MULTICULTURALISM: A CHALLENGE TO INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism denotes accommodation of diversity of class, race, gender, language, sexual orientation, ability and disability in one society. It marks diversity both in domestic and international terrains. It, in post-colonial studies, emerges as a binary opposition to monoculturalistic disposition which goes hand in hand with hegemonic role of a single culture. Monoculturalism does not recognize diversity. On the other hand, multiculturalism recognizes diversity and stands against monocentric assimilation. It respects boundaries and at the same time encourages the acceptance of a single culture. Multiculturalism promulgates equal opportunities for minority groups within a community. But many critics today look at multiculturalism with suspicion. They blame it to be more theoretical than practical. They also accuse it for its negotiation with the power relations and compartmentalizing the society. My paper will seek to investigate how multiculturalism challenges the individual identity.

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Introduction

Identity is never transparent and unproblematic. It is a continuous construction process, shared and negotiated among cultural realities, histories and aesthetics. A consistent process of negotiation and challenge marks identity and thus, it threatens the claim of 'cultural identity'. In this connection, culture stands out as a discourse of flux and displacement. Standing face to face with globalism, multiculturalism, intersectionality and liquidity of entity in an era of cyber technology identity of an individual as well as a race or a nation receives 'unstable, metamorphic and even contradictory' nature defined with "multiple points of similarities as well as differences" (Braziel 2003:233). Again, identity is grounded in the archeological phenomena and the retelling of the past of a race. But migrating nature of the people, information through cybernetics, traffic in capitals, consumer products and goods cause hybridity and cross cultural identity of any race or ethnicity and make us re-think about the rubrics of the nation and nationalism. In the same vein, continuous dislocation of people in the arena of tough competition for survival in the capitalist and corporate economic framework caused by diaspora puts the conception of cultural hegemony and homogeneity in questions. Free and open movement of information through cybernetic media challenges the conception of nationalism and puts forth transnationalism in respect of geopolitical terrains. Multinational corporations and crony capitalism both in domestic and international enterprises contribute immensely to the construction of multiculturalism and hybridization of identity. The process of diaspora that began with the inception of human race has brought people of diverse religious affiliations, different linguistic backgrounds, and diverse political and economic realities together and created cultural amalgamation. Multiculturalism encourages tolerance to all diverse cultures and thus inspires cosmopolitanism. However, at the same time the hegemonic role of economically powerful races or nations plays a role in introducing cultural imperialism which by annihilating the local culture Otherizes the natives.

The background Literary Identity

Even the academia of the Third World countries plays a crucial role in creating an atmosphere of multiculturalism. A trend of teaching comparative literature in the

universities of the Third world countries like Bangladesh has been initiated with a view to developing dialogic relationship between the First World countries and the Third World countries and promoting cosmopolitanism on the basis of multiculturalism. Due to the influence of the inclusion of comparative literature into the curriculum of the universities many are applying Western theories to interpret local literature with insignificant care for the local cultural and historical realities. Besides, the methodology followed by different universities and their departments in approaching local literary texts is most importantly tinged with Western pedagogy and hermeneutics. It accelerates multicultural vibes in the exploration of diverse people and their anthropological phenomena. In the universities of America and Europe Third World literature is studied under the title of postcolonial literature. A deliberate intention works behind this branding. It encapsulates Third World literature within a particular timeframe out of which it does not have any significant existence and this timeframe begins only from the period of the advent of the colonizers and it goes on as long as the local people live in contact with their colonizers. It implicates derogatorily that Third World literature emerges only out of the impact of the colonial hegemony other than its own cultural, historical and political aspects. In this way, Third World literature is formulated with a stereotypical label and thus, it is confined within a theoretical endeavor of branding it as alterity.

