

The Right to Narrate: Interview with Homi Bhabha
By Kerry Chance
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As part of the Human Rights Project's ongoing lecture series, leading theorist in postcolonial studies, Homi Bhabha, presented a paper entitled, "Looking Global." Throughout his work, from *Nation and Narration* (1990) to *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha has consistently questioned stable notions of culture, nationalism, and human rights, notably by applying poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories to these concepts. His ideas about the nation as narrativized, cultural dominance as ambivalent, and borders as liminal, have contributed to the way in which postcolonial studies approaches its object. Bhabha is presently a Chester D Tripp professor of the Humanities at University of Chicago, where he teaches in the Departments of English and Art.

In the following interview, he discusses the complex relationship between neo-nationalism and globalization, and the "right to narrate."

Kerry Chance: In an interview with the Free Press three weeks ago, Edward Said remarked that some nations have become increasingly nationalistic partially in response to globalization. In *The Location of Culture*, you discuss the social articulation of difference in terms of the negotiation that occurs in the liminal space between boundaries. Globalization seems to widen this liminal space, contributing to that articulation. Can you speak to the trend of nationalism, and how it may change the dominant paradigm through which globalization is conceptualized?

Homi Bhabha: I think there are two forces at play in the world today, and they play against each other in a kind of tension or dialectic. One is, as you said a moment ago, are the forces of global inter-nationalism. These are visible in international conventions, regional economic bodies, the European Union, international treaties, so on and so forth. They are also visible in the global economy and the global media economy, and of course the global market. Also, in the increase of commodification and consumption, the culture of goods. So you have this span of everything from what we recognize in a kind of early or post War sense of international to a rapid and increasing globalization.

And the difference between internationalism and globalization some say is the whole question of speed, some say it is the extent of permeation, and some consider this to be an effect of the compromised sovereignty of national economies of the nation state itself. However, in response to this global, international complex, there has been an increasing xenophobia, a kind of nationalism - and we have got to examine quite carefully what we mean by this. In some cases, it's the kind of genocidal nationalism that we see. Groups rape countries that were once under the yoke of the Soviet Union for instance, and demand autonomy for themselves in ways in which they cannot be sustained. I mean this is not nineteenth century nationalism, this is not a sense of e

pluribus unum. This is really a response to years of oppression and a desire to have a sense of national sovereignty. And they cannot support it economically, or in terms of civil society. That is why you get ethnic cleansing and such.

There are other kinds of nationalism that are more to do with regionalism, like Eurocentrism. So it's not strictly nationalism, it's a kind of jingoism, or xenophobia of a regional kind. This is closely linked to globalization because one of the institutional forms of globalization is regionalism, such as the European Union. What happens there is it becomes easier to have kind of transitional tracts through the European countries. There is what one may call a "fortress Europe" developing, in which the borders of Europe becomes more secure just as the internal borders become more fluid, which then keeps out migrant populations of people. So that creates another kind of nationalism, or a regional nationalism. We should be subtle here.

There are also nationalist movements that develop in a response to the disseminations of globalization. These movements one can call them nationalism, and they do have nationalistic configurations or symptoms, but one has to also see quite clearly what they are. And I think what you find are very strange kinds of situations. Let's take one example, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, and what you see there is a particularly interesting post-global hybrid form of nationalism. It's a nationalism that is based on a global, technological revolution. So it's a nationalism that has as its subjects a whole group of diasporic Indians, as its site of communication it has the Internet, and not that this is the only site. It is a nationalism that sees itself as a modern, global movement but arguing for a preeminence of a Hindu India. But interestingly, there is only one wing of it that is religiously fundamentalist. There's another wing of it which says Hinduism has a tolerant, quasi-secular, cultural temperament, and it is the authentic cultural temperament of India. So, Muslims are second rate citizens but they have nothing to fear so the Hindu nationalists say because really Hinduism is a broad church. So you see, the distinction and tension is not actually between globalization and nationalism. It's the way in which nationalisms are appropriating and approximating part of the structures, economies, and discourses of globalization, and transforming themselves in that way.

Let's look at another phenomenon, again one that works off of the global market, the new global technologies, the virtual communicative internet resources, is the growth of new fundamentalisms, and this growth is like globalization. Religious fundamentalisms be they Christian, be they Hindu, be they Muslim, do not limit themselves to the nation form. They see themselves as international movements. That can be seen as another kind of globalization.

There's also another kind of internationalism that accompanies globalization and this hybrid global nationalism or global xenophobia, which is the growth of humanitarian or universal human rights cultures. And I think that has its own kind of transnational perspective that we should not forget.

I would say that often the argument is that on one hand there's globalization and in a

response to that there's a kind of nationalism. I do not think it's as simple as that. I think both globalization, and nationalization, and the new nationalism are in a profound transitional and translational state at the moment.

