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The Postcolonial/Public Intellectual

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SHEILA NAIR, MAY 16 2013

In a recent commentary Hamid Dabashi poses this controversial question: “Can non-Europeans Think?”[1] This question, he writes, is prompted by a “lovely little panegyric”[2] to Slavoj Žižek in Al Jazeera. Dabashi complains that only European (and by extension some American) philosophers are considered “eminent” in the article whereas non-European thinkers go unnamed in its homage to Žižek. They are in effect denied “globality” because Europe’s appropriation of what counts as real philosophy or intellectual work is accompanied naturally by a sense of its self, a confidence in its own intellectual hype, what Dabashi calls Europe’s “self-centrism.” The European thinker, who is arguably the purveyor of Europe’s philosophical smugness, and to whom the appellation, “public,” is attached, is thus celebrated in a way that non-European intellectuals are not, at least among Europeans and in the popular press.

Dabashi’s complaint is well taken and provides a good point of departure for thinking about how postcolonial thought and the postcolonial intellectual challenge the reproduction of this asymmetry of knowledge/power. As the postcolonial intellectual makes his or her way in the thickets of academe and in public spaces, opinion, interviews and other critical commentary (an example being Dabashi’s piece) punctuate a critical, even if not a more expansive, “public” presence.

But to whom or what do postcolonial intellectuals owe their public persona? The changing geopolitical landscape in which postcolonial publics are positioned may reveal “a far more leveled and democratic playing field”,[3] but the interventions of postcolonial intellectuals have hewed more closely to a critique of European knowledge itself, and its production of a universalizing rationality and modernity. So indeed if globalization and social and political changes sweeping Africa, the Middle East, and Asia have generated a self confidence in these parts that Europe no longer holds the philosophical trump cards as it were, postcolonial thought must also establish its own unique voice even as it draws from, and pays homage to, European philosophy. After all, many a postcolonial intellectual cuts his or her teeth on the works of post-Enlightenment, postmodern, critical European philosophy and theory even as s/he invokes and integrates subaltern or indigenous histories, narratives and discourses.

Postcolonial thinkers may acknowledge the influence of European critical theory (Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Rancière, and Agamben among them), but employ them in ways that underscore the domination and hubris of the west. At the same time, postcolonial thought highlights the trajectory of “European” thought and Europe’s encounters with its “others” which finds its way into the writings of European thinkers—Sartre, for example, points to the influence of Fanon and Memmi on his own work—even if at times the borrowing is not explicitly acknowledged.[4] This may be one explanation for the “self-centrism” that Dabashi derides in his commentary, and which has also called forth the provincialisation of Europe.[5] References to European philosophy as simply “Philosophy” or “Music” as distinct from “ethnophilosophy” and “ethno-music” are anachronistic, as Dabashi illustrates, and increasingly associated with “the phantom memories of the time that ‘the West’ had assured confidence and a sense of its own universalism and globality.”[6] So, for example, Dabashi writes:

The question of Eurocentricism is now entirely blasé. Of course Europeans are Eurocentric and see the world from their vantage point, and why should they not? They are the inheritors of multiple (now defunct) empires and they still carry within them the phantom hubris of those empires and they think their particular philosophy is “philosophy” and their particular thinking is “thinking”, and everything else is – as the great European philosopher Immanuel Levinas was wont of saying – “dancing.”

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Yet postcolonial intellectuals such as Dabashi seem oddly preoccupied with what the West makes of the rest. Why does it matter that Euro-American thinkers and their supporters give short shrift to the contributions of those not presumed to be capable of “thinking”? What is to be gained from criticizing Europeans on this point? Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that indigenous research programs necessitate a rethinking of the epistemological and ontological foundations of European ways of thinking and doing research among indigenous communities.[7] While this calls for a more self-conscious reclamation of indigenous knowledge, it is also done with an awareness of how that knowledge is claimed, situated and mediated in relation to colonizing logics and histories and how it is implicated in them. Consequently, seeking Europe’s affirmation of what counts as “Thinking” or “Philosophy” or who counts as a “Public Intellectual” matters less than pointing out that the standards used to measure who or what qualifies may never be met by postcolonial thought, theory or thinkers or at least realized on the latter’s own terms. This not only a struggle in relation to mainstream thought, but applies as well to critical theory.

Finally, and coming back to Dabashi’s insistence that we ascribe a public face to the postcolonial intellectual, I would argue that the posture of the public intellectual as it is assumed in the west has a qualitatively different meaning in other contexts. For instance, attributes of a public intellectual in postcolonial Southeast Asia may include a bridging of theory and praxis in such a way that the postcolonial intellectual’s role in public life is one that appears wider and more immediately experienced. One example would be the growing engagement of such intellectuals in social media including active postings of commentaries on issues of the day. These blogs and postings are popular and generate a strong following especially among youth who actually show up in full force at events where these “public intellectuals” are speakers or presenters. Even as postcolonial intellectuals may find it tricky negotiating nationalism, political and social divisions, and ethnicized, racialized and gendered politics, their impacts may also be seen in the mainstream national media where their political, social and cultural commentary carries some weight, at least in some quarters, because of their presumed expertise. They may not inspire a “lovely little panegyric” in Al Jazeera, but they nevertheless enjoy a critical presence and visibility in public life and where it seems to matter the most.

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[1] Hamid Dabashi, “Can non-Europeans think?” Accessed at:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013114142638797542.html>

[2] Santiago Zabala, “Slavoj Zizek and the role of the philosopher.” Accessed at:
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/12/20121224122215406939.html>

[3] Dabashi, “Can non-Europeans think?”

[4] Jean Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Richard Philcox, trans.). New York: Grover Press, 2005.

[5] Dibesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

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Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007.

[6] Dabashi, "Can non-Europeans think?"

[7] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (2nd edition) London: Zed Books, 2012.

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