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POST-COLONIAL PRACTICES AND NARRATIVE NOMADS

Thinking Sikhism beyond metaphysics

I begin by assuming three things. First, I assume that the institutions of colonization continue to function in a colonized culture even after the withdrawal of a physical colonial presence. Second, I assume a particular type of colonization phenomenon among indigenous elites which involves appropriating the Master Narrative. My third assumption is that human experience, cognition and identity are fundamentally narrative in nature. Having made similar assumptions, a number of theorists have focused on issues of cross-cultural conflict, physical dislocation and experiential rupture in the formation of subjectivity. Critical engagement with colonial narratives and the re-examination of indigenous pre-colonized narratives has been recently popular. Some have engaged in unlearning privilege, while others have examined the practical methods, and unique position, of subaltern subjects who have managed to maintain indigenous ways of being while simultaneously adapting to colonial impositions. Following this line of inquiry, I am interested in the possibility of the formulation of new narratives which make sense of (but do not necessarily integrate) one's cultural past with the subject effects of colonialism. I will suggest that rather than attempting to create a central space, the project should be to fully embody hybrid ontologies and to identify with dislocation. The project should be to fully occupy marginal space.

Introduction

My initial concern is to disentangle the existential situations of immigrants from those of what I refer to as cultural nomads or multicultural subjects – the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Then I trace the colonial subject's initial linguistic dislocation, through epistemological and ontological displacement. And finally, I explore varieties of post-colonial agency that involve extricating oneself from inherited constraints and authorizing oneself in the margins between cultures. All this will be done from my standpoint as a member of the Sikh diaspora – a first-generation American with a hybrid ontology engaged in an effort to reverse the imperial gaze and to deconstruct the insidious mechanisms of colonization that continue to operate long after the withdrawal of a physical colonial presence.

The consequences of this endeavour are significant; I will demonstrate the way in which multicultural existence is a crucial exception to the 'death of the subject' proclaimed by postmodernists (Barths 1977, Foucault 1977). It is an exception to the culturally determined nature of human existence proclaimed by contemporary philosophers and cognitive scientists (Johnson 1993, 5). And multiculturalism is a way out of the limitations placed on creativity and imagination by the conceptual schemes of one culture (Johnson 1993, 5; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Quine 1951).

1. Types of diaspora: immigrants and cultural nomads

Diasporic populations encounter unique challenges resulting from conflicting systems of identification, particularly if colonization is a part of the cultural history. But there is a distinction between being an immigrant and being part of the diaspora born in a land other than that from which one's parents or grandparents came, and that difference is most evident in the respective capacities to go beyond colonial designations and the preconceived identity categories of any one culture.

Immigrants once belonged to, and were formed in accordance with, a culturally specific conceptual apparatus. The immigrant has a home but does not live there, has a language not often spoken and has habits and modes of thought which are consistent with one culture's norms. While immigrants have imposed upon themselves a sort of exile from their traditions, histories and cultures, the children of immigrants are exiled from the very *notion* of an original language, exiled from any *memory* of a homeland, exiled from the very *possibility* of an identity consistent with one culture's norms. A multicultural subject, one who is familiar with more than one culture and more than one language, has access to multiple cultures/languages/conceptual systems but is not, like those comfortably enculturated, determined by them. A cultural nomad cannot call one language a mother tongue or one place a home. Concepts like homeland, mother tongue and nationalist identity are only inherited baggage for the nomad.

