

A Study of “Tradition” in Ziauddin Sardar’s “Surviving Postmodernism” and Paul Gilroy’s “Not a Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime”

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the study of ‘Tradition’ in Ziauddin Sardar’s essay “Surviving Postmodernism (1997)” and Paul Gilroy’s “Not a Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime (1993)” which discuss on non-Western culture and black cultural production respectively. Both essays have entailed the issue of ‘tradition’ and the problem with tradition in Western society is that being traditional is to become parochial and regressive by ignoring the progress of modernity whereas in the eastern society it is a way of moving ahead protecting cultural values with proper refinement. In this regard, this article purports to excavate the ground of tradition in both societies. The nub of these two essays is that tradition is not the exact opposite of modernity and progress, it is rather a force to bridge past and present in an innovative way and a medium to trace back the history and heritage of any community. Sardar sees power in tradition to survive postmodernism and Gilroy finds tradition in black cultural production a potency to revisit African roots. In both culture, spiritual civilization is the basis of their activities, which inhere force to defuse fragmentation caused by material civilization. The researcher has studied ‘tradition’ as a tool of analyzing the two essays under scrutiny.

Keywords: diaspora, dogmatic, fortify, heritage, postmodernism, tradition, traditionalism

Introduction

Tradition is a way of thinking or acting that has been prevalent in a particular community or group of people for a long time. The existence of such beliefs and customs become the part and parcel in living a life with different practices that categorizes human beings in different groups though they are biologically one. Human beings are known more with their cultural base rather than biology. Even the biological processes of human beings are caught in a cultural web. It indicates that the same thing is reacted in different ways in different tradition whether it is food or environment.

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The beliefs and attitudes of people vary since they are brought up in different families. Family is the basic unit of society in which an individual psyche is formed. The family has a long history with its norms and values that becomes the tradition of this family. In this regard, it can be asserted that human psyche is the product of tradition which is the way of life of that family. Moreover, “Traditions result when thinkers of an historical era identify thought and behavior of a recent or distant past that serves as a model for, or justification of, present behavior. Thus, “traditions” inescapably reflect the more current concerns of a group or an individual operating within a specific historical context” (Robinson, 2001, p. 79). Tradition connects past with present and projects a model of behavior in present time. In broader term tradition is associated with community or group of people in which an individual is an actor. Different factors like religion, geography, education, economy and so on are responsible in forming and functioning the tradition. So tradition is an umbrella term which is connected with the practices of humankind.

The Role of Tradition in Muslim and Negro Community

The perception of people regarding tradition varies from place to place, basically the western and the non-western countries. For the western people, to become traditional is to become backward, irrational, uncivilized, primitive, violent, fanatic, and inferior, whereas for non-western people tradition is a self or let’s say a spirit to propel life to advancement. Western people think that non- Western people are a pollutant and there’s always a threat to civilization from them. “. . . Orient has uniformly been considered as inferior part of the world, it has always been endowed both with greater size and with a greater potential for power (usually destructive) than the West” (Said, 1981, p. 187). West sees power of the Orient in negative way that they might be menaced by the violent and despotic people. They further assume that orient people are traditional, their values are a hurdle to progress, and so traditional people are shiftless, emotional and decadent. West has developed a narrative as Orientalism, a body of knowledge to prove that non western people are less advanced and inferior in their social, economic, and belief systems, to show the West superior to the traditional people. West seems to be bias to the traditional people and these people are misrepresented because of their attachment to the convention, a way of life.

In non-western countries society gets tradition as a medium to mobilize every aspect of life whether it is spiritual or secular. It is believed that the community without tradition and customs gets encroached by chaos and anarchy. Tradition does not necessarily mean that you have to go back to the past that is obsolete and outmoded. Human civilization does not mean the present status of the world i.e. modernism and/

or postmodernism. In the past there was the strength of tradition which drove society to spiritual civilization. Spiritual civilization united people though they were different in their values. Love, mercy, kindness, generosity and justice are the pivotal aspects of such advancement, so the people were happy and there was peace and harmony in the community.

However, in the name of modernism people have forgotten human values. Society without social values is chaotic and there occurs the distortion of humanity. Modernism has the material aspect which is physical and incites people for luxury and comfort. Material civilization is concerned with existence which lacks faith, harmony and pro-social behavior. It does not necessarily mean that modernism is venom for humankind. It is a need to be modern to efface irrational and illogical practices but it has spread corruption by treading the humanistic values. Tradition is such a thing which helps combine material civilization with spiritual civilization. Tradition becomes a medium to germinate morality from these two civilizations. Moral behavior is an expression of man's spiritual nature in the realm of material existence, so it brings both in one place and generates life force in society.

Ziauddin Sardar, a British–Pakistani scholar and a Muslim polymath, in his essay “Surviving Postmodernism” asserts that tradition is a lifeline for Muslim community. Sardar is concerned with the Muslim community that postmodernism has directly attacked Islamic culture and cultural resistance is a must to survive postmodernism. Cultural resistance sprouts from the tradition. Sardar (1997) points out that:

Tradition is the summation of the absolute frame of reference provided by the values and axioms of the civilization that remain enduringly relevant and the conventions that have been developed in history into its distinctive ‘gaze’: patterns of organization, ideas, lifeways, techniques and products. Tradition can be periodised, it can be studied as a work of human history wherein there has been change. (p. 225)

Tradition is not that we understand superficially. There are the values of the civilization which are relevant to all periods of time. In tradition there is a kind of force that energizes the society to move ahead with humanistic values. Tradition is not dead and retrogressive but it has life enhancing force to lead any society with its pioneering steps.

