

Cultural Studies in a Globalizing World: An Investigation of Communicative Codes

الدراسة الثقافية في عصر العولمة دراسة الرموز التواصلية

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Abstract

This paper presents a diversity of overlapping terms under the broad area of Cultural Studies like 'culture studies', 'cultural criticism', and 'cultural materialism'. Through a descriptive analytical method, this study aims to show how culture operates by significant communicative codes in multicultural settings that humans learn from cradle to grave, acquiring cultural traditions, customs, and social roles. As a discipline and a school of criticism, Cultural Studies has changed the way of the study of literature. Those practiced cultural codes of religious rituals, daily activities, experiences, among others, have become the primary knowledge and recorded parts of the history of a particular society. It depicts a clear picture of how the knowledge of cultural codes and their social functions enable individuals to perceive culture and literature comprehensively and make a systematized reference to the culture of that particular society. It shows the

development of Cultural Studies, late last century, laying its foundations to be accepted in the academic field, which paved the way for literary works to be reconstructed, re-appreciated, and reassigned in reference to their cultural field. This paper attempts to answer some questions about Cultural Studies and whether it can help us explore the functions of cultural products in a society or a literary work. It provides examples of some cultural codes and how they help us read and identify an individual regionally, socially, economically, and religiously. The Conclusion stresses on readers, critics and translators to be aware of the cultural codes when dealing with, reading of or translating from other societies.

Keywords: Culture; Cultural Studies; cultural codes; cultural criticism; cultural materialism

الدراسة الثقافية في عصر العولمة: دراسة الرموز التواصلية

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الملخص العربي

لثقافة ذلك المجتمع. وتضمن البحث سرد تطور الدراسات الثقافية في أواخر القرن الماضي، حيث تم وضع الأسس لقبولها في المجال الأكاديمي، مما مهد الطريق لإعادة بناء الأعمال الأدبية وإعادة تقديمها بالإشارة إلى مجالها الثقافي. ويسعى البحث إلى الإجابة عن بعض الأسئلة منها ما إذا كانت الدراسات الثقافية تساعدنا في استكشاف وظائف النواتج الثقافية في مجتمع أو عمل أدبي معين، مع تقديم أمثلة لبعض الرموز الثقافية وكيف تساعدنا في قراءة وتعريف الضد إقليمياً واجتماعياً واقتصادياً ودينياً. وتشدد الخاتمة على القراء والنقاد والمترجمين أن يكونوا على دراية بالرموز الثقافية عند التعامل مع المجتمعات الأخرى أو القراءة أو الترجمة عنها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة؛ الدراسات الثقافية؛ الرموز الثقافية؛ النقد الثقافي؛ المادية الثقافية.

يقدم البحث مجموعة متنوعة من المصطلحات المتداخلة في المجال الواسع للدراسات الثقافية مثل "الدراسات الثقافية" و "النقد الثقافي" و "المادية الثقافية"، وباستخدام المنهج الوصفي التحليلي يهدف إلى توضيح كيفية عمل الثقافة من خلال رموز تواصلية مهمة في بيئات ثقافية متعددة يتعلمها البشر طيلة حياتهم لإكسابهم التقاليد والعادات والأدوار الاجتماعية، وكيف أن الدراسات الثقافية أصبحت تخصص ومدرسة للنقد أدت بدورها إلى تغيير طريقة دراسة الأدب. فالرموز الثقافية التي يجري ممارستها مثلاً في مجال الطقوس الدينية والأنشطة والتجارب اليومية وغيرها تصبح معرفة أساسية وأجزاء مسجلة في تاريخ ذلك المجتمع. ويرمي البحث إلى تقديم صورة واضحة حول معرفة الرموز الثقافية ووظائفها الاجتماعية وكيف أنها تمكن الأفراد من إدراك وفهم الثقافة والأدب فهماً شاملاً وتصيح مرجعاً منهجياً

Introduction:

The human infant, as a creature, is born cultureless but their special behavior is, to a large extent, influenced by the cultural surroundings. Culture is, essentially, made up of interwoven networks which operate through major communicative codes. Thus, in dealing with one another, we commence unconsciously by learning the codes of our culture. The human infant learns cultural behaviors through some imitations, and in time vocal significant instructions are involved. And such events are recorded and become a history of human behavior in a particular society. This

accentuates the distinction between humans and animals; animals' behavior is learned through physical imitation and performance of other members of the species such as bees, ants, monkeys, etc. Thus, every individual has to acquire or learn cultural traditions, customs, and social roles in order to interact with and react to some circumstances culturally and methodically.

