From a Distancing Discourse to a Discourse of Familiarity: Reflections on Development in Rural Bangladesh for Future Research

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1. Introduction

By the end of eight years of poverty and development work in rural Bangladesh, I went to the United States with wide range of questions and not too many answers. Yet I felt committed to this area of work and wanted to address these questions. As a result, I was ended up at Michigan State University in a course called Roots of Contemporary Anthropological Theory where I hoped to grapple with these questions. Through many of the readings for this class I began to build a framework for a key issue that many of my questions fit into. They centered on how rural people in Bangladesh view development compared with the people running development projects. This includes project activities at the local, state, and international levels. Is there a way to facilitate better understanding over the goals of development as seen by local people compared to those organizing and funding the development activities? Through our class readings, I began to think about addressing these issues in terms of what Abu-Lughod (1991:158) describes as "distancing discourses" verses "discourses of familiarity". By examining ways in which the developers and the villagers have distanced each other, steps can be made to create a discourse[1] on development in which many voices are heard.

One of the areas of development that I was most closely involved in while working in Bangladesh was gender and development project for poorest household in rural Bangladesh. The training materials we used to train village women on gender and development training were published in Bangladesh, but developed by foreign expatriate contained very basic knowledge on gender related issues i.e. difference between

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sex and gender, gender relation, gender division of labor etc. Development workers like me knew the materials well, as we had used the same materials over last decade in Bangladesh. The answers seemed so simple and reasonable, and I wanted to do my part by teaching them to someone who needed that knowledge. Yet somewhere deep into the training program of a rural village, I realized that these lessons did not seem to be meaningful to the village women in the ways I expected them to be. It seemed at times that many were tolerating the training programs on gender and development, because they received credit facilities for attending this training and for forming village groups. After all, this is what they seemed to see as the greatest needs as well as patterns of how development work was done in the past. Was it possible for me to drive up in a car twice a month and convince them that they could be well of through using this skill and knowledge of the training in income generating activities in the world around them? Or perhaps I should say through local upper class and western generalized knowledge of the world around them.

Every day I spent in village, the gap stood before me that separated my discourse from theirs. Abu-Lughod writes on this in her piece "Writing Against Culture." She says:

> We must be prepared, despite efforts directed at the West, to be confronted with problems posed when even our most enlightened humanistic endeavors reach those in other contexts where the conventions may not be recognized and the power issues are read differently. [1991:159]

My enlightened knowledge of the road to employment for Third World women, which the West[2] had endowed me with, was certainly not viewed as such by the poor villagers in Bangladesh I worked in. They had ideas about who we were, and we had ideas about who they were. Yet these ideas were rarely talked about between us. Even though I had brought different example from different South Asian countries to be side by side with them, a border stood between us. In *The Realm of the Diamond Queen,* Tsing explains that borders have an imagined other side. It is by looking at border crossings that intersections of power and difference can be found (Tsing 1993). Development work is indeed a border crossing, where people interact with those on the other side

using an imagined picture of who the "other" is. By examining this border crossing, issues of power and difference can come to light. This is the first step in moving toward a discourse of familiarity in which many voices can contribute to how development work is approached.

2. Creation of the "Self" and the "Other"

Foucault's discussion of power and knowledge lays the groundwork for understanding the border that exists between the developer and the developee. Foucault says in his interview that power[3] is productive and (Power) produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth, what he tried to explain in the *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 2001). Also in "Truth and Power" he explains, "'Truth' is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it" (Foucault 2001:530). The truth that I had been taught about women's employment, development and Purdah[4] was indeed a construction, as Foucault suggests, of discourse and institutions of power that produced it. I was taught and later being advised by my western counterparts that it was through relating certain meaning and knowledge to Third World peoples that they could be well off. But Foucault says that history is about relations of power rather than meaning (Foucault 2001). It is not just a matter of communicating the knowledge of the powerful to those who are less powerful. One must recognize the power dynamics in this equation. Knowledge about the village women by the developers and policy makers speaks more to the power relations between the two than anything else.

