

**Postcolonial Literature**  
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**Lecture No. #14**  
**Homi Bhabha and the Concept of Cultural Hybridity**

Hello and welcome back, to this Lecture series, on Postcolonial Literature. Now, we had ended our previous Lecture by discussing, Rabindranath Tagore's and Frantz Fanon's criticism of the idea. Though, we had also discussed, how Nation state, had become the norm by the second half of the 20th century, in the parts of the world, which was once Colonised by the European powers.

Which means, that independence movements in places like Africa for instance, or in the Indian subcontinent, almost automatically, led to the formation of Nation state. Now, but in the conclusion, I had suggested that, the criticism of Tagore and Fanon of Nation and Nationalism, also compels us to look beyond the present political norm of Nation states. Now, Nation state is almost a political norm in the world, right.

But, as we have seen, that there are very powerful critics of this idea of Nation state and Nationalism. And, these critics like Tagore and Fanon, compels us to look beyond the category of Nation state. And, we will make this attempt today, by exploring the works of Homi Bhabha, and see, if we can arrive at an alternative understanding, of Postcolonial human community, beyond the category of Nation state.

Now, our starting point, in this exploration today, will be the concept of Hybridity, which plays a central role in Bhabha's work. And, after we discuss Hybridity, we will then move on to another very important concept in Bhabha, which is a Mimicry. And, then finally, we will revisit, the idea of Nation and Nationalism. But, before we start discussing the writings of Bhabha, let me introduce to you, Homi Bhabha, in a few words.

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**Homi K. Bhabha**  
(1949 – )



Bhabha was born in 1949, in the Parsi community of Bombay. And, he did his graduation, from the University of Bombay, before moving to the University of Oxford, as a postgraduate student. And there, he completed his Masters, as well as his Doctorate. He started his teaching career, in the United Kingdom. But then, moved on to America. And, he is now, the Anne F. Rothenberg Chair Professor in Humanities, in the University of Harvard.

Now, Bhabha is often regarded as part of the “Holy Trinity” in the field of Postcolonial studies, with the other two figure, being, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. We have already discussed, Edward Said, in our previous Lectures. And, we will take up, Gayatri Spivak, in the Lectures, that follows. But, coming back to Bhabha, his most influential work of Postcolonial theory, is the collection of essays titled, *The Location of Culture*, which was originally published in 1994.

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- *The Location of Culture* (1994)
- “The Black Savant and the Dark Princess” (2006)
- “On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission” (2009)
- “Beyond Photography” (2011)

And, though Bhabha has subsequently Authored, a number of other important works like, *The Black Savant and the Dark Princes*, *On Global Memory*, and *Beyond Photography*, he is primarily known for, *The Location of Culture*. And, in today's Lecture, we will be exclusively focusing, on this particular collection of essays, to understand the theoretical position, that Bhabha takes.

Now, in our earlier discussion on the Colonial Discourse, we have seen, how Colonialism is constructed by the Europeans, as a civilising mission, in which, a superior culture of the Metropolitan West, comes in contact with the “Inferior Culture” of the Colonised Periphery. This Superior-Inferior binary indicates, that in spite of the Colonial contact, the culture and civilisation of the Western Coloniser, and of the Colonised East, were perceived as two distinct and separate entities.

And, this perception is perhaps most clearly stated, in that famous opening line of Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The Ballad of East and West*. I have already quoted this line, in one of my earlier Lectures. But, I am going to quote it again, now. The line is, of course, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. And, as I said, this line is perhaps the best expression of the notion, that in spite of the Colonial contact.

The Western civilisation and Western culture of the Coloniser, was distinct and superior to the culture and civilizational values of the Colonised East. Now, this notion of distinct cultural essences, separating the Coloniser and the Colonised, also informs the kind of Middle Class Nationalist Discourse, that we have studied earlier, from within the context of India.

Indeed, the cyclical pattern of fall and recovery, which should be very familiar to you by now, which underlines the Nationalist Discourse is pivoted, on the notion of distinctive and pure cultural identities. As we have seen earlier, the lament of someone like M K Gandhi for instance, is that India under the Colonial influence, has lost its distinctive culture and its native inhabitants, are busy imitating the culture of the Colonisers, which is completely alien to them.