But in the universities of the Third World countries the departments of comparative literature are including American, European, African and Asian texts though they are yet to come out of the hegemonic role of the First World literature. It is undeniable that this inability is an outcome of a series of phenomena including globalization and its macro-economic system that holds an integrated world system though it works with a hypocritical view to compartmentalizing the world and dividing it on the basis of economic distinction as the First World and the Third World. Thus, as Edward Said asserts in his seminal book *Orientalism*, the world is divided into two unequal halves, Occident and Orient and "[T]the Orient was almost a European invention…" (Said 1978:9). Said wrote it in 1976, in 20th century. But now in 21st century transnational practices throughout the world under the subterfuge of globalization and globalism through the outsourcing of service industries are bringing heterogeneity of cultural and anthropological realities together and deliberately ensuring the hegemonic status of the First World countries, called so on the basis of economic and mercantile potential. It occurs mostly because of the competitive and innovative accomplishments in the production of commodities by the bourgeois capitalists. In this connection, the

prediction of Marx and Engels is relevant when they proclaim that "… bourgeois class is periodically obliged to revolutionize the instruments and relations of production, and thereby social relations in their entirety" (Mishra 2006: 148). The bourgeois capitalists revolutionize the instruments of productions from time to time to create an everlasting market and ensure a constant flow of money into their purse. In the past this market was confined within a community. But now in the age of corporate capitalism the whole world has been transformed into a global market. Revolution in the invention and innovation of machines essentially contribute to the paradigm shift of this market policy, totally based on the mode of capitalist production. And inevitably this "[C] apitalist production generates a new "vicious circle"" (Engels 1976:355). Exchange of these products among the nations requires participation of the mass from these reservoir of labor. It is more political than economic because in such a situation the circle which is formed ensures the upper hand position of the First World countries. It conspicuously appears that the mode of production is intensively related to the whole social system. So, it is not possible to conserve the old etiquettes and social values as they are closely related to the mode of production. Political and cultural realities of a nation go through changes even if the people do not migrate physically from one country to another country because the 'vicious circle' constructed by the mode of production encapsulates everybody of the global market in a polyphonic power structure. Hence, the conception of multiculturalism now is not merely defined merely by diaspora or migrated body of population only. Cyber technology and outsourcing practices contribute immensely to the dislocation and relocation of cultures and thus to the production of transnational, hybridized and multicultural identity.

True, transnationalism has replaced imperialism by creating confusion regarding the locations of centre and periphery. Now, for imperializing a geographical area or a nation commodity, culture, knowledge and language play a more important role than an army. In the name of democratization of commodity and market the corporate capitalism transforms everybody, from margin to centre, into a consumer and thus extends its market in every nook and corner of the geographical terrains. For example, in Bangladesh almost everybody, if wishes, now can use shampoo of some prominent brands because it can be purchased ranging from a 3 Taka (Bangladeshi currency, 1 US Dollar is equivalent to about 87 Taka) mini pack to more than 3 hundred Taka large container. But it never means that this mode of production and appropriation aims at creating economic and social equilibrium. These brands create connectivity among the mass population. But connectivity does never mean equality. This connectivity is constructed on the basis

of the democratization of commodity, not socialization of economy and it ensures an undisturbed flow of revenues into the purse of the capitalist producers. Thus, the slogan of multiculturalism is a deliberate initiative frequently echoed by the bourgeois capitalists for the expansion of their market. This market encircles all the compartments of the society with a distinct purpose of maintaining individual location of the classes in the society regarding their respective economic ability.

Economic ability of the transmigrated people began to decrease from 1980s when internationalization of capital became a fashion of economic enterprises. With the onset of this process many stable jobs had to encounter insecurity and "[M]any stable industrial-sector jobs had been lost through the export of manufacturing industries and related jobs abroad, frequently to Third World countries" (Schiller et al. 1992:8-9). While, in such a situation, describing the condition of the USA, Nina Glick Shiller et al. assert:

*In many large urban areas in the United States well-paying, unionized, industrial employment was replaced by service sector and clerical employment. Sweat shops and homework proliferated. The newly created employment was characterized by low pay and little or no benefits or security. (*Schiller et al. 1992: 9)

The proliferation of transnationalism as a product of corporate capitalism brings forth a revolutionary change in the construction of the new conception of multiculturalism. It is now in the twenty-first century about not only diversity but also compartmentalization in the same community or same nation because economic discrimination acts as a block on the way to synthesis among the diverse and discursive pedagogies of multiculturalism and from the perspectives of the essentialist notion, national or ethnic identity is prominently marked by hybridity and heterogeneity of conceptualizations of location. Now geographic diversity is not as much powerful as psychological diversities regarding the response of the people to varied waves of ethnographical and ethnological phenomena. Thus compartmentalization is, at present, more psychological than geographical.

