

Introduction to Cultural Studies
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Lecture - 25
Culture Studies : A Recap

So hello and welcome to this NPTEL Course entitled Introduction to Cultural Studies. So we can have a group session today. So I have invited my class today to participate in this session where we have a very informal interaction, basically a conversation about this course. Just taking you through some of the text which you have covered so far and also have a more generic discussion about the purpose of this course, the aims and objectives which a course like this ought to have, okay.

So a very warm welcome to our class, you have come over. ((00:45)) Roy and Lakshmi Chitra who are here in this session. So we just start with the very basic question, the very generic question that we started off with this course and that is what is culture and what is the aim and purpose of doing a course like this, cultural studies. So if we get some responses from the group that will be great. So what do you mean by culture.

So if I just give you the word culture randomly, how do you define it? What would be your working definition, culture as an entity, as a phenomenon, as a process, how do you define it? Okay a set of codes, values, which prevail in a particular society at any particular point of time. So culture is something temporal. It belongs to a certain historical frame. So there can be no such thing as the human culture.

I mean we are always talking about cultures because they are notoriously context sensitive. And there is a coded quality about culture as well. It is a set of codes, sometimes it is cryptic in a sense that you know some of the codes are quite mysterious, some of the codes are very notoriously well preserved etc. And the codes are replicable, they are played out across different historical situations. So there is a code of quality about culture. So culture is a set of codes.

It is a good definition. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Anything else that one can contribute to it? Cultures are organic. It keep changing. Okay, very good. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. So let us rephrase the question and so let me ask you what are the adjectives of culture. So we got you know the coded quality as being one adjective of culture, organicity or organic another adjective of culture.

Any other qualifiers, any other markers of culture? It is coded, it is organic, mutable. Yes discursivity is one of those terms which I am sure all of you attending this course have heard it many times, numerous times, one of my pet terms, discursivity. What is discursivity? Since we have discursivity, let me just trigger a conversation about discursivity. How do you define discursivity? It is obviously related to discourse. It has something to do with discourse.

“Professor - student conversation starts” What is discourse and what is discursivity? How do you define discursivity? Permanent belief in a particular society which enforces the discursive practices of the individuals and those practices again reinforces the idea of discourse. Right, very good. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. So it is a bit of a loop really. So and again this is something that I have been saying since the very inception of the course.

So what we need to do in culture studies is we question the boundaries between the inside and the outside. So the organic, interior, human being as an autonomous individual and the discursive individual who is a social animal. So that boundary needs to be requestioned, right. So we question the boundary, we question the borderline between these two. So discursivity can become an affective phenomenon.

It can become an existential phenomenon and of course like you said very correctly it is also an apparatus, a set of an artificial apparatus which contain rules, values, ideologies, laws, legal codes etc. So discursivity is a very complex entanglement, again one of my pet phrases in this course, a very complex, asymmetric entanglement between the inside and the outside, between the human individual existential self and the more extended social self etc.

So we have been looking at culture as a process, culture as a play between the inside and the outside. Culture as a negotiation with codes. Culture as a navigation with the artificial apparatus of discourses, values, ideologies around us, okay. So having defined culture it is a good definition of culture to begin with. So what do you think would be the purpose of cultural studies, as students of culture studies.

All of us over here in this room are students of culture studies. So what could be, what would be ideally our purpose in terms of doing this course, culture studies? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** What do you think this course should be designed to do? To study culture as a text. Okay good. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. So to study culture as a text which means the assumption obviously here is we are looking at the textural quality of culture.

So culture is a text which can be written, rewritten etc. it is like a CD-ROM. It can be you know rewritten all over again. It can be deleted it can be erased and after it is erased new codes can be set into it etc. So the writability or the inscriptive quality of culture is something that we are very interested in. Culture as a text material. Culture as a textural phenomenon which can be written, rewritten, replayed etc.

And obviously the moment you use the word text, it is a very useful word. A text is something which can be, which is obviously constructed. It is a construct and anything which can be constructed can also be deconstructed and reconstructed. So again we are looking at culture as a deconstructable text. So something which can be deconstructed. So deconstruction becomes a very useful critical theory in cultural studies, right.