In the cyclical pattern, underlying the Gandhian Nationalist discourse therefore, the notion of return and the recovery, which is crucial as you will know, signifies a reverting back to the civilizational values of a Precolonial past, which represents an era of cultural purity. Now, against this idea of a pure culture, which can be distinguished, and kept separated from another foreign culture, and which can be reverted back to. Against this, Bhabha proposes the idea of Cultural Hybridity.

Now, since Bhabha's concept of Hybridity is complex, and at the same time, it is central to the field of Postcolonial studies, let us go through it, carefully, step-by-step. Now, in order to understand Bhabha's Theory of Cultural Hybridity, we need to understand that, for Bhabha, culture is not a static entity. For him, it is not an essence, that can be fixed, in time and space.

On the contrary, culture for Bhabha, is something which is fluid, something which is perpetually in motion. It is a melting pot of several disparate elements, which are regularly being added, and which are regularly transforming, our cultural identities. So, for Bhabha, there is, for instance, no pure Indianess, or Africaness, or Britishness, that can be grasped, studied, or even returned too.

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And, to understand, what I mean here, let us consider for example, the famous European Anthropologist, Bronisław Malinowski, who travelled in the early 20th century, to the Islands of Papua New Guinea, to study the natives, in their “Original Settings.” Now, Malinowski's writings on these natives, represent them as the possessor of a distinct culture, which has remained uncontaminated by any foreign influence.

And, if we look at this picture of Malinowski, sitting with Papuan Islanders, it is easy to believe, both in the pure uncontaminated nature of their aboriginal culture, and distinction, separating them from the culture of the white man, who is sitting between them. But, as we know, Bhabha would contend that, such a notion of pure uncontaminated culture is a myth. All culture, is characterised by a mixedness, which Bhabha refers to by the word, Hybridity.

But, how can the culture of these “ Remote Papuan Islanders”, be contaminated, in any way. Well, another modern day Anthropologist, James Clifford, in his essay, Travelling Cultures, takes up this case of Malinowski. And, he writes that, Malinowski's portrayal of the Papuan culture, as pure, static, unchanging, and uncontaminated, is an illusion.

And, such illusions, about pure uncontaminated cultures, are carefully constructed, not only by Malinowski, but almost by all Anthropologists, writing about their field studies on Dwellers of Species, far removed from the West. And, the illusion is created, there for instance, by stressing on the isolation of the field, which the Anthropologist goes to study. This, for instance, is done by leaving away details about, how the Western Anthropologist himself or herself, travels to that distant location.

Because, a detailed account of the travel, will immediately destroy the notion of isolation and cultural uncontaminatedness. Why? Because, it will connect the Anthropological field, with the metropolitan centre. Because, at the end of the day, the Western Anthropologist himself or herself, is travelling. And, by travelling, is actually connecting the metropolitan centre, to that distant location, which is removed from the West.

Now, in other words, if the Anthropologist managed to find his or her way, to the field of study, then that field of study cannot, but be connected to other places. And consequently, its culture cannot, but be influenced by and mixed with other cultures, which is very obvious. Because, if someone can travel into a particular space, it means that, travel is possible. And, the moment travel is possible, then we conceive that space, not as an isolated area.

But, as an area, which is interconnected with other places, and not only in terms of physical interconnectedness, but also in terms of cultural interconnectedness. So, the notion of cultural isolation, and uncontaminated cultural purity, crumbles down here, if we think of how, the Anthropologist has physically travelled to that distant location, which is his or her feet.

But, the notion of cultural isolation, and cultural purity, also crumbles, if we remember, that the Anthropologist is communicating with the inhabitants of his or her field of study, in some way or the other. Which means that, there is definitely, some sort of translation going on. And, it is through this process of translation, that the Anthropologist understands the culture of the native inhabitants, about which he or she writes. And, also vice versa, the natives also understand the questions of the Anthropologist, for instance.

So, if a culture, is all sealed up and isolated, then the very possibility of such a translation and communication, has to be ruled out. But, since such a translation is actually taking place in that field, we cannot really regard that cultural landscape, as completely isolated and sealed. So, as Malinowski's case suggests, no culture is isolated enough, to maintain any sort of purity or uncontaminated essence, that remains static over time.