Globalization from a multicultural perspective

Hence, living in a compartmentalized society dominated by the hegemonic constructions those who are deprived of the privileges and opportunities provided by bourgeois capitalism create a new "cultural space which calls for a new awareness of who they are, a new consciousness, new identities" (Schiller et al 14).

Individual class possesses individual state of awareness. One is different from another in content and disposition. But the sense of nationalism which is the basis of transnationalism gives these classes a sense of shared interest and it brings all of them on a single platform which is termed as nation state. At present in the multicultural framework and in a borderless world nations of the world are living with their individual identity only because of their awareness of the distinct space and location in respect of globalism and globalization.

In an age of cybernetic information an individual's location and identity are defined not by his/her physical presence but by his/her psychological disposition. Owing to the development of hi-speed communication system, hyper technology, electronic social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instragram, IMO, YouTube and other popular forms of communication based on internet network now, people have formulated a divided self within which they are encapsulated. They are scattered in different places with different cultural and ideological realities but with a consciousness of their mother culture, history, heritage and economic realities. Consequently, they are multi-culturally constructed entity, a homogeneous self-constructed by heterogeneous elements of culture and ideology. It is also true that multicultural atmosphere is not always capable of bringing about synthesis among different cultural groups of people. In Bangladesh most of the people usually assume that the course of their history and heritage is linear and they stick to a particular religious belief system and their over consciousness about their supposed linear religious and historical location possesses the risk for them to be detached from the diverse myths, cultural phenomena, belief system and history which deserve an extensive consideration in respect of the whole subcontinent. This monolithic disposition raises a wall between them and other people with different belief systems, ethnic identities and rituals. A good number of ethnic people living in the hill tracts of Bangladesh are neither Muslims nor Bengalese. The inclusion of their literature, rituals, history and heritage into the main stream of the culture of the majority of the people is not conspicuous. Besides, a huge number of Biharis who have not gone back to Pakistan after the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 do not have any remarkable presence with their episteme and aesthetics in the main stream of Bangladeshi culture. This Bihari diaspora is now living in, in Homi Bhabha's phrase, 'the third space', in 'in-betweenness' and in the midst of becoming and unbecoming, that is, becoming remaining 'Bihari' or becoming 'Bangladeshi'. They are still marginalized even if the High Court recognized their citizenship in 2008. The present phenomenon of Rohingya drew a lot of sympathy from Bangladeshis initially mostly because of their religious affinity. But recently it is

known from different sources that many of them are involved in terrorist activities and drug trafficking. Consequently, they are gradually losing empathy and sympathy from the people of the country. In this connection, if multiculturalism intends that diverse people should live together on a single platform then it must ensuring an atmosphere of mutual understanding and knowledge about one another is a must. If this knowledge resist everybody to do anything that create anarchy, then the synthesis will be possibly ensured in a multicultural atmosphere. But to implement this issue the annihilation of compartmentalization is a must. Will the hegemonic culture mostly fortified by religious ideology let this happen? The solution to the problem of intolerance lies in the satisfactory answer to this question.

At present multiculturalism deserves more research and critical exploration for many reasons. Many universities around the world, even in Bangladesh, have launched Comparative Literature Department and included the text of different countries in their curricula. It is undeniable that like other aspects of life, multiculturalism gears up the study of comparative literature in the academia around the world. But the ambivalence found in the formulation of multiculturalism divides people into two major groups. One thinks that multiculturalism promulgates the essence of a liberal and cosmopolitan society. Another presumes that it provokes angst and anxiety by fragmenting a nation and placing different fragments face to face in a conflicting temperament. Even the comparative literature department in many universities, by including only the widely read foreign writers and prize winning foreign authors into their curricula, conspicuously peripheralize or marginalize the less read authors or ethnic texts of a community or race. Some major authors from Africa, Latin America or South Asia find their asylum in these curricula into which a huge number of minor author of these continents find no significant space in these curricula. This case can be looked over from political perspective. Even in the aura of multiculturalism European and American authors dominated the curricula which may be interpreted as a hegemonic exercise of dominance in the academic curricula of Third World countries. It can also be marked that almost all these texts of the First world authors are read and taught in English, a language of hegemony of Europe and America. They might be read and taught in translation into the mother tongues of the local learners. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o defines this practice of studying literature in European languages as 'narrowness in the study of literature' (Thiong'o 1993:24). Ngugi finds with concern that even in the comparative literature departments of the universities and institutions of his country only the European languages are exercising their hegemony even if these institutions are aware of other cultures. In his words:

