



Echoes Across Borders: Talal Asad's Reflections On Meaning In A Global Age

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Abstract

To define culture is to chuck out a piece of its poly-semic meanings, as not only culture means differently for different people, how and to what extent people participate in this space differs accordingly. But our preoccupation here is to do two things- one, to deal with how this space gets defined in its essentialist domain, that is, how a culture creates and negotiates an identity for itself with which it chooses to define itself, for example the notion of "Englishness" as elucidated by Talal Asad, but the argument can go much deeper. Secondly, how can we study the clairvoyance that is ejected in the process of meaning formation to this identity, through which this identity is given a theoretical and conceptual and ethical validation as well as a pre-history, which is then inserted albeit anachronistically into the modern definitions of this identity. Thirdly, cultural spaces don't always correspond to physical spaces and they have the capability to transcend those spaces, though there are ways in which cultural spaces interact with these physical spaces, in determining how people who are not believed to have belonged to this space historically or culturally, enter and negotiate this space. The meaning formation in this space is layered in relations of power and hierarchy, though not necessarily hegemonic, as the language of the meaning formation in itself provides particular space, particular way to enter that cultural space and their position within the cultural space that they need to respect.

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To define culture is to chuck out a piece of its poly-semic meanings, as not only culture means differently for different people, how and to what extent people participate in this space differs accordingly. But our preoccupation here is to do two things- one, to deal with how this space gets defined in its essentialist domain, that is, how a culture creates and negotiates an identity for itself with which it chooses to define itself, for example the notion of "Englishness" as elucidated by Talal Asad , but the argument can go much deeper . Secondly, how can we study the clairvoyance that is ejected in the process of meaning formation to this identity, through which this identity is given a theoretical and conceptual and ethical validation as well as a pre-history, which is then inserted albeit anachronistically into the modern definitions of this identity. Thirdly, cultural spaces don't always correspond to physical spaces and they have the capability to transcend those spaces, though there are ways in which cultural spaces interact with these physical spaces, in determining how people who are not believed to have belonged to this space historically or culturally, enter and negotiate this space. The meaning formation in this space is layered in relations of power and hierarchy, though not necessarily hegemonic, as the language of the meaning formation in itself provides particular space, particular way to enter that cultural space and their position within the cultural space that they need to respect. The crisis however arises when the particularities of these "micro-culture" situated in the "macro-universe of cultural trajectories" tries to assert its Positionality as separate from the assimilated whole, so an additional question needs to be asked- how do multiple spaces of identities act out in a cultural space, and if they does, does this space remain a singular entity or even this space change its form and new meanings adjoin the existing

meanings to deal with the anomalies that creeps into the space in the process of extension of that space ? Another question that we can deal with is whether this cultural space is inclusive or exclusive in nature? Further problematizing this notion, can we then argue that the sharp dichotomy between inclusive and exclusive spaces, interiorized and exteriorized identities don't really exist in the way we perceive it, and thus this mediation of space is an important factor to be taken into consideration.

As Deleuze points out-

The identity of the subject does not survive that of substance. All identities are only simulated, produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition.

How these spaces act out in the psychological and public arena is also a matter worth dealing with, wherein the psychological domain prepares the subject to accept identities which he or she needs to inherit to allow himself or herself more freedom within that space, without overlooking those identities that he genuinely accepts as his own. Talal Asad does point out that cultures other than what goes into the essentialist definition of the culture enter this cultural space in the capacity of an individual, as the collective assertion of identity poses problem for the ongoing definition of the space. The space is flexible but also regulated, and thus infiltration and interaction is not a free flowing process here. So when the state intervenes as in case of Rushdie affair or as Zizek points out, in the banning of burqa in France, the underlining statements have multiple implications-firstly, State works with a handful of laws at its disposal, which though co-existing, may also be partially contradictory in nature, and at this stage, the state has to pick and choose, according to its contextual importance, the law that needs to be enforced. So, if the laws of mutual co-existence and special rights don't always gel with each other perfectly, it is the linguistic performativity of law, and not the intrinsic truth that lies at the heart of the law, which determines its binding nature.

