

# **THE POWER OF DISGUISE AND THE FEAR OF BEING DISCOVERED: IDENTITY CONFLICTS WITHIN CYBER CULTURE**

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The phrase "think global, act local" was coined by Walt Disney who was the most prominent figure in twentieth century entertainment industry. This subtle phrase not only captures the delicate nuances of producing a cartoon entertainer but it also prophetically assimilates the guiding principle that finance capitalism has adopted subsequently in its global conquest. Perhaps this phrase has been the unarticulated motto of the IT revolution as well as the restructuring of capitalism that occurred in the 1980s. It is common knowledge that communication networks were available ever since the invention of the telegraph. However, the sort of information revolution that we are witnessing today has its roots in imperialist globalization which is flanked by international accords like the General Agreement in Trade and Tariff (GATT) and General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The internet is an important front of globalization on several levels. It is at once a market place which helps to move capital and even commodities in a faster and more efficient mode. It has a cultural side too and thus the suave operation of the Ideological State Apparatus is also rendered more efficient. In the case of internet, we are slowly witnessing a transition from the euphoric optimism which proclaimed the end of the state to a more realistic appraisal of the extension of state surveillance and control through the web.

The impact of converging information media needs to be studied in relation to social and cultural practices, particularly as these media cross cultural and political boundaries. The very question of postcoloniality is at stake as media and their associated contents reach across the planet. We might then ask: Is the epoch of postcolonial or transnational studies over? Can the present era be best characterized in terms of resistance to western hegemony by states that formerly were administered by the imperial branches of European and American governments? Or are we now in a post-postcolonial epoch? Social scientists like Ziauddin Sardar are of the opinion that "cyber space" is actually an extension of "post-modernism". The west is not content with the subjugation of realities, modes of knowing and actual being of other cultures; it is on the lookout for new spaces to conquer. Sardar writes in his essay "alt.civilizations, faq: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West" about cyberspace that "It [cyberspace] is a conscious reflection of the deepest desires, aspirations, experiential yearning and spiritual Angst of Western man. It is resolutely being designed as a new market and it is an emphatic product of the culture, world-view and technology of Western civilization. (Sardar 16-17)

Sardar views "Cyberia" as a set of interacting fantasies which are rooted in the imperial past of Europe. He explains that the west has always been obsessed with new territories to conquer. Cyberspace is the surrogate for old colonies, the new "continent" artificially created to satisfy Western male's insatiable desire to acquire new wealth and riches. He explains this by making a comparative study of the colonization of non- western cultures and the occupation of Cyberspace. His conclusion is that Cyberspace is the newly discovered "other" of western civilization. He also has a comment on the body/spirit binary that has been interrogated by the postcolonial critics. He writes:

In direct opposition to non-Western cultures, which enhance body awareness by directing the mind towards the body in such systems as Tai chi, Yoga, Tantra and acupuncture, Western culture seeks liberation from the body by dissolving into the machine. To escape his utter loneliness, his inability to relate meaningfully to nature or other cultures, even his own society, Western man seeks union with the only thing that he sees as redemptive: technology. (Sardar 36)

Sardar's reading provides us with a critique of the concept of "virtual urban features" which maintains that the rise in virtual technologies is a natural extension of the way in which twentieth century urban community space has developed. Office buildings, shopping malls and museums are often viewed as spaces which fill the margins of conventional urban, public space and they are said to promote technologically mediated communications. This understanding leads to the realization that the marginal areas of real urban space already constitute virtual environments, thereby suggesting a common feature for urban space in the real and the virtual worlds. Jerome R. Ravetz, in his essay, "The Micro Cybernetic Revolution and the Dialectics of Ignorance" deals in detail with the new revolution brought in by information technology. He prefers to call it the "microcybernetic" implying its operation at the micro levels and also its total emphasis on control and maintains that it is unprecedented in history. According to Ravetz, what distinguishes the cyber- revolution from the previous revolutions is that it is a revolution of consciousness. The novelty of the new technology is that it operates at a

deeper level of the consciousness. However, he is also aware of the influence of such a deep-seated revolution in a class society.

One can imagine a society in which the divisive trends of the present are extrapolated; where those with more money enjoy the liberating cultural benefits of microcybernetics; those with less can still use it for education and organization; while those with none are even more cruelly excluded from a glittering world they see all around them than at present. (Sardar 56-57)

It is this exclusion mentioned above that often characterizes a postcolonial situation. For the postcolonial the world of "microcybernetics" glitters with all its Euro-American glory and it constantly tempts him/her to access it and reinforce his individuality as a citizen of the global village. Ravets also notes that with the traditional forms of expressing dissent being rendered meaningless, terrorism would gain more acceptances against the total forms of control exerted by microcybernetics. While the logically articulated political positions of the postcolonial are denied entry into the net the articulations of terrorism find more access and this is highly suitable to the imperialist designs and their "othering" strategies.

The impact of new technologies has a more direct effect and bearing on the cultural scenario. Arturo Escobar in his essay "Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture" examines the new anthropological situation that is brought about by the advent of new media. It is doubtless that computer technologies are bringing about a radical change in human existence. Theorizing about this situation oscillates between "libertarian utopia" and "corporate dystopia". It is argued that science and technology form crucial arenas for creation of "culture" in the modern world. "Internet" has brought in a new set of social (and personal) rituals and this, as we have already seen, creates a new set of social relationships. Computer and Internet technologies have brought in a new sphere of "technosociality." This has to be understood in the background of the increasing liaison between science and capital in the matter of organizing social orders. The coupling of body and the machine and the integration of capital and knowledge are the hallmarks of Eurocentric modernity as such. Colonial modernity occurs in its mimicry of and in its opposition to these larger narratives of European modernity. Escobar maintains that "Societies, economies and cultures were thus restructured by capital and scientific knowledge in an extremely efficient manner relative to previous regimes" (Sardar 114)

