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Popular Culture in the Context of Music, Literature and Sports

Siddhartha Raju

*Teaching Assistant, Department of English
Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Puttaparthi, India*

S.Srinivas

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract

Situated within the broad ambit of Popular Culture studies, this paper firstly outlines the meaning of 'Popular Culture' and the significance of studying it from an academic point of view. It then discusses the type of relationship Popular Culture has had with (Indian) music, literature and sports.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Literature, Music, Sports

Introduction: Popular Culture in Academics

Academic interest in Popular Culture, which gained popular in America in the 1960s, is important from a historical perspective because it offers an opportunity to examine seriously and objectively the validity of 'cultural products' that attract mass appeal. Something akin to Popular Culture must have existed even in ancient Greece and Rome where it was defined, described and derided as such by various authors (Parker 149). The term Popular Culture itself is of more recent vintage, and John Storey situates its emergence in the post-World War II period or the early modern period.

The general use of the term Popular Culture to mean 'the culture of the masses' may be misleading, however, given the negative attention it has generally received in intellectual and academic circles. This negative attention is arguably related to the notion that Popular Culture is mass-produced and commercial, which pits it against so-called 'high culture' that is purportedly allied to refined individual acts of creation.

'Popular' and 'Culture'

According to John Storey, the culture critic Raymond Williams defined the term 'popular' in four different ways: as referring to something liked by many people; as a label to talk about inferior kinds of work; as relating to work that deliberately sets out to win favor with people; and as a reference to aspects of culture created by people for themselves (Storey 5). The word 'culture' itself is often defined in elite discourse as that which refines a human being, and in demographic contexts, on racial, ethnic and religious grounds (Storey 2). Crucially, for Williams, the term 'culture' may be applied to the intellectual works and artistic activities of a people.

Popular Culture may, therefore, be seen as a social phenomenon expresses itself in everyday objects, actions and events, reinforcing the ideologies and the perceptions of the very cultural groups from which they emanate. It, therefore, has the power to shape, consolidate and transmit beliefs and behaviours. Given this power, studying Popular Culture in a serious academic setting becomes important because being better informed about it allows one to make better choices concerning the values it represents. The rest of this essay offers a glimpse of whether and to what degree Popular Culture has been represented in (Indian) music, literature and sports.

Popular Culture and Music

Two schools of music dominate the musicological discourse in the Indian context: Hindustani Classical and Carnatic, with their roots in the northern and southern parts of India respectively. Apart from these two schools of music, there are also tribal, folk, Sufi and regional flavours of music, which are practised by peoples of different social groups in India, depending among other things on their regional and religious affiliations. A sort of boundary separates the ‘schools’ of music from the mere ‘flavors’ thereof, however, and the boundary reveals India’s general struggle with social discrimination more than matters of musical merit. As T.M. Krishna, a renowned Carnatic musician, says in his Magasaysay Award speech of 2016: [it has] *“become clear to me that the music was not just about the melody and the rhythm; it had [sic] been so internalized by the religion, conventions and rituals of the holding community, my community as to make it ours, ours to practice, to preserve, to protect, excluding the rest, especially those on the first step of India’s caste-based social order.”*

Krishna, an artist belonging to the upper caste, reveals through his words that art has become a part of India’s dominant or ‘ace’ culture, a fact he thinks is unfair to both art and society. Responding to the unfairness directly, Krishna has taken Carnatic music to places it had hitherto never visited, including the slums of Chennai, and has helped break somewhat the upper-class stranglehold on it. In his opinion: *“A culture which dominates can call itself powerful; it cannot call itself culture...Every community, even*

the most marginalized, has its exquisite art and hosts multitudes of cultures. Power has tall citadels; culture has a level stage. The tall citadels need to be brought down; the ignored artistic traditions brought on to the proscenium stage.”

Krishna’s words represent a clarion call to all societies and ask them to detach culture, which exists independently, from the socio-political mechanisms which prey upon it. After all, a civil society ought to be able to share all the wealth of all the cultures in whose ‘air space’ it functions, without sundering it as ‘high’ and ‘low’. Krishna, however, is in the minority, and the larger reality is that art and judgments on art continue to be the preserve of a select few, a fact that has plagued the field of literature for centuries.

Popular Culture and Literature

To begin with, the etymological history of the word ‘literature’ makes interesting reading. The word has its roots in Latin ‘litter’, meaning ‘a letter of the alphabet’, the knowledge of which, in contemporary times, is referred to as literacy. The current meaning of the word ‘literature’ emerged only late in the eighteenth century, and Raymond Williams writes of its emergence thus: *“...First, a shift from ‘learning’ to ‘taste’ and ‘sensibility’ as a criterion defining literary quality; second, an increasing specialization of literature to ‘creative’ and ‘imaginative’ works; third, a development of the concept of ‘tradition’ within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of ‘a national literature’”* (Williams 48).

