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The Ontology of Culture in the Post-Modern Framework

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Abstract: This paper explores the ontology of culture in the context of a postmodern framework. This framework has challenged traditionally fixed notions of identity, meaning and truth by stressing on the influence of language and power in shaping the meanings of truths and discourses. It has also questioned and uprooted the fundamentals on which the entirety of knowledge resided. Culture can be used as a pivotal lens through which these intricacies can be grasped. Thus, discussing the ontology of culture becomes an indispensable venture to decode the many-sided interplay between power, representation, and human experience. This article will primarily revolve around two questions: First, to what extent has the concept of culture changed in the contemporary era of globalization, unprecedented technological advancements and cultural pluralism? Second, how has the notion of culture changed in the post-modern framework? In its essence, post-modernism renounces dominant narratives that shape our worldviews and challenges the idea of stable meanings and fixed identities. From this standpoint, if post-modernism stays true to its essence while dealing with the concept of culture, it does seem highly likely that it played an important role in reshaping the notion of culture and turning it into a highly complex and arbitrary idea. Thus, as a case study, we have enquired how Pakistani culture has been transformed and developed at the hands of post-modern framework and how Pakistani youth is responding to the changes in their ever-evolving cultural identities.

Keywords: Culture, Post-modern Framework, Globalization, Identity, Hybrid Culture, Trans-culturation.

1. Introduction

The term 'culture' persistently refers to a profound identity marker for distinct groups of people. A group usually adheres to its own shared beliefs, practices, rituals and customs which are assumed to be followed by all of its members. Culture possesses this tendency to shape whole of an individual's life by influencing these shared norms, values, thoughts and behaviors. When an individual identifies with and participates in joint customs of a particular culture, it fosters a sense of belonging and identity in him. These shared beliefs, values and experiences connect him/her with other members thus reinforcing a sense of unity, harmony and pride. Moreover, cultural values play a significant role in an individual's perception about himself as well as others. This is how culture plays a crucial role in identity formation of a person.

George F. Hegel, one of the most influential figures of German Idealism, posits that identity is actually based on the process of recognizing and responding to differences. Cultural identities are not formed in isolation; rather they are shaped by how we see ourselves in relation to others (Hegel 1807). Herder, on the other hand, gave credit of the existence of specific cultures to their particular languages, saying that cultural identity is tied to language since each language offers and embodies a unique world-view and perspective. While defining culture, he says that wherever men have lived together as groups over a period of time, there is culture (Herder 1772).

The notion of identity is primarily relational; a complex inter play between the outer world and the inner human consciousness. It sums up the relation between the objective and the subjective, real and the ideal, and material and the spiritual. This notion of identity has existed since the beginning of cultures and dawn of self-awareness. Identity, as an immaterial construct within one's consciousness compasses personality, feelings, emotions, and attitudes, developing through an unending process of development, progress, adaptation, change, and improvement (Hall 2019).

Identity unfolds in two dimensions: psychological and social. Former contains reason, cognition, intellect, senses, and emotions, while latter, which can also be termed as the cultural dimension is about belonging to a group or groups. Culture determines the content and form of identity to a large extent. It imposes upon man his place in the world. This particular place than helps him build his particular worldview. Thus, culture reconciles one with self as well as with one's environment. Individuals draw profound sense of identity from their cultural experiences. These cultural practices play a central role in shaping their sense of selfhood.

Cultural identity can be defined as the collective awareness of a group of people, formed by a variety of cultural elements. Culture serves as a framework that organizes individuals within a community. Identity forms an essential connection with cultural indicators like religion, race, and ethnicity. Thus, identity and culture are intertwined with each other. As culture seems to have undergone a profound transformation under the influence of post-modernism, same has happened with identity. Identity is no longer a fixed and static concept.

Cultural identity provides the backbone to the ontology of any culture, thus, while exploring the ontology of culture in the post-modern framework, this paper investigates the intricacies of the relationship between meta-narratives, power dynamics, and the ever-evolving human experience. As culture both shapes and in return gets shaped by these forces, the aim of this research is to analyze how the identity landscape has evolved and changed, under the impact of fluidity offered by post-modern worldview. We aim to find out the impact of post-modern ideas and thoughts on how the Pakistani individuals (particularly youngsters) perceive their cultural identity, nowadays.

