

# Ethnicity And Its Issues And Perspectives: A Critical Study

Sanjay Kumar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Gowher Ahmad Naik<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Department of English

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Department of English.

## **Abstract:**

*Ethnicity is a complex phenomenon. It is a highly controversial, disputable, problematic term that does not have any fixed meaning and is used as a less emotive term for a race. Ethnicity is a social construct like race, but the main difference is that race refers to phenotypical differences, whereas ethnicity refers to cultural differences. Ethnicity helps an individual to identify with a larger group, and one's ethnicity may identify an individual. Too many writers like Max Weber, Michael Brown, Wsevolod Isajiw, etc. have discussed many features to define 'ethnicity.' To explain and outline an apparent meaning for ethnicity, authors like Fredrik Barth, Abner Cohen, Michael Hechter, etc. have postulated different approaches such as primordialism, instrumentalism, materialism and constructivism. Robert E. Park has contributed to the theory of ethnicity by focusing on assimilation theory. Authors like Omi and Vinant have openly opposed this theory and considered the immigrant as the basis of ethnicity. The chief motive of this paper is to discuss the shifting meanings of ethnicity and to depict the purpose behind the divisions based on ethnicity.*

**Keywords:** Race, Ethnicity, Classification, Primordialism, Instrumentalism.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Categorization is part of life. We classify people to gain access to them and to identify them quickly. Without classification, it would be difficult to define and identify worldly objects and human beings. Human beings have an urge to determine similarity and diversity to ethnic groups to establish their essential identity. They need diversity to distinguish themselves from others, while at the same time; they need belonging and similarity to an ethnic group to find reassurance and comfort. Similarity “implies the risk of loss of individual identity, while diversity is perceived as a threat to unity” (Bolaffi 239). The division of people is not wrong, but the division of people into different ethnic groups to show dominancy and superiority of one over another is terrible.

Ethnicity belongs to social and cultural groups. It is based on the sociological structure. It is determined based on a person's national, regional, and cultural group. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, ethnicity means “the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national and cultural tradition” (523). In this definition, it is shown that ethnicity means belonging to a social group that has a common national and cultural tradition. It is a fluid concept that can be constructed broadly or narrowly. For example, the Indian subcontinent may be considered as an ethnic group, but there are many sub-groups like Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, and Bengali. These are also considered ethnic groups. In another example, people living in Britain may be called British, but there are many subgroups like English, Scottish, or Welsh. Ethnic groups can be further subdivided into different subgroups, and two or more ethnic groups can be merged into one ethnic group. A separate ethnic identity can be formed by division or blending. This ethnic identity is known as ethno genesis.

The word 'ethnic' is taken from the Greek word 'ethnos,' which means 'nation.' Later, ethnicity was used to mean pagan people or heathen nations, who were non-Christian. Ethnicity, as a term, is generally used for collective cultural identity. It is defined based on cultural criteria, but race is determined based on physical criteria. Language is also a source of intense ethnic rivalry. It is used to belittle, abuse, or deny separating the identity of different cultures. It is inherently linked to culture, and identity. Sometimes, it is used to dominate over other cultures within the nation-state. In the past, race and ethnicity have been used interchangeably, but in the modern time, race refers euphemistically to ethnicity or the race included in ethnicity. These are socially constructed concepts. Ethnic group is translated as a nation's people. In the nineteenth century, it was used as "peculiar to a race, nation, or people."

German sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920) takes race, culture, nationality, tribe, and religion as some features to define ethnicity; among them, race is the first to define any ethnic group. Max Weber insists that ethnic groups are social constructions because they are based on a shared community. He says that it is not a belief in the community that creates the group, but it is a group that creates the belief. This group formation results from the drive to monopolize power and status. Michael Brown suggests six leading indicators of an ethnic group including "name for itself, common ancestry, historical memories, shared cultures, specific territory, and having a sense of common ethnicity" (Islam 20). According to Brown, out of these six indicators, the most important is shared culture. Sociologist, Wsevolod Isajiw, in his book *Ethnic Problem Retention* (1981), has discussed debated issues of ethnicity. He states that there are seventy elements to define ethnicity prominent among these are culture, ancestry, religion, language and race.

