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Being with the Other: (Im)Possibility of Ethics of Alterity

In the present era of social and political revolution, the importance of an ethics of commitment is more relevant than ever. The distinction has to be made between the ethics and politics of the present moment. It is in this compulsive focal point of history that I see the importance of Gandhian ethics very relevant. Inspired by Gandhian ideology and the practice of satyagraha (the practice of non-violent resistance), the 'Arab Spring', as it is known, aims at the coexistence of Islam and democracy. The aim of the present paper is to see the importance and acknowledgement of the Other as essential for ontological existence of Self. The second half of the paper revisits the tension between Self/Other in postcolonial context and in a deconstructive mode argues about the (im)possibility of ethics of alterity.

Key Words: thics/Politics, Self/Other, Postmodern/Postcolonial, Gandhi, Levinas, Derrida, Arab Revolution

The origin of the present paper lies within a critical historical moment which not only disturbed me but also unequivocally associated my Self with millions of Others in almost a revolutionary fashion. This disturbing moment was the sad incident of the suicide of a young Muslim, Mohamed Bouazizi, who sacrificed his life for a 'common cause'. His death moved millions in the Middle East and sparked off a revolution – millions of young people like him mobilized themselves on ethical grounds to change the face of political dictatorship across the Middle East. This Arab Revolution (2010) continues to shape and reform not only the geopolitical relations of the East and the West but also the way we perceive power relations in post-colonies. Many questions arise about the nature of revolution with special reference to a spirit which is normative in nature, especially in relation to postcolonial nations, which are different from other nations in the sense that it is repeatedly haunted by its colonial past. Middle-Eastern countries were part of the colonial project, but even after the fall of empires, most of them have continued to witness coercive imperial treatment by their own leaders. White colonizers have been replaced by their own people. A handful of people have appropriated most of the wealth in newly independent nations. This class of people continues to work on behalf of their white masters in post-colonies. Though power centers have been demolished, countries like the US continue to decide the fate of millions of people who are over-burdened by a double condition – 'postcolonial' and 'postmodern'.

History, clearly, is not a linear progression or regression, it is an interplay of 'challenge and response' (Arnold Toynbee) to historical incidents and provocation. It is a dialogic interpretation, an interplay between several contradictory, hierarchical forces. The forces, if enacted on the basis of mutual respect and collaboration, ensure that goodwill and stability prevails in society; whereas if there is provocation and exploitation, social stability gets disturbed and voices of resistance are heard, as we see in the recent democratic uprising in the Arab countries. Inspired by Gandhian ideology and the practice of *satyagraha* (the practice of non-violent resistance), the 'Arab Spring', as it is known, aims at the coexistence of Islam and democracy. What has provoked the revolutionaries to assimilate and unite, forgetting their narrow communal religious differences, is the exploitation caused by autocratic rulers and the lack of democracy. Their struggle is for building an ethical democracy, in which faith in religion will be a personal choice for believers or non-believers in a free and pluralistic civil society. While the role of religion in such an uprising is ambivalent. The project of the Arab revolution is a "good life" for its people, irrespective of communal differences, through a "pluralistic democratic society with freedom and justice for all" (Dallmayr 174). Such a project, in my view, leads towards freedom from blind fundamentalism and participates in the "conversation of humankind" towards building a cosmopolitan community, an emerging cosmopolis.

There has been an ongoing debate about the uses and abuses of using the prefix 'post' as a common precondition to understand the aftermath of colonialism and modernism. Irony is inherent in any attempt to understand the strategic nature of modernism and colonialism, as

