The Liminality of Meaning:

The Implications of Homi Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity

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Abstract

The present paper is a daring attempt to vindicate the implications of Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory of hybridity in reading literary texts and cultures. Reading, in Bhabha's theory, is by no means a slavish imitation of an authorial intention or an assimilation of the target culture. Meaning is generated out of the transaction between the student's culture and that of the author. The student's identity and the text's meaning are both located in the in-between. The text itself might be read as a hybrid, nomadic, and ryizomatic world. The act of reading is a process of cultural hybridity in which the student's negotiation of meaning constitutes what is dubbed a 'Third Space', an interstice which transcends the Manichean polarities us/them, Self/Other, colonizer/Colonized.

Bhabha's theory puts into radical question the mimetic view of language. Reality, in his approach, is produced not prior but during the student's encounter with the text/target culture. Since the text is not immune from the taints of its author's ideology and his cultural demarcations, students' role is to resist imperial/colonial representations by correcting and dispelling many Western texts' stereotypes. They are enticed to appropriate the literary signs they read and to dislocate the text from its original context. Indeed, the postcolonial strategy of 'writing back' would constitute great gains if applied in the literature class.

1-Identity in a Foreign Language

The colonizer has always deemed the colonial language as an important weapon of subjection. The famous Kenyan writer and theorist Ngugi Wa Thingo' maintains that language is "the most important vehicle through which […] power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation."[1] Ngugi assumes that speaking a foreign language makes the non-native speakers prey to the danger of assimilation and of losing their authentic culture. He believes that western language and culture are "taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds." ("The Language" 288) Ngugi, like many other post-colonial writers, is inspired by Michel Foucault's belief that discourse reinforces power relations, because those who have power spread their knowledge in the way they wish. In his study of the nexus between power and knowledge, Foucault asserts that power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourse, learning processes and everyday lives"[2] Believing that control over language is one of the main instruments of imperial oppression, Ashcroft et al also ascertain that

> [colonial education] installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as a norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities […] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. [3]

According to the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis", every language expresses the specific worldview of its native speakers and constructs their reality. For the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, human beings "dissect nature along lines laid down by [their] native languages"[4] In line with this view, Ngugi asserts that "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next." ("The Language" 289) According to this view, no other borrowed language can replace the native one in expressing its worldview. Frantz Fanon also considers that speaking the language of the oppressors implies the acceptance of their culture, because "to speak […] means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."[5] Identity would consequently be at stake in the use of a foreign language.

2-Homi Bhabha's theory of Hybridity

Bhabha suggests that the best term to describe cultural relations is intercultural dialogue rather than cultural antagonism. He states that it is "the 'inter'-the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between […]-that carries the burden of the meaning of culture."[6]

Postcolonial theory has tergiversated the view of the rootedness of cultural identity. The latter comes to be understood as a "rhizome"[7] In other words, cultural identity is formed via rhizomatic intercultural relations. To explain the impurity of cultures in the postcolonial context, Ashcroft et.al use the very interesting image of the "palimpsest", which is an old document whose writing is partially or completely erased to be replaced by another. In their words, "previous 'inscriptions' are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness. This confirms the dynamic, contestatory and dialogic nature of linguistic, geographic, and cultural space as it emerges in post-colonial experience. "[8] This cultural and linguistic impurity is also highlighted by the American anthropologist James Clifford who asserts that everyone's identity is a hybrid one and that there is no pure race, language or religion. In his words, "it becomes increasingly difficult to attach human identity and meaning to a coherent 'culture' or 'language'"[9] What Clifford implies is that cultural hybridity is an inevitable fate because no culture can survive and thrive apart from the other cultures; otherwise, it will perish and fade away in the mist of time.

