

SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Journal for the
Study of Race,
Nation and
Culture



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN 1350-4630

Narrative Authority: Performing the Postcolonial Self

Ajit Maan

Postcolonial displacement and resulting cultural nomadism of second generation diaspora is often associated with loss, lack, exile. This author's position is that the cultural and linguistic margins that nomads inhabit are places of abundance and possibility. Establishing decolonized autobiographical authority necessitates the type of recognition, deconstruction, and re-association that second generation diasporic populations are uniquely positioned to undertake.

... the monolingualism of the other would be that sovereignty, that law originating from elsewhere ... appropriated in order to understand it *as if* I was I was giving it to myself ... monolingualism imposed by the other operates by relying upon that foundation through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial ... (Derrida, 1998, p. 39)

I am optimistic about the creative possibilities of a performative response to the subject-effects of colonialism. Why optimism? Because the ability of the postcolonial to transcend pre-determined identity categories is enabled by the marginal space that the postcolonial inhabits; the key to the problem, as in many good narratives, lies in the problem itself.

In the following pages I will explore the unique self-constitutional capacities of the postcolonial by first exploring the insidious effects of colonial translation (linguistic, cultural, and ontological), by making a crucial ontological distinction between colonized people and their heirs, and then by articulating the capacities for unenculturated autobiography—a capacity enabled by difference and contradiction.

These processes of development are generational, they involve interpretation, and they are cyclical. Therefore, reference to a multi-tiered hermeneutical circle, spiralling upward, will be made throughout the paper and can be conceived as follows. The process begins at the bottom and works upwards:

Ajit Maan, 134 Marlboro Lane, Eugene, OR 97405, USA. E-mail: ajitmaan@comcast.net

Narrative Authority	
Deconstruction	Creative possibility
Recognition	
Appropriation of Memory (autobiographical lie)	
Mastery of cultural norms	Diaspora (cultural nomads)
Mastery of language	
Alienation (and reactionary traditionalism)	
Recognition	Indigenous colonized (exiles)
Appropriation	
Subjective	
Cultural	Colonial translations
Linguistic	

The first stage in this process begins with colonial linguistic translation and ultimately reaches the level of literal alteration in the ontology of the colonized subject. The next level of colonization is enacted by the colonial subject him or herself (this is the insidious nature of colonization) and begins with the appropriation of Master language/culture/identity. Appropriation (internalization) is followed by the recognition of oneself as ‘other’ through the Master’s gaze. Note that one has to have internalized the Master perspective in order to recognize the relation of oneself to it. The result of this recognition is alienation and this resultant alienation is multi-fold. It is the alienation from one’s original language/culture/identity, alienation from the Master perspective, and the inability to return to a pre-colonized state-of-being. This last form of alienation often results in what has been described as ‘reactionary traditionalism’ (Hogan, 2000, p. 12). Finally, for the diaspora, for the cultural nomad, there is the possibility of narrative authority which begins with the recognition that colonial powers can be generated only with the cooperation of the colonized, and is followed by the systematic dismantling or deconstruction of colonial ontologies. Let us begin at the beginning.

Translation: Linguistic, Cultural, Subjective

Some of the most insidious effects of colonization are initiated with the seemingly innocuous act of linguistic translation. In considering the ontological consequences of colonization on a particular diasporic population, I am assuming that the reverse of Derrida’s understatement, ‘The colonial subject’s relationship to the language of the colonizer is always ambivalent’ is also true and equally as pressing: the colonizer’s relationship to the language of the colonial subject is always, at least, ambivalent.

Translation is always an appropriative act; it alters the thing being translated. When a culture has been colonized, it is re-described and re-defined in colonial terms such that while the colonizer may be attempting to describe the language/culture/subject, he is actually creating the language/culture/subject he thinks he is describing. For example, the lack of correspondence between Indian and British linguistic, conceptual, and even metaphysical systems has been compensated for in translation. Discursive formations established correspondences, artificial correspondences, that would make the unfamiliar comprehensible. For example, 'Brahman' was translated as 'Priest'. That sort of translation had the effect of diminishing an entire range of ways of being and simultaneously marginalized the subject.

