

Raymond William's Perception of Culture: An Insight

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ABSTRACT

Culture is a way of life. Food we eat, clothes we wear, languages we speak, Gods we worship, are all aspects of culture. In very simple term, we can say that culture is the embodiment of the way in which we think and do things. It is also what we inherit from the society. All the achievements of human beings as members of social groups can be called culture. Art, music, literature, architecture, sculpture, philosophy, religion and science can be seen as aspects of culture. However, culture also includes the customs, traditions, festivals, ways of living and one's outlook on various aspects of life. Culture thus refers to a human-made environment which includes all the material and non-material products of a group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next. There is a general agreement among social scientists that culture consists of explicit and implicit patterns of behaviour acquired by human beings. These may be transmitted through symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment as artifacts. The essential core of culture thus lies in those finer ideas which are transmitted within a group, both historically derived as well as selected with their attached value. More recently, culture denotes historically transmitted patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and express their attitudes toward life.

Introduction

The English word 'culture' is derived from the Latin 'cult or cultus' meaning tilling, or cultivating or refining and worship. In sum it means cultivating and refining a thing to such an extent that its end product evokes our admiration and respect. This is practically similar to 'Sanskriti' in Sanskrit. The term 'Sanskriti' derives from the root 'Kri (to do). Three words come from this root 'Kri- Prakriti' (basic matter or condition), 'Sanskriti' (refined matter or condition) and 'Vikriti' (modified or decadent condition). When 'Prakriti' or raw material is refined it becomes 'Sanskriti' and when broken or damaged it becomes 'Vikriti'.

Since ages, Indians have called their culture as human culture (*manavadharma or manavasanskriti*). It has tried to be as comprehensive as possible to suit the needs of every human being, irrespective of age, sex, colour or race. In spite of many political upheavals it has flourished and endured. We have not been able to trace its beginning, hence it is taken as having no beginning (*anadi*). It has always existed in time and it shows no signs of decay or death; hence it is spoken of as eternal (*sanatana*). It is called 'Vedic' because the earliest literature in which it found expression is the *Vedas*, the oldest books known to the world. What is the secret of its longevity and imperishability? In his *Why Religions Die*, a short work, but of great value, Professor J.B. Pratt of America makes the following observation :

...Indian culture and religion is the only culture which still tends to survive the present crisis because it is strong, deeply rooted, flexible and capable of absorbing new currents. It leads to life-like vitality which is self-perpetuating, self-renewing and eternal. That which in it, was vital and true, cast off the old shell and clothed itself in more suitable expression, with no break in the continuity of life and no loss in the sanctity and weight of its authority.¹

Generalizing the secret of longevity of this Vedic religion and its culture, Professor Pratt further adds – "If a religion and its culture is to live, it must adapt itself to new and changing conditions; if it is to adapt itself to new and changing conditions; it is to feed the spiritual life of its people, it must have the sensitivity and inventiveness that shall enable it to modify as the needs demand."

Not only the Hindu religion, but the culture of the Hindus has been changing and developing in accordance with the needs of time and circumstances without losing its essential and imperishable spirit. The culture of the Vedic age, of the ages of the *Upanishads*, the philosophical systems, the *Mahabharata*, the *Smritis*, the *Puranas*, the commentators, the medieval saints and of the age of modern reformers is the same in spirit yet very different in form. Another secret of the vitality of Indian culture is its catholicity. Here mutually contradictory creeds can and do keep the house together without quarrelling within the hospitable Hindu family.

'...Hindu thought and culture ... because of its ingrained conclusiveness, its tolerance and its indifference to doctrinal divergences, stressed the essential unity of all Indian Dharmas, whether Hindu or Buddhist or Parsi and minimized differences. This tolerance of differences of opinion and creed within its own fold and even outside itself is an essential characteristic of Indian Culture."²

It is true that 'culture' defies unanimous definition, but it has basic tenets of strong family base, *guru-shishya parampara*, secular outlook, spirituality, acceptance of diversity of faith and belief in the fundamental unity of the whole universe. A glorious feature of Indian culture has been sublimation of higher values. It is seldom that old things lose their hold on the minds of the folk; for forms linger long after the meaning is forgotten. Indian sentiment has been in favour

of transmuting the older decaying form into one more useful, than of casting it away as dead and useless. It believes in conformity, compromise and conciliation of tradition. It is on the same principle that many Indian poets, decade after decade flourished and those who did not care for it were rebels as they traversed on the long journey of creativity.

In Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent,' we find how dominant social structures maintain their dominance, while at the same time other social groups and in fact individuals can contradict or subvert those cultures. There are dominant, residual, and emergent parts of any cultural group. Interestingly enough, while dominant is the most powerful shaping force as obviously indicated by the name, it does not get its own section of the essay, but is mostly shown as the sort of cultural mass that he pokes at with his other types of culture. Dominant culture oversees the whole essay, without ever being explained outright. He presumed that readers would have enough cultural awareness to understand the dominant group in their own cultures without giving any direct explanation. Williams does however, clearly explain the other two ideas, residual and emergent.

Residual is the influence of old cultural practices on modern societies, consciously or unconsciously. A sort of "residue—cultural as well as social" that is built into the infrastructure of the dominant culture. He goes out of his way to differentiate residual from archaic, archaic being mostly outdated and abandoned cultural practices, residual being certainly active in shaping society, even if it does not come from the dominant culture itself. Williams considers organized religion, rural community, and monarchy three important residual traits of culture.

Raymond Williams describes emergent culture as the new cultural ideas and practices that are being created constantly in a society by groups and individuals. These ideas can be dominant themselves, but they can also be alternative or opposing. Alternative would be less confrontational, whereas opposition (to the dominant culture) would clearly be more confrontational.

Raymond Williams also talks about public versus private in dominant culture, where practices that are not openly of the dominant culture are practiced in private. The dominant culture can do nothing about this, whether or not it approves of these practices.

'Therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention.'³

Williams's description of dominant cultures being influenced by individual actions and practices, as this is a prominent idea in practice, a theory that shows how individuals shape their cultural environment through their own agency.

A new field of academic study that finds its origins in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (UK) and the work of critics like Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart

and later by Stuart Hall, Tony Bennett and others, Cultural Studies is a discipline among disciplines. Cultural Studies is interested in the processes by which power relations between and within groups of human beings organize cultural artefacts (such as food habits, music, cinema, sports events and celebrity culture) and their meanings.

What 'culture' has meant before:

- 'Culture' derives from 'cultura' and 'colere', meaning 'to cultivate'.
- It also meant 'to honour' and 'protect'.
- By the nineteenth century in Europe it meant the habits, customs and tastes of the upper classes (also known as the elite).

What 'culture' means now in Cultural Studies:

- 'Culture' is the mode of generating meanings and ideas.
- This 'mode' is a negotiation over which meanings are valid.
- Meanings are governed by power relations.
- Elite culture controls meanings because it controls the terms of the debate.
- Non-elite views on life and art are rejected as 'tasteless', 'useless' or even 'stupid' by the elite.
- What this implies is that certain components of culture get more visibility and significance.

Cultural Studies looks at mass or popular culture and everyday life. Popular culture is the culture of the masses. It is graffiti, comic books, mass cinema (as opposed to 'art cinema'), popular music (as opposed to classical music), the open spaces of the city (as opposed to art galleries), sports... it is the culture of the majority.

For a very long time such forms of art was dismissed as 'inferior'. The term 'mass culture' was used pejoratively. The only 'true' culture was that of the elite of the society. The culture of the wealthy minority section of the population was projected as the 'standard' or 'true' culture. So academic studies would look at 'great works of art' or 'classical authors', ignoring the fact that the greater number of people never viewed these art forms or read these classical authors. Standards of judgment and ideas of taste were framed using these elite forms as examples. Certain authors, forms and genres were given respectability as 'culture'. That is, the very term 'culture' came to be associated with a smaller section of the population and their tastes.

What this means is that the upper classes in a society legitimized certain artefacts as 'culture'. Some objects — a painting by M.F. Hussain, the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare, the films of Satyajit Ray — acquired an aura of respectability as 'culture'. Most critics did not discuss Sidney Sheldon or the films of Manmohan Desai as 'art', relegating them to the realm of 'popular culture'.

Conclusion:

The writings of Raymond Williams on politics, culture and literature are the most significant contributions to the Marxist critique of culture and the arts. His works laid the foundation for the fields of cultural studies.

Reference

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