So it's a very complex web, and I'm going to be talking a bit about this today. The thing to remember is that the nation isn't dead. The nation survives today in a complex, compromised situation. The trace of the nation survives in all kind of ways. So whether we talk about transnationalism, post-nationalism, de-nationalization, what you have to be aware of is what part of nationness is being recycled and reiterated, transformed, reapproximated, and retranslated.

The important thing to understand is that we are living in translational times. And maybe all times are translational times. But I think it is our intellectual responsibility to understand that the ground beneath our feet is a shifting, sliding ground, and to try to actually take account of that.

KC: You have said that writing creates a liminal "space" that links and dismantles the opposition between theory and political practice. Could this idea of liminality and writing perhaps be a way to approach human rights discourse in a non-essentialist way? In other words, how do you conceive of "rights" outside an essentialist perspective?

HB: Let me just say that one of the things that I've been thinking about is the way in which human rights or human rights discourse does not simply take the world simply as it finds it. It is a discourse about the importance of making claims, about aspirations, about projection, about the future. If you think about this claims, aspirations, futurity, it is freedom and emancipation as non-tangible but concrete goals. If you think about it like that then the referent of human rights, the human - whether its first generation rights, second generation rights, individual rights, or group rights, minority rights (which, of course, is at the heart of human rights) - the referent itself is profoundly complex. "What is human about human rights?," has to be in every articulation of a convention, of a human rights article, and has to be reconceptualized. Human rights then have functional, 'real' effects but, as you know, one of the main problems in human rights is how enforceable they are.

So this whole gamut of the non-referentiality but the necessity of human rights is so much like what we talk about when we talk about literature or culture. In a sense that culture is not enforceable in a way, or that the truths of literature are not enforceable. And yet they are profoundly transformative. Literary language in a very sensual sense is non-referential. That doesn't mean it does not have references but that it does not directly refer to the physical world. One of the beauties, and the powers of literature is that it is representational. And I think that's the important word. Just in the way in which human rights (re)presents the problem of the 'human' in its various guises as a claim to freedom. So literature or culture also seeks to (re)present the most advanced notions of ethicality, tolerance, communality. But it does not have a concrete referent. In fact, literature or cultural art can work its magic and have profound historical effects

because it is not tethered to some simplistic, reflectionist notion of a referent. Does that answer your question?

KC: Well, in terms of human rights not having a concrete referent, it seems to open many possibilities. What do you see as possibilities in human rights and where do you see the discourse going?

HB: This is an interesting question because on the one hand the bearer of rights is the bearer because she or he is human, you don't have to be more than that. But rights are being continually recreated in response to what is happening in the world. When I say it's non-referential, what I'm saying is that there is an important element of a human right, which is based on ethical claims: this is what the world should be like, this is what fairness should be, this is what global justice should be. Those things are not always enforceable within national jurisdictions. And yet the power of the right is to make us aware of the potentiality, the political potentiality, the human potentiality that exceeds specific jurisdictions.

So where I see it going is in two directions. One, in the more practical, political area, I see human rights increasing its responsibility to protecting the unequal, to protecting minorities, to those, as we heard in the presentation this afternoon [by Jacqueline Bhabha], protecting those who are vulnerable, those whose freedom is fragile.

I also see human rights discourse as extending in another direction in which its ethical claims are developed in a way that is not utopian but aspirational. There's a difference between the two. Utopianism is a way of in a sense forgetting the problems of the present. Human rights can never do that. Human rights must be concerned with the continuum, the everyday, the tremendous contradictions and problems of every day life. But in the same breath, it cannot be burdened by that. It moves ahead and begins to think about ethical claims that may be prior to obligations. You know, there's this idea that all this is poppycock, and someone, I forget, John Stuart Mill or somebody said, "This is nonsense on stilts." And unless there is someone who is obliged to respond to the right, what's the point of the right. I think philosophers say well that's not true, that non-justiciable rights are also important. Ethical claims are the basis of rights.

So I think it's going in two directions. One, human rights trying to deal with those who are vulnerable in a very complex millennial world we inhabit. And also, it must evolve its ethical perspective.

KC: Related to what you were just saying about a non-essentialist view of the human and of rights, you've written about the "right to narrate" could you say more about that?

HB: You're right to emphasize that my notion of the human is not some a priori quality. That's why nothing I've said would confirm an essentialist view. But what interests me more is the translational capacities of what the human means. I propose the issue of the "right to narrate" which will be the subject of Wellesley Library Lectures that I will be delivering in the fall in response to various things. One, in response to the fact that you now have these truth commissions, where because of the problematic nature of what a

historical even is or was. We all know about the tragic tyrannies of the apartheid in South Africa, and we all know in some sense about the disappearance of radicals in Latin American dictatorships. And yet, these societies and cultures as a way of negotiating their future, as a way of making or marking some kind of transition, require an intricate, problematic ritual of public memory gathering, and public testament, or public witnessing in and through the accounts of individuals involved on both sides of these deeply wounded and wounding historical situations. So I wanted to understand what was involved in giving someone the right to narrate, and why has it become such an important issue of our time.

