

A Nation Without a Subject: Politics of Multiculturalism in the U.S.

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The politics of localization and globalisation is one of the manifestations of contemporary liberalization with the other two processes of democratisation and decolonisation. Globalisation in the United States has been particularly reflected in what Frederic Jameson has stated as “penetrating and colonizing [the] — pre-capitalist enclaves of nature and the unconscious”. Penetration of this kind in the guise of liberal post colonialism has been able to make interventions into the ‘official Occidentalism’ and ‘anti – occidental currents of the non-western countries’. (Chow 1995). Therefore cultural globalisation by way of McDonaldisation, Western theory or popular culture has been the strategy of the United States to establish its economic hegemony. Globalisation is in the real sense, globalisation of the American Imagination and forcible incorporation of peoples, locales, ideas and practices. Transnationalism, post-nationalism and multiculturalism are genres of the narrative of the free floating capital which Jameson has phrased as the ‘cultural logic of Late Capitalism’. (Jameson 1991). This logic of the capital produces a simultaneous sense of belonging to the place, culture and language- a localisation and a sense of multiplicity – a global consumer identity. The contradiction between a global consumer identity and a local ethnic citizenship expressed by the term glocalisation, which is global-local and local-global, has Americanised the globe but has produced a de-Americanisation of America. The commodification of all areas of experience on the one hand and the problematique of identity construction or the *epistemic status of cultural identity* (Mohanty 2001) on the other, has created a delinking of ones experience and ones identity. Identities can be both *real* and *constructed*. (Moya et al 2001). But the problem before a cultural critic is, how can identities be politically and epistemically significant on the one hand and variable, nonessential and radically historical on the other? The issue of cultural essentialism brings one to examine the idea of a nation or something distinctively ‘American’. One finds that there isn’t anything which one could label as American because Americanisation of the globe has de-americanized America. Therefore America is conspicuous of the absence of a national identity or cultural coherence. There are a myriad mixed blood, transnational subjects in America, dragged into the geographical space of both the Americas historically through diaspora, forced inclusion etc. or who have floated with the global capital in search of greener pastures but there is no American subject of the

American nation particularly as a predicament of Americanisation of the globe. One needs to address the question as to how a nation or its subjects can be identified if it increasingly defines itself in global terms.

American Studies, as Hillis Miller suspects was one of the attempts to create the unified national culture, which was never there. For the first generation of American studies scholars there was indeed something 'American' genuinely, that which is non-European. But American studies by shifting its focus towards history, culture, society and institutions landed itself in a permanent theoretical and methodological challenge as to how to define American culture specifically. Gunter Lenz has stated that the redefinition of "America" as it was generated by American Studies resulted in an attempt "to rewrite the scholar and the citizen in a truly democratic society".(Lenz 2001). Thus instead of ushering in a concept of unified culture, American studies moved in the direction of pluralization of cultural world. French theories may have sharpened the tools of the process but its device comes from the radical heritage of the American studies movement. It was hence contended that there were many literatures in the U.S. and not a American literature and also, that there was so much cultural diversity that the claim not only of a coherent national culture but also of one national literature appeared to the unfounded. Accordingly models of a post national American studies that stress comparative American culture within the multi-culture of the United States was created by way of situating 'domestic multi-culturalism' within international, trans-national and potentially post-national contexts. Michael Kammen has remarked that 'the creation of compiled identities has been a highly significant aspect of Americanisation as a social process'. (Kammen 1998). Subjects of America are subjects on the borderline - formed by overlapping or conflicting cultures or discourses. Or subjects who are part of trans-national ideas or areas such as the Caribbean, the American South, the American and Canadian West, Latin America or Africa —particularly subjects of diaspora where culture have clashed and interacted in as a shared or antagonistic history. Thus the notion of 'nation' in the context of America is diffused in the network of global or trans-national interrelatedness.

One wonders as to whether the subject of America can be termed as postcolonial or what Bhaba calls- a part of a growing trans-national culture. Are the subjects, as diasporic or subaltern, victims of interior colonialism or imperialism? Or are they participants in the process of Americanisation of the globe? These questions raise a critique of the official policies of the United States, particularly multiculturalism on the one hand and the cultural and political turn of events after September 11, 2001.

