

ISSN 2305-9257

Southeast University
Journal
Of
Arts and Social Sciences



Centre for Arts, Social Sciences and Islamic Research

Southeast University

Volume 1, No. 1, December 2014

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Of Identities: Fixity, Fluidity and Postcolonial Musings

Southeast University

Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

Vol. 1, No. 1
December 2014

Business Office : Office of the Editor
Southeast University Journal of
Arts and Social Sciences
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Telephone: +88-02-9861596, 9882340
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Published by : Centre for Arts, Social Sciences and
Islamic Research
Southeast University, Dhaka

Price : Tk. 350 (US \$8.00)

ISSN : **2305-9257**

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Of Identities: Fixity, Fluidity and Postcolonial Musings

Sheikh Mehedi Hasan*

Abstract: *The article attempts to elaborate upon the swirling nature of what is constituted as “self” and “identity” in a contested area of postcolonial discourses, outlining relevant literatures and theories relating to postcolonial identities. With regard to postcolonial identities a variety of opinions exist which are based on surveys, analyses and intuition. One of the aspects of postcolonial identities as being static, imposed, assumed, ascribed or moving is thoroughly debated in studies on identity. However, the force of identity is pervasive enough to transcend binaries and move freely in and out of spaces. The article argues that the nature of identities could be volatile and violent coming in contact with the predicament of the postcolonial condition.*

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Cultural and National Identity, Hybridity, Postcolonial Musing

The question of identity is crucial in a postcolonial society. Postcolonial society has inherited a diversity of cultural, social and political hierarchies owing to colonial rule. Colonialism as a dominant discourse, on the other hand, has developed through the logic of modernism which substantiates the process of legitimisation of oppression. The colonial masters tried to make their subjects confused and hybridised with regard to their cultural and national identity. Sometimes a blueprint was undertaken to form a hybrid nation that would be, for example, “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (qtd. in O’Reilly 17). The colonial system contributed to creating a special class of educated Indians in British India. They were derogatorily referred to as “the Babu” and they themselves also enjoyed being identified with the term. But the British writers (such as Charles Dickens) never used the term approvingly, but rather they made much fun of it⁸. The discourses centring on the identity of the Babu determine the coercion of colonial

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⁸ “Dickens once said that he could not write the word lest he should make it baboon.” (qtd. in Choudhury 86)

discourse. Serajul Islam Choudhury points out, “[t]hat he should be created and then ridiculed is of a piece with the ideology of the cultural subjugation of colonial rule.” (86). Thus, the subject of identity is culturally and historically situated; sometimes, the individual does not have a choice to assume an identity independently since identity is imposed as well. In a postcolonial society, identity crisis is considered one of the dominant phenomena. It is not only because a postcolonial subject fails to identify himself/ herself either with the colonial burden or with the subsequent postcolonial existence, but s/he is in the present context enchained to the dynamics of the New World Order. Nevertheless, postcolonial identities are never static, but rather as a vortex they are ever spinning in a violent motion.

The article first discusses “identity” in general and makes a link between identity studies and postcolonial theories. The growing issues of globalisation, multinational capitalism, multiculturalism and “new internationalism” have changed the structure of the present world to a large extent, making it very difficult to define the nature of postcolonial identities. From global perspectives, postcolonial studies cannot be confined to a flux of binary oppositions or a critique of colonial burden and discourses. Similarly, any territorial studies under the banner of postcolonial theory might prove in many cases inadequate as well. Therefore, if something really challenging is allowed to emerge out of postcolonial studies, the area should be kept open to multiple interpretations and applications. In fact, the possibility of spaces and options leaves a conscious choice of position in determining the predicament of the postcolonial condition. At the end of this article, we muse on the possibilities of spaces in postcolonial theories, which would help debate different dimensions of postcolonial identities.