Edward Said discusses this issue in his book *Orientalism*. According to his expiations, Orientalism is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1979:3). It is more about power over the Orient than a discourse about it (Said 1979). The Orient is a construction made by the West about imagined people on the other side of the border. In essence, it tells more about the West itself than the people it is attempting to describe. The same is true of the knowledge created by developers about people in developing countries. The objectives and training materials of Western development expatiates and western development agencies tell more about their own perception of women, work and practice of purdah rather than truly describing the actual situation of a women in a Third World Country. The knowledge I was teaching helped me to make

sense out of their world in my own terms. Said calls this *exteriority*. "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (Said 1979:20-21). Exteriority was used in developing training materials for the Third World that helped the West to make sense of those "others" who were not economically as well off as they were.

Orientalism also speaks to the power relationship between the Occident and Orient. Said suggests that it is necessary to recognize one's identity as an affiliation with power before being an individual (Said 1979). In the case of being a development worker representing an international organization, I was seen as such before being thought of as an individual. Said's words ring true to my own experience. My affiliation with the privileged educated upper middle class development professional as a regime of power is a part of my identity that cannot be denied in my attempt to train trade specific skill to village women in Bangladesh. Because of this identity, I carried an assumption that the voice I knew was the authority on knowledge and truth, while other voices remained unheard. In teaching this skill knowledge, I carried with me a regime of power from my class position as well as an imagined identity of poor village women of Bangladesh.

Abu-Lughod addresses the issue of imagined identities on either side of the border in her discussion of what she calls the "self" and "other." She argues that it is necessary to write against the concept of culture in order to break down this border. The culture concept is problematic in that it gives connotations of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness (Abu-Lughod 1993). It contributes to generalizations and representations that fix boundaries between the "self" and "other" (Abu-Lughod 1993). As a result of these distinctions, distancing discourses take place (Abu-Lughod 1991). She also says that generalization is a language of power (Abu-Lughod 1993). Each of these points will be elaborated below.

Abu-Lughod explains that one should be cautious of generalizations for two main reasons. First, it is a language of power (Abu-Lughod 1993:8). This ties in with what Foucault and Said talk about. Generalizations drown out the many voices to let only the one

dominating voice be heard. That voice becomes the authority on the lives of many. For example, generalizations about women's low participation in labor market have been made for all of the Muslim countries together. They are published in books by global development and research organizations and have been a greater impact on the employment polices of the Muslim countries everywhere. World identifies Muslim women's social position accordingly. When a Muslim women is using veil she has been identified as oppressed by her culture, but same question do not raises when a Christian none in a western society covers her head and the whole body in order to protect her religion. As Said says, this speaks to the power dynamics between the one creating knowledge and the one about whom it is created. Abu-Lughod suggests that writing in generalizations implies a construction of the "other" as different and inferior (Abu-Lughod 1993). Difference between the "self" and "other" is always hierarchical (Abu-Lughod 1993).

As a language of power, generalization makes people look very much the same, as well as very different from the person generalizing about them. It creates a homogenous image of people on the other side of the border. Issues regarding women's work, for example, are assumed to be essentially the same for the entire Muslim world. All that needs to be done then is to translate this knowledge into local languages. As a part of generalization too, a sense of timelessness is created. Change and strategy cannot be accounted for without attention to the particulars of life (Abu-Lughod 1991). Time indicates change, which indicates heterogeneity and diversity. This is truer to the way the world is than a generalized and static image of a group of people.

Abu-Lughod (1991) points out how the generalized knowledge that is produced by anthropologists, scholars, governments, journalists, and development experts creates a distancing discourse. There is no sense of familiarity in this discourse that would lead one to believe that s/he had anything in common with someone who is "other." Again it orientalizes, closing off discourse to the people who are being spoken about. Each side speaks amongst itself and perhaps *at* each other, but not *with* one another. The discourses that take place in development often contribute to this distancing discourse. Those with power generalize knowledge about Third World peoples and often tell them the answers, rather than creating a discourse to talk with them about development issues.

