

Cultural Studies: An Interdisciplinary Field of Study

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Abstract

The term 'culture' is derived from the Latin word 'cultura' or 'colere', which means germination. It encompasses explicit and implicit knowledge, experience, language, behaviour, rituals, beliefs, and everyday life practices mutually constituted, acquired and transmitted within society. Raymond Williams rightly defines culture as "a whole way of life" (Williams xvii). Culture in cultural studies is considered the "mode of generating meaning and ideas" (Nayar 4). As an academic discipline, it gained momentum during the 1960s, taking contemporary culture and its social dynamics as its concern. It is an interdisciplinary field of study drawing on several disciplines like Marxism, Feminism, sociology, anthropology, political science and history to analyze the complexities of culture and its relationship with power dynamics within society. It also takes theoretical insights from post-structuralism, post-colonialism, social theory and semiotics. Nayar calls cultural studies "a discipline between disciplines" (4), which includes critical approaches from several disciplines to investigate the cultural practices aiming to understand how meaning is constituted, received and regulated within a society. It also combines subfields like media studies, popular culture, gender studies and others to trace the power structure and the means of production that affect everyday life. The present study is an attempt to explore cultural studies as an academic and interdisciplinary field of study.

Keywords

Culture, Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, Marxism, Feminism, Anthropology, Post-Structuralism, Post-Colonialism, Media Studies, Gender Studies etc.

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Cultural studies is an inclusive approach to analyzing the facets of culture and its means of production. The term was popularized by Stuart Hall and Richard Hoggart during the 1960s. Before the emergence of cultural studies, culture was considered a fixed or stable entity associated with high culture. It was taken as the product of the elite class. It merely comprised everyday cultural practices and customs of a specific society, ignoring the practices of ordinary people. Cultural studies challenged this traditional way of understanding the meaning of culture, redefining culture as a dynamic process. The publications of Richard Hoggart's *The Use of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams' *The Culture and Society* (1958) were significant in the early development of cultural studies. The approach was Marxist as it focused on the relationship between cultural practices and power structures within society. The movement heated up when another milestone, the formation of BCCCS (Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) in England in 1964, took place. It played a pivotal role in establishing cultural studies as an academic discipline. This shift was a groundbreaking phase for the study as it gave space to all other unvoiced or marginalized sections and put them at the forefront. The pioneering scholar, Roland Barthes, a French theorist, philosopher and semiotician, had a lasting impact on cultural studies. His essay collection *Mythologies* (1957) is considered a fundamental text of contemporary cultural studies. He enforces popular culture to understand the relationship between language and cultural production. His notion is characterized by his application of semiology to popular culture, believing it to be a prime source of meaning within society. Pramod K. Nayar, in his *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, rightly remarks that popular culture is the "culture of the masses" (5). It encompasses the culture of the everyday lives of ordinary people and examines the nuances of cultural practice and changing meaning and values over a period of time.

Cultural studies argues that meanings are not fixed or constant; rather, they vary with the passage of time and changes, hence they are a dynamic entity. Therefore, cultural studies have different areas of negotiation. It emphasizes how power relations within a society affect cultural artifacts such as food, habits, sports, cinema, events, fashion, and other social interactions. The power that significantly affects the artifacts is the economic power, as it plays an important role in shaping ideologies. Those who possess economic power can maintain their culture, status and monetary benefits, hence influence cultural power. People who are economically marginalized are also culturally marginalized, as the low culture is the culture of the masses, which has been ignored, and therefore, their culture does not find any space, as the phenomenon points out. The key subjects such as multiculturalism, cultural dissent, identity crisis, class, race, gender, social interaction, diasporic conflicts, women's role and representation, mass media, etc. are also integrated into cultural studies.

Historically, Cultural studies have a deep-rooted relationship to Marxism as both rely on the role of ideologies in influencing the power system within society. Marxism is based on economic determinism. It advocates the ‘base-superstructure model’, for which it says that the society has two broad divisions: one is the elite class or rich capitalist class, and the second is the labour class. It believes that the former creates false ideology, forming the cultural superstructure of the labour class. Unknowingly, the latter class follows the false consciousness created by the capitalist class. Hence, cultural studies critiques old Marxism for being overly focused on economic determinism, and it gives importance to popular culture, everyday life and subcultures. It says that culture is not merely the reflection of economic forces but also a space of resistance, negotiation and transformation. It gives importance to the everyday practice of life, especially ordinary life, whereas Marxists’ approach was to focus merely on the economic aspect of society and thus understood responsible for the class-based society due to this unequal distribution of the economy.

Later, the Marxist approach became modest with the emergence of the New Left Movement in the 1960s. It is a critique of orthodox Marxism which focuses on the economic aspect of society. It was the new form of Marxism that gave enough space to all other movements that could not get public visibility. The chief advocates were Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Herbert Marcuse (Father of the New Left Movement), and Stuart Hall, etc. The movement played a pivotal role in showing the seeds of cultural studies.

Stuart Hall and the BCCCS developed the framework called the circuit of culture to analyze how cultural texts, meanings and practices are created and circulated within a society. Through five interconnected facets: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation, the phenomenon takes place. The very first term Hall suggests is representation, which includes how something is symbolized in language, media and any discourse and how these meanings are created and taken by the onlookers. The second term, identity, suggests how any group of people relates to cultural products. The third term, production, is the process of construction of cultural products through different media, such as the media industry, etc. The fourth one is consumption, which suggests how any society interprets and interrelates with cultural creation. The fifth one is a regulation that suggests how a cultural product comes into regulation through distribution and consumption.