And as some of you would know and in most of the text that we have drawn on they sort of directly or indirectly paid debt to deconstruction in a massive way. So bringing in deconstruction as an investigative strategy, as you know a tool to examine certain text etc. So I mean by deconstruction I not just mean (()) (06:32) but the entire phenomenon of deconstruction, right. So the entire idea of questioning text, question the constructed quality of text etc.

Okay, so talking about text, let us move on very quickly to some of the texts which you have covered in this course so far, some of the key text that we have examined for the purpose of this course. So starting with for instance George Orwell's Shooting the Elephant which is sort of an autobiographical I say about what happened to him once in Burma when he was a colonial police officer. So how to read that particular essay as a cultural text?

Again, mind you it is an autobiographical essay. It is deeply personal, subjective. So again we are back to this loop between the personal, subjective, and the discursive, objective and how the borderlines blur away. So if you treat Orwell's essay Shooting the Elephant as a text which is relevant to cultural studies, how do you, how do you begin to look at it as a cultural text in terms of the events, yes.

“Professor - student conversation starts” highly coded. He is performing one specific role that is the white male, supremacy in that context. So this is where he gets to perform and he feels like he has the agency over there. So this is highly coded in a way. Ya, very good. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

So we have some very key terms. So the coded quality in the text, the performativity in the text. So he is coded, he is codified. He is not so much an individual as a code, right. He is a code who is supposed to perform a certain function and again the context becomes very important over here. So if you were Burma 2018, this will make no sense at all. But this is Burma 1930s which is colonial Burma where the white man is basically a God you know.

And you know the white man has supposedly all the agency to control, to tame, to civilize etc. So all that lovely narratives about imperialism being a civilizing machine that is rampant at that time. So it is that context out of which this essay emerges right and Orwell of course over there is a colonial officer whose job is to preserve and perpetuate the supremacy of the white race, right. So he is there as an agent, a reluctant agent but still an agent on the payroll of the empire.

So he is someone who is carrying on the function of the empire in that sense. So immediately what strikes us when we read that essay is the coded quality of the essay. So it is very coded. So

he is a colonial police officer in Burma and immediately we are in a set of codes, right. We are in a set of functions, in a set of performances right. So that again, that takes away the individuality of the author, the individuality of the human subject and the entire essay if you read it at the existential level it is about the liquidation of individuality.

It is about the exhaustion of individual. There is no individuality left. You are a function, you are a code and it is the job to carry out that code, okay. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** How else would you read that essay? It is a very good start. How else would you read that essay as a cultural document, Shooting the Elephant? Reading it along Homi Bhabha’s idea of stereotype and we can see how ambivalence is executed in a space and how the power is not just unidirectional but it is a multidirectional sort of agency power. Exactly. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

So the entire essay becomes a very good execution of what Homi Bhabha, and this brings us to the second text thank you so much for that it brings us to the second text of Bhabha’s The Other Question where he is basically theorizing the production of the other and he is looking at how the other becomes a very complex production. It is not just unidirectional as you very correctly pointed out. The power does not flow from the colonizer to the colonized.

It is not just that simple. That is a very reductionist way of looking at the colonial power. Actually, power is more complex than that. It consumes the colonized as well as the colonizer and the entire essay, Shooting the Elephant is about being consumed by power in more ways than one. So what we see in the essay is obviously a very good example of ambivalence right.

So Bhabha talks about ambivalence in terms of the colonial stereotype because he says quite clearly the stereotype needs to be preserved in two supposedly contradictory ways and the contradictory ways are a. it should be permanent and it should be replayable at infinitum. So you should be able to play a stereotype over and over again at different discursive climates. And it also should be permanent right?

Now when you bring that theory to Shooting the Elephant which we do in this particular course we see that how the supremacy of the white man is a permanent phenomenon right. That is given, that is something that construct is never questioned, right. So if that is questioned, the entire machinery will fail, right. So that is a given, that is a presupposition. So there is a presupposition of privilege there.

