

Multiculturalism: The Other Subject or Subjects Otherwise

—*Sukalpa Bhattacharjee*

The politics of localisation and globalisation is central to the emergence of a large number of cultures across the globe. There always exists a conflict between one's sense of belonging to a place, culture, and language—an affiliation and the simultaneous sense of multiplicity and specificity produced by globalisation. The post-colonial and the post-modern sensibilities, with the lingering and pervasive hegemony of Western theories on them have been reduced to a kind of cultural essentialism. Therefore, the issue of the location of the self, community, culture and other specific markers of identity within the heterogeneity of globalisation has still remained unaddressed. Multiculturalism, which had been brought into cultural discourse to understand the various construction of cultural identity, recognised cultural diversity as a permanent aspect of political societies. As a result, multiculturalism has not succeeded in projecting the ongoing processes of social construction of collective identities and therefore, has not been able to explain the politics of the drawing of real and imaginary boundaries. 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? (Eisenstadt and Giesen 72-192). These questions inevitably generate a critique of multiculturalism and its theories.

Multiculturalism in a broader sense generally refers to the doctrine that "cultural diversity should be recognised as a permanent and valuable part of political societies" (Templeman 17). The different theories of multiculturalism virtually work out the different possibilities of this doctrine to investigate the definition of cultural identity. Eisenstadt and Giesen (Templeman 17) have offered two typological assumptions—the first is that collective identities are a product of the ongoing process of social constructions. This assumption rests on the politics of inclusion and exclusion. The second assumption is that the definition of collective identity can be constructed in three ideal modes, specifying the nature of collectivity, membership and the relationship between members and non-members. The first type of collective identity known as *primordiality* leaves the other as 'unalterably different' (Žizek). Charles Taylor's work is an example of this approach and states the necessity of cultural communities to have protection of their own identities (Taylor). The second type is the 'civic construction' of cultural community, which sees the emergence of a community as a historically developed construct. The third mode of construction of collective identity is the *universal* mode which is based on transcendental belief that communitarian bond is sacred.

One can see that the determination of difference, inclusion and exclusion in these theories of multiculturalism is vague because there are communities which inhabit the same geographical locations through migrations to other countries. This also includes professionals who go overseas—ethnic, religious and electronic communities. Bhikhu Parekh stresses the need for communication across boundaries which is the most important form of cultural recognition. As a result of the histories of diasporas, partition, exile and major displacement, an individual or a community lives simultaneously in several

of these historical and cultural *worlds* and therefore a 'civic friendship' across borders entails a dialogic encounter between communities. A *universalist* multiculturalist position states that intercultural communication involves the defending of one's principles towards others. Kymlicka argues that the protection of minorities in liberal societies is a necessary condition of existence for the autonomy of their individual members—a view that Parekh and Taylor also share. Throughout these processes, the other is not recognised as an equal moral partner and therefore a form of multiculturalism that combines respect for different cultures in the principles of a liberal society, remains a far cry. In this context it may be mentioned that panethnicity contrary to multiculturalism comes closer to making an adjustment of the local and the global within a larger world of civic friendship. Panethnicity assumes a conglomerating form with chunks of identities coming together in a contingent fashion. Further, it acts as a search for common grounds for living together between diasporical, racial and other identities. What looms large through such a construction is the possibility of a moment of differences and alterity that gives it a dynamic and changing character beyond the logic of multiculturalism. Panethnicity articulates sameness and difference in a language that preserves the sense for itself. This is why narratives of culture(s) and literature(s) in the contemporary world is laying more emphasis on ethnicity than on nationality (Chow 1990), to make a distinction between 'ethnic immigrants,' 'national minorities' and incorporated cultures (Chow 1998:226-28).

One significant aspect of the politics of multiculturalism is "the facade of welcoming non-Western others into putatively interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchange, a continual tendency to stigmatise and ghettoise non-Western cultures precisely by way of ethnic, national labels" (Ibid). Authors who write about the cultural specificities of the first world use generic terms like 'Gender' or 'Development' because it is considered to be an intellectual or theoretical contribution. But authors who deal with non-Western (specific) cultures are

required to situate their work in 'geopolitical realism' using terms like 'Indian women' and 'Japanese culture'. Therefore generic terms like 'World Literature' or 'Gender Development' only create cultural ghettos and relegate minor cultures. This is why critics like Rey Chow have directed their attention to Orientalism which still lives in the west and have therefore reformulated their enquiry as *What happens when multiculturalism travels non-west? They further ask—if Western institutions are the culprit for not bringing about true multiculturalism, will we solve the problem by allowing the marginalised to speak for themselves?* In his attempt to read the impulse behind American multiculturalism K. Anthony Appiah states that multiculturalism "is symptomatic of increasing insecurity about self-identity, an anxiety over the submergence of difference in sameness" (32).

