Chapter-II

Problematics of Identity

Issues of Identity:

The historical meaning of ‘identity’ is best preserved in its derivative ‘identical’ which means the same. Its ultimate source was Latin *idem*, i.e. same; a pronoun formed from *id* meaning ‘it or that one’ with suffix - *dem*. It has been in use in English since the 17th century for referring to a previously cited author or text. This formed the basis of late Latin *identitas*, which meant literally ‘sameness’. The main meaning of its English descendant identity, ‘individuality’, ‘set of definitive characteristics’ arose from the notion of something always being the same or always being itself (rather than something else).\(^1\) Thus, etymologically, difference, sameness, fixity, exclusion and inclusion– these concepts are built into the theory and practice of identity, and this brings us to Joseph Butler for whom everything is what it is and not another thing. But it is difficult to know when we have one thing, not two.\(^2\) This points to the possibility of overlapping, fluidity, layeredness, and the concept of identity gets considerably problematized.

In contemporary study of culture, society and politics, identity has become a significant issue. Individual or group or community – has the tag of identity as an ontological necessity. Otherwise, the Latin *idem* or Sanskrit *idam* or German *Dasein* disappears. At the same time, we are not sure of, we do not agree on the location of the boundary, the circumference, the *laxman rekha* to

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show the purity or authenticity of an identity. This creates a paradoxical situation where identity suffers from an ‘identity crisis’, ‘when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty’. Contemporary identities, therefore, have become fluid, delimited, ambivalent, uncertain striking at the root of given, essentialist identity. In place of universalizing, settled ethnic, national, geographical or cultural identities, we are faced with fashionable and potent concepts such as difference, hybridity, migrancy and diaspora. And everywhere there is a kind of warning for us when we go for pure, unadulterated, authentic identity. In the words of Adrienne Rich, quoted by TRS Sharma -

O You who love clear edges

More than anything, watch the edges that blur.

Hence the new norm is heterogeneity in the place of homogeneity, hybridity in the place of purity, fluidity in the place of fixity or rigidity. “There is a persistence of cultural heterogeneity because, as Derrida puts it, ‘a pure singularity can recognize another singularity only in abolishing itself or in abolishing the other as singularity’.” This makes ‘pure, uncontaminated or essential’ identity ‘anchored in unsullied originary moment’ an epistemological myth, impossibility. Looking at the other or difference as an ontological necessity for the identity of the self or the group, Terry Eagleton “sees

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4 Ibid. p-131
postmodernism as a form of ‘culturalism’ because it refuses to recognize that what different ethnic groups have in common socially and politically is more important to their emancipation than their cultural differences.”

Similarly, H. Bhabha writes, arguing against the celebrations of frozen identities from the past that Fanon “is far too aware of the dangers of the fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial culture to recommend that ‘roots’ be struck in the celebratory romance of the past.”

Baral is acutely conscious of this nature of identity. For him ‘an identity, theorized only on difference, looks skewed gesturing toward an internal contradiction that while excluding the other seeks to be recognized by it of its difference.’ For him ‘the classical notion of singular identity having a monocultural representation advocated by historical anthropology is no longer tenable’. He sides with Edgar and Sedgwick who assert: “The recognition that identity is not merely constructed, but depends upon some other, opens up the theoretical space for marginal and oppressed groups to challenge and re-negotiate the identities that have been forced upon them in a process of domination.”

In the light of such argument the ‘principle of separatism’ that underprops constitutional provision of reservation, and Elwin’s A Philosophy for NEFA appears flawed and divorced from reality, though well intentioned. This makes the salience of Derrida’s concept of differance and the resultant aporias –

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8 Ibid. p-119  
10 Ibid. p-116.
present-is-absent and centre-is-not-the-centre apparent in the understanding of any kind of identity.\textsuperscript{11}

Rath finds that ‘the walls between cultures, made of bamboo or brick, soft clay or stone, are always porous.’\textsuperscript{12} His preferred mode and expression is dialogical, not dialectical. As ‘old-fashioned dichotomies and polarities are no longer helpful in reconceptualizing the nature of the human world’, Bakhtinian dialogics becomes an imperative. In \textit{The Location of Culture}, Homi Bhabha is eloquent with such an assessment of identity situation: “Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”\textsuperscript{13} Hence Bhabha’s emphasis on the peculiar nature of the boundary – “the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks. The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses.”\textsuperscript{14} This has its strong echo in Hans Georg Gadamer as paraphrased by Fred Dallmayr:

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\item \textsuperscript{11} Baral, Kailash C. “Identity and Cultural Aporia: Globalization and the Tribes of India’s Northeast” in \textit{Dialogics of Cultural Encounters}, (ed) Sura P. Rath et al, Pencraft International, New Delhi, 2006, p-121
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p-13
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p-17
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“hermeneutical inquiry is based on the polarity of familiarity and strangeness and dialogical understanding as the true locus of hermeneutics always hovers in the ‘in-between’: between self and other, familiarity and strangeness, presence and absence.”