In current literature, “identity” is studied and explored at numerous levels and from various perspectives and approaches. In earlier studies, sociologists mainly focused on the formation of “me” and explored the ways and parameters which would mould “an individual’s sense of self” (Cerulo 385). In recent sociological studies, however, the focus has been shifted from the analysis of the individual to the collective. Some researchers regard identity as “a source of mobilization rather than a product of it; . . .” Besides, the prevalence of virtual identities draws attention from researchers (ibid. 385). Poststructuralists and cultural theorists emphasise the fluid nature of identity. The later Foucault moved away from his previous concept of fixed identity and pointed out that there is no such thing as a fixed self. One’s identity can undergo changes in relation to discursive formations and surroundings he comes across (*Discipline*

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and Punishment, History of Sexuality 1)⁹. Given a particular condition, say colonial condition, identity can be fragmented as Diana Fuss shows in her article on the vulnerable nature of identity and existence of the black or brown man who is “forever in combat with his own image” and “begins and ends violently fragmented” (22).

The subject of identity is necessarily complex as it takes in the totality of social experience, much of which is inextricably influenced by shared history and culture of a community. The concept of identity is assumed to convey a picture of social uniformity. It is also supposed to be linked to social, cultural or national inheritance and association. What constitutes the identity of a group is not always easy to determine. Bourdieu notes that “the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships.” (qtd. in Norton 350). Every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganising that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity (Norton 350). According to Yusuf Bangura, some issues like how individuals are socialised during the course of their lives— as members of different races, families, neighbourhoods, villages, professions, social groups or transnational and trans-cultural organisations— should be taken into consideration when one attempts a discussion on search for identity in general.

In postcolonial theories, the term “postcolonial identity” prevails. Theories of “identity politics” are exploited to explain the nature of postcolonial identities. An essentialist philosopher and a nationalist caught in a binary construction would argue for “postcolonial identity”, which positively represents a distinct racial essence, as opposed to the colonial identity. On the other hand, constructionists opine that “social, psychical, and linguistic structures determine identity” (Hawley 240). Besides, other studies are available that analyse identity in a theoretical frame. Thus, it is highly problematic to depend on a particular theoretical structure to discuss and determine an individual’s postcolonial identity in a literary work. Let us outline first the relevant literature on the theories of identity.

⁹ For a detailed discussion see Urbanski, “The Identity Game: Michel Foucault’s Discourse-Mediated Identity as an Effective Tool for Achieving a Narrative-Based Ethic”, *The Open Ethics Journal* 5 (2011) 3-9.

Karen A. Cerulo in “Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions” discusses sociological discourses concerning constructions of identity. The essay gives a historical background to identity study from the 1970s onward. With regard to collective identity Cerulo explores the relation between identity and “imagined communities¹⁰”, and identity and resistance. At the end, the paper focuses on post-structuralist/ postmodern perspective on the study of identity, exploring possible spaces as to the shifting nature of identity. The parameters of virtual identity and the inevitability of its existence on the prevalence of information technology are also investigated in the paper. Jennifer Todd in “Social transformation, collective categories, and identity change” theorises that “changes in collective categories of identity are at the core of social transformation. The causal linkages among identity change, institutional change, and change in modes of practice are, however, complex.” (429). The shift or change of identity is subject to factors of “socio-political change”, “wider social processes”, and “resource distribution.” However, it is a complex process depending on the individual’s experience and moments of intentionality when s/he faces choices as to the direction of change.

Marilynn B. Brewer in “The Many Faces of Social Identity: Implications for Political Psychology” discusses social identity as a concept that has been invented and reinvented across the social and behavioural science disciplines to provide a critical link between the psychology of the individual and the structure and function of social groups. It reflects the constructivist approach to the study of identity construction in which identity is perpetually developed in relation to the surroundings. This paper further reviews various definitions of social identity as used in different theoretical frameworks, drawing distinctions among person-based identities, relational (role-based) identities, group-based identities, and collective identities.

Identity may have a psychotic dimension as well when a person happens to experience alienation and dislocation. Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* points out that “in adopting the values of white colonial power, the subaltern black people deny their own identity and are thus led into a psychotic condition” since they remain alienated from their culture and roots (qtd. in Hawley 119). He states— “In the first case the alienation is of an almost intellectual character. Insofar as he conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race, he becomes alienated.” (174). The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991.

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And it is white. . . . and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence (178). If colonialism is considered psychopathological, then it distorts human relations and renders everyone sick (Loomba 143). Aime Cesaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, however, shows the double-edged effects of colonisation by terming it “a disease”. If European colonial civilisation, according to Cesaire, amounts to a sick civilisation— “decadent, stricken and dying”, then whoever comes close to it will turn sick and psychotic. This violent process of distorting identity will only result in the emergence of insanity.

