'Ambivalence' and 'mimicry' in colonial discourses

Let us probe further into how colonial discourses are not always so sure of themselves as might be presumed. In '*Orientalism* and its Problems', Dennis Porter argues that even the most seemingly Orientalist text can include within itself moments when Orientalist assumptions come up against alternative views that throw their authority into question. Texts rarely embody just one view. Often they will bring into play several different ways of seeing without always deciding which is the true or most appropriate one.

An example Porter gives is T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922). Sure, he admits, this text might seem a fairly robust example of Orientalism. But there can be identified moments when Lawrence seems to depart from an Orientalist position and articulates *alternative* ways of thinking about the differences between East and West. Porter concludes with the important point that 'literary texts may in their play establish distance from the ideologies they seem to be reproducing' ('*Orientalism* and its Problems', p. 160). Even the most seemingly Orientalist text can articulate 'counter-hegemonic' views within itself. As Porter usefully reminds us in his use of the phrase 'in their play', literary texts are mobile and often contradictory affairs, positing several opinions rather than just one. Cross-currents of 'Orientalist' or 'counter-Orientalist' thinking can exist simultaneously within a single text.

The lack of conviction within colonial discourses is also the concern of Homi K. Bhabha. Like Said, Bhabha has become one of the leading voices in postcolonialism since the early 1980s; but unlike Said, his work is often very difficult to understand at a first reading because of his compact and complex written style. In his essay 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism' (in *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 1994, pp. 328–56), Arif Dirlik argues that Bhabha is 'something of a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation' (p. 333) and attacks his incomprehensibleness. Bhabha is difficult to read, to be sure, but he is not completely incomprehensible and his ideas can be some of the most thought-provoking within postcolonialism. Whereas Said draws upon more materialist theoretical work in his thinking, Bhabha is indebted to psychoanalysis and is influenced by Sigmund Freud,

the poststructuralist Jacques Lacan, and the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*. The first of Bhabha's essays we refer to in this section constitutes Chapter 3 of his book *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), and is called 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism'. The second essay, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', constitutes Chapter 4 of the same book. I suggest that you approach Bhabha's essays slowly in the light of the abridged accounts we meet below, which necessarily sacrifice some of his ingeniousness and suggestiveness for the sake of clarity. The accounts I will give bear scant witness to the sophistication and theoretical innovation – as well as frustration – of his work, but it is hoped that they will prove useful guides as you begin reading Bhabha. The purpose of looking at Bhabha's work is to construct a working knowledge of his concepts of 'ambivalence' and 'mimicry' in the operations of colonial discourses.

Let's take 'ambivalence' first. Like Said, Bhabha argues that colonialism is informed by a series of assumptions which aim to legitimate its view of other lands and peoples. 'The objective of colonial discourse', writes Bhabha, 'is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction' (*The Location of Culture*, p. 70); hence, as we have seen, the emergence of colonial stereotypes that represent colonised peoples in various derogatory ways. However, in an inspired departure from Said's concept of Orientalism, Bhabha argues that this important aim is *never fully met*. This is because the 'discourse of colonialism' (we'll have to use Bhabha's problematic singular term for the time being) does not function according to plan because it is always pulling in two *contrary* directions at once.

On the one hand, the discourse of colonialism would have it that the Oriental (or, in Bhabha's parlance, the 'colonised subject') is a radically strange creature whose bizarre and eccentric nature is the cause for both curiosity and concern. The colonised are considered the 'other' of the Westerner (or the 'colonising subject'), essentially *outside* Western culture and civilisation. Yet, on the other hand, the discourse of colonialism attempts to domesticate colonised subjects and abolish their radical 'otherness', bringing them *inside* Western

understanding through the Orientalist project of constructing knowledge about them. The construction of 'otherness' is thus *split* by the contradictory positioning of the colonised simultaneously inside and outside Western knowledge. Hence, in Bhabha's terms, 'colonial discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible' (pp. 70–1).

So, on the one hand, stereotypes translate the unfamiliar into coherent terms by seeming to account for the strangeness of other peoples: the Irish are inevitably stupid; the Chinese are always inscrutable; the Arabs essentially are violent. The distance between the colonisers and the colonised is *lessened*, as the colonised are brought within the boundaries of Western knowledge. But, on the other hand, colonial stereotypes also function contrariwise to *maintain* this sense of distance. The colonisers must never admit that other peoples are not really very different from themselves, as this would undercut the legitimacy of colonialism.