Another theoretical position that one can take here is the power relation that stimulates this cultural space. And it's not just the Foucauldian understanding of power, which is invisible yet pervasive and discursive yet all-encompassing, not just hierarchical, but intersecting with different social relations, manifesting itself in the way these social relations are played out. Two Foucauldian interventions are important to point out before we move on to discuss further- one, is the Positionality of power, where power is relative to your position which holds the key to dominance. This Positionality is not situated in the individual capacity to hold power but more in the site of power which empowers the individual or culture to hold power. In case of culture then, can we then understand culture as site of dominance or as Gramsci called it- "cultural hegemony"? Though yes, there are elements of hegemonic behavior, but we need to contextualize the narrative of this hegemony, as it exists in particular domain in a particular language. Deleuze and Guattari point out the concept of assemblage to discuss how entities with their fragmentary, diffused, breakdowns and particularities trying to create a sense of wholeness which is never realized or achieved, which also means that the identities and cultures are always in the making, and different parts try to create a sense of wholeness being mixed together but also have to be programmed together in unity, rather than being in a realized unity. This further means, that there is a constant need of different types of rhetoric- one, which establish the equality of all people located within the geo-cultural space, but at the same times constantly redefines the possibilities and restrictions of this cultural space, which helps in establishing the exclusive nature of the space, though these exclusivities themselves exist in uneasy harmony with each other. Asad for example, points out how Arabs use the rhetoric of anti-western polemics on the grounds of its harmful effects on the traditional, pious culture of Islam, which extends its domain as far as to use of electronic media etc, which curiously is also the main transmitter of the messages of the perceived theocracy. Another example, which points out the assemblage of uncertainties of spaces, is that of Kantian notion of public domain as a space of reason, where discussion needs to be encouraged, though not only the space itself is regulated by its intrinsic elitism, but the de-ontological condition it poses regarding criticism to the state.

The inclusive and exclusive spaces are blurred in the uncertainties and fragmentary Positionality of these spaces. But that doesn't mean that the power relation is not a major force here. Of course it does, and as Edward Said points out that the power lies not only in the ability of one culture to enforce themselves on others but the possibility of the other culture to be molded into that culture, which also means a partially willing partially unwilling negotiation on the part of the cultures, to extend the cultural space to others, and the dominant representatives of the culture acquire the power to grant the validation

to utilize that cultural space. Said calls it the flexible positional superiority of the culture wherein they engage in a series of possible relations without losing the relative upper hand. Thus, Britain can interact with the refugees with a paternalistic attitude, which even though providing them entry to the cultural space, makes the difference very apparent. Similarly, the decision to ban Burqa is not only an assertion of equal rights of women, but also an assertion of a sense of cultural homogeneity, where burqa becomes a contested terrain, wherein the solution is either assimilation of the ritual as syncretism in culture or elimination of heterogeneous and perceptibly different from the rest of the culture. Thus, cultural space exists in an uneven exchange with different domains of power which are not limited to just political or cultural exchange but extends to intellectual, scholarly, psychological and sociological domains.

How legality does interact within this cultural space? As John Rawls points out, even though legal normativity establishes equal rights for every citizen, in practice, multiple social positions exist in contradiction to each other, and thus it is not possible to take into consideration all social positions at once. In such situations certain positions become the representative position as long as a crisis pops up in the implementation of such generalized and hierarchized justice. By Foucauldian understanding, the legal space is not bereft of cultural space, and we can actually trace how not only is there a subjective Positionality of legality that a cultural space has to undertake, but there is a whole paraphernalia of judicial procedure, the teleology of which not always rest on the assertion of truth but rather as an act of socio-political communication. This paraphernalia resembles a cultural space in the sense that as the space gets specialized and variegated, it develops a series of experts, who though, are not directly associated with the act of disseminating justice, are instrumental in defining that space. The insertion of these classes makes it easier to not only theorize the cultural space, but insert clairvoyant meanings into a newly founded discourse.

