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Identity, its Dynamics and Ethics: Some Meditations

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Abstract:

Assertion of identity in literature and culture involves representation of different types of subject positions and strategic posturing in various contexts like nation, gender, caste, class, race and sexuality. Adopting these contexts as thematics literary and cultural theory have addressed the struggle of various groups of people against hegemonic orders for their right for equitable self-representation. Feminism, Marxism, Subaltern Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Indigenous Culture Studies, Dalit Studies etc have already crowded the critical scene with their respective discursive regimes to produce as well as the politicize their epistemic claims and rights.

My purpose is not to survey these theoretical disciplines, but to throw light upon some theoretical aspects of the representation of identities in literature while focusing on a few similar looking tropes as well as figures of identity and the variations they lend themselves to. I wish to argue that identity has no essence; nor does it have a metaphysical ontology, nor does it have a signified as well as authoritative referentiality. Identity is but a signifying effect and a representation of a 'presence' with possibilities of figural immanence in literary/cultural discourse. One often comes across certain amount of truculence in the phraseology i.e., "assertion of identity" in oppositional discourse. It is therefore necessary that we have a nuanced understanding of identity and its discursiveness so that its reification and reduction to literal meaning can be avoided.

Keywords: Identity, Dynamics and Ethics, Meditations, representation, theoretical aspects.

If assertion of identity is to be made in literatures written in English and non-English literature, the contexts of discussion are to be understood as postcolonial, in as much as the English language has been both an instrument and signifier of postcoloniality. A little over decades ago, in her book *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Vishwanathan argued that the colonialists made a conscious effort to perpetuate their hegemonic supremacy through the invisible operation of English. She has shown how British literary curriculum was introduced in India not only to demonstrate the superiority of English culture but to "mask" the economic exploitation of the colonized. The propagation of English literature among the "natives" and its institutionalization in secular government and the Christian missionary schools facilitated formation of a western educated native elite and their cooptation into colonial culture so that the authority of the British government and British mercantile and military interests could be safeguarded and promoted. While the hegemonic power of a liberal, rationalist humanism mediated through English

literature made the empire secure from the resistance of the colonial natives, the empire needed safety at home as well. What it produced was a discourse, both literary and non-literary, of home, orderliness, good behavior, moral values etc, calling up the negation of all these in the figuration of the colony out there.

As we all know, in *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said asserts that British cultural forms such as the novel contributed to the establishment of an “us” versus “them” dialectics. That is, such forms of the self and other were constitutive of “positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, and moral values” (Said 81). Because of this well-established sense of order, there was little or no domestic resistance to British hegemony. Said gave us a specific example of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Mansfield Park is an estate supported by an overseas plantation in Antigua. In the novel, Sir Thomas returns to put his house in order, just as he has established order by Antigua through colonization. We also know that the 19th century English novelists like Dickens and George Eliot, in conformity to the needs of the empire, produced the fictional versions of the colonial outpost, i.e., Australia, to rehabilitate those like Micawber of *David Copperfield* or Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede*, who were rejected by home. Those who could be socially and economically useful and morally acceptable had a claim to be at home in England, as it were. But those who were socially and morally aberrant were to be kept away in the peripheral regions of the empire. Those who were brought home to England from the colonies, if they happened to be women, were to be confined to the attic as mad women, and one remembers so well Bertha Rochester, the voiceless racialized other woman in *Jane Eyre*. Thus colonialism as a system of culture and power of the empire was embedded in a discourse of race and patriarchy. It engendered cultural binaries of various kinds, informing identities within an epistémè of difference and discrimination. The native man was negatively defined as not what the white man was claimed to be. Similarly the black and coloured woman was defined as what the white woman supposedly was not. Accordingly, the native's culture and religion came to be defined as the antitheses of the colonizer's secular society, which was built upon freedom and justice and a monotheist religion that was amenable to a rationalist knowledge.