The Birth of the Concept of Culture and its History

There has been an explosion of literary terms, especially those related to culture. The term *culture* was derived from '*cultivation*', which means to cultivate in agriculture, and it has been applied to literature and philosophy. The cultural school of criticism might be similarly referred to as '*cultural studies*', '*culture studies*', '*cultural criticism*', or '*cultural materialism*'. Explicitly, Cultural Studies refers to a new progressive approach for analyzing the conditions that influence the production and reception of all kinds of cultural products and practices, among which, literature is considered as only one form of many of cultural '*signifying practices*'. It primarily studies the functions of the social, economic, and political factors which create different cultural forms and '*endow them with their social "meanings," their "truth," their modes of discourse in which they are discussed, and their relative value and status*' (Abrams 65). Cultural Studies is a new approach to the study of literature and culture. It is a discipline and a school of criticism in itself, which has relatively changed the way of the study of literature. In his book *Cultural Studies*, Nilanjana Gupta noted two distinct lines of approach presented by Cultural Studies. The first refers to the study of literature within sophisticated relationships '*between the works of literature and the prevailing social, material, historical, and ideological conditions of time it was written*'. The other is concerned with the growth of the '*study of literature beyond the traditional ideas of what constitute 'great' works of literature to include pamphlets or other documents, non-written texts, and even cultural phenomenon of various kinds*' (Gupta 1).

Culture is a blanket term, which includes language, ideas, beliefs, traditions, customs, works of art, rituals, religions, ceremonies, and the like. It has a complex history and a variety of meanings in contemporary discourse. The term 'culture' is mainly used in three relatively distinct senses to refer to, "*the arts and artistic activity; the learned, primarily symbolic features of a particular way of life; and a process of development*" (Longhurst at al 2). In a great sense, culture is dependent on human rational behavior or abstract thought to assign certain names and meanings. Therefore, culture is mutually learned and habitually shared by individuals, but it is not biologically inherited. This is clear in the classic definition of culture provided by the founder of social anthropology, Sir Edward Tylor, who

stated that culture is '*acquired by man as a member of society*' (qtd Peacock 3). Moreover, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn present one hundred sixty-four definitions of culture, variously ranging from '*learned behavior*', to '*ideas in the mind*', '*a logical construct*', '*a statistical function*', '*a psychic defense mechanism*', and so on (Britannica 2011). These two anthropologists preferred to define the concept of culture as an abstract behavior generated from concrete events, but culture itself is not a behavior. In his work *The concept of Culture* (1973), Leslie A. White aptly defined culture as a '*class of things and events, dependent upon symboling, considered in an extrasomatic context*' (234). This definition clearly distinguishes between behavior and culture. That is to say, when things and events are related to human organisms, they constitute behavior; when they relate to one another, they constitute culture. For instance, the mother-in-law taboo is a combination of ethics, concepts and acts (in some societies when the newlyweds reside near the bride's house, there was an enforced taboo forbidding any contact between the bride's mother and her son-in-law. This was practiced among societies like Navajo, Apache, Sioux, the Cree, and the Cheyenne). When this combination relates to human organisms, it constitutes a behavior; when it relates to the place of residence of the married couple, it becomes culture. Human behavior is defined as a behavior dependent on symbolizing that any human being does; whereas coughing, yawning, stretching, sneezing, etc. in themselves are not cultural. Therefore, culture is a human-made environment, in which the coded patterns of behavior are acquired and non-biologically inherited from one individual and generation to another. Those inherited and practiced cultural codes are parts of the history of the society, though history might not completely express them. Hence, cultural codes of religious rituals, daily activities and experiences have become the primary knowledge of that society, which we rationally perceive. Having known those cultural codes and their social functions, we will be able to perceive culture comprehensively and make a systematized reference to the culture of a particular society. Since cultural codes originate from human activities, social context and structure, they establish complete social life and represent the society as a united network. They remove the obstacle of unfamiliarity and facilitate the way of understanding others. This paper attempts to answer some questions about Cultural Studies and whether it can help us explore the functions of cultural products in a society or a literary work. Can Cultural Studies change the way of our perspectives and values of perceiving a literary work? What is the relation of Cultural Studies with cultural materialism and new historicism and how do they place literature in the context and investigate the background of the literary work? Are cultural codes similar in all cultures or different from one culture to another?