The distinction between the existential situations of immigrants and those of cultural nomads is a crucial one; failure to make the distinction results both in immigrants imposing their alienation upon future generations, and in multicultural subjects appropriating alienation that is not their own. I am suggesting that the sense of loss, deprivation and nostalgia that saturates the narratives of cultural nomads and linguistic border dwellers (Derrida 1998) is evidence of the appropriation of a false memory and then the development of artificial longing for what it represents. A brief example, which involves the identity or identification of generations of Sikhs born outside Punjab, will clarify my perspective: The longing for the homeland is legitimate only for those who were born or lived in Punjab. For the rest of us, longing for a home we have never known, and then creating a connection between that imagined home and one's identity, is an example of appropriation of an older generation's alienation. It is the appropriation of an existential situation, and an accompanying mythology, that is not our own. This is but one example of the way in which those of us in the diaspora self-impose a sort of double-bind of not belonging where we belong and of yearning for a home we have never known. Rather than

attempting to create a central space for ourselves, the project should be to more fully embody hybrid ontologies, and to identify with dislocation. The goal should be to fully occupy our marginal space.

The construction of fictional memory of an original culture from which one can mourn being exiled is a way to align one's cultural alienation with a recognizable form of alienation within a culture, but to do so is to misidentify. It is a form of self-deception. The nomad experiences something far more profound than simply being removed from original home/language/culture. The nomad is removed from the very possibility of such. For the nomad, these things have not been lost – there is nothing of them to remember. However, this sort of existential status is not lamentable, as it holds immense constructive possibilities.

The potential capacity for response to colonial impositions *results* from marginalization and displacement. As a minority community historically defined by exclusion and difference from the dominant discourses of Hinduism and Islam, Sikhs are in a uniquely subversive position. One of the ethical problems with thinking of Sikh identity as consistent and central is the resulting division of 'others' as 'same' or 'different'. If identity (in this case defined as 'sameness' or *idam*) is not privileged over difference, then the basis for ethical action shifts. Our pre-colonized ontology defends pluralism and violates caste systems and gendered social roles. This historical positioning, combined with the transnational and multi-linguistic nature of multiculturalism, enables access to multiple stories, voices and conceptual schemes. Existence *between* authoritarian discourses of dominant cultures enables an extended form of agency wherein one who exists between cultures can undermine traditional associations, assumptions and identity practices, while at the same time creating narrative connections between otherwise incommensurable world views.

There are multiple potential problems associated with existence outside any one culture's norms. The problems have to do with a perceived inability to 'ground' oneself and one's actions resulting from intimate familiarity with cultural relativism:

1. The difficulty of speaking in 'one's own voice' or from a singular perspective voice when one has not one, but multiple voices resulting from experiences in a multitude of places and in various languages.
2. The problems with consistent identity associated with cultural dislocation, including being the object of radically inconsistent, even incommensurable, cultural norms.
3. The confusion resulting from colonial appropriations, and the reappropriations of colonized ontologies.
4. The conflict of hybrid ontologies.
5. The Western tradition of monolingualism and narrative unity require too much experiential negation on the part of multicultural subjects.

Let me address the fifth, and least self-explanatory, of these difficulties. While many contemporary theorists insist on the inadequacy of Western narrative structure for our 'narrative identities', our own traditions don't provide accessible alternatives. The Eastern sense of self is completely bound up with ancestral site, with family, with social place. Radical dislocation, lack of ancestral figures with whom one can identify and the unashamed use and manipulation of language make the traditional sense of self inaccessible to many of us. The Western ego-ideals of singularity

and autobiographical unity create the *appearance* of what has been described as inconsistent, fragmentary, discontinuous beings. The Western normative ideal for autobiographical narrative – that is, linearity and unity – requires psychological repression even in Western subjects, but requires an even greater self-effacement on the part of multicultural subjects. The ideal of a unified self not only requires a brand of self-imposed amnesia, it also has the effect of marginalizing non-unified or discontinuous autobiographies as hysteric, random and incoherent. Cultural nomads are forced to look beyond either tradition, and yet neither tradition is left behind. This is what Spivak refers to as new narrations of older scripts (Landry and Maclean 1996, 27). History must not be denied; it must be imbued with various alternative meanings.

There is evidence (Kumar 1994) which suggests that the ‘contextualization’ practised by Eastern colonial subjects causes less cognitive dissonance than it would for Western subjects. Contextualization is a particularly effective adaptive strategy for dealing with colonial cultural impositions. It involves the cognitive separation of activities in which physical separation is symbolic of cultural difference. For example, Western influence in the East has created a rift between the place/space where one works and the space/place where one lives. So in adapting, or contextualizing, someone might dress for work in Western-style garments and speak English, while at home revert back to traditional ways of life *without any conflict*.