Lastly, the language of this cultural interaction is vital to understand the cultural exchange. As Asad notes, different ways in which the refugees and Muslims negotiated with the British, and how it was different from the ways colonial state interacted with the colonized. The language which is employed to denote such relations needs to be deconstructed. “assimilation”, “adaption”, “amalgamation”, “co-existence”, “tolerance” all are relative terms, which begs this question- assimilation of whom and by whom? Tolerance of whom and by whom? Aren't we pre-supposing an agency who gives validation to this interaction and others who gets validated within the space? Thus, the power structure is also pre-supposed in the very formation of the cultural space as to who belongs to it and who are to be included and to what degree? The existence of the culture space is thus defined as innate as we assume that people become a part of the space, but we need to also understand how this cultural space is itself getting constructed and here, we need to provide a historical outlook, as Asad does, how this sense of a cultural space in Britain was getting formulated since the medieval times, and how this cultural space was getting molded in the wake of larger interaction of the somewhat crystallized space.

Also, we need to understand how an anthropologist interacts with this cultural space with his baggage of scholasticism interspersed with a subjective gaze. Culture and knowledge share a very deep-rooted association in the way culture provides the fodder for the knowledge formation and then the same knowledge is utilized to understand the culture better with the knowledge acting a context to enter the space of the culture under study. But we are not concerned here with the pragmatics of knowledge as a byproduct of interaction between the subject and agent (who himself is a part of his own culture) of culture, but rather the process through which knowledge becomes possible, which requires not only a dialogue but a need to translate this dialogue into a narrative. Now, again, there is a particular way in which this interaction is seen- as a gaze of the scholar, who entitles himself with sophistication of language and methodologies, or as a performance on both sides with multiple subjectivities of discourse, perception, language, identity and representation crossing each other. Talal Asad tries to problematize this further by bringing the dynamics that take place when an anthropologist tries to understand the culture in his own language and then translate it in his language, which may have no or little bearing with the culture he is studying. The gaze of culture in itself at times get translated into perceptive knowledge as culture is understood as something frozen in time, studied at a point of time, this frozen quality makes it easier for the scholar to deconstruct the culture by just gazing as they understand that the knowledge is already present in the culture which just need to be extracted. But can we also see the process through which the subjects but not the agents of history participate in the process of this knowledge formation. And by the process of knowledge formation, we are not concerned by the question

of traditional knowledge, self-perception, memories and the space of interaction with the scholar. But rather the very psychic process that makes these people conscious of the “archival value “of their own culture. The first act of translation, then takes place in the psyche of the people involved in the dialogue. If culture should be understood as a processual formation rather than set of symbols with signifying values, then the narrative to explain this processual development is also an attempt to give a prehistory to the culture, prehistory because the historical antecedent to such a narrative may well be anachronistic, but there is a translation on a very basic level to exteriorize an interiorized discourse. The psychic process not only in shaping our memory and perceptions, and hence guiding what is to be told, and what not, in a way also depends on what could be narrative zed and what cannot. A text, oral, written or dialogic, never tells everything verbatim, a lot of things are left unsaid- certain things that the subject takes for granted or the subject speaks with certain things in his hindsight, which is not directly discernible for the scholar. How this “unsaid known can be translated by the scholar in his narrative.

The question then also needs to be asked- who provides the framework? Does the scholar provide the framework by asking the sets of question to extract particular facts in a particular language, or the subject culture itself moulds the subjective culture into extractable objectified information? It is easy to say that both processes work in tandem depending upon the nature of the discourse, and the relation between the scholars and the subjects. But here, another point needs to be emphasized- dialogue, with its implicit heteroglossia, subjectivities and multiple perspectives can provide multiple meanings and much that exists in the silences, but observing these cultures is in itself a tool of information. In this process, it is not the individuals who are the mediators in translating the culture, but in the process of observation, depending whether the scholar choose to gaze the culture or engage with it, the visual embodiment of the culture, it's symbols and semiotics themselves become a text for translation, begging for interpretation by the scholar.

Thus, to conclude, one may point out that cultural space is not mere a byproduct of cultural interactions but a meeting point of different discourses and assemblages, which exist in multiple relations with each other, and constantly try to define and re-define themselves in the process of interaction and differentiation. Neither this process is unidirectional nor stagnant but interspersed in web of discursiveness, hierarchies, positionalities, subjectivities and multiplicities, and thus these multiple voices need to be extracted.

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