The in-between space of contact and creation is called ‘borderland of both resistance and freedom’ by Trodd, and ‘heterotopia - an autonomous zone of cultural encounters’ by Foucault. Using such postmodernist ‘reduction of identities to systems of differences’ Mohanty speaks of ‘layers of selfhood’ instead of fixed identity, and of cultural identities as reducible to systems of differences – as a consequence of which cultural relativism and incommensurability amongst radically different cultures become deceptively spurious. Moreover, this position has blurred the distinction between ‘intercultural’ and ‘intracultural’, and positively vived with a concept such as ‘transculturality.’ Much like modern tradition, such a view of identity has given birth to concept like ‘identities in motion’ and ‘new ethnicities.’ “Ethnicity, in common understanding, is never new. Like the genes and gods, it is for all time.” But drawing heavily upon Hall, Mulhern is not averse to say that “ethnic identities are not fixed by inheritance. Rather they form and reform in successive and varied contexts of existence.” Benedict Anderson brings in the elements of imagination to define and explain such fluid nature of identity in

16 Ibid, p-23
18 Ibid, p-133
20 Ibid, p-120
21 Ibid, p-121
the context of nation or any community. His definition of nation is: “it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”\textsuperscript{22} While the ‘sovereign’ element points to its identity in the traditional sense, etymological sense, the ‘limited’ element foregrounds the postmodern, poststructuralist, Derridean sense of identity. For Anderson “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”\textsuperscript{23}

Any identity, thus has elements of \textit{heimlich} and \textit{unheimlich}. Whether a nation or an ethnic community, its identity is a Janus-faced construct, in the \textit{medias res}, looking within and without simultaneously. According to Bhabha “The ‘locality’ of national culture is neither united nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity.”\textsuperscript{24} This assertion may cover any identity, individual or community. Formulated by Herder and his heirs, “the maxim of authentic identity centerstaged ‘originality’ of lifestyles on two levels: that of the individual person among other persons, and that of a ‘culture-bearing people among other people’.”\textsuperscript{25} Opposed to this, Taylor stresses the need for a critical dialogical interaction among cultures along Gadamerian lines: “what has to happen is what Gadamer has called ‘fusion of horizons’. We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the

\textsuperscript{22} Anderson, Benedict. \textit{Imagined Communities}, Verso Book, London, 2006 p-6
\textsuperscript{23} ibid. p-6
\textsuperscript{24} Bhabha, Homi K. \textit{Nation and Narration}, Routledge, New York, 2006. p-4
\textsuperscript{25} Dallmayr, Fred. \textit{Beyond Orientalism}. Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 2001. p-212
background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The ‘fusion of horizons’ operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts.”

So Dallmayr’s emphasis in Beyond Orientalism is clear: it is beyond difference in the sphere of identities. His understanding of identity is akin to Husserl’s turn to the ‘life-world’, and Heidegger’s insistence on the worldliness of human life and his portrayal of human Dasein as a ‘being-in-the-world’, that is, as a creature intimately enmeshed in a complex, multifaceted context.27

If identity is truth, it is ‘transgressive and transitional truth.’28 Analyzing Fanon, Bhabha finds three conditions that underlie the ‘process of identification’:

First, to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object and as Jacqueline Rose writes, “It is the relations of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis of identification.”29

Second, the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting.30

“Finally, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy– it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that

27 Ibid. p- 220
28 Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture, Routledge, New York, 2009. p-57
29 Ibid. p- 63
30 Ibid. p- 63
image.” Hence, any identity or identification is an existence or being for an other that bears the mark of splitting from which it comes. This creates the atmosphere of ‘certain uncertainty’ that certifies the existence of identity and threatens its dismemberment at the same time.

This brings the binary of self and other to the fore, and identity as a ‘narcissistic reflection of the one in the other’. Here identity ceases to be an a priori, a finished product, and becomes ‘ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality’.