Asish Nandy in *The Intimate Enemy* discusses the nature of “modern Western colonialism and its various psychological offshoots in India.” He argues that “the first differentia of colonialism is a state of mind in the colonizers and the colonized.” (1). He describes this state as “colonial consciousness”, which is a psychological state rooted in earlier forms of social consciousness. (Post)colonial self is constructed as split personality in a perpetual conflict between one’s colonial consciousness and commitment to native culture. This type of identity crisis can also be found among group identities within themselves.

In colonial and postcolonial discourses, identity crisis occupies a significant place. In *Identity and Violence* Amartya Sen, terming it “reactive identity”, discusses how this type of identity is constructed and what the impulses or repulses behind this type of identity are. “Reactive identity” comes out of the confusion and inferiority complex a colonised person undergoes. In other words, it is the direct result of colonial hangover experienced by the colonised.

Language and culture influence the making of an individual or collective identity in a given context. Lee S. Kim’s essay “Exploring the Relationship between Language, Culture and Identity” investigates the interconnectedness of language and culture, and how language and culture impact one’s identity. Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” suggests that identity could be linked to national or cultural inheritance and association. It can be defined in terms of shared culture, “shared history and ancestry [that] hold in common” (222, 223). Generally, language based identity with a strong sense of cultural consciousness leads to a rigid form of identity. An extreme form of nationalism on a collective scale is born out of this type of identity-consciousness, and elements of resistance are prevalent. The Bengali Language Movement of 1952 that took place in the then East Pakistan united the Bengalis in terms of linguistic nationalism driven by a strong sense of Bengali culture and inspired in them the need to protest on a large scale as a unified group. However, the act of protesting and resisting on the basis of language identity could succeed,

given that the group concerned enjoys a certain amount of power. As Deborah Schiffrin in “Narrative as Self-Portrait: Sociolinguistic Constructions of Identity” states, “the ability of narrative to verbalize and situate experience as text (both locally and globally) provides a resource for the display of self and identity.” This aspect of identity determines the agency of a group having power of articulation.

However, in a colonial situation, where the natives are forcefully colonised and any attempt to resist is suppressed violently, dominant language and culture can rigorously reshape one’s identity. In a colonial context, while making the relation between language and identity, Fanon in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* explores the violent role of a dominant language in shaping the identity of a colonised subject. By applying poststructuralist theories of language as discourse and by exploring the location of power in relationships between individuals, communities, and nations, the relationship between language and identity can be clearly understood as Bonny Norton suggests in “Language and Identity”. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* speaks of the cultural resistance to imperialistic hangover in terms of assertion of nationalistic identities. Culture is a source of identity as it is constructed out of codes that are thought and known to be the best. How identity is constructed in Said’s opinion is to “return to tradition and culture”. But there is a problem in this type of identity construction; since resistance takes place in the form of return, varieties of religious and nationalistic fundamentalisms emerge. Said prefers the commitment and permissiveness of fluid multicultural spaces of hybridity (pluralistic identity) to rigorous cultural constructs (xiii).

In addition, one group’s radical cultural identity or national identity can pose a threat to other group(s). Adib Khan in his essay “In Janus’ Footsteps” (2001) warns of the threat and danger of radical nationalism, especially in Western states as they experience increased immigration from the East:

Discourse on gender, ethnic and class identity appears to have subsided for the moment and we are caught in a mesh of aggressive nationalism that encourages a somewhat naïve and illusory view of a heroic identity. Guilt and alienation are frequently evoked to lash individuals into an acceptance of an advanced tribal mentality, and these are often achieved by clearly defined characteristics of unacceptable non-conformity. Probably this is a communal reaction to fear, a backlash against globalisation that is perceived to be a threat to national identity. (qtd. in Alam 197).

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In this context, one can refer to Anders Breivik's brutal killings of about seventy seven innocent people. He later admitted that he committed the heinous crime because he was inspired by a sense of radical nationalism formed through his strong commitment to Christian fundamentalism that produced tremendous hatred in his heart towards the Muslim immigrants¹¹. In this regard we can quote Sen as well—

“The world is frequently taken to be a collection of religions (or of “civilizations” or “cultures”), ignoring the other identities that people have and value involving class, gender, profession, language, science, morals, and politics.” (xvi).

