

## **Cultural Studies: Bridging Academia and The Public Sphere**

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### **Abstract:**

Cultural Studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field that redefined Culture as a site of struggle rather than mere aesthetic expression. Originating in British academia with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, it foregrounded the analysis of everyday life, examining power relations and ideological structures while bridging the gap between academia and the public sphere. By studying traditions, beliefs, customs, rituals, language, and forms of artistic and intellectual creativity, Cultural Studies critiques dominant structures and explores marginalised voices. In India, institutions such as the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society have adapted cultural studies frameworks to local contexts by critically engaging with caste, gender, media, and indigenous cultures. Their work underscores how power relations and ideology inform and influence social institutions, cultural production, and everyday practices. This paper attempts to show how Cultural Studies operates both within and beyond academic institutions, investigating the production and circulation of cultural meanings, and examines its role in politically and socially intervening to foster critical consciousness, resistance, and transformative social change.

**Keywords: Cultural Studies, Academia, Public Sphere, Power, Culture.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Emerged during the last three decades of the twentieth century, the domain of Cultural Studies has witnessed a significant rise in interest and intellectual investment, marking a decisive shift in the understanding of culture as a site of struggle rather than mere aesthetic expression. Cultural Studies is a distinct and interdisciplinary field of enquiry that seeks to analyse the culture of everyday life and the power relations that govern it, foregrounding how meanings are produced, circulated, and contested within society. Started as an academic enterprise with the establishment of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and initially limited to British academia, Cultural Studies is now dispersed across the world and has acquired a broader domain of operation and analysis. Being a field of study that takes the whole society as its text, it often crosses and erases boundaries to examine and intervene in the subject matter. It is not simply a study of culture; rather, it is an attempt to engage politically with it, to unravel the power relations that govern culture in a society, and to critique dominant structures while articulating possibilities of resistance.

## **THE IDEA OF CULTURE**

The understanding of 'Culture' is pivotal to the field of Cultural Studies. Culture, comprising traditions, beliefs, customs, rituals, myth, and language, binds a community into a whole. With the rise of Cultural Studies, there have been various attempts to define culture, which reveal its dynamic and contested nature rather than a fixed or static entity. Raymond Williams, in his *Keyword: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, states that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language ... (and) has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" (49).

Etymologically, culture has been derived from the Latin word *cultura*, meaning “cultivation”, and *colere*, which means “to till, tend, or guard”(Williams 49). Culture was initially attributed to the agricultural enterprise when human beings tried their hand at some common modes of working or farming and began to live as communities for development. With time, culture acquired the metaphorical meaning of human development. With the dawn of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, culture came to denote the development of the individual through education. In the wake of the nineteenth century, culture became woven into the social milieu and it came to mean the collective beliefs, thoughts, and ways of living of a particular class, mostly the upper-class people. Society was then divided into the cultured and uncultured people, consequent upon which there was a strict segregation between mass culture and high or elite culture. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, there was a reaction against this separation, and a radical change in the meaning and scope of culture took over. It came to encompass the whole range of thoughts, beliefs, customs, artefacts, media, literature, ways of living that constitute human society. Defining culture, Paul Willis says that it “is the very material of our daily lives, the bricks and mortar of our most commonplace understandings” (qtd. in Grossberg 4).

According to Lawrence Grossberg et al., culture primarily has two dimensions. They say,

Culture is understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities and so forth. (5)

Raymond Williams provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of culture in contemporary society, categorising it into three broad dimensions:

- i) The general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development

- ii) Particular ways of life
- iii) Intellectual and artistic creativity (52)

Cultural Studies primarily concerns itself with these aspects of culture, examines how they come to have value, and attempts a political reading of these aspects in order to understand how they acquire significance in a society at a particular period of time.

### **CULTURAL STUDIES**

Cultural studies has become a distinct field of interdisciplinary study with its unique approaches and methodology, which “could be best seen as a bricolage” (Grossberg 2). There has been a plethora of definitions of Cultural Studies offered by intellectuals, but the attempt to define Cultural Studies is itself fraught with problems, considering its overarching and all-embracing nature. As Sparks in his essay “The Evolution of Cultural Studies” says, “it is extremely difficult to define cultural studies with any degree of precision” (14). Though cultural studies resists any definition, there are several theorists who have attempted to define cultural studies. One of the most comprehensive definitions is given by Lawrence Grossberg et al:

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic conception of culture. Unlike traditional anthropology, however, it has grown out of analyses of modern industrial societies. It is typically interpretive and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures. Cultural studies is thus

committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices. (4)

Continually engaging with the political, economic, erotic, social, and ideological, cultural studies entails the study of all the relations between all the elements in a whole way of life. (14)

Though Cultural Studies was initially limited to practice within the higher education system, the central goal of Cultural Studies lies in its connection with the social and political sphere and in the analysis of forms of power that guide knowledge formation and cultural formulations. The central idea behind Cultural studies lies in its goal to examine the cultural formations of society and also to provide the people “ways of thinking, strategies for survival and resources for resistance” (Grosberg 2).

