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Negotiating cultural difference

A proliferation of approaches to cultural identity tempts us whenever we try to categorise and rationalise cultural difference and diversity. Identity is often understood as one being conditioned by notions of race and nation. Sometimes it has been defined with reference to social and political constructs. Other instances of identity have been located in discursive cultural and social practices rather than as something which is imposed and reified – as something which is constantly valued and re-valued in a process of ideological flux – a dialectic which challenges any final formulation as well as a static concept.

Orientalism demonstrated the political nature of culture, of the ideological basis of acts of imagination (literature) and the material effects of particular kinds of representation. Said located 'culture' as central to the empire, and thus demonstrated the maturity of discourse and rhetoric. He asked us to read literary and other texts 'contrapunctally', against the grain in order to detect the racialised, imperialist discourse within it and to resist it. Postcolonialism is possible through such a resistant reading, where we identify the ideological grids of the so-called literary texts, when we begin to develop a different historical narrative other than the one handed down to us by the colonial discourse (Nayar: 2010. 163).

Imperialism and colonialism may be taken as examples of cultural imposition of one dominating culture on another. Edward Said, Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Homi Bhaba and other theoreticians have enshrined how Western ideologues of the East become cultural products projected to showcase the cultural superiority of the West. Frantz Fanon has argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), and later in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967) that colonialism had an insidious effect on the identity of the native by mutilating his self-respect as he was forced to perceive his identity in terms of the white man. Thus in the ideology of colonialism the self of the colonized develops through a process of negotiation with the Other rather than in conflict with it. Said also asserted in his *Orientalism* (1978) that a discursive component

existed in the colonial project. The East in primitive terms was created by the literary or discursive thought process of the European mind. The European mind had made use of the discursive apparatuses of representation like archaeology, literary, history, music, ethnography, political theory and social commentary. This epistemological onslaught prepared the way for cultural domination and military conquest. But during the postcolonial phase, when nations were slowly declaring their independence, people who were erstwhile colonized, started asserting their identity and self in acts of confrontation with the European powers. They perceived their difference from a dominating power in political, social and psychological terms.

It is an interesting study as to how the image of Indian civilization was constructed by European travelers like Bernier, as well as colonial scholars like Max Muller and James Mill. Up till the nineteenth century people in India were quite open about sexuality. Indeed, there were written accounts as well as graphical representations on temples. But with the advent of the British, the Victorian fear of sexuality stifled the natural discourse of Indians and induced repression and fear among the Muslims. This was how the colonial cultural approach warped the particular prevalent Indian social practices in the nineteenth century.

In her “Culture Based Negotiation Styles” (July, 2003), Michelle LeBaron has cited an anonymous article disseminated by James T. Felicita, head of contract systems for NASA Systems division, titled “Negotiating with the Americans”, in which the writer conflates nation and culture in intercultural relations “unlike the Japanese, the Americans are not racially or culturally homogenous (LeBaron 2003: i).” She has indicated that even though it is difficult to characterize any national or cultural approach to negotiation, generalizations are frequently drawn.

Such attempts at generalization takes into account contextual factors like time, setting, situation, stakes, history between the parties, nature of the issue, individual preferences, interpersonal dynamics and mood (Le Baron 2003: 1). Though it is not always useful to generalize an individual’s approach to culture, but it may be practically useful to define some patterns and habits that define what is normal in negotiation since they are not culturally bound but may be designated as culturally defined common sense (LeBaron 2003:1). It is true that there exists many kinds of differences occurring across cultures, and that cultural groups are too diverse and changing contexts too influential to resist definitive description. However, as LeBaron indicates, we should be aware of a caveat before outlining these generalizations, it is that “most of the ways of studying culture, communication, and negotiation are derived largely from western concepts (LeBaron 2003:1).”

Internationally acclaimed experts like Hofstede, Hall, Kluckhohn, Strodbeck, Carbaugh have identified different tools for analyzing cultural differences as they relate to negotiation. As indicated by LeBaron, two broad different orientations to time exist across the world, namely, monochronic and polychronic. The monochronic approaches to time are linear, sequential and involve focusing on one thing at a time and are common to European culture especially in Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia and the U.S. The polychronic approach involves simultaneous movement of multiple things and people and the time spent in interaction is more elastic than any fixed schedule. This is widespread in Mediterranean and Latin cultures, including France, Italy, Greece, Mexico and in Eastern and African cultures.