Probing Said's argument that Western representations of the East are based primarily on fantasies, desires and imaginings, Bhabha points out that the fantasies of the colonial stereotype often appear as horrors. The discourse of colonialism is frequently populated with '*terrifying* stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy' (p. 72 – my italics). Any attempt to subdue the radical otherness of the colonised is perpetually offset by the alarming fantasies that are projected onto them. This indicates how, in the discourse of colonialism, colonised subjects are split between contrary positions. They are domesticated, harmless, knowable; but also *at the same time* wild, harmful, mysterious. Bhabha argues that, as a consequence, in colonialist representations the colonised subject is always in motion, sliding *ambivalently* between the polarities of similarity and difference; he or she simply will not stand still. Because of this slippery motion, *stereotypes* are deployed as a means to arrest the ambivalence of the colonised subject by describing him or her in static terms. But this fixing of the colonised's subject position always fails to secure the colonised subject into place. Hence, stereotypes must be *frequently repeated* in an anxious, imperfect attempt to secure the colonised subject in the discourse of colonialism. As Bhabha argues, 'the *same old* stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be

told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time' (p. 77). The *repetition* of the colonial stereotype is an attempt to secure the colonised in a fixed position but also an acknowledgement that this can never be achieved.

Thus, to sum up, Bhabha's 'discourse of colonialism' is characterised by both *ambivalence* and *anxious repetition*. In trying to do two things at once – construing the colonised as both *similar* to and the *other* of the colonisers – it ends up doing neither properly. Instead it is condemned to be at war with itself, positing radical otherness between peoples while simultaneously trying to lessen the degree of otherness. Although the aim is to fix knowledge about other peoples once and for all, this goal is always deferred. The best it can do is set in motion the anxious repetition of the colonised subject's stereotypical attributes that attempt to fix it in a stable position. But the very fact that stereotypes *must* be endlessly repeated reveals that this fixity is never achieved.

In his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man', Bhabha builds on these ideas and explores how the ambivalence of the colonised subject becomes a direct threat to the authority of the colonisers through the effects of 'mimicry'. Bhabha describes mimicry as 'one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge' (p. 85). It focuses on the fact that in colonised nations such as India the British authorities required native peoples to work on their behalf and thus had to teach them the English language. An example is Macaulay's infamous 'Minute' (in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, 1995) on Indian education of 1835, in which Macaulay argued that the British in India needed to create a class of Indians capable of taking on English opinions, morals and intellect (we will return to longer look at this 'Minute' in Chapter 5). These figures, comparable to Fanon's French-educated colonials depicted in *Black Skin, White Masks*, are described as 'mimic men' who learn to act English but do not look English nor are accepted as such. As Bhabha puts it, 'to be Anglicised is *emphatically* not to be English' (p. 87).

However, these mimic men are *not* the disempowered, slavish individuals required by the British in India. Bhabha argues that they are invested with the power to *menace* the colonisers because they threaten to disclose the ambivalence of the discourse of colonialism

which the use of stereotypes anxiously tries to conceal. Hearing their language returning through the mouths of the colonised, the colonisers are faced with the *worrying threat of resemblance* between coloniser and colonised. This threatens to collapse the Orientalist structure of knowledge in which such oppositional distinctions are made. The ambivalent position of the colonised mimic men in relation to the colonisers – '*almost the same but not quite*' (p. 89) – is, in Bhabha's thinking, a source of anti-colonial resistance in that it presents an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of the discourse of colonialism. By speaking English, the colonised have *not* succumbed to the power of the colonised. Contrariwise, they challenge the representations which attempt to fix and define them.

This is a different assertion to Said's model of Orientalism, which does not consider how colonial discourses generate the possibilities of their own critique. Previously, the notion of mimicry had been seen as a condition of the colonised's subservience and crisis, the measure of their powerlessness. We can find this view at times in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*; its most famous expression is perhaps the Trinidadian V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* (1967). But Bhabha refuses the defeatism in Naipaul's work and offers a much more positive, active and insurgent model of mimicry. So, by revealing that the discourse of colonialism is forever embattled and split by ambivalence and mimicry, always doomed to failure in its attempt to represent the colonised, Bhabha avoids the criticisms of Said's work by attending to the ways in which colonial discourses are problematised by the very people they claim to represent.

STOP and THINK

As his critical vocabulary might suggest, Bhabha deals with the (singular) discourse of colonialism at a very abstract level. Terms like 'colonising subject', 'the colonial stereotype', even 'colonial discourse' itself are rather transcendent and absolute. As Nicholas Thomas argues, Bhabha's work is weakened by its 'generalising strategy' (*Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology*