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**Course Material**

**Department of English and Modern European Languages**

**M.A. - SEMESTER II**

**Dr S M Mirza**

**Paper VI : Readings in Literary Criticism**

**Unit I : Classical Theory**

M. H. Abrams : Orientation to Critical Theories

**Unit III : Marxism, Feminism, Post-Colonialism and Cultural Studies**

Edmund Wilson : 'Marxism and Literature'

Elaine Showalter: 'Towards a Feminist Poetics'\*

Homi Bhabha : 'The Other Question'

Stuart Hall : 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'

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Dear Students, Hello.

Only **the two highlighted essays** above remain to be taught.

I'm providing you course material below for **Homi Bhabha's 'The Other Question'** so that you can understand it and prepare your answers for the exam.

**Prepare on Bhabha's idea of stereotype and its role in colonial discourse.**

Notes on **Stuart Hall's 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'** will follow soon.

In case you have any doubts you can contact me on phone or send queries to my email.

**All the best!**

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**Homi Bhabha : 'The Other Question'**

**Bionote**

Homi K. Bhabha was born in 1949 in Mumbai, India. He is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University.

He is one of the most important thinkers in the influential movement in cultural theory called post-colonial criticism. Bhabha has formulated a set of challenging concepts that are central to post-colonial theory: hybridity, mimicry, difference, ambivalence. These concepts describe ways in which colonized peoples have resisted the power of the colonizer. Instead of seeing colonialism as something that is gone, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present. The authority of dominant nations and ideas is never as complete as it seems, because it is always marked by anxiety, something that enables the dominated to fight back.

**Books-** *The Location of Culture* and *Nation and Narration*.

In **The Location of Culture**, Bhabha extends his explanation of the "liminal" or "interstitial" category that occupies a space "between" competing cultural traditions, historical periods, and critical methodologies. Again utilizing a complex criteria of semiotics and psychoanalysis, Bhabha examines the "ambivalence of colonial rule" and suggests that it enables a capacity for resistance in the performative "mimicry" of the "English book." Discussing artists such as Toni Morrison and Nadine Gordimer, Bhabha seeks to find the "location of culture" in the marginal, "haunting," "unhomely" spaces between dominant social formations.

#### **Publication**

**Revised many times; the final version in *The Location of Culture*, 1994. Its full title is**

**The Other Question' 'Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism**

#### **Overview**

In this seminal essay Homi Bhabha outlines his central ideas about his theory of colonial discourse. He draws on Michel Foucault and Edward Said's works and tries to depict how stereotypes and discrimination are crucial in the discourse of colonialism. He provides the concept of ambivalence *which he* considers essential in the colonial discourses of stereotyping.

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## **Background**

### **Important Terms**

**colonialism:** The imperialist expansion of Europe into the rest of the world during the last four hundred years in which a dominant imperium or center carried on a relationship of control and influence over its margins or colonies. This relationship tended to extend to social, pedagogical, economic, political, and broadly culturally exchanges often with a hierarchical European settler class and local, educated (compractor) elite class forming layers between the European "mother"

nation and the various indigenous peoples who were controlled. Such a system carried within it inherent notions of racial inferiority and exotic otherness.

**post-colonialism:** Broadly a study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled "Third World" cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments. Post-colonialism, as both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change, has gone and continues to go through three broad stages:

1. an initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state
2. the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy
3. a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity

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**ambivalence:** the ambiguous way in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often regards the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupt. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse.

**mimicry:** the means by which the colonized adapt the culture (language, education, clothing, etc.) of the colonizer but always in the process changing it in important ways. Such an approach always contains in the ambivalence of hybridity.

**orientalism:** the process (from the late eighteenth century to the present) by which "the Orient" was constructed as an exotic other by European studies and culture. Orientalism is not so much a true study of other cultures as it is broad Western generalization about Oriental, Islamic, and/or Asian cultures that tends to erode and ignore their substantial differences.

**other:** the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group. By declaring someone "Other," persons tend to stress what makes them dissimilar from or opposite of another, and this carries over into the way they represent others, especially through stereotypical images.

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## Notes and Analysis

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### **Bhabha: The Other Question: The stereotype and colonial discourse**

In this essay, Bhabha (B), addressing the ambivalence found within the process of stereotyping within the colonial discourse. He primarily looks at the process of colonial discourse and then analyzes the structure of stereotyping itself. Claiming that stereotypes operate out of

ambivalence, through the usage of skin as the signifier within a schema that is heterogeneous, B claims that the stereotype is a act that is self-contradictory, and in fact does not exist.

