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Course Material

Department of English and Modern European Languages

M.A. - SEMESTER II

Dr S M Mirza

Paper VI : Readings in Literary Criticism

Unit I : Classical Theory

M. H. Abrams : Orientation to Critical Theories

Unit III : Marxism, Feminism, Post-Colonialism and Cultural Studies

Edmund Wilson : 'Marxism and Literature'

Elaine Showalter: 'Towards a Feminist Poetics'*

Homi Bhabha : 'The Other Question'

Stuart Hall : 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'

Dear Students, Hello.

I have already provided you material for Homi Bhabha's 'The Other Question'

I'm providing you course material below for **Stuart Hall's 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'** so that you can understand it and prepare your answers for the exam.

With this, I have completed your course.

In case you have any doubts you can contact me on phone or send queries to my email.

All the best!

Stuart Hall : 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'

Biographical Note

--Stuart Hall was a Jamaican-British academic, writer and cultural studies pioneer, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1932 and died in London, aged 82 , in February 2014.

-- Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams are considered as the founding fathers of Cultural Studies.

-- Hall is a Marxist, and one of the founders of the influential journal *New Left Review*.

-- Hall was also involved in the Black Arts Movement.

-- Film directors John Akomfrah and Isaac Julien looked upon him as role model. Remember: The essay under discussion talks about Caribbean films at length.

-- The Guardian writes: **Hall was always among the first to identify key questions of the age, and routinely sceptical about easy answers.**

-- Cultural studies identifies cultural forms and analyzes them in relation to power and politics.

Important Books by Hall:

Hall, Stuart (2016). *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*.

Hall, Stuart (2017). *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and other essays*.

Hall, Stuart (with Bill Schwarz) (2017). *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*.

Publication

Stuart Hall's seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" was published in 1996.

Overview

Stuart Hall says that there are two ways in which 'cultural identity' can be explained. The first is the essentialist definition that is based on similarities found in a group of people. However, there is another way in which 'cultural identity' can be defined which depends on similarities and differences as perceived in an imagined cultural group. For Hall, the second definition is more useful as it helps us understand that **'the historical and social contingency of identity.'**

Notes and Analysis

- In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Hall explores the question of cultural identity and its representation. He does so while discussing the emerging Caribbean cinema in which 'black identity' and 'black subjects' are made centre of focus.

- Hall confesses that his examination of the related themes of cultural identity and diaspora has been determined by personal reasons.
- He was born in Jamaica and then went to Britain on a scholarship before permanently settling and becoming an important academic and pioneer of culture studies. So questions pertaining to cultural identity had always been of utmost importance to him.
- He points out that Cultural identity and diaspora are simultaneously as political, historical and personal.
- Hall explores two concepts of “cultural identity.” The first is based on an essentialist definition that emphasizes the similarities that purportedly comprise the “oneness”, the underlying essence, of “a people”. It is this identity that practices of representation, such as cinema, seek to (re-)discover, excavate and articulate.
- The second definition of “cultural identity” emphasizes the similarities and the differences amongst an imagined cultural group – such as “The Black Triangle” of Africa, the United States, the Caribbean and the United Kingdom.
- These groups are supposed to have similarities in their histories and ancestries but whose past as “a people” contains ruptures due to “the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.
- As a historical materialist, Hall emphasizes that identity is contingent and not ahistorical or fixed.
- However, he takes ideas about identity, representation and race more seriously and is concerned with them more centrally than in many historical materialists accounts that focus more exclusively on class and class consciousness.
- Hall argues that we cannot comprehend the trauma of “the colonial experience” by using the first essentialist definition but we can by using the second definition, which emphasizes historical and social contingency.

- The Power and Creativity of Essentialism -
Essentialist conceptualizations of identity claim there is an authentic cultural identity, a “true self”, which “people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common”.

--The “oneness” this definition purports is understood to be a “stable, unchanging and continuous [frame] of reference and meaning” that reflects the general, shared cultural codes and common historical experiences of “a people”.

--Within the boundaries of this definition, the “authentic” cultural identity is understood to be hidden underneath or obfuscated by “more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’”. “Authentic” cultural identity, this shared essence, is foundational to “a people”; it is the unwavering truth that lies “beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history”.

--While Hall questions the essentialist definition of “cultural identity”, he cautions against neglecting or underestimating “the powerful and creative force” motivating the rediscovery of “hidden histories” and the content of what is “found” in these “rediscoveries” .

--He points out that the excavation of “hidden histories” has provided motivation and an organizational logic to much feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial art and activism.

In the world of art, he suggests, it is essentialist understandings of cultural identity that cinematic representations often seek to dig up, mourn the loss of and romanticize. It is this formulation that played the muse for the Negritude movement and the Pan-African political project. The essentialist understanding of cultural identity also played a motivational and organizational role in anti-colonial struggles, such as the Algerian revolution, and continues to inspire national and transnational art and activism.