“The image – as the point of identification – marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split – it makes present something that is absent – and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition.”

“The image is only ever an appurtenance to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the appearance of a reality. The access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plenitude; the process of displacement and differentiation (absence/presence, representation/repetition) renders it a liminal reality. The image is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence, and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss.”

Both Fanon and Bhabha see ‘the edge of meaning and being’ and ‘the shifting boundary of otherness within identity’ in this context. But “the place of the other must not be imaged, as Fanon sometimes suggest, as a fixed phenomenological point opposed to the self, that represents a culturally

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31 Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p- 64
32 Ibid. p-64
33 Ibid. p-73
34 Ibid. p-73
35 Ibid. p-73
alien consciousness. The other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity – cultural or psychic – that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the cultural to be signified a linguistic, symbolic, historic reality.”

So the other bestows objectivity on self and identity, and always holds a lack or ambivalence. This creates a continuous osmotic flow supplementing both self and other, giving a paradoxical unstable stability to the notion of identity. There can be no ‘homogenized other’, no ‘homogenized self’ and hence no homogenized identity. Hence, Lacan’s suggestion that ‘the other is a dual entry matrix’ and Derrida’s suggestion that self-other-identity relation involves the logic or play of the ‘supplement’. For Bhabha this creates the ‘overlapping space between the fading of identity and its faint inscription’ between and across the self and the other, that engenders hybridity. He links this space to Lacan’s ‘moment of temporal pulsation’, Foucault’s ‘quasi-invisibility of the there-is’ and Lyotard’s ‘temporal beat’ and ‘continuous embedding’. This reveals cultural identity as an artifice, and highlights the ‘subversive slippage of identity.’ Hence, we have the “crucial engagement between mask and identity, image and identification, from which comes the lasting tension of our freedom and the lasting impression of ourselves as others.” This creates the notion of hybrid identity that is neither empty nor full,

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36 Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture, Routledge, New York, 2009, p- 74
37 Ibid. p- 74
38 Ibid. p- 78
39 Ibid. p- 80
40 Ibid. p- 80-81
41 Ibid. p- 90-91
42 Ibid. p- 91
neither part nor whole, and what Terry Eagleton says, at once diffusion and affirmation, the death and birth.\textsuperscript{43}

The issue becomes more complex when we consider identity as ontology (being of identity) and identity as epistemology (knowledge of identity). This leads to the concept of identity as a space for the playing out of ‘existential verities and literary truths.’\textsuperscript{44} The in-between nature of identity becomes apparent when “all co-ordinates, despite our attempts to find them in a spirit of positivistic exactitude, are in fact ‘between’: between identity and location, between living and thinking, between theory and practice, between theory as professional and academic expertise and thinking as existential and phenomenological orientation, between ontology as horizon and the ontic as our particular ways of inhabiting that horizon.”\textsuperscript{45} These ‘particular ways’ are both constitutive and constituted. And this brings in the play of uncertainty and freedom into the realm of community experience and identity. Radhakrishnan has critiqued Williams who has given ‘experience’ a transcendent status in the formation/constitution of identity. For him any position or location, and hence experience has an inbuilt mobility, and this militates against any essentialist concept of identity. Using the Bakhtinian terms he says: “locations are characterized by an internal ‘exotopy’, and as such the logic of displacement becomes a corollary to the logic of position. Also, by virtue of its itinerant

\textsuperscript{43} Bhabha, Homi K. \textit{The Location of Culture}, Routledge, New York, 2009, p- 91-92

\textsuperscript{44} Radhakrishnan R. \textit{Between Identity And Location : The Cultural Politics of Theory}, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, p-xv

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. p- xviii
nature, any position is liable to take on charges that are simultaneous and contradictory.”

So, belonging to a community is an unsettled affair, always admitting variation and resisting homogeneity. This discounts the possibility of radical otherness or selfhood. Thus, identity is burdened with ‘ambiguity and uncertainty.’ “Since a culture’s system of beliefs and practices, the locus of its identity, is constantly contested, subject to change, and does not form a coherent whole, its identity is never settled, static and free of ambiguity. Like the identity of an individual, that of a culture changes slowly and in parts, allowing its members time to absorb and adjust to changes and reconstitute identity on a new basis.”

