



COMMUNITY TEXT AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

In the perception of writing in the Western philosophical tradition identified by Derrida as an exteriorized representation of speech, writing was to be distrusted because of its transmissibility and repetitiveness beyond the immediacy of voice, the presence of the subject and the origin of spoken articulation, among other things. In short, writing exceeded and thereby exposed the limits of phono and logocentrism on which logic, rationality and theology in the West are grounded. It is writing which enables difference possible to the extent imagined by Derrida. Phonocentrism arrests difference to a great extent for every revisiting of the text will be deferral – a verbatim repetition of the oral text being impossible. This makes appointment of the authentic, official repeaters (who will in fact be authors of a new text similar to the original but never the same) essential.

Derrida believes that by the process of difference being is a writing, a constant becoming. Being's apprehension (which is related to Derrida's idea of trace) thus hinges on the difference in ontological determination, that to which Derrida refers to as a 'becoming space of time', a 'becoming time of space'. This ability of writing to provide temporal aspect to the ontological and ontological to the temporal still depends on the idea of the objective ontological existence of the signifier – which may not at all be the case with the signifiers in a myth, making the reader of the myth totally free and totally bound at the same time¹.

Lyotard defines culture as a particular way of being in fundamental situations : death, love ,work, giving birth, being embodied ,growing old, speaking. People have to be born, to die, and so forth, and a people arises in response to these tasks, to those calls, as it understands them... Culture is precisely those modes of relating that take place irrespective of whether or not they are understood or formally recognized and made into laws and contracts.

To explain his analysis of culture he discusses the Cashinahua tribe whose culture he describes as composite. Here because of the apparent simplicity of their organization, it is relatively easy to see how the tribe's cultural coherence is generated by their processes of shared story telling in which their beliefs, identities and relationships are related back to them.



These stories are according to Lyotard metanarratives which follow rules (language games) which are of a nature different from those which can be applied to other metanarratives e.g one of the rules of the language game of a community in case of such a narrative of a community text is acceptance without questioning, for in such cases the ‘social bond is composed of language “moves”(1984:11)

One can deduce that – ‘The pragmatic agreement between the players regarding the language game involved in reading of community texts is essentially the non-dialogic relation between the reader and the text. The restriction on reader response is, as it were, a necessary condition for the existence and survival of a community text and the community itself.

Lyotard points out how the Western society was tied together by grand narratives of truth and justice and equality and the unrelenting spread of capitalism has destroyed the traditional social bonds that link all of humanity in the grand narratives of progress. Truth, the basis of the speculative grand narrative, and justice, the goal of the grand narrative of emancipation, no longer have the universal appeal they did for modernity. (p28,Lyotard) Since the sense of identity of the westerner emerged from grand narratives located in the multiplicity of language games that no longer follow a single metanarrative an individual identity gets dispersed. Thus Lyotard has shown how the westerner first perceived himself as member of a universal humanity during modernity and has in the postmodern world now become ‘a nowhere man’.

As compared to the metanarratives followed by the Western world we have community based societies in the world which continue to remain bound by the narrative of the community text. Such a text serves many purposes. It binds the community. The text, especially the ‘fabulous’ and unbelievable in the text provides the sense of identity to the members of the community.ⁱⁱ Dr. Devadatta Patnaik; myth = myhya : A Handbook of Hindu Mythology, (Penguin Books: New Delhi,2006)

Mythology tends to be hyperbolic and fantastic to drive home a myth. It is modern arrogance to presume that in ancient times people actually believed in the objective existence of virgin births, flying horses, parting seas, talking serpents, gods with six heads and demons with eight arms. The sacredness of such obviously irrational plots and characters ensures their flawless transmission over generations. Any attempt to challenge their validity is met with outrage. Any attempt to edit them is frowned upon. The unrealistic content draws attention to the idea behind the communication. Behind virgin births and parting seas is an entity who is greater than all forces of nature put together. A god with six heads and a demon with eight arms project a universe where there are infinite possibilities, for the better and for the worst.

From myths come customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings. Mythology influences behaviors and communication. Myth and mythology thus have a profound influence on culture.

Dr. Patnaik claims that ‘People outgrow myth and mythology when myth and mythology fail to respond to their cultural needs. The question that must be addressed is when does a culture outgrow myth and mythology i.e. the basis of their culture? His question is intricately related to the issue of the reading of a community text.

