



VOICING THE VOICELESS: THEORIZING THE 'OTHER'

The 'Indian text' in the context of world literatures today, has become a highly debated and controversial 'site' that is dominantly marked in Bakhtin's terms by 'polyphony' and 'heteroglossia'. However, in spite of the variety of voices, the post-modern phenomenon also talks about the 'voiceless', 'the hybrid', the 'native', the 'aboriginal', the 'marginal' often referred to as the 'other' and it would be quite a task to theorize this ideology by defining the concept and then exploring the 'meta-narratives' that have been embedded into the 'other' in the form of political and social 'discourses'. A proposal is therefore made in this paper to examine the concept of the 'other' in the light of Contemporary literary theory and thereby develop a universal paradigm that 'connects' us to the 'dead' past, and the 'unborn' future.

DEFINING THE 'OTHER':

In contemporary critical theory, the term 'other' refers to groups/populations that are socially, politically, economically and geographically outside the hegemonic power 'center'. In fact, the definition holds true for the 'subaltern', the 'marginal' and the 'aboriginal' as well for they too are excluded from established structures and denied a 'voice' in their society.¹ According to Antonio Gramsci, the word 'subaltern' is synonymous for the 'proletariat' - the oppressed, racial minority which helps define the majority group. And this 'other' was created to counter the dominant practices of the 'center'.

THE INDIAN TEXT:

The Indian text, which, as recent studies in archeology proves, is one of the oldest surviving texts, in human history and therefore serves as a time-tested 'site' for ideological positions. As we move from the paleolithic, the medieval and the modern ages, one can but see the Indian situation as a Nature/God-centered text with very specific do's and don'ts in the four classes of the society. Then too, the socio-political discourse was between the Brahminical/ kshatriya center and the 'other' vaishya and shudra classes. In other words, the idea of the 'other' had always existed. Thus if the 'shudra' was the 'other' during the ancient and medieval times, today, in modern times the nomenclature of 'other' has changed to 'dalit', 'harijan', 'aboriginal', 'native', 'underprivileged', 'marginalized', 'belonging to the third/fourth-world' and the like. The idea that needs attention here is whether this binary of the 'centre' and the 'other' was a 'construct', a 'discourse', a 'fallacy' or was this 'Othering' phenomenon a historical reality? Very often, the implied connotations and denotations of the 'other', circumscribe on leading marginalized, exclusive 'small lives', devoid of 'advantage', 'freedom' and 'self-respect' in every sphere of life as compared to those in the 'center'. For instance, in the Indian colonial text, if the Mughals were the 'center', the Marathas were the 'other', if the English/white was the 'center', the Indian/brown/black was the 'other'; if the King was the 'center', the noblemen/ the subjects were the 'other'; if man was the 'center', the woman was the 'other'; if the Occident was the 'center', the 'Orient' was the 'other' - all very precisely placed in a binary that asserted the supremacy of one (former) over the 'other' (later). This has been the social, economic and political discourse since centuries and the argument that one might have is whether this underpinning of the one 'voicing' against the voiceless 'other' is justified at any level or not!

The Indian and the western scriptures too, from the mystical point of view, have always posed a divide between the soul and the body. Here, using the former analogy, the soul becomes the 'center' and the body the 'other'. Let us illustrate this 'center-other' phenomenon with a brief narrative from the African context.

THE GENTLEMEN OF THE JUNGLE:

In Jomo Keyyatta's allegorical story, the colonizer and the native of the land start out on friendly terms. Mr. Elephant (Britain) befriends a man (inhabitant of land) and one day, during a thunderstorm, asks the man if he can stick his trunk in the man's hut (land) to keep it dry. The man willingly helps the friend in need, not knowing that soon Mr. Elephant would take over the whole hut (country) and force the man out. Hearing the man begin to protest, the other forest animals (British colonizers) come to see what the problem is between them. Then the lion (ruler) sets up a Commission (British officials) to investigate. Despite the man's concerns, no one from his side is included on the council (due to the inferiority and stupidity of the "savage"). Eventually, the council meets and decides that Mr. Elephant is only fulfilling his God-given right to occupy the hut and put it to the best economic use possible since the man is not able to fill it adequately (because the inhabitants are backward and underdeveloped people). The commission also gives man the permission to rebuild the hut somewhere else (displacement from original culture), but this situation only leads to the same incident recurring (continual oppression) with Mr. Buffalo, Mr. Leopard and so on. Finally, the man decides that he must defend himself (awakening to the oppression around him) and builds a bigger and newer hut than the ones the animals are currently occupying. The new hut attracts all the jungle animals, and they end up fighting among themselves inside the hut. His plan effectively in place, the man lights the hut on fire (taking steps to end oppression), and everyone burns down with the house (oppression ends). Declaring that "Peace is costly, but it's worth the expense," the man lives happily ever after (free from colonization).

