

Introduction to Human Sciences

Literature Module

Lecture 1: What is Culture

Why do I need the Humanities

- The cumulative and individual experience of being a human
- Equally human? Some more, perhaps?
- Who, why, where are more/less human
- The modern citizen-subject – autonomous, free, free-willed, inalienable rights

- Political subject
- Psychological, emotive, rational, economic entity
- The Humanities are a **continual accrual of the entirety** of this human experience
- We exist as individuals, as social bodies, as concepts

- Humanities are a study of the experience of being all of these
- Individuals, social bodies, concepts
- Think critically, creatively, imaginatively
- Ask questions and interrogate existing conditions of being a human

- No separation between human society and the Humanities
- Encounter other imaginations, ways of being in our everyday
- A good novel tells a story of other times/societies/genders/races/ages/realities
- The Humanities are essential training in finding a language to ask questions about these “others” and “us”

- Fiction allows you to imagine hobbits, elves, rings, wandering wise men, magic hammers, iron suits, dwarfs, evil and good
- Humanities – those orcs look like black people!! Was Tolkein racist?!! Debatable.
- To be evil is be/become dark (non-white perhaps?)

Some Good guys



■



Some bad ones





What is Culture?

- Relationship between human experience, everyday life, social relations and power
- Particular cultural practices include but are not restricted to literary production, visual and aural production, art and artisanal practices, pop culture and ephemera.

- Culture is the everyday (*shaadi* dancing, flowers in hair) and the long-forgotten (Mohenjo-Daro)
- The massive (Ganga-Jamuna, Taj Mahal-Mahabalipuram, *karma*) and the minute (touching of head with a finger)
- Continually produced and reproduced

- Literature: Written works, especially those **considered of superior or lasting artistic merit** (Oxford Dictionary)
- Understanding culture requires understanding a specific conjunction between the ideal of all human achievements and values; a common practice and a way of life commonly understood by members of a society and the new, creative, and untested. (Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall)

Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*)

- Late 18th century. Industrial Revolution
- Industry -- as an institution
- Democracy – as a political word, not just theoretical or literary
- Class – modern social structure we recognise as class (Lower orders/class, middle class, working class). Class, not rank.
- Art – a special kind of truth. Imaginative, unique. Aesthete/aesthetics. Talent, genius

- Culture – meant a “natural growth.” training smthg. to grow – including training a human being. Comes to mean a thing in itself
 - I. a general state of mind/being. Close to perfection
 - II. General state of intellectual development in society as a whole
 - III. A body of arts – this dance/music is “our” culture
 - IV. A whole way of life/physical and spiritual. Comes to be a battleground of shame/pride

- Distinguish three levels of culture
 1. the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place.
 2. recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period.
 3. the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition

Where is Culture?

- It is in the organization of production of society, the structure of the family, and institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate. Cultural artefacts cannot then be read only in aesthetic terms.

- To read literary texts with social and historical analyses
- Historical circumstances, social traditions, and the media work together to create a cultural milieu in which certain sets of beliefs are either reinforced or questioned in the text

Banksy





Souza – “Birth” 2015, 3.1 million euros



A few ideas

- High artistic/cultural merit vs low culture/literature
- Exclusivity of access, control over means of production, rarity
- Artist vs artisan, skills vs talent/genius
- Distance from the body (Herbert Marcuse)

Lecture 1 – Recap

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Literature Module

Lecture 2: “Good” vs “Bad” Culture

- What does it mean then to study culture/s and its manifestations?
- Strong interlinkages of Culture with Power
- The middle class – history of intervention through culture
- Aristotle – truth arrived at through knowledge
- Knowledge should direct practice in arts and science

Hierarchies of Knowledge

- Nadir – Functional knowledge of everyday necessities of life (food, clothes, shelter, sex)
- Zenith – Philosophic knowledge that has **no purpose outside itself** (affords men felicity and leisure)
- Fundamental break between the useful and the beautiful
- Beautiful, “pure” theory congeals into an independent activity

- Practice is no longer guided by truth arrived at through knowledge. Labour vs contemplation
- An economic hierarchy of labour can be traced
- “lower” order activities divorced from beauty and thought produce a class of men dedicated to production of goods
- Distance from physical labour produces class

- Wealth/well-being depend on opaque market forces, while he (worker) has no access to beauty
- The world of necessity, of everyday provision for life is unfree, inconsistent
- The man forced to engage in this entirely is slave to other men and things
- Man perforce has to exist for smthg outside of him
- In a field of opposing social interests

- Class Structures are produced
- Caste structures perpetuate this division
- Peasant/Serf vs Priest/Brahmin
- Physical needs are not bad per se – they are crucially fulfilled in a bad, unequal order
- In capitalism, the commodity attempts to replace truth/beauty
- Science/technology vs Humanities, Philosophy

- Pursuit of the Highest good/truth is a “luxury”
- So, we end up with a hierarchy of truths mirrored in a social hierarchy
- In the face of social contradictions, Idealism retreats – in Aristotle
- The material world should be transformed by the truths revealed by knowledge of Ideas

- History of Idealism is the History of coming to terms with the established order
- CULTURE is that negotiation
- It mediates between Idealism and material conditions of exploitation and profiteering

Capitalist Epoch

- Universal validity of “culture”
- You are not born into labour/leisure
- You are in a pure exchange of labour and services i.e., your personal qualities/needs don't matter except as commodities
- Your higher ideas – to God, truth, leisure, beauty are tested against a universal set of values we call “culture”