Sardar's notion regarding postmodernism is that it is anti-humanistic and it demolishes the values that have been established in traditional societies. “Postmodernism in fact dismembers Other by attacking their immune system: eradicating identity, erasing history and tradition, reducing everything that makes sense of life for non-secular cultures into meaninglessness” (Sardar, 1997, p. 228). Islamic society is a non-secular society which is under the pressure of the western

postmodernism. To defend such pressure non-western societies basically the Muslim community should develop immediate and mediate strategies. These strategies might be Traditionalism and Tradition. Traditionalism, which the West calls fundamentalism, is beneficial for immediate action but not good in long term. Tradition is a sure weapon to respond the pressure given by the West in long term. While Traditionalism saves non-western heritage from postmodernism immediately being aggressive. Tradition develops Self of the cultural societies. This Self does not mean individualism which is dominant in Western society; it is the inherent human nature of selflessness, an inseparable component of the non-western practices.

The innate nature of human being is selflessness and this nature flourishes from the release of ego. When one is free from ego s/he can easily accept the change without eliminating the Self that helps bring past and future close within the continuity of its own account. The non-western people are not dogmatic as indicted by the West but they defy change that disrupts the harmony of the society. Regarding the meaningful change of the traditional society Sardar (1997) points out that “All non-western cultures will change and are changing. The issue for them is to change within meaningful boundaries, reformulate tradition into cotemporary configurations, rediscover their history and heritage in forms that empower and resist the onslaught of modernity and postmodernism and, on the basis of tradition, to author new answers to contemporary questions”(p. 229). Change in traditional society should be holistic to produce moral human beings. Change is acceptable in cultural society in terms of integrating and producing good people and society. So Tradition in the non-western society is in the core that unites the communities through the development of humanistic values which are sterile in the Western communities.

Paul Gilroy, a scholar of Cultural Studies and Black Atlantic Diasporic Culture, in his essay “Not a Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime” talks about the Tradition from the perspective of black cultural production. In general term tradition is the reversal of modernity and an obstacle to move forward and being progressive. Traditional community is believed to be superstitious, fogey and dogmatic, but tradition in black aesthetics is not to cling to the primitive practices, rather it is the identity of black diaspora. Tradition is indispensable for African people since for them tradition is their artistic tradition, expressive culture and communal values. This tradition nullifies individualism which is superficial and abrupt, and prides over their roots that are directly connected with African history and heritage. They believe that their progress and development become sustainable when they move ahead with their culture. Their concern over culture is that “Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people . . . is not savagery. It is culture” (McKay

, 1929, p.1025). Black community takes tradition as the basis of all their thoughts, ideas and actions. Their cultural strength is their communal strength which drives their community to collective progress and identity.

Black tradition is connected with African history and heritage that existed before colonialism and slavery. Black cultural critics, who are living in the New World, have developed a dialogue with black political discourse. In this discourse black writers advocate the black tradition which explores and exposes black identity tracing back to African origin. Gilroy (1993) regarding black tradition further asserts that:

The idea of tradition gets understandably invoked to underscore the historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural crossfertilizations which make the notion of a distinctive and self-consciousness black culture appear plausible. This usage is important and inescapable because racisms work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of black life. (426)

Racism has reduced black people to cipher and created hurdle to get integrated; in this situation tradition helps continue history and raise consciousness among the dispersed blacks. The consciousness of the blacks is to get connected with African roots.

African roots are directly associated with the notion of authentic African self. This self is the subjectivity of the black Atlantic diaspora that has fragmented in Europe and America. Black cultural critics opine that modernity seems to promote such kind of fragmentation of the self and it must be checked. The only way to check the promotion of fragmentation is tradition, a self that provides a bond between local cultural forms and styles and their African heritage. African past which is a means to connect past with present and gain lost identity is pivotal for all the blacks, so Arthur a. Schomburg (1925) claims:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for is the social damage of slavery that the present must repair and offset. (231)

The sense of past and originality is crucial for the Negroes who have been disconnected from their African root. Historical sense develops the consciousness of the community and helps feel proud of their ancestry.

So Gilroy admits that tradition is not the antithesis of modernity, rather a phenomenon that connects African origin with modernity. He further opines that in the

name of tradition slavery, colonialism and racism that carry them despair and terror should not be revitalized but erased.

Conclusion

Tradition is not a negative term that we understand superficially. It is a medium to continue the history and heritage of any community. For Sardar tradition is a surest weapon to defy fragmentation caused by postmodernism in non-western cultural community which stands on humanistic values. Non-western or Muslim community's immune power is its culture which is dynamic to be changed in a meaningful way with time but it does not move beyond community values. On the other hand, Gilroy finds African originality in tradition which promotes the bond among blacks in Europe and America to escalate their struggle for identity. The divided black community in matters of gender, class and sex gets integrated when they are involved in the issues of African values, their mother. Communal reciprocity, humanity, tolerance are the African values which have been recurrently raised in black cultural productions. Tradition, not only in Muslim and black community, is a driving force in all traditional societies which does not let people divide and establishes a strength to expose and beat external forces to keep the culture intact and assimilate the progress of the society. It is an energy to maintain humanistic values, like love, mercy, kindness, generosity and justice, which have been continuously attacked by the material values.

Referneces

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