In *Writing Women's Worlds,* Abu-Lughod tells a story that illustrates the concepts of generalization and distancing discourses, which contribute to the creation of the "self" and "other." While living with a Bedouin family in Egypt, they all had the opportunity to visit the home of a certain Egyptian woman. This woman had a modern, luxurious home and had formerly been an airline stewardess. She made it a point to explain to Abu-Lughod that she had modern, Western friends and affiliations. Abu-Lughod remarks at how she took offense that this woman would assume that they had some sort of common bond and both felt a sense of superiority over the Bedouins (Abu-Lughod 1993). The Egyptian woman also implied to Abu-Lughod that she knew those Bedouin women were promiscuous even though they wore veils. She based this judgment on what she knew of Saudi Arabian women, but implied that it was also true of the Bedouin women that Abu-Lughod knew (Abu-Lughod 1993).

The generalizations that this Egyptian woman makes about the West and the Bedouins are both problematic to Abu-Lughod. The woman homogenizes what it means to be a Westerner as well as being a veiled woman. She tries to have an identity with the West, while making the Bedouins "other." Also in choosing to discuss such issues only with a person she thought she shared an identity with, she excluded the "other" from being able to explain why they would wear veils. In doing so, she was participating in a distancing discourse that contributed to an imaged generalization of what being Bedouin implies. She also misrepresented Abu-Lughod by assuming they were very similar because they both knew things about the West.

Wolf also writes about issues surrounding the creation of the "self" and "other" in her article *Situating Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork* (Wolf 1996). Illustrating on Mohanthy, she explains how "colonial discourse constructs 'other cultures' to separate colonizer and colonized" (Wolf 1996:33). Even as the West is being studied more and more, this is done in isolation to Third World and minority dialogues (Wolf 1996). She also said that many of the feminist works are an attempt to look at the border crossings, where these two worlds interplay[5]. But they are also interested in looking in general at the border crossings of power and difference at the state and local level (Wolf 1996). This carries Said's argument further to talk not just about the West verses the Orient, but any issue of power and difference.

Referred to Tsing, Mohanthy and Ong, Wolf speak about the way in which discourses of power on development create an identity for the "other", the way West identifies 'Third World women' as 'a singular monolithic' and 'powerless marginal passive' subject (Wolf 1996:33). Thus, they are labeled as underdeveloped and inferior in some way because they have not progressed and become civilized. This gives them the identity of "other." The whole notion of development and terms such as "underdeveloped" or "Third World" seem to imply an otherness that is a Western construction of identities of non-western peoples. The voice of non-Western peoples speaking on their own identity and views of development are drowned out by this powerful discourse.

Similarly Abu-Lughod also comments on how the concept of culture has contributed to a false homogenizing of people because of othering from outsiders. Indeed in the area of development, cultures have been assumed to be homogenous, as well as Third World peoples in general. Little attention is given to diversity of behavior and beliefs within a culture and even between cultures.

So far the discussion in this paper has mainly focused on issues of the "self" and "other" pertaining to imagined identities and dynamics of power between the West and other parts of the world. Wolf contributes to this discourse by illustrating how issues of power and difference exist not only on a global level between the West and Third World, but also at a national or local level. While she says "indigenous field workers are 'marginal natives' (Freilich in Altorki, 1988:16) and often feel they are both insider and outsider due to class, cultural, rural/urban backgrounds, or language in order to having spent years in Western universities" (Wolf 1996:16). A creation of the "self" and "other" occur on both sides of the border between upper class educated native policy maker and developer and marginal poor. The rural poor had perceptions about the intentions of the state in these development attempts as well as upper class peoples involvement in these works, and the state had perceptions that as undeveloped rural people, they needed to be developed. For example in Bangladesh on the side of the poor rural women, they perceived the government as trying to improve the economic condition of the female headed households because they need to show that are working for poor, which will ensure their votes in the next election.

Thus, even within nations and "cultures", power relations and constructions of "other" must be examined. Although a lot of discussion on development centers around Western nations who are directing resources to Third World nations, they are not the only players in the game. As also demonstrated in Abu-Lughod's encounter with the Egyptian woman, generalizations within nations contribute to creating "others." In looking at how policy maker, developers and poor villagers view one another in my own research, I must also consider the diversity within each of these groups. If I fail to do so, I am accepting the model of generalizations and the "other" produced from relations of power, which I have been writing against in this paper.

