Language, Identity and Culture: the Issue of Multi-Culturalism, E-Diaspora & Global Culture Networks with Special Reference to Call Centres in India

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Abstract. In a world of liberal globalised economy, the concept of territory or border has been dissolved through the technology of new media. The emergence of online networks, through the internet, has facilitated the process of non-physical migration and e-diaspora. This e-diaspora has led to the emergence of complexities regarding concepts like language, culture and identity where these concepts seem to re-configure and approximate themselves in the digital space. This has eventually led to re-defining a hybridized concept of language, identity and the multi-cuturalism, creating global culture networks and leading to cultural junctions. This paper tries to understand these redefined concepts through the literature reviews, the case studies and interviews of call centre employees in India. The findings from this paper would germinate into understanding language, culture and identity as they operate in the digital space.

Keywords: Globalization, diaspora, multi-culturalism, networks, cultural junction, identity, language, migration, internet, online.

1. Introduction

The concept of Globalization in the digital space has led to non-physical migrations, thanks to new media, specially the online internet medium which has obliterated the concept of territory, boundary or border of any sort. In its search for understanding the re-defined concepts of language, culture and identity, this paper seem to lean upon the theoretical framework of diaspora in order to understand these concepts in a new way. The emergence of call centres in India provides the case study basis of understanding how multi-culturalism operates online and how global network systems is formed obliterating the boundaries of time and space. This phenomena critically analyzed leads to the concept of cultural junctions where different cultures arrive, meet and collide with each other and ultimately deformed and reformed into a hybridized culture that has its own identity and language. Even such hybridized culture has its own power structures in its DNA which can lead to future research. The objective of this paper is to understand the impact of hybridized multicultural Diasporas on language, identity and culture as they operate online in the call centres of India.

2. E-diaspora (Electronic Diaspora)

In a globalised economy within a neoliberal set, Diaspora and cultural hybridity as concepts have foremost in understood the online spaces where multicultural trends operate leading to hybridized social structures. Before understanding the diasporic nature of online spaces, it would be worthwhile to understand the concept of Diasporas as they operate in offline spaces. Diasporic frameworks included "a privileging of movement or territorial migration of formally colonized people towards Western geographies and their metropolitan centres."(Ong, 1998; Walsh, 2003), a dialectic of "home" and "away"(Axel, 2004), which means that there has to be a movement which is transnational in nature to far-off geographies; "a stabilization of particular modality of temporality in which hybridity is often conceptualized through the

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linear framework of time" (Shome, 2006) "the framing of the diaspora in relation of 'otherness' to the nation (Tololyan, 1996) "in which the diaspora is seen as a post-national interruption to nationalist discourses of any kind of "ethnic absolutism"(as in Appadurai, 1996 or Gilroy, 1991). These diasporic framework as suggested by the North Atlantic geographers, are being challenged by critics who feel that diaspora is just not the dispersion of people to different localities. Rather, it consists of a multitude of dimensions and vectors involved in border crossings. (Ong, 2004, p.87). The modern understanding of diaspora should aim towards a "more nuanced critical genealogy of terms equivalent to diaspora in different cultures and communities is a path yet hardly taken". (Liao, 2005, p.508). It involves questions of agency and the requirement of such migrations. The concept of a complex framework of diaspora becomes evident with the example of call centres which acts more or less like cultural junctions in the era of globalization. A cultural junction would signify a centre point where all cultures meet like neural junctions. The call centres are better known as BPO/KPO (Business Process Outsourcing/Knowledge Process Outsourcing) attracts clients from all over the world performing multiple business transactions across the globe. Analyzing this phenomenon of call centres from old theoretical frameworks of diaspora would fail to fit in the new digital space. This phenomenon has to be studied from the perspectives of new technological and information flow upon which the very concept of hybridization of language, culture and identity needs to be tested. In a nutshell, the framework of diaspora would enable readers to understand how some of the fundamental tenets of individual existence like language, identity and culture gets challenged and reformed in the era of globalization. This paper would argue how the nativity of such concepts are being uprooted and replaced by hybridized structures so as to attain the broader political and economic advantages for a country.