The ultimate value of community in propagating liberal democracy and individual responsibility is another important area to discuss. Miller says that community is an indispensable foundation for democracy (Miller 1989). But can a cosmopolitan community construct liberal democratic practice, or can liberal democracy be introduced in a community with a cosmopolitan consciousness? Democracy is based on equality, liberty and fraternity. Gandhi advocated self-rule (Dallmyre 153) or self-government as the essence of democracy. But his conception of self-rule was not selfish rule or autocratic rule over Others (Chantal Mouffe), but the cultivation of a humanitarian consciousness which considers self rule as self-control or self-moderation for the sake of shared wellbeing, and to build a just and ethical society on the basis of non-violence. Though Gandhi's concept of self-rule does not address global society in the age of globalization, but I would argue that modern liberalist individual democracy is a combination of ethics and politics, the private and the public, a just association of self-rule, which is the moral aspect, and self-government, which is the political aspect. This ethico-political linkage is the essence of liberalism in modern democracy, which resembles a cosmopolitan community. Communication is a very important factor in the success of liberal democracy. The discourse on democratic systems that takes place in a cosmopolitan community comprises the inclusion of others, the negotiation of differences, the wellbeing of the 'general public', and the construction of the 'we' instead of 'I'. Such a community reconciles the dichotomies between universal rights and particular rights, global and local, public interest and private interest, common welfare and individual welfare, and so on.

Every 'encounter' has a specific context and needs to be understood in its spatial and temporal dimension. The colonial encounter is not like other focal points in the history of human civilization where two different cultures generally interact. It is full of violence, but given to the better understanding towards the Other, Levinasian philosophy offers better understanding of human nature and can make living together possible.

Living together does not necessarily or primarily mean living together in peace. It also implies a compulsion, a law which forces people of different religions, cultures, languages etc. to live together. This is a process of learning to live together, only after which living together with peace is possible. For example, the members of a diasporic community or a multicultural society must leave aside their personal whims and cooperate – something which to a certain extent political laws help one to do. Attaining a 'living together in peace' is a long drawn out process which is preceded by living together badly, or as enemies or strangers, or even with wars – as Derrida says, "one must well live together". Note that the word "well" is here used as an adverb rather than as an adjective. If used as an adjective it would mean a living in peace and harmony with the Other. It signifies either to "live together" or die, with whatever and whoever you cohabit with. He believed that "even if this cohabitation is resigned, armed, organized, at times guaranteed by a contract, a constitution, and some institutional jurisprudence, it answers to a common, and therefore higher, interest" (*Living Together* 24- 25).

The idea of living together once again takes us to Derrida's concepts of 'forgiveness' and 'reconciliation', which are essential for peaceful cohabitation. "Living together,' I belong to that which does not belong to me, to my own, to a language, a site, to a "my home," that do not belong to me and which I will never possess. Belonging excludes any absolute appropriation, even the radical right of property" (37).

Politics seems to privilege the liberal aspect of human beings – portraying them as free to take their own decisions and do anything they desire. This sort of freedom can be misused by totalitarian powers too (as in the case of Nazism and Fascism). Postmodernism seems to rob the agency from the human being and declares the death of humanity, which has given rise to study of post-subjectivity. One form of this post-subjectivity can be sought out in the works of Levinas, for whom the subjectivity gets its energy in form of being 'responsible for the Other'. Responsibility is not a burden here, but ethically a choice that relates the "me" to the other and helps both to thrive.

A recent elaboration in postmodern theory can be seen in the works of Jean-Luc Nancy, who, like Levinas, promotes the philosophy of 'living together' not only as an ethical choice to be made by troubled postmodern subjects but also an ontological condition for being. His works emphasize the need to exist together in the age of multiculturalism and plurality. For him the idea of singular existence derives meaning only when singularity encounters plurality, and the sole aim of such an encounter is to enrich the human experience.

Colonialist expansion used not only modern techniques to conquer but also to justify any degree of violence. Is this irony also a constitutive part of postmodern and the postcolonial? The answer varies based on the positionality of the analytical mode. Some critics have considered it a futile enterprise because, as Ato Quayson points out, "[Postmodernism] is ultimately apolitical and does not feed into larger projects of emancipation" whereas for others "there is a productive way of seeing the two as mutually reinforcing" (87-88).

One of the most important issues about postmodernism is how and why the prefix 'post' was joined to the term 'modernism'. This debate takes us back to the Age of Enlightenment and the rise of reason brought about by philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G.W.F. Hegel and others. The human ability to reason was the ground on which human freedom was based. With the coming of the twentieth century and especially after the Holocaust, thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard attacked reason. This attack illustrates the primary shift from modernism to postmodernism. Postmodernism rejects the unitary idea of reason, especially in the political context.

