

## The Role of “Mimicry” in Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse with special reference to Homi Bhabha’s *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*

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This paper aims at explaining Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘mimicry’ as discussed in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”. This essay has been taken from his book *The Location of Culture*. The concept of mimicry is not as simple as it seems at first instance, but a complex one. I have tried to define the concept of mimicry in simplest form; its role in colonial and postcolonial discourse and how the western exploitation of the east led them feel inferior. The postcolonial studies have brought up the issue of subordination of the eastern countries on the hands of the ruling classes and the resultant effect of this domination is mimicry. Though imitation is a very natural phenomenon to perceive something which is foreign and superior to us, yet when this natural becomes unnatural the problem arises. This tendency of considering themselves (natives of the ex-colonized countries) inferior to the colonial masters (European powers) during the colonial times due to their ignorance of the manipulation and diplomacy of the West led them feel frustrated, dispossessed of their identity, disillusioned and destroyed. This was neither a single case nor a single place where this colonization of the mind existed but there were a number of people in the colonies who were the victims of such mal-treatment. To mimic the whites became the ultimate destiny of all the racially distinguished people. My focus here is on the various ways in which mimicry operated not only during the colonial era but also how it has crept in the postcolonial times when all the ex-colonized countries have become independent. Now with the turn of the century everything has changed, even the forms of the colonization have changed. The direct and visible domination of the West over the East has taken the form of the indirect and invisible control over third world countries. Mimicry of the West, now, is not only limited to European countries but USA, having entered into the first world, has gained more prominence. People now do not imitate only the superior manners of the first world countries but they have started considering that whatever is foreign is the best. This change of attitude and blind imitation is fatal to the growth of the individual and the nation as a whole.

Postcolonialism as a theory emerged during the late 1980s. Postcolonialism is a pro-active movement against any kind of injustice, any kind of depravity and distinction. It has developed the literature which has given us a platform to view the relationship between the western and non-western countries from a different point of view. In the Introduction to Robert J.C. Young’s *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Montage says, “... postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last” (2). The history of colonialism dates back to the period of Renaissance. Discovery of America marks the modern period of colonialism. William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* is an allegory of colonization, in which Prospero, wearing a black robe with a magic wand in his hand, represents the colonizers, and dominates Caliban. In the Introduction to *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft and others define the term “Postcolonial” and say it is “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). The chief pioneering figures of postcolonial

theory are: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak. It was Edward Said's ground-breaking work *Orientalism* (1978), which marked the beginning of postcolonial studies.

The postcolonial thinker, Frantz Fanon has been influential in the works of these contemporary postcolonial critics. Fanon's ideas have helped the critics to understand the layers of marginalization which exist in the society especially amongst the Blacks. His work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) has influenced the people world-wide, who were once colonized by the British colonial powers. Fanon deals with the psychological effects of colonial domination and disempowerment in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1954):

The countries like India, Africa, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, New Zealand etc., which were once colonized, have now started asserting themselves with the coming of this new age of postcolonialism. Once the colonial masters departed from the colonies, these nations became socially, politically, and economically independent. But the colonial hang over that was left on the psyche of the colonized was greater than the physical subjugation of the people by the colonizers. The colonizers adopted certain methods of dominating the natives. They snatched their lands, and ruled over it. Thus, they displaced them from their places physically and mentally. Having the sense of hegemony of their own civilization, they started making the natives feel inferior/infertile/ barbaric/ illiterate. They adopted the divide and rule policy to dismantle the unity of the natives. In terms of Albert Memmi, the colonizers created a kind of "inferiority complex" in the minds of the ignorant natives which forced them to look at the West with alluring eyes. It further, developed "dependency syndrome" in the natives for the West, says Mammoni in his *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*.

The language and culture have been the major tools of colonization. The enforcement of English language in the colonies made the natives mute and dumb. It became difficult for them to communicate, and express themselves or raise their voice against any kind of exploitation. This was a kind of spiritual subjugation in the words of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. In his work, *Decolonizing the Mind: The politics of Language in African Literature*, he says that "The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (9). To spread the English language they created a surrogate Englishman through English literature in schools and colleges. Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1978), enlarged the scope of the postcolonial approach by exposing the 'Eurocentric Universalism' which establishes western superiority over the east.

