

**A PROLEGOMENON TO THE STUDY OF THE
MYSTICAL ELEMENTS IN THE ANTI-
ESSENTIALISM IN POST-STRUCTURALISM,
POSTMODERNISM, FEMINISM AND QUEER
THEORY**

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This is a prolegomenon to the study of the mystical elements in anti-essentialism in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and queer theory. The mystical elements have so much in common with Buddhist notions on the non-self, the illusory nature of the phenomenal world and the conventional nature of reality. Where Buddhists use these insights to liberate the person from the conventional world, the anti-essentialism in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and queer theory use them to in fact bury the person deeper into it via their political ideologies and power politics'. Where Buddhists create a salvation theory - a soteriology - the anti-essentialism in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and queer theory create more ideological prisons and straight jackets which keep people buried in the illusionary world, the theorists acknowledge, rather than helping the people to disentangle themselves from it via the eradicating of conventional ideologies which imprison them and which these theories consciously manufacture. It is as if the theorists have discovered the Buddhist insights but rather than help release people from conventional reality they in fact create propaganda and mind control techniques to keep people from the realizations that will free them from the conventional realities these theorists acknowledge themselves. These theorists from a Buddhist point of view are trying to construct identities based on their ideologies rather than deconstruct identities based upon their insight of decentered selves and reality. They turn around their insights to use for political and power politics against the people as no more than ideological propaganda to control - a fairly typical western

preoccupation- and in fact camouflage the illusory conventional world via their manufactured constructions of truth

The whole edifice of anti-essentialism in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and queer theory it will be seen is built upon the ideas, implicitly or explicitly, of the linguist Saussure who argues as Barry notes

“... for Saussure the signifiers which make up a language refer only to one another and interact with one another but do not figure forth a world.”¹

Saussure’s thinking stressed the way language is arbitrary, relational and constructive and this way of thinking about language greatly influenced the structuralists because it gave them a model of a system which is self-contained in which individual items relate to other items and thus create larger structures.”²

Modern theory takes this idea of Saussure and extends it by coupling it with the idea that because we can only know the world through language then and language does not reflect the world but constructs it

If this extended theory is invalidated most of modern theory will come tumbling down into a shattering heap of rubbish. This extended theory or IDEAS ARE SIMILAR IF

¹ . P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002 p 113.

² Ibid., p. 44.

NOT IDENTICAL TO THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LANGUAGE THEORY OF SAPIR He argued that language structures and constructs the world.³ This theory has had much criticism and there is evidence from anthropology that is it just plain wrong.

POST-STRUCTURALISM

The post-structuralists maintains that the consequences of this belief are that we enter a universe of radical uncertainty since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing and hence no certain standard by which to measure anything.⁴

In this regard they are arguing that language does not reflect reality but in fact constructs it reality is only language or textual.

“By contrast post-structuralism is much more fundamentalist in insisting upon the consequences of the view that in effect reality is textual.”⁵

“... signs float free of what they designate, meanings are fluid and subject to constant slippage”⁶

³ *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thinkers*, 1983, p.674-675.

⁴ P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002. p. 61.

⁵ P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002, p.64.

⁶ *ibid*, p.64.

“ post–structuralism is much more fundamental it distrusts the very notion of reason, and the idea of the human being as independent entity, preferring the notion of dissolved or constructed subjects whereby what we think of as individual reality is not an essence at all , merely a “tissue of textual ties”⁷

“In the resulting universe there are no absolutes or fixed points so that the universe we live in is ‘decentred or inherently relativistic.’”⁸

MAYA

“The continually changing impermanent phenomenal world of appearances and forms of illusion or deception which an unenlightened mind takes as the only reality. “⁹

SAMVRITI

“roughly “conventional truth’ the relative truth of the phenomenal world..”¹⁰

ANATMAN

“Nonself nonessentiality The anatman doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism, it says that no self exists in the sense of a permanent eternal integral and independent substance within an individual existent. Thus the ego in Buddhism is no

⁷ ibid, p.65.

⁸ ibid, p, 67.