In such institutions there were competing or comparative centres in the study of humanities: the very fact one was studying in a university where there were other literature departments meant that one was aware of other cultures. But most of these departments were largely confined to the languages of Europe and within Europe to the literature produced by the natives of that language. American literature departments were for instance completely oblivious of the poetry and fiction of the African-American peoples. In the discussion of the American novel for instance, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison were hardly mentioned as part of the central tradition of the American literary imagination. (Thiong'o 1993:25)

The impulse and speed in which the art and literature of the First World countries are assumed by the Third World readers are not found with the readers of the First World countries regarding their interest in Third World literature. This practice of marginalization is also widely available within the domestic terrain of the Third World countries. Ethnic literature in ethnic languages of the ethnic people is not usually found to have a significant space in the curricula of the universities and educational institutions in comparison with the mainstream literature in the language of the majority of the people. Then can multiculturalism be defined only from international perspective? If the intertextuality and intersection among the local heterogeneous and diverse languages, rituals, traditions and anthropological realities are not possible, how can the term multiculturalism be sufficiently defined? Rather amalgamation of local diversities can successfully fight back the hegemony of the First World countries in the name of multiculturalism. Again, in the aura of multicultural realities, the conception of multilingualism is challenged by a single hegemonic language and there is a chance that this language can segregate the readers from the essentialist and normative knowledge of the culture and political and economic realities out of which these texts assume their shape. In this way, European languages like English, French and Portuguese run with the tenet of deculturation of the local readers and take up the "role in the Disneyfication of world cultures" (Macedo et al. 2003: 17). True, in the name of multiculturalism hegemonic English, like some other European languages, is used as a means of reading and teaching the Third world literary texts and thus, "Western homogenization discourses are very evident in foreign and second language education practices" (Macedo et al. 2003: 97). In the hegemonic atmosphere created by English language while reading Third World literature "[S]peakers are unable to establish the compartmentalization necessary for survival of the language variety" (Romaine 2000: 49). In such an atmosphere heteroglossia is not encouraged. Besides, non-linear course of history leaves a lot of traumas on the Third World countries

and the narrowness stemming out of their traumas limit to a great extent the ability to accommodate multicultural minority rights. India, for example, still faces the challenge of accommodating the multicultural minority rights and this limitation stems out of its political narrowness emerging from the "country's partition along religious lines in 1947" (Ashcroft 2019:128). Even Bangladesh which "was founded in 1971 on the basis of secularist principles" faces the challenges of accommodating its multicultural minority because of its wide use of religion in politics in the post-liberation phase (Riaz 2010:45). When a particular belief system dominantly turns into political ideology it falls into the bog of limitations to accommodate multicultural minority.

Multiculturalism challenges the notion of diglossia. Actually, diglossia can be extended to encompass more than two languages or varieties of languages in functional relationship among various linguistic groups in a society. True, the world today with multiplicity of unsolvable problems, languages, economic links and cultures is becoming one. But only a few transnationals are deciding the economic, political and linguistic destinations of the whole world. Only a few international institutions are generating policies for the whole world. Hence, multiculturalism does never mean the empowerment of all individual cultures of all nations on the basis of equality. Ngugi aptly clarifies this issue in his compelling book *Moving the Centre* in the following words:

Those global economic and political processes invariably give rise to cultural links. The evolution of the present global order over the last five hundred years has seen the world being dominated by a handful of languages; European languages of course and the cultures these have carried will have shaped the dominated in similar ways. (Thiong'o 1993:31)