M. S. Nagarajan, in his book *English Literary Criticism and Theory*, says that "...this colonialist ideology created colonial subjects who behaved in the way the colonizer had programmed. They willingly accepted the superiority of the British, and their own inferiority. It produced a 'cultural cringe' so to speak" (187). Thus, this difference of the natives from the superior colonial masters forced them to imitate, and the phenomenon of imitating the West, in terms of Homi Bhabha is called 'mimicry'. Homi Bhabha is one of the chief pioneering figures of postcolonial theory. He has talked of "mimicry", "ambiguity", "hybridity" and "liminality" in postcolonial contexts. His concept of "mimicry" is often discussed in postcolonial studies. How the "colonial mimicry" influences the

psyche of an individual is of interest to the readers of postcolonial literatures. He has been influenced by French thinkers Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. He borrows his concept of “mimicry” from Jacques Lacan and writes: “The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare (qtd. in Bhabha 85)”. Bhabha defines “mimicry” and says, “... colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (86).

In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, Bhabha probes the psychic mechanisms of the colonized subject (i.e. almost the same, but not quite) and his desire to imitate the colonizer (a reformed, recognizable Other). According to Bhabha, “mimicry” is one of the most effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. “Mimicry”, in colonial and postcolonial discourse, is defined as when people of the colonized country start imitating the behaviours, attitudes, language and culture of the colonizers. The feeling of superiority of the colonial masters over the natives leads the members of the colonized nation to look at themselves as the inferior human beings. Thus, it automatically establishes the belief that the West is always ‘educated’, ‘civilized’, ‘reformed’, ‘disciplined’, and ‘knowledgeable’, while the east is illiterate, barbaric, primitive and ignorant. “Mimicry” seems to be an opportunistic method of copying the person in power. This suppresses one’s own cultural identity and leaves the person to an ambivalent and confused state. Bhabha says that “... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*” (86). It is a kind of love-hate relationship with the West.

The postcolonial literature is replete with such examples of “colonial mimicry”. The central character of V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, who not only changes his name from Ranjit Kripal Singh to Ralph Singh, but in this process of becoming like an English man, he reaches to the state of displaced, disillusioned, disintegrated and fractured identity. Ralph’s idea of England as a “promised land” finally disappoints him. This disillusionment ultimately leads him to believe what he says in the novel: “So quickly had London gone sour on me. The great city, center of the world, in which, fleeing disorder, I had hoped to find the beginning of order. So much had been promised by the physical aspect... there is no light like that of the temperate zone (18).” Ralph Singh comes to believe that he was living an artificial life when he says: “We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown order of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new (146).”

Homi Bhabha, in his essay “Of Mimicry and Man”, introduces the study of Charles Grant’s “Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain” in which Grant has considered the Christianity as a form of ‘social control’ in a country like India where multicultural people reside. Bhabha quotes the words of Grant, “... that “partial reform” will produce an empty form of the imitation of English manners which will induce them [the colonial subjects] to remain under our protection” (qtd. in Bhabha 87). In Macaulay’s words, the “mimic men”, created through the English schools, who used the doctrines of the hegemonic power to construct their own identities as subjects of Empire, were “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (qtd. in Bhabha 87 ). Bhabha traces the examples of

mimic men in India through the works of Rudyard Kipling, George Orwell, and V. S. Naipaul. Bhabha says that the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis in which “to be Anglicized, is *emphatically* not to be English”.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” has gained wide significance in Colonial Discourse Analysis. “Mimicry” as defined by Bhabha is a complex phenomenon. It is not merely the imitation of the human behavior but the attitude and temperament come into play. It does not cultivate a positive and creative approach in the mind of the ignorant native instead it hampers his growth. The native desires for something that he lacks and he keeps on learning the new strategies of imitation to achieve the desired goal. But Bhabha says that “mimicry *repeats* rather than *re-presents*”. Bhabha says that this process of imitation is never complete, and there is always something that he lacks. There are always cultural, historical, and racial differences which hinder one’s complete transformation into something new. This desire of the colonized for the total metamorphosis and have the power of the imperial master is never fulfilled and Bhabha says that “the *menace* of mimicry is its *double vision*”. The obligation on part of the colonized to mirror back an image of the colonizer produces neither identity nor difference; it is only a sort of “*partial presence*” in him, which is the basis of mimicry.

In the similar way, Frantz Fanon analyses the psychological effects of colonial domination in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon exposes the trauma of being a ‘Black’ and the haunting desire to be like the Whites. In his Introduction to the *Black Skin, White Masks* he questions, “What does the Black man want?” (10). He answers in his own voice and says that Black is not even a man. The desire to mimic the White haunts the Black day and night. He confesses, “I am obliged to state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is White” (12).

