



## CULTURAL STUDIES: THE NEW ACADEMIC FASHION

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**Abstract:**

Cultural studies and Interdisciplinarity operate in a new fashion in current academics. Cultural studies expose the cultural politics of production, distribution, consumption of knowledge; it unearths how culture is represented and made a carrier of knowledge and power in a given context. Interdisciplinarity makes a simultaneous and metatextual approach to arrive at the cultural making of knowledge. In India, both cultural studies and interdisciplinarity are in rapid race amongst and across disciplines. This paper is a modest attempt to understand the dynamics of these academic new fashions and their pedagogic principles.

**Keywords:** interdisciplinarity, cultural studies, disciplines, phenomenology

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The genesis of cultural studies can be traced back to 1930's Frankfurt School in Germany and to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) of 1960s in Britain. The former associated 'culture industry' with production and circulation of knowledge, and the latter 'culture studies' with the populace; call it mass culture, popular culture or folk culture, etc. The ontology and epistemology of knowledge were being reorganised at BCCCS, while toppling the traditional hierarchy of top to bottom pyramid of knowledge. E P Thompson's "history from below" (Thompson: 1963), Richard Hoggart's autobiographical account of his city's fast and technological transformation are some of the early examples of this (Hoggart, 1957). The fast-transforming societies from rural to urban, agrarian to industrial, city to metro city, local to global, etc., were some of the compelling issues of new culture to be dealt from their cultural roots. The wall of grand culture was falling apart, and the windows of peculiar cultures were rising up. Cultural studies had to come up to tackle these issues and bridge the cleavage between intellectualism that were restricted to university classrooms and the world of problems just outside the university gate.

Critics like Stuart Hall (1992), Raymond Williams (1989), Richard Johns (1986), Ben Agger (1992), etc., have rightly pointed out several reasons for the rise of cultural studies. Broadly, the paradigm shift from positivism to post-positivism, the peculiar existentialism in New Times, the rise of New Universalism, the constant incarnations of literary criticisms and theories, the new edge creativity, proliferation of new medias, etc., have fostered the cultural studies fashion. After we are told that knowledge is a social construction, we have started investigating into the sociology/culture of knowledge, even in science and medicine. Culture is 'phenomena' for us rather than being 'noumena'. Knowledge, then, as part of a culture becomes an object of phenomena to be phenomenologically read by us. And our attempts to derive "meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads" (Hall 17). Thus, culture, for the cultural critics, is the genetic repository of a knowledge, and, with this 'cultural lens', we derive multiple meanings.

In other words, cultural studies expose the cultural politics of production, distribution, consumption of knowledge; it unearths how culture is represented and made a carrier of knowledge and power in a given context. Ben Agger puts it thus, "The radical or critical version of cultural studies is more overtly political, seeking to provide analyses and

critiques of cultural texts and institutions to empower the culturally disenfranchised into both expressive and political action" (qtd in Dickens 101).

Interdisciplinarity: The Cousin of Cultural Studies: Cultural Studies deconstructs the myths of center and periphery, and enables us to see the temporality or the mystery of structure, order and hierarchy. As for disciplines, it is anti-disciplinary, as it blurs the traditional disciplinary boundaries and promotes more collective and collaborative studies across disciplines. Stuart Hall describes cultural studies thus:

Serious interdisciplinary work involves the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is. We had to teach what we thought a kind of sociology that would be of service to people studying culture would be, something we could not get from self-designated sociologists. It was never a question of which disciplines would contribute to the development of this field, but of how one could decenter or destabilize a series of interdisciplinary fields. We had to respect and engage with the paradigms and traditions of knowledge and of empirical and concrete work in each of these disciplinary areas in order to construct what we called cultural studies or cultural theory. (Hall 16) Interdisciplinarity is our new intellectual condition and closely linked to Cultural Studies. Both of these are the intellectually fathered Siamese twins whose similarities are more than the differences. Thus, say it interdisciplinary studies or cultural studies, they are the academic conditions of our contemporary times, our postmodern conditions, as Lyotard would define. They are the urgent incarnations of our times, a kind of western *déjà vu* on Indian soil, born to tackle the peculiarly evolving social realities and experiences. As a Gramscian intervention, they aim to produce interdisciplinary knowledge, theory, and praxis. Interdisciplinarity is a conjectural practice, as Stuart Hall calls it, where we deal with more disciplines than just one.

In interdisciplinarity, we stand together with more vigorous and curious passions to learn and research-- more becomes merrier as compared to one linear march of a lonely discipline. Dealing with multiple disciplines thus defies the homogeneity and the monotonous nature of a hegemonic discipline. Interdisciplinarity is a threat to discipline, it is more anti-disciplinary than multidisciplinary as it defines any normative and hegemonic discipline.