The white man is the superior race etc. and what is also simultaneously true is that the supremacy of the white man should be played over and over again through different events, through different performances. So the Shooting of the Elephant becomes a very symbolic act and this brings me to the next question that I will just dish out to you and that is how would you read the event in the essay, the act of shooting the elephant.

“Professor - student conversation starts” How would you read the symbolic act? What symbolic function do you think that event carries and it carries several symbolic functions, shooting the elephant but can you just start off with a few. Well, one of it is that he orders his force to do it so as to preserve the white man’s priority and he does not get the choice. Right, okay. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

So in a very symbolic sense it becomes an act of annihilation of the agency, the human agency is being killed and you know those of you, all of you have read the essay, but if you remember that essay, the elephant is increasingly humanized in the essay. So you know the entire act of killing the elephant is described as a murder which is obviously a very human metaphor. So elephant is humanized.

There is a degree of empathy between the elephant and Orwell and the symbolic killing of the elephant becomes also the killing of the self, the agency, the agentic self that Orwell has which becomes completely secondary, tertiary, peripheral compared to the discursive self which needs to be preserved, the discursive self which needs to be preserved over and above the deep existential self. Anything else and how else would you read it as a symbolic act.

I mean related to what you just said. What else is happening with shooting of the elephant. What kind of an act is it? What is the adjective that you might use to describe that act, shooting of the elephant? Performative perhaps, okay. And it is performative because Orwell is not just performing the white man's role but he is also making it spectacular, right. So the spectacle of the act, the spectacular quality of the act is something which needs to be highlighted and if you remember the essay lots of theatrical metaphors are used.

The curtains go up, the people are behind him expecting for the event to happen. They have come to consume it visually etc. which brings us to the other important term for this course performativity which then are used to connect it to the other important text which we have covered that is Judith Butler's Gender Trouble, right. Now you can read you know there are several ways you can read the Orwell essay, you can read the you can use Bhabha's The Other Question to read it. You can also use Butler's Gender Trouble to look at Orwell in that particular essay.

“Professor - student conversation starts” Now what is Gender trouble about? Performativity of genders. The performative quality of gender. So how does Butler define gender in Gender trouble? Gender is something constructed and something that is performed. Exactly. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. So in other words what you just said a little while ago is completely true about gender that is gender being a textual act. So gender as a text which can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, right.

So the textuality of gender becomes very important in gender trouble and if you look at the title of Gender trouble, the word trouble is quite indicative over here. So what does it want to trouble? It wants to trouble the very normative understanding of gender, right. The very heteronormative understanding of gender. The very constructed quality of gender that is being deconstructed in that particular book.

So in many sense in that particular work, Gender Trouble, it ticks many boxes I mean it is obviously a book on gender studies but is also deeply poststructuralist, is deeply postmodernist

and it can be related to colonial studies as well because it gives you the theory through which identities are produced. So in a very interesting sense the book is about production, right.

Production of identities and again we are looking at the blurring borderlines between the biological and the ideological and how the borderlines between the biological and the ideological blur away in that kind of a extreme discursive climate where what you are as a body what you are as a self is immediately discursive. So this brings us to the idea of the entanglement between corporeality and discursivity.

So what do you mean when I say that, that corporeality and discursivity are entangled. What, it is actually a very simple thing. I am just using some complex words. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** But what am I saying essentially when I say corporeality and discursivity are entangled. Discourse is the potential to affect you're the way you behave like your performativity everything is, right exactly. Sir, it extends to your body. Exactly. Or your body needs to perform in a certain way like the text says, the narrator says. Ya, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

So corporeality is a very complex phenomenon of embodiment which is neural, psychological all that is very neural, psychological, cerebral that is fine. But also is deeply discursive. So by embodiment I not just mean how the body functions at the biological level but also how the body dresses up, how the body behaves, how the body picks up language. What kind of a linguistic register is being used by the body at any given point of time etc. right.

So these are very discursive decisions that the body takes, that the self takes in any given point of time. So what Butler says quite clearly is that the human subject is never prediscursive, right. So the entire idea of a prediscursive human subject is questioned by Butler and in that sense she is questioning the very white enlightenment canon of looking at consciousness as some autonomous, romantic activity which is divorced from discursivity, right.