These compartmentalized ways of being are at odds with 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 towards integration and consistency is problematic in situations in which there are conflicting social roles, commitments, interests, duties and so forth. Eastern subjects have inherited a self-structure that is contextualized and highly relational so that inconsistency is not a threat to oneself.

While this sort of identity-dependent-on-cultural-context may seem like multiple personality disorder as there is no unifying Grand Narrative presiding over the collection of culturally specific narratives, there *is* an associative self-structure based on *place/space* and *memory* rather than on temporally linear narrative constructions. Embodied memory is the central axis.

2. The hermeneutics of colonization and reversing the gaze

The cycles of colonization, translation, appropriation, mastery and recognition form a hermeneutic circle involving varieties of literal colonization of one culture by another and various levels of appropriation of the colonizer’s ontologies by the colonized.

The first tier of the interpretative cycle has at least three distinct phases enacted by the colonizer and three phases enacted by the colonized. The colonizer engages in *linguistic translation* of ‘native’ language and usage, *cultural translation* in an attempt to make ‘native’ culture comprehensible and *translation of the subject*, which involves a literal alteration in the ontology of the subject resulting from linguistic and cultural translation. Then, enacted by the colonially altered subject, are the processes of

appropriation of the master language/culture/identity, *recognition* of oneself as other through the master's gaze and *alienation* resulting from loss of one's original language/culture/identity and from the inability to return to a pre-colonized ontology. The following section is an archaeology of the colonial practice of ultimate translation: translation of the subject.

A. *Translation: Linguistic, cultural, subjective*

Translation, beginning with linguistic translation, is an appropriative act. Translation in colonial/imperialistic contexts 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 consciously be attempting to describe the language/culture/subject, he or she is actually creating the language/culture/subject thought to be being described. For example, the production of textual translations, dictionaries and grammar books by the British in India converted Indian languages (Persian, Sanskrit, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi) into instruments of colonial rule. The lack of correspondence between Indian and British linguistic, conceptual and even metaphysical systems was compensated for in translation. Discursive formations established correspondences, artificial correspondences, that would make the unfamiliar comprehensible. For example, *Brahman* was translated as 'priest' (Cohn 1996, 19). That sort of translation had the effect of diminishing an entire range of ways of being and simultaneously marginalizing the subject.

In British translations, meaning was attributed to a word, a sentence or a 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. For example, to try to infer the meaning of *nam simran* by attempting to determine what it refers to is to misunderstand. Its referent is over-determined. While *nam* refers to the *nam* and *simran* is a verb denoting a repetitive practice, the meaning, if it can be understood that way at all, has to do with the effect on one's state of being.

Another example of linguistic/cultural/subjective translation is the way in which 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 relationships for the English concept '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 Mother's younger brother, another designation for Mother's older brother, another for Father's older brother and yet another designation for Father's younger brother. There is also a different designation for maternal and paternal grandparents. All these differences are translated into English by diminishing those sorts of subtleties.

The linguistic distinctions in these kinship lines are not just linguistic; they refer to distinctions in kinship patterns. They refer to patterns of behaviour, to roles and

responsibilities, to inheritances, to expectations and obligations. Those 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 responsibilities for parental care-taking and ritual and ceremonial duties.

To diminish those linguistic differences in translation is to go well beyond linguistic translation; it is an example of cultural translation. Beyond that, it is an example of translating the subject. Within the colonial context, one can be no more than an 'uncle'. What happens to various roles and responsibilities? What happens to all the subtleties in ways of being and in relationships between family members? They are, of course, silenced, homogenized under the simplistic English category: 'uncle'.