Amartya Sen pursues such problematics of identity, and links the ‘solitarist’ approach to human identity to violence. In this approach human beings are seem as members of ‘exactly one group,’ ignoring the ‘pluralities of human identity.’ Sen’s take on the issue is significant because he sees such plurality not just as a result of poststructural fad and theorizing, but deeply entrenched in the traditional wisdom of mankind at different spatio-temporal points of history. In his sweeping survey he refers to Wilde’s claim, ‘Most people are other people’; Shylock’s rhetorical questions: ‘Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed

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46 Radhakrishnan R. Between Identity And Location: The Cultural Politics of Theory, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, p- 136
49 Ibid. p- xiv.
by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?'; in the Mahabharata, Bharadvaja countering Bhrigu’s defence of caste system by asking: ‘we all seem to be affected by desire, anger, fear, sorrow, worry, hunger, and labour; how do we have caste differences then?'; the atheistic and agnostic literature in Sanskrit and Pali, and the fourteenth-century Sanskrit book, a doctrinal anthology, Sarvadarshanasamgraha (literally translated as a ‘collection of all philosophies’) presenting sixteen chapters respectively sympathetic to sixteen different positions on religious issues, among others, to make his point. On the basis of such inherent plurality and similarity Sen takes a position against ‘the miniaturization of people’, and ‘splitting of the large world into little islands that are not within intellectual reach of each other’ and ‘civilizational partitioning…stifling other – richer – ways of seeing people.’

On the other hand, identity has been seen as a function of space, space ‘as a mechanism of organizing lives and conditioning them.’ But, without a porous, overlapping boundary, the space of identity leads to claustrophobic situation of sterility and attrition. This has prompted Foucault’s “analysis of spaces like madhouses, clinics and prisons (that) aptly illustrate ways of regulation assumed by those in power to control the boundaries allotted to certain sections of society, policing any kind of transgressions, deviating from

51 Ibid. p- xvi, 34, 42.
the norm.” In this sense authentic, original identity with an inviolable core is not only a myth, but also detrimental and undesirable.

But there are others who are not ready to wish away identity at the altar of poststructural aporia and amorphous theorization. For them ‘identity’ must first ‘be’ to slip, enmesh or overlap. They are not ready to go the whole way to embrace postmodern uncertainty that negates identity. For them the human world is a world of middle-sized objects where the uncertainty principle at the micro and macro levels do not hold good. The minimum degree of stability helps form and sustain identity at both individual and community levels. Guided by such an attitude people like Mohanty and Moya have tried to stabilize and save identity. Moya thinks, “Just as the postmodernist dismissal of identity is based on a denial of the possibility of objectivity, so Mohanty’s realist reclaiming of identity is based on a reaffirmation of the possibility of (a postpositivist) objectivity.” Such postpositivist realists do not agree on the postmodernist definitions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘knowledge’, and believe in the possibility and desirability of ‘theory-mediated objective knowledge’.

Wary of chasing the mirage of absolutist and empiricist idea of objectivity and identity, they factor in

55 Ibid. p- 12
56 Ibid. p- 13
subjective experience and positions to conceive knowledge that is both objective and subjective at the same time. Such truth, knowledge or identity claim is premised on the possibility of uncertainty, revisability. Following C. S. Peirce they own up such a ‘fallibilistic’ claim, and do not ‘separate the realm of hard facts from the realm of values.’\textsuperscript{57} For them subjectivity is not antithetical ‘to objective knowledge but constitutive of it.’\textsuperscript{58}

So it boils down to the old triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis in the form of objective-subjective-truth, knowledge or identity. Such identity is half objective, half subjective. Wordsworth captures this nature of reality when he says –

\begin{quote}
\ldots of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear – both what they half create,
And half perceive; \textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Using the metaphor of space, these perspectives could be linked to open spaces, closed spaces and hybrid third spaces.\textsuperscript{60} Identity as this third space could be linked to the “notion of the ‘trialectics’ of space that explains space as a repository of perceived, conceived, and lived worlds.”\textsuperscript{61} Here lies the poetics of space, poetics of history and hence the poetics of identity. Such poetics goes beyond the empiricist exactitude of the objective or the subjective model, and

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. p- 17
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. p- 6
attains freedom from what Adorno dubs ‘the jargon of authenticity.’ He is against ‘the ontological search for an immutable standard like gold’ because ‘authenticity becomes authentic against the background of reproductibility.’ This makes the authentic inauthentic in the beginning, and brings us to the postpositivist idea of knowledge, reality and identity. So, playing on Blanchot, we may say that the site of identity is a site other to that of sovereignty, a site that can expose in being exposed.