In British colonial translations, meaning was attributed to a word or sentence or phrase. And meaning could be determined and translated through a supposed synonym. It was also assumed that the meaning of a word, sentence, or phrase had a direct referent. But meaning is determined and understood differently by an Indian subject for whom there may, or may not, be a direct referent.

An example of the way in which language, culture, and even individuals are transformed in translation is the way that lines of kinship were translated by the British. In Indian cultures, one refers to one's 'sibling' and one's 'cousin' with the same word. There is no distinction, linguistic or otherwise, between one's 'sibling' and one's 'cousin'. Alternatively, there are several different words and distinct relationships for the English concept of 'Uncle'. In an Indian context, there is a distinction made between an 'uncle' on the maternal side and an 'uncle' on the paternal side. Still further, there is a linguistic and correlative relational distinction between an 'uncle' who is younger than one's parent and an 'uncle' who is older than one's parent. So there is one designation for the mother's younger brother, another designation for Mother's older brother, another for Father's elder brother, and yet another for Father's younger brother. Even further, there is also a different designation for maternal and paternal grandparents. All these differences are translated into English by diminishing those sorts of subtleties. And these distinctions are not just linguistic. The linguistic distinctions denote varieties in kinship patterns and beyond that they refer to expected behaviours, to roles, to responsibilities. And they refer to expectations and obligations and even to inheritances. These sorts of distinctions in kinship imply one person's ability to choose his own career and another's obligation to manage the family farm or business. They imply responsibility for parental care-taking and ritual and ceremonial duties.

To diminish linguistic difference through translation is to go well beyond simple linguistic translation; it is an example of cultural translation. Still further, it is an example of translation of the colonial subject. Within the colonial context specific roles and responsibilities and subtle variations in relationships are completely silenced.

Incompatible cultural premises make much of what is translated inaccurate at best. For example, when a communication was received by a British officer, he would attempt to understand the meaning by translating the content of the letter. But for an

Indian subject the meaning of the communication would exceed the official content of the message. As meaningful as, or even more meaningful than, the content of the message itself were, for example, the preliminary form of address, the material or parchment or fabric the message was written on, the type of script used, the social status of the messenger, the conveyance used to deliver the message, the manner in which the message was presented, etc.

Acts of translation transpose something into something else. In colonial contexts this mutation becomes institutionalized. If there are no shared cultural premises translation changes language such that the colonizers culture becomes the privileged referent.

The Colonized

Colonized individuals go through several well documented stages: appropriation, recognition of oneself as 'other', and alienation. The mimicry implicit in appropriation has been the subject of theorizing and has been fictionalized as well. In *The Mimic Men* (1967), V. S. Naipal's theme is the union of language and power. While colonial powers re-describe and therefore re-construct reality, the assumption by the powerless is that words signify a pre-existent reality. Naipal's story portrays the mimicry of the colonized as naive but in a following section I will describe the ways in which mimicry has been used by subaltern colonized subjects as a form of ridicule and has therefore been useful as a method of creating a space between colonial utility and subaltern reality. The aim of this sort of mimicry is to go unrecognized, to appear outwardly as part of the normative order, as a strategy of survival while subversively challenging of the order one is mimicking. As Nita Kumar's anthropological field studies have indicated, indigenous elites have been more adept at appropriation than powerless subaltern subjects and therefore the recognition of oneself as 'other' may be more of a surprise for elites and the resulting alienation may be a phenomenon of indigenous elites.

The alienation of the colonized resulting from the recognition of oneself as 'other' is only one side of alienation. The other side is the recognition that one has also become alienated from one's indigenous culture. Patrick Hogan (2000) refers to a sort of reactionary fundamentalism as the view that indigenous cultures should return to the 'pure' form of tradition as it is viewed as crucial in the struggle against colonialism and Hogan argues that this sort of return to the original is, in fact, an abandonment of development, 'usually involving some sort of dogmatic textual literalism linked with coercive force' (p. 12). Some postcolonial writers would agree and have abandoned English altogether favour of writing in their native tongue. But I agree with Rushdie who thinks that that sort of return is impossible. The problem with the myth of the return is that what is often returned to is not one's tradition but rather a version of that tradition—a colonial and ideological misinterpretation of the tradition. Hogan observes that

the reactionary traditionalist is typically someone who has tried to become English and to be accepted into English society but has failed. In seeking to become English he/she has internalized not indigenous culture, but colonialist views of indigenous culture. (p. 13)