THE INTERPRETATION: ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION;

The interpretation of the story very aptly demonstrates the colonial methodology adopted by the rulers in East Africa, India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Iraq etc.

The beginnings of 'setting out in friendly terms' is virtually true and justified for all forms of colonization all over the world. In Biblical terms, Adam was the first settler in the Garden of Eden and he remained so till the point he defied the colonial 'God', for all had to remain subservient to the Supreme Authority. He started on friendly terms asking Adam and Eve to partake of all flora and fauna but not to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree. However, the injunction was defied and the first settler was exiled by the authorial center and made the 'other' to work for his daily bread. Since then all countries and nations have followed the same colonial paradigm.

What is evident throughout the story is an anti-colonist attitude and it is therefore imperative that one understands that the 'colonial-colonized' binary might be true for the beasts in the forest but it is definitely not a 'happy' situation in a 'human' world. Kenyatta, appropriately, chooses animals/beasts to symbolize the members of the colonizing nation and gentlemen to correspond to the native inhabitants of the land. The beastly image of the colonizers conveys the 'attitude' of the so-called colonial center that they are not behaving like humans. In other words, any form of colonization that asserts the superiority of 'one' over the 'other' degrades men to the level of **beasts**. For instance, Ben Jonson, very topically, in **Volpone**, shows the major characters as executing their 'inhuman' parts according to their animalistic tendencies (Mosca: Fox; Voltore: Vulture; Corbaccio: Raven; Corvino:

Crow etc.) when they 'fall' from being human. Similarly, the use of the word 'Jungle' shows that the animal like colonizer's vision is erroneous and that the people of the third-world countries are not 'others'; not savages; not 'barbaric'; not 'uncivilized' after all.

Jomo Kenyetta's short story leads us to a central concept of postcolonial theory, which is referred to as 'othering'. It could be referred to as a well-thought out methodology in which a 'center' gradually marginalizes and erases the essential identity of an individual through its colonial ideological forces. And thus we have a division of the world between "**us**" - the civilized, the cultured, the good - the 'center' and "**them**" - the savage, the uncultured and the bad - the 'other'. The colonizers continually view themselves as better to those living in the area they are trying to colonize. For instance, Edward Said talks about the interplay between the 'Occident' and the 'Orient' in his *Orientalism*, where the 'Occident' is his term for the West (England, France, and the United States), and the 'Orient' is the term for the romantic and misunderstood Middle East and Far East. According to Said, the West has created an opposition between the reality of the East and the romantic notion of the 'Orient'. Consequently the Middle East and Asia is looked upon with prejudice and preconceptions. And in order to fill this fissure, this void, the west has created a culture, a history and a future promise for them for they are backward and incapable of knowing their own history and culture.

It is on this framework that rests not only the study of the 'Orient', but also the subject of political expansionism of Europe in the East. Right at the start, Mr. Elephant tells his "friend," the man to remain outside during the thunderstorm because his "skin is harder," and he can survive the elements better than he. This is the 'discourse', the 'narrative' created by the 'center' for the 'other'. After this episode, still trusting these animals, the gentleman innocently believes that the lion is looking out for his best interests. And this gullibility existed for a sustained period of time. The innocent native inhabitants could not see through the European/ Western colonial design and hence 'believed' in them time and again. When the commission is formed, it becomes evident that man is in an inferior position in the investigation. No one from his side is "well enough educated" to understand how law works. To make the perpetrator a part of the committee probing the investigation implies making a mockery of the law. To refer to men as "not educated enough" too smacks of a snobbish, superior, arrogant, demeaning, audacious attitude which refuses to assign any form of 'education' to the 'other'. Besides, the council/committee members have divine authority to rule and thus would look after "the interests of race less adequately endowed with teeth and claws." The people of the land are backward and not far enough developed as a nation to rightly use what they own. And therefore the superior center has the authority, the right to use native resources. And this is how the center justified the steady and gradual draining of the native wealth and natural resources.

