



The Poststructuralist Critique Of Othering

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Abstract

The process of othering divests the Other from virtues of pride, dignity, and nobility. The Other is mentally classified as not one of us and less human. The concept of othering can be looked upon as based on structural binaries. This is problematic, however, because the binary opposition fails to perceive the power embedded in this opposition. The poststructuralist critique of the structural binary of opposition liberates the multiplicity of forces and differences that the structuralist opposition reduces to a mere dyad. Nietzsche, the precursor to poststructuralism, deconstructs the notion of “good”, “noble”, and “truth” in this context. Derrida’s deconstructive approach also offers insight that the privilege or value attached to the othering agency is only culturally inherited prejudice based on pre judgement.

Keywords: Othering, binary, power, poststructuralism, Nietzsche, Derrida.

Introduction

Othering is a process that identifies a person, a group, or a thing as different from oneself on the basis of some culturally constructed characteristics. One’s identity is established on the basis of the difference thus identified. The person or the group that is othered is vilified and frequently subjected to humiliation and marginalisation. The process of Othering divests the Othered from the ‘virtues’ of pride, dignity, nobility and natural rights. Othering occurs between two conflicting civilisations. World history is replete with many such examples. Othering is also embedded in the encounter between two groups living in proximity. The bloody conflicts between Muslim sects in West Asia and different tribal groups in African countries bear testimony to this. The consequences of Othering can go to unimaginable brutality: complete annihilation, elimination, incarceration into prison for life. Genocide and ethnic cleansing, which are also the forms of Othering, are the inevitable consequences of such conflicts.

In psychological parlance, the Other is mentally classified in one’s mind as ‘not one of us’, as less human and less worthy of respect and dignity than we are. This is the construction of one’s in-group as opposed to the out-group members. The phenomenon associated with the in-group construction is the out-group derogation, a natural corollary. Out-group derogation is the form of Othering, where the out-group is perceived as threatening to the members of the in-group. Othering, as such, manifests prejudices towards Others.

It reveals a set of prejudices and conditions that propagate group-based marginality and inequality.

The discourse of Othering produces the Other in its entirety. As Said observes in terms of the Orient, the Other for the Occident, it manages and even produces the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively (Said 3). Antonio Gramsci's concept of Hegemony also gives insight into the process of covert form of Othering. Gramsci distinguishes civil society from political society. Civil society consists of institutions like schools, families, and unions, and the political society consists of the army, police and central bureaucracy. The former is non-coercive in character, while the latter rests on coercion and domination. Culture, according to Gramsci, operates within civil society, which is the composite of ideas and institutions that influence people not through coercion but through consent. Hegemony, thus, is the rule by consent. It others people in societies or States which are non-totalitarian. The instrument of Othering, in such cases, is not overt but covert. In totalitarian States, however, the instruments of Othering are overtly coercive in nature.

The reduction and strengthening of in-group identity as opposed to the perceived antagonistic out-group have many causes. The most crucial issue is power. The threatening of one's position or power leads to action that seeks to consolidate one's identity. Organising gatherings of the same people around the same rallying point then becomes the cause of sameness against difference. A knowledge about the same is constructed, and a history about the same is recognised. All these processes go on to reify the cultural identity of a group or an individual. The identity is reduced to static 'our identity' encompassing certain traits against 'their identity'. The interaction between our identity and their identity ignores the individual's complexity and subjectivity, breeding prejudices and stereotypes and resulting in the stigmatisation and ostracism of the Other. This Othering involves both the physiological and psychological violence on the Other.

Yiannis Gabriel observes:

"Othering is a process that goes beyond mere scapegoating and denigration – it denies the Other those defining characteristics of the 'Same', reason, dignity, love, pride, heroism, dignity, nobility and ultimately any entitlement to human rights. Whether the Other is a racial or a religious group, a gender group, a sexual minority or a nation, it is made rife for exploitation, oppression and indeed genocide by denying its essential humanity. . . .(Gabriel)

The concept of Othering can be looked upon as based on structural binaries, i.e., upon dichotomies like white Vs. Black; man Vs. Woman, etc., where the term on the left of the binary is perceived as superior to the term on the right. However, it is problematic because it fails to perceive the power embedded in this opposition. It obfuscates the relationship when one element of the binary opposition defines itself (consciously or unconsciously) against the other element negatively. The word 'Opposition' denotes a natural antonymic relation. However, as Currie observes, in order to account for the embedment of power in this opposition, it will do good to substitute the word Other for opposition. He further

observes that the Other can be better understood “as a structuralist and psychoanalytic name for the inferior member of a hierarchical quasi opposition implying a power relation” (86). As the notion of otherness has power relation embedded in it, it carries with it the poststructuralist critique of the structuralist explanation of opposition. It is the analysis of the innocence of opposition. The consequence of such critique is the “voicing of otherness that is consigned to silence” (Currie 87). The poststructuralist critique, as such, seeks to liberate the multiplicity of forces and differences that the opposition reduces to a mere dyad, thereby transcending opposition and understanding difference in more complex and multifarious ways. These consequences can be illustrated within the framework of feminist criticism, which contests the subordinate position of women as the Other to men in the man-woman dyad or binary. Before the influence of the structuralist theory, feminism employed the ‘strategy of sameness’ and the ‘strategy of difference’ in their quest to accomplish equality with men. The strategy of sameness works with the notion that man and woman are part of common humanity and, therefore, there is no discrimination between them. The strategy of difference, on the other hand, works with the recognition of a woman’s particularity and difference that defines her position of parity with a man. These strategies were later criticised as having a very limiting position without any instrumentality in altering or contesting the sex-specific privileged characteristics of man. There was a possibility that the struggle for equality might take a back seat. Bacchi, in this regard, observes:

“Talking about ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ also diverts attention from the problem of hierarch. . . . If women are, in fact, ‘different’, the question becomes: why has this ‘difference’ been constructed as a disadvantage? If women are, in fact, the ‘same’, the problem of their relative disadvantage and lack of power remains unresolved. There is a need, therefore, to shift the focus of analysis from the difference to the structures which convert this difference into disadvantage” (qtd in Currie 88).