Every society possesses a culture with its language, ideas, codes, etc., transmitting it – directly or indirectly – to every individual born into it. This develops and forms the individual's personality within the effects of its cultural milieu. That is to say, before we study the literature of another culture, it is very necessary to understand its codes, which are different from one's own. For instance, a British visitor to Arabia would report that Arabians drive on the wrong side of the street. Understanding the code of the culture would facilitate a sound reaction and produce a fine appreciation. This is true in the sense that one cultural pattern might have a variety of forms in different cultures, and morality requires ethical rules of conduct, in which a culture could, it is said, be understood in terms of itself. For things and events might be moral in one culture but immoral or neutral in the other. It is of great importance not to grade culture as superior or inferior, higher or lower because culture is native and glorious in every individual's eye. It is true that cultures vary geographically but they possess a '*universal cultural pattern*' of the same general categories: '*speech, material traits, art, knowledge, religion, society, property, government, and war*' (Greenberg 295).

Culture Studies as an Independent Discipline:

Cultural Studies is, broadly speaking, an amorphous term. It would be very interesting to mention the fact that the first precursor of modern Cultural Studies was Roland Barthes, who analyzed the social conventions and "*codes*" that carry meanings of such social products and practices. In Britain, cultural studies of literature and art were inaugurated by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in 1958 and were known as neo-Marxist studies. Then in the 1960s-70s, Cultural Studies was established in the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham. It was considered a prominent center for publishing and editing cultural works such as *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Sub-Cultures in Post-War Britain* (1976), *On Ideology* (1978) and *Working Class Culture* (1979). Furthermore, the center laid the foundations for Cultural Studies to be accepted in the academic program of higher education. As an academic field, Cultural Studies can be identified with Raymond William's argument that *culture* has not resulted from selected events of particular individuals, but from the consequences of their entire life, deemphasizing the distinction between high culture and low culture. Cultural Studies focused more on social, political, historical, and ethical frames to broadly show the real cultural situations of individuals' life in a particular society, the outcomes of which are known as cultural codes.

On the other hand, in the USA Cultural Studies was recognized as 'new historicism', which was founded by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. It became significant in the 1980s-90s. Similarly, Cultural Studies aims at eliminating the traditional distinctions between high literature and low literature, which has numerous consumers. Cultural Studies is also concerned with the analysis and interpretation of social practices outside the domain of literature and art. All the same, there are no limits of analyzing the texts and contexts of the cultural patterns of behavior, and, furthermore, 'current studies deal with a spectrum ranging from the vogue of body-building through urban street fashions, and from cross-dressing to the social gesture of smoking a cigarette' (Abrams 66). Cultural criticism is part of Cultural Studies, which helps us explore the whole and pure functions of cultural products in a society. As a literary field, it developed its canon during the 1950s in western literature. English literature accepted to deal with the ideology of the cultural production, and, then, "Cultural Studies' tended to gravitate towards those forms of expression that were conventionally deemed (often pejoratively) to be popular' (Childs 42). In fact, critics took notice of popular literary texts and mass culture such as magazines, newspapers, romance, etc., and nonliterary forms such as radio, TV serials, film, music and the like. Thus, Cultural Studies expanded its role to include the analysis of cultural and subcultural forms.

