

## **Indigenous Epistemology and Placing the Cultural Self in Crisis: A New Hermeneutic Model for Cultural Studies**

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The field of cultural studies is yet to decisively facilitate its stated aim of providing meaningful and genuine understanding of the so-called 'cultural self' and its myriad cultural transactions. Deconstructive analysis unearths the cultural presuppositions inherent in this field, which is laden with enduring colonial tendencies and biases still prevalent in today's academic discourse. My argument is that the understanding of a culture is inevitably enigmatic when one's scholarship is situated in the presupposition of a binary that opposes self to other. Subjects studying other cultures, I argue, better understand and empathize with the subjects of their study when they are willing to sacrifice their own self-constructed cultural otherness. A deeper dialogue, a dialogue embedded at the core of self-experience, I argue, is the hermeneutical key for understanding cultural subjects. This approach of deconstructing the self in an effort to recognize the other, I believe, has a greater potential to bridge abiding differences and heal a multiplicity of culturally wounded subjects. Real cultural dialogue occurs in that 'fusion of horizons' that arises from the bracketing of one's own culturally constructed presuppositions.

### **Difference and Culture**

While Gadamer, Derrida, and Caputo call into question the subject via their respective hermeneutic approaches, the way that cultural studies have been institutionalized has functioned primarily as an instrument for the subject to interpolate his own preconceptions and misconceptions. As a consequence, a disturbing trend of mis-reading so-called 'marginalized cultures' has cultivated a binary of the culture and its reporter, thereby subverting human experience in the course of its self-objectification. By examining a few historical examples, I analyze in this paper how the construction of cultural selves and particularly the scholar's separation of oneself from the life-events examined, has only furthered cultural misappropriation and turned the field of cultural studies into a hermeneutical battleground. Gadamer, rather than trying to synthesize the perspectives of the self and the other, stresses openness toward the perspective of the 'other.' He is willing to suspend the individual subject's own position, which calls into question what

Bakhtin or Caputo have argued in order to maintain difference or assert the irreducibility of the self and the other. By exploring examples from cultural studies where the cultural 'other' is India, I argue that those hermeneutic models that are not willing to call into question the subject itself are epistemologically flawed. A necessary 'fusion of horizons,' a symposium of mutual understanding as it were, is not possible unless the subjects in dialogue are willing to dissolve their differences or come out of the epistemic shell that defines their selves and differentiates one from the other. A dialogue, to me, is inter-penetrative, wherein both subjects merge in constituting a new paradigm. A mere exchange of words cannot be considered a dialogue. Presumed differences, in my understanding, can and often do, stem from misjudgment.

This misunderstanding is not always a cognitive error, but often times, is due to a failure on the part of those engaged in dialogue to put aside their respective epistemological biases. The subjects engaged in this kind of fallacious hermeneutics, in my opinion, can speak but not engage in dialogue. I consider the binary created by these subjects as 'false,' and as long as the cultural selves are not willing to escape their evaluation of others based on faulty parameters, no actual dialogue can occur. I propose in this paper that the construction of the binaries of 'cultural self' and 'the other' has precluded actually knowing other cultural selves or initiating any truly meaningful inter-subjective dialogue. This leads to my proposal that the cultural selves that initiate discourse need to erase their subjective horizon in order to penetrate the realm of the 'other.' This does not preclude subjects from making judgments, but this breach in the horizons of the self and the other will open up a space which can provide a foundation for 'understanding' to occur. As long as the subjects are not willing to relinquish their conceptual boundaries, there is no real 'fusion.' In other words, self-existence is not dependent upon the sustenance of the 'ego,' and when the maintenance of a subjective horizon precludes the possibility of a dialogue, a meta-awareness is required to relinquish subjectivity.

The defining of a culture requires the presence of a cultural other. This 'other' constitutes a difference that allows one culture to identify itself. When different cultures develop a dialogue, numerous binaries can emerge, such as that of insider and outsider, or superior and inferior. Post-colonial studies have deconstructed the settings in which cultures have been studied. This has given a new twist to studying 'other' cultures and has problematized the colonial framework of admiration, adoption, and assimilation, where the eventual outcome of such studies has remained to diminish the cultural other. The question is, can we really know the cultural others that are not our own fabrications? The arguments developed in this paper demand bracketing

the self from discourse, placing the subjective horizon in crisis and entering into the realm of other subjects, and in this process, they borrow some premises from classical Sanskrit philosophy. Seeking an even broader horizon, I argue in this paper that human concerns and consciousness cannot be confined to cultures alone, and the advancement of our shared destiny relies on our ability to develop trans-cultural disciplines rooted in global wisdom, rather than arguing for or against the cultural self. All cultures have the narrative of human survival and possess insights that prepare humanity for further evolution. The crises of global warming or the lack of drinking water, for instance, are common challenges for the entire humanity. Non-violence, along the same lines, is not merely the concern of some Jain monks, but a global need. Our construction of the binaries should not preclude knowledge systems. In this sense, this paper appeals for a movement beyond the recognition of cultural differences.

I understand the consequences of this proposed reading of cultures to be the potential for a transcendence of the binaries of self and other, insider and outsider, in-group and out-group, that characterize and drive much cultural dialogue. Cultural dialogue, like any other form of discourse, does not innately remain fixed to established binaries, but rather shifts according to the dynamic nature of the subjects and interpreters that are always constructing their respective interpretations within and according to their own particular frames of reference. Historically, however, it has been possible for cultures to expand the scope of dialogue and adapt by freeing themselves from the fixed ideological frameworks. The dialogical selves, in this light, embody a 'becoming' that is itself discursive—flux, rather than 'being,' as Heidegger and Caputo would agree. By giving some examples from cultural studies that stem from the faulty parameters of biased subjects, I argue in this paper that cultural dialogue can occur only when the subject's own epistemic horizon is breached, allowing the identified other to engage in dialogue as a conscious subject and not just a mere concept of objectification.