Language is a part of a larger system of meaning, and those meanings are the results of cultural premises that may not be shared cross-culturally. Another example will further illustrate the incompatible cultural premises that evidence the problematic nature of translation: When written communication was received by British colonials, they 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 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 (parchment or fabric) the message was written on, the type of script used, the status of the messenger, the conveyance used to deliver the message, the manner in which the message was presented, and so forth (Cohn 1996, 19).

These observations lead to more essential questions about the nature of cross-cultural translation: Is translation, by nature, an act of appropriation? Is translation necessarily masterful or colonizing? Is it possible to translate while leaving the subject of translation intact?

It seems to me that translation is always, at least, mistaken if it places the text (and here I refer not only to a literal 'text' but to 'text' in the postmodern sense) in a certain and particular position and then ascertains 'the' meaning or finds 'the truth' 'in' it. That sort of textual violence, of interpretation handed down from a presupposed position, renders the text voiceless. The text becomes subservient to one's assumptions if there is a pre-existent normative ideal and the non-conforming elements are silenced, repressed, marginalized, misread or misinterpreted.

When normative ideals precede textual exegesis the interpretation takes on a life of its own, cut off from one culture's traditions in service to another culture's assumptions. This phenomenon is particularly brutal in colonial contexts.

The Western insistence on the concrete as the stuff of knowledge has had its consequences. The colonial insistence on the effable, the translatable, on stable meaning, has rendered entire cultures mute. British translations never got beyond notions of meaning as fixed and stable across varying contexts or beyond clarity and distinctness in the Cartesian sense. The British search for meaning that was stable and could be categorized was an imperialist act. It is imperialist because in Indian contexts, statements, utterances, observations, stories, myths or *kathas* are not unconditional statements of fact but rather are highly provisional and contextualized. One gets closest to 'the' meaning when one understands meaning as non-final and as codependent. So that while colonial translators thought of themselves as providing a

framework within which meaning could be grasped, they were actually functioning to shape meaning in accordance with their own presupposed framework.

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 colonizer's culture becomes the privileged referent.

That is the insidious nature of colonization. That is the machinery through which it continues to operate long after the withdrawal of a physical colonial presence.

B. Appropriating 'memory'

A second tier of the hermeneutic circle, enacted by second-generation immigrants or cultural nomads, may appear to repeat several phases of the previous generation, but there are significant shifts. The most significant among the shifts is that these interpretative processes are enacted internally rather than being imposed externally. Another significant shift is that these second-tier phases include not simple appropriation but the *mastery of colonial language* and the *mastery of colonial cultural norms*. There is a third aspect of second-generation diaspora that is of particular interest – the appropriation of the existential situation of the exile. This practice is what I refer to as an 'autobiographical lie'.

The mourning for the native culture is possible only for first-generation cultural exiles. The lie involves not only appropriating a masterful view of the 'native's' predicament but also the appropriation of the older generation's alienation. In this sense, the second generation colonized is in a double-bind that is, in fact, self-imposed.

As a first-generation exile one can experience alienation of this sort, but for those of us in the diaspora this alienation is not our own. This is our parents' alienation and it is comparatively simplistic in form.

C. Reversing the gaze

A third level of the hermeneutic process includes: the deconstruction of colonial ontologies through an archaeology of that ontology that finds its roots as far back as linguistic interpretation of the colonized by the colonizer (as seen in the example of the translation into 'uncle'); the recognition that even the master is a social construct and that master power is generated by the subjugated (an example of this phenomenon is the rejection of the practices of caste/class/racial/gender distinctions that are the complete antithesis of pre-colonized Sikh ontology); and, finally, the development of narrative authority without return to the myth of the original.

Having argued elsewhere (Maan 1999) against modernist notions of unified linear selfhood, and having argued in favour of understanding multicultural identity as highly contextualized, I want to add an essential cautionary note. There is a danger in multicultural existence; the danger is a sort of cultural relativism (and its consequences) that can result from being rooted in cultures with variant ontologies. The consequences of culturally relative identity constructions can be a sort of apathetic or even irresponsible stance – choosing not to ground *authority* in oneself or selves.