Indeed, the theory itself (hybridity) is hybrid since it borrows from a cluster of theories like that of Jaques Lacan, Jacque Derrida, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Since its appearance in the 1990s, the theory of hybridity has had a great influence on postcolonial studies. In Bhabha's terms, binary oppositions like the colonizer/the colonized, Self/Other undergoe a process of deconstruction by the emergence of a hybrid space between them, which is also called "a Third Space", a "liminal space", or "an interstice". Bhabha discusses the danger of "the fixity and fetishism of identities." (The Location 9) He challenges the view that cultures have fixed and unchangeable traits. He rather ascertains the fluidity of cultures. In his words,

> The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation […] challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People […] It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew. (The Location 37)

Bhabha refers to post-colonial religious situation in order to illustrate his theory of hybridity. Some natives of the colonized lands, who have never owned a book, view the Bible as "signs taken for wonders-as an insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline." (The Location 102) Despite these people's attraction to the new religion, they did not imitate its ideas slavishly; they rather took a repulsive attitude towards it by "using the powers of hybridity to resist baptism and to put the project of conversion in an impossible position." (The Location 118)

In their definition of the term hybridity, the critics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Grifiths, and Helen Tiffin state that

> One of the most employed and most disputed terms in post-colonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc"[10]

In this sense, hybridity is used in post-colonial theory to refer to linguistic and intercultural space, space of in-betweeness. It implies a direct contact between Self and Other or their fusion in a single, mixed and impure culture. This view collides head on with that of Edward Said, one of the early theorists of cultural hybridity, who asserts that "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude."[11] Hence, hybridity is likely to reduce the sharp dualistic or Manichean thinking and break the rigidly established barriers between the colonizer and the colonized. It is a daring attempt to find a common space or a contact zone where cultures meet. The critic Peter Brooker develops further this idea, pointing out that the meanings of the term hybridity refers to "the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities, or of texts which express and explore these conditions."[12]

Since borders are fluid and cultures are not hermetic and self-sufficient, the Self is defined and constructed in relation to an Oher. As the critic Milica Zivkovic states, "[t]here can be no fixed or true identity, no origin or original […] There is no ultimate knowledge, representation is no longer a matter of veracity or accuracy but merely of competing"[13]. In this view, national identities are inclusive rather than exclusive. Hybridity shakes the verity of an authentic culture or a fixed reality. Borders, which are thought to be divisive, might be uniting. This view goes along the line of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's discussion of borders. In "Borders and Bridges, he writes:

> [I]f a border marks the outer edge of one region, it also marks the beginning of the next region. As the marker of an end, it also functions as the marker of a beginning. Without the end of one region, there can be no beginning of another. Depending on our starting point, the border is both the beginning and the outer edge. Each space is beyond the boundary of the other. It is thus at once a boundary and a shared space"[14]

So, when dealing with alterity, one must accept to cross the border into the third space of interpretation, the realm of the in-between where ambivalence reigns. In dealing with Otherness, the whole interest lies in the incessant process of border-crossing between antinomies in the Third Space, which knows no boundaries.

Bhabha's theory is often misunderstood as an attempt to create a universal culture, a leveling and an elimination of divergences in a world marked by difference and Otherness. Hybridity implies a recognition of difference despite cultural mixedness and impurity. It entails a moderate

coalition of cultures that would preserve their distinctiveness. Despite cultural border crossing, separatedness and difference are invincible. According to Ngugi, knowing the Other might enlighten us, but one should never forsake his own culture. In his words, "What has been in the colonial context is that the act of interpreting the other culture that is far from us has, instead of clarifying real connections and each culture thereby illuminating the other, ended by making us captives of the foreign culture and alienating us from our own" ("Borders and Bridges" 119). The quote illustrates the fact that despite hybridity, separatedness and difference are maintained.

Concerning the post-colonial linguistic situation, Bhabha maintains that discourse is not entirely within the control of the colonizer. He believes that the colonized, who were always 'objectified' by the colonized finally become 'subjects' capable of destabilizing the colonial authority. The colonial discourse, which has long empowered the colonizers can disempower them. Hence, hybridity means the "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal […] It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (The Location 112).

3-Literary Interpretation and the Liminality of Meaning

Indeed, literature is a signifier of national identity and heritage because the author always locates the text in his socio-historical and cultural context. So, to decrypt the meaning of the text, students often resort to the author's life and his social and historical context where they believe the meaning of the text lies. They take the author's intention as the only possible meaning and correct interpretation for the text. Edward Said evinces the danger of such a method of reading literary texts. In his introduction to Culture and Imperialism, he states that "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method the colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (Xiii).

Instead of representing a fixed reality, the text has a multiplicity of meanings, which differ in accordance with the reader's socio-cultural context. Indeed, Bhabha refuses a purely mimetic view of language. The text, in his view, must never be read mimetically as a reality that must be taken for granted without questioning. The theory of hybridity considers realism and historicism as historically and culturally specific. It insists on the arbitrariness of signification and emphasizes the open-endedness and hybridity of language and meaning. According to Bhabha, "the *who* of agency bears no mimetic immediacy or adequacy of representation. It can only be signified outside the sentence" (The location 271).

Hence, Bhabha vehemently criticizes the view of language as a closed system. He calls into radical question the view of language as a tool of expressing a fixed meaning, which is inscribed in the words. The foreign language, when used by others, is remoulded and adopted to new usages. It is decentered from its original meaning and acquires a new meaning at the hands of the non-native speakers. Challenging the mimetic view of language, Bhabha sees the literary text itself as a site of hybridity. According to him, "When the words of the master become the site of hybridity-the warlike sign of the native-then we may not only read between the lines, but also seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain" (The Location 121).

With the advent of post-structuralism, the intellectual world has been decentred. Postcolonialism, which borrows from post-structuralism, calls for a deconstruction of any authoritative centre to which one might refer for a correct and valid interpretation. Indeed, the centre has been deconstructed since Frederick Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God. The relativity of truth is best expressed in Nietzsche's dictum "There are no facts, there are only interpretations." Very much like post-structuralism, post-colonialism is based on skepticism and certainty.

Postcolonialism, following the path of post-structuralism, has purged the world from a traditional Manichean thinking, which has long been rife in the West. This Manichean thinking divided the world into binary oppositions like the colonizer/the colonized, Self/Other, Man/Woman. It privileges the first polarity and undermines the second. Those polarities or binaries, to use a Derridean Jargon, undergo a process of deconstruction in the post-colonial discourse. In fact, opposites are already united; they depend on each other integrally, thus, there is no absence without presence.

Due to the difference of writing, the utterance attains different ramifications of meaning. According to Bhabha,

> The reason a cultural text or a system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation-*the place of utterance*-is crossed by the difference of writing. This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation itself-not the content of the symbol or its social function, but the structure of symbolization. It is this difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic or transparent (The location 36).

So, the text is open to a wide range of interpretations because of the difference of writing across societies and communities. In the act of writing, the author employs a set of strategies, rules and assumptions, which are embedded in his community and used unconsciously in the act of writing. Hence, within the same community, the author's intention and the reader's interpretation are likely to dovetail with each other. Of utmost significance, the same work is received differently by different societies. According to Bhabha, "The transfer of meaning can never be total between systems of meaning." (The Location 163) This view collides head on with that of Stanley Fish, who coins the term 'interpretative communities'. He writes:

> Interpretative communities are made up of those who share interpretative strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round [15]

So, accordingly, the writer and the reader of the same community are prone to infuse a text with the same meaning since they have a set of shared rules and attitudes. Interpretative communities, according to Fish, explain "the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) […] Of course this stability is always temporary (unlike the longed for and timeless stability of the text) Interpretative communities grow and decline."("Interpreting the Variorum" 304) So, even in the same interpretative community, meaning varies with time and circumstances.

Like Derrida, Bhabha focuses on the semantic slippage within the text. He also emphasizes "how signification is affected by particular sites and contexts of enunciation and address" (The Location 119). The slippage of the colonial discourse occurs when the text is read in another context. Also, due to the effect of différance[16], meaning changes.

Words, signs, and symbols acquire different meanings in different contexts. Language, when detached from the socio-cultural context it depicts, becomes liminal, unable to covey a stable or exact meaning. As Bhabha maintains, "The ill-fitting robe of language alienates content in the

sense that it deprives it of an immediate access to a stable or holistic reference 'outside' itself" (The Location 164).

The same text and the same words, in the same language, are open to a multiplicity of meanings when read by different readers, who belong to different cultures. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephen Dedalus expresses how a foreign language acquires a different meaning when spoken by non-native speakers. He says:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master,* on his lips and mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language [17]

Reading or interpretation is not a reproduction of the author's thoughts and expressions. Derrida calls this repetition of the author's intention or meaning "doubling commentary", because this is a reproduction of a pre-existing meaning/reality. Instead, reading is a productive process of constructing and reconstructing meaning.