Thus, the structure, also a construct that engenders the Other, has to be identified, and its concepthood or ‘presence’ has to be dismantled. In structuralism, the concept of difference is thought to construct meaning. But this very concept of meaning was questioned by ‘difference’. This was the moment which can be called the ‘poststructuralist moment in the concept of difference’, where the concept of difference offers us new insights about the meaning as a unitary thing or multiplicity of meanings. This further paves the way to understanding Other not as having the same parochial meaning but breathes new life into it, leading to poststructuralist analysis. The poststructuralist critique, thus, seeks to account for the discursive context that foregrounds the constructed hierarchy of power relations.

It is important to know how Nietzsche, the precursor of Poststructuralism, views the traditional approach that has been instrumental in creating values and shaping Others in the minds of the majoritarian segment of society. Nietzsche does not seek to derive the knowledge or the rules of moral values that are fundamental in constructing the Other out of the universal principles. Instead, he raises questions which are historical or, to use his term, genealogical. Nietzsche asks for the historical background or the psychological basis of the values and their opposites. He has nothing to do with

objectively determining good from evil, true from false, or right from wrong. He is concerned with the politics that underpin the construction of these binaries in the way they are and not the other way around. His focus lies on the way of creating such values. Nietzsche is of the understanding that the values existing as such should be called into question first. For such questioning, one needs to know the circumstances in which these values were constructed and how they grew and changed. Such knowledge had never been desired, according to Nietzsche. His questions are concerning the value of the values. This implies the poststructuralist critique that instead of imposing stability on the analysis of difference by focusing on the simple difference of binary opposition, as the structuralist did, the poststructuralist would disturb the limiting dichotomy of the binary so that the relationship can be perceived in a new light. The perception will liberate the concept of Other from the closure of binary opposition. A new interest, thus, emerged after poststructuralism — the Others, the margins, the borderlines invited a fresh analysis of themselves, putting into question the neutrality of the dyad of binary opposition. It was no longer seen as an innocent structural relation but rather a hierarchical one where one term dominated the other. An analysis as to how priority, value, and privilege came to be ascribed to one term of the binary at the expense of another one, and the very idea of “Other” is engendered, underlies the critique of poststructuralism.

The dimension of the opposition is certainly not given in nature but is actually provided in ‘truth’ or ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’, which do not have their value in themselves. Instead, they are the result of value judgements established in a certain way and not in another way. Nietzsche explains,

“The concept of ‘good’, for Nietzsche, did not originate with the people to whom the ‘good’ was shown. Rather, it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is, the powerful, or knowledgeable or the noble, or those who were high stationed in the society, who decided their actions and themselves as good in contradistinction to all those who were low-minded, common and plebeian” (qtd. in Kaufman 25).

Out of this distance, ‘they’, the “good”, grabbed the right to create or label these values with some coined names. As a precursor to poststructuralism, Nietzsche is concerned with the act of judging, which is instrumental in creating the world by making determinations about good and evil, truth and lie, light and shadow, and value and its opposite in certain ways. Although poststructuralism reads hierarchical politics in these binaries and endeavours to reverse the hierarchy, Nietzsche already observes that both sides of the given distinction also communicate with each other in a subterranean fashion so that what constitutes the value of good and revered things may be related, tied to the seemingly opposite thing as if they are one in essence.

The deconstructive approach to the binary opposition throws new insight into the ontology of the Other, its dialectic relationship with its own cause. Derrida identifies three steps as the dialectical interplay between the binary opposition. Mark Currie in his book *Difference* explains these three steps: The first step is the exposure of the hierarchy, i.e.,

the recognition of the assumed superiority of one term of the binary over the other. The second step is the reversal of that binary, i.e., prioritising the subordinate term between the two terms. The third step is the disruption and reconfiguration of the different elements of time and history in the dialectic of the process of Othering (51). This deconstructive approach to binary opposition illustrates how one term of the binary defines another one so that both terms take on equal social valence. Deconstruction offers an insight that the privilege or value attached to the dominating or the Othering agency over the Othered is only culturally inherited prejudice based on prejudgment and, therefore, not a rational appraisal of social relationships. Derrida opposed the structuralists' concept of the spatial structure frozen in time. The introduction of the temporal element offers theorists like Derrida an analysis that historicises social realities and enables them to see how they operate in terms of the changing times. Historicising text means resisting the univocal, singular history and being open to different histories and multiple truths. Historicising Othering processes recognise the irrational violent hierarchy in the binaries, here the Othered and the Othering agency, and make them questionable. Such insights encourage a researcher to write histories of the marginals and the excluded ones, othered by a singular metanarrative of the metaphysical concept of history, thereby bringing to light the discursivity and the irrationalities of Othering.

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