

CULTURAL STUDIES: THE DOMAINS AND THEORETICAL METHODOLOGIES OF THE DISCIPLINE

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The crossing of disciplinary boundaries by the new humanities and the “humanities-to-come” is lumped as “cultural studies” in a very confused way. The term, cultural studies, was coined by Richard Hoggart in 1964; and the movement was inaugurated by Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* (1958) and by *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), and it became institutionalized in the influential Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS], founded by Hoggart in 1964. It is evident that much of what falls under cultural studies could easily be classified under various other labels such as marxism, structuralism, new historicism, feminism and postcolonialism. Since the term has become popularized, I would not focus on why it is named so. Instead, the concern of this paper is to provide a deep theoretical understanding of cultural studies. Cultural studies analyzes the social, religious, cultural, discourses and institutions, and their role in the society. It basically aims to study the functioning of the social, economic, and political forces and power-structure that produce all forms of cultural phenomena and give them social “meanings” and significance.

A conspicuous activity in cultural studies is the analysis and interpretation of objects and social practices outside the realm of literature and other arts. As well as broadening the conventional definition of literature, cultural studies tends to ground the study of literature in a larger framework which can include the economic institutions of literary production, the ideological context of prevailing beliefs, and broad political issues of class, race and gender. Hence cultural analysis tends to stress what is specific or unique – in terms of time, place and ideology – to a given cultural and literary moments.

Before providing going into the details of cultural studies, it is necessary to know the meaning of “culture”. Perhaps the most conventional definition of the word culture refers to the beliefs, rituals, and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation (Habib 2008: 172). More generally the word has been used to refer what is produced by human being as opposed to ‘nature’. However, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has challenged this sharp distinction between culture and nature. In his *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold defined culture as “the best that has been thought and said” in the world. In order to give a comprehensive account of cultural studies, I shall focus on the concern of cultural studies in various countries; literary theory leading to cultural studies; cultural turn and cultural criticism; major theorist in cultural studies like Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze; cultural theory, nativism and postcolonialism; the role of translation in cultural theory and cultural encounter; the concept of language and culture in structuralism and poststructuralism; reconceptualizing representation and identity in terms of transculturalism and transnationalism through the intersection of feminism and cultural sociology; crucial problems in cultural studies; and interrogation of cultural studies.

A Survey of Cultural Studies in Various Countries

The British version of cultural studies, developed under the influence of Hoggart, Thompson, Williams, Stuart Hall and others, included overtly political, “left wing” views, and criticism of “popular culture” as “capitalist” mass culture. It absorbed some of the ideas of the Frankfurt School critique of the ‘cultural industry’ (i.e. mass culture). It has its root in the new historicism. In contrast, the American version of cultural studies concerned itself more with understanding the subjective and appropriative side of audience reaction to, and use of mass culture. In Canada cultural studies has focused on issue of technology and society. In Australia, there has sometimes been special emphasis on cultural policy. And in South Africa, human rights and Third World issues are among the topic treated. The focus of cultural studies in India is basically limited to caste-system, social rituals, traditions and the like.

Literary Theory Leading to Cultural Theory

Indeed, there is a literary tradition from Arnold and Irving Babbit through TS Eliot and FR Leavis to John Cary which sees literature and arts as repository of culture, of aesthetic, moral and spiritual values which are threatened by the continued advance of a mechanistic and materialistic civilization.

Cultural studies evolves out of critical social theory, which comes under the rubric of “sociology of literature” as early as 1952 in his book *The Common Pursuit*, FR Leavis noted that sociology of literature was “a field that has been much attention in the recent years” (quoted in Habib 2008: 173). Earlier model in Frankfurt School and British cultural studies made the relationship between culture and society the centre of their analysis to contextualize the production, distribution and consumption of culture and to critically analyze the cultural text.

The field of cultural studies is also evolved out by structuralism’s emphasis on examining a text as a set of semiotic codes operating within wider complex of social codes.

Reader-response criticism and Dialogic criticism are also forerunner of cultural studies, since in both the meaning is product of manifold determinant that are specific to a class, social group and speech community.

It has been more heavily influenced by Marxist thought in exploring the relationship between cultural form (the superstructure) and that of political economy (the base). Gramsci modified classical Marxism in seeing culture as a key instrument of political and social control. Thus the key rubric for Gramsci and for cultural studies is that of “culturalhegemony”.

However, in his chapter *Marxism and Culture*, Williams acknowledges that a Marxist account for the complex connection between the economic base and the superstructure (of philosophy, politics, art, religion, etc.). In his *Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies*, Hall recounts that cultural studies had a fraught relationship with Marxism.

Cultural Turn

The cultural turn is neither simply affirmation nor refusal, neither commercial exploitation nor genuine revolt. It is neither simply resistance against some external order nor straight forward conformity with the parent culture.