3. Language

Language is supposed to be a primordial form of communication since birth. But "mother tongue" as a concept seems to be in a threat within the purview of a globalized world. In fact, one of the ways to understand how language has been affected by the concept of diaspora in this era of digitized capitalism stems from the fact that the concept of race has re-defined itself in the digital space where technology has replaced physical migration. The issue of race in the concept of diaspora and hybridity has shifted from the visual hatred to aural subordination. The physical appearance of an individual which was dominated and marginalized by the capitalized structures has shifted to aurality where the digital domination has taken place through the language, the accent, and the voice. The politics of race has shifted from visual manifestation to aurality and from embodiment to disembodiment. To bridge the gap of the language, the accent barriers and the etiquettes of the Americans with the Indians, rigorous trainings are imparted and the employees are made aware the difference between "Indian English" and "Global English" It is important to know that the trainers themselves ask employees to de-Indianize themselves and speak the correct global English. Indian accents are often termed as "accent interference" which requires regulation and Americanized trainings. This training virtually erases the voice of the third world country and reconfigures it to suit the "tastes" of the Western world. Interestingly, virtual hybridization takes place when an individual of the third world country looses his/her voice, tone, language and of course identity to become a digitized first world citizen. Thus language plays a major role in the issue of Western domination. The creation of English as an international language obviously raises questions regarding the other languages subordinated to English. In call centres, English becomes a mother tongue language and replaces the original mother tongue of an individual. This alienation of language from the traditional family language crates a fragmentation even within the family where the power play is exercised by those who know the language and those who do not know it. This make belief world of a 'pseudo Englishman' in fact becomes a benchmark of success in society as well as the business model of the call centres in India. In fact, according to the English trainers at the call centre, the ascent of the Indians speaking English can raise serious legal issues if it does not sound good as per the client's expectation. According to Merchant, (2003), "the faster speed of spoken Indian English (which can surface from time to time despite rigorous training) can sound rude or unsophisticated compared to the slower American speech patterns". The fallout of such an expectation failure can lead companies to face legal troubles if the client takes such things as offensive or feel that they have been misunderstood (Shome, 2006). So, on one hand, the companies not only would take the benefits of a low cost labour, they are also under the

risk that their brand name can be under fire if the call centre employees are not trained well. So, English language does become a significant parameter of the call centre business.

4. Identity and culture

The second important issue is that of situatedness and the construction of globalized identity. The question pertains to where an individual is positioned or is the concept of situatedness now transferred to flexible positioning. When researched on the case of call centres, it is observed that these call centres have become places of cultural junctions as people from different countries call these centres and hence every client from different countries need to be treated separately. A business where customisation of the world takes place needs an individual to compromise his or her own self. Every communication to an individual of a different country comes with a set of socially constructed norms of behaviour, personality and the anchor country where the call centre is situated has to cater to different sort of cultural norms. The call centre employees are always at junctional timings between the West and the East. Whereas a call centre situated in India and the client is of America, there are times when at night, the call centre employee would say "Good morning, sir". This is because they are catering to an individual of different time zone. Hence, the employee transports itself between different time zones and finds it hard to match with the time of his/her own country. This leads them to act in multiple times and spaces causing mental stress and situate themselves in the messy intersection of transnational identity. The creation of split personality becomes evident all the time and this impacts the personal setup of an individual and a different set of personality comes out when the call centre employee interacts with society. This is a major issue as everyday an individual has to negotiate multiple identities and forget its actual identity. The sense of time and belonging to a particular space becomes hybridized between home and work and between national and transnational interactions. The question of situatedness becomes important as these employees try to negotiate the Local-Global spaces. This has an effect on a conservative society like India, where women working after a certain period of time is considered as a taboo. This has an effect on the institution of marriage where a groom's family finds it difficult to adjust to the working patterns of his wife who comes late night or early morning. There creep huge problems of handling family versus professional world equation. The public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, is also getting minimized and from a domestic public sphere, there is a new form of emerging public sphere which can be called a corporate public sphere. The effects of societal fragmentation of the West has reflected very heavily on the Eastern countries and hence instrumental in creating fragmentation in the close knit family structures of Indian household. The office spaces are trying to provide family gratification and the concept of a traditional family is increasingly being outdated.