Cultural Materialism: Culture and Society

Another important term is **cultural materialism** which refers to two separate critical fields: **anthropology and cultural studies**. The former is an anthropological scientific strategic research, which was first introduced by its originator **Marvin Harris** in his book *The Rise of Anthropology* (1968). In analyzing the social and cultural development of humans, cultural materialism gives priority to the material and behavioral progression. This helps us to be familiar with the differences and similarities among cultures and societies. It refers to a sociocultural interaction between humans and their environment. In his updated 2001 book *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, Harris put it simply that cultural materialism is 'based on the simple premise that human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence' (xv). Harris was influenced by the writings and concepts of many anthropologists and philosophers like **Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Malthus, Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward Tylor, etc.** The latter critical field is concerned with literary theory and cultural studies, which analyzes and studies the historical literary texts and contexts through theoretical methods. In fact, cultural materialism was coined by **Raymond Williams** in his 1977

work *Marxism and Literature*, which describes the material effects of culture on day-to-day life. In this book, Williams described cultural materialism as ‘*a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism... a Marxist theory ... because of the relative unfamiliarity of some of its elements, part of what I at least see as the central thinking of Marxism*’(6-7). However, it is difficult to make a distinction between Marxist criticism and cultural materialism. On the other hand, cultural materialism can be compared to new historicism, in which both place literature in the context and investigate the background of the work of art, because the text frames the context and vice versa. It is true that cultural materialism is the opposite of idealism. The first reflects the political and economic forces of material production and their effects upon culture, whereas the latter considers high art as the outcome of talented and autonomous minds. In the same book cited above, Williams introduced a new term ‘*structure of feeling*’ to cultural materialism: ‘*we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences*’ (132). It is through such vivid and changing values and perspectives that we live and react to the world around us. It is an obvious point that cultural materialism also deals with cultural work of subordinate and marginalized individuals and other forms of culture. The text is analyzed with time reference not only to the past but also to the present. For example, a Shakespearian play will be studied in reference to its economic and political contexts of the ‘*Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church)*’ (Dollimore & Sinfield viii). In other words, Shakespeare’s plays can be reconstructed, re-appreciated, and reassigned in accordance with their cultural field. All in all, the cultural materialist study of Shakespeare is one of many examples that proves the way we change our perspectives and values of perceiving a literary work. In this connection, Dollimore and Sinfield accurately presented a critical method with four characteristics to define cultural materialism. It consists of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and textual analysis.

Cultural Codes: Culture as a Set of Meanings

We believe that the best way to handle this problem is to consider culture as a code and to be clear about all the implications and effects of culture, particularly the way cultural items are presented in literature. Cultural code, as defined in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, groups all the references in the text to the cultural and social background and knowledge from Balzac’s time. Cultural code also means to switch our behavior in accordance with the expectations

of the other party in order to communicate successfully with acceptable value. In this sense, many people leave their countries either to study, or work, or do business in different parts of the globe, where they find their own culture conflict with others' customs and beliefs. And they have to develop cultural awareness and to adapt – more or less – their cultural environments as well in order to positively overcome some embarrassing situations. In multicultural societies, people may skillfully and effectively apply what may be called '*multi-cultural code-switching*'. When not behaving in accordance with the cultural norms, this makes communication psychologically and emotionally uncomfortable. In this connection, the new adapted codes shift the immigrants' lives to positivity but those codes may be rejected when they go against the traditional cultural conventions.