2. Evolution in Cultural Perceptions and Definitions

Culture used to be a stable and unanimously agreed upon concept during the late decades of nineteenth century as well as the early years of the twentieth century. The definition given by Edward Burnett

Taylor, in his work, 'Primitive Culture' elaborates it as "Culture, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society"(Tylor 1871). In this definition, Taylor captures the notion of culture in all its comprehensiveness and encompassing nature, which makes it clear why all the modern anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers considered it enough to follow his definition. He connected culture with human behavior and activities so strongly that for him culture might not even exist outside the boundaries of human actions. In his time, culture was a stable, established, and shared system of beliefs that gets transmitted from one generation to the other within a particular group and society.

In the recent years, since the second half of the twentieth century, the definitions and conceptions of culture have multiplied and gotten varied. Thus, in the contemporary world, culture is no longer a simple and stable concept. It has become a very complex notion because post modernity has over emphasized on the subjectivity of human experience. Kroeber and Kluckhohn in '*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and History,*' say that "culture is an abstraction from concrete human behavior, but it is not itself a behavior" (Kroeber 1952). This definition given in 1952 runs entirely counter to Taylor's explanation and thus it created a contradiction between the two extremes which then led to a hundred different interpretations of culture.

Afterwards, culture came to be understood as a learned behavior by some researchers, while for others not a behavior at all (but an abstraction from behavior). Some interpreted it as something that exists only in the mind while at the same time, for some thinkers culture consisted of observable things and events in the external world. A further complication that emerged was culture was conceived as an idea. But again there were varied responses to this conception. For some thinkers, this idea exists in the minds of people

belonging to that culture while according to some other thinkers, this idea resides in the minds of the observer.

This theory extended itself further when Seyla Benhabib suggests that culture can be viewed and defined differently depending on the observer. From the eyes of its own members, a culture is not homogenous but an amalgam of traditions, stories, rituals, and practices which they share in common with each other. But, when seen by an outsider the culture appears and is assumed as a unified whole. In the context of imperialism, she says that such a view is imposed onto the culture which makes it easier for the outsider to control it on the basis of some generalized beliefs (Benhabib 2002).

3. Cultural Unity and Discourse: Exploring Shared Social Lineages

Alan Patten said that members of one particular culture share a common experience among themselves which is different from the members of other cultures (Patten 2014). Like Hegel, he too identifies cultural identity as fundamentally based on differences and the concept of the 'other.' For him, this said experience is that of socialization, since culture is purely a social phenomenon. Culture is usually comprised of beliefs, meanings, and practices but these beliefs and practices turn in to cultural identity due to social experience and social lineage shared by the people of that culture. In other words, mere beliefs and meanings do not constitute a cultural identity but this identity is fundamentally based on the notion of 'shared common experiences.' On the other hand, it may also seem from this account that a number of formative conditions experienced by a group of people are causally connected to the creation of particular culture, but it is not that simple.

Even in such a group based on common elements, members have experiences which are purely subjective and idiocentric to them. In this context, what still makes it a culture is the presence of formative institutes and practices to which all members relate them equally and which bring them together as a group. These include educational

places, language, media, traditions, stories, rituals, and practices. The historical context attached to these institutions and practices then distinguishes one culture from the other. This as a whole provides the members with a distinct way of viewing the world and forming a particular perspective of it. It also helps them understand one another and seek solace and comfort in this understanding.

In this situation where the members have their own personal experiences along with having certain shared ones, it is unsurprising that they form a diverse range of values. Thus, Patten's view of culture is not a static one. It provides a picture of a culture that is not merely based on a set of values and beliefs; instead he designs a culture whose existence depends on its members believing themselves to be a group of people having common experiences of certain cultural institutions. This way their 'common practices' can change and go through evolution with the passage of time and change of situation but it will not change their cultural status as long as these 'changes' remain common among them.

Such a culture then requires a certain smaller group within itself that acts as a governing body for the culture and controls its institutions, as suggested by Patten. Thus, it can possibly be criticized that this group in power might not consider the agreement of the entire cultural group when it comes to creating cultural norms and practices that are supposed to be shared by all. This could easily lead to a power imbalance by the hands of the smaller group in control and might turn culture which is a purely social phenomenon, into a political mess. But this is not all, such non-static and evolving culture puts the identity of its members at risk as it leaves them confused about the exact grounds that actually identify them.