B begins by looking at how the stereotype is currently understood through a notion of fixity: stereotyping, and "othering" is a process by which individuals, or groups are given identities and societal positions, values and so on through certain and specific qualities. Yet, B means to trouble this notion of stereotype:

"Yet the function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power--whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan--remains to be charted."

To begin, he looks at the idea of colonial discourse within itself, and the power relations that coincidentally exist in this schema. He begins by setting up the idea of creating the colonial subject and object. This relationship is dependent upon a basic otherness:

"Only then does it become possible to understand the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse--that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity."

Colonial discourse then, is a schema dependent upon the notion of difference yet enacted through an "economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power."

From these points, B means to draw attention to the fact that colonial discourse is a productive process of othering, through a schema of colonial fantasy and power. Within this system, there are signifiers and signs. B goes on to draw a line between previous conceptions of stereotyping, which seems to be essentializing and B's constructed differences within a schema of heterogeneity, and ambivalence of identities. B goes on to point out that skin, the most obvious sign is deeply connected to power, and the process of othering. This is what is interesting, is the work done by B demonstrating that the stereotyping is related to the imaginary process within individuals. The act of identifying and understanding that object:

"The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. Despite the play of power within colonial discourse and the shifting positionalities of its subjects (for example effects of class, gender, ideology, different social formations, varied systems of colonization and so on), I am referring to a form of governmentality that in marking out a 'subject nation', appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity. Therefore, despite the 'play' in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other; and yet entirely knowable and visible."

This fact leads the reader nicely into B explication of how the stereotype is formed and then rationalized within an overtly ambivalent environment of meaning and identification.

From this point, B goes on to address Said and Foucault's conceptions of intentions of polarities as well as use of power within the colonial discourse. Through this critique and commentary B means to uplift the role of ambivalence within discourse (within representation). Here, one of the main issues that he points out is the fact that both Said and Foucault's assumption that colonial discourse produces a system that is closed, and complete: albeit operating through subject-object narratives and oppressive power systems. B means to once again bring out the importance of, and obviousness of the heterogeneity that characterizes the process of stereotyping. Much of this work is important for B's argument because it raises the groundwork where B can focus and point his argument to the system of colonial discourse. He looks at how colonial stereotyping involves fetishizing and power within the discourse. This inherently involves a identification process that B means to eventually connect to the Lacanian imaginary stage.

"My anatomy of colonial discourse remains incomplete until I locate the stereotype, as an arrested, fetishistic mode of representation within its field of identification, which I have identified in my description of Fanon's primal scenes, as the Lacanian schema of the Imaginary. The Imaginary is the transformation that takes place in the subject at the formative mirror phase, when it assumes a discrete image which allows it to postulate a series of equivalences, sameness, identities, between the objects of the surrounding world. However, this positioning is itself problematic, for the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which is simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational."

From this point B delves into the fact that the stereotype pivots on this notion of ambivalence denied through identification and fixity of the stereotype. Through specific signs, (race, history, class, ethnicity and so on), the colonial object is given meaning and a position. However, this process is not done in isolation, but rather the subject is involved too. Here the subject goes through the imaginary phase where she sees the colonized and identifies it with a specific meaning. However, this process of similarity, yet simultaneous projection of meaning and othering, is tainted and constantly infused with a notion of "lack": "Like this mirror phase 'the fullness' of the stereotype --its image as identity--is always threatened by 'lack.' This lack is qualified and understood as an ambivalence of fixity of meaning due to a heterogeneity of meaning for the colonial object. B help clarify this all:

"Although the 'authority' of colonial discourse depends crucially on its location in narcissism and the Imaginary, my concept of stereotype-as-suture is a recognition of the ambivalence of that authority and those orders of identification."

In the end, B asserts that stereotyping is:

"a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse."