In the post September 11, 2001 scenario, there has been a shift of imagination from America as a nation to America on the threat – to a perceived danger from unidentifiable

sources of subversion and terror. Unlike the Vietnam fiasco, where the aggressiveness of America and the possibility of a defeat were in question, there is no immediate self-criticism of America, as it is in the receiving end. The imagination is unidirectional that is to locate 'who is the enemy?' – both within and without. Narrative accounts, intelligence reports and a host of suspects dominate the flow of the unidirectional imagination, especially the contours around 'suspects', conspiracies, terror plots and moves to encounter and counter all such strategies of the enemy. What makes representation possible in such a war-war game played at the global level is not the signified account of terror but the politics of signification. The politics of signification lies in presenting America as the global epicentre of financial and technological revolutions. There it must also present itself as the epitome of freedom and security to others. As seen by others in the self-representation, the agency of progress must take precedence over the image of being a superpower. Again, America must sufficiently balance acts of remoting itself by acts of charity and well being of others. This side of the politics draws reckoning. Given the bullying, mercenary and hegemonic overtones of such dual strategies of self-promotion and charity, what was missing was a global enemy. Within the space of self-realization of America, the absence of an enemy has been casting shadows on acts of benevolence. September 11, 2001 has brought in the double picture of an external aggression and a globally legitimate counter-terrorist role for America, so that anyone who is not in the side of America is in the side of terrorism. Although it was not America versus rest of the world, the rest of the world remained as the rest in the America versus terror. However, the vacuum resulting out of such a self-presentation of America as the protagonist of the *clash of civilizations*, as it was termed had its global consequences. America's principal strategy was to negotiate its own acts of benevolence and retribution with the rest of the world. But the enemy is so dispersed both within and without, that the campaign against terror could not be materially substantiated, and hence there was a loss of credibility of this campaign. It may be mentioned in this context that Edward Said has raised similar questions about the role of the United States in West Asia and the burden that a history of suffering has placed on the Palestinians. (Said 2001).

The current question particularly post 9/11 is, 'who is a American'? As mentioned earlier, the issue of the location of the self, community, culture and other specific markers of identity has been rendered conflictual by globalisation. Multiculturalism, as a policy of the United States could not bridge the gap between 'filiation' and 'affiliation' in this situation of flux, because multiculturalism which had been brought into cultural discourse to understand the various constructions of cultural identity, recognised cultural diversity as a permanent aspect of political societies. How does a community emerge? How do the grand narratives of cultural

essentialism erase the small narratives of immigrant cultures or national minorities? Who decides as to what is inside and what is outside a cultural or political boundary. These questions inevitably generate a critique of multiculturalism and its theories.

According to Peter J. Taylor (Taylor 1999) *American* is the name given to a process of emulation and adaptation under the condition of a consumer modernity, which manifests itself in the spread of mass production, corruption and mediation. According to him 'capacious Americanization' by way of 'high hegemony' of the United States have been experienced between 1945 and 1971 which was replaced by 'resonant Americanization' in the 1970s. This second phase of Americanization describes an ideological context for transmission of American culture 'here, there and everywhere'. In the current post-national paradigms post 1990s, the globalization debate has challenged the cultural imperialism of the United States. The crisis of national identity amidst the flux of the partial and imaginative order of global cultural economy, cultural criticism has begun to rethink a coherent American identity. Critics like Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1996) have observed that a trans-national and unceasingly deterritorialized global formation has seen a political, economic and conceptual making of national identity. Mass media domination based on ideological imperialism is tilting towards information market dominance. September 11th 2001 has been a moment of rethinking by the United States that 'You don't need that much power to produce far reaching changes in a society even as powerful America' (Mehta, 2003). Many Americans have since then been trying to reinvent the American myth of invincibility. But invincibility in even the mightiest empire itself a myth. The recent war with Iraq would perhaps invite a greater coalition to challenge American hegemony. The post September 11th symptom has specifically been the crisis of America's identity as a nation. Arundhati Roy (Roy 2001) had stated "America is at war against people it does not know" in creating the 'International Coalition against Terror' America would have to legitimise its concern for justice and freedom by manufacturing an imaginary enemy. The South Asians in the United States were the easy targets for America to exercise its half knowledge of self-identity, who suffered violation of civil liberty. Any south Asian for example an Indian Sikh with beard was a ghost of Osama. Ms. Roy cites that on September 20th the FBI said that there was doubt about the identity of the high-jackers. On the same day President Bush declared "we exactly know who these people are..." Thus was unleashed the 'clash of civilization' discourse with the massacre of innocent people to ironically justify the equivocating distinction between civilization and savagery.

