

essay

Cultural Studies in the Metropolitan Academy

by Azfar Hussain

WHAT HAS COME TO BE KNOWN—and also celebrated—as “cultural studies” today in the metropolitan academy owes a great deal to, and also significantly departs from, Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1958). A British Marxist cultural critic and theorist, Williams underwrites and undertakes a thoroughgoing study of popular and mass culture—newspapers, magazines, radio, film, television, popular song, etc.—in an attempt to contest and dismantle long-valorized binary and hierarchical oppositions between “high” culture and “low” culture. Indeed, Williams’s famous formulation that “culture is ordinary” worked well to the extent of generating—first in Britain and later in the United States—numerous other discourses concerned with the ordinary—discourses which have by now earned the name “cultural studies.” Thus it is widely believed that cultural studies began in the sixties in Britain. Indeed, today, the scale and scope of such discourses have only remarkably expanded in the metropolitan academy to the point that “cultural studies” truly turns out to be, what Bourdieu calls, “cultural capital”—capital that has meanwhile found many areas of investment on a global scale. Cultural studies, thus, is also considered a “prestigious” academic engagement much in the way that “theory” is. In fact, in many instances, cultural studies has been subsumed under “theory” itself, and has certainly drawn inspiration and resources from the well-known *post-trinity*—postmodernism-poststructuralism-postcolonialism.

Now, whether or not Williams “fathered” cultural studies is a question that cannot be readily answered with a “yes” or a “no,” simply because many of Williams’s later formulations, including the one that culture is ordinary, are unmistakably Gramscian. But one notices that when Anthony Easthope writes a history of cultural studies in Britain, he remains virtually silent on Williams’s Gramscian inheritance, and, thus, on the crucial difference between Gramscian “cultural studies” and the contemporary discursive *jouissance* produced, packaged, and circulated from the metropolis in the name of Gramsci himself. Such silence, of course, cannot be explained away as merely “accidental,” because, as we will see later, certain silences produced and reproduced by metropolitan discourses are profoundly implicated in those larger ideological-political spaces that characterize the metropolis itself. But before we turn to those spaces, it would be useful to look at certain developments that have so far significantly mobilized cultural studies in the metropolitan academy.

While the work of Raymond Williams is usually considered as having its initial impact upon the study of the ordinary and the everyday, the journal called *Screen*, primarily devoted to film-theory, deserves special mention here. This journal, for instance, published the works of such British critics as Colin McCabe and Jacqueline Rose, among others. Although their works were concerned with film, they aimed at what might be called a *discursive chutnification*, as exemplified in their attempts to perform a

special kind of wedding of Louis Althusser (the French (post)structuralist Marxist) with Jacques Lacan (the post-structuralist psycho-semiotician). Thus, when Marxism and psychoanalysis were brought together on the terrain of poststructuralist semiotics, a “sophisticatedly complex” discourse was born with the consequence that it became—and still remains—a source of textual pleasure to those who are interested in studying “the ordinary.” Ah, pleasures of the text!

Thus, while responding to developments of structuralism and poststructuralism, “cultural studies,” from the very beginning, began to develop methodologies and strategies—predominantly hermeneutic—that privilege the textual, rather than the intertextual, at the expense of what Gramsci would call “concrete events” that, according to him, constitute the “real dialectics of history.” Certainly, the birth of an intertextual free economy—an economy in which the dictum of “only connect” works very well in the sense that you can, for instance, find connections between a Foucault and a news-vendor in Gullistan any day—is one of poststructuralism’s major contributions. And it is this very contribution that cultural studies, right from the beginning, did not merely recognize but also appropriated, again with varied pleasures of the text.

Here, of course, by no means I am trying to pooch-pooch the entire project of *Screen* or the works of Colin McCabe *et al.*, simply because they initiated—and strengthened, to an extent—the *energeia* of “reading” culture in such a way that enables one to deconstruct traditional hierarchies and orders kept alive by capitalism and patriarchy. For instance, in his 1974 essay called “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses,” McCabe deconstructs the “classic realist text” in an attempt to show how “this kind of text” is complicit with the capitalist-patriarchal ideology of ensuring “the position of the subject in a relation of dominant specularly.” Indeed, as far as “reading” is concerned, McCabe’s gesture is politically positive. The point becomes even more obvious when one looks at yet another *Screen* essay called “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by Laura Mulvey, first published in 1975. Here I would endorse Easthope’s point that Mulvey has effectively engineered a whole body of feminist discourses, contributing to what might be called “feminist cultural studies.” Already in her 1974 book called *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Mulvey significantly took up the issue of the gendering of the gaze, as summed up in her famous formulation: “Woman as image, man as bearer of the look.” Although this formulation has hitherto been variously contested, even by Mulvey herself in her “Afterthoughts,” it inspired other important work in feminist cultural studies in the eighties. I would particularly mention Jacqueline Rose’s *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986) and Griselda Pollock’s *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (1988).