Interdisciplinarity is thus activist in nature as it practices organic intellectualism and aims at solving than simply orating. It bridges the old

beliefs in mental labour and manual labour, and promotes critical pedagogy. In interdisciplinarity the classrooms become laboratories of social issues, and students and teachers become cultural workers as they decode the culturally encoded meaning(s) of any knowledge. Probing into any issue and deriving not just one meaning but many is the most interdisciplinarian reading and researching of our times.

If Phenomenology emphasized on the primacy of intentionality which they call as phenomenological reading of the life-world, cultural studies and interdisciplinarity pinned this intentionality to the vast and evolving domain of culture that they believed as the bedrock of any reality. Culture for them is not merely logocentric; it is a cognitive reality, an object of perceptions, intuitions, and conceptions. Culture is what people do to themselves through their senses, conscience, intuition, and actions. We need to sensitize ourselves about culture to derive the cultural meaning.

Culture is viewed as polysemic, multilayered, complex and contested, and interdisciplinarity questions the cultural binary- dominant versus residual, good versus bad, normal versus abnormal, etc. Knowledge is cultural construction, and, in interdisciplinarity, we probe into the culture or sociology of knowledge. Nothing including disciplines and subjects are beyond cultural construction.

Moreover, it is the virtuality (Dynamism) of culture which gives rise to its dynamic nature of cultural meaning. Thus, in interdisciplinarity, we look at the dynamic nature of knowledge, we pace with the changing facts, fashions and tools; we believe in inclusion of methods, tools, perspectives than in the exclusion of ideas and approaches. It is from this dynamism of knowledge, an organic ideology is born,

Interdisciplinarity comes as a tool to deconstruct this cultural meaning, i. e, production, distribution and consumption of culture-- human, posthuman, artificial, tangible or intangible knowledge. Knowledge becomes contested, relative and political- always a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Therefore, decoding the schematized practices, patterns and politics of culture actually makes a text (knowledge, history, religion, country, identity....) more meaningful and useful. Decoding the circuits of culture, as Stuart Hall calls, is the primary intention of interdisciplinarity studies.

The post-positivists such as Thomas Kuhn, Karl Raimund Popper, Karl Mannheim, Paul Feyerabend, etc, critiqued the futility of fixity, objectivity, methodology, experimentation and

espoused for cultural or sociological evaluation of knowledge, even to the extent of being anarchic in approach (anarchic science of Feyerabend). Interdisciplinarity thus is an escape from disciplinarian norms and normativity. It deals with an expanded nature of culture, making space for the de-centered or marginalized culture. It blurs the traditional elitist boundaries between mass culture, popular culture, folk culture, etc.

As we have mentioned above, interdisciplinarity has appeared an urgency in contemporary times, particularly in the wake of metamorphing realities and experiences. Back in Indian academic context, it has become more necessary to theorize, formulate and historicize the mushrooming of forms, degrees and natures of social realities. Our New Times demands for new intellectualism, as it demanded for the requirement of the new leftists in 1960s Britain. We cannot keep our classrooms away from the society outside it; we cannot ignore peoples' stakes in the university education, we cannot be ignorant to government policies and plans for students and populace. The redundancies of old syllabus and old pedagogy is the bane of our times. Technology, unemployment, poverty, politics, religion, activism, and new economics strongly seek an interdisciplinary approach to learning and training. The new theories, new lives, new kinds of creativity, and new scapes of ethnology, finance, ideology, technology, etc, as Arjun Appadurai frames, are our intellectual compulsions to deal with these from multiple and collaborative perspectives.

Interdisciplinarity is a network of scholars; it is a group work which derives its axiological importance from sharing with other disciplines. It attempts to have prismic perspectives from all angles and consider and weigh knowledge rather than merely prescribe or proscribe it. It believes in the total sum of more disciplines than just the individual sum of any particular subject.

Interdisciplinarity is also our responsibility, whether you are an academician, artist, writer, student, doctor, engineer, or anything else. Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiango, Wole Soyinka espoused this responsibility to Africans; Edward Said does this to all the postcolonial world, especially the oriental world. Even poets like R. N. Tagore and W B Yeats showed us this cultural and interdisciplinary method, though we did not practice it much under the colonial inferiority complex. Thus, we had the oppressed pedagogy, and now we need a pedagogy for emancipation. Interdisciplinarity can be more inclusive and emancipatory.

On the other hand, the carnivalesque 'life-world' (Mikhail Bakhtin) of ours enforces the immediacy

of collecting, recording, researching, and disseminating our changing cultures on our intellectual and academic exercise. Our contemporary culture is dynamic, polyphonic and political in nature. It embodies culture(s) of politics that constitute what is known as mainstream or marginal, elite or popular, inclusive or exclusive, local or glocal, intellectual or manual, etc., to mention a few binaries. Cultural studies, irrespective of being devoid any particular and prescriptive methodology, exposes the circuits of cultural/social construction of knowledge, where not only the tangible but intangible, not only human but post-human cultures are taken into account. We talk of empathy, feeling, emotions, animals, spaces, digital humanities, deep ecology, graphic novels etc., in the general ambit of cultural studies. In fact, the shift from old Marxist approach to society to new Marxist approach was based not on mere intellectualism but on moral intellectualism- the ethical accountability of intellectuals.