Structuralism sees culture as “like a language”. Structuralism extends its reach from “words” to the language of cultural sign in general. Thus human relations material objects and

images are all analyzed through the structure of signs. In Levi-Strauss, we find description of kinship system as “like a language” (Barker 2006: 16).

The fetishism of the popular can be read as postmodern turn in cultural studies. One version involves an appropriation of the collapse of high to low culture, of depth on to surface, and audience into the text; in its most extreme version, the postmodern turn in cultural studies excludes the very possibility of progressive or critical encoding or decoding of cultural text, or significant cultural opposition and resistance.

Another significant turn in cultural criticism signifies “the death of hermeneutics” that is, there is nothing behind the surface of text, no depth or multiplicity of meaning for cultural inquiry to discover and explicate. Thus postmodern cultural critics, say, Baudrillard and McLuhan, privilege the medium over message, style over substance and form over content. Certain Baudrillardian and extreme version of cultural studies resists eliticism, excessive pessimism and political deficits within some version of postmodern theory.

Major Theorist in Cultural Studies

Roland Barthes: Barthes uses Saussure’s linguistics model to analyze French popular culture. For this, he effectively extended structural analysis and semiology (the study of signs) to broad cultural phenomena; and this can be seen in his one of the founding essays of cultural studies, *Myth Today* from *Mythologies*. He takes Saussure’s schema of signifier / signified = sign, and adds to it a second level of signification. In *Elements of Semiology*, he talks of two systems of signification: denotation (primary) and connotation (secondary), the latter involves the meaning that are generated by connecting signifier to wider cultural concerns. Here the meaning involves the association of signs with other cultural codes and meaning. He claims that it is at the level of secondary signification or connotation that myth is produced and consumed. “Myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system” (Barthes 1972: 113). To understand this aspect he gives an example of a Black soldier saluting a French flag.

Derrida: There is much that is valuable within cultural studies is derived from post-structuralism. Cultural studies has taken from Derrida the key notions of writing, intertextuality, undecidability, deconstruction, “difference”, trace and supplement. These concepts stress the instability of meaning, its deferral through the interplay of texts, writing and traces. Consequently, categories do not have essential universal meaning but are social construction of language. This is the core of the anti-essentialism prevalent in cultural studies. That is, words have no universal meanings and do not refer to objects that possess universal qualities. For example, since words do not refer to essence, identity is not a fix universal “thing” but a description in language (Barker 2006: 18).

Jean Francois Lyotard: Derrida’s assertion of the instability of meaning and Foucault awareness of the historically contingent character of truth is echoed in Lyotard’s postmodern “incredulity towards meta-narrative”. Lyotard rejects the idea of grand-narratives or stories that can give us certain knowledge of the direction, meaning and moral path of human development.

Lyotard shares with Foucault the idea that knowledge is not metaphysical, transcendental or universal but specific to particular time and space. For them knowledge is

- a. Specific to language game; and
- b. Local, plural and diverse.

In Lyotard’s interpretation this implies the “incommensurability” or untranslatability of language and culture.

Gilles Deleuze: In a context of increasing globalization, the field of cultural studies faces several issues that echo concerns expressed in widespread social, economic and political debates. Is it the job of cultural studies to counter the forces of global cultural homogenization and engage in an identity politics that reinforces local specificities? Should cultural studies function primarily as a force of hybridization, somehow blurring the local distinctions without ever allowing the emergence of a single stable global order?

The work of Deleuze and Guattari has drawn increasing attention in cultural analysis and globalization. In cultural studies of a continental European orientation, Deleuze and Guattari's influence has been marked, especially in the discussion of what they call "minor literature," and in the growing literature of globalization several of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts have made their appearance. Of the many concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari, "nomadism" is one that has had an especial appeal to scholars in cultural studies and that has increasingly infiltrated discussions of globalization. The concept of "nomadism" helps us chart the course of cultural studies in global era, but only if the concept is engaged in detailed and thorough manner. But, what has nomadism to do with globalization? The goal of a "society of control", Deleuze and Guattari imply, is a global social order that transcends cultural division, one in which very production of people – their bodies, their way of living, their modes of subjectivity – undergoes a constant and thorough monitoring and control. But on their discussion of capitalism they most fully engaged the interrelationship between nomadism and globalization.

In their widespread idea of the "Empire as a machine" what they offer could be described not as an alternative to Said's paradigm, but a related though different way of thinking about some of the operation of colonialism, particularly not just as a form of fantasy but also a form of ambivalent desire.

Their social theory of desire which cuts through problematic psychic-social opposition of orthodox analysis is of great importance. Central to Freud's repression of his own Oedipal insight would be the way in which he failed to see the intimate connection between the production of desire and social production in its widest sense a schism that has remained a defining feature of most psychoanalysis ever since.