The problem is that shifts in narrative authority constitute a shift in the ground for ethical action. And having access to multiple cultural traditions can provide multiple ways out of taking an ethical stance or, alternatively, an ethical stance can subvert, embody and/or contribute to multiple cultural traditions. When theory and practice split, ethical action based on grounded narrative authority can remind a culture of its theory and traditions.

Taking narrative authority, *self-authorship* is a post-colonial practice. The action of choosing where to place 'one's' authority is central to understanding identity in any kind of personal sense. I use the term 'self-authorship' to imply an interest in the self-creation of modernism mediated by a recognition of the involuntary aspects of existence of postmodernism. Self-authorship assumes a narrative nature of human experience but goes further than the narrative-identity theories of MacIntyre (1981) or Ricoeur (1983, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1992). Self-authorship is a variant of self-creation but the former integrates the postmodern critique of 'selfhood' and therefore treats individual choice as limited to either acceptance of, reaction against or mediation of the involuntary aspects of existence. Self-authorship assumes that while a person comfortably grounded in one culture cannot get past its conceptual schemes (Quine), one can mediate them creatively or, as Mark Johnson would caution, metaphorically (Johnson 1993). However, the mediation of conceptual schemes of various cultures enlarges one's existential choice. Multiculturalism provides this crucial exception to the otherwise determined nature of existence. Let me explain.

In light of the postmodern deconstruction of the modern 'self', questions about what personal identity is, who has it, and how one becomes identified have been addressed by reference to various theories of social construction. A person is not, postmodernists claim, a freely choosing rational individual. In fact, the notions of free will and rationality are toppled, along with the possibility of individuality, by an archaeology of institutional powers that are responsible for constructing what had previously been thought of as a person, a person's identity, a person's body, a person's values, convictions, beliefs, behaviour. Of these formative institutional powers, linguistic and discursive traditions are of particular interest to those concerned with the possibilities for selfhood in an autobiographical sense.

Mediating the voluntary and the involuntary, the given and the chosen, is a post-colonial attempt to move away from mimetic identity practices toward some form of performative selves representation. Mimetic identity practices are those regulatory practices which constitute the internal coherence of the subject, the self-identical status of a person. These are socially instituted and maintained norms for intelligibility of 'personal' identity within a particular culture. Mimetic identity practices create, maintain, reproduce, regulate and legitimize conformity. For example, gender categories are *constructed* by the repetitive practices (passivity, sentimentality, physical weakness or, alternatively, aggression, dominance, rationality) that are generally considered *results* of, or *expressions* of, these very categories. And this type of repetitive performance not only constructs but also regulates other performances.

At the other end of the spectrum are possibilities for self-creation consistent with the modernist notion of rugged individualism. This extreme assumes, too optimistically, that individuals can liberate themselves from normative conventions of identification and create a self and a life by choosing. Existentialism is an example of modern movements of self-creation.

Mediating the extremes of social construction and self-creation is *selves representation*, which begins deconstructively by exposing the coercive and limiting consequences of identity categories and practices, and then destabilizes identity constructions by exposing their normative regulatory functions. Selves representational identity is formed in the process of *performing* the identity that it is purported to be.

The notion of self-authorship assumes a type of *internarrative identity* (Maan 1999) created through the continual mediation of pre-existent faulty conceptual separations of consciousness and corporeality, individual and communal senses of self, self-creation and social construction and singular unified self and multiple fractured personalities. The next section outlines a few of the pre-existent faulty conceptual separations that the nomad must mediate and suggests forms that mediation might take.

Conceptions of the self: East and West

In Western traditions personal identity is based upon uniqueness and formed by separation. It has been observed that individuation seems to be the most crucial aspect of the Western autobiographical endeavour (Olney 1980, introduction). The hero of the traditional narrative is defined by exclusionary means, by distinction from the crowd. The heroes of the Western myth consider themselves and their opinions as the centre of their own self-possession. Identity for them is intimately personal.