Apart from negotiating spaces, there are employees who create virtual families while talking with the client. From the physical space and identity, the virtual space re-identifies individuals according to the customers. These employees use fictitious names in order to create an aura to the foreign client that both of them come from the same cultural settings and hence will be able to understand the problems and the needs better. These call centre employees create a whole set of "pseudo families" while talking to their clients so that their clients do not think that the mental setup and upbringing of both are different. This "virtual family" becomes the employees' everyday family pushing the original family farther away. Thus, the "memory, space, time, technology, globalization and identity intersect to create the 'modern' worker of the global service economy and its cross-border flows". (Shome, 2006). Another issue is of gender and sexuality where women find themselves extremely challenged when they become subject to "sexual harassment" and late night works. Scholars have commented on "how the female body and sexuality function as a central terrain upon which the collusion and alliances of national modernities are occurring in globalization". (Bhattcharjee, 1997; Freeman, 2000; Grewal, 2005; Mohanty, 1997). The cultural norms of a close knit society like India, is far different and sensitive towards certain issues like sex which are not discussed very openly like the West. Then, there are challenges of gaze from trainers to imagined customers to family, to the computer screen and the landscapes of the call centre. (Shome, 2006). The role play of an imagined identity to the global capitalist structure and the time and belonging to "home" and "away" at the same time has become the pedestal of global culture. Hence these call centre cultures form the hybridized global network cultures where both transaction and networking with the client for more business is both with and without risk.

Global network cultures give rise to making an inclusive global community sharing economic transactions, while the emotional inclusiveness of a family culture becomes less feasible. Thus the politics of diaspora and hybridity is always, in the words of Stuart Hall, 'politics without guarantees'.

5. Findings

The above analysis, based on literature review, case study of call centre and interview of call centre employees yields interesting findings and directions towards a new global reengineering. The first finding is that the traditional concept of diaspora has reconfigured itself in a new way in the world of new media. It is no longer the physical export of a colonized individual or group to the land of the colonizer. Now, it is even more complex as boundaries have dissolved in the digital space and digital Diasporas are multi-directional and multi-vectorial. The second finding is that the English language is a major instrument of the Western world to colonize the developing countries. Not only, are economic transactions being made through the English language, an individual of a developing country has to re-vamp his/her entire accent, voice, behaviour, etiquettes and identity to become a "Westerner" to be a part of the call centre business. Language, as a form of communication, is no longer for the mass; it has increasingly defined its niche class in the digital space. The third finding is the identity crisis that the call centre employees continuously face as they revolve in time, space, boundary of the two worlds. Neither can they situate themselves in their own world nor can they fully transform themselves to the norms of the Western world. What actually comes out is the increasing number of hybridized split personality trapped in the no-man's land. Identity comes along with a sense of situatedness. When the situatedness depends on economic flow, the identity also flows along with the direction of the tide. The fourth finding is the creation of cultural junctions, global network cultures and hybridized multi-culturalism all of which has its presence in the case study of call centres in India. The cultural junctions, from which the global cultural networks flow, creates multi-culturalism and give rise to a new set of cultures with a different structure but the same proportion of power equation of the West and the East. This research on the impact of diaspora on the call centres of India opens up a few questions and suggestions- the need of race being defined as a concept of inclusivity and exclusivity, when boundaries have dissolved. Race as a concept of hierarchy needs to be debated as globalization has more to do with dissolution rather than segmentation. The common thread of humanity needs to be the key to exchange and not race. This will lead call centre employees to be their own race and yet serve the customers of the West. The globalization of language is still in its very nascent state as so many languages is a daunting task to learn. But if the West opens up to learning languages of the East and specially the languages of those countries whom they interact the most, there may be a time when the need for a "perfect language accent with adopted original tonality would not be a requirement". Finally, every identity and culture has its own uniqueness. If globalization has to be embraced, then people of the West also need to understand the culture and identity of the country they are talking to. They should be willing to do business with the developing countries that are becoming emerging economies of the World for their own benefit. Simultaneously, there is a need to understand the business benefits of pooled economy which is much beyond the concepts of race and the imposition of a particular language, identity and culture to the developing countries.

6. Conclusion

The concept of diaspora has created a whole new world of meanings. Dominant languages have impacted even more than they did before. The world of technology is evolving in such a way that there is very scanty chance to chose one's own liking. Rather the choice is from the already chosen set of options. Every act of work is monitored, controlled, modified and shaped. The call centres of India provide one such living example of the multitude of compromises that the developing countries face in the era of globalization. It is time the world realises that globalization increases dependence and dependence becomes a habit. Till the time there is a particular power to push a particular choice, this model works. But once the habit is developed and then the model fails, the counter-hegemonic powers will subvert the dominant structures. It is even more of a probability of this type of situation when some basic elements of sustenance like language, identity and culture acquire hybridized formats. In order to avoid such a situation, it becomes even more justifiable at this point to remove the barriers of race, culture, language and identity. As the world dissolves to homogenise the

geographic silhouettes, the psychology of the West and the East needs to adapt itself to the changing reality. The encompassing of a variety of language, identity and culture bereft of remembering which part of the world it is from, would enable the impacts of diaspora and globalization to achieve further heights and add positives to the global society.

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