

Al-Hikmat: A Journal of Philosophy
Volume 39 (2019) pp. 19-29

OCIDENTALISM, ORIENTALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL SURVEY

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Abstract: In this article, I have argued that the idea of creating a “civilizational other” is pivotal to the project of colonization. Political authority over the native cultures cannot be established unless Empires create knowledge which declares them essentially superior to native cultures and civilization. The arrival of the British in the subcontinent is no exception to these hegemonic practices. Natives are made to believe that their cultures, histories, folklores and mythologies are either of marginal importance or need to be revised in terms of western epistemic demands. This way of thought paves way for the reformatory and educational project of the colonizer. The indigenous epistemic structures/narratives are revised or obliterated as they cannot fulfill the modernist demands of progress and enlightenment. My argument is that the erasure is primarily political and not epistemic. I have surveyed the western idea of the construction of the self and other and how in political terms, it becomes instrumental in establishing the western hegemony over the Orient. Furthermore, I have focused on the sub-continental epistemic response to explore the genesis of Muslim identity which paved way for the creation of Pakistan.

Key Words: Orient, Occident, Episteme, Hegemony, Native, Folklore, Mythologies

Introduction

In this article, I have explored the idea of “Self” and “other” as it appears in the western episteme. My argument is that to understand the process of colonization, it is important to see how any civilization constructs the idea of “other” to give itself a distinctive national identity. In other words, the internal contradictions and fissures of the nationalist ideology are silenced in the presence of “other”. Hence the epistemological imaginary paves way for the construction of a nationalist identity which sustains itself as long as the “other” is perceived as a threat. And with the change of “other”, the construct/category of national identity also goes through the process of revision.

Occidental Perspectives

The project of colonization drew its philosophical strength from the imagined superiority of west over the other non-western people. By considering the non-western people as their “civilizational other”, the western scholarship also deprived them of the right to represent themselves. They cannot speak for themselves. They need to be represented. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979) theorizes how the non-western people are imagined and represented in the western episteme. He observes:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident.” Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point of elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny and so on. *This* Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx (Said 2000, 3).

Said explains the politics of imagining and representing the nonwestern spaces and subjects under the generic term of Orientalism. In terms of Hegel’s master slave relationship, the Occident recognizes itself only if Orient serves as its antithesis (Master Slave relationship). Such a binary is useful for many purposes. It not only gives a narrative of superior identity to the Occident but also establishes its position as master to control and subjugate “the other”. In this style of thought, the Orient is deprived of its history, culture and language due to which neither can it

represent itself nor can it produce any knowledge about itself. And ironically, the Occident celebrates a unitary history which can accommodate Aeschylus, Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx.

This unitary history tries to produce a historical vacuity for the Orient which can only be filled meaningfully by subscribing to the western canons of history and civilization. Thus the idea of an essentialist Orient which exists *per se*, paves way for the cultural hegemony of the West. European identity can thus be established only in the presence of the Orient (Said 1979, 7). In this power relationship, one has the power to represent and other is just represented. Said further argues that from the late Renaissance to the present, the European identity has considered itself superior to non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter (7). In other words, a conscious effort is made that a counter narrative to challenge this superiority may not emerge.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said explores the idea how power and ideology work consciously or unconsciously to produce cultural/literary narratives that help colonizing imagined uncivilized communities. Taking up narratives and especially novels, Said contends that these narratives construct an image of the “Other” through images, metaphors and symbols that ultimately become an archetypal representation of the uncivilized other. The process of creating and circulating these narratives follows a two pronged strategy. On the one hand, it paves way for colonial hegemony and on the other hand, it blocks the narratives of the other to emerge. Literary narratives, according to Said, not only serve the aesthetic purposes of giving delight to the readers but also become instrumental in portraying a particular type of the world view. Both the colonizer and the colonized use this medium to narrativize their identities. Said makes a very useful comment on the relationship between culture (novels and other literary narratives) and imperialism.

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or block other narratives from forming and

emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them (Said 1994, xiii).