In a lecture titled ‘Ethnicity: Identity and Difference’, which Stuart Hall gave in 1989 in an American college, he famously said, “The English are racists not because they hate the Blacks but because they do not know who they are without the Blacks” (16). He then went on to explain how through the self-other dialectic in the structures of difference and Derridean *differance* controlled by regimes of power and knowledge identities are infinitely produced and played out without resolution. What Hall explains to us is that identity is a process of self-recuperation and as much of calling forth of difference at one point of time and at one space and as being engaged in conflict with difference at another point of time and at another space. What is noteworthy about identity is the its discursiveness and dispersal across different sets of postcolonial chronotopes through which literary tropes and figures undergo variations.

We already know that the empire legitimated and sustained its rule through the self-serving construction of itself in terms of the differential figuration of the other. But it would be far from

true not to acknowledge the problematic inherent in the process of such construction. One part of the problematic is that the figuration of the native was to be not just a hopeless antithesis of the self-assured white man, but a projection of his racial anxiety and guilt in a figure like the black consumptive man James Wait aboard the ship in Conrad's *Nigger of Narcissus*, or a projection of the white woman's sexual fantasy of masculinity and pride of European culture in the figure of Oroonoko, a Romanized slave, in Aphra Behn's eponymous novel. If imperial ideology is understood to be fraught with ambivalence of subject position as was Rudyard Kipling's, then for him India was a site of filiative relations of 'home' and also the imperial space to deepen a sense of loss of the self and anxiety of racial difference. This ambivalence was reproduced in Kim's deeply fractured identity, prompting him to a struggle for self-recuperation. "Who is Kim?" "What is Kim?" are two questions that Kim asks himself repeatedly in the novel: 'I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?' A "mixture o' things" though he is, neither wholly Indian nor wholly British, he has to partly adopt the white man's habits of mind, combining his 'colonial' strength, and partly face the difficult challenge of attempting to preserve the stability of the Anglo-Indian world, which nurtured him.

The other part of the problematic is that colonialism triggered off a wide range of cultural formations of identity, starting from those based on mimicry on the part of the native at one end to those where the native takes an implacably nativist position at the other end. Mimicry is a complex proposition, and I shall come to it later. But those who take nativist positions cannot sustain the ideology of purity underpinning such identitarian positions. For someone who takes a nativist position nativism is not ontologically rigid. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o took such a position in abdicating his English name and argued in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that Kenyan students had become alienated from their social, cultural traditions and histories under the impact of English. We have to understand this position of Ngũgĩ's as anything but pragmatic. Ngũgĩ's pragmatism lies in securing for his cultural critique of the political economy and neo-colonial culture of Kenya the constituency and endorsement of the West. Living as a diasporic academic in an American university he has rewritten in English the political novels, namely *Devil on the Cross* (1978) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), which were first written in Gikuyu. While the linguistic and cultural nativism helps him to spread a vigorous message of revolution among the masses against misrule and corruption in Kenya under the regime of Daniel Arap Moi in particular and neo-colonialism in general, his novels are implicated in postcolonial politics both in the sense of being concerned with the problems of post-independence Kenya and its national culture and being available in the global circuits of production and distribution through English while addressing themselves to the peripheries and talking about them in the western academia, or cultural metropole.

One needs to reiterate here that identities are not ontological purities and fixities, but are at best normative measures that totalize multiple subjectivities and selves as R. Radhakrishnan would tell us. He exthat "the normative citizenship of any identity within its own legitimate time or history is an ideological effect that secures the regime of a full and undivided Identity" (158).

The chronotope of identity is always flexible and complex, and more so is that of postcolonial identity in so far as this chronotope involves multiple layers of cultures mediating discontinuous and noncontiguous times and spaces that are juxtaposed.