3. Assumptions of the "Other"

The class readings have served more than anything to help me examine my own socio-cultural assumptions as someone who has participated in development circles. Although Bangladeshi poor village women on the receiving end of development projects also make assumptions, I will leave commenting on this domain unexplored, as it is what I will try to understand through my future research. As I have explained in this paper, I cannot speak for someone else. However, it is helpful at this point to discuss some presumptively assumptions made by my western and educated and privileged local colleagues of the "other" in terms of development work.

While the issue on how, despite a revival of interest in issues of knowledge and power that Foucault brings into the discussion, not much has really changed. As Tsing says, all too often, the inspiration has been to offer chic new clothes to a familiar history of increasing 'modern' homogeneity. In this view disciplinary politics and destabilized ironic consciousness advance unchanged around the globe. [Tsing 1993:88]

My own realization is more or less the same. I have noticed that the same issues of power and knowledge seem to be covered with a new paper in the name of equality, diversity, and development. Each of these is originally a Western idea that is forced on people in an assertive way, as it is the authentic voice that shapes public policy and directs global resources. Like my earlier comments on generalized knowledge created and given authority by powerful global

development organizations i.e. The World Bank, European Commission, World food Organization etc., these ideas have contributed to a generalized method of development in the Third World.

Knauft makes an argument in his piece "Stories, Histories, and Theories" that Marx set a framework out of which anthropology has operated, especially from the 1970's onward. This framework is based on "the explicit critique of inequality across a full range of cultural, sociohistorical, and material dimensions" (Knauft 1996:16). Here I have no plan to discuss about the influence that Marx may or may not have had in this framework. The point of emphasis here is that this critique of inequality seems to have dominated anthropological discourses as well as other Western discourses on development as well as other international issues. When documents such as the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" homogenize people globally under the same understanding of "equality," is this really any different from other dominant discourses of power that have generalized and fade out other voices? Does it barely contribute to the "self" and "other" gap that has been established by dominating Western discourse all along? It seems to say that there are people on the right side who agree with us, and there are those "others" who do not. It appears to be the same problem dressed up in new clothing labeled equality.

Sally Engle Merry in her writing contests this very idea, saying that human rights is not a Western idea. She claims that anyone can enter the global arena and contribute to the global discourse on human rights (Merry 1997:30). She uses the example of a tribunal formed in Hawaii that incorporated Kanaka Maoli law, international law, the US Constitution, the law of peoples as nations, and the inherent law of humanity (Merry 1997:42). She says:

Arguments between relativist and universalist perspectives on human rights depends on outdated notions of holistic and discrete cultures...rather than on the processes by which cultures are continually reformulated through local practices. [Merry 1997:45]

What Merry failed to take into account are the power relations of this discourse on human rights. As Said indicated, this can take place at various levels. On the global scale, one still needs to have a certain

education and speak a certain language in order to contribute to this discourse. In essence, one must join the side of the regime in power to a certain extend to be able to have any influence in this realm. Also, relations of power exist on the local levels as well. It should not be assumed that just because there is an indigenous voice on the Hawaiian tribunal that that voice speaks for all Hawaiians. A serious generalization has been made by Merry in assuming this. In attempting to talk about diversity, she has recloaked a regime of power that is producing universalized generalizations on the "self" and "other."

Finally, there is one more area of critique on the presumption that I have noticed thus far in my own experiences in development work. Echoes of Spencer and Morgan still resonate in the very notion of development itself. They endorsed the idea of social evolution—that people progressed from one level of "development" to the next according to a similar pattern. Morgan writes, "Mankind commenced their career at the bottom of the scale and worked their way up from savagery to civilization through the slow accumulation of experimental knowledge" (2001:43). Is this idea really so different than the assumptions of my western and bureaucrat colleagues that people will become developed as they gain more knowledge? Nothing of the relationship of power to knowledge is considered in this understanding. Spencer (2001) writes about how individual and social organisms move from homogeneous to heterogeneous as they evolve. This seems to parallel the homogeneity with which the West treats the Third World. The underdeveloped are assumed less knowledgeable and more homogeneous than those who have produced and legitimized knowledge on a global level.

Examining notions such as equality, diversity, and development as they are used in discourse about the "other" is an important part of the research I aim to do. It is necessary to explore the assumptions made by the people organizing and funding development projects about the people they are meant to be helping. In the future, I plan to continue to ask how this is contributing to a distancing discourse of "self" and "other," as well as speaking to relations of power and the production of knowledge. I have begun to think about these issues from my own viewpoint and experience. As I proceed to do specific research in rural Bangladesh which country speaks only Bengali, I hope to look at development policy and project and village women with the same sorts of critiques.

