Hyper reality and Identity in a Postcolonial World

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ABSTRACT

Jean Baudrillard, arguably the 'guru' of Postmodernism, is one of the most prolific thinkers of the last two decades whose writings have significantly altered the contemporary landscape, in fields as diverse as sociology, arts, science fiction studies, graffiti, internet and the media. His statements whether that of the 'Gulf war did not take place' or his notion of simulacra and hyperreality, have provoked extreme reactions from various quarters ranging from the vitriolic to that of intense fascination. Taking the critics understanding of Baudrillard's project as devoid of agency as my starting point, I seek to understand how Baudrillard's critique of consumerism and his notions of simulacra and hyperreality have informed the postcolonial debates on identity. Without trying to trace the chronological developments of Baudrillard's thought, in this paper, I will examine his semiological study of objects and hyperreality in order to investigate the articulation of identity, nature of representations in terms of nation and cultural differences. The formulation of the concept of identity is unthinkable without the concept of alterity or difference. The link between the formation of the 'self' and the positing of the 'other' has been time and again explicated in various social, psychological, and philosophical theories. Identity, is one of the most contested and debatable terms both within the realm of Postcolonialism and also within Postmodernism. Though in this paper I am not seeking to understand identity in terms of convergences and divergences in postmodernist and postcolonialist theory but instead seek to examine the implications of one of the major postmodernist theorist, Jean Baudrillard on the notion of identity and subjectivity within the Postcolonial world.

Keywords:

hyperreality, objects, identity, agency, postcolonialsim/postmodernism, alterity, nation through semiological representation

Introdaction

The era of function and of the signified has revolved, the era of the signifier and the

code is beginning.

(Baudrillard, qtd. in Smith 163)

The formulation of the concept of identity is unthinkable without the concept of alterity or difference. The link between the formation of the 'self' and the positing of the 'other' has been time and again explicated in various social, psychological, and philosophical theories. Adi Hastings and Paul Manning in *Language and Communication* observed, that "identity is always understood in relation to alterity. After all, it takes two to differ" (qtd. in Silke Horstkotte & Esther Peerens 1) and to signify a self. Identity is a concept that is predicated on a "series of dichotomous separation", us and them, male and female, white and black, here and there, my nation and yours, and so on. These binaries are "premised on the illusory construction of an essence" (Grace 41).

The concept of identity is one of the central tenets in Postcolonialism, which was shaped by the anti-colonial struggles of the 1940s. Concerned with political freedom, the overthrow of colonial power and the establishment of self-government, postcolonialism in the words of Izabella Penier in "Modernity, (Post)Modernism", "focused on the restoration of an authentic relationship between representation and reality and of the self-representation of the colonized" (26), in short, on the articulation of identity. Postcolonialism could hence, be understood as During in "Postmodernism or Postcolonial" said, the "need in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or European concepts of images" (33).

Identity, is one of the most contested and debatable terms not only within the realm of Postcolonialism but also within Postmodernism. Postmodernism in the words of Linda Hutcheon, is both "over and under-defined" (Hutcheon 3), being "notoriously slippery and indefinable" (Nicol 1). Having come into fashion, since the political events and the linguistic turn that took place during the 1960s France, this was a "new sensibility", described by Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler (qtd. in Nicol 1), which emerged in the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Jean Francois Lyotard among others, who questioned the grand 'metanarratives' of historical

progress initiated by the Enlightenment project. Postmodernism has seriously challenged the binaries between art and life, nature and culture, fiction and history, and to use D'haen words, to demystify "our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning" (qtd. in Hutcheon 7). A poetics of postmodernism posits the impossibility, the "untenability", "fallaciousness" (Conner 20) of the Cartesian subject and instead shows that both the subject and the world outside the subject are, not in some sense 'out there' but constructed through textual and cultural traces.