In framing my position, I have drawn from José Cabezón's (Cabezón 2006, 21-38) insight that cultural studies have not only constructed the binary of the self and the other but also a presumed superiority of the self in relation to other. Erasure of this constructed self and its superiority, I argue in this paper, is a precondition for constructive hermeneutical dialogue. In order to propose an interpretive model that sustains the collapse of this fabricated self, I borrow ideas from Bhartṛhari, Śaṅkara, and Abhinavagupta as well. Unlike their Western counterparts, these philosophers recommend an erasure of the ego-self, the self that is culturally constructed, in quest of a higher, purer

truth. I propose that ‘recognition of truth’ is possible only when the dichotomy of subject and object is dismantled and the dialogical subject transforms his horizon, going beyond those restrictive parameters in which the self-produced-by-culture has been defined, and instead experiences the perceived other as the very self to-be-known.

The seeds of my argument can be traced in their seminal form to concepts, terms, and teachings in classical Sanskrit philosophy, particularly the concept of ‘intuitive knowledge’ (*pratibhā*) and the doctrine of self-recognition (*pratyabhijñā*). Both *pratibhā* and *pratyabhijñā* reference ideas linked to faith in a transcendental truth beyond the fluctuating discursive patterns of dialogical selves. The epistemic framework for recognizing reality, in these parameters, can shift the subjective horizon—just as ‘truth’ cannot be labelled ‘subjective,’ it cannot be about ‘objective’ reality, as the binary of subject and object are innately relational. Both are problematic in recognizing reality. The intuitive stage of *pratibhā* is non-dual in its nature; and, in this self-reflexive awareness, there is no dichotomy of self from other. From within the framework of such a term, one is inclined to seeing the wisdom of seeking that reality that allows for an interpenetration of all epistemic domains. This, to me, is a real dialogue: not to realize that we are utterly different, irreducible, and impenetrable, but that we rest—all and each and every one of us—on the very same foundational reality that expresses itself through us.

This leads us to two different scenarios. In one, the subjects engaged in dialogue are hellbent to preserve their ego-self and muster their rights and explore their strengths. In the other, the subjective domains overlap, and an enterprise that initially stems from the desire to project one’s own superiority transforms itself into a hermeneutical pattern of mutual understanding and appreciation. In this age in which the world’s citizenry is progressively moving away from classical ethnocentric consciousness and embracing more pluralist values, cultural studies cannot stand alone, isolating itself from real human needs. As a consequence, the project of the ‘restoration of ego’ will have to collapse and find its home in universal human aspirations. Moving away from fictional self-identity, we scholars can contribute to the larger cause of adaptation by providing cognitive frameworks that facilitate a higher order of self-awareness grounded in values of non-violence.

Bhartṛhari introduces the concept of ‘self-seeing-speech’ (*paśyantī*) that witnesses itself while also seeing entities as if externalized. This is the level of speech wherein the so-called external and internal are commingled. My proposed model of hermeneutical dialogue involves subjects in this self-seeing stage whereby that which was previously objectified and externalized as ‘out there’ transforms into an intimate

otherness that is perceived within as one's own self-essence. The intrinsic nature of language as dialogical and the manifestation of reality in dialogue, therefore, can be derived from the concept of *paśyantī*. An epistemology resting on this concept can lay the foundation for a broader discourse on cultures. The concept of *paśyantī* suggests that before a real dialogue, an internal dialogue must occur. The very expression of language presumes this internal dialogue. My argument is that only when this dialogue stems from a common ground, based on truth, can a real conversation with the 'other' have lasting and true value. Such a true dialogue occurs when the internal dialogue of *paśyantī* and the external dialogue with the other comes into union. In plain words, we can hear each other better, if we speak from our hearts. No dialogue is possible in deception. This knowing-of-the-heart is a higher gnosis (*paramajñāna*).

I propose not an abnegation of the 'other,' nor an incorporation of the other within the 'self.' On the contrary, this model suggests the experience of oneness in the intuitive state of *pratibhā*, wherein one breaches his subjective horizon, as if becoming the other. We cannot discover the truth by seeking it within the polarity of the self and the other, as the truth transcends this dichotomy. Only when such an ideological *aporia* is breached, can one see through the eyes of the other and realize the way things are in their respective actualities.

For example, what does it take to solve the Gaza problem? Are the two parties in war willing to relinquish their Jewish and Muslim identities, and feel for a moment just as human beings, greet each other without threat, without cunning and deception, and initiate a dialogue that does not threaten the existence of one another? If not, no dialogue is ever possible. When cultural, linguistic, geo-political, or any other interests become more important, or when the fictional selves engage in dialogue in order to preserve their ego, there is no letting go of the ego and there is no understanding between the conversing subjects.

As the 'other' is a product of alterity, the arguments derived from *pratibhā* and *paśyantī* demonstrate that the categories of 'self' and 'other' are superimposed onto the ground of pure awareness and are simultaneously arising. This being the case, the quest for the other who is not superimposed is logically impossible. Following the model of *pratibhā*, truth manifests when differences dissolve, as the polarities constructed in cultural settings can manifest only what is relational and not the absolute. This dissolution of difference is not the dissolution of cultural difference, but rather the dismantling of the superimposed dichotomy (Cabezón 2006, 23-24). The contemporary hermeneuts arguing for cultural dialogue seem to have forgotten the greater reality that, while we all stem from particular cultures and speak different

languages, our aspirations and ingenuity cannot be confined within these parameters. While all subjects are cultural, speaking reality in their own language, what they express is not just relational. At least, this is the parameter in which the *advaya* epistemology of Dharmakīrti or the *advaita* epistemology of Śāṅkara and Abhinava functions. On the other hand, if 'reality' is culturally constructed, no dialogue is required, as it cannot ever enter the horizon of the other subject. Not only that, it leads to the consequence that the other in a dialogue or the object in the epistemic process of cognition always remains unknown. In either case, to this author the predominant model of hermeneutics based on the dichotomy of subject and object is incapable of addressing true cultural dialogue.

Relying on the above non-dual arguments, my fundamental proposition is that hermeneutical propositions grounded in the dialogical opposition of subject and object are inherently flawed or at least epistemologically limited. My argument for adopting *pratibhā* as the essential ground of cognition is toward the end of demonstrating the validity of the epistemological recognition of non-duality in the process of engaging in cultural dialogue. I argue that an actual 'experience of reality' does not occur within any epistemic horizon confined by dichotomy. Furthermore, the very premise of the objective gaze is to accept the 'other' as devoid of reflexive self-awareness. Now the question is, how can subjects engage in understanding each other, or breach their respective epistemic horizons in quest of this non-conditional truth? And for this, I would like to engage Śāṅkara's presuppositions for reading Advaita.