Diaspora

The tiers of the hermeneutic circle enacted by second generation diaspora immigrants may appear to repeat several phases of the previous generation but there are significant shifts. The most significant among the shifts is that these interpretive processes are enacted internally rather than being imposed externally. Another significant shift is that these higher-level hermeneutic phases include not simple appropriation but *mastery* of colonial language, and *mastery* of colonial cultural norms. And there is a third aspect of second-generation diaspora that is of particular interest in relation to Derrida's problematic in *Monolingualism*; it is the appropriation of the existential situation of the exile. This practice is what I refer to as an autobiographical lie.

Mourning for native culture is possible only for first generation cultural exiles who are doubly alienated, first from their own culture and then from colonial culture. The autobiographical lie involves second generation immigrants appropriating not only a masterful view of the native predicament but also the appropriation of the older generation's alienation. In this sense the second generation diaspora self-imposes alienation.

There is a crucial distinction between indigenous colonized and second generation diaspora. Second generation diaspora are nomadic in the Braidottian sense (1994). A nomad is a person who exists in-between cultures and languages and social institutions. The nomad has *access* to multiple cultures/languages/conceptual schemes but is not determined by them. Nor can he call one language his mother tongue or one place his home. Contrarily, one who is culturally exiled once belonged to, and was formed in accordance with, a local, a language, and a culturally specific conceptual apparatus. 'Homeland', 'mother-tongue', and 'nationalist identity' are only inherited concepts for the nomad. While the first generation of colonial subjects were exiled from their traditions, histories, languages, cultures, and selves, the second generation of colonial subjects is exiled from the very notion of an original language, exiled from any memory of a homeland, exiled from the very possibility of a stable identity.

The sense of loss, deprivation, and nostalgia that saturates Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998) is evidence of the appropriation of a false memory and then the development of alienation from it. It is a deception, a lie, on the part of the cultural nomad. One cannot grieve the loss of a homeland or a language or a culture one never possessed nor was possessed by.

Monolingualism is an extended lament which confuses two separate methods of reacting to uprootedness; one is lamentable and one is not. Truly lamentable is the construction of a fictional memory of an original culture or mother-tongue from

which one can mourn being exiled. In creating these fictions the nomad finds a way to align her alienation with a recognizable form of alienation within a culture and in so doing mis-identifies.

Creative Possibilities

For contrary to what one is most tempted to believe, the Master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything ... the Master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally, what he calls* his language ... (Derrida, 1998, p.23)

The highest levels of the hermeneutic process include: 1) the recognition that even the Master is a social construct and Master power is generated by the subjugated; 2) the deconstruction of colonial ontology through an archeology of that ontology that finds its roots as far back as linguistic translation; and 3) development of narrative authority without return to the myth of the original.

If postmodernists and contemporary cognitive scientists are right about the institutionally constructed nature of individuals, and if repression (Maan, 1999, pp. 67–85) or amnesia (Derrida, 1998, p. 60) is required to create a homogeneous identity *within* a particular culture, then cultural alienation is a blessing not a curse.

The comfortably enculturated fit into Derrida's 'second possibility' of amnesia under the guise of integration (p. 60). Recall that this is the possibility of stereotyping oneself to conform to the prototypical model of the average person. That particular dis-order of dis-placed identities is lamentable only if 'order' is understood positively and 'disorder' negatively.

Those who exist outside dominant cultural traditions, conceptual systems and languages, are also alienated from authoritarian constructions of selfhood. They are alienated from socially constructed internal coherence and free from a synthetically unified identity based on homogenization. From this perspective one's subject position in the margins is something to celebrate.