But the point I am trying to make here is this: despite various poststructuralist-postmodernist hermeneutical strategies adopted by “cultural studies”



A conference on cultural studies at Washington State University

from the very beginning, many—if not all—versions of cultural studies, emanating from the metropolis, have ended up *fetishizing the textual*. Of course, I do not intend to undermine the need for critical—or even deconstructive—textual readings because I believe they can be effectively politically used against capitalism and patriarchy, but when, as in many cultural studies projects today, the political itself is reduced to the merely textual (and when “history” itself turns out to be an open-ended field of discourses celebrating the undecidables or the play of signifiers), I begin to see certain dangers. Indeed, the birth of cultural studies in the sixties, its massive expansion throughout the seventies and the eighties, and its near-canonization in the metropolitan academy in the nineties, if taken together, keep clinching the point that the pleasure of the text is more important than a praxis-oriented politics rooted in specific, concrete historical realities. In the kind of intertextual free-economy engineered by Eurocentric, text-centric poststructuralism and increasingly appropriated in the domain of metropolitan cultural studies, “radicalism” has often been accomplished in the name of *textual chutnification*. For instance, for many, the question that becomes appealing is this—what would be the effect if a bit of a Lacan and a bit of a Derrida, along with a bit of a Marx and a bit of an Althusser, are textually cooked together with spices drawn from a Lyotard and a Baudrillard? Certainly you would get something out of it—something perhaps exciting, but what remain mostly neglected in this process are the specific, historical sites—the sites of class-gender-race—that make the production of those discourses possible. In other words, “textual chutnification” of the kind I’m speaking of tends to preclude the possibility of any praxis-oriented micropolitics in favour of the oppressed, although postmodernist-poststructuralists involved in cultural studies are never tired of talking of “politics” (rather “the politics of the text.” Ah, politics!).

Now, Gramsci, the Italian Marxist-Leninist activist and theorist, has also been variously and playfully appropriated in contemporary metropolitan cultural studies. For Gramsci, “culture” certainly constitutes an extremely important area of intervention in that his interest lies in initiating a “cultural revolution” that would create a “new socialist culture” through a concrete, site-based, class-and-gender-oriented politics and praxis. For him, certainly, “reading” is also important; but what is equally—perhaps more—important is

the historicization—and the concretization, if you will—of that reading in such a way that would immediately involve what Gramsci calls “vital action” geared towards creating a socialist culture within a given “historic bloc.”

But, indeed, it is a kind of irony that numerous versions of cultural studies are today endlessly invoking Gramsci. True, Althusser earlier provided a source of textual excitement (in the sixties and seventies); now it is Gramsci who is being endlessly celebrated. Even a cursory glance at the current works of Stuart Hall (including the early Hall of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham), Bennett-Mercer-Woolacott, Laclau and Mouffe, and Marcia Landy immediately reveals the point I am trying to make. But why is Gramsci so attractive to them? And, more importantly, what kind of Gramsci? I would argue that while the Gramsci of anti-positivist and anti-foundationalist cultural criticisms is happily welcome in the metropolis, the Gramsci of the organized, organic, programmatic struggle for socialism/communism remains entirely neglected. For, to speak of the latter kind of Gramsci would simply be a scandal in the area of cultural studies by now caught up in the ideological-political spaces of poststructuralism-postmodernism that now routinely resist “programs and parties” (recently the Prince of Deconstruction in the guise of the Prince of Denmark—i.e., Derrida appearing as a Hamlet in *Specters of Marx*—gleefully dispensed with the need for any political party as such). Moreover, in poststructuralist-postmodernist kind of cultural studies, to speak of the Gramsci of the organized cultural struggle for socialism/communism would amount to resurrecting the ghost of the Enlightenment project/metanarrative of emancipation (any such narrative is a deadly sin in postmodernism). Therefore, three cheers for a Gramsci minus his commitment to socialism/communism! And three cheers for a Gramsci who can be unproblematically appropriated in cultural studies as a “postmodernist”!

While such “cheers” generally, if not exclusively, characterize the pleasure of the texts fetishized by the general economy of contemporary metropolitan cultural studies, some members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was established at the University of Birmingham in 1964 under the directorship of Richard Hoggart, evinced, at least initially, a certain commitment to what might be called “the politics of commitment” itself.

Stuart Hall is undoubtedly a case in point. One can also think of the early Richard Johnson, if not the Johnson of “What is Cultural Studies Anyway?” (a manifesto of cultural studies published in the USA in 1987). But, over time, and with increasingly experimental discursive transactions with postmodernism-poststructuralism, the politics of commitment that we saw earlier in cultural studies has today turned more toward the pleasure of playfulness than toward anything else.