Prior to beginning his commentary, Śāṅkara proposes that only select people are authorized to read Vedānta. The four constituents—(1) discriminating wisdom of what is transitory and what is not, (2) having no craving for enjoying the world, (3) having moral qualities and strengths to restrain oneself from physical desires, and (4) the zeal to attain liberation—according to Śāṅkara, are the preconditions for understanding his teachings (*The Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya*, I.1.1). What is noteworthy in this itemization of requirements is that our ability to learn something is framed by our intentionality. When Śāṅkara's arguments in this context are engaged, the study cannot be guided by prejudiced concerns, and the subjects both from inside and outside (in the case of cultural discourse) thereby fail to recognize a reality that is beyond the culturally-constructed notions regarding distinctions

between ‘subject’ and its ‘object’.<sup>1</sup> This is to argue that ‘understanding’ as an epistemological category requires the transcendence of frameworks bound to such binaries as subjective and objective, inside and outside, etic and emic, and so on.

In order to demonstrate how intentionality affects understanding, I am offering a few examples of the readings of Indian cultural forms in the contemporary period. Indian philosophy has been studied since its origin with multiple and sometimes contrasting purposes: adherents study one school of thought to imbibe the instructions and apply them in their lives (like people studying and practicing Yoga); opponents of any given school mine its thought in order to refute it and propound their own doctrine (like Dharmakīrti reading Mīmāṃsā and Nyāya philosophies); there are examples of studying another culture with an intent to learn from it and adopt its tenets (as in the case of the emergent philosophical structure with the integration of various yogic systems found in Patañjali’s system, or in the writings of Gauḍapāda or Śaṅkara). In these modes of cultural dialogue, evident in the classical examples of Hindu-Buddhist-Jain debates over epistemology and metaphysics, self-correction has always remained consequential. Even when there is no erasure of difference, there is a process of refinement through which the ‘sacred’ voice of the other is heard. Contemporary imperial studies of the marginalized cultures, on the other hand, too often aspire, perhaps at times naïvely, to erase the other. Colonized cultures, in this paradigm, are always ‘food’ or the primary materials (just like the raw materials in the industrial products) for the sustenance of the imperial machine. These studies, I argue, presuppose a dichotomy prior to engaging in dialogue. In other words, this framework rarely allows for a real dialogue to occur and a real understanding to emerge.

Studying other cultures, in my experience, is most fundamentally about the opportunity and challenge of understanding other people at the level of their fundamental ground. When engaged in this way, cultural studies have the potential to initiate an authentic existential transformation, either in the party that initiates the dialogue or the one that responds. Cultural understanding, therefore, has to be dialogical, as it is about the engagement with, by, and for a plurality of subjects. Only those subjects who truly ‘understand’ can transform and not those who have been merely ‘understood.’ That which is merely understood remains confined to the realm of objectivity. From a Vedāntic perspective one could say that the ‘understood’ being ‘objective’ remains

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<sup>1</sup> With this, I am deviating from the model of hermeneutics of the ‘care for the other.’ There are several writings along these lines. I am directly referring to Abeysekara 2004, 973-1001.

thereby nothing more than superimposed illusion. Subjects cannot enter a dialogue without recognizing that cultural studies require the epistemic shift out of objectivity into the world of the subject.

My argument is a sub-set of a broader argument regarding the parameters by which India has been read in contemporary times and the problems that such readings have produced. My thesis is that it is the very flawed interpretive approach of such studies that generates the problems arising from such studies.

To clarify my argument I turn again to Śaṅkara's theory of superimposition (*adhyāsa*) whereby reality is not known due to a cognitive error in which the subject is misidentified with the object. Realization of the true nature of things can occur only when a knowing subject is willing and able to escape from this epistemic defect. It is only when one has made such an escape that one is in a position to provide unbiased and valid interpretive reflections on one's own, let alone another's, cultural heritage. In short, cultural dialogue can occur only when subjects are willing to problematize their own cultural horizons; and, they must do so specifically via the perspective they gain by being liberated from those very horizons. In other words, with my thesis I point to the existence of a transcendent gaze—one may call it the gaze of a disinterested subject, or that of the witnessing self (*sākṣin*)—through which one ascends by the erasure of one's culturally constructed self as one thereby enters the condition of the relational self that emerges in the binary of being-with-other.

### **Cultural Monologues**

'Dialogue', by definition, presupposes the existence of two subjects exchanging their perspectives. In cultural dialogue, however, the dominant subject's autonomy in interpreting the subordinated subject results in abnegation of the other's genuine subjectivity. The result is monologue with an imagined subject. In this platform, not only are the 'other' subjects misunderstood, they are not even brought to the ground of being. While this monological framework has many defects, I argue that it, perhaps paradoxically, nonetheless also has the potential to lead to the kind of dialogue I have heretowith claimed it negates.

Here a question arises: are we doomed to live solely in the fictions we tell about ourselves and each other, believing our monologues to be dialogues, or can we actually learn to understand each other, to experience the real object, and to have a real dialogue? Just as human awareness is culturally shaped, my conviction is that we are capable of having real understanding and dialogue. Accordingly, subjects can understand each other, and can transform their perspectives, without

one subject destructively subjugating the other subject's epistemic, hence cultural, domain. The transformation of Buddhism in China, the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism, the transformation of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophies in classical times, all are the result of such dialogue. If we pinpoint a timeframe, we may not find an ideal dialogue occurring even during those historical modes. What we cannot deny, though, is that in this exchange, respective historical instantiations brought about an eventual transformation of cultural understanding that occurred as a consequence of these not-so-perfect dialogues and oftentimes monologues.