Thus role of narratives becomes of primary importance in imagining nations and civilizations. In other words, the essentiality of the idea of nationhood depends upon the vigor of the narratives that bind all those who happen to be the reader of these narratives. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson argues that no theorist including Freud, Marx or Darwin had been able to answer the questions raised by nationalism. He makes a historical survey of the idea of nationalism and how during different historical epochs, it had appropriated itself to meet the social and anthropological demands of the human societies. In the first phase, there were “religiously imagined” communities in which the meaning depended on the non-arbitrariness of the sign. In other words, the interpretation of the sacred texts was elitist phenomenon accessible only to a few. It forged a religiously imagined concept of nationhood among the members of a religious community.

With the rise of “print capitalism”, the speakers of the same language considered themselves to be the part of an imagined community. Innovations like newspapers and novels identified and addressed new national communities. The new discourse of nationalism replaced the elitist use of language of scriptures with vernacular languages. This phenomenon forged a new sense of nationalism rooted in the idea of economic determinism. In other words, the people who speak the same language and read the same printed material belong to one nation. This version of nationalism challenged the theocratic version of national identity in which only a select few had the privilege of reading and interpreting scriptures. Thus language gives birth to territorialized nationalism in which religion serves only as a small part of a big whole.

The Orientalist Perspectives

In *Nations and Narrations* (1990) Homi. K Bhabha contends that *Imagined Communities* was instrumental in motivating him to make this collection of essays on idea of nationalism. Anderson argued that symbolic structure of a nation works like a realist novel bringing diverge elements and characters through a narrative. *Nation and Narrations* explores this idea of structural similarity of a nation with that of a novel by drawing on the writings of Foucault, Said, Benjman and others. In “Introduction: narrating the nation” Bhabha observes:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation—or—narration might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. (Bhabha 2004a,1).

The idea of nation connotes a community which happens to share the same cultural space and believes in the narrations of nationhood. It takes birth in the mind's eye and consolidates itself by creating and circulating stories and myths about its origin. Thus much earlier than nation becomes a political idea, it takes birth in literary space and projects itself in time and space through metaphors, symbols and folk tales. These stories afterwards become national heritage.

Since stories have heroes and villains, the narratives of nationhood also create villain to project themselves in time and space. This defining of the self through other is important in political and aesthetic terms. In political terms, it creates a space within the power structure of the state. In aesthetic terms, it keeps the idea of an imagined community alive by reworking the historical past, myths and stories; hence, a constant negotiation with dominant power structures through narrating the narratives of nationhood. Thus nation becomes a site where these subjectivities find their expression in the form of political desires to gain more power for one's nation. And in a colonial state this struggle appears as the form of negotiation between the cultures of colonizer and the colonized people.

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha further explores how these two cultures create new sites of meaning when they contest each other in the colonized space. He argues that the colonial attempt to produce an anglicized cultural identity produces a version of identity which is neither purely colonial nor native. As a result of cultural collision or interaction, the native's identity is mutated taking the form of hybridity. Bhabha employs postmodernist theory to critique the idea of a stable or pure national identity. He further argues that theory allows studying the ways in which race, community, gender and nationality converge to produce hybrid versions of identities.

The arrival of the colonizer in the subcontinent not only produced cultural hybridity but also introduced Hindu Muslim binary. The War of Independence 1857 happened to be the turning point in Muslim consciousness about its identity and representation in the public sphere.

The colonizer had wrested power from Muslims. And they had preconceived notions about Islam and Muslim identity. Romila Thapar in her essay “Religion as History in the Making of South Asian Identities” argues that there was already a European view of Islamic civilization since the time of Crusades. This was couched in terms of holding back the tide of Islam and an attempt to save Christendom (Thapar 2002, 284). It means that in European religious consciousness Islam already existed as the “other” and in India it posed a potential threat to the consolidation of Raj.

Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) in his seminal work *Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind (Causes of Revolt)* assured the British:

There are, again, no grounds for supposing that the Mohammedans had for a long time been conspiring or plotting a simultaneous rise or a religious crusade against the professors of a different faith. The English Government does not interfere with the Mohammedans in the practice of their religion. For this sole reason it is impossible that the idea of religious crusade should have been entertained (Khan 2017, 17).