⁹ The Encyclopedia of Eastern philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986, p.223.

¹⁰ ibid., p. 299.

more than a transitory and changeable –therefore suffering prone empirical personality put together by the five aggregates.”¹¹

“... whereby it is held that all reality is linguistic so that there can be no meaningful talk of a real world which exists without question outside language.”¹²

Postmodernism

“ . . . But what he [Baudrillard] asks if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs? The whole system becomes what he calls a simulacrum¹³¹⁴

MAYA

“The continually changing impermanent phenomenal world of appearances and forms of illusion or deception which an unenlightened mind takes as the only reality.

“¹⁵

‘The grand sweep of this kind of rhetoric has a strong appeal. One might see it as a kind of latter-day Platonism, its devotees enjoying the mystical insight that what is normally taken as a solid and real world is actually just a tissue of dreamlike images.’¹⁶

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹² P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002, p.69.

¹³ ibid, p.. 87.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.87.

¹⁵ The Encyclopedia of Eastern n philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986, p.223.

¹⁶ P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002 p.89.

“Likewise if we accept the ‘loss of the real’ and the collapsing of reality and simulation into a kind of virtual reality...”¹⁷

“... the sign which conceals an absence which conceals the fact that the supposedly ‘real’ which it represents is no longer there, that beyond the play of surfaces there is nothing else.”¹⁸

MAYA

“The continually changing impermanent phenomenal world of appearances and forms of illusion or deception which an unenlightened mind takes as the only reality.”¹⁹

PSYCHOANALYSIS

For LACAN the unconscious is structured like language

“If signifiers relate only to one another then language is detached from external reality and becomes an independent realm, a crucial notion of post-structuralist thinking.”²⁰

Lacan insists then that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious be followed through to its logical conclusion which is “the self’s radical ex-centricity to itself. And he asks ‘who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself since at the heart of my assent to

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.89.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 90..

¹⁹ The Encyclopedia of Eastern philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986, p.223.

²⁰ P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002 p. 111.

my own identity it is still he who wags me'. Hence the self is 'deconstructed shown to be merely a linguistic effect not an entity.'²¹ For Lacan the unconscious is structured by language

Lacan deconstructs the idea of the subject as a stable amalgam of consciousness we the can hardly accept novelistic characters as people but hold them in abeyance as it were and see them as assemblages of signifiers clustering round a proper name.²²

ANATMAN

“Nonself nonessentiality The anatman doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism, it says that no self exists in the sense of a permanent eternal integral and independent substance within an individual existent. Thus the ego in Buddhism is no more than a transitory and changeable –therefore suffering prone empirical personality put together by the five aggregates.”²³

“... for Saussure the signifiers which make up a language refer only to one another and interact with one another but do not figure forth a world.²⁴

“Lacanian concepts- since language names what is not present and substitutes a linguistic sign for it.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid, p.113.

²² ibid, p.113.

²³ Ibid.,p. 12.

²⁴ ibid., p 113.

²⁵ Ibid.,p. 114.

“Likewise all words are purloined letters, we can never open them and view their content unambiguously, we have the signifiers which are the verbal envelope of concepts so to speak but these envelopes cannot be unsealed so that the signifieds will always remain hidden....²⁶

MAYA

“The continually changing impermanent phenomenal world of appearances and forms of illusion or deception which an unenlightened mind takes as the only reality.”²⁷

FEMINISM

“Within feminism there is a strong emphasis on the ‘constructed ness’ of femininity ... these formulations are ways of avoiding essentialism which is the contrary view that there is some natural given essence of feminine that is universal and unchangeable.”²⁸

Ecriture feminine ... issues forth a pure essence of the feminine. Such ‘essentialism is difficult to square with a feminism which emphasizes femininity as a social construct.’²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁷ The Encyclopedia of Eastern philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986, p.223.

²⁸ P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002. p.133.

²⁹ Ibid., P.128.