In order to demonstrate how the contemporary parameters of cultural studies lack the desired dialogical model, I provide now a few examples from European approaches to the reading of Indian culture. If closely analyzed, these studies can be summed up in three distinct trends: first, upon the premise of inherent dichotomy, then upon similarity, and finally with the premise of inherent categories. As Cabezón has noted, these three trends can be summed up with the statements 'they are not like us,' 'they are like us, but we are rational,' and 'they are like us, but,'; however, as he notes, each of the statements can actually be subsumed within the first as they all arise from the affirmation of inherent dichotomy (Cabezón 2006, 23-24). This first trend of inherent separation is vivid in the Hegelian approach that is alive to this day, although centuries have passed and the language of hermeneutics has changed somewhat since Hegel penned his thoughts. Examining Hegel's approach to history can be described as the doing of a historiography of Eurocentrism. Such a perspective perhaps helps us frame the discourse in (unfortunately common) contexts where 'philosophy' is considered proprietary to the West. When engaging in cultural dialogue by means of this model, there inevitably arises a *faux* 'dialogue' constructed by one party who deems himself more 'rational' to an other who is defined as 'not-like-me'. This model of course keeps in place the necessary theses and antitheses which are woven together via synthesis.

No doubt, recurrent Indological use of the Hegelian method has helped frame the European perception of what or who India is. Hegel immersed himself in the study of Indian thought, even writing a book on the *Bhagavadgītā*, only to later depict these scriptural depths to be nothing more than an "insanity [found] through opium," (King 1999a, 124)<sup>2</sup> or "an Idealism of imagination, without distinct conceptions," (Hegel 1956, 139) or "a Pantheism, however, of Imagination, not of

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<sup>2</sup> The statement of Zaehner that Indian philosophy is 'platonic madness and ecstasy' resonates of Hegel's statement (See Ganeri 2002, 376).

Thought,” (Hegel 1956, 141) and self-realization “a sort of hazy consciousness” (Hegel 1956, 149). In Hegel’s perspective, “Hinduism, with a monstrous inconsistency, is also the maddest of polytheisms” (Hegel 1971, 307).<sup>3</sup>

Now, one may wonder, what is the point of this excavation of graves, this unearthing of skeletons? The question is, As long as we do not examine the roots of the problem and cure it at its foundation, how then can we heal our collective cultural body?

A hegemonic cultural tyranny based on subordination is not, of course, a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century product. Just as in the past, such hegemony bleeds cultures today, and, today as yesterday, civilizations and ethnicities are being wiped out, even as you read this next word. The logos of Aryan superiority theory or the related Aryan invasion theory, and many other similar ideas, result in the institutionalization of the superiority of one race over another, giving privilege to one against the other, and thereby granting power to one at the expense of the other. These are not simply desktop theories obscured in one footnote. These statements are placed centrally to this text as my thesis on transcendence includes this point: these age-old stories of subjugation, ignorance and suffering haunt us to this day, be it in Nepal, Nigeria or even (to bring home the point by example) every major urban center in the United States. Through this gazing into our own histories we may or may not find the same brutalization of ‘the past’ in today’s ethnographic readings, and we may or may not see that this agenda of engaging in dialogue in order to erase the other has remained unchanged. Whatever we find, we will find our truth. Reading Hegel or Max Müller,<sup>4</sup> therefore, is not just to locate the history, but to face the mirror of our collective, culturally-determined selves. In so doing, we thereby come to the place of transcending that collectivity. I write here not merely on the narrative of India. The field of African studies, for example, bears similar characteristics (Camara 2005, 82-96).

Recognizing reality by analogy, or the method of comparison and contrast, is faulty in the epistemic sense that the thing-in-itself is neither similar nor different from others but is the object itself. This approach cannot give us the knowledge of the thing-in-itself, as the

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<sup>3</sup> Hegel goes further: “Deceit and cunning are the fundamental characteristics of the Hindoo. Cheating, stealing, robbing, murdering are with him habitual . . . the Brahmins are especially immoral” (Hegel 1956, 158).

<sup>4</sup> For Max Müller, Vedanta remains the primitive religion of the Brahmans. See Müller 1926. One can also note the subtitle of Müller’s text, ‘*So Far as it Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans.*’ He says with regard to the Vedic literature that it is “full of the most artificial conceptions, the lucubrations rather of conceited dreamers than of simple and original thinkers” (1926, 299).

thing known is qualified, realized only in relation to the other. Śāṅkara and particularly Vimuktātman identified an epistemic problem of recognition in terms of identity and difference, the epistemic modes that conclude in comparison or contrast (Timalisina 2009, 85-102). The problem with this mode of comparative study is that it embraces categories of the 'self' and projects them onto the 'other.' The typical argument is that both the cultural constitution of the self and the other are relative, relational, co-arising, and bound to be epistemically faulty. Let me highlight the limits of this approach with two citations from the writings of Max Müller. Regarding the Upaniṣads, Müller writes, "[I]ts language, no doubt, is less exact than that of an Aristotle, its tenets are vague, and the light which it sheds on the dark depths of human thought resembles more the sheet-lightning of a somber evening, than the bright rays of a cloudless sunrise" (Müller 1926, 300), and regarding Hinduism in general that "it will make us hesitate before we deny to the Aryan nations an instinctive Monotheism" (Müller 1926, 300).

These examples are cited here only to demonstrate how far we have been able to both progress, and regress, in cultivating a real cultural dialogue over the past centuries. However, it is not my contention that these parameters are impossible to overcome. On the contrary, the erasure of the culturally construed subjectivity, I argue, can shape a proper understanding among cultures, allow cultural subjects to be understood, and in turn, have a culturally diverse society engaged in meaningful conversation. This is not an erasure of cultures, as has been the consequence of cultural monologues in the colonial paradigm. If cultural identity is a form of game, I am only cautioning that the players engaged in the game ought to be aware that they are engaged in play.

In too many cases, the existing models of cultural studies, whether comparative in nature or studies on a single topic are bound to fail as they too often stand on the shaky ground of faulty presuppositions. It is not that these studies are by themselves problematic, but rather that the shaping of the discipline itself has been guided by a flawed set of core epistemological values. If the human angsts and fantasies, dreams and memories, are grounded on the single thrust of survival, why then cannot there be universal philosophical quests and responses, rather than the preclusion of the literatures of entire civilizations as so many tragically censored chapters from the book of ethnic studies?