So that is being questioned by Butler altogether. So this very Cartesian notion of consciousness which is you can generate yourself by just thinking you know you do not need the artificial

apparatus around you. You think therefore you become something. That romantic idea is obviously a very reified idea as well and again we are looking at the collusion between romance and reification which is something which is rampant in gender studies.

You romanticize something, you also reify that simultaneously. It works with gender, it works with the human body in every which way you objectify them. But also in a more consciousness studies level if you look at the way the Cartesian frame works I think therefore I am becomes a very inward looking enterprise which moves away quite deliberately and quite stubbornly from the discursive apparatus around you. So I do not need it.

So I look inward and I produce myself out of it which is obviously a very male fantasy and if you look at enlightenment as a phenomenon it is very male, it is very white, it is very white and very male and that has been questioned by Butler in gender studies in Gender Trouble that book that she writes which is quite seminal in a way that it deconstructs the many myths about gender, the many myths about identity production etc.

So one of the many things which that book does is that it questions any idea of prediscursivity any idea of meta discursivity etc., which brings us to the other important text that we have covered so far, that is Lyotard, the Postmodern Condition. Now in Postmodern Condition, Lyotard talks about language games quite a lot. That is something that he goes back to drawing on Wittgenstein, drawing on many other philosophers.

So what are language games according to Lyotard and how are language games related to the idea of the demise of the grand narrative because that is what the book is all about, The Postmodern Condition. It talks about the demise of the grand narrative. There is no grand narrative left. Instead what we have are language games. So what are language games in the context of this death of the grand narrative. How did you find language games?

What are language games as defined by Lyotard? So perhaps you can look at language games as different micro activities, right different micro activities which include language, include embodiment, include discursivity, corporeality etc. So those language games come with a set of

preset codes. So he uses the analogy of chess for instance. So in the chess game for instance we have some preset codes which are agreed upon.

Otherwise you would not have the game of chess in the first place. However, once you start playing the game of chess then as a player as an intelligent player you have the choice of you know combining and permuting different moves but the macro narrative of rules must be maintained. So you cannot make a queen go in other direction. If you do that the game will come to an end, right.

So the very condition of the game is that, that set of macro rules should be maintained but within that set of macro rules you have the liberty to make iterations the way you want to. So each move becomes an iteration, right. So it becomes an iterative activity. So you make a particular piece go in a particular way following the bigger network. So what we are talking about here is discursive fields, right. So it is a helpful analogy to think of discursive fields as a magnetic field, right.

So no object escapes the discursive field. So all of us are part of a discursive field at any given point of time. Now the only way you can assert over agency and this is something that Butler says as well is within the discursive field. So Butler and Lyotard both sort of seem to agree on this that any attempt or any aspiration to be to transcend discursivity, to transcend the discursive field as a romantic aspiration which ends up being a failure and which ends up being consumed by the grand narrative.

So the acknowledgment of discursivity is something that Butler and Lyotard talk about quite clearly and this acknowledgment of discursivity is one of the conditions of postmodernism that you acknowledge the constant discursivity around you, right and you cannot escape discursivity. Every moment is discursive. Now within that particular discursive field you have the choice you have the agency as a subject to make iterations to play different language games right.

So you know Lyotard talks about language games quite a lot in this particular context. Now the moment you say language games, the moment you say that everything is discursive, every activity is within a particular discursive field what that also means, what that also suggest is that

there is no macro space out there. There is no macro public space out there where different language games blur away and we have some kind of consensus created. Now that kind of an idea is very Habermasian right and at the end of postmodern condition we find there is a bit of a argument that Lyotard takes up with Habermas.

What is that argument? What is Lyotard's problem with Habermas? And Habermas of course is a big advocator of the public space as a form of a consensus you know a specialty for consensus from which you know decisions can be made and intellectual activities can happen. Now why do you think Lyotard would be opposed to that kind of a idea of the public space? So why would postmodernism as a phenomenon be ontologically opposed to any idea, any assumption of a public space.