Our identity and existence are more of a cultural survival than biological one. Your biological existence may end with your clinical death, but the culture you lived with would never be forgotten. Culture is an ever evolving yet indelible mark on us- before and after. In culture knowledge is deliberately encoded through strategies and expectations, and aimed to be decoded, to draw our attentions not merely to the text, “but to their relations of production” (Clifford 13). Graeme Turner in his book *Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (1990) rightly puts this thus, “The processes that make us – as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race or gender – are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible” (Turner 2).

Reading culture is the primary project of cultural studies; particularly, encoding or decoding (as Stuart Hall calls) of it is the praxis of cultural studies. Culture therefore is a readerly text (Roland Barthes) but to be flirted with by the actual readers (Roman Ingarden). A reader should look into the production, consumption, regulation, identity and signification working collaboratively in circulating culture (Hall 1). And cultural studies came up at this juncture to brave into new praxes of knowledge and methods.

Back in 1960's Britain, the exponents of BCCCS realized the urgency of going cultural in their social studies. In fact, Stuart Hall admits this thus, “When cultural studies began its work in the 1960s and '70s, it had, therefore, to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself”

(Hall 15). Cultural Studies was a response to the ‘swinging sixties’ (1960's), to the old leftists, to Thatcherism, to new world order, to war, hydrogen bomb tests, to women, gay, black movements, and not to mention of the new incarnation of students protests in universities across Europe. Massification of university elites who were deaf and defiant to rising social problems outside universities, mushrooming of student ratios in universities leading to unwanted unemployment and Mosco-fication (Marx-isation) of Europe were the other three reasons that needed urgent intellectual attentions and solutions. The BCCCS came up at this juncture to apply the Gramscian model in tackling these promiscuous problems that were threat to freedom, choice, dignity and survival of many across societies. It would do well to read what Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks*:

The relationship between the intellectuals and the world of production is not as direct as it is with the fundamental social groups but is, in varying degrees, "mediated" by the whole fabric of society and by the complex of superstructures, of which the intellectuals are, precisely, the "functionaries." It should be possible both to measure the "organic quality" [organicita] of the various intellectual strata and their degree of connection with a fundamental social group, and to establish a gradation of their functions and of the superstructures from the bottom to the top (from the structural base upwards). (qtd in Roger S. Gottlieb 118)

Interestingly and contrary to the 1960's Britain, we have witnessed a steady rise of intellectualism, activism, and creativity around us, especially as it is prominently conspicuous in the social media or cyber world. AI being the most favourite matter of concern and discourse. Memes, reels, Facebook, Instagram, chat houses, etc. are the new means of social dialectics. Where do we place our traditional learning, attitude and aptitude in this virtual context? Similarly, there are intellectuals outside the educational domains who are untrained, yet equally imposing and intellectual as the traditionally trained intellectuals. We witness an alarming growth of hybrid knowledge(s) as progenies of technology and humans. The question of the hour is how do we deal and decode these liminal or hyphenated knowledge(s) that are the semiotics of life *under* computer.

Cultural Studies nevertheless has made inroad into Indian academics. There are mushrooming of centres, colleges, departments, chairs, etc., that are committed to this new fashion of cultural studies. For the Indian intellectual world, it still is a western practice, but comfortably inducted into their

academic world. Nevertheless, it has raised liberal platforms for studies and research, though there are visible disadvantages of it. It is in its adolescence in India, and yet to achieve its manhood. The last one and half decades of cultural studies in various disciplines in Indian universities and colleges refer to its teen-age problems- some praise worthy, some really naughty. We mean the advantages and disadvantages of cultural studies as a western tool and technique in Indian soil.

However, it would not be wrong to presume that we are almost tempted to give in to these alluring trends of cultural studies. But we must also learn that Cultural Studies is not just anything. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler commented on this phenomenon in their introduction to *Cultural Studies* (1992) that "cultural studies cannot be just anything. that it matters how cultural studies is defined and conceptualized" (qtd in Le Hir 76).

There is, therefore, an urgency at least in the Indian scenario to learn and practice the art and aesthetics of cultural studies. It is a reality and we cannot distance ourselves from this. The New Educational Policy of India also predominantly envisages for an open and interdisciplinary studies and learning. We thus believe that the practice of cultural studies is an escape from the orthodoxical canon, an escape from colonial construction and treatment of knowledge. Culture in its fast-shifting states is more of an imposition than a mere choice. And the best way to decolonise ourselves from such cultural colonisation is to deal with it through Cultural Studies, and to deal not from one normative discipline but together with several disciplines. It is only then we can best realise the democratic, inclusive, transformative, anti-disciplinary, and humanistic nature of Cultural Studies.

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