Antiessentialism in one form has a model which "...Is that of the unconscious and consciousness and Lacanian re-use of these notions ... ever present is the linguistic unconscious a realm of floating signifiers random connections improvisations approximations accidents and slippage – everything that is entailed in the post-structuralist view of language”³⁰

ANATMAN

“Nonself nonessentiality The anatman doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism, it says that no self exists in the sense of a permanent eternal integral and independent substance within an individual existent. Thus the ego in Buddhism is no more than a transitory and changeable –therefore suffering prone empirical personality put together by the five aggregates.”³¹

“ the argument in favor of Lacan and Freud is again that it shows sexual identity to a “cultural construct” gives a detailed series of ‘insider’ accounts of how construction takes place and shows examples of this conditioning being revisited “³²

LESBIAN FEMINISM/QUEER THEORY

Some lesbian feminists argue that ... lesbianism should be regarded as the most complete form of feminism³³

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 129.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³² P, Barry, *Beginning theory*, Manchester university press, 2002. p.132.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 141.

One form of lesbianism had its "... assumptions that lesbianism is a stable category a 'transcendental signifier' which is just there as a fact as a trans-historical constant rather than as a nineteenth century construct. In the 190s a second les essentialist notion of lesbianism emerged within the sphere of what is now known as 'queer theory.'"³⁴

Libertarian lesbianism

"... Sexuality is not seen as something merely 'natural' and unchanging but rather as a construction and subject to change."³⁵

ANATMAN

"Nonself nonessentiality The anatman doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism, it says that no self exists in the sense of a permanent eternal integral and independent substance within an individual existent. Thus the ego in Buddhism is no more than a transitory and changeable –therefore suffering prone empirical personality put together by the five aggregates."³⁶

"Lesbianism ... also rejects the essentialism which had ... been inherited from feminism."³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

³⁵ Ibid., p.142.

³⁶ The Encyclopedia of Eastern philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986.,p. 12.

³⁷ Barry opcit . p. 142.

“How exactly then in theoretical terms does queer theory differ from lesbian feminism. The answer is that like many other current approaches lesbian/gay studies within this ‘queer theory’ ambit have drawn particularly on post-structuralist work of the 1980s. One of the main points of post-structuralism was to deconstruct binary propositions ... hence in lesbian/gay studies the pair heterosexual/homosexual is deconstructed ...”³⁸

“Lesbians say [homosexuality] is not a stable essential identity as that ... ‘identity can become a site of contest and revision.’”³⁹

.” all identities including gender identities are a ‘kind of impersonation and approximation ... a kind of imitation for which there is no original.’”⁴⁰

ANATMAN

“Nonself nonessentiality The anatman doctrine is one of the central teachings of Buddhism, it says that no self exists in the sense of a permanent eternal integral and independent substance within an individual existent. Thus the ego in Buddhism is no more than a transitory and changeable –therefore suffering prone empirical personality put together by the five aggregates.”⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., p.144,

³⁹ ibid.,p. 144.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p, 144-145.

⁴¹ The Encyclopedia of Eastern philosophy and religion, Shambala, 1986 .p. 12.

Thus we can see the elements which are common between Buddhism and anti-essentialism in post-structuralism, postmodernism, feminism and queer theory. We can see how western theorists use these insights not to liberate the people but to enslave and imprison them in ideological structures centered around identity gender etc. These theorists see quite clearly the conventional ideological and illusionary nature of reality but nevertheless use these insights for propaganda reasons to not deconstruct but in fact construct new identities and gender roles for political and power political ends. It is as if they see but don't understand what they see. This is clearly explained by the Buddhist as being the result of an unenlightened mind. They are still imprisoned in the illusion they say they see still taking shadows for reality as in Plato's cave and as a consequence perpetuating the illusion and keeping themselves and others enslaved to the very thing they see through opaque glasses but not really understand just what the shadows really are. All they can do is indulge in control and manipulation a long tradition in western thought and practice.

As we can see the whole edifice of these theories come crashing down if the idea that underpins them is invalidated. All these theories sit upon the one premise that language constructs reality and there is no reality outside language. From these premises all the sophistications of the theorists flow. In effect a small thing indeed from which monstrous growths and tangled jungles have germinated. Kill the seed and the growths wither and die.

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