

Culture in Cultural Studies

- Sudhir Kumar Pandey
& Manjari Johri

Abstract: Culture is considered as the most difficult and complex term to define. There have been several attempts to define and conceptualize culture over the years. However, each discipline has come up with its own definition of culture. The paper is an attempt to define 'culture' and has tried to locate and conceptualize it in the area of cultural studies. In fact, cultural studies is the only area where the term culture has defined the genre. In cultural studies, especially Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, has provided the definition of culture which is still relevant today. Particularly, Williams proposes a democratic definition of culture which has developed as the socio-political and historical process. The paper has tried, among the array of definitions of culture, to provide a definition of culture which is postmodern in approach and practice.

Keywords: Williams, Hoggart, culture, society, cultural studies, ordinary, literacy.

I

Any attempt to define culture needs to mull over a broad range of topics such as politics, religion, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Culture is a heterogeneous formation which makes it difficult to define and interpret. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) believe that culture “in explanatory importance and in generality of application” is “comparable to such categories as gravity in physics, disease in medicine, evolution in biology...(3). This aforementioned observation gives a clear indication about the importance of culture in social sciences and humanities. Culture like gravity can be felt and realized, but the conceptualization of culture is a very tedious affair. Even in today's socio-literary scenario it is one of the elusive terminology/concept. Though we have an array of theories in humanities and social sciences, the difficulty posed by the heterogeneous and discursive nature of culture still makes it an attractive topic to consider. In fact, Fran Martin (2003) believes that the definition of culture is “difficult but important to define.” Similarly, a noted theorist Terry Eagleton (2003) believes:

Culture' is a slippery term, which can be either trivial or momentous. A glossy colour supplement is culture, and so are emaciated Africans it offers to our eyes. In Belfast or Basque country, culture can mean what you are prepared to kill for. Or—for slightly less zealous—die for. It can also be squabble over the merits of U2. You can be burnt to death because of culture, or it can be a question of whether to wear that rather fetching Pre-Raphaelite style shirt. Like sex, culture is a kind of phenomenon which it seems one can avoid underrating only by overrating. In one sense it is what we live by, the act of sense-making itself, the very social air we breathe; in another sense it is far from what most profoundly shapes our lives. (p.48)

The above-mentioned observation reveals a significant aspect about the nature and status of culture in human life. For Terry, culture is slipper because it lacks immovability. Also, it is particular at the same time general. This duality, as a result, of particular and general adds intricacy to its definition. Moreover, if it is a 'social air' which we breathe, then to locate culture in definitional arena is an involved affair. It is very much clear by the 'two senses', that the concept of culture is a problematic area. This problematization of culture provides an opportunity to elucidate the concept of culture in present day humanities and social sciences. There have been several attempts to define and conceptualize culture. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952) was one the earliest attempts to define and understand culture. This book provides a host of definitions and commentary on the different perspectives on culture. However, multiplicity of definitions produce convolution of different sort. To unravel this convolution, this paper will try to locate culture in the realm of cultural studies. Culture, the concept and the analysis, is actually a project of cultural studies. Cultural studies provide a 'gawk' at the concept of culture. It looks the term 'culture' comprehensively and provides a germane agglomeration of view on its theory and application. To understand and locate the nuances and intricacies of culture, we need to understand the methodology and practices of cultural studies. This understanding will provide us a clear stand about the nature and status of culture. Cultural studies arose as a discipline after the WWII. In fact, it is one of the projects of liberal humanism which sought to locate the value and purpose of human rights in this postmodern world. M.R.A. Habib (2011) provides a pithy piece on the objective and purpose of cultural studies:

In summary, cultural studies might be characterized by its broad definition of literature as including all aspects of popular culture, its situation of literature as a set of semiotic codes among broader social codes, its view of culture as an instrument of subordination or subversion, a site of ideological struggle, its commitment to broadly left-wing political aims, and its generally empirical, interdisciplinary, and collaborative methodology. (p.277)

From the above passage two phrases are noteworthy: *interdisciplinary and collaborative methodology*. In fact, these two phrases best describe the essence of cultural studies. Cultural studies imply all the available methodologies and disciplines to understand the nature and existence of the human nature and its relation to the world at large. Here a mention of Terry's observation about culture seems relevant. For the simple reason that if culture is 'the very social air we breathe' and it is 'what we live by', then for the study of such phenomenon we cannot rely on the singular discipline and methodology. Hence, a collaborative approach is the characteristic of the genre. Answering about the characteristic question of cultural studies, Stuart Hall (1980) notes:

In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no 'absolute beginning' and few unbroken continuities. Neither the endless unwinding of 'tradition'.... [w]hat we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristics unevenness of development. What is important are the significant breaks—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations

are displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes. (p.57)

The above deliberation elucidates the nature and need for cultural studies as a separate genre. Cultural studies, according to Hall, is a result of such break from the older line of thoughts. It is both a continuation of and departure from the earlier political, sociological and literary theories. Hall (1980) believes that two significant books—Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* and Williams' *Culture and Society*—which describes the purpose of and need for cultural studies are the works of recovery. They do not propose something new rather they deal with the long debate of culture and its location in the wider socio-theoretical framework. For the purpose of the argument about culture, analyses of these two texts are pertinent to understand the nature and meaning of culture in cultural studies. Simon During (1999) notes that “Hoggart wanted to show how those changes” in working-class life of postwar Britain “affected an individual's whole way of life”, Simon further states that for Hoggart “culture was an important category because it helps us recognize that one life-practice (like reading) cannot be torn out of a large network constituted by many other life-practices—working, sexual orientation, family life, say” (p.1). Simply put, in culture everything exists in relation not in binary. On the other, Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958), looks culture as a part of the society and sees 'culture as a whole way of life'.