Postmodern theory is suspicious of the notion of humans possessing an undivided and coherent self which acts as the standard of rationality, and guarantees all knowledge claims irrespective of time and place. It no longer believes that reasoning subjects act as vehicles for historically progressive change. (Woods 10)

Gluing the prefix “post” can certainly seem like an attempt to homogenize the conceptual framework, which both these movements have been significantly denying so far. Also, whereas postmodernism emphasizes a “linguistic turn”, postcolonialism claims to understand a “cultural turn”. I believe they both can be understood and bolstered by an “ethical turn”.

It is power which is at the heart of a radical distinction between ethics and politics. The relation between ethics and politics, even the notions themselves, can never be same in the thinking of powerful imperial centers and in those of suppressed societies. For the latter, ethics is a reality which forms their social relations, whereas power and its unethical use pay little heed to any such social relation. Colonial discourse objectifies and determines the values of colonized people as “savage”, because they consider their ethical social relations as unscientific. Science for them had become a tool to dominate and exploit, one of the “technologies of domination” (Foucault). Science, being a hallmark of colonial modernity and enlightenment for the colonizers, provided a means of upholding a totalitarian outlook towards Others. There ought to have been moral aims, for instance in a discipline like Anthropology, which ought to acknowledge the Others and respect their differences.

Notions of the Other and alterity have formed the crux of philosophical debate since the days of Plato. Freud imparted a new critical currency to it using a comprehensive psychological model, which was later challenged and reconstructed by the poststructuralist methodology of Lacanian psychoanalysis. To encounter the Other one doesn't necessarily have to cross boundaries: sometimes that Other is just beside us or within us. Social, economic, cultural and political frameworks approach the question and problem of Otherness with their specific methodologies. The rise of minority studies, animal studies, feminism, posthumanism and queer studies has problematized and reshaped the question of Otherness. Postcolonial theory, however, has always emphasized the dichotomous model of Self/Other, the premise of which is the power relation between the West and the East, the power struggle and relation of aggression and resistance between the colonizer and the colonized. But relying excessively on this model tends to keep us oblivious to other important factors like the relationship between Self and community¹ or collective, and how, in the light of this new relation, we can go beyond the premise of power relations and consider the journey of the postcolonial community as postmodern and finally as cosmopolitan or global, a consideration that might help us think beyond dichotomies. My aim is to see whether the agenda of the cosmopolitan community, which is an emancipatory agenda, a liberating project, can transcend the dichotomies and differences of postcolonial studies, and also to seek a new kind of relation of self with community, where Self and Other are not struggling to establish a space; rather, the relational space is itself based on cooperation and living with difference. In other words, can the relation of Self and community or the place of Self in community help us to think beyond the dichotomy?

If modernity is an age of certainty and stable identities, the postmodern society believes in fluidity, collective membership, and multiple identities. It is an age of insecurity, the impact of

which could be stressed on by referring to the postmodern idea of community. Due to globalization and current problems in the world situation, a clear shift can be found from the modern concept of community to the postmodern conception. The postmodern community is a 'fragile' community, open to 'difference', focusing on 'contingency', and 'liminality'² and 'less rooted in stable social relations' (Delanty 104). One important characteristic of postmodernism is decentralization, or having multiple centres; it is not the age of 'grand narrative' or structure. To the postmodern community, as Delanty says, "[M]arginality is everywhere. Postmodern communities are nomadic, highly mobile, emotional and communicative" (104). If modernity and postcoloniality gain their strength from a sense of nationalism, postmodernity relies on mass culture, transnationalism, and subcultures where the conflicts or dichotomies become porous because identities are not stable and people are less rooted in their indigenous cultures or less rigid in their ideologies. Nationalism, which in the colonial period acted as a source of unity for people, has undergone considerable change. Postcolonial studies, though valorizing nationalism, mainly stress differences or dichotomies, the conflict and the resistance, the power struggle between the West and the East, the colonial masters and the weaker barbarous colonized section, the 'we' and 'they'. Renowned postcolonial critics like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and even Spivak focus mainly on difference, resistance and interaction, and the voice of the Other as the voice of resistance and an assertion of identity, inadvertently emphasizing the relevance of dichotomies which remain still prevalent, and thus, in my opinion, still measured on the scale of the western concept of modernity. In this paper, I discuss alternative modernity and modernity in the postcolonial context while reinforcing the contribution of the Others or the subalterns in bringing modernity, but the dichotomy between Self and Other continues to exist. It is time to go beyond the postcolonial context of dichotomous communities, since the postmodern community is a 'fractured community' (Lindroos 2001) based on a heterogeneous society where both Self and Others are unstable and 'non foundational'; therefore, how can the conflict between Self and Others be stable?