Though in this paper I am not seeking to understand identity in terms of convergences and divergences in postmodernist and postcolonialist theory it would be useful in the context of my paper to confront the question of Kwame Anthony Appaih whether, the 'post' in both Postcolonialism and Postmodernism stands for the same thing? Arif Dirlik, calls 'postcolonialism', a "child of postmodernism" (qtd. in Loomba 205), one which emerges because of the increased visibility of academic intellectuals of 'Third World' in cultural criticism of the First World. For Dirlik, both postcolonialism and postmodernism are complicit, to use Jameson's phrase, in

the 'cultural logic of late capitalism'. In Linda Hutcheon's article, '"Circling the Downspout of Empire": Post-Colonialism and Postmodernism', postcolonialism incorporates a "strong political content", whereas in postmodernism, its political agenda is "ambivalent" (150). But, in both of these studies, the self-reflexual reconsideration of the discourses of history involves the "strong shared concern with the notion of marginality" (153). Keeping these differences in mind, I would examine the implications of one of the major postmodernist theorist, Jean Baudrillard on the notion of identity and subjectivity within the Postcolonial world.

Jean Baudrillard, arguably the 'guru' of Postmodernism, is one of the most prolific thinkers of the last two decades to have profoundly affected the Western socio-political and economic scene. His writings have significantly altered the contemporary landscape, in fields as diverse as sociology, arts, science fiction studies, graffiti, internet and the media. In the words of Kroker, Baudrillard not only constitutes "the postmodern scene" (1988) but, all that is difficult and incomprehensible in post-industrial late capitalism is, manifested in the writings of Baudrillard. A "master thinker" (Kellner, 2), his statements whether that of the 'Gulf

war did not take place' or his notion of simulacra and hyperreality, have provoked extreme reactions from various quarters ranging from the vitriolic to that of intense fascination.

Douglas Kellner asserted that "Baudrillard's project is vitiated by the absence of a theory of agency" (216). Taking this as my starting point, I seek to understand how Baudrillard's critique of consumerism and his notions of simulacra and hyperreality have informed the postcolonial debates on identity. Without trying to trace the chronological developments of Baudrillard's thought, in this paper, I will examine his semiological study of objects and hyperreality in order to investigate the articulation of identity, nature of representations in terms of the nation and cultural differences.

Introduction

Starting from the *System of Objects* (1968); *The Consumer Society* (1970); *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976); and to *Simulations* (1981), Baudrillard sought to define consumption through the 'objects' of everyday life. *System* inaugurates Baudrillard's life-long fascination with the "object: as form, as image and as principle," (Pawlett 9) that functions as a "system of signification" which undertakes the "policing of

meanings" (Rivkin and Ryan 415). Through a re-reading of Marx and Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (1973), Guy Debord *'Society as Spectacle'*(1988), Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday life* (2008), Baudrillard delineated that social life as mediated by consumption has nothing to do with the principles of 'reality' and neither with the satisfaction of 'needs'. This represents according to Baudrillard a "strategic mistake" (qtd. in Grace 15), more of a hegemonic and totalising economic structure of capitalism, as it envisages an 'inherent meaning' and "objective anchorage" in both 'objects' and 'needs' (Porter 1). If the world of economy and the system of economic exchange exists on an understanding of a prior natural, given, essence in both subject and object, this is debunked in the writings of Baudrillard. In the early works, Baudrillard is primarily concerned to "discern the abstract 'language' that underlies our relationship with ordinary domestic objects", one which is not based in terms of their use-value, but "as a way of communicating with others" (Butler 3).

Classical economics, according to Porter, posited that capitalism was a system of commodity production and, value was produced by labour, and output responded to consumer demand, which is

determined in turn by the subject's needs (1). Modern consumers on the other hand, have become more of a 'cyberneticians' who consume the "idea of relation between signs". Objects are liberated from their functionality and materiality and they derive their meanings as signs, whose value is derived by a disciplinary "code". It is through the logic of the "code" that our desires and needs have been "mapped", in advance, to appropriate objects. Baudrillard insists that "objects cannot be understood independently from the signifying system" (Grace 13) which actually constructs them as objects. In fact, the sign constitutes the world, as exchange value determines the use value. The subject becomes a 'person' through the process of 'personalization', the demarcations and the terms set up by the sign-object system itself.