“Professor - student conversation starts” getting a consensus on public space basically is again a kind of reinforcement of a grand narrative. Okay, very good. So Lyotard is like not favoring of and he argues that if that happens then there always some sort of micro narratives which might be different from the grand narratives. It would not get any representation. It is a sort of grand narratives. Right. So then he argues for deconstruction of grand narratives so that the micro narratives can have their representation. Exactly. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

So postmodernism as a phenomenon is not so interested in agreement in the first place. It is not so interested in a consensus in the first place. It is much more interested in fragmentation, in discontinuities, in other words interstitiality, right. What is interstitiality, inbetweenness right. Inbetween two categories, liminality, interstitiality, so these become very important phenomena in postmodernism.

And postmodernism as a movement, as a process, as a phenomenon is much more keen on those things rather than looking at some kind of a public consensus which can like you said very correctly very quickly convert into a grand narrative, right. So the entire idea of becoming a grand narrative is questioned by postmodernism, right. This brings us towards the end of this session where I will just make a little literary, put a little literary cream on the entire discussion.

And so ask you what is the purpose of something like realism in the entire debate about representation, grand narrative etc. So you know if you look at each of these texts that we have covered I mean Bhabha spends a lot of time on realism, Lyotard spends a lot of time on realism, Butler spends a lot of time, but what is realism and why is realism so important to these philosophers do you think. How is realism an important issue as a form of representation in literature different kind of narrative strategies.

“Professor - student conversation starts” Realism I think is I mean is rather popular. It manages to kind of makes one forget that it assigns, it assigns towards the artificial, one cannot I do not know, one is not given space to move. We talk about Darcy, both kind of assign to us to the point that we can put in, right okay. So but realism as you are very right. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

But realism as a narrator strategy what are the objectives of realism as, yes it aims at the totalizing kind of representation and seems to know everything in the heads of the characters. There is a beginning, middle, then end. Once upon a time something happens and lived happily ever. That is a realism narrative, they lived happily ever after. Now obviously this kind of a narrative technique would very quickly ally itself with grand narratives.

Will very quickly ally itself with any kind of a hegemonic representation. So realism is obviously a construct, right. Is a construct which sort of tries to pass off as a given. Tries to pass off as some kind of an all-knowing technique, right. But of course it is a fabulation because you cannot really know what happens in the minds of the characters. In a very interesting sense unreliable narration becomes a more authentic representation rather than realist narration because in real life we do not know. We do not know what is happening in the heads of people around us.

So essentially if you are asked to represent people we will become unreliable by default, right. So unreliable narration actually is a more authentic form of narration and that is something that postmodernism picks up quite clearly and if you look at postmodernism as a canon although it is probably a bit of a you know oxymoron in terms but however if you look at postmodernism as a phenomenon you find that it is something which keeps going back to unreliable narration.

It goes back and digs up Tristram Shandy. It goes back and digs up different other texts, Don Quijote for instance and then it comes in to the major postmodernist writers Bogues Joyce, I mean different other people you know Marque Nemes, John Phallus. So different postmodernist writers they keep going back to unreliable narration as a more authentic form of narrative technique and this move away from realism becomes the very discursive decision in postmodernism, right.

Because realism as all of you correctly pointed out it very quickly allies itself to a totalizing technique and was best friends with imperialism, it was best friends with racism, it was best friends with any kind of patriarchal assumption about woman etc. because it was all knowing assumption. It seems to know everything. It seems to so represent the very totalizing kind of a cosmos before you. So the entire ontology created out of realism is a very total ontology.

It is completely complete. There is no incompleteness in realism and therein lies its fallacy. Therein lies its sort of a fabulatory quality. It sort of fabulates. It imagines. It gives you the fantasy of completion, right and this fantasy of completion is something that is questioned by all the theories that we have covered in this particular course including Butler, you know Bhabha and then of course Lyotard as well.

This entire fantasy of completion that is never really complete. The entire idea of a complete cosmos is a fantasy which is more often than not very male and very racialized in quality, okay. So this concludes this session. Thank you very much for your interactions and I hope to see some of you again in the times to come, okay. Thank you.