James Tully tries to introduce and establish culture as a dialogue. Culture, he says, in the face of multi-culturalism is not entirely homogenous in itself. Culture is not a static phenomenon, rather it undergoes constant change. It goes through steady transformation and reimagining by the hands of its own members and through interaction

with other cultures (Tully 1995). In this way, we can conclude that the identity and meaning of cultures have several aspects, instead of having one essentially particular meaning. Since culture is a social human phenomenon, so just like humans and almost everything related to them, it too is inherently complex in itself.

This view appears in contrast with the previous one as instead of subtracting a smaller group to determine the cultural meaning and practices, all the members of the culture appear as its author. Culture here is not handed to them from somewhere above. On the contrary, it comes to them in the form of dialogue and engagement between members which make the members the source of extracting cultural values. Here, the values and basis of the culture are under constant negotiation without making them any less meaningful.

Introducing such blurred and confused lines, Tully even allows a member to attach and detach himself from the culture when he feels like it and such a notion makes things questionable on obvious grounds. Let us have a look at the extent to which Kroeber and Kluckhohn took the concept of culture by calling it an abstraction. We would like to add that the problem is that they do not know what they themselves mean by 'abstraction' and could not define it. Hence, as an abstraction, culture becomes invisible and imponderable. It loses its boundaries and binding force, which makes it fluid and uncontrolled.

4. Globalization and Cultural Hybridity

Globalization is not only marked by the exchange of goods, services and commodities; it is also remarkably spreading information, trends and ideas. This phenomenon is at the heart of intermingling of diverse cultures and resultantly creating an impression of a single global culture, thus making this world a shrunken single community i.e. global village. This collision of different cultures has created a unique amalgamation of different practices, beliefs and traditions; which has given rise to a phenomenon called 'Cultural hybridity'. Its affects can be witnessed not only in the growing dominance of English language,

our cuisine, and the way we carry fashion but are also evident even in our belief systems.

4.1 Cultural Hybridity

The above mentioned fluid and ‘evolving’ notions of culture together with the current state of our globalized world, gives birth to the concept of a ‘hybrid culture.’ Cultural hybridity refers to the dynamic blending and intricate fusion of different cultural elements, like practices and symbols, thus resulting in the creation of new and unique expressions that go beyond traditional boundaries.

This situation has fostered the emergence of hybrid identities and truly depicts the complexities of a globalized world. In this more connected cosmopolitan world cultural boundaries have become porous due to the frequent interaction between people belonging to different corners of the world. This Cultural hybridity can be considered as an expression of an increasingly globalized world in which individuals and communities are rapidly embracing diversity and forging new blended identities.

4.2 Ontology of Globalization

Manfred Steger explains that globalization is about shifting forms of human contact and the term refers to a set of social processes that are assumed to transform our current social condition into one of globality. By ‘globality,’ he means, a social condition which is characterized by the existence of global economy, politics, culture, and environmental interconnections which make most of the currently present borders and boundaries irrelevant. Globalization is driven by advancement in technology, communication, transportation, and the liberalization of trade and investment. This leads to the creation of a global network that transcendent national borders and facilitates the flow of goods, services, capital, information, and ideas across the globe. In addition, it has also fostered cultural exchange and the intermingling of diverse traditions and lifestyles.

Anthony Giddens defines globalization as a process in which social and economic relations become detached from local contexts and are restructured on a global scale. He argues that this process is driven by the expansion of capitalist markets and the rise of new information technologies that allow for greater communication and exchange across borders. It is a political, technological, and cultural phenomenon which contrary to the popular belief cannot be just confined to its economic aspect. Globalization is not just about the outer world or the landscapes that are remote and far away from a local individual. It is very much of an internal thing as well as we see it influencing the very private and intimate aspects of our personal lives (Giddens 1990). It is presented as a thesis that now we all live in one world. A new form of world interdependence where there are no 'others'. Derrida explains globalization as a process through which the world is transformed into a single entity that is governed by a set of universal values and norms (Derrida 1998).