Now, in the United States, “cultural studies” emerged as a “cutting-edge” field of discourses during the 1980s and 1990s, primarily among university intellectuals and critics on the left. Cultural studies programmes have by now been established at many American universities. Such programs at universities like Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Duke, Syracuse, Carnegie-Mellon, Columbia, Cornell, Minnesota, for instance, have meanwhile earned international reputation. Certain new journals also appeared, and have been promoting cultural studies since their appearance: *Cultural Critique*, *Differences*, *Representations*, *Social Text*, *Cultural Studies*, for example. The purpose of *Cultural Critique*—a journal that was founded in 1985 at the University of Minnesota—at least sounded well: “[to study] received values, institutions, practices, and discourses in terms of their economic, political, social, aesthetic, genealogical, constitutions, and effects.” As Vincent Leitch points out, “In the North American setting, cultural studies aspired to be a new discipline but served as an unstable meeting point for various interdisciplinary feminists, Marxists, literary and media critics, postmodern theorists, social semioticians, rhetoricians, fine arts specialists, and sociologists and historians of culture.”

One would do well to recall here the contribution of Robert Scholes, considered as “one of the more influential American literary proponents of cultural studies.” Indeed, the liberal Scholes of *Textual Power* (1985) argued that “we must stop ‘teaching literature’ and start studying-texts.” While Scholes at least made some sense in questioning and unsettling “literature” as the only privileged discursive category (many poststructuralists and postmodernists—and certainly Marxists—also already did so), he nevertheless ended up reifying or fetishizing textuality, even when he decidedly moved from an apolitical structuralism to “an increasingly political textual (cultural) studies steeped in poststructuralist thought,” simply because while structuralism encourages one form of textual fetishism, poststructuralism does another.

Now what about contemporary “post-colonial” cultural studies that has also been circulating from the metropolis? While many argue, following Homi Bhabha, that postcolonialism is a radical political rewriting of postmodernism-poststructuralism, others think—following Arif Dirlik, Aijaz Ahmad and Anne McClintock—that “postcolonialism” is very much complicit with those versions of poststructuralism and postmodernism that are blind to the problems of national(ist) struggles, contemporary global capitalism, and class-politics. Certainly,

“postcolonialism” does not designate a singular body of discursive and political practices, simply because numerous versions of postcolonialism are still emanating from different geographical spaces with different political inflections and agenda, or simply because there is a difference between a Spivak’s “postcolonialism” and an Arjo Ali Matubbar’s, for instance.

But, then, what might be called “metropolitan postcolonial cultural studies”—as can be represented by the established *poco-trinity*, namely Said-Spivak-Bhabha—generally does not seem to celebrate the general economy of textual fetishism we’ve been talking about so far. The Said of *The World, the Text and the Critic*, for instance, already exhibited his kind of critical resistance to European poststructuralist textuality (Said used Gramsci here by foregrounding a plea for the worlding of texts as events); Spivak has by now significantly moved from a deconstructionist kind of textuality to a rigorously politicized space of the “gendered subaltern” and “identity-talk,” while Bhabha is still proposing his kind of postcolonial counterhegemonic project in the metropolis. But the problem still lies in the fact that all three of them, despite their different discursive engagements with Gramsci, have taken “cultural studies” more as a “radical” but marketable hermeneutic than as a means to a praxis-oriented politics that would aim at initiating the process of creating “a new socialist culture.” In other words, for Said-Spivak-Bhabha, Gramsci is certainly very much alive in “cultural studies,” while the very Gramsci of “commitment to socialism” remains almost entirely ignored.

If it is true that the production of traces is also the production of silences, then the “radical” traces of metropolitan postcolonialism tend to create spots of silences that, on a careful reading, point up certain levels of dangerous complexities in the ideology of what Jameson calls, invoking Mandel, “late capitalism.” Of course, certain versions (I’m not speaking of all) of postcolonialism-poststructuralism-postmodernism—and cultural studies encouraged and energized by that *post-trinity*—serve the purpose of late capitalism well by silencing “the committed, socialist other” (represented, in this specific case, by the silencing of that very Gramsci who is a classic Leninist instance of a life-long commitment to communism) in the very late capitalist space itself.