Desert of the Real

- Here, sameness is essential
- Rather minute differences that ultimately produce sameness
- Fashions that produce a rhetoric of individual choice
- We basically watch the same movie again and again
- Egs. Modern day ones – Ranbir Kapoor's entire career is about watching a grown petulant boy hopefully becoming a man
- Beards, Slim Pants, Coffee, Trekking, photography, Graphic Design – Hipster

- A universally obligatory, eternally better, more valuable world must constantly be affirmed – a world removed from the facticity of daily struggles, yet realizable from **within** each individual without transforming the world
- “Civilization and Culture” – where Sublime Beauty and antagonistic relations of existence are stabilized and pacified

- Culture – Supposed to be concerned with every individual's claim to happiness
- Root of Culture – hierarchies of antagonisms
- Society reproduces itself through economic competition
- Here, happier social existence is rebellion – Maruti factory, Amazon, Bangladeshi Sweatshops, women vs goddesses, Refugees vs migrants

- Culture belongs to he who has internalized a proper mode of behaviour
- He who comprehends the truths of humanity as battle cry is a rebel (Nargis vs Satyajit Ray)
- Culture – ennobles, speaks of the dignity and freedom of man without freeing him

- Beauty and truth, contemplation and intellection then are “cultural” activities
- Both sublimated and internalized
- Neither forms allow real material conditions to change
- Culture perpetuates forms of systemic/epistemic oppression

- At the same time, culture is that which escapes the confines and language of power disrupting the narrative of political and capitalist formation.
- Such escapes are short lived, and quickly co-opted
- “Azaadi Song” – Kanhaiya Kumar, Dub Sharma, *Gully boy*



Pop art/Culture

- Popular art is not art that has attempted and failed to be real art, but art that operates within the confines of the popular
- While retaining much in common with folk art, it became an individual art, existing within a literate commercial culture

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Lecture 3: The Written Text

Good or Great Culture

- Some cultural artifacts are more valued than others
- Intrinsic aesthetic/moral/spiritual value
- Shakespeare – great because of something internal? Or have we been conditioned?
- Text is important
- Its values, and their histories, are to be questioned

- English literature departments and the colonial project
- Streamlining of certain literatures as superior to others
- Does *Meghadhoot* reflect the lives of common people? Is the language accessible to anyone but a few? Greek, Latin, Roman texts

The British

- Establish the first of the Literature departments in the country
- European aesthetic and moral values
- The analysis of Western imagination as typified by some of its luminaries: Alighieri Dante, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth

- Were Shakespeare (1564-1616), Dickens (1812-1870), Sharat Chandra (1876-1938) meant to be high literature?
- The case of India – anti-imperial move
- The anti-imperialist hero comes via Europe
- Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Vidyasagar, Tagore, Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati

- Community in crisis
- An intellectual class that is educated in the European tradition
- Looking for traditional textual evidences for current malaise
- Resurrecting ancient texts
- Valorizing European ones

- The very concept of Literature comes from this turmoil
- To unify a cultural practice, establish it as good by *European* standards
- Men of letters read, write and discuss proper literature
- Formation of middle class and right “values”

What about the rest

- Literacy, and access to literacy, gains primacy
- Other literatures – written and oral
- Middle Class vs low forms of education (kirtan, kathakathas, jatra, lavani, Parsi and Gujarati theatre)
- Regional literatures – their reach, circulation and afterlives

- Back to a hierarchy
- What experiences get a readership; who are the marginalized
- Between small regional publications and the Jaipur Lit Festival, lies a literary tradition that continues a legacy of colonialism and caste hierarchies

Battling old demons

- Rushdie – *Midnight's Children* (1981)
- Lauded as a continent finding its voice in the West
- Is there one voice? Is the voice of the continent English?
- Major literary traditions in Marathi, Tamil, Bangla, Assam, Mizoram, Kannada, Malayalam

- “World” Lit./ “Third World” Lit
- English writing from the Global South becomes representative of a nation’s literary production and identity
- Binary relationship between first and third world, us/US/Europe vs the world
- The political category of the nation
- Rushdie is the voice of “Islam” or of “India” depending on the book

Does it matter

- Lit. exists in a variegated terrain
- Does it matter, who to, why, under what circumstances?
- Why do states bother with censorship?
- Writers, poets, lyricists, stand-up comedians – arrested, banned, jailed, killed
- Gaddar, Safdar Hashmi, Taslima Nasreen, Sushmita Banerjee, even Gulzar. Manto, Faiz

Literature – Contested site

- *The Satanic Verses* (Salman Rushdie, 1988)
- Banned in India before it was banned in Iran
- Khomeini issues fatwa to kill Rushdie in 1989
- Rushdie goes into hiding in the UK
- Divided Muslims from Westerners along lines of culture
- Freedom of expression vs Blasphemy

- Who read *The Satanic Verses* ?
- English speaking and literate readership
- Very few people in Iran and India would have bothered
- Why then do states continually intervene?
- Why is power afraid of the imaginative text?
- What offends – *Kashmir Files* vs *Parzania*
- *Udta Punjab*

Two thoughts

- A thinking culture is dangerous – organic, mutative, resistant
- A cultural text is bound. All arms of the Humanities are needed to make it organic, relevant

Pride and Prejudice (1813)

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

Ajanta Deo (2019)

कौन अपनी बेटी को चिड़िया कहता है
सिर्फ चिड़िया कहने से घर आसमान नहीं हो
जाता ।