4.3 Pakistani Culture

In the contemporary world, culture is no longer just about language, food, beliefs, and rituals but a major part of it is about media and the sources of entertainment and information. With this understanding in mind, the effects of globalization on culture (in the general sense of the word) and in particular on Pakistani culture have become easy to be comprehended. The globalization of media and its incalculable influence, together with some key historic events of the past (significantly colonialism) has given rise to transculturation which is the exchange and blending of cultural elements between different groups and societies. The blending between so many aspects of Pakistani and Indian culture is one such example; for instance, the wedding ceremonies. Thus, because of this transculturation, hybrid cultures have come into existence.

Homi Bhabha claimed that as there is a space in between the designation of identity, so this space between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity. He pointed out that this hybridity entertains cultural differences within a single community or

a group without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha 1994). With the global spread of cultural products especially that of popular culture (movies, music, television shows, and digital content), Pakistani people too have come to engage with diverse cultural experiences and this interaction has resulted in a seamless and welcoming adoption and incorporation of these cultural elements into their own identities and practices.

Bhabha argued that this mixing of cultural practices does not give more power to a certain cultural and there is no hierarchy among them. The two cultures reconcile and coincide with each other and coexist without a power tussle. We would like to disagree with this point of Homi Bhabha because it is very clear that American culture has taken over a decisive lead over other cultures in shaping the world we live in today and to be very precise, we cannot call it reconciliation (Harrison 2000).

Social media also play a due role in the formation of hybrid cultures by creating platforms for global conversations and interactions. This virtual interconnectedness and interaction among people gives rise to the emergence of new cultural expressions that are a blended picture of multiple sources. An example of hybrid culture is the rise of k-pop across the entire globe. In the early 2000s, it started as a genre of music and television shows and now it has managed to expand itself into a global phenomenon with the help of media. What started as music has now developed into the entirety of entertainment industry along with fashion and beauty. In addition to its massive international following, Pakistani youngsters are also part of this sensational global community of 'k-pop fans.'

Many a youth across the globe, including Pakistani youngsters consider social media, Netflix and Spotify etc as a part of their identity and major portion of their daily life is influenced by what they see over screens. What they see over screens is what they usually aspire to be. Girls want to look like on-screen models for dual reasons. First: because media has successfully propagated that looks

matter the most whether in pursuing your career or hunting a spouse. Second: because boys too wish to have a westernized girl who is capable of keeping up with the latest trends. An individual who is spending most of his time on screen has no way to know about his indigenous culture and its values. The global culture itself which is the product of globalization is hybrid in nature and has managed to alter the indigenous cultural practices and routines across the globe.

5. Role of Postmodernism in Changing Narratives about Culture

The term 'post-modernism' first surfaced in the field of Philosophy during second half of the twentieth century along with Jean Francois Lyotard's pamphlet. Before this, it was a more local term that had remained in the circle of literature since a very long and non-presumable time. Its emergence in Philosophy gave it the universal importance that it relishes in today. The 'post' in post-modernism has almost nothing to do with temporality, so it cannot be said that post-modernism strictly comes after modernism; though it can be its consequence. Modernism did not get replaced by post-modernism, instead the two now coexist.

Simply, post-modernism can be understood as a phenomenon of deconstruction and rejection of met narratives which could either be religious or liberal. Lyotard explains that that it can be characterized by 'incredulity towards meta-narratives (Lyotard 1984). Meta-narratives refer to grand, all- encompassing theories or systems of thought that try to provide a comprehensive explanation of history, progress, or truth. As Lyotard argues, post-modernism rejects these meta-narratives as totalizing and oppressive and instead emphasizes on the significance and validity of fragmented nature of knowledge in contemporary society.

Lyotard suggests that in the post-modern world, knowledge is no longer based on a single, universal foundation, but on a plurality of 'language games' and discourses. These language games are local narratives that work on their own rules, criteria, and modes of validation. In the absence of a meta-narrative and the emerging

plurality of local and personal narratives, post-modern framework can be explained as an emphasis on performativity, where knowledge is evaluated on the basis of its ability to perform a function and values are replaced on practical utility. Along with this, the nature of post-modernism refers to the mode of thinking that stands against established norms and challenges the existing discourses.

In the context of media and popular culture, Jean Baudrillard argues that in the post-modern world, reality and its representation (which is done through media outlets) have become indistinguishable due to the prevalence of simulacra. By 'simulacra' he means copies or reproductions that bear no relation to any underlying reality. He adds that in this post-modern society, the signifiers (images, symbols, signs) have detached themselves from their origins and have become independent entities which has created a hyper-real environment (Baudrillard 1981).