4. Towards a Discourse of Familiarity

It was Geertz (2001:341) who said, "The aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse". This discourse should include the voices of other people in the consultable record of what people have said (Geertz 2001). This remains an impartial goal of the discipline. It seems that if there is going to be a true discourse at all, it requires multiple voices speaking with one another. But in order for discourses to be *between* people and not just *about* people, it is necessary to work towards breaking down the border erected between the "self" and "other" and move towards a discourse of familiarity.

During Foucault's period, he was concerned with detotalizing knowledge. By doing so, he sought to discover "the multiplicity of discourses in a field of knowledge" (Best et al. 1991:43). This looked not to generalize and unify, but rather to diversify. Foucault was working under the assumption that regimes of power produce knowledge and truth, as has been discussed above. Yet here he is also suggesting that other voices may be uncovered under these dominant discourses. Abu-Lughod speaks more specifically to this issue.

In Abu-Lughod's piece "Writing Against Culture," she lays out suggestions for how anthropology can be done addressing the problems of generalizations and power that come with the culture concept. One suggestion she makes is that the focus on discourse is a positive development in anthropology. She writes, "It allows for the possibility of recognizing within a social group the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects" (Abu-Lughod 1991:148). In her book *Writing Women's Worlds*, she demonstrates how these multiple voices operate in a social group through the stories she has compiled on her host Bedouin family. She divides the book into generalized anthropological categories, such as polygyny and patrilateral parallel-cousin marriage. Yet it is evident through reading the stories, that all that is being said does not fit neatly into a consensus on these categories. Various views are shared on marriage coming from men, women, young, old, family, non-family, etc... Even within these smaller categories, there is variation (Abu-Lughod 1993). By allowing these multiple voices to be heard, Abu-Lughod is both recognizing the multiple voices in the social group she lived with, as well as contributing to an anthropological discourse that demonstrates

the familiarity that the "self" has with the "other." This is shown through the heterogeneity of life and multiplicity of voices speaking on particular matters of everyday life.

Of course, I do not know if any Bedouin have read her book or are talking about the issues she raises because of her work. But at least in the West these voices can be considered in the discourse on anthropology and development.

This, however, is only the first of many steps toward a discourse of familiarity. If the only voice that dominated people have is through power regimes writing about them, this is just Orientalism again in new clothing. If however, these writings can truly contribute to breaking down borders erected between the "self" and "other," then they are truly working towards a discourse of familiarity. This is accomplished by addressing issues of power that have produced knowledge about the "other" and recognizing voices that are drowned out by this dominant voice.

Through my own examination of distancing discourses on development in rural Bangladesh, I aim to familiarize these people in a Western dominating development circle, but also contribute to the discourses that go on in development. In addressing power and knowledge, perhaps the policy makers and development agencies will begin to identify the voices of poor village women in particular on development and employment issues. Perhaps the current training manuals on income generative activities, which are produced by Bangladeshi experts and prescribed by global development agencies can be throw aside to really listen to what local people are thinking about their own good rather than just telling them in order to improve their economic condition what they should do. And perhaps the border that has been built between development agencies, policy maker and the villagers can begin to fade away as the "other" becomes more familiar through truly recognizing the multiplicity of voices that are speaking.

Notes

1.	See Abu-lughod (1991) Aihwa Ong (1988) Chandra Mohanty (1991) Foucault (2001) Fairclough (1989) Gasper D & Apthorpe, R (1996) Said (1979) and Tsing (1993) Wolf (1996).

2.	I did my MA in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. IDS is well known in Europe particularly for their Bangladesh work.

3.	See Foucault (2001), Luke (1974), Rowlands (1995).

4.	Purdah is a cultural practice of women's seclusion from public place. Literal meaning of purdah is veil. According to development literatures purdah is the barrier, which cultural practice in Bangladesh is basically preventing women to join in the labor market.

5.	Chandra Mohanty (1991) Aihwa Ong (1988) and Tsing (1993) cited in Wolf (1996)

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