Very much like the Deconstructionists, Bhabha believes in the ambiguity, unreliability and slipperiness of language. He believes in the non-existence of a solid or stable meaning. Bhabha shares Derrida's view of the intrinsically metaphorical nature of language and its inability to convey a clear meaning or an absolute truth. He emphasizes the ambivalent nature of language and its untrustworthiness in expressing any veracity or verity.

Indeed, the word or language, in general, does not exist in a vacuum. Its meaning cannot be searched for in a dictionary; is to be sought in its speaker's intention and his context. According to Michael Bakhtin,

> Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other peoples' mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own [18]

Hence, language cannot attain any meaning unless it is uttered in a context. When decontextualised or read in isolation or in a dictionary, words cease to possess any sense.

Since the individual's identity is hybrid due to the hybrid nature of culture, and since the language in which literature is composed is also unstable; it follows that meaning is also hybrid. Central to Bhabha's theory is that the individual has a double vision or consciousness because he is divided between at least two cultures (for example the culture of the colonized and that of the coloniser). According to him, meaning is liminal, and its construction requires a passage through a Third Space. The latter "represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot in itself be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation." [19]

The meaning of a text is always located in the in-between since it is read by a social group, which differs from that of the author. Emphasizing the existence of a Third Space, or an interstice, between the reader's culture and that of the author, Bhabha states, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised, and read anew." ("Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference" 208) Liminality implies that words are detached from their original or fixed meanings; they are imbued with new shades of meanings. Signs always mean more than what they say. Language is fluid and it is even marked by conflicting and contradictory interpretations. In Bhabha's view, textual liminality entails "a contradictory process of reading between the lines." (The Location 250) Thus, Bhabha's theory calls into question the truth of literary interpretation.

The text's meaning, in Bhabha's theory, is not given but rather constructed in the reading process. In reading postcolonial literature, in particular, the reader is asked to be a hybrid one. According to Bhabha,

> by allowing ourselves to become hybrid readers, we can enter into dialogue with the texts and their political implications. We can understand what it means to be both inside and outside varied cultural contexts, and experience the different kinds of spaces and insularities that those contexts permit. In other words, we allow ourselves to be transformed and translated culturally, entering into dialogue with the work, its implicit readers, and the power relationships between them. (208)

So, the colonial discourse, in Bhabha's theory loses its authority.

4-The 'Writing Back' Strategy

In reading postcolonial literature, in particular, Bhabha suggests that "the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunts the historical present." (The Location 12) So, if writing is a negation, reading is a negotiation or a restoration of what has been repressed and negated. The quote refers to the 'writing back' strategy. The terms is first coined by Salman Rushdie, and it is canvassed in Ashcroft et.al's The Empire Writes Back[20]. Indeed, the 'writing back' also refers to a postcolonial strategy of reading literary texts. In responding to literary texts, students should deconstruct all the stereotypes, they should correct what has been misrepresented. They are enticed to rewrite the text or interpret it in accordance with their socio-historical reality. A post-colonial reading, according to Ashcroft et.al, is

> a form of deconstructive reading most usually applied to works emanating from the colonizers (but may be applied to works by the colonized) which demonstrates the extent to which the text contradicts its underlying assumptions (civilization, justice, aesthetics, sensibility, race) and reveals its (often unwitting) colonialist ideologies and processes (Post-colonial Studies: Key Concepts 173).

In his critical commentary on John Stuart Mill's On Liberalism, Bhabha suggests a model of how to read texts. As he puts it,

> Rereading Mill through the strategies of 'writing' I have suggested, reveals that one cannot passively follow the line of argument running through the logic of the opposing ideology. The textual process of political antagonism initiates a contradictory process of reading between the lines; the agent of the discourse becomes, in the same time of utterance, the inverted, projected object of argument, turned against itself." (The Location 24)

In this sense, reading texts requires a reading between the lines. It implies approaching texts with a critical stance to decipher their real meaning. The same language that might be used to undermine and devalue the Other might be used against the Self; this strategy becomes known in the post-colonial discourse as "Prospero-Caliban syndrome", which means the use of the colonial language as a weapon against the colonizer. During the intercultural dialogue through literature, "meanings and values are (mis)read […] signs are misappropriated. (The Location 34)" Reading also implies reinterpreting or reconstructing identity/history. This reconstruction of identity and rewriting of history imply a reversal and displacement of hierarchical binary oppositions and a redefinition of otherness. The critic D. Emily Hicks states: "If writing is always a rereading, is not reading always a rewriting? Such a question points up the context in which border writing must be approached as a process of negotiation"[21] Reading or interpreting the Other is very subjective, and it is not based on plausible or cogent arguments. Hence, history is 'his' story.