Dress is one of the social aspects that convey a meaningful communicative code. The clothes we wear daily include much culture in them. We can recognize and determine the individual's identity from his/her dress. Implicitly, dress links the individual to a specific community: '*Dress serves as a sign that the individual belongs to a certain group*' (Barnes 1). In the case of a Muslim woman, she almost always wears *hejab*, (*black*) *gown*, and usually *veil*; a modest dress covering the body and hair. In some cases, women are obliged, for example, not only to cover their faces but also hands in Arabian countries. Thus, the woman's identity is defined socially, religiously, geographically, and historically, linking her to a certain community. The cultural code of veil tells us that Muslim girls start to wear a veil mask almost at puberty. In Muslim societies this code is mixed with religious and social values:

For many Muslim women the veil is a sign of coming of age— becoming an adult woman and therefore marking a woman's status in society. The veil expresses the need for respect for women as members of the Muslim community— and certainly is not a sign of their oppression (Maisel 29).

Dress code includes and excludes individuals. To make it more clear, *sari* in India, for instance, is a common female dress that functions to include the fact that the woman belongs to a certain Indian community and to exclude her from other communities, as well. Therefore, the dress helps us read and identify the individual regionally, socially, economically, and religiously. Similarly, we can identify a male Arabian belonging to one of the Gulf countries by his dress, in which he wears a *long white gown*, *gotra* (a straight-cut cloth that is placed evenly over the head and shoulders), and *Agaal* (black rings made of cloth that are put on the forehead to keep the gotra in place). However, hardly do we find an Arabian wearing a tie, for

instance, on the long white gown. This is ridiculous and unacceptable as it breaks the cultural code of the dress traditions in Arabia.

The Arabians, opposing modern Western cultures, try to retain traditional customs and habits, bearing in mind that the old is better than the new. Now, culture consists of '*rhetoric modernization*' in which the retention of the old habit of eating risotto with one's own fingers vs. a knife and fork, for instance, becomes a statement of principle (Gregg 35). The '*honor code*' in Muslim and Hindu cultures has its weight. The control of the daughters' and sisters' virginity seems to be part of the cultural heritage, in which women are not allowed to surrender themselves to foreigners but to their husbands. Opposing Western cultures, man-woman life is not based on boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. The '*honor code*' shapes the basic social personality and produces an ideal type of individuals: '*The honor code thus has the feel of a coherent system of values but in fact occasions endless debates about what its terms mean and how they should be applied*' (Gregg 97). Fostering and serving parents is considered an honorable deed and moral obligation in eastern culture, where people's behavior is greatly affected by religion and other beliefs. In some communities, it is difficult to put the codes of ethics into practice due to cultural and social conditions. Those difficulties are the outcome of the cultural interactions between individuals, families and communities. Ethics is concerned with the sense of 'good life' rather than the sense of ascertaining the meaning of goodness. '*Ethics, then, as distinct from the formation of moral codes (i.e. of laws of behaviour, of what we must and mustn't do) concerns how we conduct our lives in order to be good*' (Oswell 210). We may consider theistic cultures such as Islamic culture, in which the code of ethics prevents individuals from seeking their rights. Unlike most other countries in the world, a big percent of Arabians, for example, do not react to or sue their doctors' malpractices: '*This is due not only to the belief that whatever the doctor decides is the right thing but also to the conviction that the final outcome is determined by God alone*' (Okasha 18).

Culture includes a multitude of varieties of cultural codes each of which has its own social, religious, political, ethical, etc. references. An act could be sinful in one culture but it is a custom in another. For example, prostitution and alcoholic beverages are *haram*, 'sinful', in Islamic culture and, rather, it is considered a crime that carries a sentence to its perpetrators. On the other side, in a Western culture like French, for example, there are '*hundreds of thousands of unmarried men in Paris, who go to prostitutes,*' and to alcoholic pubs as if they were going for a natural need like food or drink (El-Enany 21). There is a distinction between cultural habits and laws. Prostitution and alcohol are banned in Islam by law, but in France such things are considered parts of social customs. Yet, it would be difficult for all societies to

submit to absolute established moral codes. But the code values, such as honesty, are recognized by all religions and cultures.