We may now consider 'negritude' as an identitarian case in point. In opposition of the supremacist French colonial culture and its assimilative tendencies, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Shengor and Leon Gontran Damas championed negritude as the identitarian appellation signifying an ontology, epistemology, aesthetics and politics for the solidarity of all Black people in terms of their common destiny of slavery and the aspiration of anti-colonial revolution. It was a cultural, intellectual and aesthetic movement. But many people like Wole Soyinka dismissed it on the basis of its essentialism. Many others studied it only to be overwhelmed by the contradictions between Shengor and Cesaire. While Shengor was regarded, and for that reason criticized, by many as a neocolonialist, and 'French bootlicker' (Amiri Baraka) and a proponent of essentialist, romanticized and transcendental notion of negritude, Cesaire was found to be expounding a historicist, revolutionary notion of negritude. That it is a highly diversified concept with contradictory positions is a fact postmodernists would like to press upon. But many scholars of Marxist persuasion (one of them Christopher Wise in an essay "The Dialectics of Negritude", *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts*, Eds. Gita Rajan and Radhika Manoharam, Greenwood, 1995), try to shore up this concept in its totalist nature from its fragmentariness and reconstitute it for deployment of all the minorities and disempowered people, superseding their historical specificities.

Some such thing has happened in the Indian context as well. A minority identity – in the sense of being socially-economically marginalized and politically disenfranchised– needs to articulate in a language that is scarcely his or her own. The cultural and linguistic impossibility of saying about oneself in one's own language is the very condition of being marginal and 'minor', according to Deleuze and Guattari (1983). Therefore the language chosen for expressing the marginal, the minor and disenfranchised entities and ideas is 'deterritorialized', no matter whether it is a politically or culturally established vernacular or English. Deterritorialization amounts to disturbing the dominant modes of representation and codes of interpretation as inherent in it. The dynamics of the minority is therefore interventionist in nature, and its need is felt by the academia. This is what Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd argued way back in 1986. Since then the minority cultural discourse has theorized the need to retrieving archival literary texts of the minorities, the economically exploited, politically disenfranchised, socially manipulated and ideologically dominated groups of people. It has also argued for their inclusion in the university syllabi for achieving the right kind of epistemological, cultural and political objectives.

Rightly, in parallel with the political and economic process of empowerment of the Dalits in India, their voices have been heard in Indian literature since the early 1990s in anthologies of poetry, short stories and novels. Although the voices of the untouchables and socially marginalized can be traced back to the Buddhist literature and Bhakti poetry in all Indian

languages from 13th to 15th centuries, the tone of radical protest and an ideology of resistance to caste oppression became strident under the influence of democratic and egalitarian thoughts and movements in the 20th century. In recent times anthologies of short stories, poems, autobiographies, and novels in the vernacular Indian languages and English translation have been published on a large scale. Critical writings, testimonies and histories have also come out in a spate, as it were. Many of the very literary texts have been retrieved and come into circulation, owing to the archival work of Dalit scholars. These in fact testify to the strategies that Mohamed and Lloyd have argued about. Dalits are not a homogeneous group either politically or socially. Nor are they homogeneous in themes. Dalit writing has been inspired by African, Afro-American, Latin American literatures of resistance and has been conceived of in critical discourse and literary as well as cultural historiography as a genre that enunciates a subaltern critique of the traditional Indian caste-society and post-independence state. It also formulates an aesthetic of its own in opening up a whole gamut of experiences and understanding of the world that had been silenced in the canonical literary forms of India.

Dalit poetry questions the cultural assumptions and formal injunctions of classical poetics. Dalit cultural discourse has a revisionist agenda in opening up for serious interrogation issues of social exploitation and discrimination that had been considered natural and normal over the centuries. For these reasons Dalit writing as a body of writings with diverse themes assumes an overarching identitarian label, which has its usefulness. Not all forms of Brahminic critique in Dalit literature are anti-Brahminic, as some of these are from a Buddhist position. Nor indeed all Dalit literary works deal with victimization by upper castes and social hierarchization as a theme. Alienation of a Dalit from his own community and class differentiation complicating caste structures are in fact new ways of perceiving social dynamics that some works in this genre deal with. One example is the Malayalam short story in English translation titled 'Madness', written by C. Ayappan. It is about the feeling of embarrassment a Dalit teacher suffers on being required to visit his sister in a mental asylum. His newly acquired middle-class status and higher class background of his fair skinned wife, even though she is a Dalit, are reasons for refusing to meet her and the other poor, dark, ill-clad relatives. In *Bheda*, an Odia dalit novel by Akhila Naik, corruption and exploitation of the poor do not always coincide with the caste lines. The BDO, a Dalit, is very corrupt himself and is in cohort with the sarpanch and the police and instrumental in the exploitation of the poor, who are mostly the lower castes or Dalits.