If what I just described is the importance of the notion of the "right" in the "right to narrate", I'm also interested in the right of narration. Because many of the issues that are being discussed in South Africa or various Latin American countries, or other parts of the world, many of these issues of public debate or record - the 'what happened' in these places where there is guilt - there are legal remedies, legal structures, there are institutional, political structures, and yet, the power of the narrative must not simply be absorbed into those institutional or political preconceptions. Each time we know the story of South Africa, more or less, each time that story is told, something is affirmed, something ethical, something aesthetic, something political. So I want to understand the place of narrative in that context. Then that right to narrate is not simply like the first amendment right therefore. It is not something simply about the free expression of the individual. It's precisely what I've been talking about, the network of narratives, the network of stories that exist in a particular moment that are recorded from one moment to another.

So what I'm interested in is the right to narrate as enunciatory right, not just a expressive right. Therefore, my notion of who is the subject of the right to narrate is not the individual who is narrating but a whole network of discursive, cultural, political, institutional, a network of events and enunciations and constructions and writings that construct the possibility of narration. It's an enunciatory right. I also think that coming out of the great social movements of our times - diasporic, refugee, migrant - people and groups often have a kind of split mode of being. They can be political citizens in one particular culture and cultural citizens in a very different kind of trans-national, cosmopolitan sense. They live this split. And even people who are not migrants. If all of a sudden your society, or community becomes a place where a whole range of other people settle, then the nature of jurisdiction becomes different. The very ground under your feet is being renamed, even if you never left it. But all of sudden there are influxes of people who are coming in that have their own narratives, their own histories, people from India, people from Pakistan, Bangladesh. All of a sudden your own home becomes uncanny, to yourself and to others. And in that situation of jurisdictional unsettlement, narrative of the enunciatory kind gains a very specific force and power.

For instance, in the work of Joseph Conrad's novels. One way of thinking about these novels, at least the Marlow novels, is about the incomplete narratives of these deeply complex figures. So you can take this kind of nineteenth century character-based reading, these are psychologically very complex figures, they're guilty, they do all

kinds of good things and bad things and their stories never end. But you can also look at it less as the expression of personality or character and more as kind of jurisdictional, territorial issues. These narratives are all the narratives of the incomplete nature of that particular global project, which was colonization. So that the stories continually start and stop in other parts of the world in Conrad. Each harbor has a mouth, each harbor harbors a narrative. And there is this same jurisdictional unsettlement. Would Jim, in *Lord Jim*, have been guilty had he jumped ship in British waters, as he had in African waters. So the jurisdictional unsettlement of our times gives a particular place to narrative, and that is again why I am very interested in the right to narrate.

Also, a number of the people we are interested in, in the area of human rights - people at borders, people before tribunals, people seeking refugee status, people seeking minority status - represent themselves in terms of narrativity. So I think narrative has to be seen both in its contiguity with equality, what is justiciable. Narrative has to also be seen as the poesis of political and social practice. Making of law, of ethics, the making of history, the making of an event, is also part of the right to narrate.

KC: I also wanted to ask how you understand the negative side or should I say another dimension of the concepts valued in your work - hybridity and ambivalence, for example. I mean, what is it to unequivocally endorse such equivocal notions?

HB: I don't shrink from them at all. I think they are concepts that really try in the best way in which I know to deal with the complexity of historical, cultural, and literary moments. I absolutely endorse complexity. It's not just because my language is complex, or the concepts are complex, it's that the problems we have are very complex. You cannot understand the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, who have lived in close proximity for a hundred years, who have had to dialogue despite the inequalities, without understanding that the colonized is and has had to be ambivalent in relation to the colonial. And the colonial is necessarily through that whole process of colonization also ambivalent. The whole history of colonization is about antagonism and ambivalence.

It's simplistic to endorse some kind of reductive political moralism, some kind of simplistic notion of freedom and emancipation. Freedom is a very difficult thing. And it's only if you have been oppressed that you understand how you have had to survive, and the way you have had to survive is actually functioning in and through ambivalence or through the hybridization of your culture. People who colonize people upon whom various cultures were imposed, which then became part of their cultural repertoire, were not exactly give the choice: Do you want your culture hybridized? Not that any culture itself is not hybridized. There are all sorts of lateral if not vertical or hierarchical hybridizations.

But on the other side of it is the affirmation of cultural authenticity. You know, this is my culture, and this has been taken from me and I want it back, which is a very good move. But you can't understand why that plea for cultural essentialism or authenticity,

which you could understand in some contexts, why that was happening if you didn't understand the ambivalence and the struggle around cultural authority. Hybridization is not just about the mixing of cultures. It is about the struggle for authorizing a culture or de-authorizing it.