Homi Bhabha strikes at the same point and says that the metamorphosis of the ‘colonized black’ in the process of being a White, makes him different from his own race and community and transforms him only to resemble the White. Thus, he is excluded from his own society and belongs to neither his own people nor to the Whites, and he is “*almost the same but not white*”. Fanon, very excellently, exposes this racial anxiety of being White in his Introduction to the *Black Skin, White Masks*: “There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to Black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to White men at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect” (12).

How these racial differences and linguistic difficulties of a foreign language can lead to traumatic experiences is far from imagination. Postcolonial theory has given voice to the unvoiced and it has given platform to Third World Countries so that they have started writing back to the Empire in the very same language which their masters have taught them years back. Postcolonial literature criticizes the racial discrimination and the humiliation on the hands of the Whites. The influence of it has gone deep in the psyche of the human beings that it can not be undone. Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* is a critique of such influence on the Blacks. In which, the female protagonist, a young black girl Pecola craves for the blue eyes so that she will look like the Whites. She thinks that after being White everything will get changed; their family standard will be uplifted. The suffering and the pain of Pecola to have something that she can’t have makes her insane. Toni Morrison has tried to give a glimpse of her suffering:

“Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45).

M. S. Nagarajan refers to this “divided self” of the colonized as “unhomeliness”. He says, “One becomes a psychological refugee, in not being able to feel at home even in one’s own home” (187). During the rule of the colonial masters in the colonies, the influence of imperial powers led the dominated natives feel dispossessed, and devoid of the language of the colonizers to communicate. This pressure forced them to imitate the superior Other. The colonized native at this first stage of imitation belongs to Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’, when the child neither has the language, the symbolic system, nor the understanding of the world. He looks at his own image in the mirror and looks at ‘Others’. This ignorant and child-like native also looks at his own image in the mirror of colonial masters’ superior etiquette only to find himself inferior and small, but he can not express himself until he enters into Lacan’s ‘symbolic stage’ and learns to speak and raise his voice.

Thus, Bhabha, having analyzed ‘mimicry’ in the colonial discourse, hints that there is a need to use ‘mimicry’ as a subversive method in postcolonial discourse. He suggests that having entered into the ‘symbolic order’ of our development, we should now speak. The influence of Freud and Lacan on Homi Bhabha is quite obvious as he has taken them into consideration in his essay. According to Bhabha “mimicry” does not only destroy, as he says:

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge in the defiles of an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations. (90)

According to him “mimicry” is an “eccentric strategy of authority in colonial discourse” and the ambivalence of “mimicry” leads us to think that the “fetishized colonial culture” is an “insurgent counter-appeal”. On one hand, there are writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, Wole Soyinka, who have talked of decolonization and the restoration of the past of their native culture, while on the other hand there are writers like Derek Walcott and Homi Bhabha who believe in hybridity, cultural transplantation and cross-pollination.

The postcolonial literature has helped to highlight the forms of “colonial mimicry” and criticizes it at many levels. Even it suggests of dismantling the concept of first world and third world countries as it creates a division between these two places. The first world includes all the developed and ruling countries while the third world includes all the developing and ex-colonized countries. The first world countries are automatically given prominence when they are put in binary opposition as first world/third world. The third world countries still look up towards the first world considering it reformed, polished, mannered and civilized. Mimicry of the West has now extended to the imitation of their way of speaking, dressing, and living. This unnatural and abnormal mimesis of the West is a hindrance to third world countries’ complete development. The influence of the western culture is very much obvious not only in our day to day life but in other fields like films, music, literature, customs, religion and our personal relationships as well. In the name of modernity we have become blind adherent to it and keep copying and mimicking whatever comes to our way. We have adopted

the policy of 'what is west is best' without acknowledging the logical reasons of it and its consequential results. Thus, the first world still keeps fascinating us with the use of magical spells of its language, and culture.

Once the realization dawns on the natives of the third world countries, they start resisting against the domination of the imperial powers through the same techniques with which they have been colonized. During this postcolonial era, we should now resist the impact of the West with best possible means. We should now put the binary oppositions in play and dismantle the hierarchy of the west and the rest. Mimicry can be the method of subversion and it can adopt a new role in postcolonial discourse. Though Bhabha doesn't clearly mention how "mimicry" can play subversive role in postcolonial discourse yet often he seems hinting at this idea. We can use "mimicry" to make fun of what we don't like in the West and can counter attack it. The political freedom of the third world countries will then only result in mental and psychological independence of its people. Thus, it will lead them to a better future.

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