How can the *Mahābhārata* be a concern for understanding only the Indian psyche but the *Illiad* the unquestioned standard for understanding human nature writ large? How can Patañjalian analysis of mind be a mere subject of Indian spirituality and the psychoanalysis of Freud be a universal science? I argue here not against a comparative study. Things or concepts are cognized by comparing or contrasting,

and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. The only problem is, how can a hermeneutical stage grounded on misconception and institutionalized with the purpose of protecting some and subjugating or even erasing others, ever provide a platform for a meaningful dialogue? Be it the comparative study initiated by William Jones who compares Gautama with Aristotle, Jaimini with Socrates, Vyāsa with Plato, and Kapila with Pythagoras (Sugirtharajah 2003, 15), or that of Max Müller when he compares Vedānta to ancient Greek philosophies, or of Paul Hacker who compares Vedānta to Neo-Platonism and reflects upon Hindu ethics in light of Schopenhauer (Halbfass 1995, 211-226 & 273-318), an ardent desire to overpower and subordinate the other is vivid.<sup>5</sup> Comparison could be one of the superb means of cognition. Even the Naiyāyikas from classical India defended analogy (*upamāna*) as one of the instruments of valid cognition (*pramāṇas*). If analogy can give valid cognition, why not apply the same method in contemporary times? Comparison can enhance our knowledge only when what we are comparing (the objects) are not the figments of our own imagination, and we are willing to go one step further and erase our ego from the meta-gaze while witnessing the world-events.

There are two sets of arguments that have been developed thus far in this meditation on the limits and possibilities of cultural studies. First, a positive hermeneutics free from an agenda to violate the other<sup>6</sup> can emerge with the premise of the intrinsic value of the 'other.' There is not just a tendency to absorb the Orient in the writings of Whitehead, Alan Watts, or Ken Wilbur, but there is also the emergence of a new kind of recognition of the value of reading texts and traditions on their own terms. We may have to wait for the perfect example of this new paradigm, but the samples we have already before suggest that South Asian studies will not simply remain 'ghetto studies' but will penetrate the center of our hermeneutical consciousness and thereby reshape various disciplines in the future. It remains critical that that the binaries of 'self' and 'other', of 'rational' and 'irrational,' and other such comparisons made to establish rationality, will inevitably reflect problematic hermeneutical assumptions.<sup>7</sup>

The second argument developed in this essay is that the very proposition of recognizing reality within the framework of a binary between the self and other is itself inevitably faulty. All the problems stemming from these models can be resolved if and only if the binary of

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<sup>5</sup> Müller compares Greek *logos* with Vedāntic 'name' and 'form' and the Vedāntic *sat* with '*substantia*' of Spinoza. See Müller 1911.

<sup>6</sup> The argument is, cross-cultural studies have been initiated with intents to uproot the cultures being studied. For discussion, see Dallmayr 1996, 107.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on rationality in Indian thought, see Ganeri 2009.

the subject and object is viewed as subsidiary to reality itself, and is thus an unreliable means of knowledge that leads sometimes closer to knowing the entity but always fails in the end to represent the truth itself. When the yardstick of comparison is based on the self and the other with an underlying conviction that the other is always inferior to the self, there is a violation of the basic norms for cultural dialogue. Just as any Indian can relish *Romeo and Juliet*, emancipating the reader-subject from its original geopolitical boundaries, so can a Western reader enjoy *Śākuntala* and not locate it only in one cultural setting. Sometimes, we have a surplus of cultural imaginations, and the erasure of the self from discourse will ensure a real aesthetic pleasure or an intellectual insight that the cultural divides do not allow. The real radicality of hermeneutics—borrowing here from Caputo—comes with this erasure of subjectivity. This is not simply about subjects finding reality ‘out there’ in terms of objects cum objects, but rather in subjects bracketing their own subjectivity and giving space within themselves for the presence of the other.

We see the signs of this cognitive superimposition nearly immediately when we turn to the writings of the leading (mostly European) Indologists. Jacobi, for instance, maintains that there was a ‘philosophy’ in India and *ānvīkṣikī* is his applicable term while Hacker rejects this perception (Ganeri 2002, 359), saying that Indians had philosophical thought but did not have a term to denote it. Other Indologists question the application of specific terms such as *darśana* to denote philosophy.<sup>8</sup> What is amusing is that these scholars are looking for a term in India that stands for the dictionary definition of philosophy as it is known in the West. The flaw here is not that these scholars can be superseded by a new scholarship. The problem, rather, lies in Eurocentrism and the so-called ‘enlightened’ and ‘rational’ subject reading the subordinated other.

Let me further point out the persistence of this tendency in contemporary scholarship. Halbfass, for instance, writes, “[Systems other than the Western traditions], . . . in spite of all analogies, are ultimately not philosophical traditions” (Halbfass 1988, 433). Moreover, he concludes [F]or the time being there is no escape from the global network of “Europeanization” (Halbfass, 441-442). He concludes that “Modern Indian thought finds itself in a historical context created by Europe, and it has difficulties speaking for itself. Even in its self-representation and self-assertion, it speaks to a large extent in a European idiom” (Halbfass, 375).

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<sup>8</sup> The comparative approach to early studies is explicit in Müller 1998.

As one can see, Halbfass's conclusions are not categorically different from what the early Indologists observed. Truth be told, Halbfass is correct in stating that the modern self-discovery of India is first the discovery of the European self in India, rather than finding its own subjectivity. At the culmination of the colonial project, subjects discover their identity not by means of self-recognition but by recognizing the other and construing the self in relation to the other. As one can see, Halbfass first assumes philosophy as categorically European and concludes that the concept of philosophy for Hindus is a tool, not only of "Westernization" but also of self-affirmation against the West (Halbfass 263). Embracing Heidegger's argument, Halbfass claims that there is no escape from Europeanization.<sup>9</sup> That is, the only way non-Europe can have self-reflection and theorization of individual and collective experiences is only through the European gaze. I am not bringing these arguments to critique Halbfass but only to relate the past with the present, the foundation of colonial studies and its culmination. Contemporary epistemologies illustrate that our experience is ecologically grounded, and our cognition is constructed in relation to its surroundings. A rational way to recognize reality begs one to go beyond what is given to experience and seek truth beneath it. Cultural studies, on the contrary, are founded on fictional subjects uncovering the fictional others. As a consequence, we have bracketed human experiences, whether these are secular or religious, and framed them in terms of the other.