Another dimension of time relevant to negotiations is the focus on past, present, or future. Cultures like Iran, India, and the Far East are categorized by Carbaugh as past-oriented. The United States, he indicates, tends to be oriented to the present and the near-future. Latin America leans toward both present and past orientations. As detailed in other essays, indigenous people in North America combine a past- and future- oriented approach to time that stretches seven generations forward and back. Negotiators focused on the present should be mindful that others may see the past or the distant future as part of the present. Negotiators for whom time stretches into the past or the future may need to remember that a present orientation can bring about needed change (LeBaron 2010: 2).

Paul Gilroy in his book, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (2002) has posited the absence of Black cultures in the constituents of the English nation in his excellent exposition of the idea of multicultural America – as an instance of Black culture in contest, contact and conflict with the White. In other words,

The black Atlantic, in his work of the same title (1993) becomes the space of diaspora and transnational cultures. Whereas earlier diaspora studies focused on the origin- new home binary, Gilroy argued that hybrid spaces emerge when African cultures meet European ones and vice versa. Adapting Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness' Gilroy proposed that right from the time of the slave trade Africans moving towards the 'new world' became diasporic, with a consciousness of both European and African cultures. This double consciousness, for Gilroy, is a productive cultural condition (Nayar 2010: 233).

The idea of transculturation, a term coined by Marie Louis Pratt in her study of travel writing in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

Transculturation (1995) explains an interesting cultural phenomenon. The idea that transculturation works both ways has been advocated by both Gilroy and Marie Pratt. Africans learn from Europeans, adapt and later merge with European cultures while Europeans become acquainted with African culture and recognize their Otherness. African American authors illustrate this double consciousness and thereby exemplify diaspora as a productive cultural process. In this way acculturation and transculturation becomes an interactive cultural space. Stuart Hall in *Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities* (2000) has argued for shifting and multiple identities even within the context of British culture, thus raising one of the most contentious issues in contemporary cultural studies—the intersections of race and national identity. In his book he has offered us a glimpse into the hybrid British identity with its associated blackness:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself---Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolization of English identity – I mean what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea. Where does it come from? Ceylon-Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history (2000:147).

We can indeed identify some of the present issues surrounding cultural diversity and difference especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and in the last decades of the 20th century. These questions roughly concern questions of identity in national, racial and political terms in the context of both localized and globalised cultural forms. Cultural studies today resolve around displaced and mutated identities of family, origins and “native” cultures in third-generation immigrants especially the spaces where there is an intersection of racial-ethnic identity with national identity. However, poststructural notions of identity pose a challenge to cultural misconceptions in the notion of “cultural fix points” as has been noted by Fredt Jandt (1995). Even Judith Butler in her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990) has emphasized that “identity is performatively constituted” and which echoes Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes,” underlining that being a woman is a process, a becoming, rather than a fixed identity. In other words, Butler has suggested that one cannot act or acquire an

identity outside this system of discourses and that the subject is never static, a stable, cogent identity. Stuart Hall and McGrew (1992), along with others like Gergen (1985, 1991, 1997) have also reiterated that there is no single monolithic identity but decentralized or multiple and often contradictory identities.

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Richard Evanoff in his work, *Universalist, Particularist, and Constructivist Approaches to Intercultural Dialogue on Ethics* (2004) has identified two principal approaches to intercultural studies, which can help us in an understanding of cultural difference and the consequent ways and means necessary to negotiate such diversity. One is the universalist approach to intercultural ethics which seeks “convergence on the basis of forms of rationality, knowledge, values and so on, which are assumed to be universally valid for all cultures (Evanoff: 2004.1). On the other hand “the particularist suggestion is that since all forms of rationality, knowledge, values, ethics are relative to particular cultures, no convergence is possible and cultural diversity should simply be accepted (Evanoff: 2004.1). In strictly *universalist* terms any negotiation between cultures must be preceded by an empirical discovery of a common core of ethical norms and principles across cultures. As professed by Wiredu (1996) and Macer (1994), universalism in cultural studies has a modernist orientation and a post Western Enlightenment legacy. It envisages a homogenization of cultures, which has a teleological drift towards a single goal and tends to assess progress in unilinear terms. But as such cultural difference cannot always be homogenized since multiple, often contradictory identities resist such simplification and should rather be negotiated. Sometimes this is fraught with some problems. Asians, Blacks adopting and melting with the pot of American culture have a lot of problems today with reinstating their own identities, discourses and ethnicities.

