Abstract
The legitimacy of this report derives from the hypothesis that in spite of Edward Said’s phenomenal Orientalism (1978) and the consequent discipline of postcolonial studies that it initiated, knowledge continues to be manufactured and centered in the West. Such centralization implies that knowledge must be seen and mean the same to a non-Western observer as it does to a Western one. The findings of this report question this assumption by showing a vantage point from where knowledge appears differently than it does from the present, supposedly only position. More importantly, the crisis which has plagued the social sciences since the later decades of the twentieth century seems to be the specific condition of the established perception of knowledge.1

Looking from the other, the other’s, or the alternative perspective what we immediately become aware of is that the Western hegemony was imposed on the non-Western world by reducing the latter into an ignorant, almost non-literate entity. The disempowerment of the colonized, that is, was realized by a contempt for and obliteration of its knowledge from the world of being and truth. The postcolonial condition, however, is realized not in turning the wheel of time back but in reconciliation, or creating a new equation between the two apparently contradictory perceptions of knowledge or ways of seeing the world.

In so far as this is a narrative of the knowledge that was banished from the conscious life of the human in the last few centuries, and at the same time it aims to construct a condition that does not yet exist, it may be taken as a work of fiction. Hence it must be an aesthetic project.2

Keywords: Sufi Tradition; Postcolonial Condition; Knowledge; Modernity; Fiction

1 The crisis is well articulated in these words of Giddens (1991:36): ‘The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organization cannot be obtained, … results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part out of our control.’

2 ‘We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.’ Picasso, cited in Berger (1993:34)
There seems to be a fair measure of agreement among thoughtful and properly equipped students of the Old Testament that there is little in it, save a few fragments of poetry, which took its present form earlier than about 850 B.C. The literatures of Egypt and Babylonia were at that date already hundreds, one might almost say thousands, of years old.

Peet (1931:1-2)

My dear child, it is true that you cannot perceive Being here, but it is equally true that it is here. This finest essence,—the whole universe has it as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: That you are, Svetaketu!

Upanishads (Hume,1990: 33)

I have good hope that some future awaits men after death, as we have been told for years, a much better future for the good than for the wicked….I am afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.

Plato (1997:55)

…..it is a magnificent feeling to recognize the unity of a complex of phenomena that to direct observation appear to be quite separate things.

Einstein (Holton:1996:114)

I. Introduction

In order for the modern, Western theory to be true, a legacy of over four and a half thousand years of knowledge had to be rendered obsolete. For a while (for what is two or three hundred years but a while!), it seemed to work. Not any more though. And it is not we in the periphery who are the first ones to find out that all is not well with it. Rather it is the Westerners themselves who are quarrelling amongst themselves whether the whole project, the so-called Enlightenment project (or the project of modernity)\(^3\) was worth the cost that it is ever demanding, with the Ozone already bleeding and no hope of the ‘most developed societies’ agreeing to cut their consumerist ambitions.

It was the knowledge revolution of the 16\(^{th}\)-18\(^{th}\) centuries that took place in Europe that proclaimed an absolute discontinuity between what we know as modern knowledge and premodern knowledge, a distinction that ousted the latter from the domain of knowledge and its then possessor from the domain of culture, civilization and freedom. Once we call the legitimacy of this Berlin Wall to question and act to pull it down, as it is already weakened and unable to stand anyway, we find the span and amount of the subject of our investigation extended to nearly five thousand years. It would be pretentious, though, even to suggest that ours is going to be an attempt to give a full review of the knowledge of that enormity. I would rather confine myself to demonstrating that however necessary the Berlin Wall might have been in the first place, it has lost its legitimacy and meaning in the present. Furthermore, the unity of knowledge, of thought, following such dismantling is the precondition of the postcolonial condition.

