

# Cultural Studies and Postmodernism: An Introduction

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**Abstract:** *Cultural studies is an academic field grounded in critical theories of postmodernist era. It is not an investigation of any particular culture or area of the world rather it concerns the political dynamics of contemporary culture as well as its historical foundations, conflicts and defining traits.*

**Index Terms** -Cultural Studies, Postmodernism, Margi and Desi.

Postmodernism is characterized by overthrowing of elitism of modernist 'high art' and shifting the focus to popular and mass culture. It is an amorphous movement which de-establishes the conventions and codes of society. Where modernists believed in keeping 'classical' literature inaccessible for masses, Postmodernists move from elitist intellectuality to enjoyable lucidity for mass consumption. Cultural studies in this league is an anti-elitist theory, a cross-disciplinary enterprise which breaks the hegemony of upper class people and revises the whole history. It is a leftist movement which emphasizes on never to accept power. As Raymond Williams wrote in his essay, "Culture is Ordinary", culture belongs to masses as much as it belongs to elite class. With these new cultural theories, we have moved from *margi* to *desi*, *central* to *marginal* and from *elite* to *aam aadmi*. It is interesting to observe how the contemporary fashion styles also have origin in popular culture of working class. One example of the same would be the culture of torn, low waist jeans with shirt tucking out

Postmodernism is skeptical of explanations that claim to be valid for all groups, culture, traditions and race, rather it focuses on relative truth of each person. Cultural studies, in this sense, is a postmodern approach with no tsarian monologue. It believes that apparent realities are merely a construct with no absolute truth in them. Thus, it demystifies the essentialisms being created and opens up space for dialogue, dissent and disagreements.

In a recent controversial news, the topless pictures of Kate Middleton, duchess of Cambridge, were out on web. Pictures were clicked when she was enjoying her private time sunbathing while vacating in Paris. Same happened with Prince Harry who was partying in a private suite of Las Vegas. However, media's interference in their private lives was criticized in both cases what becomes significant to observe is that where the nude pictures of Henry were considered to be cool and naughty and made him a style icon for several English kids, such pictures of Kate were taken as highly offensive. Idea behind this was that *shame* is an essentialism associated with women more than men. The same thing became cool for the man and shameful for the woman .

Another significant observation is the representation of mothers in Hindi cinema and how it became a carrier of certain ideas about motherhood. To take an example one can focus on the role played by Nirupa Roy in almost all the Bollywood movies of 1970s where she is shown clad in a white saree, sacrificing and

devotional mother whose love for her children is selfless. She becomes the epitome of Indian mother attaching *sacrifice* and *devotion* with a women, specially Indian mothers.

Postmodernist theories including cultural studies attempt to break all these generalizations and stereotypes. Similar is the concept of *breadwinner* which is associated with men. Even our language is patriarchal which represents human kinds as 'mankind', human labour as 'man labour' and 'man hours' and hence, constructs the binary oppositions of men being productive whereas women are seen as merely a distraction or temptress. Instance of Menaka being sent by Indra to break the severe penance undertaken by Vishwamitra has an internalized idea of a man being the doer where a woman being merely a temptation

In fact, the essentialism of marriage in which man should be taller than woman has a covert idea of imposing the power of former over the latter. Elizabeth Taylor when asked in an interview claimed that she loved being beaten by Richard Burton reason being his violence as a symbol of his masculinity. Again, we observe that violence is associated with manhood and tolerance with womanhood.

Eurocentrism is a concept made by Europe itself by which it positioned itself as the centre of the world and the 'rest of the world' became the periphery. The idea of centre is associated with something significant and that of periphery with the insignificant. In a typical Indian village there is a main road that leads to the temple, which is the centre of the locality whereas houses of *dalits* lie on the periphery.

Cultural studies, therefore, decentralize the structures. In his essay, 'Inventing Traditions', Eric Hobsbawm claimed the same thing that traditions have been presented as a way of life like existing 'always already' However, these traditions are very much recent in their origin and have been fabricated by powerful sections of society. These power structures relocate these traditions in past to justify and legitimize them and then, institutionalize them for their continuity. For instance, eating of beef has been condemned only by a hundred years of civilization otherwise it had always been a stable diet for people in tribal areas. Likewise there is no evidence of saree being a traditional wear for Indian woman. An outfit that restricts the movement of women and keeps them confined, it can be seen as a hegemonic patriarchal idea of keeping women domesticated. Hegemony, concept given by Antonio Gramsci, in simple words, is to rule by consent. When British colonized India, they institutionalized English language to conquer the sensibilities of natives. To rule by power is always short lived and there is a constant fear of a revolution by oppressed therefore, English made Indians believe that Europe is superior and their own country as inferior and hence, secured their position for more than a century.

Cultural studies breaks these hegemonic discourses. *Cultural sixties* ( 1960- 1969) was a decade marked by fall or relaxation of social taboos and gave way to leftist and radical events and trends. That was the decade in which thirty two African countries got their freedom from European power which was a liberating movement for the world. With the Students' revolution in 1968, in Paris, the whole world broke free of social restraints. With the popularity of *Beatles* in the same decade, screaming in rock concerts became



a symbolic practice of freedom and liberation too.



As a result of such liberating movements, Author is dead from the Literature and master narrative has been rejected. Readers are free to find their own meanings with the new concept of ‘freeplay’ came into existence and hence, multiple interpretations of one text are given space. In his essay, “Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture”, Clifford Geertz advocates consideration of all the perspectives while studying a particular culture. *Ravana*, a character from Ramayan is considered a villain by the most Indians in the north part of the country, whereas in South India and Sri Lanka, he is worshipped as a God. Therefore, instead of one dictatorial discourse all the narratives regarding any culture are considered in cultural studies. And when subjectivity comes into play no final meaning can be derived and hence, it is deferred forever.

We all have fallen into the trap of what Althusser terms *ideology*. Like all those men who started shouting Teresa even without questioning who she was and where did she live, we all are victims of ideology and even unaware of the fact. All forms of discourses are manifestations of Ideology, relations and power structures in a society and that’s how a society works. Upper class engaged itself with construction of ideology whereas the lower class, who becomes the victim of it, is stuck with winning their bread and butter that they don’t even realize the trap let alone revolting against it.

However, we can’t escape the trap of ideology too. If we escape from one, we fall into the other but at the least, we, being the students of cultural theory know what to choose and what not to.

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