This tendency has allowed for the marginalization of the study of philosophy emerging from non-Western cultures. Even when such studies have been generated, the categories explored have typically been shaped by Western hegemonic agendas. And the disciplines that are found more fruitful for the expansion of the Western agenda have remained more prominent in academe than those that have served others' goals. The demise of philology is one such example.<sup>10</sup> Rather than initiating a dialogue, this has consequently resulted in creating a fabricated discourse with an imagined other.

Now the question remains, is it possible to move beyond appropriation and subordination when reading other cultures? Can cultures be studied and not fancied? These need to be answered, if there is any future to the disciplines that have emerged in our times. Halbfass concludes, "Concerning the semantic relation of *darśana* and 'philosophy' and the applicability of the European word 'philosophy' to

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<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of the Indological studies of Hacker and Halbfass, see Franco and Preisendanz 1997.

<sup>10</sup> This has been observed in Frauwallner 1973, xlvii.

the Indian tradition of thought, I agree completely with Mohanty that there is no justification for a puristic and Eurocentric restriction of the scope of philosophy and for an exclusion of India from the historiography of philosophy.”<sup>11</sup>

Utilization of such categories differs from merely an unconscious or prejudiced appropriation of knowledge in that there is an awareness of the application of categories, and unease in its lack of congruity. What this means is that human intentionality must be at the center of both judgment and action, and as long as a correction is not made in the basic level of intentionality, then our effort to learn and transform ourselves and the world will result only in cultivating interpretive methods and products that inevitably lead to *duḥkha*. A refined and noble intentionality ought to be the foundation of what we learn and what we produce from of our learning. I am reading Śāṅkara or Dharmakīrti or Abhinava in this context not to affirm or reject their esoteric wisdom, but only to borrow from a shared epistemology that grounds experience in a cognitive state transcendent to the binary of subject and object. This, I believe, can give a model for an understanding beyond cultural and linguistic constructions. I also argue that this model can help one cultivate awareness by problematizing one’s own subjective horizons.

Śāṅkara, for instance, lays out the foundation for studying Vedānta, an argument that can be expanded to make a claim that subjects need to cultivate themselves in order to experience something outside their misconceptions. Additionally, he expects that the subject has control over his personal inclinations and is capable of bracketing himself from the discourse. Reality cannot be experienced, according to Śāṅkara, while preserving the ego. He argues that recognizing the truth leads to a dismantling of ego and thereby a removal of ignorance and its effect, which is the root cause of the the perception of ontological difference between self and other. If applied in the context of cultural studies, Śāṅkara would argue that one cannot make an attempt to know something upon the premise of the self and the other, for when true insight arises, the binary of self and other disappears. This is not just the epistemology of Śāṅkara. Dharmakīrtian epistemology also rests on the assumption that realization in itself is non-dual, only manifest in terms of subject and object due to misconception.

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<sup>11</sup> Halbfass in Franco and Preisandanz 1997, 307. For problematizing the category of ‘Indology,’ see *ibid.* 156, 165, 306. The issue of translating philosophical categories is further problematic. For some examples, see Ingalls 1951; Matilal 1984, 231-252; Matilal 1985, 319-332, 356-57; Potter 1991; Halbfass 1992.

Ideas cannot be the domain of a particular culture, as they have a tendency to be universal. The colonial attitude that human inspiration and ingenuity can be labelled as ‘ours’ versus ‘theirs’ fails to acknowledge this universal thrust of the truth. Reality cannot be the victim of violence and subordination, as it is self-aware and self-effluent. Rather than discovering the truth that embraces all humanity, the colonial tendency has bracketed human angsts and aspirations within time and space or within race and gender, and as a consequence, has engendered misconceptions about the value of cultural studies. This, in my opinion, rests on a faulty epistemology of knowing the other by representing the other. What has been ignored in this epistemic paradigm is a natural process of the fusion of the cognizing subject with what is being cognized, a real fusion of the epistemic horizon. If we read Hegel, Nietzsche, or Whitehead, or from India the thinkers such as Tagore, Aurobindo, or Radhakrishnan, there is a clear flow of ideas from East to West or from West to East. Ideas are like medicine and one should use it based on their efficacy and not on their origins. Too often the ideas we are cultivating through various forms of cultural studies are causing the cultural body to collapse, penetrating to the host-bodies like parasites and consuming their life-energy from within.

The result of this parasitic hermeneutics is little more than the promotion of European ideas to the non-West. I am rather more interested in seeing comparative studies transcend the realm of colonially-produced binaries and authentically engage the actual thoughts of non-colonialist cultures in order to give rise to a nuanced, sophisticated global philosophy, one capable of guiding humanity through the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

Heidegger claimed that we cannot escape ‘Europeanization.’ I ask, Do the studies under the guise of phenomenology serve the same purpose?<sup>12</sup> Mohanty posits: “[O]riginal Vedānta is phenomenological, later Vedānta is metaphysical” (Mohanty 1993, 253). In his opinion, “Vedānta’s ‘Brahman’ is rather the transcendental subjectivity of Kant or Husserl than the all-inclusive Absolute of Hegel or Bradley” (Mohanty 1993, 253). Bina Gupta argues that phenomenology “leads us to a point where linguistic and interpretive differences, though recognized, are transcended” (Gupta 1998, xii). What we see through these respected scholars is not the tendencies of the West reading the non-West, but rather of the non-West internalizing the West’s categories into its own self-understanding. Self-recognition, in these settings, can only be validated by the internalization of foreign

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<sup>12</sup> For a select examples of the phenomenological approach to Indian philosophies, see Sinha 1983; Gupta 1998; and Lusthaus 2002.

categories, and this validating process is not possible without reframing one's mode of thinking within the framework of the other. This, of course, is one, perhaps even clandestine, mechanism of colonialist subjugation.