Sufi tradition is seen as a representation of the tradition, of a way of seeing and living, that formed the core or nucleus of premodern corpus of knowledge. Sufi tradition

\(^3\) There is a host of postmodernist literature on the subject and which would be cited in due course.
as a way of thought and practice, then, it should be clear at the outset, is and has been treated in the following pages as a species of a genus and not a genus itself. This tradition, that is, is seen as a manifestation or articulation in Islam or in the Islamic world of a tradition that emerged nearly three millennia before. Though India can be termed as its first home where it became nearly the defining current in both Hinduism and then Buddhism, Upanishads being its first great formulation, it soon appeared universally, China and Greece being the second most powerful centres after India. Subsequently it played major role in the shaping of Christianity and finally found its probably the most powerful expression in Islam, whereby it is known as tassawuf, Sufism, or the Sufi tradition (Alhaq:1996).

The tradition, of which Sufism is the Islamic expression, can be designated variously as oppositional, parallel, critical, inner, core or counter tradition. It can be represented through the help of a picture (figure 1) where there are five (or more) spheres. These spheres represent living religions, preeminently Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Abrahamic family of religions and Hinduism and Buddhism from the Indo-Chinese family. Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and various other and later religions such as Sikhism can be denoted through other spheres. Presently, for brevity’s sake, we would continue to speak of five spheres, which can be distinguished through separate colours such as red, blue, green, orange and yellow. However, within each sphere the core tradition is designated by a single colour, let us say black, of varying shades.

Figure 1. The structures of various religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Budhism
The central idea that this diagram purports to convey is that the critical tradition is one, single, continuous tradition running through various living religions. For precision’s sake we can simplify this diagram into a single sphere (figure 2) in which the core tradition is represented in black.4

Now it needs to be made clear that this report does not aim to take us unto paradisiacal state in which there are no problems to confront. Rather it just intends to say that instead of old problems which Western knowledge has imposed upon us, we need to deal with new ones.

The first problem of course relates to the word tradition. For this word generally refers to, and rightly so, the five spheres as a whole so that the words religion and tradition appear to be synonymous. In this case critical tradition emerges as a tradition within tradition, both forming one whole in a relationship of essential tension, to borrow an elegant phrase from the title of a book of Thomas Kuhn (1970). Thus we would distinguish between them by referring the one as tradition and the other with one of the prefixes related above.

The second problem is that in figure1 there does not appear any representation for the Greek critical tradition that originated there contemporaneously with China or a little later, in the fifth century B.C., to be more precise, and subsequently flourished in Greco-Roman world up to the third-fourth-century of the common era. The reason for this omission is that that pagan religion in which it appeared, or of which it was the core tradition, did not survive. And yet the critical tradition, of which Socrates was the founder and Plato the chief expounder, played a titanic role in the formation of the Christian tradition and more specifically of the core tradition within the Abrahamic tradition.

4 Sufism is generally referred to by the term ‘Islamic mysticism’. The question might arise whether we can express the core tradition by the generic word ‘mysticism’. Perhaps yes, but I have avoided to use this term due to its peculiar Western understanding, often far from satisfactory due to varied reasons.
The postcolonial condition, on the other hand, is a hypothesis. It is a condition and an idea waiting to be realized. It may be a reality as a periodizing concept, in so far as colonialism as a form of occupation and total control of the non-Western world by the Western powers has largely come to an end. However, since the control has changed into an indirect, neocolonial mode, the dependency of the non-Western peoples being the continuing condition of the independence of the Western peoples, postcolonial condition as a state of being, or as an experience, both individually and collectively, in which humanity becomes estranged from the estrangement within, awaits for its tenets to be articulated first as a system of knowledge and then translated into an alternative mode of seeing and doing, thinking and behaviour. This report is directed towards that end.

The following words of Neera Chandhoke serve well as a preamble to the starting hypothesis of this report:

A crisis develops in the social sciences when its practitioners become apprehensive that existing epistemologies and modes of cognition are no longer capable of perceiving or grasping the complexities of social phenomena – in other words when realization dawns that a particular way of comprehending the world is inadequate or even faulty. This may be due to the fact that the object of theoretical investigation is seen to have changed, or that the particular mode of inquiry is flawed in its inner logic and structuration. The theorist realizing that the concepts hitherto available for understanding the world are no longer capable of doing so, seeks either to restructure conceptual hierarchies, or to incorporate another theoretical tradition which seems to be more promising. …. Given also the fact that social sciences are characterized by competing frames of knowledge systems, switches or the appropriation of one tradition by another have been possible. Indeed, even when one tradition of knowledge acquires hegemony, others exist as alternatives on the horizon (Chandhoke:1994: 1-2).

