

Introduction to Human Sciences (HS8.102)

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Literature Quiz

Abhinav S Menon (2020114001)

Question 1

One possible definition of culture is the interaction among human experience, everyday life, social relations, and power. It encompasses the mediation, the compromise, between the idealism (present in the value system of a society) and pragmatism. All these components interact with each other in complex ways to create what we call “culture”.

Literature and other forms of artistic (visual, aural) expression are a set of practices that form one manifestation of culture. However, culture is not restricted to these practices. It can include the minuscule – day-to-day occurrences, like how one might haggle with a shopkeeper or an auto driver – and the ubiquitous, like superhit films and bestselling books.

Among the various aspects that make up culture are general states of mind, the state of intellectual development in society, arts, and a way of life.

Culture is present in the organisation of society, the structure of the family, and the institutions which are involved in social relations.

In other words, it is fundamentally about people and how they interact with one another, and is thus deeply embedded in social relations and institutions. It is an important part of how one behaves with one’s family, close friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, and significant other. How one addresses one’s superiors and inferiors, who makes up the “household”, and who is responsible for what in this miniature society are all examples of the expression of culture in social organisation.

Marriage is an important social institution in many societies, and people’s perspective of it shapes this importance. It may be considered a union of families, or only of people; it may be considered a convenient means to settle down and run a house, or an expression of love; and so on. These are all parts of the culture of the society that perceives marriage in these ways.

Culture also includes, as mentioned above, mass media and other forms of artisanal expression. These too are, at their core, people interacting with other people – the image of actors on a screen or on a stage, the communication between a writer and a reader, or a composer or singer and a listener.

Question 2

We have seen several examples of controversial pieces of literature and other media, which states go to great lengths to curtail. On many occasions, people go to no lesser an extent to fight for their right to express themselves in any way they see fit.

This might appear incongruous, given the limited reach of the printed word (restricted as it is by literacy in the concerned language). However, literature has the power to mobilise its audience in a way that makes it a big potential danger to the powers that be – like any other inflammatory media, such as cinema and music.

This is the motivation behind states' (sometimes severe) reaction to “sacrilegious” literature.

An example discussed in class is *The Satanic Verses*, by Salman Rushdie. This book was perceived as blasphemous and insulting towards the Islamic faith, and banned soon after its publication in India and Iran. Attempts were made on Rushdie's life, leading him to go into hiding.

This instance shows that religion is an important aspect of cultural expression which can be mobilised to create resistance.

Question 3

Aristotle theorised a hierarchy of forms of knowledge. This hierarchy starts at the bottom, with the knowledge of everyday necessities of life, which is functional in nature. Its purpose and its usefulness come from its intimate relation to the survival of humans and/or humanity. The topmost, “purest” form of knowledge is philosophical, obtained by self-reflection, which is essentially an act of leisure.

This spectrum of knowledge transforms into a measure of the aesthetic of labour, in a sense. Thus a corresponding hierarchy of labour (and consequently social class) is formed from the hierarchy of knowledge.

In this hierarchy, the lowest and least respectable professions are those which require no knowledge, or only “impure”, pragmatic forms of thought. They are concerned with practicality and usefulness. They form a social class dedicated to production.

The uppermost rungs in this social ladder are the professions which necessitate “real” or “aesthetic”, reflective knowledge. Social class here is produced by distance from the physical labour performed by the perceived “lower” classes; a distinction (grown into a fundamental break) between intellectual and manual exertion. is formed at this point.

This social “pecking order”, although it has distinctions of knowledge at its base (at least as hypothesised by Aristotle), is reflected in a very real way in society, as we see. It is perpetuated in different social institutions across cultures. Caste is one such institution, which goes to embed this hierarchy deeply into the psyche and the organisation of society – reflected in its properties of heredity

and rigidity. The perpetuation of these class boundaries then leads to restriction of interaction, and influences other social institutions, like education, marriage and the household.

Question 4

One effect of British rule in India was to create a mindset of the superiority of British (more generally, Western) value systems and cultural expression.

This happened via the formation of a new class of people raised in India, but educated in English and in the Western tradition. This social group, consequently and predictably, began to produce literature in the British tradition in India, which gained popularity as English grew in usage in the subcontinent.

This was important as it created a new strand of literary production in India. In addition to a new culture of Indian English writing – distinct in flavour, lexicon, and grammar from British English – it spawned a tradition of Western-style novels in India as well. Vernacular literatures also flourished under this practice. Frequently, these works (both English and the vernacular) formed a social commentary as well. Resistance against casteism, sexism, and a number of social evils found their place in this new thread of literary expression.

For example, the first Western-style novel in an Indian language, *Indulekha* (written by O. Chandu Menon in 1889), tells the story of an eponymous lady of the Nair caste, who was expected to marry a Namboothiri man almost thrice her age, under the social tradition of *sambandham*. However, unbeknownst to her family, she was in love with Madhavan, the hero of the story and her paternal cousin. The story follows the rebellion of the couple against the pressure on Indulekha from her elders to marry the Namboothiri, and touches on religion as well, quoting English writers and works in an intellectual, rational discussion among characters representing the conflict between Westernism and traditionalism.

Kamala Das (also known as Madhavikutty, later Suraiya) was another author who spoke out against the established order, both in English and in Malayalam. Her works are known for being controversial and uncharacteristically unspoken for a woman at the time.

Question 5

The 1980s and 1990s were the beginning of a fundamental change to the culture of cinema in India. The 1980s saw the popularisation of TV in the country, meaning that films could now be watched in the comfort of one's own home. This must have been augmented by the possibility of recording films in a compact form (videotapes) that could be played back any number of times. This practice also made it possible to pirate movies, which was another factor that pushed

people from theatres to homes.

The 1990s were a period in which an event occurred that hugely affected nearly all spheres of Indian life – liberalisation. Global industry entered the picture, which hitherto had included only indigenous creations. Furthermore, continuing the tradition of the previous decade, cinema began to be tailored more and more to TV. This move was furthered in the 21st century, with the popularisation of streaming platforms and watch-on-demand.

We have seen, thus, the effect on cinema of (1) the growth in popularity of the TV in India, and (2) the globalisation of the last decade of the century. These are the technological and economic factors that played a role in the popularisation – and therefore cultural legitimacy – of popular cinema. This legitimacy, once cinema had acquired it, was passed on to the values that the industry chose to display: values which began to tend more and more towards capitalism and romance (cf. DDLJ, 1995), from traditionalism (cf. Mr. and Mrs. 55, 1955).