It would be a misrepresentation if I fail to point out that these appropriations have not simply been the servants of colonial agendas. The phenomenological view of Advaita, for instance, could be considered an example of the kind of dialogue I herein promote, even if the resonance of Eurocentrism, with its reframing of Buddhist or Vedanta discourse to suit a particular reading of philosophy in Europe.<sup>13</sup> The truth is that the scholars who have assigned Indian thought to phenomenology have failed to clarify their position of Vedanta or Buddhism through the means of post-phenomenological reflection. I ask this, Can these disciplines be reduced to a stream of phenomenology? Is this what the 'fusion of horizons' looks like?

The only positive remark I have regarding Indological phenomenology is that it is at least a mimicry or replication of the design of dialogue. When phenomenology does not lead to the reduction of one stream of thought even before the dialogue occurs, then this interpretive trend has the potential to engender new streams of thought and new philosophies for the future. Indological phenomenologists can also compare ideas, not in the sense of identity but as affinity (see, for example, Lusthaus 2002, 13). And if the studies of Indian philosophies are not with an intent to reduce the oriental thoughts to a particular stream of European thinking, or not to appropriate ideas, then this reading in the light of affinity has the potential to facilitate an actual understanding of the non-West.

Working in non-Western philosophy is itself an attempt to defy the parameters of colonial discourse. Heidegger, for instance, claims that 'Western philosophy' is a tautology, because philosophy is 'Western', or even more precisely, 'European.'<sup>14</sup> Rather than opening a dialogue with the non-West, the mainstream West has thus closed herself, engaging in

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<sup>13</sup> "These 'translations' or 'substitutions' should not be taken as a claim that Yogācāra as such and Phenomenology are interchangeable or nearly reducible to each other, such that one entire system, or even a constellation of concepts and terms from one system can be carried over into the other painlessly and without shedding a drop of doctrinal blood" (Lusthaus 2002, 12).

<sup>14</sup> 'The often-heard expression 'Western-European philosophy' is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in nature; Greek, in this instance, means that in origin the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first laid claim to the Greek world (*Griechentum*), and only it, in order to unfold'. Martin Heidegger, quoted in King 1999b, 27.

a pseudo-dialogue rather than the quest for an inter-subjective discourse, a real dialogue. As Halbfass argues, this self-enclosed tendency remains problematic. His statement in terms of appropriating Vedānta by measuring its categories in light of Western ideas is remarkable: “[S]uch comparisons which try to demonstrate the superiority of the Vedānta by measuring it against foreign, Western standards also testify to the continuing authority of these standards” (Halbfass 1988, 308).

It needs to be observed that the trend of reading the non-West in order to expand Western ideas, rather than expanding human understanding by going beyond geo-political parameters is not restricted to Western scholars alone. According to J. L. Mehta, “[F]or all non-Western civilizations, Heidegger’s thinking brings hope”, as he believes that Heidegger is an “untimely *Rishi* in this time of need”.<sup>15</sup> Mehta describes the process of realization as not innocently spiritual, but that which involves the growing ascendancy of reason over imagination, of Occident over Orient.<sup>16</sup> What we learn from these examples is that the study of cultures in the platform where a part of humanity is posed as a binary to the other, no real comprehension is possible. This is not the case that the construction of the Orient is not cherished by some in the ‘Orient.’ The argument is, this encapsulation of human consciousness to some ethnic or geopolitical boundary has only caused in marginalization, subordination, and a consequential displacement.

The writers addressed above are ready to sacrifice several traditions and central components of a particular Indian philosophy in order to appropriate it so that it fits with Western thought, specifically, phenomenology. This is even more vivid if we examine religious studies, with primarily the Protestant categories being framed for comprehending religions. The mechanism in which Christianity functions, such as the beliefs in the Holy Book, a Prophet, Sin and Redemption, just to name a few, becomes the measuring stick for reading other cultures and philosophies within the rubric of religion, be it Jainism or the indigenous traditions.

Contemporary studies in Western settings or their replication in non-Western academe has helped the West to impose its categories on the non-West, as exemplified above. Had the beginning been grounded on exploring the parameters of human understanding, cross-cultural studies could have had positive results. Had our concerns been primarily oriented to listen and learn, rather than convince and

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Dallmayr 1996, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 95.

proselytize, we could have gained ground. What Russell wrote some sixty years ago, “The Western reader wishes to know what influence Greek philosophy had on Buddhism, the more so as Buddhist art suffered a powerful Hellenic influence,”<sup>17</sup> is what remains as the guiding principle for cultural studies even today. The foundation for studies of the non-West has been so sacrosanct, and the building blocks just the walls of deception, that squeezing the truth out of these studies is harder than quenching thirst by pressing sand.

What we learn from these historical observations is that cultural studies have emerged in faulty parameters. A lack of awareness of this flawed paradigm leads not just to the subversion of cultural categories or the displacement of indigenous perspectives, but it also threatens the very life of the cultures being studied. This, however, is not an argument that a genuine quest for knowledge is not possible. It is only that the faulty epistemology cannot lead to knowing the truth. A correct approach, I argue in the following lines, stems from dismantling the superimposed binaries. Plain and simple, it is not necessary for a reader to affirm his Western identity when reading the non-West, and vice versa. It is detrimental to experiencing reality, being empathically connected to human experiences, when the subjects create walls to shield themselves from what is being read. Rather than appropriating oneself as a reporter, the correct approach for scholars is to empathize with the way it feels to undergo the depicted circumstances, or to transform one’s own experiential horizon.

Several proposals have emerged in this perplexing hermeneutic ground. The solipsistic model of the impossibility of knowing the other’s being, the proposed sympathetic gaze towards the other, the ‘fusion of horizon’ applied in a different context where ‘self’ and ‘other’ can have a dialogue, all have their limitations. A real recognition of the other comes at the time when the self is already transformed. The binary of self and other, a cognitive barrier that keeps the experiencing subject aloof from the life-events that he studies, is not one of the hermeneutic models that deserves a rescue. Putting the subject in crisis, as Caputo would say, is what allows the truth to unfold. When an ethnographer brackets his own subjectivity from the gaze, the anxieties or joys of the subjects he is studying become his own anxiety and joy. If understanding something is not about appropriating something, there is a future for these studies and also hope for the discipline of the Humanities. It is better to have a sip of tea and feel its bitterness than to observe a tea ceremony and write one million reports.