Cultural studies has its roots in cultural materialism also. It relates culture to the material world and considers power relations as a significant context to interpret texts. It believes that a text always has a material function in the contemporary power structure of society. It also focuses on how the power relations within the

society over a period of time change. It gives cultural studies a new root map for analyzing texts from social and material perspectives.

As cultural studies also examines the role of human behaviour in society, it is deeply associated with Anthropology, which is the study of human behaviour and society, focusing on human evolution, development, social and religious practices, kinship and language. It also studies the cultural practices and their significant role in shaping cultural society. The main concern of cultural studies is to scrutinize the production, consumption, circulation, and regulation of a culture within a particular society. It is a wide-ranging field of study drawing its theoretical insights from various other movements.

Furthermore, structuralism, a linguistic theory propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure, can be traced as a strong connection to cultural studies. It is based on a synchronic approach to language system emphasizing the concept of binary opposition, signifier and signified. It talks about the arbitrariness, constitutional and relational forms of the development of language. It relies on the form of language at present and how the structure of language shapes reality. The meaning is governed by structures. In relation to Structuralism, Cultural studies sees how meaning is constructed and regulated within society and how power influences the cultural forms. Structuralism provides theoretical insights into Cultural Studies to analyze culture as a sign system. Cultural texts, including film, media and fashion, are taken as a composite system of signs that work together to generate meaning. Cultural studies also critique structuralism for its hard and fast rule of the fixed meaning of the text and for neglecting power as an influential facet of the meaning.

In this order, Cultural studies also takes its theoretical insights from post-structuralism to interpret culture, power, and meaning. Both believe in the fluidity of meaning, arguing that one meaning of a period differs from another period of time, thus it is not fixed but constantly changeable. The meaning is highly contextual and dynamic. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan are the prominent post-structuralists who have hugely influenced cultural studies. Michel Foucault proposed the concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse, which are also taken as key facets of culture by cultural studies.

Cultural Studies has a deep relationship with postcolonialism theory. The terms like hybridity, third space, subaltern, and marginalization are widely examined in cultural studies, too. Postcolonial theory explores colonial domination and how it influences identities, societies, and power relations within a culture under colonial rule. Postcolonial literature includes the works written during and postcolonial era and examines ongoing influences of colonialism in various aspects, such as affecting

class, race, identities, and shaping societies, thus providing a framework to the writers of cultural studies for understanding and analyzing the complexities within the society.

In Cultural Studies, examining women's voices is significant. Feminism is a literary theory that asks for equal socio-political and economic rights for women. Emerging in the 1960s, it became a significant phenomenon in the literary canon. It raises voices against gender-based discrimination and patriarchy, asking for an equal platform for women. Cultural studies believe that gender roles are the central part of developing culture and society. It argues for equal representation in all parts of society. Numerous authors have given the feminine perspectives in their texts.

Cultural Studies is also associated with Gender Studies as it talks about the role of gender in the socio-political and economic status of society. Gender studies focus on race, identity, class, and ethnicity, asking for equal rights for the marginalized section. It includes feminism, race studies, LGBT, Queer Studies and Masculine Studies. Both gender studies and cultural studies examine the role of gender in the construction of society and how power affects the shaping of cultural and social norms.

Media Studies has become one of the significant parts of circulating any message or communication. It analyzes the myriad media through which information is circulated in cultural studies. Marshall McLuhan is considered to be the father of Media Studies. He says, "[i]n a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" (McCluhan 1). Media studies is closely associated with cultural studies. Media studies focuses on media production, regulation, consumerism and the effect of content in a particular society. Cultural studies also examines various forms of culture, practices, beliefs and ideologies within a particular society. Along with the media, it also caters to literature, popular culture, films, fashion, music, and the everyday life of ordinary people.

To circulate information in a short time, the media is one of the quickest responsive tools. It is a revolutionary invention, whether print, electronic or broadcasting, magazine, social media or mass media for humankind, all have made a huge impact on the formation of culture. It creates media culture, forming social values or ideology and affects the pattern of culture in a particular group of people. The media is a significant tool to spread information in a short time. In cultural studies, one goes through how a media culture develops and affects society and how meanings are circulated and adapted by society in a particular discourse is investigated in the discipline.

Popular culture is the culture of ordinary people, and it is closely associated with cultural studies. It includes media, fashion, television, music, art, language, literature, everyday life and other forms of communication which help to establish

a culture within a society. It comprises the everyday practices of the common people. Tradition, rituals, and norms are the means of culture that reflect a group's long-standing way of practice. Although the meanings are dynamic, the course of preserving that set of practices goes on from generation to generation. Popular culture caters to all the sections of society that have been neglected for years and are at the margins. Thus, cultural studies tries to bring them into the mainstream by giving them enough space to advocate their significance.

Conclusion

Cultural studies is a field of study that provides a framework through which one can study the dynamics of culture, society, ideology, power structure and its interdisciplinary nature. It acts as a medium and gives space for marginalized voices. From Marxism to New Left, Structuralism to post-colonialism, gender studies to feminism, and popular culture to media studies, cultural studies has a wide and deep relationship with all these theories. It interconnects all other disciplines and provides a platform to study culture from different perspectives.

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