The development of media has occurred in unison with the development of capitalism and colonialism. This intricate relationship of give and take between media and the capitalist/colonialist enterprise has been examined in detail from various angles. In a generalized way it could be said that media operates by providing models and setting value norms for a given society to follow. These models and values, often hidden beneath the guise of a universalistic rhetoric, would contain the ideological configurations of the power structure that media is a part of. Related to this is the concept of the "cyborg" in whom the human and the machine blend into a single identity. However, Escobar also states that "The crucial nature of cyberculture in/from the Third World, however, remains to be articulated." (Sardar 116)

The impact of technologies and the new media and the notion of development and modernity they perpetuate have to be studied from an ethnographic point of view as well. It is necessary that the urge to articulate "generalizations" has to be resisted meaningfully. It can be seen that cyber culture also contributes to the socio-political and cultural condition of "hybridity" that is the hall mark of colonial modernity. This happens in the larger context of the restructuring of the relations between rich and poor countries in the wake of the IT revolution. It is a doubtless fact that high technology creates a situation of new dependency of technology-poor countries on the leaders in the innovation and production of computer, information and biological technologies. The usual solution suggested for this is that the Third World countries should pursue aggressive technological modernization. But the cultural implications of this suggestion are rather problematic as it would result in continued western dominance in the fields of culture and identity. It is possible to conclude that like development, technologies are also not culturally neutral. The claims regarding the revolutionary scope of virtual communities against the backdrop of these social and cultural inequalities is often extremely unrealistic and peripheral. As Michaele Willson in her essay "Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma?" points out:

The internet, in particular, is depicted as being more interactive, accessible and democratizing than previous information technologies. Whether that depiction is valuable is not questioned. But the prospect that such a form of community will achieve anything beyond placing a more acceptable 'front on technological society such as providing more meaningful experiences of 'being together is indeed questionable. (Holmes 146)

It is observed that virtual socializations, instead of providing richer experiences of social life actually effects a "thinning" of the complexities of human engagements to the level of mono-dimensional transactions and a consequent detachment of the user from the political and social responsibilities of the real environment. This is essentially true of the postcolonial citizen who attempts to gain entry into the global village and thereby seeks to escape from all the contingent responsibilities of his/her political and cultural milieu. Thus, it can be seen that the obsessive adherence to cyber communities has a political side as well. Somewhat the same concern is voiced by Mark Nunes in his essay "What Space is Cyberspace? The Internet and Virtuality" when he writes:

The internet, rather than presenting a simulation of totality, might provide a space of play. Instead of pursuing ends through this technology, one might turn oneself over to the drift and derive of 'cyberspace'. This vision challenges us to find a depth to the screen, to find-or, rather, lose-ourselves on a different bearing, off our familiar paths. (Holmes 176)

Finally, there is also the fact that the web is becoming increasingly market driven over the years. Market forces almost always rely on mainstreaming. Web pages are either financed through advertising or links to other commercial sites, and since the attempt is to increase the number of hits the discourse on those pages must inevitably tally with the mainstream commonsense notions that are held by a majority of the audience. This closes off any trace of revolutionary potential that the Internet might have inadvertently had at any point of time during its origin and development. As John M. Sloop points out in his essay "Ideology", "Profitable products and popular Web pages must reinforce the "common sense" that consumers already recognize and have taken on as their own." (Swiss 93). Audiences have always been attracted to messages that are about them. While ideologically reaffirming the belief of the audience the internet inevitably reaffirms certain specific kinds of knowledge and values. In the economic front also the relationship between the development of capitalism and the development of new media are more complexly related than as it is usually taken to be. There is an argument that "cyberspace" has its origins in the nineteenth century attempts to speed up circulation time, and has taken on a new importance with the globalization of consumer- oriented capitalism and the ending of the possibility of spatial fix. We have already seen Ziauddin Sardar explaining cyber space as an extension neo-colonially occupied space. However, it is possible to go beyond that and problematize the issue further. Internet has resulted in the speeding up of communication to a point where space is decontextualised and supplanted by a distinctly non-geographical hyperspace. In such a space the symbols move independent of geography and this new hegemony gained by information is highly conducive to the appropriation of neo-colonial culture. Jon Stratton deals with the issue in his essay "Cyberspace and the Globalization of Culture". Here Stratton raises the question in a rather metaphorical way. If the Internet is thought of as a small town, he asks. ". . . then who inhabits is?" (Porter 270) He says that the mythical American small town does not contain African-Americans or Asians. But the point is as to how long the internet is going to be this mythical American small town full of upwardly mobile whites whose life is the very model of bourgeois ethics. When is this small town going to be intruded by the barbarians from outside? How long will it take for the town to succumb to the forces of history? Stratton concludes:

The determination to transform the Internet into the Information Superhighway would counter the "problems" of minority access, by returning to the modern mass media relation, metamorphosing the current access to public speaking into a limited, interactive choice among different purchasable commodities and, in the process, slowing down the reconstitution of the nation-state. In the end, however, it will remain to be seen whether the American capitalist dominance of hyperspace will continue, or whether more space can be produced in which other languages, other cultures, and non-economic concerns can all have a space. (Porter 271-272)

The realization that Internet, or the various uses of new media, can be interrogated from the postcolonial point of view is a part of the grand project designed to end the capitalist dominance over hyper space. Any attempt to resist the present scheme of things should take into account the fact that the new media operates overtly on the cultural front and covertly on the economic front. This is the realization behind the attempt to look at cyberculture from the third world point of view. It is an attempt to do away with disguises and to eliminate the fear of being discovered which haunts the postcolonial subject who ventures online.

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