To define and clarify the nature of word ethnicity, we need to understand many theoretical approaches to ethnicity. In the development of the ethnicity theory, there are four main theoretical approaches: primordialism, instrumentalism, materialism, and constructivism. First, the primordial approach to ethnicity claims that each individual is born into an ethnic group or tribe perceived as a culturally defined unit. It is the oldest approach in anthropological and sociological literature. Primordialism holds that ethnicity has always existed in human history. For them, ethnicity is closely linked to the nation. Primordialists hold that ethnicity is given at birth and is drawn from kin-clan structure. They view ethnic identity as innate, fixed, and permanent.

Second, two main contributors, Barth and the members of Manchester School, challenged the primordialism approach of ethnicity. Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is an instrumental work in the development of ethnicity. He emphasizes the situational, relational, and interactional nature of ethnicity. He contends that cultural features are situationally defined. When we interact with other ethnic groups, we maintain our ethnic boundaries. Abner Cohen, a member of Manchester School, laid the foundation for the instrumental approach to ethnicity. It suggests that elites agitate ethnic tension by intentionally provoking ethnic violence as a method to seize power, defend against group threat, and protect their existing authority. Their research was central to critiques of structural functionalism, driving a shift in anthropology from the analysis of tribe as a unit of social structure to ethnicity as a process of social organization. Both approaches have some commonalities, thinking that an ethnic group has many tangible components like shared language, customs, traditions, or religion, which are the chief elements of an individual's ethnic identity.

Third, the materialist approach is underdeveloped in the literature. It is also known as the epiphenomenon approach to ethnicity. Ethnicity is "seen as a part of superstructure and hence is considered secondary or epiphenomenal to the economic base and relations of production" (Spencer 82). Michael Hechter represents this approach. He views ethnicity as an

epiphenomenon of class relations. “Ethnicity is thus something created and maintained by an uneven economy or a product of economic exploitation” (Isajiw 2). These crude Marxist theories suggest that violence between ethnic groups is the result of economic inequality and exploitation. Fourth, the constructionist approach asserts that ethnicity is socially constructed. This approach is based on the notion that it is constructed in everyday living. Unlike the earlier instrumental conception, ethnicity is constructed through social interaction, by both elites and ordinary people.

The ethnicity theory, in the 1920s, was put forth by Robert E. Park. The race is one of the factors in determining ethnicity. Some other factors in accessing ethnicity are custom, religion, language, nationality, and political identification. Before this theory, there was biological essentialism that believed that the white race was superior to non-whites. People of different ethnic groups are migrating from their country to another country for many purposes. In foreign countries, they try to assimilate the foreign culture while sometimes they are forced to adopt it. They lose their own culture and identity under the effect of a foreign culture. It is known as the assimilation theory. The ethnicity theory is based on assimilation. Park delineated four steps to assimilation: contact, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. Park states that Africans cannot assimilate white culture. Robert E. Park insists that people of color fail to absorb the American culture because they do not drop their deficient culture. He is a chief exponent of the assimilation theory. Park suggests that immigrants come into contact with an alien society and adopt a new lifestyle. As a result, they lose their distinctive ethnic identity.

We know that race is based on physical aspects, whereas ethnicity is based on shared culture, religion, and the language of human beings. The word ‘race’ has more negative denotations than ethnicity. The concept of race was used in the past during European mercantile expansion, and ethnicity was used for capitalist expansion. Michael Omi and Howard Winant consider race and ethnicity as different concepts, and in work, *Racial Formation in the United States*, they directly oppose the ethnicity theory. They argue that the ethnicity theory was solely based on the immigrant’s patterns of a white ethnic population, and it did not provide a satisfactory record of the unique experience of the non-white in this country. Different stages in the immigrant process in this theory are- contact, conflict, struggle, and finally, assimilation. Assimilation did not work as a response to racism and discrimination for some groups as it did for other groups. They criticize ethnicity theory because it strips us of our ability to examine the structural components of racism that encourages the neglect of social inequality.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, it was believed that race and ethnicity were conflated and were treated “as if there were no substantively important conceptual differences between them” (Bolaffi et al. 99). Omi and Winant decline this view. They believe that an ethnic group is used for a voluntary immigrant who comes to the United States from different parts of Europe. At the same time, race “is especially apt in discussing African Americans and Native Americans” (Kivisto and Croll 9). Voluntary immigrants suffer from prejudice and discrimination, whereas involuntary immigrants, who are forcefully taken into slavery, suffer from oppression and marginalization. Ethnicity and race are distinct concepts, a reminder of the histories of the voluntary immigrants versus others. Cornell and Hartmann in their work *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in the Changing World* (2007) view race and ethnicity as distinct but not always mutually exclusive. They contend that “there are empirical instances in which race and ethnicity overlap and cannot be distinguished as neatly as Omi and Winant sought to do” (Kivisto and Croll 10). Finally, ethnicity and race are not synonymous; race is a subset of ethnicity, and race is a prominent element of group formation and ethnic identity.