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<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell in a review of Radhakrishnan’s first volume of *Indian Philosophy*. Quoted in Ganeri 2002, 433.

## Dismantling the Binaries

The argument of this paper is that when we really desire to understand what a thing, person, or culture is in its respective, solitary actuality, then we have to be willing to penetrate beneath the sphere of ego and dismantle those fictitious identities that reside in unilateral systems of discourse. Education is transformational in the sense that we become what we know. Moreover, what it is that we know through the educational process is via the system of signs that are encoded into our consciousness during the period educational training. In the west, such knowledge has long-since been grounded in dualistic epistemic presuppositions. What this has meant is that the majority of Indologists have tended to view 'India' through a pre-coded consciousness capable of engaging the world through the lens of 'A' and 'Not-A.' True understanding requires a meta-gaze that gives a direct encounter with the truth and not some intervening fiction.

Following the dualistic epistemology applied in cultural studies, understanding stems from the recognition that 'I' can never know the mental state of the other, and in this sense, the other is doomed to be represented. What is ignored through such an assumption is that 'self' is irreducibly relational, constructed in dialogue with the other. Therefore, the genuine consideration of other selves is as crucial to constructing the self as is the self required for the recognition of the other. It is given that the 'other' is not experienced the same way as is the self: "[T]his is exactly this not-knowability that constitutes the other as such. The other's appearing as other is constituted by non-appearing" (Caputo 2000, 41). What has been problematic, though, is the construction of a too-often *duḥkha*-engendering hermeneutic breach between those studying and those being studied. Gadamar appeals for putting one's own horizon at risk, while the aforementioned tendencies reject even the engagement of the other horizon. According to Caputo, Derrida himself demands the same. Caputo writes, "[P]utting one's own meaning and self at risk, indeed one's own home, is the only way to let the other come, but one would let the other break into what is our 'own', which means that for Derrida the other would breach, not fuse with our horizons" (Caputo 2000, 42).

This is not about re-presenting the other. It is not even about presenting that other. This is about experiencing the pure being, the being shared by the self and the other. Recognizing reality does not constitute a polarity. It is this fabrication of the polar opposites that constitutes the epistemic problem. As I have stated in the beginning of

this paper, this is due, not to some lack in the structure of hermeneutics, but the shortcomings of its practitioners. The solution is simple: Instead of observing how the witch-doctors in Indonesia or India perform healing rituals, give some medicine to the ailing patients, save some lives, and experience for once that you are just another fellow human being. You will feel even better if you do not trade your medicine for the faith of the native.

Proposing to place the cultural self into crisis, Blanchot states:

“We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement” (Blanchot 1997, 291). Just as there is nothing mystical in Blanchot’s call for questioning the subject, we can read Nāgārjuna, Śāṅkara or Abhinava the same way. The project of cultural studies cannot be founded upon the premise of subverting indigenous worldviews, converting the natives to the mainstream religious practices, insubordinating native experience, and imposing Western beliefs and values. This can be achieved only when a scholar is willing to relinquish his own perspectives and presuppositions when studying a foreign culture.

The discourse that is possible from the ground of ‘not-knowability’ not only presupposes the existence of the other, but also expects an acknowledgement that the ‘other’ is capable of speaking for himself. Caputo writes, “From the depths of a ‘common strangeness’ we concede that we do not know each other, and that, because of this, we can only speak *to* each other, not *about* each other” (Caputo 2000, 60).

One can argue, what kind of dialogue will this initiate if the very self itself is brought into crisis? The response is simple: it is not a total abnegation of the center of experience, but of its presuppositions with regard to both the self and the other. To condition reality by power, arguing that there is no truth but conditions constituted by power, is tantamount to blocking the sunlight and saying that there is no sunrise. We can sit together and read Hegel and Śāṅkara, or read Augustine and Abhinava, and not reduce their thoughts to a specific culture and time. Rather than anthropologizing the thoughts of Gandhi, we could have implemented them to resolve the Gaza problem. Bracketing human experiences to a particular culture and using them as ethnographic examples, the major premise of ethnic studies, should not come at the cost of our univesal human nature.

Two premises make these studies irrelevant: one, a culturally conditioned subject wanting to study another culture in itself is problematic; and two, the epistemic paradigm that reduces the truth to perspectives and makes all the perspectives equal makes the quest for

truth by means of 'studies' irrelevant. As I have argued above, the real conversation is embedded with the self, an intrinsic nature of being, and this is expressed in terms of *paśyantī* that confirms the internal dialogue that is a requirement for an external conversation. *Paśyantī* explains the dialogical nature of reality. Along the same lines, the concept of *pratibhā* or intuitive or reflexive awareness, a meta-gaze, also gives us a path. Coward explains *pratibhā* as "unitary intuition" (Coward 1976, 43), interpreting it as "the intuitive flashlike understanding of the sentence-meaning as a whole" (Coward 1976, 44). This, according to Bhartṛhari, is the state in which meaning can be revealed. The concept of *pratibhā* explains that recognition of the reality occurs in the ground where the dichotomy has been dissolved. The concept of *paśyantī* describes the level of awareness where "the limiting forms of manifested speech have been transcended and the final omniscient vision is achieved" (Coward 1976, 47). Recognition, following both of these concepts, is a process that unites the binaries wherein awareness divided into the forms of subject and object dissolves. This coincides with the way that language manifests from a unitary self-awareness to the ground of word and meaning.

The hermeneutic models that rest on difference or identity are thus both faulty. Truth is not experienced in relation: it is the manifestation of the thing-in-itself, the pure being. This manifestation is conditioned every time it is cognized in relation. This relational representation of the truth has epistemic limitations and what we have seen in the modes of Indian studies are just examples to demonstrate how the epistemic ground of recognizing something by maintaining difference is flawed. In essence, a hermeneutic shift is required whereby the self is willing to sacrifice its ego-bound identity and penetrate the objects, or experience other subjects the way they would experience themselves. This would not only help us evolve as empathetic beings but would also give us better insight into our own surroundings.

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