II. Discussion

It is now commonplace that the state of knowledge since the latter part of the last century is in crisis that prompted Lyotard’s earlier report on knowledge (Lyotard:1979). The main premise of our hypothesis, then, is that the crisis is two-fold, that is, not only ‘the object of theoretical investigation is ….changed,’ but also ‘the particular mode of inquiry [hitherto employed] is flawed in its inner logic and structuration.’ To be more precise, ‘the particular mode of inquiry,’ the ‘existing epistemologies, and modes of cognition’ would refer in the following discussion to modernity, modern epistemology, or modern mode of inquiry which appears to be faulty and flawed due in part to the fact that the object of its investigation or the world for which this epistemology was evolved has undergone phenomenal transformations.

To explicate the premise further, modernity is seen as ‘a particular way of comprehending the world’ which began taking shape in Europe at the beginning of the latter half of the last millennium. The new era began by overturning the traditional or religious knowledge systems which had hitherto governed the millennia old pre-modern civilizations.

The second premise of our hypothesis is that in so far as the modern mode of cognition turns out to be flawed, its rejection or critique of the traditional mode must also be flawed, thus pushing us towards a radical re-evaluation of the epistemology of
premodern or traditional knowledge systems. If the prevalent mode of cognition has
turned out to be seriously faulty in its perception of the totality of human condition, then
its judgment of the preceding mode of cognition of reality must also lose all legitimacy.
There is nothing striking in this observation. For the knowledge revolution that ushered in
the modern era brought virtually a change of regime, as radical a change of regime as, for
instance, was the French Revolution of 1789, or perhaps more appropriately the October
Revolution of 1917. However, as this regime collapsed, the fallen regime’s perception of
pre-1917 state of affairs was also rendered obsolete.

It would be immediately apparent that the metaphor of regime and regime change
is being used advisedly. As Chandhoke has mentioned, the human condition is
characterised by a plurality of knowledge systems, or paradigms, if we can say so for
heuristic purposes. The crisis in knowledge is usually marked by the fact that the leading,
dominant or reigning tradition starts losing its grip on the minds and imagination of the
humans as it increasingly manifests its failure in the comprehension of the social and
natural reality. The weakening of its grip on reality and on the mind of the human are the
two sides of the same coin. In such situations, the alternative or rival conceptual
frameworks of reality raise their heads for hegemony and power. This point leads to the
third premise of our hypothesis.

As modernity or modern civilization endeavoured to overthrow the traditional
regime and marched towards establishing its hegemony, during the nineteenth century a
split occurred in its ranks down to the bottom which would have fatal consequences at the
end. Henceforth modernity had two faces, or two identities engaged in a mortal combat
for the ultimate supremacy. These two modern modes are known variedly as capitalist
and communist, liberal and Marxist, rightist and leftist and so forth.

As the conflict between the two modes or forms of modernity entered into the
most violent phase of its conflict, or what is known as the Cold War, it soon began to be
realized by many that the promise of freedom offered by each party might be a chimera.
By the 1970s the Marxist, or what had been the opposing mode in this conflict, especially
in its Soviet form, began losing its credibility as a real alternative to the established
capitalist, liberal perspective. This led to a questioning of the legitimacy of the modernist
perspective itself, a challenge led by what is known as post-structuralism and which in its
turn inspired postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the fundamentals and founding
premises of modernity.