Thus Subaltern studies in Latin America especially *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (2001) questions the processes of homogenization and segregation on which hegemonic practices of representation are based. The Afro-descendants and indigenous women in Costa Rica are successful in critically analyzing and transforming such hegemonic discourses by focusing on intersections between gender, sexuality as well as ethnicity as social categories of differentiation. Thus the basic idea is to dismantle the Western hegemonic discourses on modernity and insist on individual heterogenic practices.

Individuals are produced, changed, reproduced by cultures. The

Western colonial imposition on the Orient was a violent upheaval on the people of the middle East, Africa, Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia, where they had to accommodate themselves to the sweeping revolutionary ideologies and were forced to change their ways of life, vision, social practices, along with the adoption of a foreign language as their linguistic medium and lifestyle. The entire social practices and lifestyle of the Orient in the nineteenth century illustrate a history of transformation in terms of the adoption of new values and ethos of a new world order. Again, the Renaissance in 17th century Europe had a later manifestation in India especially in 19th century Bengal with the advent of Europeans on the Indian subcontinent.

Cultures are also produced, changed, reproduced by individuals. The rise of Arab nationalism, and Zionism have changed the face of the Middle East forever. Displaced intellectuals from Europe to America during World War II have had a lasting impact on the ideological climate of America. The birth of Indian nationalism in leaders like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Rabindranath Tagore have enunciated a secular state in India. Hanif Kureishi and Khaled Hosseini as well as Bharati Mukherjee or Jhumpa Lahiri have illustrated in their novels how adoption of culture can influence individuals or how can individuals adopt, adapt and be adept in creating new nuances within a dominant culture. Indeed, a perusal of postcolonial literature shows the complex interaction between the cultures of Europeans and that of the East. Such an interaction was possible due to the palimpsest nature of Eastern cultures where the dominating culture lies like a layer upon the dominated as in Salman Rushdie's novels, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) and *The World Beneath Her Feet* (1999).

Politicization of cultures and identity may be seen in the Islamisation of social practices, ideology and politics in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. The conflation of religion, politics and culture occurs in the ulema's teachings, social practices leading to the reification of religious identities thereby precluding cultural interaction and obviating democracy. On the other hand, depoliticization of identity may be seen in the prevalence of a Hindu Muslim brotherhood in the silk industry of Varanasi (India), despite conflicts they have produced a unique narrative in terms of trade, effectively catering to the interests of both communities. Such complex interactions between rival religions have successively depoliticized social practices and facilitated reproduction of existing power structures.

Intercultural practices have also been codified in the domain of arts, cinema and literature and which cuts across race, nation and

religion. Cinema, for example produces its own formula for film production whether in Hollywood or Bollywood and depends on its institutionalizing of fables, stories, narratives and people. In this way the codification of certain social practices through the spectacular and the gorgeous in *The Godfather* (1972) trilogy highlights the subversion of cultural practices. Media popularizes the vulgar and the low, the forbidden and the bizarre in ornate portrayals of characters, thereby institutionalizing ways of being and ways of doing which cuts across cultural differences. Cinema highlights intercultural dialogue in various modalities, whether it is the screening of *The Great Gatsby* (1974) or *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) or the *Goal* (2006) trilogy.

Evanoff insists that

Particularist approaches to intercultural dialogue on ethics are based on the idea that each has its own particular values and norms which are incommensurable with those of other cultures. That different cultures conceptualise the world in different ways, hold to different forms of rationality, and construct different values and ethical systems can be taken as an empirical fact which is well-documented in the fields of both anthropology and intercultural communication.-----Validity is determined by the cultural system of which one is a part; hence, what is real, true, right and beautiful in one particular cultural context may not be real, true, right and beautiful in another cultural context (Evanoff: 2004.5-6).

Actually, the idea of moral relativism entails the claim that differences between cultures ought to be respected and accepted on their own terms and that such contrasting features are irreconcilable. Negotiations between cultures require that there should be a common basis for cooperation and mutual action for solving problems of a transcultural nature rather than merely insisting on cultural difference. It is the aim of intercultural studies to create an environment for negotiation between two or more cultures, which come into contact with each other either conflicting or amicably.