Post-modernism is where simulation has replaced reality, and the people are entirely immersed in a hyper-reality. This has made us lose touch with the real and allow edus to be consumed by world of simulated experiences and desires. So, the media and social media content that was supposed to 'represent' culture has become the culture in the post-modern era. Because the simulacra that it produces are taken as real and the truth in the absence of a meta-narrative. Baudrillard calls this:

"The dissolution of TV into life, and the dissolution of life into TV.

John Fiske in agreement with Baudrillard adds that post-modern media does not give a 'secondary representation' of reality and instead it produces the reality which is mediate. Thus, in the post-modern times, all the events that 'matter' are media events (Fiske 1994). With this understanding of post-modern framework, the previous debate on the change in the conceptions and definitions of culture becomes more comprehensible.

With the emergence of post-modernism and the rejection of universal, and singular meta-narrative that came with it, it is hardly surprising that it reformed our established notions, including that of culture. The diversity in the understanding and interpretation of culture started from the twentieth century, which temporally connects with the period of surfacing of post-modernism. Thus, when Taylor's definition of culture got rejected and a refusal arose in accepting just one explanation of culture, the plurality of narratives and definitions came into being.

In the absence of a singular explanation of culture, the terms such as 'abstraction,' 'dialogue,' and 'social lineage' appeared as a proposed definition of culture and gave rise to a hundred different interpretations of the concept which led to the arbitrariness regarding it. Refusal of a static understanding of culture gave birth to definitions that revolved around a culture that was complex, dynamic and could evolve at an unprecedented pace, making its boundaries fluid, blurred and virtually invisible. The separation of culture from human behavior was an added layer to the changing narratives about culture brought about by post-modernism.

This, along with the globalization of media and globalization in general, made possible the existence of hybrid cultures, transculturation, and the mixing of cultural elements on the global scale. Further, the abundance of 'hyper-real simulations' by the hands of popular urban media outlets facilitated the formation of as many 'cultures' as possible along with their global spread. Not only the plurality of narratives about culture increased and spread far and wide, but they were also taken as real and true because of the hyper-real environment made by simulations. Thus, post-modernism staying true to its nature and essential character has managed to deconstruct a single universal and static narrative of culture and has replaced it with as many narratives as possible with no consensus between them.

As a result of which, hybrid cultures, cultural relativity, and the grand scale of acceptance for popular culture have not only come into

existence but has also established themselves with full vigor and strength. Pakistani culture is of no exception. It has largely been influenced by the popular culture and majority of Pakistani youth is under its spell with full heartiness. They think it an indispensable part of their progress and prosperity. Many of the traditional values are being ignored. The way the youth likes to dress up and the inferiority complex associated with speaking in the regional languages are only few instances of how the cultural identity is no longer an issue.

In light of these arguments, this can be carefully remarked as another triumphant success of capitalism as the notions of identity and culture now no longer hold their significance in themselves. Rather both of these are being shaped through mass consumerism providing all the benefits to the capitalists. As this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper and needs another full research article, we would suffice by concluding that the traditional notion of culture has undergone a significant transformation in the contemporary global world and the fluidity offered by post-modern framework has provided it the room to be turned as an arbitrary idea, in the sense of being open to many varying (sometimes even contradictory) interpretations.

6. Conclusion

In the post mid-20th century era, a decisive shift about the perceptions regarding the ontology of culture has occurred. Culture is no longer conceived as a static phenomenon which is directly linked to the human behavior. Instead, now the emphasis is on its intricate and ever-evolving nature. This profound shift is largely attributed to the influence of post-modern school of thought. The framework suggested by post-modern thought elevates culture to a philosophical abstraction. Culture when taken as an abstraction is no longer a direct result of human actions. As a consequence, cultural identities underwent a significant alteration, becoming increasingly fluid and clueless. The rise of social media, enhancement of globalization, and flexibility offered by post-modern frameworks together contributed to this shift in the ontology of culture.

Recognizing the challenges posed by post-modernism in our globalized world is crucial and undeniably vital. In these times, there is a pressing need for in-depth research to navigate potential solutions, mitigating confusion, and preserving diverse cultural identities in this ever-evolving landscape. Such an exploration can offer feasible solutions for alleviating the perplexity surrounding cultural identities, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious coexistence in our diversified and globalized world.

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