What is important to note here is the use of term Mohammedans to describe Indian Muslims and also the categorical denial of the role of religion in fueling the rebellion. Moreover, Syed Ahmed confined religion to the private sphere of life as he was satisfied with the British policy of non-interference in the religious practices. My argument is that mentioning of the term Mohammedan could be taken as the first step towards registering the presence of a distinct Muslim identity in the public discourse. And it was the only possible way to negotiate with the changing political conditions of the subcontinent. It further means that there is a shift in the Muslim imaginary about its identity. It needed a new national narrative which could capacitate them to create a legitimate space in the post 1857 power relations. And religion turned out to be the best possible option to engage with both Hindus and British.

Imagining one’s history is central to any narrative of identity. Because it is through the historical consciousness that religious consciousness finds its way in the public discourse. In the words of Romila Thapar, “History becomes central to the identity and demarcation of those in contestation”. (289) With the fall of Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862), Muslims developed a nostalgic attachment with Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) whose glory helped them fight the feelings of powerlessness in the colonial India. In the pre-colonial India, Muslims had never expressed such passionate love for Turkey. Ironically, Muslims soldiers had fought against Turkey as the part of

Royal Indian Army. It was during the hard times of political downfall that they needed to relate themselves with a symbol to fight the feelings of disempowerment in India. In theoretical terms, it was an act of imagining their national/ religious identity as non-temporal and non-spatial rooted in some mythical past which joined all the Muslims together under the generic term of *Ummah*. Hence a transnational Muslim identity overtakes Indian identity. Mubarak Ali in his essay, "Consciousness of Muslim identity before 1947 observes:

Muslim search for pride in their Islamic past, thus, once again turned their orientation of Indian Muslims outwards, towards the rest of Muslim world. The consciousness of a greater Muslim identity obscured their Indian identity from their minds. Their sense of solidarity with the Muslim world found expression, especially, in sympathy for the Ottoman Empire (Ali 2011, 20).

Thus history and fiction intersect each other to give birth to narratives of identity and nationhood. Indian and Turkish Muslims had nothing in common except religion. But in the hard times of victimization, they found in Turks what they had lost on Indian soil i.e. the power to be the master of their own fate. But the alliance turned to be of illusory nature as with the fall of Ottoman Empire, the narrative of transnational identity lost its currency. Indian Muslims started Khilafat Movement to strengthen their claim on extra-territorial nationalism. The movement failed with the end of Turkish caliphate. And once again, Muslim scholarship was in search of a narrative that could bring a synthesis between these two narratives of nationhood.

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-138), the poet philosopher, tried to bring a synthesis of these two conflicting narratives of nationalism. In modern democratic secular consciousness, religion was only a private affair of human life. And the public space was essentially of non-religious nature. The private public dichotomy weakened Indian Muslim claim over a separate national identity. In one of his speeches, Iqbal tried to answer this question:

What, then, is the problem and its implications? Is religion a private affair? Would you like to see Islam, as a moral and political ideal, meeting the same fate in the world of Islam as Christianity has already met in Europe? Is it possible to retain Islam as an ethical ideal and to reject as a polity in favour of national polities, in which religious attitude is not permitted to play any part? This question

becomes of special importance in India where the Muslims happen to be in minority (Iqbal 2013, 8).

In the speech, Iqbal comments on the fate of Christianity that how with the rise of secular nationalism; it was pushed to the private sphere of life and also lost its universal appeal (Raja 2010, 128). Islam could only survive as a cultural force if it were not faced with the threat of numerical majority of Hindus. He sees the separate nation state for Muslims as the only viable solution to the complex political situation in India. In his famous Allahabad Address (1930), he proposed:

I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North West Indian Muslims State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India. (Iqbal 129).

The speech is considered to be the official manifesto of the demand for Pakistan. But it also does more than that. One can see that the distinct character of Muslim identity is being stressed because of the fear of unalterable numerical Hindu majority. Muslims had never felt like this when they were at the helms of the affairs. But with the loss of political power, they felt that only religion could serve to secure the purpose of bargaining for a better political position.