Being a rather vast area of study, Cultural Studies takes as its subject matter the whole culture of a society and adopts methods and approaches from any field deemed fit. As Grosberg et al. argue, “Cultural studies draws from whatever fields are necessary to produce the knowledge required for a particular project” (2). Thus, taking objects of study from diverse areas, Cultural Studies intervenes in cultural constructions across various fields such as literary studies, gender and sexuality, postcolonial ideology, racism, and so on. It analyses how certain literary works, such as those of Shakespeare, are considered to belong to high culture; how gender roles are constructed within and outside the family; how the image of the Orient was constructed and marginalised; and how the dominant class uses mass media to spread ideology, and so forth. It takes into account all the elements of culture in order to study, critique, and reconstruct them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

If Cultural Studies attempts to study and analyse all the elements of culture, all relations between these elements, and to intervene in the matrix, then how does it do that? What methodology does it adopt?

Considering the overarching nature of Cultural Studies, it can be said that there is no particular set of methodologies that can be claimed as belonging exclusively to its domain. Cultural Studies can adopt any method and any approach from any field and employ it for its own purpose. There is no fixed disciplinary practice, no rigid research methodology, or set of questions that limits the area of Cultural Studies. The scope of Cultural Studies is so broad and its boundaries so open that it can adopt any strategy to analyse culture and ways of life critically. As Radhakrishnan states, “It is assumed that Cultural Studies is a domain of knowledge which can accommodate unsettling and disturbing questions that other disciplines have always refrained from asking” (4). At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the praxis of Cultural Studies should have an impact on the public sphere and politics. It is not just a chronicle of social change, but an intervention in it. It should remain politically engaged within the cultural domain of the public sphere.

## **EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES**

Cultural Studies emerged with the rise of the working-class population in British academia in the post–World War II era. The genesis of Cultural Studies can be traced outside the academic establishment, in the working-class movement. As there was a division of culture, with working-class culture relegated to a secondary position, Cultural Studies began by questioning ideology and examining how certain cultures operate at the centre while others are marginalized. Figures such as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart attempted to bring their own cultural heritage into the domain of mainstream culture. They also sought to trace the

power relations operating at the heart of this cultural formation and division. This led to the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1964, which attempted to engage politically with culture, to analyse how culture is practised and produced, to examine the relationship between margin and centre, and to dismantle this binary by unseating legitimized culture.

### **AWAY FROM THE MARXIST PARADIGM**

As Cultural Studies arose in reaction to elite culture, it is often compared with Marxism. Commenting on the emergence of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall states that Cultural Studies is not a legacy bearer of Marxism; rather, it is an outcome of the ideas of the New Left, which has “always regarded Marxism as a problem, as trouble, as danger, not as solution” (279). Cultural Studies takes as its object of study ideas that Marx never explicitly addressed—culture, ideology, language, and the symbolic. Thus, Cultural Studies moved radically away from Marxism and also began to critique the tenets of “Eurocentric Marxism.”

### **INTERVENING IN INSTITUTIONALISATION**

One of the central challenges that Cultural Studies faces is the danger of institutionalisation and over-theorisation. As Stuart Hall observes, “the explosion of Cultural Studies, along with other forms of critical theory in the academy, represents a moment of extraordinarily profound danger” (292). When confined to institutional frameworks, Cultural Studies risks losing its critical and transformative potential, obstructing its ability to achieve meaningful social change. What is urgently required, therefore, is the intervention of organic intellectuals—scholars and practitioners who move beyond the limits of formal institutions to ensure that theory is not merely abstract but actively engaged in the political and social realities of the

world. Only by bridging the gap between theory and praxis can Cultural Studies intervene effectively, challenge the dominant structures, and contribute to reshaping society.

### **COUNTER-DISCIPLINARY PRACTIS AND RESISTING INTELLECTUALS**

It is also often noticed that there are attempts to limit Cultural Studies within the boundaries of a discipline, with the aim, as Giroux et al. put it in the essay “The Need for Cultural Studies,” “to describe culture, to accumulate knowledge about culture” (478). Intellectuals do not engage in the public sphere and instead remain within the cocoon of the institution, playing a fundamental role in producing the dominant culture. Therefore, there is a need to move beyond the boundaries of academia and reach the public sphere. Giroux stresses the need for resisting intellectuals who can undertake counter-disciplinary praxis both within and outside academia and develop a discourse of an oppositional public sphere. At the same time, Cultural Studies should develop its own pedagogical and curricular practices to empower students to critique and offer resistance in the public sphere, so as to have a far-reaching impact and bring about radical social change.