Notwithstanding this “powerful and creative force”, however, Hall argues that the act of “rediscovery” is ultimately “an act of imaginary reunification”.

Such acts “[impose] an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas”.

Cinema and photographic practices achieve this “[imposition of] an imaginary coherence” amongst “the peoples of The Black Triangle”, for instance, by representing or conceptualizing Africa as the centre, “the missing term”, that gives meaning and coherence to a purported underlying black cultural identity.

Such representations of cultural identities of diaspora ignore the practical experiences of “ruptures and discontinuities” experienced in the diaspora.

But, for Hall, such representations of “imaginary reunification” are significant in beginning to heal “the rift of separation, the ‘loss of identity’” caused by colonialism, transportation, and slavery.

These representations are resources of identity and of resistance intended to and, in fact, strategically used to combat and to reinterpret “the fragmented and pathological ways” that dominant, Western cinema have represented colonial, post-colonial, and anti-colonial experiences.

Yet, ultimately, such essentialist approaches become problematic, despite the ways that they give — and have given — creative and practical impetus to important anti-colonial movements.

An Unaccomplished Fact

For Hall, the authenticity and authority to which the concept of “cultural identity” can lay claim is questionable because practices of representation are always influenced by the historical situation.

Hall emphasizes that his own scholarly discourse is spoken from specific places, including his own experience as a Jamaican-born and raised youth who has spent his adulthood in the diaspora.

The implication of the positionality or standpoint of the subject means that practices of representation are always enunciated in and from a particular, yet ongoing and changing context of place, time, culture and history.

Because “all discourse is ‘placed’”, even discourses of identity, it follows that identity is not transparent or an “accomplished fact” that cultural forms of production, such as cinema, can represent authentically and authoritatively. Rather, identity is itself an ongoing process of “production” that is constituted within, never outside, representation. --

--We cannot speak for long about “‘one experience, one identity” with much exactness without coming to acknowledge “the ruptures and discontinuities” in the history of “a people”, whether it be people of a ‘voluntary’ diaspora or of an imperial power forcing the dispersal and enslavement.

--- This is why Hall’s second definition of “cultural identity” is so poignant: it points out that what we call “identity” is an ongoing process “of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”.

In this way, it “belongs to the future as much as to the past” .

Identities are not *a priori*; they do not transcend culture, history, time, and place .

They are historical; they “come from somewhere”; they change in and through power relations that are temporal, placed, spatial, and situational.

The past does not just wait idly by; rather, through social imaginings of the past, as well as material relations of the past that live on in the configurations of contemporary relations, it is active; the past transforms, and can be liberating or debilitating.

This is why Hall is so apt in describing identities as “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past”.

This is why he argues that it is only by using the second definition of “cultural identity” that we can comprehensively analyze “the traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience’”.

It is this second position that enables an investigation of the power and normalization to which the colonial regimes “subject-ed” the colonized.

If one adopts the essentialist definition of “cultural identity” and forecloses the possibility that identities change, then one cannot begin to comprehend, let alone recognize as such, the differences as well as the similarities among “a people” and between “different peoples” that were and are constituted in and by relations of that “fatal couplet, ‘power/knowledge’”.

In this light, cultural representations like those in cinema, photography and other arts are not simply ‘a second-order mirror’ of an essentialized identity, but productive of old and new identities.

In this sense, modern black cinema is a vital part of the construction of new positionalities for those in the black diaspora.

Closing Remarks

Socialists emphasize the primacy of class in trying to understand power and to organize people. Hall would agree that class is important, but he would also question the isolation of class from other culturally significant modes of power like race, gender and sexuality.

Moreover, from Foucault, he insists on the productive relation of power. If one recalls Karl Marx's anti-essentialist analysis of a class of itself and a class for itself in "The Eighteenth Brumaire", however, then Hall's approach should not be seen as 'foreign' to socialists.

Rather, it should be clear that cultural issues of identity and representation have been critical to socialists for a long time, although typically centered around class cultures and not those of racialized subalterns.

What Hall's work and cultural studies more generally offers us is a set of concepts and ways of thinking critically about history and people's lived conditions that take seriously issues of culture, identity and representation, where these are not understood as fixed but as historically contingent and social.

-- Moreover, Hall's essay is a reminder that cultural identity has been and still is an important motivator in getting masses of people to come together around a common goal. Socialists and others struggling for liberation may find Hall's work, and cultural studies more generally, useful in thinking critically about these motivations and organizational logics that have been and continue to be significant for so many people.

Source: Ian Hussey: **Note On Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity And Diaspora"**

