounds that the one presently favored consists almost entirely of 'dead white males.' A greater place ought to be made for women, and for people of non-European races and cultures" (65). A curriculum of education designed on such logics, he believes, would raise doubts about the image of inferiority imposed by the powerful on the suppressed people and help in according proper recognition to and inclusion of the previously excluded.

Bhikhu Parekh, one of the leading contemporary multiculturalist thinkers, is of the opinion that multiculturalism is "about cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences" (3).

Differentiating between a multicultural and a multiculturalist society, Parekh observes that any society having two or more cultural groups is a multicultural one, but that society becomes multiculturalist only when all the cultures within it are recognised and allowed to flourish. To use his own words in this context, “the term ‘multicultural’ refers to the fact of cultural diversity, the term ‘multiculturalism’ to a normative response to that fact” (6). In his definition, multiculturalism is “about the proper terms of relationship between different cultural communities” (13). He emphasizes a better understanding of the nature and subtlety of the violence along with the cultural oppression and deprivation of people and its grievous results.

Emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity for a healthy society and culture in everybody’s life, Parekh writes, “human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they are born into, raised in and deeply shaped by their cultural communities” (120). According to him, there exists a dialectical relationship between human nature and human culture that is instrumental in the creation of cultural diversity which needs proper recognition and accommodation to be extended by everyone living in a society. Parekh observes in this context:

As thinking beings who seek to make sense of themselves and the world, humans create a system of meaning and significance or culture and organize their lives in terms of it. And since they ... think and dream differently, causes the capacities for creativity and imagination and so on, the cultures they create are inescapably diverse in nature. Far from being an aberration or a source of puzzle, cultural diversity is an integral feature of human existence. (126)

No cultural community exists in isolation, rather the members of the different cultural communities live their cultural life interacting with and influenced by the members of other

cultures. Parekh, for this reason holds that, “almost all cultures are multiculturally constituted” (163). A culture deserves to be respected and recognised for giving “stability and meaning to human life” and holding “its members together as a community, and displaying “creative energy” (Parekh 176-77). The respect for a culture and its followers comes from the fact that “human beings should be free to decide how to live, that their culture is bound up with their history and identity, that it means so much to them Every community has as good a right to its culture as any other, and there is no basis for inequality” (Parekh 176). The ideas of justice to dispel inequality, common belonging and the role of the state in ensuring these among the people are also dwelt upon by Parekh. Like Taylor, Parekh also talks of multicultural education in order to create an awareness about the worth, historic importance and equality of other cultures.

The idea of toleration is the first principle of multiculturalism for Chandran Kukathas, an important figure in the discourse of multiculturalism and it precedes other logics of multiculturalism like equal rights, recognition etc. In the essay, “Liberalism and Multiculturalism: The Politics of Indifference”, he expresses the view that in “modern societies ... cultural diversity poses a challenge not only to the makers of government policy, but also to the philosopher looking to understand how it might be possible — in principle — for people of different ways to live together” (686). This challenge can be traced to the politics of recognition in that each group demands “recognition of their distinct identities as members of particular cultural communities within society” (Kukathas 686). The situation worsens when the society has to face with a tussle between the recognition of the rights of its individuals and those of the cultural communities. Kukathas further opines that the “persistence” and “ferocity” of the claims for recognition calls for an answer that must be a “more complex, and nuanced, answer ... to the

problem posed by the politics of recognition; and that answer must acknowledge the need for...attitudes for openness and tolerance” (687).

The liberal multiculturalism of Kukathas, as he says, is about “upholding the framework of law within which individuals and groups can function peacefully” (691) that enables “the members of society ... to pursue their various ends”, and where “the polity is able to accommodate all peacefully” (694). The members of such a society have the privilege to “associate or dissociate” (697) from others. From the arguments offered by Kukathas, it is apparent that he favours a society and cultures where majority and minority do not exist, where there is plurality of cultures and where people of different cultures live on mutual understanding and toleration.

The politics of difference and justice finds a strong advocate in Iris Marion Young. She is concerned with the issues of justice, all inclusiveness, equality among communities, existence of difference among social groups, and oppression. She objects to the traditional theory of justice and believes that any “conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression” as it “exhibits the importance of social group differences in structuring social relations and oppression” (3). Pointing to the fact that in society, “some groups are privileged while others are oppressed” (3), Young opines that to mitigate oppression the social justice system must recognise the presence of social differences among different cultures. Nancy Fraser has also argued for the recognition of the differences. But she does not confine it to cultural difference only and extends the idea of justice to include economic differences too as these injustices are “two broadly conceived, analytically distinct understandings of justice” (21). She argues for a simultaneous rectification of both in that they are interrelated and vital sources of subordination.

Of late the cultural feminists have come up with the issues of gender relations in multiculturalism. Susan Moller Okin is one of the most vocal critics in this debate of whether multiculturalism is bad for women. The lack of a specific theory to represent the position women, especially coloured ones within cultural groups, particularly minority cultures leads her to question: “what should be done when the claims of minority culture or religion clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states?” (9). Okin is critical of most of the cultures as gendered where women are not allowed a proper space, where differences exist in terms of freedom, power and authority between the sexes. She critiques the cultural bias in favour of men who are discursively positioned “to determine and articulate the group’s beliefs, practices and interests” which in turn “limit the capacities of women and girls of that culture to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can” (12). Okin is also critical of the traditions like clitoridectomy, polygamy, child marriage etc. in that these are meant to restrict women and to make them “servile to men’s desires and interests” (Okin 16).

The discussion in the foregoing paragraphs points to the fact that multiculturalism as a post-colonial discourse has redefined the cultural relations among different cultural groups. It not only exposes but also dismantles the colonial notions of majority/minority, dominant/dominated and other such categories of oppression. Minority cultures have been restored to their rightful stature as worthy subjects of knowledge as a consequence of the multicultural arguments. As a theory, it examines cultural diversity, communal harmony, identity, recognition, mutual concern, tolerance and peaceful coexistence of several cultures and subcultures within a specific geographical location. It promotes cultural heterogeneity, the value of equality and respects minority cultures that have been at the periphery for several centuries. Multiculturalism

vehemently opposes cultural imperialism and treats all cultures at par and advocates for the protection and maintenance of their respective uniqueness. It probes whether the different communities and cultural groups living together within the same geographical space treat each other at equal terms.

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