The question whether Muslims demanded for a separate state for implementing Islam in their public and private lives; or the demand was a bargaining chip to secure a better political position still remains a point of debate among various sections of society. Ayesha Jalal in *The Sole Spokesman* (1985) argues that there was imprecision in the way Jinnah formulated his demand for Pakistan. She argues that it was a deliberate political move to be used as a bargaining chip because he never wanted Pakistan to come into being in its present form. Especially the division of Punjab and Bengal was never envisioned by Jinnah. The title of the sole spokesman of Indian Muslims also indicates his political position as the Muslim who was only interested in safeguarding the right of the Muslims in India; and not creating two heterogeneous states in perpetual conflict with each other. Since both the nations were fused with the spirit of reviving their imagined glory hence it left no option to Jinnah but to accept the creation of Pakistan.

Christian church rescued Greek and Roman Empire when they were no longer able to defend themselves against the attacks of Barbarians. It means that the political vacuity was addressed by the religious discourse

to foster the feelings of national unity on the one hand and check the civilizational decay on the other. Identity politics followed the same philosophical trajectory in the subcontinent. And especially in the post 1857 scenario, for Indian Muslim elite, religion was the only theme that could give them a narrative of national unity and identity. Akbar S. Ahmed in *Pakistan Society: Islam, Ethnicity and Leadership in South Asia* (1986) argues that Indian Muslim history is unique in the sense that unlike Iran and Afghanistan, Indian Muslims had to confront other religious identities and find space for coexistence. In India, this politico-religious engagement redefined the idea of Muslim identity when they were faced with creating political spaces within a dominating Hindu majority. He further argues that the Muslims responded by adopting one of two historically opposed model of social behavior: orthodox, legal, formal on the one hand; unorthodox, syncretic and informal on the other. The Muslim response to the British colonial rule was the third borrowed from the both. It was orthodox, syncretic and informal insisting upon religion as the sole basis of human conduct.

Venkat Dhulipala in *Creating A New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (2015) rejects Ayesha Jalal's thesis that Jinnah used Islam as a bargaining chip to secure a proper representation for Muslims in the power corridors. He is of the view that Islam promised them what they had lost after 1857 i.e. their own kingdom and the Ottoman Empire, their newly found source of inspiration during colonial times. He observes:

My study argues that far from being a vague idea that accidentally became a nation-state, Pakistan was popularly imagined in U.P. as a sovereign Islamic state, a New Medina, as it were called by some of its proponents. In this regard, it was not just envisaged as a refuge for the Indian Muslims, but as an Islamic utopia that would be the harbinger for renewal and rise of Islam in the modern world...emerges as a worthy successor to the defunct Turkish Caliphate as the foremost Islamic power in the twentieth century (Dhulipala 2015, 4).

I have presented a historical survey of the idea of birth of nationhood both in the Western and the Oriental episteme. Thus, in tracing the trajectory of building binaries, we have reached a point where the new binary of "self" and "other" replaces the old one of "civilized" and "barbarian". I argue that the modern nomenclature does not change the inherent power positions in the making of binaries. It still remains a power relation in which one has the power to represent the

“other”. Hegel further argues “consciousness has, qua self-consciousness, henceforth a twofold object—the one immediate, the object of sense-certainty and of perception, which, however, is here found to be marked by the character of negation; the second, viz. itself, which is the true essence, and is found in the first instance only in the opposition of the first object to it. Self-consciousness presents itself here as the process in which this opposition is removed, and oneness or identity with itself established (Hegel 61). In other words, to be conscious of one’s identity is to be conscious of oneness attained through the negation of the “other”.

Conclusion

The epistemic survey of both the Occidental and the Orientalist narratives of self and other has led me to conclude that the construction of “Other” is dependent on power relations. The Greeks termed the non-Greeks viz, Egyptians, Persians, Medes and Phoenicians as *barbarians*. Figuratively, the word connotes uncivilized, cruel and uneducated. For identity politics it is pivotal to imagine “other/s’ as lesser human beings. And the project of colonization draws its political strength from this type of epistemologically imagined superiority.

The question of having a distinct Muslim identity in the subcontinent is rooted in the fear of political erasure that could have resulted after decolonization. The modern power arrangements relied on the authority of the Hindu majority. And the Muslim minority feared further marginalization in a democratic dispensation. Hence, the Muslim intellectuals revisited the idea of the self and other to create space in the emerging power hierarchies. The ideology of Pakistan was an epistemic response to the narratives of an essentialist/imagined western superiority of the occident over the orient.

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