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of territorialization is also important in the context of colonialism and involves three further implications. The first serves as a reminder that colonization above all involves the physical appropriation of land, its capture for the civilization of another culture. It thus foregrounds the fact that cultural colonization was not simply a discursive operation but a seizure of cultural space. The second implication can be viewed in terms of relation between the land and the state. And in its third modes it highlights that characteristic of colonialism so effectively emphasized by Fanon, *contra* Gandhi: violence.

Cultural Studies: Nativism and Postcolonialism

Nativism is a form of imaginative identification with the symbols and discourses of the nation-state. Nativism is a form of identification with, representation of shared experiences and history.

Postcolonial theory explores the issue of race, nation, ethnicity, subjectivity, power, subalterns, hybridity and creolization (Barker 2006: 282). Under the rubric of these disciplines literature and literary theory often becomes vehicles for social commentary. Ashcroft et al. (1989) in *The Empire Writes Back* highlights two important models for postcolonial literature:

- a. The national model; and
- b. The black writing model

The former centers on the relationship between a nation and its former colonizers, and the latter on the work African Diaspora of the Black Atlantic.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* seeks to show that European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

Cultural Theory: Translation and Cultural Encounter

Translation can be defined as a dynamic term of cultural encounter. However, the category of translation unfolds its potential to stimulate cultural studies only if it reaches beyond the qualities traditionally ascribed to translation, such as equivalence and faithfulness to the original; and it is here, translation becomes fundamental category of analysis that is able to meet the cultural challenges and those of cultural studies when these are faced with contentious field of cultural encounter in an emerging global society. Some of the questions opened up by the encounter between the cultures in translations are following. What happens when disparate “national stories” are placed into interaction in cases of forced population transfer due to war and economic migration? How do relationships between culture of births and exile affect core definition of “native”? How do these new, hybrid forms of cultural interaction “translate” and domesticate particular “political” practices (Longinović 2002: 10). Other factors for cultural encounter are television, radio, media, internet, international business, shopping in supermarket, etc.

Language and Culture: From structuralism to Poststructuralism

From the 1960s, cultural analysis became increasingly interested in the process of meaning making. Stuart Hall was very interested in theorizing culture in terms of “language” or “discourse”. The interest in language as a cultural phenomenon encounters significant changes in the philosophy of language. While the Enlightenment had been interested primarily in the question of how individuals “know” their world, but a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century began to change their focus of inquiry; and began to ask how is knowledge possible? The answer provided was to treat language as the primary mediation between an individual and the real world. That is, we can know nothing except the mediation of language.

Initially many of these studies treated language as a cohesive and, ordered and operative system of meaning making. “Semiology” attempts to explain how all meaning-making is constituted through “signs” and “sign system”. Saussure argues for a particular structures which supports a given sign system are common to all meaning making. Levi-Strauss argues that culture is informed by similar meaning-making processes and patterns. Barthes applies the notion of “myths” to explain the domination of particular meaning-making patterns in contemporary French culture.

These structuralist approaches of meaning-making are questioned by more recent French language theorist, and have asked question about the imprecise nature of language and meaning making. This emphasis on the incompleteness of meaning-making, history and culture is central to the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Gauntari. Poststructuralism, therefore provides a theoretical basis for broader questioning of meaning-making in contemporary culture.

Reconceptualizing Representation and Identity

Issues of representation and the construction of identity can be seen as organizing principles for exploring intersecting debates in the area of feminism, sociology and cultural studies. The interdisciplinary nexus of cultural studies has always been characterized by a “desire

to transgress the established boundaries”, cultural studies has increasingly become a vehicle for the transcultural and transnational conceptualizations and framing of debates on representation and identity.

Cultural studies has been the interdisciplinary matrix where contested debates on representation and identity, the global (international) and the local (national), the hegemonic “centre” (Britain, America) and the “margins” (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) have occupied centre stage. As McKenzie Wark observes:

The growth of cultural studies, seen from the point of the view of the effects on the development of new media technologies, is part of phenomenal increase in the volume and velocity of transborder cultural flow that are increasingly marking all of us into “cruising grammarians”, to borrow the phrase from Morris. (2007: 159)

The response of those involved in cultural studies at the margins is, “the appropriation of the specifying category of the ‘post-colonial’ by Australian, Canadian and New Zealand practitioners of cultural studies”. They claim that this can be seen as “the strategic invocation of an alternative frame of meaning of ‘international’, one that counters hegemonic ‘world’ order led by American and British cultural studies” (Stratton 1996: 366).