What I want to underscore is that identity is not a mere nominalist term assigned to a subject as a name; nor does it designate its ontology as something fixed. There is no one-to-one correspondence between an identitarian term and an entity designated by it in essentialist manner. Identity is a term of ostensive definition of entities, variously exemplified by the entities that are otherwise difficult to be defined as things/subjects-in-themselves in their specificities. Identity cannot designate ontology; rather it produces an effect of the ontology of a subject or an entity represented within discursive practices of the assignation of cultural meanings to it. Identity underscores the extensional meaning of discrete subjects or entities that position/posture

themselves, or are made to do so under representational regimes, and perform in designated ways in society and culture to be interpellated in representational terms. We owe to Wittgenstein and Judith Butler the concepts of language play and discursive performativity in terms of which entities are represented as identities, acquiring corporeal inflections of race and gender. Further, the performativity and performative valence of identity keep on changing just as the modes of representation change. In correlation with this change, the positions of propositions of subjectivities in the context of time and space keep changing. That is the reason why while talking about identity we should avoid simplistic notion of representation of figures in literature and culture. Similar figures can lend themselves to different meanings in terms of the performativity in different contexts.

Let us take the example of Kim (from Kipling's novel *Kim*, 1901) as an example of cultural hybridity and a figure with ambivalent affiliations in a situation of colonial culture. Colonial culture, as Homi Bhabha says, not merely engenders acculturation, but also the domains of differences, and it brings about their displacements and overlaps, producing cultural interstices. In these interstices inter-subjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated through complicity and conflict. Presented as a white child (the son of an Irish soldier in British India), and growing up wildly on the streets of Lahore, outside of the reach of British society, Kim is a liminal figure. Burned black as any native in skin colour, and inclined to speak the vernacular more readily than his mother-tongue, which he speaks in a clipped and sing-song way, Kim has stronger cultural affiliations with Indians. He does adopt Indian identity as a performative for relationship with the Indian community. But he also adopts the British identity for empowerment when situation demands. For instance, in Chapter 9, he adopts the English language and takes the help of its symbolic power to resist hypnosis, which is a cultural practice of Eastern tradition. His life and career unfold in a picaresque mode as he is pressed into the service of British intelligence system against the Russians by an Afgan spy, taken under the tutelage of the Tibetan Lama and titled 'Friend of the World', claimed back to the English fold by his father's friend and sent to a famous English school, sent on espionage mission of the Great Game to steal maps and documents from the Russians, and finally being undecided about what he is and what course of life he should take. The total effect of the chain of events and situations in which Kim finds himself and the various roles of complicity with the Empire in a war situation and with spirituality which he performs often in a ludic/mimic manner is one of ontological ambiguity, from which Kipling himself suffered. The ontological ambiguity lies in Kim always finding himself as the other of persons and systems with which he wants to affiliate himself.

