

Connotations of Culture and Identity: A Study on the Significance of Cross Cultural Interactions

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Abstract—Culture and Identity are two complex terms that are most relevant in the present as cross cultural interactions are a recurrent phenomenon. Culture and identity are two concepts that have larger connotations. When the world itself is considered as a global village, the significance of exploring geographical boundaries and maintaining peaceful co-existence is a requirement of the time. At this juncture, understanding the significance of culture and identity needs to be explored. This paper enhances the understanding of culture and identity by examining these terms in detail. The development of the field of studies named cultural studies and its scope is presented in this paper. It further tries to connect these two complex terms in the context of cross cultural interaction.

Index Terms—Culture, cross cultural interaction, identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Culture is the complex everyday world we all encounter through which we all move.”(Andrew: 102) This definition of Andrew provides an all-inclusive definition of the term ‘culture’. The word ‘culture’ originates from the Latin word ‘cultura’ which means ‘to cultivate’. The term ‘Cultural Studies’ was coined by Richard Hoggart, as evident in Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice, when he established the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964. (Barker 101) Cultural Studies remain as an established school of studies in many Universities and still has a larger scope in making one’s perceptions on culture clear. One derives meaning out of the everyday experiences by understanding culture for which a cultural interaction and communication is inevitable.

Crossing of geographical and cultural borders have close connection with studies on different cultures. Geographical borders determine the limits in which a particular ethnographic group is scattered. Laws and power are used to protect these geographical boundaries so that the defined population is protected from any external interference. Edward Said, a post-colonial critic, in his work Culture and Imperialism, focuses on this phenomenon of creating one’s ethnic identity and mentions: “Yet just as human beings make their own history, they make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.” (399). While much emphasis is given on identifying cultural differentiation among people across geographical borders, Edward Said asserts the need to focus on the uniqueness of

every culture. This emphasizes the fact that cultural dichotomies don’t just leave space for differentiation but one should also try to identify the similarities of cultures.

Space and locale have close relations in framing identity for the people and make different cultures unique. This idea is further understood from the work, A Place in the World, where it is emphasized: “Identity is connected to a particular place . . . by a feeling that you belong to that place. It is a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home, because part of how you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place.” (89) As I use the word, ‘culture’ it means two things in particular, in relevance to the comments of Edward Said, “First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure. Included, of course are both the popular stock of lore about distant parts of the world and specialized knowledge available in such learned disciplines as ethnography, historiography, philology, sociology, and literary history.” (xiii) Literatures are platforms of cultural documentation whether it be travel writings, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies or historical texts. Cultural documentations could be seen in literatures across all languages, sociological and anthropological studies. Literatures frame cultural discourses that could be examined at any point of time. Edward Said, in Culture and Imperialism, remarks about the relevance of cultural discourses in the context of literary representations of culture: “The internalization of norms used in cultural discourse, the rules to follow when statements are made, the ‘history’ that is made official as opposed to the history that is not; all these of course are ways to regulate public discussion in all societies.” (399) Hence, literary and textual studies tend to provide cultural identities to ethnic communities through narration. Homi Bhabha, a sociological critic, in his work Nation and Narration, points out the significance of narratives in framing cultural identity to a nation: “The ambivalent perspective of nation as narration will establish the cultural boundaries of nation so that they may be acknowledged as containing thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased and translated in the process of cultural production.”(3) Hence, literatures that present cultural identities to a nation is worth detailed analysis in this context.

The language used for cultural depictions have to be focused on with utmost seriousness as they frame the identities for the communities depicted. Language poses a barrier in representing the culture of a ‘foreign’ place as the writer will not be able to relate completely his/her personal experiences with the real life experiences of the indigenous people that he/she had experienced in the places that are

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depicted in literary texts. Linguistic barrier occurs in literary narratives in various areas including the geographical description of the places, physical description of the people and the manners in which cultural practices are described by a 'foreign' person. The unawareness of the native language of the people of the 'new' place creates a barrier for the writer or investigator in mingling with the ethnic people and to gain complete meanings of their culture. The 'other' culture which connotes the culture of the 'foreign' place, is often represented to the best of the visitors' knowledge and belief even though he/she does not have a hold on the ethnic language spoken by the communities. This can create gaps in literary representations of different cultures and provide an entirely 'new' version of identity to the ethnic people. Hence, language is an important requisite in the encounter of a 'foreign' culture. The lacunae of literary representations is further emphasized by Bhabha when he suggests in *Nation and Narration: What I emphasize is that within the liminal image of the nation is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness of the cultural temporality the nation inscribes through a transitional social reality.* (1) This argument asserts that there are gaps in literary representations and lived experiences as culture is a very abstract and complex phenomenon that could not be completely absorbed and documented in the form of literatures. Still literary and historical texts help to re-examine the written culture even after a long span of time. The relevance of studying historical texts that frame identities to nations is an area worth detailed analysis.