The way we experience social life and what we consume become operational under the impetus of the 'sign', that is, the system of meaning is given importance rather than the subject's interpretations and engagements with it. The choice that is provided within the system through its "modes of frequent gratifications and frustrations' create the 'perception of freedom, participation and agency" (Grace 11) but which are merely

strategies that 'integrate' the subject into society, creating certain 'personality types'.

Thus from the functional value of signs we have moved to the "structural value of signs" (Rivkin and Ryan 488). This capitalist dismissal of the 'use-value' of the object is seen to destroy objective reality. As Baudrillard surmises, "*referential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upperhand*" (emphasis in the original; Rivkin and Ryan 488). This makes the structural system autonomous, resulting in 'simulation', that is, "signs are exchanged against each other, than against the real" (Rivkin and Ryan 489). To give an account of the consequent undermining of the key binaries like real/imaginary, subject/object, good/evil, Baudrillard recounts the successive "social and historical mutations" (Genosko xv), which lead to this new era of simulation. The first stage from the Renaissance till the Industrial Revolution is characterized by the dominant form of "counterfeit" where "signs reflected and then perverted a basic reality". Second stage is characterized by "production" which is the major schema of the Industrial age, where signs "masked the absence of a basic reality", as in the age of mass reproduction. Third stage is

the reigning scheme of the "current phase", where signs now bear no relationship to any reality, "the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal" (Rivkin and Ryan 498).

In a world where everything has been rendered as a sign and an image, the idea of representation becomes irrelevant. In *The Precession of Simulacra*, Baudrillard draws the conclusion that there is no question of Disneyland being constructed as "imaginary" because that would imply the presence of a "real", rather the "whole of America", according to him belongs to the "hyperreal order and to the order of simulacra" (7). So, when Baudrillard advises us not to forget that the "real is merely a simulation" and the image can only lead to another image, the question persists where can we find agency? The answer might not be so simple or direct, and I will specifically focus on what does hyperreality have in common with Postcolonial subjectivity, the "silent other" of Europe in Said's terms and in what ways does it inform the debates on Postcolonial identity.

Identity as Alterity

As Edward Said observed, reflections on identity inevitably invokes the "secret sharer" of difference, and the

"exploration of the remote" (Gupta & Ferguson 2). Postcolonial studies beginning with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiqued colonialist discourses of having functioned in binaries, the creation of a "vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference" between "us" and "them" (qtd. in Loomba 43), but transformed its victimised subjects into agents of resistance by the invocation of the very tenets of liberal humanism that it sought to challenge. The appeal to justice, equality, and freedom which is the focal point of postcolonial studies reveals according to Ivison, "the simultaneous invocation of the inadequacy and yet the indispensability of liberal values" (qtd.in McCarthy ix). If, for Ashish Nandy, colonialism was an effect of the rise of modern individualism and the "insane search for absolute autonomy" (qtd. in McCarthy ix), so, the articulation of Postcolonial subject is more of a repetition, a re-colonization of the colonialist legacy. Feminist and anti-colonialists critics discourse often hinges on the need to reclaim a space characterized by 'essentialism'. But this positing of an identity based on binary oppositions, merely juggles the term as Gunew and Yeatman pointed out and which, does not contribute in "changing

the power structures behind such construction" (qtd. in Grace 78).