J. N. Mohanty pursues and presents the problematics of identity lucidly between *The Self and Its Other* in philosophical essays of the same name. He draws upon Husserl’s idea that “Everything that is so foreign, so unintelligible, has a core of familiarity, that the completely foreign is still familiar in as much as there are spatial things, men and animals, villages, landscapes etc, to assert the presence of the other, the unfamiliar, the unintelligible, the strange, the unknown in one’s own self, own home-world.” Such apparently contradictory streams, centripetal and centrifugal at the same time, make identity a dynamic stasis or static dynamics. Mohanty is conscious of this paradox in the concluding summary of his work: “Two theses are advanced in this essay. The first part argues for an inter-involvement of theory and practice within a culture, and for the claim that the primary, organic, and the higher, that is, the reflective level, harbour seeds of universality. The second part criticizes the much touted thesis.

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63 Ibid. p-52
65 Mohanty, J. N. *The Self And Its Other,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p-110
of cultural relativism by questioning if we have a satisfying criterion of what a
culture is, by rejecting as misleading the representation of cultures as self-
contained spheres, by arguing for the positive thesis that cultural identity is a
higher-order construction whose tendency is to marginalize and eventually
destroy internal differences. I think both parts together constitute a viable picture
of a cultural life-world.”

Pursuing all these thoughts further we may see the identity of a people or
community as a perpetual process, a migration or peregrination with tactical
thaws or rests on an axis or circumference that embraces and is constituted by its
cultural, social and philosophical webs or systems.

Identity and Language:

Language names and preserves, carries and communicates meaning. While
performing this function language becomes a crucial and defining vector
of a group of people, a community in the arena of its identity as both being and
becoming. It “is the most powerful means of communication, vehicle of cultural
values and aspirations, and instrument of conserving culture. As such, language
is an important means to acquire and preserve the identity of a particular group
or community. Language and culture are interrelated because the language
regions possess certain homogeneity of culture and are characterized by common
traits in history, folklore, and literature. Among various cultural symbols –
religion, race, language, tradition, and customs, etc. – that differentiate an ethnic
group form the other, language is the most potent cultural marker providing for

66 Mohanty, J. N. The Self And Its Other, Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p- 140
group identity. Its spatial spread over a fixed territory makes language more important than religion as a basis of ethnic identity formation.” 67 Warikoo has tried to establish this theoretical position in the context of Jammu and Kashmir, the northern, crown state of India, and mentioned how “The Bengali language proved to be more powerful an ethnic factor than common Muslim identity” and “led to the break-up of Pakistan in 1971 and the creation of a new independent nation – Bangladesh.” 68

In his seminal work *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thion’o has cogently argued the language-communication-culture relations in the context of the politics of language in African literature. According to him “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.” 69 He sees three aspects or elements of language in communication. The first element refers to “the relations people enter into with one another in the labour process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses.” 70 This aspect covers the division of labour – from the simplest between man, woman and child within a household to the more complex between branches of production. This is “what Karl Marx once called the language of real life.” 71 Hence “production is co-operation, is

68 Ibid. p-244.
70 Ibid. p-13
71 Ibid. p-13
communication, is language, is expression of a relation between human beings and it is specifically human.”

Speech is the second aspect of the language as communication. “It imitates the language of real life, that is communication in production.”

“Language as a system of verbal signposts makes that production possible. The spoken word is to relations between human beings what the hand is to the relation between human beings and nature. The hand through tools mediates between human beings and nature and forms the language of real life: spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech.”

“The written signs constitute the third aspect of language as communication. The written word imitates the spoken. Where the first two aspects of language as communication through the hand and the spoken word historically evolved more or less simultaneously, the written aspect is a much later historical development.”

But “communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and notions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge. Those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths.

