

Research Article

Cultural Studies and the Role of Literature

Neethu Anna Tharakan

Department of English, Mar Ivanios College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India



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ABSTRACT

Cultural Studies is a field of theoretically, politically, and empirically engaged cultural analysis that concentrates on the political dynamics of contemporary culture, its historical foundations, defining traits, conflicts, and contingencies. Cultural Studies researchers generally investigate how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena such as ideology, class structures, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and generation. This article entitled “Cultural Studies and the role of literature” explores the relationship between literature and culture. In a way, Cultural Studies affected the way literary texts is theorized and read.

Address for
correspondence:

Neethu Anna Tharakan,
Mar Ivanios College,
Thiruvananthapuram,
Kerala, India. Phone:
+91-9745961865.
E-mail: neethuth@gmail.
com.

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Cultural Studies is an academic discipline which combines political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, media theory, film studies, criticism, and others to study cultural phenomena in various societies. It has developed into a diverse and lively international and intellectual field. As Hall, one of its founders has put it:

Today, Cultural Studies programs exist everywhere especially in the United States... where they've come to provide a focal point for interdisciplinary studies and research and for the development of critical theory.^[1]

As a field of study, Cultural Studies has had important effects on the study of literature. It has sought to theorize the role of literature in society in new ways and to look at literary texts in relation to cultural institutions, cultural history and other cultural texts, forms, and practices. In Britain, Cultural Studies began to transcend its roots in English Studies with the founding of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964. Its first director Richard Hoggart was well known for his extension of techniques of close reading to working class culture over mass culture.

Representation is the key concept in Cultural Studies. It views everyday life as fragmented, multiple where meanings are hybridized and contested. In the 1970s the major influence on Cultural Studies was the work of French Structuralist Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and French Semiotician Roland Barthes. For Althusser, there is no consciousness, no subjectivity, and no identity outside ideology. Culture should instil values in the individual. It is a site of conflicting meanings and values. Antonio Gramsci modified classical Marxism in viewing culture as a key

instrument of political and social control. The key rubric for Gramsci was “hegemony.” For Roland Barthes “semiotics” became important in the analysis of popular culture.

The key feature of Cultural Studies was its interdisciplinary mode of working. To quote Prof. Ien Ang:

Ultimately doing Cultural Studies does not mean contributing to the accumulation of science for science's sake, the building of an ever more encompassing, solidly constructed, empirically, validated stock of “received knowledge,” but participating in an on-going, open-ended politically oriented debate, aimed at evaluating and producing critique on our contemporary cultural condition.^[2]

At the same time, Cultural Studies does not imply abandoning what we call traditional. In the words of carry Cultural Studies, “is concerned with the struggles over meaning that reshapes and defines the terrain of culture. Cultural Studies is committed to studying the production, reception and varied use of texts, not merely their internal characteristics.”^[3] It assumes that a given object of analysis say, for example, a shopping mall, rap lyrics, or the institution of English can be read in different ways. For example, mall is a space of display, where goods are displayed for maximum visual display. It emerges as a site of gazing and secondarily as a site of shopping. It altogether entices us to unleash the possibilities of making a better identity, by trying out or consuming global brands and cosmopolitan fashion.

In an editorial statement in the journal “Cultural Studies” written in 1999 Lawrence Grossberg and Della Pollock commented thus: ^[4]



Cultural Studies continues to expand and flourish in large part because the field keeps changing. More and more universities have some formal Cultural Studies presence; the number of books and journals published in the field is rapidly increasing (13/1).

There are a number of factors which make Cultural Studies popular. It denies the separation of “high” or “low” or elite and popular culture. Being a “cultured person” used to mean being acquainted with highbrow art and intellectual pursuits. Cultural critics today work to transfer the term culture to include mass culture, whether popular, folk or urban, thereby acquiring a kind of universal significance. In other words, Cultural Studies help us recognize that literature does not occur in a space separate from other concerns of our lives. It is always near to us and is present everywhere.

Notes

Representation: The image of an idea or thing. Cultural Studies has taken keen interest in representation, recognizing that it is central to the kinds of political questions surrounding identity it is concerned with.

Semiotics: The science of “signs.” It was the dominant mode of analysis in the humanities, particularly in Cultural Studies which saw semiotics as a means of theorizing how ideology works.

Ideology: Ideology means a set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which binds a particular group of people. Louis Althusser conceived it as an imaginary relation to real condition.

Hegemony: Hegemony means “soft power.” In other words, it means power that maintains its authority without the need for violent coercion. Gramsci realized that Culture is more a political tool than mere force of arms.

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