Cultural encounters largely depend on ethnic communities' interactions and communication. Identities are created and re-created based on cross-cultural interactions. Ethnic groups are often seen as adhering on to their geographical and cultural boundaries preventing much of external interactions. This could be obviously seen among many cultures, and the reason for this phenomenon could be varied. People in a particular geographical location have more connection with the climate and environmental conditions that has its reflections on the identity of that particular ethnic community. This could be visibly seen in the colour of the skin, the physique of the people and in the physical features. Hence, geographical locale has an important role to play in providing external manifestations of commonality or differences that define the identity to the people.

There are various aspects that one has to take into consideration when one transgress cultural boundaries. Cultural boundaries are human constructs and are hence permeable to any 'foreign' cultures. As evidently seen from the work *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*, culture entails "recognition that all human beings live in a world that is created by human beings, and in which they find meaning. Culture is the complex everyday world we all encounter through which we all move." (102) This could be a reason for people to cross these self-defined boundaries exploring 'new' possibilities.

II. DISCUSSIONS

Culture' and 'identity' are two sophisticated terms that evolved out of human interactions and communication. Identity derives from assumptions of assigning oneself to any particular group or community. The methodology applied for understanding culture and identity in this study includes textual analysis and discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is concerned with producing an analysis of how and to what purpose language is used, through use of specific textual features in order to facilitate the knowledge of its effects. This makes the researcher to study many critical materials and resources on culture and identity to broaden one's own perceptions of these complex terms as is evident in this study.

Culture, as seen from this study is a complex set of human actions that makes a particular group different and unique from the other. 'Culture' is related to identity though one could provide only subtle differences among these complex terms as the culture of any community itself is its identity from the rest of the parts of the world. The relation of culture with identity is dealt with by Kath Woodward, a sociological critic, in *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation*, where she mentions: "Identity presents the interface between the personal-what is going on inside our heads, how we as individuals feel about who we are-and the social-the societies in which we live and the social, cultural and economic factors that shape experience and make it possible for people to take up some identities and render others inaccessible or impossible." (18) 'Strangeness' or inaccessibility is associated with the people of a 'foreign' land not because they are found to be different and distant from the other. It is the view point of the encountered person that colours the identity of the ethnic land. The study of culture has its relation with the practices of society in day-to-day life. It focuses on the life style of the groups of people in a community or civilization. Cultural Studies analyses human experiences considering the assumption that human nature and culture are related. Just like the relation of human nature with culture, human nature and identity are also closely connected terms. At present, the focus has shifted from the consumption of art, fashion and literature to a complex link of people from different places and different societies. Different social groups were able to construct different social identities based on this. Hence, the study of culture would be incomplete without the understanding of cultural identity.

Culture enables the individual to find meaning in the environment in which they live, through mutual relations with different social groups. Culture is a term that has intricacies within its totality. No clear distinction or demarcation could be made about the definition of culture as Michel Foucault, a sociological critic, comments in his work, *Cultural Analysis*: "No culture can claim authenticity-although many of them routinely do-and no value gives access to truths that lie beyond itself, beyond its own discourse." (23) The duty of a researcher or writer in the field of cultural studies is to work as an observer and to interpret his/her experiences to give the reader a clear picture of the culture of the 'foreign' people/places that were investigated on.

The process of crossing cultural boundaries is trendy

from times immemorial due to various reasons. Explorations and conquests are the earliest of known reasons for which people crossed geographical borders. If one examines the earliest accounts, travel has given more space for exploring new places. As could be perceived from *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*: “Much of the work of observing, interpreting, articulating the exploration of that world, as well as the historical development of the imperialized world that led to it, was done through recovery and analysis of people’s writings about ‘foreign’ and especially ‘erotic’ places in which they had travelled and lived: as colonial masters, pilgrims, explorers, ambassadors, ambivalent wives, roving soldiers, ecstatic cross-dressers, conquistadors, missionaries, merchants, escaped slaves, idle students of the gentry and aristocracy, ‘adventurers’, and alienated modern artists.” (261) As evident from the quoted comments of Mary Baine Campbell, a culture critic, people have undergone the process of travelling from times unknown for various purposes. This phenomenon has helped in cross cultural interactions over a period of time and had enabled in framing the identity for the civilizations that were explored. For critics like F. R. Leavis, culture: “belong to a tradition dating back to at least the eighteenth century, whose thinkers were alarmed by the growing separation of the economy and society. Would commercial values triumph over human ones? Wasn’t personal well-being more important than the pursuit of wealth? Shouldn’t co-operation, not competition, be the ruling principle of society?” (19) These are a set of queries that are worth examining even in the present context. In the present, crossing geographical boundaries and finding a place to settle down along with the ethnic communities has given new dimensions for crossing cultural borders. It has taken a refined position and is coming under the purview of another discipline known as migration studies where the migrants’ experience of the ‘new’ land and its people is taken into consideration.