But this colonial hybrid figure signifying ontological ambiguity undergoes a variation at the hands of Tagore when he creates Gora(*Gora*, 1909), who is adopted by with the same antecedents of Irish parents who are dead. But here Gora's uncertainty is partly mitigated by his ignorance of his parentage and partly by the overriding contextuality of the vision of Bharatavarsha which Gora cherishes and wants to realize on the basis of radical Hindu faith. He

is represented as fair-faced, broad-shouldered and excessively tall, resembling more a European than his putative short-statured, stocky Brahmin father, Krishnadayal. However, he is an orthodox Brahmin, believing that India can gain freedom through the revival of its ancient cultural roots. He fights ideological battles with the Brahmos and armed battles against the British. What is interesting in Gora's case is that his European physiognomy, or corporeal identity is clearly highlighted only to be subordinated to the ideological identity of the Hindu nationalist, predicated upon his performatives of ideological harangues about a utopian India which he inflicts upon Sucharita, or the derring-do against the British in which he is engaged, or his severe remonstrance of his friend Binoy for the latter's overtures to the girls of the Brhamo household. But his orthodox Brahmin ideology of nationalism is finally absorbed by Anandamoyi, the mother, who is finally troped as the true Motherland. She is liberal, kind, generous and opposed to the form of parochialism of culture and religion that Gora embodies. Gora is shaken on knowing from Anandamoyi and Krishnadayal that neither are they his biological parents, nor is he an Indian Hindu by birth. But he is not claimed back into European fold like Kim. He does not feel closely related to the English doctor who happens to visit the ailing Krishnadayal at that time. On the contrary, such knowledge redeems him from parochial considerations of national identity based of nativity, cultural exclusivity and exclusionarity to a state of freedom, which is articulated when he says to Anandamoyi, "Ma, you are my only mother...You are my Bhartavarsha...(477)" Here Gora's cultural hybridity modulates into a cultural cosmopolitanism, favoured by Tagore, and he rises above the claims and contentions of nation-state and empire. Although at the end of *Kim* there is a possibility of Lama's solicitude and spiritual guidance for the boy's deliverance from the world of bondage and obligation and salvation, the lines are deeply ambiguous: Yet then, "with strivings and yearnings and retchings and agonies not to be told," the Lama wrenched himself back to the world of illusion. "I must return to my chela [disciple], lest he miss the Way." It is only then he finds his River; in fact, he stumbles into it. He can now tell the recovering Kim, "Certain is our deliverance. Come!" He crossed his hands upon his lap, as a man may who has won salvation for himself and his beloved. (247)

The narrator maintains a tone of calculated ironic distance and shadows the prospect of salvation with a cloud of skepticism. Kim, it is suspected, would continue to live the divided life of a *chela* of the holy man and apprentice spy, pursuing disjunctive goals of the empire and salvation. It is through his life that the contradictions of the frontiers of the empire find full expression.

It is also worth some discussion that dentitarian figures undergo representational changes over and over again in different chronotopes. For example, Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), figured as mad woman in the attic, is marked off as a different and discrepant gothic, sub-human presence of horror and disgrace, antithesis of feminine sexual norm and domesticity, and above all *the other* of the colonial white male. In the postcolonial chronotope of Jamaica in the post-emancipation period slavery the same Creole figure has been reworked as Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and invested with a voice to narrate the circumstances in which she

married Rochester and went mad. Racialized, eroticized, exoticized, psycho-sexually pathologized in Rochester's libidinal and moral economy, Antoinette develops in postcolonial discourse as the other of British Empire, doubly colonized and so on. Over production of such meanings of the mad Creole woman renders her into a standard trope of gender oppression in postcolonial feminist discourse and somewhat reified. What happens in consequence is that this figure functions as an interpretive short-circuit to preempt other meanings that can be made out of it in other chronotopes. At least one such chronotope I know of is the upper region of New England America in late 19th century which Sarah Orne Jewett uses for one of her short stories "The Foreigner" (1900). This story is about a Catholic French Creole woman, impoverished and widowed, whom Captain Tolland brings along as his wife out of pity to the village Dunnet Landing in Maine. In an otherwise culturally and racially homogeneous rural world thriving on tourist industry, foreigners are welcome as tourists, but not as settlers. Mrs Tolland, the foreigner wife, does evoke the curiosity and hostility of the native people. However, she is tolerated by and large. When Captain Tolland dies and she is widowed once again, people become sympathetic and kind towards her. When she dies, at her funeral service Reverend Bascom remarks with great pity that it matters little even though she may have been reared among the heathens, but she will find her way to New Jerusalem. That Dunnet Landing can be home where all journeys might end is suggested as Mrs Tolland is seen saying to herself sometimes: "Quite a number must ha' reached that wa'n't able to set out from Dunnet Landin". The short story deploys the chronotope for homing where the Creole woman is integrated with a community in a new place, which is an imaginary home. The home here as a trope of harmony overrides cultural disjunction, racialization and double colonization, which the figure of a Creole woman would ordinarily signify in a postcolonial register. The point I wish to make here is that literary representation of identity runs the risk of reification in lending itself to one kind of critical discourse. An identitarian figure or trope occurring within a chronotopically narrow range of texts such as postcolonial or feminist texts or Dalit texts, and being interpreted in one particular way over and over again for a long period of time undergoes ontological reification and semantic straight-jacketing, and it causes critical blindness to the richness and fecundity of the meaning of identity .