The code of bringing up children varies from one culture to another. In Western culture, mothers inculcate fashions, knowledge, and manners in their children before sending them to school. On the contrary, in some countries some mothers in the east 'raise their children to be superstitious . . . [to believe] in being watched over by the jinn....' And a girl would grow up thinking that 'she was created for nothing but marriage and divorce' (El-Enany 21). Parents eagerly teach their children to behave and talk in good manners and correct expressions, performing appropriate etiquettes in dealing with people. It is interesting to indicate the fact that children, naturally, acquire a multitude of the mother culture by being exposed only randomly to the surrounding community and environment. The cultural code of the extended family structure in the east – unlike the nuclear family in the west – is shown through generally accepted standards of social behavior such as birth, marriage, funeral, inheritance, dress, death, and so on. However, even a single act becomes public knowledge and is interpreted and evaluated differently in accordance with the individual's interest or mainstream society. The anthropologist J. Pitt-Rivers aptly remarks:

A system of values is never a homogeneous code of abstract principles obeyed by all the participants in a given culture and able to be extracted from an informant with the aid of a set of hypothetical questions, but a collection of concepts which are related to one another and applied differentially by the different status groups defined by age, sex, class, occupation, etc. in the different social . . . contexts in which they find their meaning.
(qtd El-Rouayheb 25)

Language, as an indispensable part of culture, helps to manifest and communicate the internal thoughts, implementing adequately and appropriately the cultural codes of one's life and behavior within his/her community. Language depicts cultural aspects of human life within a society. Food and drinks have their own cultural codes that are performed in certain communities but not in the others. Certain groups eat particular food and abstain from eating other items for either religious reasons or biological ones. For instance, pork and alcohol are religiously prohibited in Islam but permitted in some other religions. At a particular time of a day for almost more than twelve hours (from dawn to dusk), Muslims fast during the holy month of Ramadan, abstaining themselves from eating or drinking. Here, we stress upon a stranger to be aware of the cultural codes when dealing with other

communities and to update his/her knowledge about social customs and cultural codes. This is a very important code, where a visitor to a Muslim country will notice that restaurants and cafeterias are closed in the day time during Ramadan. And the non-Muslim has to be aware not to eat in public places during that holy month because this action hurts Muslims and might cause problems to the perpetrators.

Nonetheless, we observe that human cultures are divergent from group to group, from class to class, from time to time and so forth. Culture penetrates homogenous societies, the result of which is that their behaviors and customs become similar, but such cultural elements in scattered societies may be changeable. If the language, social and political behaviors, and any invented cultural codes are misused or wrongly adopted, they may cause problems and social misunderstanding. However, we do not suggest here that individuals should completely obey others' social customs, which may contradict theirs. For example, an Arabian receives anything presented to him with the right hand and a word of thanks. On the other hand, a Japanese would rather receive it with both hands and a bow (as a way of thanks). In reality, it is forbidden to bow to anyone or anything except the Almighty in Islamic culture, whereas it is considered a kind of ritual in Japanese values and beliefs. Cultural codes, including eye contact, exaggerated smiles, high-pitched tones, stress, nods, taps, guilt, shame, disappointment, etc. should be used in particular and emotional situations within the limits of the cultural circumstances.

Conclusion:

The foregoing discussion leads us to certain conclusions, which may be stated briefly at the end. Culture has a complex history and a wide range of meanings in contemporary discourse. Cultural Studies has recently been recognized as a new approach to the study of literature and culture. As a discipline and a school of criticism, Cultural Studies has relatively improved the way of the study of literature. There is a diversity of overlapping terms under the broad area of Cultural Studies like '*culture studies*', '*cultural criticism*', and '*cultural materialism*'. The best solution to the problem created as a result of this confusion is to regard culture as a code or system of signs and to clarify all the implications and effects of culture. It should be further noted that language is part of culture and in creative writing two codes are operative linguistic expressions and below it the underlying code of culture. Therefore, the study of culture in a globalizing world would pave the way for cultural understanding, facilitate intercultural dialogue and establish peaceful coexistence in the world. Accordingly, readers, critics and translators should be aware of the cultural codes when dealing with, reading of or translating from other societies.

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