Therefore the rhetoric of Western representation of the 'orient' has always been explicitly obtrusive, bordering an assassination of historic struggles and identities. It has taken the nature

of de-historicization of the Orient as if a descriptive account of myriad centres of the cultural orient is never consistent; rather the history of the Orient is seen in the logic that is derived from rise and fall of structures of powers in the West. If one considers this as an inherent epistemic bias of Western Rationality that includes science and history, the primary question before a postcolonial critic is how a non-western authorial position i.e. the agency of the writer is bound by the discursive strategies of representation of the self/other. Derrida raised this question in the form of determining not the agency of the author as a mere ideological function of Language and the text, but in terms of whether there could be the role of a discursive author, meaning thereby a legacy of writing in terms of performing through the differential registers of language and self-identity. Even if one assumes that the discursive strategy constitutes the self, is it in the language in which one speaks or knows oneself? Therefore it is important to locate how the author is situated in the text. Authors of South-Asian origin like the Trini-Indian V.S. Naipaul, now British writer and Nobel Laureate have a tendency to draw equivalence between the civilizational ruins of the East and the West as an attempt to reverse the Orientalist pre-occupations of the West. Other authors and intellectuals like Etzioni, who is based in the United States and who is also a Nobel Laureate have been quite explicit in their indictment of the mainstream American policies particularly after 9/11. There seems to be an element of atrocity in mainstream American writing. Jeff Mc Kenna has commented-"Is there something special about American writing? Yes. Because...we are Americans, we can do whatever, and it shows in our writing. This country, the one thing that all American writers have in common, was cast from the blood of millions of people, American Indian, slaves from Africa, Irish, Mexicans, etc. These people were used, like so much scrap, to build the foundations that connected the country...All American authors, no matter who or what they are has these atrocities in them". Again Langston Hughes was known as the "black poet laureate" because he depicted the darker social realities of American life which appropriated the symbols associated with 'white male ideal' of the American Dream. Contemporary authors in multicultural America are significant, not for their euphoric description of the American dream like Scott Fitzgerald or the deep love and pride of the country like Walt Whitman. They are significant for showing as Jennifer Weir states - "what is wrong with America" or for accurately portraying "the feeling in this country of what it is like not to feel connected to anyone else". In this context it might be mentioned that Socialist leaders like Michael Harrington had examined the condition of subjects who live in relative deprivation 'in the shadow of the American Dream'. The millions who are 'different' in the United States, he wrote tend to become increasingly invisible." Here is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see

them.” (Harrington, 1962). Multiculturalism in the United States while recognizing the *different others*, fix them as *others*. Therefore otherization remains a permanent phenomenon in the ‘melting pot’ or ‘salad bowl’ of America.

A growing body of contemporary diasporic literatures in the U.S. have expressed the anxiety of remaining an *other*. This anxiety has sometimes resulted in imagining real or imaginary homelands. Sometimes it has been expressed by an urgency to bridge the gap between one's experience and one's identity by dragging one's mind down memory lane to personal or memories of one's own communitarian practices. Victor Rangel-Ribeiro's (Ribeiro, 2003) *Loving Ayesha and Other Stories* is one such text which brings together long lost memories at a moment of racial and emotional alienation in the United States. In the last story entitled “Loving Ayesha” the author takes a mental flight to his native place and to his old love Ayesha, after having passed decades in the U.S. and having “raised a loving family, placed two continents and vast oceans between us and still you (Ayesha) are back. And I ask again why?”. Similarly Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores crossroad moments in the life of characters who journey from California to Calcutta to the crowded streets of Calcutta and the muddy ponds, to the cultural ambiguity of participation in rituals like caricatures and the bedtime stories of Didima in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Cultural ambiguity sometimes leads to fragmentary perception of reality, building walls of angst and fury around the self. Rushdie states in his novel *Fury*, “Violent action is unclear to most of those who get caught up in it. Experience is fragmentary; cause and effect, why and how are torn apart. Only sequence exists. First this, then that. And afterward, for those who survive, a lifetime of trying to understand.” Post 9/11 is such an experience for such others in and outside the United States who will take a lifetime to understand the logic and rhetoric of violence.

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