The third premise of our hypothesis derives from the contention that both
postmodern and postcolonial perspectives have never been able to come up to their claim
of challenging the fundamental premises of modernity. Indeed, as we would argue, most
of the ‘posts’ to date have thought and functioned, in spite of their claims to the contrary,
within the larger framework of modernity and historical trajectory of Europe/West. It is
for this reason that they have been seen largely as variations of modernity. Not
alternatives to modernity, offering a new regime, a new way of thought and action, that
is, but merely the revolts within the larger spectrum of modernity, and which seem to
employ the categories, or the intellectual weapons of the system which they seek to
overthrow.
If, then, they have failed to appeal to the imagination of global people in general and the new generations in particular since the dying days of the Cold War era, it is because they have been unable to locate and confront the epistemological and defining premise of modernity. This premise, this defining character of modern mode of engaging with the world, we would argue, derives from its flawed comprehension of the premodern conception of reality which resulted in its wholesale repudiation of the traditional legacy. The absolute breach, then, that occurred between the past and present, we suggest further, is chiefly responsible for the confusion and malaise in contemporary thought and human condition.

The fourth premise of our hypothesis is that in so far as modernity and colonialism concurred in their rise, to the extent that they became two sides of the same coin, the postcolonial, and in similar vein the postmodern, condition can be defined as that in which the breach between the past and the present has been overcome. Needless to say, time has put the task of creating such condition largely on the shoulders of the intelligentsia and peoples of the non-Western world on whom modern perception of reality was imposed by the might of colonialism. For the fact that this imposition for varied reasons never succeeded in full, the legacy of the premodern human experience has survived in the non-Western world, though mutilated by colonial, modernist violence and for which reason not always recognizable at first sight.

The final premise of the hypothesis around which the perspective underlying this study endeavours to evolve is that the failure of the two modern perspectives, liberal and Marxist, did not alone cause disenchantment with modernity. Rather this was the knowledge revolution of the first half of the twentieth century which dragged the ground away from the edifice of modern knowledge. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of the knowledge revolutions which were sparked by the scientific revolution of the early twentieth century. By overturning the mechanical structure of the world laboriously structured by modern science, the new physics paved the way for the re-examination of the pre-modern non-mechanical structure of the world.

More than this, in their thought they were constructing nature itself as a machine. The lines of explanation that would clear and valid for nature itself must be those that they could see clearly in the working of machines they might construct. Mechanics thus became the basic part of physics, and physics the basis of the whole of science. Nature, when we came ultimately to know it, would be construed as a single vast and interlocking machine – the machine of machines (Barrett, 1986).

Such call or need for the re-opening of the inquiry into the nature of the structure of traditional knowledge systems was further underlined by revolutions in art and across social and human sciences. The Cubist revolution of 1907 led by Picasso, for instance, abstract, spiritual paining of Kandinsky (2004), and surrealism, above all, was driven by a longing and desire to overcome the modernist absolute duality of subject and object, of the visible and the invisible, a unity emphasized by relativity and quantum at the same time. Equally importantly, the discovery of the psychoanalysis and unconscious in the domain of psychology destroyed the monolithic Cartesian subject on which the chief modernist dogma, namely, the separation and duality of man and nature, of mind and matter had been evolved.
III. Conclusion

It would be argued, in short, that the two leading modernist paradigms or modes of comprehending the world, generated by the knowledge revolution of the 16th-18th centuries, have been rendered out of date by the 20th century knowledge revolutions in various disciplines, from physics (Einstein:1932; Bohr:1958; Heisenberg:1962) and psychology (Freud:1900; Jung: Maslow:1966) to anthropology (Levy-Bruhl:1928; Malinowski:1948; Evans-Pritchard: 1965), philosophy (Cornford:1912; Foucault:1980; Barrett: 1986), history and philosophy of science(Burt:1932; Popper:1960; Kuhn:1962, 1963, 1970; Holton:1996), sociology of science (Merton:1970), religion (Durkheim:1912), art (Kandinsky:2004; Berger:1993). But if these revolutions have remained largely invisible to the naked eye, there is hardly anything surprising in it, for knowledge revolutions are always slow in coming to the prominence. Indeed, knowledge revolutions in contrast to political revolutions are largely invisible revolutions. This report, then, is in part an attempt to bring to light and connect the grand transformations in knowledge which have taken place in the known history of humankind. The belief underlying this endeavour is that once fully recognized, it would usher in new ways of thought and practice that humanity seeks presently and which would eventually define what we have called as the postcolonial condition.

References


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