Derrida's song of lament that is *Monolingualism* is possible only from an enculturated position. Derrida's is an appropriated Master perspective. The three threatening possibilities mentioned by Derrida, all 'madnesses' 'resulting from lack of stable models for ego identification', are madnesses only from the Master's enculturated perspective. Phrases like 'lack of stable models of ego identification' and accompanying descriptions like 'madness' are spoken in the language of official culture and the speaker of this language is a Master in the guise of a nomad.

Nomadic positioning is not lamentable. To invite the possibilities of nomadic positioning is to embody narrative authority. Being unenculturated or culturally nomadic does not imply a lack of cultural literacy. One with narrative authority is not stuck in one cultural system but rather has access to, and familiarity with, multiple conceptual systems, languages, and ontologies. Nomadism does not imply lack of something but rather an abundance. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are the exceptions to the stuckness that postmodernists claim for the human condition.

An essential component of post-colonial identity is preliminary deconstruction of what one has been taught about who one is. Postcolonial agency is exercised by undermining traditional identity constructions and processes of self-representation. The postcolonial may engage in subversive identity performances or parodies of the Master voice. The method of the postcolonial subject is performative re-association across borders, languages, and conceptual systems.

On one level 'I' am embodied memory. On another level, one's identity, *ipseity*, rests in one's narrative authority. It is this type of authority that is an appropriate object for longing for those who recognize the synthetic nature of all experience and the artificiality of consistent identity. The concept of a mother-tongue, like the concept of self as singular, is an authoritarian fiction that must necessarily be unlearned in order to be free from colonial discursive identity practices.

Decolonized autobiography comes out of un-learned and re-learned perspectives. The process involves: 1) deconstructing normative values in search of the power structures which support them; 2) unlearning authoritarian ontologies based on colonial knowledges, systems, and assumptions; and 3) re-narrating from an embodied postcolonial perspective (Spivak, 1996, pp. 203–235).

In contrast to a unified autobiography, the autobiography of the nomad is un-synthesized by the structures of a dominant culture. From the margins, these autobiographies are more consistent with lived experience and less amnesiac.

Hogan makes a distinction between what he calls 'syncretism' and alienation. Both are attitudes available to cultural nomads. Alienation is what Derrida displays. It is 'alienating hybridity, the estrangement from both traditions . . . the paralyzing conviction that one has no identity, no real cultural home, and that no synthesis is possible' (1998, p. 17). He refers to 'syncretism' as the combining of two cultures, taking the best or most suitable aspect of each 'and bringing them together into a new culture, ideally superior to both precedents—or, if not superior, at least better suited to those people who have internalized aspects of both cultures' (p. 16).

I find the repression involved in synthesis problematic. And while syncretism is preferable to alienation, I prefer the 'contextualization' practised by the subaltern subjects of Nita Kumar's case studies. If we accept the premises that identity is always contextualized, and that identity is a practice, then we can look beyond elites of either culture to learn from the practices of the subalterns who haven't been in a position to anglicize themselves with British educations.

The subjects of Kumar's studies construct themselves in the process of subverting authoritarian modes of self representation. The empirical data provided by her anthropological field studies in India exemplify subversive signifying practices like parodies of the Master voice and hidden use of symbols. These subjects exercise agency even while outwardly being part of the repressive normative order. The overthrowing of colonial constructs doesn't take recognized forms, in fact, it appears in the activities of daily life. They have created counter-cultures of language, myths with double-entendres, humorous mimicry, and the articulation of alternative perspectives through song and story. Counter to the negative Western assumption

of cultural mimicry on the part of postcolonial subjects, the subjects of Kumar's studies involve themselves in subversive repetition and parody performances to expose the utterly constructed status of that which expresses itself as natural, obvious, or 'just the way things are'. These subjects are aware of how the process of signification and re-signification work. They are 'discontinuous and apparently contradictory, not consistent, unified . . . but a palimpsest of identities constituted and reconstituted, constantly in flux' (p. 20). The subject that emerges is fashioned by discourse but is not a passive recipient of it,

Even when the terms of discourse seem unchanged, the slight displacement of a symbol from its conventional positioning is enough to codify completely different, opposing meaning for the subject. (p. 21)

The identities of these subjects are not inscribed by a text; their agency is exercised in the margins between dominant discourses.