Hyperreality in Postcolonial Domain

In the postcolonial contexts particularly, the distinctiveness of identity is predicated upon notion of space, "located elsewhere". However, people who inhabit the peripheries, what Anzaldua called the "narrow strip along steep edges" (Gupta and Ferguson 7), forces us to rethink the identity/difference dichotomization. The structuring polarization between identity as positive and difference as negative needs to be questioned, and the need of the hour is to move along the lines of differences structured in accordance with the "precession of the model" to rethink the subjectivities configured in accordance with a logic of simulation (McCarthy xiii). With the places and localities becoming blurred and indeterminate in the implosion of the simulation of reference, Baudrillard's fourth 'fractal' order, the erasure of all differences, has led to a renewed interest in the culturally and ethnic distinctions. Simulacra and hyperreality allows for a re-examination of the Postcolonial subject under question as well as problematize the production and dissemination of knowledge in relation to identity and cultural difference.

In the hyperreal mode, the representation or image, no longer denotes the referent, as the sign has itself become the real. "The territory no longer precedes the map, but rather the map precedes the territory. The image bears no relation to reality, it is its own simulation" (Baudrillard 11). Hyperreality facilitates an interrogation of the 'real' in both colonialist and anti-colonialist discourses making us aware of Kristeva's "writing as experience-limits" (Hutcheon 8). If identity established in these discourses is "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody", but "a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 2), one could read that "colonialism and neo-imperialism are functions of a broader Western civilizational strategy of obfuscating the hidden absence of the 'real' by simulating reality as normative" (qtd. in McCarthy ix).

As William Merrin signals, Baudrillard's work can be understood most fruitfully as occupying a space between historicity and philosophy. As an ideological site for the negotiation of postcoloniality, hyperreality allows postcolonial subjects to move beyond merely identifying with the past (with a retrograde voyeurism) to a deconstructive

identification with unfixable and positional identities within the simulacrum (qtd. in McCarthy xx). Now, with the "whole edifice of representation, being a simulation" (Baudrillard 11), one needs to ask in the words of Clifford, "what processes rather than essences are involved in the present experience of cultural identity" (qtd. in Gupta and Ferguson 14).

Hyperreality critiques "the imperialist and colonialist notions of purity as much as it question[s] the nationalist notions" (Bhabha 64). Baudrillard's views on simulacra and hyperreality shifts the ground considerably, in its insistence to question what is at stake on the importance of "irreducible difference" (Grace 89). This 'strategic essentialisms' to use Spivak's term, obfuscates the situatedness, locatedness which cannot be subsumed within the all-pervasive notions of identity based on oppositional binaries. Hyperreality tends to highlight the limitations of an identity based on the fragmented space of 'imagined communities' of a modern state. And the rapid advances in technology and the processes of globalization which have resulted in new configurations of margins and peripheries marked by migrations and the diasporic community, what is termed by Gupta and Ferguson, as 'the

transnational public sphere' meaning that the fiction of the postcolonial nation-state, whose boundaries enclose cultures and regulate cultural exchange can no longer be sustained. Baudrillard's description of consumptive society inundated with simulated images "offers a 'paradoxical space" for the agency of the subject, facilitating both creative potential and self-defining possibilities being also subjected identities to the law of the market. The "reversibility" implied in the "images preceding the real" is particularly important in terms of the debates around identity predicted on difference as it eventually shows the fictionality of all discourses about identity and cultural differences exemplifying the change implicit in "collective memory and orientation" (Rojek 115).

Conclusion

The world of Baudrillard cannot be said to be devoid of agency, or nihilistic as one is continuously aware of being a part of simulations, a world of consumption, which allows for "the radical operation of the interrogating the 'otherness' of the other" (Gupta and Ferguson 16). To conclude, hyperreality critiques the identity realized on what Arjun Appadurai has termed the "spatial incarceration of the native", and allows for a rethinking of the

relations between "culture, power, and space" (Gupta and Ferguson 17).). Moreover, through the myriad images/signs which constitute our culture, our identity is constantly renewed and expanded with the "signs being appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew"
(Bhabha 37).

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