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Homi Bhabha reads with particular care the discourse of stereotypes in colonialism. The stereotype is a form of anxious colonial knowledge. Bhabha's writings on this anxiety revise traditional studies of colonialism. The colonizer circulates Stereotypes about the laziness or

stupidity of the colonized population through racist jokes, cinematic images etc. Bhabha states that these stereotypes seem to be a stable if false foundation upon which colonialism bases its power, and are something we should perhaps simply discuss. He analyses Edward Said's classic book *Orientalism* and presents the comments in the third chapter entitled, *'The Other Question'* in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). Here, he explores the ways stereotypes and discrimination work in terms of a theory of discourse. Bhabha calls this project as *'a theory of colonial discourse'* (1994:66). This theory is based on the ambivalence he finds central in the colonial discourses of stereotyping. Bhabha suggests that stereotypical knowledges are recognized as a means of practical control, and are also kept separate from the philosophical *'civilizing'* justifications of the colonial mission. According to Bhabha, a stereotype has a problem of fixing individuals or groups in one place, denying their own sense of identity, and presuming to understand them on the basis of prior knowledge, usually knowledge that is at best defective. Bhabha states further that all forms of colonial identification need to be seen as modes of differentiation, realized as multiple, cross-cutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse, always demanding a specific calculation of their effects. (1994:67) Many agree that stereotypes are undesirable. The different stereotypes function in similar ways. The differences among them are most interesting and so each time we come across a stereotype we need to calculate anew its effects. We should also see how it has been produced and what it goes on to produce in its turn. Homi Bhabha points out that realism is inadequate to analyze the colonial discourse. He tries to connect realism and colonial discourse, stating if realism is not always colonial discourse then colonial discourse is always a form of realism. In other words, not all realistic narratives have connections with colonialism, but colonial discourse is always claiming to directly represent colonial reality. Bhabha says the stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. He further states that stereotype impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of *'—race'* as anything other than its fixity as racism (1994:75). He believes that the mirror stage encapsulates what happens in colonial discourse's stereotyping productions: the mirror stage is at least a good model for the colonial situation. He further suggests that like the mirror phase the *'fullness'* of the stereotype, its image as identity, is always threatened by lack. (1994:77) According to him, visual identification might always hold out the fantasy of full and stable identity, but that identity is immediately threatened by loss because visual identification is part of a circulation of relations rather than a one-way fixed relation. He states that the self and other are locked together. For Bhabha, there is no fact of blackness, and there is no fact of whiteness, not if those facts or identities are imagined as permanent. Homi Bhabha observes that whiteness is transparent, whiteness studies make whiteness opaque. Whiteness is made visible for what it has been and continues to be a strategy of authority. Whiteness seems to have a coherence, stability and finality that justify its authority, in contrast to the coherence and instability that explain why whiteness will always be inferior. Stereotypes function to enable colonial authority, providing the justification that the colonizer rules the colonized due to innate superiority. The authority recognizes its bases in stereotypes, producing prejudiced and discriminatory structures of governance and colonial rule is informed by supposedly civilizing ideals. The modern forms of Western political and economic institutions coexist with the ideologies of superiority. The coexistence enables the real exercise of colonial power, but at the same time that anxiety troubles the source of colonial authority. Bhabha states that this ambivalence or anxiety is necessary for the production of new stereotypes, but is also the space for counter-knowledge and strategies of resistance and contestation. Bhabha suggests

that authority is only ever complete if we take it at its word- something that colonized peoples obviously resisted, and that the postcolonial critic must continue to resist it too.

Stereotypical discourse gets to the heart of colonial discursive power in general, and towards the close of the chapter he gives this summary:

Racist stereotypical discourse, in its colonial moment, inscribes a form of governmentality that is informed by a productive splitting in its constitution of knowledge and exercise of power. Some of its practices recognize the difference of race, culture and history as elaborated by stereotypical knowledges, racial theories, administrative colonial experience, and on that basis institutionalize a range of political and cultural ideologies that are prejudicial, discriminatory, vestigial, archaic, 'mythical', and, crucially, are recognized as being so. [...] However, there coexist within the same apparatus of colonial power, modern systems and sciences of government, progressive 'Western' forms of social and economic organization which provide the manifest justification for the project of colonialism. (LC: 83)

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***Read and consider the following passages from H. K. Bhabha's 'The Other Question',***

'The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin ... colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible.'

'The visibility of the racial/colonial other is at once a point of identity and at the same time a problem for the attempted closure within discourse. For the recognition of difference as "imaginary" points to identity and origin [and] is disrupted by the representation of splitting in the discourse.'

'Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjections, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination ... It is the scenario of colonial fantasy which, in staging the ambivalence of desire, articulates the demand of the Negro which the Negro disrupts.'

'My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the identification of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the process of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possibly by engaging with its effectivity; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised).

'The fetish or stereotype gives access to an "identity" which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its

recognition of difference, and disavowal of it. This conflict of pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence, has a fundamental significance for colonial discourse. For the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy - the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered.

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