In the name of globalization "distant parts of the world have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner" (Hodges 2004: 209). It gives rise to transnational organizations and corporations. By promoting the concept of global culture it is posing a vehement threat to the local culture and thus, in the era of post-colonialism a form of re-colonizing mission of the capitalist countries is rampant, especially in the Third World countries. Capitalist countries have brought about a revolution in bourgeois mode of production and transformed the whole world into their market. They are promulgating the terms, such as, world literature, world culture and multiculturalism and transculturalism with a view to ensuring their hegemonic location among the economically backward nations. Globalization and multiculturalism go hand in hand in the twenty-first century and "[M]uch of twenty-first Century nationalism, it can be argued, is shaped by the current crisis of

globalism" (Tharoor 2020:11). But the concepts of globalization and cosmopolitanism are running with the intention of 'exploiting the privations of the poor'. In this connection, Shashi Tharoor in his seminal book *The Battle of Belonging* argues that "in the wake of globalization economic and political backlash is straightforward" (Tharoor 2020:11). Even in the developed countries resentment and rage among the poor and unemployed people are increasing because they have started thinking that the scopes of employment created by globalization and cosmopolitanism have gone to the people of developing countries like China, India, Bangladesh and some African countries. And, in this connection, Tharoor argues:

The cultural backlash derived from the same resentment but expressed itself in a different arena: the political denunciation of global trade led to hostility towards foreigners, as more and more people sought the comforts of traditional identity and ways of life. Rage was expressed against the 'alchemical brew served up in the name of progress- liberal politics, theologies of social emancipation, technocrats, trade agreements, multiculturalism'. (Tharoor 2020:11-12)

Thus, the slogan of multiculturalism cannot ensure the panacea of the maladies of compartmentalization, economic, political, cultural and linguistic discrimination and its consequential resentment and rage. And in such a complicated situation the masses who look upon themselves to be the victims of the new emerging conditions, usually look at the terms with suspicion like "cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and secularism in the name of cultural rootedness, religious or ethnic identity and nationalists authenticity" (Tharoor 2020: 12). Multiculturalism, in this way, appears to be a threat to not only individual but also national identity of the people living in the 'contact zones' where varied cultures impact on one another. Cuban ethnologist Fernando de Ortiz is unwilling to call this process of mutual influence 'deculturation'. He rather coins this term as 'transculturation' (Hawley 2004:436). Ortiz believes that culture is synthetic and influence is not only on the part of the metropolis. This influence is two sided. But it is true that metropolis is never ready to leave any stone unturned to subjugate the Third World countries. They practice it not by arms as they did during the colonial period. Now in post-colonial period they are doing it imposing their linguistic, cultural, economic and epistemic hegemony in the name of globalization, multiculturalism and transnationalism. In this way the world is still divided into centre and margin.

Thus, a chronic ambivalence characterizes the location and identity in a multicultural society. Multiculturalism has challenged the primordial conception of

identity that it is defined by the individual cultures and societies. In the past it was a very common belief that if a person can't speak Bangla he will not be called a Bangladeshi and if a person doesn't speak English he will not be called a British. But now people consider 'the idea of identity as a construct' characterized by hybridization and intertextuality among diverse phenomena (Iyall Smith 2008:16).

Conclusion

Hence, transnationality is challenging the idea of nationality. A man in this era lives in a particular geographical area but his mind always travels in every corner of the world and he lives in constant process of taking and giving. Development in one corner of the world impacts the other parts of the world directly and indirectly. The collapse of American Share Market or the New York Stock Exchange impacts the world economy and all the nation have to face the scorching impact of recession. Dialectical connectivity exists among the people of different social groups. But this dialectical communication has made them strong and at the same time weak. Social groups now constantly reform and constitute themselves in open boundaries. Here lies its strength. On the other hand, in the multicultural environment the fabric of social life has seriously been disrupted as it propagates a collage self with heterogeneity and gives rise to instability, unrest, uncertainty and insecurity. Thus, this continuous process of becoming and unbecoming invariably gives birth to a chronic malady of angst and anxiety from which the globalized world cannot become totally free.

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