Postmodern perspectives on ethics is allied with particularism, which critiques the notion of history as progress moving towards a single teleological goal and ridicules any attempt to simplify cultural difference (Bauman:1993). Lyotard has likewise cautioned against any single unified vision of the world and insisted on a multiplicity of language games in which none can be privileged over others. Any discourse which assume universality or purport to be “metanarratives” are totalizing in character, since it perpetrates “violence to the heterogeneity of language games (Lyotard: 1979.xxv). The postmodern approach to

intercultural communication, therefore, precludes any foundational, universal claims regarding knowledge, values, ethics which seeks meaningful dialogue across cultures. The ideological orientation of postmodernism is towards particularism, individualism and a multilinear conception of cultural development, and which envisages cultures as developing distinct forms of life in relative isolation from one another. And in its most extreme form such particularism may give rise to different versions of racial, nationalist and religious isolationism.

III

In his work, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication: Identities in a Global Community* (2009), Fred Jandt attempts to answer the epistemological question: "How do we know?" He states that social constructionism answers that reality is a product of symbolic interaction within social groups. But the idea that reality is subjective conflicts with the notion of objectivity itself. On the other hand, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis contends that reality is embedded in culture's language and, in certain aspects, "comes performed (Jandt: 2009.130)." The constructivist approach as outlined by Evanoff lies midway between the twin extremes of culture as subjective and differential, particular and as objective, generalized or universal. The basic operational concept tends towards an active dialogue both within and between cultures, thereby accepting their differences as well as initiating a dialogue on intercultural ethics which has the prospect of offering both a radical critique of existing social arrangements and a creative imagining of new alternatives.

In this way

By fostering a willingness to learn in a receptive but critical way from other traditions, cultures may also be able to achieve more synergetic relationships with each other. Such, in fact, is the goal of the constructivist approach to intercultural dialogue on ethics---(Evanoff: 2004.9).

When problems are shared across cultures only then can common issues be understood and new ethical formulas created. Cultures are relative but they are also affiliated to particular cultural traditions. In this context constructivism adopts a dialogical approach, thus engaging in a

dialectical form of rationality which is not only self-reflexive but also able to engage itself with a variety of different cultural perspectives. While it cannot be assumed that individuals from different cultures

will automatically arrive at a shared ethical perspective on the basis of preexisting understandings, values, or reasoning strategies, common ground can nonetheless be constructed through a dialogical process in which both sides critically reflect on what is positive and negative within their respective traditions and imaginatively seek to integrate positive aspects of both traditions into a wider conceptual framework (Evanoff : 2004. 10).

Cultural pluralism and difference can, therefore, be actively confronted, understood and negotiated not in isolation from other cultures but through dialectical interaction with Others. Such an interactionist perspective theorises aesthetic beauty, knowledge, meaning and values without universalizing human perceptions and values or subjectivising the psycho-social cultural process. In such terms cultural conflict leads nowhere and produces no signification. The mind rationalizes and engages itself with cultural difference and thereby discovers meaning, values and ethics arising out of the interactive dialogue between historically and culturally situated actors on the one hand and an objectivity enshrined in ideology and time-honoured institutions on the other.

This acquires significance in today's globalization, which is a product of both universalized as well as localized discourses in the best instances of consumerist ideology. Thus cultural collision produces at best a penchant for cultural collusion; where antithetical ideologies interact, collude and consume each other but at the same time retaining their identity and integrity. The literature of postcolonialism may be understood in such terms as overcoming not only its antithesis but isolationism by having recourse to essentials and values of other, erstwhile dominating cultures, appropriating them, making their own and even using their language and malleability to write back at them. Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe as well as other Afro-Asian writers have revolutionized writing since they use the cultural content of the Empire to strike or write back to it. In such terms cultural dissonance leads to cultural negotiation and integration.

Intercultural studies cut across cultural traditions and attempts to identify some common referential basis for cultural interaction. Putnam has claimed that in intercultural dialogue

----we are not claiming to stand outside our own tradition, let alone outside of space and time, as some fear; we are standing within a tradition, and trying simultaneously to learn what in that tradition we are prepared to recommend to other traditions and to see what in that

tradition may be inferior---inferior either to what other traditions have to offer, or to the best that we may be capable of (Putnam: 1993.155).

However, as in all intercultural exchanges there is the danger of the domination of one cultural interlocutor over another. In such interventionist enterprise all cultural exchanges might not be transparent or equivalent but in the process there is also the comfort that in such dialogue there is the possibility of the emergence of epistemological insight into the differing cultural perspectives, thereby precluding a universal panacea of a common cultural norm. Finally, we can gain consolation from the fact that irreconcilable cultural isolationism has been overcome and the limiting perspectives of one particular culture have been opened to the discerning light of others.

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