Cultural globalisation is not only taking place at the popular level in 'McDonaldisation' or 'Pepsi culture' it can be seen among non-Western critics and artists who have fallen prey to Anglo-European theory. Globalisation with the other two historical processes of democratisation and decolonisation is shaping the course of studying literature(s) and culture(s), (Pratt 1995: 59) manifesting itself in the trends of critical theory. Western critical theory in the guise of a liberal postcolonialism has been able to make interventions into the 'Official Occidentalism' and 'anti-Occidental' currents of non-Western countries (Chow).

In Third World countries such as India, post-colonialism also critiques the complicity between nationalism and colonial discourse. Multiculturalism appeals as a kind of cultural globalisation to non-Western countries with its apparent liberal democratic contents. On the surface, multiculturalism seems to have the same agenda as comparative literature in the critique of Eurocentrism and defence of cultures which are traditionally marginalised. Therefore, multiculturalism has become an obsession with literary authors and critics who claim to 'Correct Eurocentrism.' But actually without making a

critique of Orientalism in the West and its tendencies to underscore non-Western studies in the West, 'Multiculturalism' helps to reinstate rather than dismantle Eurocentrism (Chow 1995: 108-111).

Therefore, multiculturalism with its agenda of exclusion has denied a cultural pluralism, because 'difference as exclusion actually denies difference'. Difference could not be constructed more fluidly and relationally as a product of social processes. And so mutual recognition in the Taylorian sense or 'fusion of horizons' in the Gadamarian lines have not been able to be a part of multicultural politics, because 'fusion of horizons' "operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts." (Gadamer). The evolution of a democratic multiculturalism requires the assignment of transitive, transformatory and emancipatory meaning to cultural differences, rather than confining it to "exclusionary" mode.

The subjects of multicultural politics are those who bear the conflict between the 'autonomous ego' and 'situated human being' or between the "unencumbered self" and the historically and culturally contextualised self, to use Michael Sandel's phrase. The radical multiculturalists have appropriated the exclusionary politics of Western multiculturalism by pointing out that reality is socially constructed by the powerful, in order to perpetuate their own hegemony. Thus multiculturalism cannot liberate oppressed *classes*—both in the sense of economic classes and the classroom as a space for pedagogical practices. Bell Hooks has recounted that performances of the text in the classroom that involves the use of personal experience with the issues under textual discussion. Classroom becomes a common space in this process, through a solidarity of shared experiences, through an examination of how dominant system positions individual subjects. Literary and pedagogical practices should therefore guard tendencies towards "universal humanism" while connecting common historical experiences, erotic dreams,

family struggle and artistic longings in shaping the context of an agent's choices.

Having discussed certain aspects of multicultural politics one needs to address the question as to who or what is the subject of multiculturalism? How do they articulate? Subjects of mixed blood origin, migrancy, diasporas, exile, immigration, transplantation and those who carry its burdens are some of the sub-jects and subjects of multicultural politics. In multicultural America, Asian-Americans have tried to maintain individual self definitions, challenging controlling images of the West and replacing them with ethno-cultural stereotypes. The Civil Rights and Ethnic Studies movements of the late sixties have also inspired other ethnic minorities in the United States who shared solidarity with the blacks. But such attempt for self-definition has created a strange cultural ambiguity.

A modern Asian subject often asks herself whether it is possible to go back to one's own cultural roots without the mediation of an alien culture. Same is the case with Native American, Jewish-American and other mixed blood subjects of the United States. Stanley Elkin's *The Rabbi of Lud* (Elkin) represents the dilemma of a Jewish-American protagonist in the construction of (him) self. Each time an attempt is made to write (in the Derridean sense) of 'self by fusing the Yiddish and the American identity together, it results into erasure. Similarly, Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows* (Allen) probes the dilemma of the position of a mixed blood gendered identity in ascertaining her identity in a multi-ethnic, racist and multicultural America. A reading of the texts projects the construction of identity as difference and difference as exclusion.

As mentioned earlier, post-colonial and post-modern theorisations of native and alien culture(s) have left a gap in re-presentation. Apart from a panethnic mode of representation which offers an alter/native to multiculturalism (but which has its own problems), a fourth world perspective of reading and

interpretation offers a liberating space (Bhattacharjee 2000). An 'imagined community' not bound by colour, race, gender and class, but crucially by a shared struggle against all pervasive and systemic forms of domination is what constitutes the liberating spirit of a panethnic and fourth world perspective. A desire for a panethnic bonding has been expressed in Wayne Chang's commercial film: *Chan is Missing* (1981). Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1943 / 1973) challenges the myth of the United States as a land of opportunities. John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) is a strong indictment of racist hysteria. Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is a critique of the male / white sexism of the United States.