Discourses do travel, as Said himself once pointed out, and many discourses have meanwhile travelled from the metropolis to our part of the world. And, indeed, certain versions of “cultural studies,” too, have been travelling for quite some time now. While one can draw some insights from such studies, one also needs to see critically if such studies can be appropriated in a cultural context where there is no alternative to “politics and positions” against patriarchy, late capitalism, imperialism, and various forms and forces of (neo)colonialism. Indeed, how long can we afford to have that very postmodernist pleasure of the text—or the pleasure of playing with those undecidables—that would not let us stand anywhere?

exhibitions

"Dhaka" will Try the Best, Perhaps

By Ekram Kabir

THERE'S A NEW ART OUTLET IN town at Dhaka Art Centre at Kalabagan. The journey started on June 23 accompanying a bunch of to-a-great-extent art giants' works as the gallery's first exhibition which winds up today (Saturday, July 5). The initiators — Shaiful Bari and Rafique Islam — of this showroom are true when they say that there's a need for more galleries in the country for promoting the artists. In matters of promoting artists, Islam has been writing on the country's painters; and now that he has been able to establish a gallery, his long-cherished dream, he should be more than happy. It was invariably a wise move on his part, since “art-entrepreneurship” is in vogue in Dhaka and likely to stay in the future.

Alongside the connoisseurs — majority of whom want to be enchanted by realistic works — it is apparent that an increasing number of art collectors has been created. They are replacing posters with paintings. And surely, the galleries have played a significant role in this respect. Appreciable, indeed.

But art seems to be an uncanny word in this part of the world, especially in Dhaka: if any creative-minded person

(with no malevolence to the artists) comes up with an off-beat idea in addition to some manoeuvring on canvases, it will definitely turn out to be a piece of “art-work”. It does not have to be in layman’s way who very much wants to be under a magic spell simply by looking at the pieces hung on the walls of any gallery.

The nine modern artists — Mohammad Kibria, Monirul Islam, Mahmudul Haque, Hamiduljaman Khan, Shahid Kabir, Abdus Satter, Abdus Shakoor Shah, Mohammad Younus and Rokeya Sultana — have, however, come a long way in their own pursuits in this field, making Bangladesh’s presence felt in painter-rich nations of the world. All of them procured international prominence; some of them even living and practicing art abroad. They all are acclaimed painters whom the younger ones try to emulate.

Since none of the painters were available at the expo-site, one can only speculate.

As far as the inventive values are concerned, every one of them is praiseworthy in his/her own medium and themes. But there’s another side, aesthetic, absence of which strongly felt (as

a layman, of course). Take the *Untitled* of Mohammad Kibria (after a long time he has participated in any group show), which the artist completed just the day before the exhibition set forth and whom Rafique terms as a *Shilpa Guru*. Is out and out a “mannerist” work on nature. If any onlooker starts his or her round in the gallery with this piece of art, it is very unlikely that s/he will stop in front of it and think about it. The entire backdrop in gray pigments and a lump of the same in a corner do not always speak of anything.

On the other hand, Mahmudul Haque’s *Untitled One*, also a post-impressionistic piece gives a soothing hypnotic effect, only because of the colour used on it. It is near-realistic work, with only water and sky, which feels like silent like a winter frog. But yet, it disturbs — the vertical white patch in the middle of the sky is not understandable. Well, may be, he tried to balance it with the horizon, because there’s another similar stroke of brush at the left. This could be explained as pure geometry.

There was only a female painter among the group — Rokeya Sultana. Her ‘Madonna’ series, a quest for human fer-

tility and motherhood, was present on three of her print-works. And unlike others, these three were not in an urban setting. She has been working on this theme for quite some time in which she has been more than successful. But one of her work titled *Drawing*, a sketch, has received more appraisals than her Madonnas with moons. The impressionistic mindset does not cloud her works.

Group exhibitions are always difficult to write on: if you are going to dwell on all the nine of them (which you very much want to) but space constraint in the paper does not permit you to do so.

Answering to the question why Dhaka Art Centre was displaying the works of only Dhaka-based artists, Rafique said: “Firstly, it is associated with the very name of the ‘gallery’, but we do have plans to invite artists from all over the country; we are even planning to arrange exhibitions of students from different Charukala Institutes of the country.”

While trying to attract local buyers, according to the initiators, Dhaka Art Centre will follow what is best for the painters of Bangladesh. But they better bring in more female artists next time.

poem

When I am Fifty-four

by Shakil Kasem

Will we stare at ceilings
of lonely hotel rooms
too afraid to take the lift
twenty two floors below?

Will clothes and consciousness
lie in disarray, while
Tokyo or New York blinks
forbidding lights through the window?

Consoles might be whispering,
but only sad music;
bourbon will continue to be on the rocks,
but at \$20, not a cheap shot.

The world shall be shut out,
as doorbells would not ring.
Conversations with the mirror
would still result in the usual nick on the chin.

Abstractions shall scrawl themselves
across the Bob Dylan skies;
since telephones won't be answered
messages shall cluster in the breeze.

In the bar, they will come and go,
but Eliot will be remembered by few,
we the cynical and drunk
will continue to bore.

We shall ignore the nuts,
and chew on memories instead
unconvinced, uptight and very sad
will tomorrow be another day?