Since the latter half of 20th century, postcolonialism has emerged as the most dominating field of studies, daring to turn the world upside down, making the reality about the 'Orientals' visible to the so called superior Occidentals. Eurocentric discourse about social and political culture has been challenged by postcolonialism, which demands the exclusion of discrimination and introduces an alternative way to look at the other side of the world that has been long neglected by western writers and critics. Since colonies have gained independence or political sovereignty, there has been a clear slow shifting of balance of power. Countries such as India, China, Brazil, and Australia have coming out of the dark shadow of colonialism and started influencing the social, political, economic and cultural scenario of the world; empire or imperialism has attained a new meaning, from forceful imposition of power to an informal or indirect power on the interest of common multitude. Fernando Coronil argues that after Edward Said's path breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial studies became an indispensable reference for at least two reasons. First, it produced a lucid critique of Western metaphysics that

exposed the scandal of Eurocentric categories and imperial metanarratives. Second, it stimulated a plethora of studies that examined neglected dimensions of imperial domination and subaltern subject formation. No longer privileging political economy, these critical studies turned culture, broadly understood as forms of representation, into a center of analysis. It expanded our understanding of the subaltern by treating gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, in their intersections with class, as fundamental sites of subjugation. The *post-* of postcolonialism became at once a temporal and an epistemic marker, a critical lens through which to view the complicity between knowledge and power in multiple domains, past and present. (636)

However, in spite of its achievements, postcolonialism has its limitations as well. With the advent of the new idea of imperialism, postcolonialism and its philosophy fail to capture the new paradigm. After 9/11, the neoconservative Stanley Kurtz blamed postcolonialism as propagating an 'extremist' and anti-American approach. Moreover, postcolonial critics deal with binaries or dichotomies which have been fashioned by western culture. The concept of Otherness and the relation between Self and Other has changed. Robert Young argues that postcolonialism should rethink the Other and avoid tagging stereotyped features as either Self or Other. With the developmental of continental philosophy of Levinas, Foucault, and most recently Nancy, the paradigm has changed, showing the interdependence of supposed dichotomies like Self and Other. Again, there are areas like postcolonial Others who were not considered part of postcoloniality. Susie Tharu considers postcolonialism as "too diffuse and too narrow" a category (642). Simon Gikandi criticizes postcolonialism on two grounds: "It is a universally acknowledged fact that postcolonial theory doesn't make sense to literary and cultural scholars outside English. Or, to put it in more modest terms, in order for postcolonial theory to make sense to other linguistic and literary traditions, it has to be transformed or disfigured." (635). He also insists upon the importance of ethical dimension in postcolonial criticism and points out its lack, suggesting that it should be borrowed from postmodernism to enhance the importance of humane values. In spite of this limitation, the importance of postcolonial studies in addressing the postcolonial community as not anticolonial but beyond colonialism and embracing the world cannot be denied. Sunil Agnani argues that *Postcolonial* as a historical term was extended to a type of criticism. The fact that the extension of this term has failed as an enduring or repeatable reading practice does not mean the term is bankrupt. Its emptying may instead be a sign of a productive crisis from which the field (or whatever it transmogrifies into) will benefit. (639) Benita Parry also writes in "What is Left in Postcolonial Studies" that postcolonialism needs "a different theoretical paradigm if it is to participate in the critique of globalization" (355) and we should have the desire not to keep it stagnant and push beyond its limits according to the demands of time. Various critics like Benita Parry and Aijaz Ahmad had announced the demise of the postcolonial condition on the grounds of its inability to sustain equal growth for everyone in a postcolony. But Hamid Dabashi's thought-provoking book *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* published in 2012 seems to announce the official death manifesto for postcolonialism. Despite its subtitle, this book is a eulogy of the ethical choices made by