Alternatively, there is the possibility of identification through relationship rather than individuation. In Eastern traditions identity is understood as the identity of like things (the Sanskrit *idam*). This is shared sameness, sameness with others. The identity of the communal subject is completely contextualized and is consistent with, and embedded in, the space, place and culture in which it exists. Feminists have drawn our attention to the fact that women have long been identified primarily through their relationship with others. In Eastern contexts identity has to do with commonality rather than uniqueness. There is identification through relationship rather than individuation. The Eastern subject is a communal subject such that familial relations, hereditary place and ancestral ties are extremely important to identity formation. As one contemporary Indian poet put it, 'I was taught that what I am is bound up always with ancestral site' (Alexander 1993, 23).

Mediating self-centralization (or identity through individuation) and sameness with others (collective identity that is identity created through identification with clan) is a post-colonial practice. The constant and continual mediation of the extremes of individual and relational selves, rather than complete identification with one or the other, marks an act of asserting agency. The result is some ever-changing sense of *relational individualism*.

Western philosophical systems have traditionally considered the self in connection with consciousness; in fact, there is an assumption of subjectivity *as* consciousness. For example, Cartesian dualism and Kantian radical autonomy treat reason as synonymous with conscious reason and consciousness as disembodied or at least as possessing some sort of ability to become disembodied.

The Eastern ideal of selfhood also involves transcending the individual self, the embodied self, and becoming One consciousness – a consciousness shared by all

things that exist. The fundamental belief rests upon the radically un-Cartesian assumption that all *is* One, that it is our inaccurate perceptual apparatus, associated with the body, that inhibits the perception of the relatedness of all beings. Assuming that the perception of this sort of oneness is limited by embodiment is also to assume a mind/body split similar but variant to the mind/body distinction assumed in Western philosophical traditions.

The 'identity' of the post-colonial subject that I envision is located in *embodied memory*. The only constant through discomforting cultural, linguistic, temporal and spatial discontinuity is the body and its memories. I may be a collection of discontinuous multicultural fragments but *collection* is the imperative. The common connecting element is the memory and the body through which memory is generated and maintained. One may have multiple selves, roles, ways of being, which differ from place to place, but they are all housed in one body and its memories.

Any sense of consistent identity is necessarily bound to embodiment. Western theorists have traditionally sought a sense of self that is permanent over time. But for multicultural nomads there is an additional issue – to search for a sense of self that remains constant in various *places*. *Space* rather than *time* is centralized because for nomadic subjects the temporal discordance that St. Augustine problematized is further complicated by spacial discontinuity. The body is not only a locus of permanence in time because of its enduring overall structure; it is the locus of a type of permanence in time because it is the locus of memory. The past and the future are held together within the present, not as remembered past or anticipated future, but as temporally distinct moments held together via shared place in the present. Experiences that would otherwise fracture continuous experience can coexist in *embodied memory*.

Conclusion

The conflicted nature of my identity has not forced me to leave my familial and cultural traditions behind. Nor have I completely appropriated an American sense of self. And I do not identify with colonial designations. Even though the narratives of the cultures that I inhabit conflict, and there is intercultural conflict, it is the conflict, more than the cultures themselves, and the ways I create to mediate that conflict, that make me who I am. And I think of myself, perhaps arrogantly, as possessing more *personal* identity than one who does not mediate that sort of conflict. The person who does not have and act upon conflict, it seems to me, has less personal and more socially constructed (*à la* postmodern) identity. It is through the identification with or opposition to various traditional paradigms and the manipulation of languages and their corresponding conceptual systems that one creates an extended sense of agency, an agency less accessible to those who inhabit any one tradition comfortably.

My personal identity, contra both modernism and postmodernism, turns out to be predicated upon features of experience that are inconsistent with the conceptual systems of any culture. But far from being something to lament, as some do (Derrida 1998), this form of extended existence enables a form of post-colonial agency that undermines structures of self-representation and regulatory colonial identity practices.

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