In addition, the 'divine-right theory,' provided the façade to indulge in total and full-scale exploitation of the ignorant and heretic natives. Quite apparently, the man is the 'other,' unfit to function on his own without the help from superior and divinely appointed rulers. This discourse of not being 'fit enough' needs to be read in conjunction with being insufficiently equipped and undeveloped and therefore all socio-political 'decisions' have to be taken by the 'center' and not the 'other'. Thus realizing that something is muddled in these jungle procedures, the gentleman slowly 'awakens' to the colonization around him. And this moment of 'enlightenment', of 'awakening' triggers off the long process of socio-political decolonization through what Professor Virgilio Enriquez appropriately terms as: (i) Rediscovery and Recovery (ii) Mourning (iii) Dreaming (iv) Commitment and (v) Action. Although the man and Mr. Elephant started out as friends, Mr. Elephant's forceful and dominant behaviour makes the man realize that perhaps he is not as friendly as he appears. The man starts to "grumble," but these early protests are crushed by the soothing King of the jungle. However,

the process of recovery and renewal cannot be immediate for the colonial center will not give up its hegemonic position without sufficient resistance. And therefore when the man tries to protest again saying that he has no representation from his side on the council, he finds that his 'resistance' goes in vain for his words turn to deaf ears. Again, when the council meets, the man wants to narrate his version of the story, but this narrative is stifled. The man fears that violence may occur and therefore agrees with the council's decision and relocates to a new hut. Thus the colonial tools of violence and aggression are not resorted to by the native. He prefers not to create a parallel hegemonic narrative 'of the colonized becoming the colonizer', but rather 'laments' on his 'fall/loss' for a brief 'umbilical' period and then with the wings of his imagination ('dreaming') decides to patiently 'relocate,' for a true man would use violence only when it is absolutely essential and is in the larger interest of humanity. Of course, the idea of 'relocation' appears to be synonymous with the idea of 'diaspora', which is another narrative with its own problematics. But that the 'other' has sought 'alternatives' is a testimony that he aims and looks for 'creation' rather than destruction.

Thus, after the other jungle populace has taken over this hut and others as well, the man decides that he has been 'voiceless' enough and must finally protect himself. This is where the colonial cycle comes full circle. Now awakened to his 'original' socio-political identity and individuality, he creates his own independent narrative, discourse and ideology. The man, taking steps to end his subjugation, builds a new hut, in the hope that it will attract all the animals. Successfully, all the animals, swell inside and argue among themselves about ownership rights. Here too, we can note the 'center's' insulated and closed colonial approach and the effort to look for 'open' alternatives by the 'other'. Consequently, the 'other' gifted with his own ingenuity decides to create his own discourse ('voice') and makes the colonial 'center' a victim of his own making. He notes the polyphony, the multiplicity of voices and dissension among the ruling 'center' and takes the final step to end domination. He burns down the hut, and thus all the ruling animals die. This is where the discourse of native resistance touches its climax. All forms of colonial exploitation need to be actually 'burnt' to make a new beginning. The idea draws a parallel with the Noah story in the Bible about how God had to ensure that it actually rained for forty days and forty nights and then start 'creation' afresh. It is enough to effect in Derridian terms an 'erasure' but what is needed to restore the confidence and self-respect of the 'other' is to 'burn out' the old and begin anew. Free at last, the man decides that "Peace is costly, but it's worth the expense." Life ends happily ever after, for this man now knows that the colonizers are out of his way. In other words, the 'other' ceases at this point to be the 'other' for the 'center' has been displaced and uprooted. The text suggests, then, through these examples, that freedom from oppression only occurs when people awaken to the injustices around them and take matter into their own hands.

So conclusively, we can definitely accept the universal existence of the 'center-other' binary since times immemorial. In fact, every age has addressed this phenomenon through different nomenclatures. Today, the colonial paradigm is in the process of being completely subverted through the active modes of native resistance. But in all this socio-political narrative the voiceless has typically found a 'voice' that believes in othering the colonial binary for good and establishing purely democratic ideals.

Notes:

- I. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_\(postcolonialism\)/24.09/2016](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_(postcolonialism)/24.09/2016)).
- II. (<http://www.sjsu.edu/people/marcos.pizarro/maestros/Laenui.pdf/26092016>).

References:

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- II. Buchanan, Ian. Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2010.

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