The shift in the meaning of the term ‘literature’ from ‘learning’ towards ‘taste’ and ‘sensibility’ was arguably underpinned by class considerations. In the relevant social context of England, moreover, specific features of bourgeois development seem to have provided the impetus for the shift, given that terms like ‘taste’ and ‘sensibility’ were already allied to class divisions. What followed, unsurprisingly, was a division of literature itself, by the elite class, into ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature, and new genres and works were automatically branded with one of the two labels. By the time the word had evolved into its current class-laden usage, “not all ‘literature’ was [considered] ‘Literature’” anymore (Williams 51).

Williams’s remark neatly frames the bias that exists in favour of and against different works of

literature. To wit: while works which are accessible to the higher classes have become canonical texts, those of popular literature have come to be referred to as escapist fiction; as formulaic and superficial narratives which are sensationalist and which therefore appeal to the tastes of the hoi polloi and so on.

A telling example of the bias against popular literature is supplied by the BBC, that broadcasting custodian of British value systems no less, which kept the works of Enid Blyton off the radio for about 30 years: this because executives thought that Blyton's works lacked 'literary value', though she had such hugely popular children's books like 'Noddy' and 'The Famous Five', the sales of which had exceeded 600 million copies, to her credit. Milner's question on literary value is pertinent here: "Who does the valuing?" (6) or, to put it in the language of superheroes from comic books, "Who watches the watchmen?" Milner (17) contends that "that the dominant groups tend to have the better taste in art or merely... have the power to define as art whatever it is that they tend to prefer."

The latter point is revealing because it betrays the circularity inherent in handed-down definitions of art. For example, elite society might designate as literary (read 'as having artistic value') whatever texts it prefers, and then recommend them to other people because they are literary. While it has generally been accepted in the traditional valuation of literature that work is read because it is great, modern criticism, in conjunction with the rise in Popular Culture studies, has made it possible to see whether a work is great because it is read.

Popular Culture and Sports

Unlike music and literature, which are often fragmented as high and low, sport has generally been a hugely popular class-cutting monolith. It holds a time-honoured place in human history, and monuments such as those at Beni Hasan strongly suggest that a number of sports, including weightlifting, rowing, swimming, shooting, fishing, athletics and various ball games, dating back at least to ancient Egypt.

As for the team, sports played today, many of them (e.g. cricket, football, hockey) are known to have

their origins in Britain or other colonial nations, and were taken to other parts of the world by the offices of European imperialism. The industrial revolution and mass production are also often credited for the rise of team sports because they allowed people more leisure time.

While there is no denying that colonisers brought their sports equipment to colonies to entertain themselves during 'tea time', and not to teach their sports to the colonised, it is historically ironic that those very sports have often come to erase class distinctions in society, giving a voice to the hopes and aspirations of the masses, as the fabled Aamir Khan film *Lagaan* memorably showcases. Ed Smith is therefore completely vindicated in asking us to recognise and give sports its due place in civil society: "...we should remember a wider meaning of sport: the coming together of people with shared interests, in safe places, to watch and celebrate virtuosity, competition and, with luck, courtesy - the story of the ascent of the man told in brief."

Almost everything that Smith says about a sport is embodied by the Olympics, the most looked-forward-to congregation of sportspersons from across the globe once every four years. Sport may be seen as an exemplar of Popular Culture because anyone can appreciate it, without prior training or education. It is consequently unsurprising that millions of people across the world embrace sport directly as players, or engage with it as spectators, seated in the stadia or at home. As Tim Delaney writes in *Philosophy Now*: "*the masses are responsible for the... popularity of sports...[They] represent a part of many people's lives.*"

When Popular Culture studies staked their claim to be admitted into mainstream academia, they did so, because things that represented, or were part of, the lives of the many cannot be ignored in the academic discussion. Sport is one of those 'things' and is therefore increasingly finding a place in Popular Culture studies. Accordingly, universities have started studying sports from various angles and with far-reaching practical implications. A report based on the research commissioned by the British University and Colleges Sport (BUCS), for example, stresses the need to encourage student participation in sports at school and college levels, because such

participation has been shown to have a positive impact on students' employability. Those who study sports in other Universities focus on issues in contemporary sport, and how the various stakeholders of different sports, including sportspersons, governing bodies and fans, negotiate with general social concerns in the areas of race, gender and ethnicity.

Conclusion

It is unsurprising, in conclusion, that Popular Culture has had an easier relationship with sports than with music and literature. This is because matters of taste and sensibility, which are allied to education, the quality of which in turn is determined by class distinctions, have generally played a role in defining what a great book or a fine musical composition must be like. Sport, on the other hand, has always been an activity for, by and of the masses -- a sort of classless democracy where the majority wins, regardless of who loses -- and there is far less 'educated' commentary on it than there is on art.

Author Details

Siddhartha Raju, Teaching Assistant, Department of English, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Puttaparthi, India

S. Srinivas, Assistant Professor, Department of English, SSN College of Engineering, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

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