People clash with one another on the grounds of cultural differences, nationalism, ethnicity, and nationalism. This results in ethnic conflicts, cultural wars, clashes, and massacres in the world. Ethnic conflict is also known as community conflict, minority conflict, and class conflict. Ethnic conflict occurs when an ethnic group feels unsafe and is maltreated in comparison to other ethnic groups. It feels insecure due to the interference of major ethnic groups. Michael Edward Brown defines ethnic conflict in his book *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, as “an ethnic conflict is a dispute about important political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities” (Brown 5). It is the result of awareness of one’s identity to another ethnic group and cultural incompatibility of groups. An ethnic group that feels insecure about its language, culture, and religion starts denying the rules and roles of the dominant ethnic group. Nowadays, interethnic conflicts are accelerating in the names of minority conflicts, territorial conflicts.

Ethnic identity is an essential factor behind the interethnic conflicts. Integrity is the central element in the development of a personality. A person goes through several encounters with society, and in the end, he achieves insightful wisdom and learns about the world and its evils. Throughout his life, a man always searches for identity and realization. “Ethnicity is a social-psychological process which gives an individual a sense of belonging and identity” (Isajiw 1993). By ethnic identity, persons locate themselves psychologically in social systems on account of their ethnic origin and find others with those systems. The aspects of ethnic identity are images, feelings, ideas, and attitudes. Ethnic identity includes self-images and perceptions of one’s group. It also includes feelings of group obligation such as teaching the ethnic language, helping the member of the group in finding jobs, marrying within the groups. Ethnic identity involves a sense of security and “preference for members of one’s group as against members of other groups and feeling of security and comfort with the cultural patterns of one’s group as against the cultural patterns of other groups or societies” (Isajiw 1993). When a powerful cultural group destroys the identity of the minor ethnic group, it results in ethnic conflict. African-Americans also suffer from ethnic identity in America. They are weak and belong to the working class. They do not have privileges. They have to work under their owners who mistreat them. Whites acknowledge blacks as uncivilized and inferior. White people have discriminated against blacks and have distorted their identity. “Recognition is the essence of one’s life for survival in the multicultural world, so Taylor writes that identity means who we are, where we’re coming from” (Naik 32). Still, in America, black Americans struggle to make a balance being black on the one hand and an American, on the other hand, and live with the memory of slavery. Many fearless writers struggle for black identity. They see what is wrong in society and incorporated it into literature.

Another important factor behind ethnic conflicts is language. Language is also a marker of one’s ethnic group. When the language of a minority ethnic group is considered unimportant and unworthy in the official works and public places, it gives rise to ethnic conflict. Religion is also a marker of one’s ethnic group. Through religion, we recognize one’s ethnic identity. Sometimes dominant ethnic groups force the minor ethnic group to leave their religion and accept the religion of the dominant ethnic group. Minority’s religion is not allowed to do their religious practices freely. It gives rise to a long time interreligious conflicts. Ethnic indicators are recognizable factors of a group.

Culture is one of the determiners of one’s ethnic group. Culture includes ideas, customs, dress, music, dance, and habits, etc. of an ethnic group. It is described as a way of life, a set of values, beliefs, and behaviors that differentiates one particular lifestyle from another. When the dominant group forbids the cultural practices of minor ethnic groups, the tension occurs. Another critical indicator of an ethnic group is its geographical location. Its

territory of living recognizes one's ethnicity. These are the significant factors that cause racial and interethnic conflicts. Sometimes these ethnic conflicts can lead to genocide (deliberate killing of people who belong to a particular racial, political, or cultural group), holocaust (an event in which many people are killed, especially by fire), ethnocide (deliberate destruction of an ethnic group).

## 2. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it can be stated that ethnicity changes its meaning and dimensions from time to time. Ethnicity is an umbrella term that encompasses religion, race, language and other factors. It is a social construct to identify an individual. This paper began with the meaning and dimensions of ethnicity and reviewed the main approaches to it. It is not much controversial if its use is limited to categorization. But history reveals that it is used to categorize people into a hierarchy and to define whether they are to be favored or not. When used in such a manner, it can give rise to ethnic conflicts.

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