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### **Hybridity:**

Bhabha views culture not in its unchangeable essence, but characterised by change, flux and transformation and most importantly by mixedness or interconnectedness, which Bhabha terms “hybridity”

The alternative to this idea of a static culture, that Bhabha suggests, is that of culture, as an ever unfolding process, rather than being characterised by an unchangeable essence, it is characterised by change, it is characterised by flux, and it is characterised by transformation. And, most importantly, it is underlined by a sense of mixedness, or interconnectedness, which Bhabha terms, Hybridity.

So, how does this notion of Cultural Hybridity, impact our understanding of the Postcolonial condition. Let us consider, the British Colonial subjugation of India, for instance. Now, if as Bhabha suggests, Cultures are dynamic processes, characterised by change, flux, and hybridity, then the binary of a superior culture of the British Coloniser, and an inferior culture of the subjugated Indians, immediately break down.

To talk about, superior Britishness, or inferior Indianess, would mean talking about static unchangeable cultural essences. But, as we have seen in our discussion of Cultural Hybridity, Culture is not about such fixed essences, but it is about ever changing and ever transforming processes. However, the Colonial Discourse cannot admit this. Because, the notion of a superior and exalted Britishness, is at the core of its justification of Colonialism, as a civilising mission.

The moment, it is pointed out, that there is no inherent essence of British culture, the illusion of the civilising mission disappears, and Colonialism is revealed, just as it is, which is at exploitation of other people's land and resources, through brute force. The cultural justification breaks down, if we point out, that there is no inherent motion of Britishness or

Indianess. So, of course, there cannot be any inherent notion of a superior culture, and an inferior culture.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that, much of what the Coloniser projected, as the superiority of their cultural identity, including the superiority, that they ascribed to their white skin colour, emerged only gradually, during the first decades of the 19th century. In fact, during the 18th-century, for instance, the European Colonisers, had a much more fluid sense of cultural identity. And, their approach to India, was not marked by a belief in the binary of superior Britishness, and inferior Indianess.

So, for instance, as Ashis Nandy points out in his book, *The Intimate Enemy*, before the 1830's, roughly the 1830's, we can see, most British Colonisers in India, living life just like other Indian inhabitants, and often marrying Indian wives, and even offering pujas to Indian Gods and Goddesses. So, as you can see, the British Colonisers did not bring with them, any ready-made idea of British superiority or exalted Britishness.

Such an illusion, of a static cultural essence, only developed later, to provide a justification for the material exploitation, that Colonialism involved. Consequently, the idea of a static Indianess, which is inferior to the Britishness of the Coloniser, was also a construction of this same Colonial process. Now, here, I would like to introduce you to, another important concept in Bhabha, which is the concept of Mimicry.

Now, according to Bhabha, the attempt to stabilise the cultural flux and Hybridity, that characterise the relationship between the Coloniser and the Colonised, and to structure it, in terms of a superior Britishness and an inferior Indianess, led to a very interesting consequence. As, I have said, the construction of this idea of a superior Britishness or Western Culture, was crucial in defining Colonialism, as a civilising mission.

And, the logic of this civilising mission, was to culturally educate the subjugated natives, so that, they could attain the same level of civilisation, as the Colonisers. Right. So, to repeat civilising mission, with justified Colonialism, was underlined by the logic that, because the subjugated Indians, are now exposed to the superior culture of the British Colonisers, they would ultimately learn from the British Colonisers, and would be elevated to that same level of civilizational superiority.



So, in other words, the civilising mission, was about making the Colonised, more and more like the Coloniser. And, this project is most clearly stated, in the 1835 minutes, that McCauley wrote. I have already referred to this minutes, in one of my earlier Lectures. And here, McCauley states in this minutes that, the Colonial Government, should spend more on English education in India, so as to “create a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.”

Now, the problem with this effort, to create a class of Colonised people, who are exactly like the Coloniser is that, if the project is ever to succeed, then it will erase the assumed cultural gap between the superior Coloniser and the inferior Colonised, and thereby undermine the entire Colonial process, entire Colonial rule.

So, if the Colonised subjugated Indians, who were ever to become exactly like the British, then there won't be any notion of cultural gap, civilizational gap, separating the Coloniser and the Colonised, which in turn, will destroy the logic, that Colonialism is required to civilise the people of India, right. So, according to Bhabha, though the Coloniser, once the Colonised to mimic him, to imitate him, he never really expects the latter, to catch up.