The intersection of transculturalism and transnationalism with discourse on the postcolonial has provided fertile territory for reconceptualizing debates on subjectivity and identity. The relationship between postcolonialism, transculturalism and transnationalism has both epistemological and historical dimension. The concept of postcolonial provides a conceptual repertoire to facilitate an understanding of a process of global transformation or transculturation. The concept of postcolonial is by its very nature “universalizing”, because of its high level of abstraction, it need not get trapped by uniformity in its application.

The concept of the postcolonial is not about describing a particular state of historical or contemporary relations as they apply to one society rather than another. It is about “rereading” and rethinking “colonization” as part of “an essentially trans-national and transcultural ‘global’ process”. It is about the deconstruction of binary structures within which relationships are framed and represented. Postcolonial analysis “produces a decentred, diasporic or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives”(Hall 1996: 247).The concept of the “diasporic” is central here in understanding the shift in relations. The notion of the diasporic supplements and displaces the centre / periphery binary so fundamental in the met narratives around, colonizers and reorganizes and reshapes global relationships.

The postcolonial is thus sensitive to a number of dimensions including the “question of hybridity . . . the complexities of diasporic identification which interrupt any ‘return’ to ethnically closed and ‘centred’ original histories”. When colonization is thus situated within the revised postcolonial narrative framework, and “understood in its global and transcultural context”, colonization can be seen to have made “ethnic absolutism an increasingly untenable cultural strategy” (Hall 1996: 250).

The intersection of feminism and cultural studies has become increasingly significant for the transnational and transcultural conceptualization of debates around representation and identity. One such feminist postcolonial intellectual is Trinh T. Minh-ha. Trinh raises concerns about the framing and language of postcolonial theory in terms of using the “master’s tool to dismantle his house”, in addition, Trinh “refuses to be “ghettoized” through the separate and / or combined essentialism of gender, race or ethnicity”. Trinh raises the question “how can feminist discourse represent the categories of “woman” and “race” at the same time?”(Suleri 1995: 275).

Gayatri Spivak combines feminist poststructuralist and postcolonial discourses in her work. Her question of “who is permitted to speak on behalf of whom?” can often become an issue of “appropriation”. She raises questions concerning “whether or not the possibility exists for any recovery of a subaltern voice that is not a kind of essential fiction”. Spivak claims that “there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak”, and “the subject as female cannot be heard or read” (Spivak 1995: 27).

Crucial Problems in Cultural Studies

Over the past thirty years or so the theoretical and institutional field of cultural studies has developed a stage where similar problems, issues and debates have emerged from within the literature. In particular the following issues have recurrently arisen in relation to the question of how to carry out cultural investigations, namely:

- a. The relationship between language and material;
- b. The textual character of culture;
- c. The location of culture;
- d. The problem of cultural change;
- e. The limits of rationality;
- f. The question of body, biology and culture; and
- g. The problem of truth in cultural analysis.

Interrogating Cultural Studies

Cultural studies has always received criticism, invective, vituperation; often angry, often confused and confusing (mis)representation of what it is, what it does and why it goes about things the ways it does. Those who attack cultural studies often present some version of following arguments:

One idea has always been that its proliferation reduces its ability to be cutting edge, radical or transformative. But what edges need to be cut now anyway? And is it, indeed, as valuable, urgent, radical and transformative as it sometimes claims; or is this its delusion, its ideology? Is the “proper” cultural studies world view nothing more than an expression of its resentment? What is the relation between its regulative fictions and its academic-political potential? Is its growing stability and proliferation helpful or deleterious to its ethico-political aims and intentions? Does a more stabilized cultural studies amount to a neutralization of its potential or a strengthening? Does its “success” both rely on and produces what it has always been accused of: namely, its “Mickey Mouse” status, its indiscriminate studying of anything; a strategic chosen or perpetuated conveniently and / or cynically perhaps *just because* it is popular, *and just to keep it popular* (because disciplines need students)? and so on and so forth. They believe that in some incarnations, the practice, object and orientation of cultural studies have become the simple celebration of popular culture, subculture, cyberculture, technology, obscurantism, etc., matched by a *depoliticizing* of its agenda; as if, while the name remains the same, its initial, formative, “authentic” or authenticating identity or project has been evacuated, denuded, obscured or more and more erased.

In short, I have seen the concept and meaning of cultural studies and how it views literature. I have made a brief survey of cultural studies in Britain, America, Canada, South Africa, and India; and then I have passed on social critical theory, reader-response criticism, dialogic criticism and Marxism as precursors of cultural studies. After having a precise glance over the role of structuralism, fetishism of popular culture and death of hermeneutics in cultural

turn, I have moved on four major critics (Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze) contribution to cultural studies. I have also dealt the concept of nativism, Postcolonialism and cultural encounter by translation and migration of population. I have also explored the issues of culture and language, central problems in cultural studies and reconceptualizing representation and identity in the context of transculturalism and transnationalism. And finally I have explored the ground on which critics attack on cultural studies.

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