Critical blindness in cultural and economic life can lead to violence as Amartya Sen warns us in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006). Identity, in Sen's view, is an ensemble of multiple affiliations in multiple times and spaces, in multiple contexts, and in different permutations and combinations. If someone assumes an identity at a given space and time or context, that identity does not rule out other identities the same person may assume elsewhere at some other time and in another context. A person makes choice about an identitarian position, considering the relative importance of one among many loyalties and affiliations that accompany such identity at a give point of time. Absence of this understanding about identity may lead to reductionism of 'identity disregard' and 'singular affiliation', the twin causes of faulty formulation of social-scientific policies that engender inequity, discontent and violence. As far as literature is concerned, failure of a nuanced understanding of the

representation of identity can engender violence of opinion, critical obtuseness, hegemonic discourses like Orientalism.

A proper understanding of identity in its plurality redeems one to an ethical position of recognizing the other in equal measure and in equal terms as the other is made to recognize the self. In this context one is reminded of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas questions the ontological autonomy of the Self which continued from Parmenides to Aristotle to Hegel to Heidegger in the philosophical tradition of the West. The other has been defined by Parmenides in relation to the ego, not as an object in itself; it has been figured as the slave by Aristotle, someone incapable of speech, reason, and ethical choice for right action, and hence a subordinate to the self; as for Heidegger, the other cannot be brought into any meaningful relationship with the self that is predicated upon *Dasein*, Being-in-the-World, an ontology, self-sufficient and independent of the other; for Hegel, the other is dialectically related to the self, and the recognition of it on the part of the self makes to conscious of itself; so, the other is at best a moral precondition of *sameness* which the self must recognize, but this ethical act of recognition which reduces the difference of the other to sameness becomes problematic. For Lacan, the subject is defined by a desire for what he discovers is lacking in him but present in the other; therefore the other is an objectification of the desire or *lack* on the part of the self. All these philosophical views with regard to self-other relationship seem to be skewed toward the self at the expense of the absolute alterity and autonomy of the other, which Levinas challenges. He propounds the concept of the Other, an absolute alterity, which in its supreme aloofness confronts the self. The Other confronts subject as a Face in its singularity and absolute independence. It is something that is 'exterior' to the I. It is an ethical moment of epiphany at which the Other enters into my world and appears as a 'foreigner' (*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*), someone small, vulnerable, with its suffering and mortality. It is precisely the vulnerability of the Face that invites me and seduces me to grasp it and reduce it to myself. By means of its miserable being-other, it even appears in me as "the temptation to murder". And yet it overpowers me by the infiniteness of its transcendence. "This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder" (199).

Now, I think, time has come to explore such ethical positions of subject as Levinas and philosophers like him hint at. We must learn to look at ourselves from the other end of the epistemic telescope, from the position of the other at ourselves, recognize the problem of incommensurability vis-à-vis the other as an epistemological challenge and ethical obligation. In the process we will be able to critically handle the issue of identity in a humane way.

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