innumerable Arab men and women who collectively dared to challenge the political and social realities around them. It shows how a new 'empire of multitudes' pulled down neo-colonial despots like Ben Ali (Tunisia), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) and Muammar Gaddafi (Libya). The book not only threw a new light over the nature of colonialism but also asked for a normative commitment on behalf of the Arab populace to ensure the victory of democracy in its true sense. Postcolonial subjectivity has been constructed from the ability of engagement and resistance of postcolonial subjects against the colonial empire. The concept of alterity or 'epistemic Other' is the most important feature in bringing change in postcolonial subjectivity, because the construction of the subject is followed by alterity or otherness. In the postcolonial context, this kind of alterity or otherness or difference is responsible for creating binaries or dichotomies. Postcolonial studies attempts to dismantle the binaries through the emphasis on the otherness of the Other, where this kind of subject formation and the traditional concept of identity and individuality has been interpreted in a radically different way. Concepts such as the coexistence of Self with Others, the relationality, the shift of conflict from Self and Others to conflict within the Self, the sharing of experience, being-in-common, cosmopolitan consciousness, etc. have altered the basic features of the postcolonial community.

Community is neither an open nor a closed space, neither based on differences nor on commonality, focusing neither on individuality nor on collectivity, neither on the Self nor on the Other, but it is "sustained by its own reflexivity, creativity and awareness of its limits"(Delanty 112). Community is not a bordered territory (Nancy); it refers to symbolic spaces of commonality and differences where different kinds of relation and search for belongings from local to translocal to global seem to constitute fractured identities. It might be 'imagined' and 'utopian' since it is abstract and invisible, but it achieves a cognitive and practical status for the sustenance and demands of the postmodern globalized world. It has a moral and ethical undertone which assimilates and collaborates with differences through active discourse and communication. In this globalized world where the world in the sense of humanity is always under the threat of terrorism, nuclear holocaust and cold war, cosmopolitan consciousness in a world community can serve as oxygen or an essential resource for survival; and liberal democracy with its proper combination of state functionaries and cosmopolitan laws can accommodate us for the simple reason that we are human beings irrespective of differences. One of the latest books which puts forth the ethical philosophy of Gandhi in the context of present political upheaval is Leela Gandhi's *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955* (2014), which I view as a post-script to my chapter because of the possibility it opens up of seeing the presence of ethical framework in world democracies in general and postcolonial democracies in particular. The 'common' is generally understood as common welfarism, an ethos of sharing, recognition of experience and intersubjective relation of empowerment. Unlike care for worldly things, here commonality refers to a common cause, a common motivational force for people to attain ethical perfection – which is essentially an imperfection. Leela Gandhi describes 'common cause' as a "transnational project of self

ruination and radical relationality”; it is not passive relationality but “an acutely individuated dedication to becoming common – the effect of an idiosyncratic disregard for the self by the self for the cause of inclusive sociality” (109).

As my study of ethics in politics shows, democracy, refined through practices and exercises, can attain for the common good, but the democratic spirit with excessive emphasis on ethical perfection might lead to dictatorship, which is antithetical to democracy. Therefore Leela Gandhi, inspired by M. K. Gandhi’s ‘ethics of conscience’ as captured in the book *Hind Swaraj*, proposes an ethics of imperfection or imperfect historiography. M K Gandhi rejects democracy as an institutional system but believes in constructing Swaraj (*swa*=self and *raj*=rule). Such *swaraj* or self-rule is to be cultivated and practiced for the common cause or collective dimension. Common causes can’t be classified as for Self or for Other, but provide a site or scope for encounter where people, both oppressor and oppressed, collaborate to attain a visible commitment to eradicate institutional suffering.

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