A community text obviously deters its reader from being a good reader, for a good reader is one who perceives gaps in the text. More informed a reader is, more will be the expectations from the text i.e. more will be the gaps he will perceive. Negatively speaking, readers who do not, are not allowed to perceive gaps, are not allowed a deferential reading of the text accept it without questioning. In case of such texts the authorial intention gains supreme significance. Such texts are expected to condition thoughts of their readers which they centripetalize instead of centrifugalising them for this is what is involved in the process of conditioning. This ability of writing to provide temporal aspect to the ontological and ontological to the temporal still depends on the idea of the objective ontological existence of the signifier – which may not at all be the case with the signifiers in a myth making the reader of the myth totally free and totally bound at the same time.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reading of a myth and its interpretation especially by a community with the specific purpose of bringing and keeping people together demands a totally different explanation of all that is involved in the act. It should be noted that the very existence and continuity of the community depends upon the continuity and acceptance of a myth. Logos cannot be allowed to follow mythos*ⁱ Here we find a clear break in the concept of reading as proposed by Derrida. Derrida contends that all rational or theological discourse refers back to some originary or governing concept or to the word of God.ⁱⁱ

Derrida relates phonocentrism to logocentrism in the Western society. This is true of a society which has always privileged the rational (I think therefore I am kind of thinking) When Derrida thinks about reading he thinks about gaps as necessary for thought. Taking this the other way Derrida cannot think about the act of reading apart from the act of thinking. Thinking is for him an activity inseparably and inevitably related to the act of reading – thought being the very aim of reading as one may put it.

A community text is therefore restrictive in every respect. Its contribution to culture formation poses restriction on free growth of the myth and its conditioning of the human mind poses restriction on the growth of the mind on one hand and on community thinking on the other.



The importance that the authorial intention gains in the entire process poses serious problems for the community for the community's intellectual development is then effectively controlled by the author who is mostly the narrator in the case of community texts. The myth, instead of developing out of a consciousness of peoples of the community develops in the direction the narrator deems fit.

The author of the community text cannot be pronounced as dead. The presence of the author denies the reader the freedom he is allowed in case of other texts. In case of the community text logos is not allowed to follow mythos, the mythos itself is represented as a form of control. The authority enjoyed by the author of a community text makes it possible for the myth to be steered in the direction which may suit personally the author or the group/sex/family to which the author belongs. The pressure on the author to enable his community to establish /enjoy a distinct identity makes him emphasize some aspect of the fantastic which in some distorted way gets translated in the beliefs and behavior of the community.

In his attempt to point out how cultures are often fetishized Homi Bhabha points out how the cite of cultural difference can become the mere phantom of a dire disciplinary struggle in which it has no space or power. .. Kristeva's China, Derrida's Nambkwar Indians, Lyotard's Cashinahua pagans are according to him part of this strategy of containment where the other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. He believes that such a totalization of cultures cannot exist. The term 'cultural diversity' is for him fraught with problems for it is the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs held in a time frame of relativism. It gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity. He states that cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bhabha's attempt to point out the essentially postmodernist tendencies in a here –to –fore modern concept of culture the talk about culture of tribal communities such as the one's considered by Spivak or Leotard or Derrida is about the pre-modern culture of these communities as they exist in a postmodern world. Many of them do live in the 'mythic memory of a unique collective identity'.(e.g. the Murali myth and the temple dancers in Jejuri) The voluntary or forced adherence to the cultural practices often fossilized and naturalized aiming at preserving both the identity of the community and the very existence of the community culture is many a time anti humanitarian. The process of enunciation or 'the discursive conditions of ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated translated, rehistoricised and read anew'^{iv} cannot be applied to the reading of a myth or community texts. The metanarrative of a community text is more powerful than many other metanarratives for on



one hand it imposes itself on those who need to identify with a particular group and on the other hand curbs dissidence. The myth of Murali for example is imposed on the unsuspecting, innocent and powerless infants with no scope ever for discursive construction of their social reality. It is at this juncture that interference becomes essential.

ⁱ Laurence Coupe : Myth (Routledge:London,2007), p121

ⁱⁱ Julian Wolfreys : Derrida: A Guide for the perplexed (Continuum:London ,2008), p26

ⁱⁱⁱ Homi Bhabha The Location of Culture(Routledge: London,)p50

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