Crossing cultural boundaries is a means of conditioning one’s existing perspectives on an alien/foreign culture and it is a very important aspect in identifying the unique features of a foreign culture and to provide meaning for cross-cultural interactions. Identity is another discursive term that has larger implications and connotations in the present. Identity, like culture is a complex and abstract term, Wang Bin, a theorist on identity, in *Keywords Identity*, talks about identity as the ability: “to define or talk about themselves as a totality when confronted with the Other.” (81) Hence, identity brings a sense of oneness and an ability to relate with another group or person when geographical borders are crossed for varied reasons. Notions of identity are studied by many anthropologists and sociologist critics. The definition of identity and its relation to culture can be understood through the critical views of Rose in *A Place in the World* where it is mentioned that “Identity is connected to a particular place . . . by a feeling that you belong to that place. It is a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home, because part of how you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place.” (89) This idea matches with my arguments on identity, as place has a significant role in giving identity to an individual or a group of people. Comparisons can be made between culture and identity as

both the terms are connected to each other. Culture has larger connotations as it: “consists primarily of thoughts, moods, feelings, beliefs, and values.” (Wuthnow, 3) whereas identity is the external reflection of the culture of a particular place, through the external manifestations of the natives, including the dressing mannerisms, lifestyle, eating habits, traditions and beliefs of the people and many other aspects that differentiate themselves from the other.

Identity is a way of understanding the cultural differences of the people and it helps the ‘self’ to differentiate from the ‘other’. In order to understand this phenomenon much better, it could be affirmed that in order to showcase comparisons or contrasts of a culture, another culture is a requisite. Homi Bhabha, in *Nation and Narration*, mentions about the differences that had occurred among cultures during the passage of time as time has a significant role in framing identity to cultures. He mentions: “When did we become a people? When did we stop being one? Are we in the process of becoming one? What does this big question have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?” (7) Cultural differences are the construct of identity or vice versa. Hence, researchers try to differentiate one culture from another based on certain factors or yardsticks and rate them. Understanding a ‘foreign’ culture and providing an identity to the people based on scientific yardsticks is more idiosyncratic compared to that of exploring a ‘foreign’ culture and assigning meanings through cross-cultural interactions. This would further help one in recognizing the unique feature of each culture than in idling time on comparisons and contrasts.

Edward Said, remarked in *Culture and Imperialism*: “There has been a gathering awareness nearly everywhere of the lines between cultures, the divisions and differences that not only allow us to discriminate one culture from another, but enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in which they include, incorporate and validate, less benevolent in which they exclude and demote. (15) This comment emphasizes that culture is a human construction through which it create an identity for different cultures, by including and excluding certain aspects that make each culture different from other. Building direct communication and interaction with the people in a host culture would provide a lived experience and would help in the understanding of any culture. This, in turn provides identity to the encountering culture and the encountered culture and help in the universal representation of both cultures. Thus, identity and culture are different yet inter related discourses that have enough scope for discussions, institutionalization and debates.

Though differences persists across cultural borders, instead of tracing the ways in which a culture is different from the other, one needs to examine the manners in which geographical borders remain fluid and still can remains permeable for cross-cultural interactions. Even though the study of culture is an important area for research, people have lost their interest in this field, as evident from the comments of Robert Wuthnow, a culture critic when he mentions in *Cultural Analysis: Why culture failed to advance?* According to social scientists culture actually made relatively little difference in human affairs and for this

reason, ceased applying their best efforts to its investigation. They turned from the ephemeral realm of attitudes and feelings to the more obdurate facts of social life-income, inequality, unemployment, fertility rates, group dynamics, crime, and the like.(3) This comment focuses on the need for reinvestigation in the field of cultural studies in understanding national identities.

'Nation' in the words of Benedict Anderson, an anthropological critic: "is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." (7) This has larger connotations as any representation of nation is a product of deeper interaction and harmony among the people. Through this comment it is further understood and asserted that inter cultural interaction and camaraderie is more important than trying to quantify cultures through different yardsticks. The fake notions of quantifying culture than in identifying its qualities and significance is restated by this statement.

III. CONCLUSION

As evident from this study, culture and identity are two complex concepts that have varied connotations. As evident from an anthropological critic, Peter Berger, "Culture is 'the totality of man's products' defining culture in this way is to view it not only as material artifacts and non-material socio-cultural formations that guide human behavior, (what we call society is a segment of culture) but the reflection of this world as it is contained within human consciousness." (35) Connections could be made between these terms culture and identity, as culture focus on the common features within a particular group of people which make them related with each other and help in a smooth co-existence in a given geographical location, at a given period of time. Identity on the other hand, provides traits that make people in a specific cultural background unique and yet portrays 'them' as different from the 'other' culture to which they don't relate with. Instead of making these complex and abstract concept of culture and identity concrete by using many yardsticks for assessing, comparing, and differentiating, one need to experience its uniqueness and identify manners in which it can be used to have a mutual coexistence. Hence, it is the need of the hour to have a transcultural approach whereby one examines all identities and cultural aspects beyond the limited purview of comparisons and contrasts and to have a all-inclusive approach of appreciation and amalgamation. Identity and culture could therefore be seen as discourses that require detailed examinations in this age of cross-cultural interactions. This helps any culture to have harmonious relationship and maintain long lasting friendships with the 'other'.

Hence, studies on culture and identity should be

considered as an area worth research and analysis. The scope of studying identity should be extended to a stream in itself called identity and ethnic studies so that it enables in better understanding of cultures across geographical boundaries.

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