### **CULTURAL STUDIES IN INDIA**

Coming to the Indian space of Cultural Studies, it is important to understand the term culture in the Indian context. Culture in India was always held to be an antithesis to modernity. Indian culture bore ideas of distinctiveness and continuity. However, with the rise of middle-class nationalism, culture came to be seen as something backward and ancient that held the progress of India back. The middle class adopted the notion that the present cultural depravity could be compensated for by adopting the cultural values of the West. With the rise of Gandhian discourse, however, British culture was discarded as a “satanic culture,” and what emerged was a “national culture” of India that continued to dominate post-independence India. This national

culture, however, was later questioned with the rise of critique in the form of social movements. As Niranjana puts it, “This critique is articulated most powerfully in the social movements of the period (peasant and tribal movements, the women’s movement, the slightly later Dalit movement) and in the intellectual initiatives inspired by those movements (Subaltern Studies, feminist scholarship, Dalit critiques)” (4). With this, Cultural Studies began to make fresh inroads into India.

Cultural Studies in India is mainly an idea imported from British academia, which has settled itself within the higher education system, primarily in the Humanities and Social Sciences domain, and has also “demonstrated its capacity to constructively intervene in the space of the political” (Radhakrishnan 5). As Radhakrishnan states, “Cultural Studies has come to mean (...) a convenient basket into which most humanities and social science research can be put”(8). Cultural Studies has strengthened its roots with the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) in Bangalore and in various other higher education institutions such as Jamia Millia Islamia, Tezpur University, and EFLU, where several courses such as M.A. and Ph.D. programmes in Cultural Studies are offered. However, these courses, mainly modelled on Western frameworks, need to be more deeply engaged with Indian cultural contexts.

In the field of Cultural Studies in India, the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS) has left notable imprints. The Centre was instituted in 1998 “as an experiment in institutionalized research excellence in interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences” (Niranjana 33). Moreover, “this programme included work across a number of disciplines, extending its appeal to students trained in, or wishing to work in, fields ranging from anthropology, history (including and especially art history), and literature to political science, sociology, communications, and media” (Niranjana 35). Through its programmes, the Centre has redefined approaches to Cultural Studies in the Indian scenario. With its distinct manner of

selecting objects, approaches, and methods of study, the Centre takes into account both seminal texts and texts that have hitherto remained invisible or have been considered irrelevant. Along with this, the Centre has also brought about radical changes in conceptualising Cultural Studies. It analyses “any domain—be it the political, ethical, or (to shift the epistemic side) scientific, psychological, or cognitive” (Niranjana 35)—that has relevance to the understanding of culture. Consequently, it has covered a broad field of study, ranging from visual culture, films, paintings, and architecture to wider social issues such as caste, gender, modernity, and so on. With all this work at hand, Cultural Studies has developed interdisciplinary research approaches across disciplines, and it is worth noting that it has broadened its scope in the Indian context by engaging with previously unexplored fields such as media analysis, folk literature, tribal literature, indigenous culture, and so on. Cultural Studies in India is experiencing a surge and is making attempts to move towards multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary engagements in order to explore various fields of study and produce new areas of investigation and inquiry. It seeks to bring into account a range of pedagogical, research, and interdisciplinary practices and frameworks for the larger cause of the higher education system.

As Niranjana states, “Cultural Studies initiatives in India have helped imagine new models of institutions of higher education, as in the CSCS example, and to craft innovative forms of collaboration between older and newer institutions” (40). These initiatives indicate that Cultural Studies in India is not merely an imported academic framework but a dynamic and evolving field that responds to local histories, social movements, and cultural specificities. By rethinking institutional practices, research methodologies, and pedagogical approaches, Cultural Studies in India seeks to intervene in the public sphere and contribute to broader debates on culture, power, and social transformation within the higher education system.

## **CONCLUSION**

The future of Cultural Studies is immense. With newly emerging fields of inquiry, Cultural Studies, as a dissenting intellectual tradition, is broadening its area and critically and politically engaging with society to examine power relations, to intervene in them, and to reconstruct them. However, it should move beyond the boundaries of disciplines and institutions and make itself more grounded in the public sphere in order to achieve its desired outcomes, namely, radical social change. In this way, Cultural Studies continues to assert itself not merely as an academic pursuit but as a transformative practice, capable of reshaping cultural understanding, challenging dominant ideologies, and contributing to a more equitable and critically conscious society.

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