Thus, there has been a growing body of literature(s), articulating the protest against the politics of exclusion. The influence of multiculturalism is significant as it travels non-West into third world countries like India. The Indian society in its official declaration of 'secular' and 'democratic ideals' apparently cherishes the values of democratic multiculturalism. But the social reality of the Indian society is that it is highly stratified and hierarchical, "riddled with notions and levels of high and low" (Nayak). The natives, aborigines and tribes who are known as 'adivasis' are the original inhabitants of India but they are the ones pushed to social and economic margins (Spivak 1993). Mahasweta Devi mentions in the 'Preface' to *Imaginary Maps* as to how the tribals never became the part of the process of decolonisation of India although they paid the highest price for it. The 'pariahs' are another category of exploited people in the Indian social and economic formations.

The subject of exclusion in the Indian multicultural scene have also appropriated the theoretical essentialism of the West by offering an alter/native mode of narrativization and representation. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* is a narrative of a gendered pariah told over ten years to Josiane and Jean Luc Racine. This moment of encounter between these two sets of subjects or the researchers and the exploited narrators is

what Spivak would designate as a moment of 'ethical singularity' (Spivak 1993), where the narrating subjects is in control of the narrative. The proof of the authority of the narrator is that the researchers allow equal authorship of the text to the narrator. Viramma's articulation of her story of exploitation transforms the narrow idea of a 'dalit text' to the 'text of dalit' (Racine) which is a generic transformation. Such a text while retaining the authenticity of a personal narrative suggests a critique of multicultural politics and the arbitrary demarcation of the world. (The tripartite division of the world is based on the logic of the multinational capital.)

Therefore, transcending the limits posed by exclusivist, national and global policies like multiculturalism, involves what Barthes would describe as 'going beyond the sentence', which is one of the ways of resisting cultural and political closure. Several critics like Barthes have tried to understand 'closure' as an agency and that is why a non-dialectical form of closure is the problematic issue for the post-modern agent without a cause. The process of reinscription and negotiation takes on a new meaning between the subjective and inter-subjective. This new dimension in literary and cultural representation emerges as a process of agency both as a historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse. The emergence of such a process of urgency allows the articulation of subject of exclusion, whose discourses emerge as relocation and reinscription. The possibilities of a 'fusion of horizons' and a dialogic encounter lies in such relocation and reinscription beyond the politics of multiculturalism and the cultural essentialism of Western theoretical productions.

REFERENCES

- Allen, Paula Gunn. 1983. *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Press.
- Appiah, K. Anthony. 1997. "The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding," *New York Review of Books*, 9, 32.

- Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. R. Miller (trans) New York: Hill.
- Bhattacharjee, Sukalpa. 2000. "Multiculturalism: A Panethnic Asian-American Perspective" in Anil Raina, et. al eds. *Cross-Cultural Transactions in the Multiethnic Literatures of the U.S.* New Delhi: Prestige Books.
- Chow, Rey. 1990. "The Politics and Pedagogy of Asian Literatures in American Universities," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. No. 23.
- _____. 1995. "In the Name of Comparative Literature" in Bernheimer Charles, ed. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Baltimore: Md: John Hopkins Press. pp. 108-111.
- _____. 1998. "Introduction: On Chineseness as a theoretical problem." *boundary* 225; 3.
- Elkin, Stanley. 1987. *The Rabbi of Lud*. New York: Charles Scribner.
- Eisenstadt, S.N. and Giesen. B. 1995. "The construction of collective identity". *Archives of European Sociology*. XXXVI, pp. 72 - 192.
- Gadamer, Hans Georg. 1983. *Heideggers Wege: Studien Zum Spatwerk* quoted in Said's *Beyond Orientalism*.
- Kymlicka, Will. 1995. *Multicultural Citizenship : A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Nayak, Radhakant. 1997. (ed). *The Fourth World: Appraisal and Aspiration*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Parekh, B. 1994. "Discourses on National identity," *Political Studies*. 42.3.492-504.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1995. "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship" in Charles Bernheimer eds. *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*." Baltimore: Md. John Hopkins Press, p. 59
- Racine, Jean Luc and Josiane, Viramma. 1997. *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*. London: Verso.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1993. "Preface" to Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps* (trans. Spivak). Calcutta: Thema.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition" in C. Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton. NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Templeman, Sasja. 1999. "Constructions of Cultural Identity: Multiculturalism and Exclusion" *Political Studies* XIVII.
- Xiaomel, Chen. 1995. *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-discourse in Post-Mao China*. New York: OUP.
- Zizek, Slavoj. 1997. "Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." *New Left Review*. No. 225 September-October.