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### **Mimicry:**

Bhabha points out that this very idea of a lesser culture mimicking the superior coloniser turns the act into a sort of mockery of the superior coloniser's culture. The mimic men of the colonial periphery are therefore, from the perspective of the coloniser, ever to remain people who are “not quite, not white”

So, the Mimic men of the Colonial Periphery, are therefore, from the perspective of the Coloniser, people, who for ever remain, not quite, not white. And, this is Bhabha's term, not quite, not white. So, they are almost like the British, but never really like the British, right.

And, that never really like the British, that caveat is important, to maintain the assumed cultural gap, between a superior Coloniser and an inferior Colonised.

Because, if the gap completely closes down, then of course, the justification of the civilising mission, ends at that very point. But, Bhabha points out that, this very idea of a lesser human being, of course, the Coloniser considered us, Indians, to be lesser human beings. But, this very idea of a lesser human being, mimicking the superior Coloniser, also turns the act into a sort of mockery, of the superior Colonisers culture.

And, in order to understand this mockery, even imagine the situation, when a gesture or a clown, picks up the manners of a suave gentleman, and then repeats it after him, in an exaggerated and comic manner, right. So, it is imitation, it is Mimicry, but it is not something, that can be desired and accepted by the person, who is being imitated, because it is also a mockery of that person, right.

So, this possibility of comically undermining the Coloniser, and his superior civilizational position, through a partial repetition. This is what, Bhabha refers to, as the menace of Mimicry. But, now let us again return to the notion of Cultural Hybridity, and see, how it impacts the concept of Nation state.

Now, I think, it has already become clear to you, that a notion of culture, as changeable, and dynamic process, characterised by Hybridity of various elements, is fundamentally inimical to the idea of Nationalism, and to the socio-political construct of Nation state. Why? Because, the idea of Nation, is ultimately defined by a cultural essence, which is unique to the people, who were resident within its political boundaries, and which has remained unchanged for ages, and will continue to remain so, in the future, right.

So, what makes us Indians, within this Nationalist logic, is our Indianess, which is a unchangeable cultural essence, that we share with everyone, living within the political boundary of India. And, that has remained unchanged, from the glorious days of the past, and has been forwarded to us, which we will forward unchanged to the future generations.

So, this notion of Indianess, as connecting us both, with all the people living at the present, and with the past generations, and the future generations, who are to live within this

politically defined territory, is at the heart of the idea of Nation. Now, but therefore with Nation, we are back again to the problematic idea of static cultural essences. But, and because we have extensively dealt with the problem, that underlines and undermines this notion of static cultural essences, I will not go in to them.

But, you will see, Bhabha's notion of culture therefore, is unattainable, with the idea of Nation state. But, more importantly, if we are to do without static cultural essences, and think through the lens of Cultural Hybridity, then what kind of social organisation, other than the Nation state, can we conceive. Well, the answer is perhaps, best given by Salman Rushdie, in his celebrated essay titled, *Imaginary Homelands*, where he urges us to look at ourselves, not as grounded in any particular National culture, but as displaced beings, who are living the life of an exile.

The world around us, is seeing an ever-growing number of humans beings, displaced humans, moving from one place to another, because of various reasons, because of war, because of natural calamities, because of political persecution, because of economic aspirations, and so on and so forth. And, so the condition of being in exile, is gradually becoming more and more common.

But, according to Rushdie, even if we are not physically displaced, all of us are displaced in time, from the glorious National past, that we might want to go back to. So, for Rushdie, every one of us, we are all exiles, we are all displaced, if not spatially, then at least temporally. And, in most cases, both physically, and temporally. So, such a mode of thinking, the problem is that, it robs us of our National identities, that we have been taught to cherish, since childhood.

But, Rushdie argues that, there is a rich compensation. And, this compensation, lies in the fact, that we then as exiles, and as displaced human beings, become an ear to all cultures of the world. And, we can fashion our own cultural identity, by mixing the disparate elements, that the world as a whole, offer to us. Our cultural identity, then becomes a dynamic process of transformation, and gives us far more agency to shape ourselves, than is offered by the straitjacket of National identity.

So, with Bhabha's notion of Cultural Hybridity, we gradually move from Nationalism and Nation states, to the idea of Cosmopolitanism. And, we will discuss this in more details, when we take up the poetry of Derek Walcott, in our next Lecture. Thank you.