Rather than synthesizing cultures, as Hogan suggests, a postcolonial might make sense of cultural conflict by manipulating and re-associating experience. The postcolonial voice may be polyphonic and contextualized. An adaptive strategy for dealing with colonial cultural impositions has been 'contextualization', a term which refers to the cognitive separation of activities in which physical separation is symbolic of cultural difference. For example, colonial influence has created a separation between where one works and where one lives and the attendant modes of being at work and at home. So in adapting, or contextualizing, someone might dress for work in Western style garments and speak English while at home observe all the indigenous ways of being *without any conflict*. Compartmentalized ways of being are at odds with the ideal of Western consciousness which aims at universalistic principles of behaviour and could potentially cause considerable cognitive dissonance in a Western subject. The Western assumption of the ego-ideal of self and identity that is orientated toward inner integration and consistency, cohesion and sameness, is difficult in situations of cultural conflict and is therefore seen, usually by Western theorists, as a considerable problem. However, Eastern subjects often express a structuring of the self that is highly contextualized and relational and provisional so that inconsistency is not a threat to 'oneself'.

Derrida's question, 'In what language does one write memoirs when there is no authorized mother tongue?' is Masterly confusion. Derrida wants to say that his language is not his own, but this is as true for the Master as it is for the colonized, recall 'the Master does not *naturally* possess what he calls his language'. Colonized subjects and cultural nomads are not alone in speaking the language of the 'other'. Everyone speaks the language of the other, some of us speak the language of several others, and it is not lamentable. If 'I' am not independent of language, then the language that I am composed through *is* my mother tongue. Isn't that the definition of mother tongue if one understands the self-constitutive role of language the way that Derrida does? To discover one's mother tongue, one only has to ask in what language experience is experienced. For postcolonials, and those in the cultural

margins, the language experience is experienced in is hardly ever monolingual. Further, the unauthorized status of the mother tongue is not lamentable; it is enabling. It is only from the perspective of authorized culture that one needs an authorized autobiographical voice.

Derrida's statement 'I have only one language and it is not my own' is neither the situation of the exile nor the nomad. It is truer when stated by one who is comfortably enculturated. Derrida laments deprivation of the language of his ancestors. The monolingual is thrown into translation, 'translation with no reference, without an ordinary language or source' (1998, p. 60). But for the cultural nomad, this is an imaginary original language; it is an appropriated and false memory and language. It is like an imagined homeland where one has never been. Would the language of his ancestors qualify as *his* language? In this example, and in the bulk of *Monolingualism*, Derrida suggests that being inside a dominant cultural tradition and its language would be a cure for his condition. He suggests that being-in the linguistic tradition of his ancestors would provide him with a language which would qualify as his own. But it seems that enculturation would get him further away from, rather than closer to, something like a language of his own.

To mourn the fictive loss of a 'prior to the first' language, a mother-tongue, is to mourn the status of not being completely possessed by, completely constructed through, a particular linguistic system. Derrida internalizes the master-edict that one must belong to a particular language or be in possession of one central language.

If the goal is what Derrida calls 'amnesia in the guise of integration', that is, stereotyping oneself to conform to the model of the 'average person', that goal is more easily attainable by those within a particular cultural tradition. If, however, the goal is some form of self/selves creation, or something resembling free will, then the goal will be more easily attainable by those who exist outside dominant cultural traditions, conceptual schemes, and authoritarian constructions of selfhood.

Alienation is part of postcolonial experience. It represents hope. If the internal coherence of *any* subject is socially constructed, and if repression or 'amnesia' is required to create a homogenous identity *within* a particular culture, then the cultural nomad has escaped the nearly inescapable.

References

- Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1998). *Monolingualism of the other or the prosthesis of origins*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hogan, P. (2000). *Colonialism and cultural identity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kumar, N. (Ed.) (1994). *Women as subjects*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia.
- Maan, A. (1999). *Internarrative identity*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Naipal, V. S. (1967). *The mimic men*. New York: Penguin.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary homelands*. New York: Viking.
- Spivak, G. (1996). *The Spivak reader*. New York: Routledge.

Copyright of *Social Identities* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.