Judith A. Howard in “Social Psychology of Identities”, discussing postmodernist conceptions of identities, notes “identity” as fluid, multidimensional, personalized” Hall suggests that “we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside. . . .”(222). He further observes, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within,” (225). Thus, identity is not predetermined, nor is it constituted on the basis of homogeneity. Though identity tends to be fluid in nature, certain issues like social or political groups, cultural practices, personal experiences, ontological concerns etc. contribute to constructing particular identities.

Peter Adler in “Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Multiculturalism” suggests a transcendental identity for a human being who is committed to a larger vision of the global community, transcending the boundaries of nationalism. The article argues for “an international person” who may now be on the threshold of a new kind of being who is socially and psychologically a product of the interweaving of cultures of the present time. Nation, culture, and society influence individuals, make up their values, and give insights into the world. Human beings cannot hold themselves apart from some form of cultural influence. The conditions of the contemporary world tend to produce cosmopolitan identities for global citizens. Nick Stevenson also argues for cultural or global citizenship with respect to the media of mass communication

¹¹ “Mr. Breivik, a right-wing extremist, admitted to the slayings in a court hearing shortly afterward, but denied criminal guilt, portraying the victims as “traitors” for embracing multiculturalism and Muslim immigration policies.” See “Anders Behring Breivik.” *The New York Times* Aug. 24, 2012.
<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/anders_behring_breivik/index.html>

and globalisation processes (“Globalisation, National Cultures and Cultural Citizenship”). Culture in its various forms now serves as primary carrier of globalisation and modern values, and constitutes an important arena of contestation for national, religious, and ethnic identity, argue Robert J. Lieber and Ruth E. Weisberg in “Globalization, Culture, and Identities in Crisis.” They further contend that the threat of global culture to certain identities, for example, Muslim identities in conservative Muslim societies is not so much a clash between civilisations, but a clash within civilisations.

However, globalisation might have a different effect on some individuals and their identity shifts. In particular contexts, globalisation can drive them to take up positions in order to retain a collective identity. Catarina Kinnvall views globalisation as a decisive force of imperialism that drives certain individuals/communities to seek refuge in religion and nationalism that eventually polarise identity, terming religion and nationalism “identity signifier.” In this context, self identity being threatened could eventually become existential identity leading to the polarisation of identity and the formation of collective identity-groups (“Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security”).

Stephen Reicher in “The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance, and Change”, through the theories of social psychology, explains the flexibility of human beings in creating and relating to social worlds. The paper, arguing that identity is not fixed, but flexible, states that social identity and self-categorisation theories provide an “interactionist framework” instead of “reductionist approach” to theories of identity construction. Identity cannot be explained by giving reference to psychological processes, but rather the relation between the processes and the cultural and structural settings should be examined. In the “reductionist approach” to identifying an individual or a group, according to Sen, the relations between different persons are seen as “relations between the respective civilizations to which they allegedly belong.” (41). Sen, who is more concerned with the fluid nature of an individual’s identity than with the fixed nature of collective, community or group identity, elaborates upon the civilisational conflicts by focusing on Huntington’s theory “clash of civilisations” and shows how identity is assumed, ascribed, manipulated, and reduced to a subject of politics and business of civilisational conflicts. Identity is forced to take refuge mainly at the bottom of binary constructions such as Western civilisation versus Islamic civilisation. He, however, proposes to come out of this narrow binarism and offers a broader understanding of identity, dealing with different dimensions and demeanours of individual identity. He states—

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“[T]o see any person pre-eminently as a member of a civilization (for example, in Huntington’s categorization, as a member of “the Western world”, “the Islamic world”, “the Hindu world”, or “the Buddhist world”) is already to reduce people to this one dimension” (41).

Identity can be of two dimensions in a nation-state like India and sometimes it is essential to maintain a two-tier identity. Sudipto Kaviraj states—

Accordingly, although in many respects India established a typical nation-state, its constitution sanctioned a distinctive two-tier nationalism which encouraged its citizens to be both Tamils/Bengalis/Gujaratis and Indians. Indeed, it was believed that there was no way of being an Indian pure and simple, without going through one of these identities (4).