73 Ibid. p-13
74 Ibid. p-14
75 Ibid. p-14
governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous or cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of people’s identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.” 76

Ngugi sees three important aspects of language as culture: culture as “a product of history which it in turn reflects”; culture “as an image-forming agent in the mind”; culture as it “transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language.” 77 “Thus a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.” 78 Before he moves over to another section to examine the affects of the

76 Thiong’o, Ngugi wa. Decolonizing the Mind, Book Land Publishing Company, Delhi-2007, p-14-15
77 Ibid. p-15
78 Ibid. p-15
colonialist imposition of a foreign language on African children, Ngugi sums up with his characteristic brevity and penetrating sweep: “Language as communication and culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.” Watson puts emphasis on ‘the language as a vehicle and symbol of (German) identity’ which leads to the slogan ‘Ein Volk, soweit die Zunge reicht – one people as far as the language reaches.’ In fact, playing on Johnson’s remark one could assert that language is both the ‘pedigree’ and prospect of a nation, a community. Hence, Schleiermacher, echoing twentieth century theorists such as Whorf, rightly opines: “what is cogitated in one language can never be repeated in the same way in another.” In this context Snead is convinced that “language here must be taken not merely in philosophical and etymological terms, but also as an entire pool of resources at the disposal of narrators, from the raw materials (vocabulary and syntax, as well as the repertoire of myths, rituals, folklore), to the processing tools (formal and

79 Thiong’o, Ngugi wa. Decolonizing the Mind, Book Land Publishing Company, Delhi-2007, p-16
structural devices, such as repetition and withholding, types of address, tropes of arrangement), to consideration of narrative reception (audience composition and feedback, market place).”  

In case of any nation or community or ethnic group language provides an ‘element of continuity’. It preserves the past, sustains the present and ensures a future, acting as a great repertoire of memory. The linguistic past is ‘not history but tradition’, and ‘tradition is akin to memory’. And the function of such memory centred tradition is defending identity against heterogeneity, discontinuity and contradiction through an unceasing activity of selection, revision, and outright rejection.  

Appiah recognizes the connection between language and identity and draws attention to the eagerness of minority communities to ‘own’ a language because “it is to a great degree a condition for the exercise of one possible identity option, namely, to live a life in which one’s experience as a member of the group is shaped, interpreted, mediated by its language.”

Language, with dress and (culturally denoted) physical features, makes the core trinity of ethnic group. The other, more superficial trinity comprises kinship, commensality and common cult. But language as group marker has more social and psychological weight than dress does. It binds individuals to produce group solidarity and creates boundaries that separate and join

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83 Ibid. p-252
84 Ibid. p-253
85 Ibid. p-253
simultaneously. The language community may seem an abstract notion, but in reality it is the more concrete because it connects individual with an origin which has as its content the common act of their own exchanges of their discursive communication, using the instrument of spoken language. We find the unique cultural wisdom of a people embedded in its language, and it is the most efficient means of transmitting culture. It ‘engenders the roots, philosophy, culture, heritage and communication of a people.’ Every culture has adapted to unique circumstances, and the language expresses those circumstances. While a community may not lose its identity when it loses its language, its identity is closely associated with language. To buttress his claim Osaaji refers to Ngugi wa Thion’o for whom ‘the domination of people’s language by another leads to the dismemberment of the soul from the body, (and) this dismemberment takes a speech community further and further away from itself to other selves, from their world to other worlds, which can lead to spiritual subjugation.’

To further quote Ngugi: “Language is power. Language has power to upset, uproot, and shackle… which may explain why much postcolonial writing reveals the continuing struggle over the word. If you name the world, you own it. If you are dominated, you see the world through the eyes of the conqueror, effectively burying your memory under the conqueror’s memory.” In such circumstances his prescription is ‘re-membering’ the broken and scattered parts,
and Osaaji’s prescription is an amalgam of Spivak’s deconstructive mode and Neil Lazarus’s resistant mode. While the former ‘calls for tampering with the dominant languages through reversing, displacing and seizing their apparatus of value, of value-coding, the latter involves the urgency of historical confrontation, a kind of extreme violent self-expression in circumstances where possibility of peaceful and dialogue-based relations are denied. People like Kalkus regard language as a ‘coordinate’ of culture and cultural mobility. But such mobility presupposes a kind of negative capability, an ability to be and not to be at the same time, simultaneously inclined towards being and nothingness, and gives the cultures and languages a dialogic flexibility at borders, boundaries, areas of contact. Languages are evolutionary, cultures are evolutionary. One should be wary of ‘the sensation of rootedness’ because ‘one of the characteristic powers of a culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition’. While language is believed to contribute to the development of people’s cultural identity while demarcating their differences from others, Radhakrisnan sees the realization of this difference through the emancipation of the ‘hegemonic grid of identity’.