The 'writing back' strategy might be applied to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, which depicts Africans as savages and cannibals; they were even silenced and made speechless in the novel. The meaning of a novel like The Heart of Darkness depends on the community the reader has come from. African readers are liable to interpret it as account of the Europeans' greedy and heartless accumulation of ivory in the Congo. It demonstrates the West's fervid desire for imperialism and colonialism.

The role of the student is to 'write back' and to restore voice and power to those who were deemed inferior. Like in post-structuralism, a post-colonial reading involves moving minor people and marginalized cultures to the centre.

Edward Said has also given a new reading to Albert Camus, one of the great authors and one of the winners of the Nobel prize for literature. Said criticizes those who read Camus outside his historical context, which is colonialism. According to him, readers of Camus's The Outsider never consider the fact that Murseut, who is not given any name or history in the novel, is judged for killing an Algerian, something, which had never happened. For Said, this is a misrepresentation of history [22] Camus, obviously, has a hidden purpose behind this misrepresentation. Another example Said uses to explain the strategy of 'writing back' is Albert Camus's novel The Plague in which many Arabs die, but this fact is never mentioned in the novel. The only one who interest Camus and the European readers at that time, and even now, are the Europeans (67). Said maintains that the starting point of his reading of Camus is the fact that he was against the Algerian independence.

Bhabha considers Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses a glaring example of hybridity. But this novel, which is a misrepresentation and a misreading of the Koran, was received as a blaspheme by Muslims. Some non-Muslim readers have received it positively. Apart from the cultural and linguistic hybridity it contains, the novel's reception evinces how interpretation differs from one culture to another. The very notion of blaspheme differs from one cultural context to another. Indeed, hybridity should not amount to a heresy or a blaspheme like what Salman Rushdie did in his The Satanic Verses. By describing it as a blaspheme, Muslims have used the power of hybridity to to read this hybrid text. According to Bhabha,

> Blaspheme goes beyond the severance of tradition and replaces its claim to a purity of origins with a poetics of relocation and reinscription[…]Blaspheme is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter of the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation (The Location 225)

So, hybridity becomes a blaspheme when it is applied to the sacred texts like the Koran. Bhabha goes further to theorise blaspheme as neglecting the original literary of cultural text when reading it in another context.

The opening chapter of Rushdie's The Satanic Verses pays the reader's attention to the problematic nature of 'true' discourse. The narrator says: "Once upon a time - *it was* and it was not so, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did* - maybe, then, or maybe not"[23] So, it is for the reader to decide the verity of what he reads; he is free to generate his own meaning.

Conclusion

Resisting the Eurocentric vision of the world, Bhabha's theory attempts to transcend and tergiversate the traditional Manichean thinking. It downplays oppositionality and calls for an increasing intercultural dialogue and mutuality, preferring hybridity to a monolithic and exclusive culture. Indeed, binary opposition Self/Other, colonizer/colonized seem to collapse in the post-colonial context with the existence of a hybrid culture or a Liminal Space.

Reading literary texts allows students to transgress the traditional dichotomies and deconstruct the myth of a pure culture. The act of reading is a process of mixedness, interaction and interconnectedness of cultures. However, and despite the possibility of crossing cultural borders through literature, discrepancies and divergences should always be maintained. Hybridity should only promote intercultural dialogue but never lead to the effacement of difference or to the loss one's essential cultural traits.

Bhabha's theory encourages students to construct meaning in relation to their socio-cultural context and not just to parrot an authorial intention or some subjective readings, which proffer erroneous attitudes and views, which students might imbibe without reflection. By adopting a strategy of 'writing back', students question and criticize the ideologies implied in the text. Students must be impelled to find and deconstruct the prejudices and stereotypes. They must distrust the text as a mimetic and representative of a fixed and unchangeable reality.

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