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* explores identity in diasporic contexts. He has come up with terms like “in-between-ness”, interstitial space, ambivalent identity etc. to talk about “cultural hybridity” in metropolitan contexts. The hybrid identity, according to Bhabha, dwells in an “interstitial passage”, in a space of in-between-ness. He observes—

“This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.” (5).

However, Bapsi Sidhwa’s elucidation on the hybrid or fluid nature of identity seems more sensible and cosmopolitan. She replies in an interview—

I have been, at various times, a citizen of Pakistan and India, and now I am an American. As one for whom national borders are becoming blurred and matter of citizenship disconcertingly fluid, I feel I belong to these countries simultaneously rather than sequentially: and whatever happens in them resonates for me as a writer. (qtd. in Alam 361)

Sen is prolific in exploring many facets and facades of one’s identity. Recollecting the traumas and losses that took place in the recent history of India’s partition in 1947 because of collective identities, religious, ethnic and political, he comments:

In our normal lives, we can see ourselves as members of a variety of groups—we belong to all of them. The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of

Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theatre lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a Jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English). (Sen xiii)

Putting too much importance on religious based, national or regional identity has proved to be detrimental to a society like South Asia where people of different religions and faiths have coexisted from time immemorial. In the waves of history, new civilisations emerged in the land, merged into the existing ones, and thus enriched and advanced them¹². But when the practice of confirming identity on the basis of religious affiliations or community affiliations prevails, people become less human, and irreversible gaps emerge that create deep wounds too hard to be healed. People in the same country become enemies to each other and put all efforts to annul the defined “other”. For instance, Sen claims, “civilizational classifiers have often pigeonholed India as a “Hindu civilization”—a description that, among other things, pays little attention . . . to India’s more than 145 million Muslims (not to mention Indian Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Parsees, and others), and also ignores the extensive interconnections among the people of the country that do not work through religion at all, but through involvements in political, social, economic, commercial, artistic, musical, or other cultural activities.” (177). Therefore, we could posit that issues of “identity” in a postcolonial society are intertwined with a number of contemporary literary and cultural theories.

In a theoretical frame of colonial-postcolonial dialectic, a typical postcolonialist would propose to dismantle colonial culture in the aftermath of colonial rule in order to recover pre-colonial identity thus retaining cultural purity. However, as “such pre-colonial cultural purity can never be fully recovered” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 95), a space of postcolonial predicament emerges in the ongoing postcolonial condition. Nandy puts it this way—“the colonised Indians did not always try to correct or extend the Orientalists; in their own diffused way, they tried to create an alternative language of discourse” (xvii). According to Fanon, the space lies “in the consciousness and in the lives of men and women who are colonized” (*Wretched* 27).

¹² See Thapar 990-1014.

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Since postcolonial identity is not a singularity construct as discussed already, we could muse on approaches to locating dimensions of spaces in discussing the nature of identities, of course, on an equal basis. Achille Mbembe, when asked in an interview about the nature of current postcolonial theory, suggests that it is an exaggeration to call postcolonialism a theory. “In truth”, he elaborates, “it’s a way of thinking that derives from a number of sources and that is far from constituting a system because it is in large part being constructed as it moves forward.” (unnumbered). In his view, postcolonial thinking or musing is “a fragmented way of thinking”, but in the broad area of postcolonialism, “there are some forms of reasoning, and some arguments, which distinguish this current of thought and which have made a major contribution to alternative ways of reading our modernity.” (ibid.).

As the identity of the postcolonial is in a paradoxical terrain, postcolonial musings could attempt to analyse “this vast area of ambivalence and the aesthetic reasons behind the confusion and its paradoxical effects.” (Mbembe unnumbered). Being the product of the circulation of knowledge between different continents and across different anti-imperial traditions, the postcolonial current is an intellectual constellation; it is like a river with multiple tributaries (Mbembe unnumbered). This approach has obviously a strong concern for humanism, however, not European humanism on its face value. The approach does not imply that anything Western should be discarded, nor is it confined to any binary structure. It attempts to establish an equal space, provoking a kind of responsibility in a globalised world to promote humanity.

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