Llamas and Watt have highlighted the symbiotic relationship between language and identity. They write: “The connection between language and identity is a fundamental element of our experience of being human. Language

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94 Radhakrishman, R. Between Identity and Location : The Cultural Politics of Theory, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007, p-75
not only reflects who we are but in some sense it is who we are, and its use defines us both directly and indirectly…language mediated attribution of identity to individuals is so ingrained in human social affairs that we consider a person lacking a name to also lack an identity. Neither our identities nor our languages are static, however. Both are constantly shifting and being re-negotiated in response to the ever-changing contexts of our interaction.”

Pierre Bourdieu, discussing regional and ethnic identity, makes an important point that applies to many other types of identity as well: although they essentialise what are actually arbitrary divisions among people, and in this sense are not ‘real’, the fact that, once established, they exist as mental representation, makes them every bit as real as if they were grounded in anything ‘natural’. He refers to struggles over ethnic or regional identity – over the properties (stigmata or emblems) linked with the origin through the place of origin and its associated durable marks, such as accent, to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world, thereby to make and unmake groups.

Modern linguistics has slowly but steadily embraced the identity function as central to language. The works of Labov (1963), Lakoff (1973), Gumperz (1982), Edwards (1985), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), Fishman (1999), Joseph (2004), Benwell and Stokoe (2006) have firmly grounded identity as a function of language. In Biling’s view ‘an identity is to be found in the

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97 Ibid, p-12
embodied habits of social life, including language’. According to Joseph language has been a key ingredient in the process of identity formation and reproduction for at least five reasons:

“Groups of people who occupy contiguous territory and see themselves as having common interests trend to develop, over long stretches of time, ways of speaking that are distinctive to them.

Cultural unity is believed to be the product of a shared language. This is what Fichte meant by ‘invisible bonds’ by which nature has joined those who speak the same language. As language is central to the habitus we spend our formative years learning words and their meanings from those around us and acquire tastes, habits, ways of thinking. The language does not somehow transmit culture and identity to it’s speakers – rather, it is that text in constant interaction with which older speakers transmit culture and identities (local and personal as well as national, ethnic and religious) to the young.

In addition to being the text of cultural transmission, the language is the principal medium in which texts of national identity in the more usual sense will be constructed.

Being a proper citizen and member of a community is inseparable from using proper language as determined by the language – culture – nation (community) – class nexus.

Language is used as the most obvious test for deciding whether particular individuals belong to the nation (community) or not. Most nations no longer

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resort to racial classifications – yet many do require cultural qualification that includes language overtly or indirectly.”

According to Silverstein and Bloomaert identities of all sorts, including linguistic ones, are constructed at the interstices and margins of categories and places to which they are tied. It is for those at the margins that identities matter most. Who’s he when he’s at home? is the hardest and the least interesting question to answer because when he is at home, he does not need to be anybody. It’s when he’s not at home that his identity matters. Indeed, in a significant sense, it is only then that his identity exists. Bucholtz and Hall present ‘identity as a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories’. They keep the definition of identity deliberately broad and open ended: identity is the social positioning of self and other.

Proposing five principles—emergences, positionality, indexicality, relationality and partialness— they anchor identity in interaction and present it as an inter-subjectively achieved social and cultural phenomenon. Reversing the order Barbara Johnstone has situated language in identity. For her “Discourse is a continual process of mutual coordination in making senses of the world; ‘languages’, ‘grammars’ and ‘identities’ emerge in the course of this process, as

100 Ibid, p -17
102 Ibid, p-18
human’s reflexivity – our ability to see what people do as an illustration of how to do it, and to arrange things in ways that encourage others to attend to these illustrations– links together sets of actions, linguistic and otherwise, into registers of conduct.”

In other words, language is a phenomenon in which discourse expresses itself as constitutive for Dasein’s existence. Language is made possible because Dasein can be disclosed in discourse – explains Naik.

Hence Dasein or being-in-the world or total identity is a construct of language. But there is a fair degree of inbuilt instability that prompts de Man to insistently emphasize topological dimension, language as unstable and self-destructive play.

This is equally true at the level of the individual and the speech community. Inspite of other differences with de Man, Bakhtin emphasizes the socially determined nature of language and sees its truest features being revealed only in moments of crisis or change.

All these views and positions establish the centrality of language of any community as its vital constitutive and sustaining factor. Language facilitates its being and preserves it as a socio-cultural-philosophical construct through a process of inclusion and exclusion, convergence and divergence. This makes the identity of the speech community dynamic and creates a condition where we are required to look beyond the differences so that we have the experience of difference and hence, identity.

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