II

First part of the paper tried to locate the culture in realm of cultural studies. It is clear from the previous discussion that culture here is not separate from the society. It is all encompassing term which includes every possible activity which a human being practices. In the Keywords (1979, 87), Williams notes that “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought”. To further this argument, Lawrence Grossberg (2013) deliberation over the meaning of culture is noteworthy. Grossberg sees a significant reason behind this complexity. He notes that “its complexity is neither accidental nor academic” (p.456). In this sense culture is not an academic concern rather it is a historical concern. This is a process in the history which is still in the progress. This progressive nature makes it difficult to conceptualize. Even Williams himself has admitted that culture should be treated as a problem. It is a problem of different sort which needs to investigate the structure and formation of society. In this regards Grossberg makes an interesting remark:

If, in the first instance, culture is a problem rather than a concept, we might assume that a category surfaces as an object of attention and scrutiny at those moments when culture matters....[a]ny attempt to understand the concept then must look to its specific forms and contents at any moment and ask: What work is the category doing? What forms of disembeddedness (autonomy) are claimed for it, and

what forms of embeddedness (within the social totality) remain effective, whether acknowledged or not? (p.457).

This abovementioned deliberation about culture provides a valuable observation particularly in cultural studies. Culture then becomes a place where everything meets. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak reiterates the same idea that “culture is a place where different explanations always collide, not just by races and classes, but by genders and generations” (p.360). There is no logical progression in culture. In fact, John Hutnyk (2006), too, concludes that “the becoming particular of culture might be traced through the various incarnations and avatars in bounded form” (p.357). Culture, thus, is not separate from the society, but it is a future history and past tradition which is ever evolving and all inclusive. On the other, culture is not the best of the things which has been thought and said as Arnolds puts it. It is an ordinary creation. Raymond Williams's *Long revolution* (1965) declares that we share a common meaning we live in the community, hence 'culture' in this respect is 'ordinary'. Francis Mullhern (2003) while commenting on the ordinariness of culture makes the point more clear:

Learning and communication, then, are the substantive process of culture, which, moreover, is not simply an image of the world but one of its modes of constitution. Without these processes it would be impossible to posit an intelligible world. They are in this basic sense fully 'creative'—and yet, it also follows, in no way 'exceptional'. Creation, on this account, is one of the banalities of social—historical 'nature'. Creation is ordinary. (p.81)

This process of communication and sharing make the culture 'a whole way of life'. It also provides a basis for relationship among the elements in the society. Thus, from theoretical point of view study of culture is the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life. Stuart Hall (1980), on the similar lines, gives a definition of culture in the area of cultural studies:

Culture is not a practice; nor is it simply the descriptive sum of the 'mores and folkways' of societies—as it tended to become in certain kinds of anthropology. It is threaded through all social practices, and in sum of their inter-relationship.... [t]he analysis of culture is, then, 'the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships'....[t]he purpose of the analysis is to grasp how the interactions between all these practices and patterns are lives and experienced as a whole, in a particular period. (p. 60)

This above definition provides a very clear idea as to what does culture mean in cultural studies. Culture, then, is the relationship and interaction between these relationships which happens in the complex social organization. It is an attempt to discover the nature of the social organization which is complex in both its structure and relationship. This definition of culture is all inclusive and relational. Culture is a medium through which meanings are originated and discussed in relation to the other structures of the society. If culture is not a natural thing, then cultural studies tries to understand the production and consumption of the culture in a given society. Culture is what we do and practice in everyday life. To conclude the concept and definition of culture in

cultural studies, Alviro Pina's (2005, 237) observation becomes pertinent here. For Alviro, Williams's concept of culture both as a theory and practice is significant because "it treats culture as a process, both common and differentiated, shared and conflicted". This is important for today's world because this provides a democratic view of culture which is inconclusive. Another valuable point about this definition is that "it is open to and aware of diverse starting points and develops in dialogues and conflict." This openness and receptivity of culture both as a theory and practice makes it relevant in today's scenario.

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To Moon

- Lata Dubey

Moon, moon, moon spreading yourself on the sky arms four
Milking its way toward whispering wind
To touch, to sense and to see and breath
For rejuvenating, refreshing and reverberating the earth
So that this could be and abode of everlasting mirth,
O Moon! You keep spreading silver
Shine on the water
To submerge your beauty, image and
Virtue in the mirror
Of life, love, light latitude or longitude
Reflecting all over the globe
For caressing your ornamental fairer tresses
To shine, to show, the world the
Value of the moonshine,
Some say you receive
Your strength from the sun,
But I feel you deserve my praise.
For being bold, beautiful and benign
Though not the brightest star of the galaxy.