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Adapting Popular Culture in Chetan Bhagat's *Half Girlfriend*

Dr A Princy Anto

Associate Professor

Department of English,

Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Chalakudy

Abstract

This paper analyses the representation of popular culture in *Half Girlfriend* by Chetan Bhagat through the lenses of cultural hegemony and the culture industry. Set against the backdrop of globalized India, the novel reflects the aspirations, anxieties, and identity struggles of Indian youth, particularly in relation to class, language, and social mobility. Drawing on the theories of Theodor Adorno and Antonio Gramsci, the paper argues that the dominance of English-speaking elite culture in the novel represents a hegemonic structure that shapes individual consciousness and reinforces social hierarchies. Through the character of Madhav Jha, Bhagat portrays the internal conflict between regional identity and metropolitan sophistication. Madhav's insecurity about his English fluency exposes how linguistic capital becomes a marker of superiority in contemporary India. At the same time, the novel itself operates within popular culture, using accessible language and relatable themes to engage mass readership. Ultimately, *Half Girlfriend* both reflects and critiques the cultural forces that shape modern Indian identity in a globalized world.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Cultural Hegemony, Globalization, Youth Identity, Class Consciousness

Introduction

"The principle of true art is not to portray but to evoke. And thus the artist's duty is to pause, not to bypass", says Kosinski, the American novelist. There is art in every aspect of life. And thus art is no longer a complex, distant external reality, rather an indelible part of human existence. An aesthetic experience of art could include a mixture of feeling, such as pleasure, anger, anguish, suffering and joy. The experience of art is never with the naked eyes. Rather it is designed by a set of preconceived notions like the cultural background, personal knowledge, and even knowledge about art itself. In large measure, what one likes is based on what one

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knows. Hence the art experience depends on a confluence of sensations, knowledge, and feelings.

Literature is one among the many manifestations of art. And of the varied 'literatures', Indian literature holds a unique aroma and assorted richness. Indian English Literature is enormous in its scope and is an amalgamation of multilingual and multicultural creations. The beginning of Indian English literature could be traced to the 18th and 19th centuries. It has started in the colonial period, undergone drastic changes in the postcolonial period and has taken new forms and shapes in the modern era. Contemporary literature in India is influenced considerably in content by the western philosophy and thought. It has undergone various changes in respect of characterization, language, content etc. In the arena of international literature, contemporary Indian literature occupies a position of pride for its extravagant affluence and originality. Contemporary Indian writers have taken to writing in English and their style is varied. This varied taste can be sensed in the writings of Manu Joseph, with his new added flavour in his analysis of caste in contemporary India. Another sense of taste is reflected in the writings of Jeet Thayil where his *Narcopolis*, completely subverts and challenges the Indian literary traditions. The much acclaimed novel, *The Utmost Happiness* of Arundathi Roy is another breakthrough in the Indian Literature because of the revelation of riot inside the characters she deals with and because of the ferocity of the narrative. And thus it can be argued, to an extent, that compartmentalization of Indian English novels into one category is no longer possible

Chetan Bhagat has turned out to be a sensation in Indian English literature. He depicts the real-life pictures in his novels. He has won much applause among the Indian youth as he writes about the youth. He feels that youth is the real agent to change the future of our country. The emergence of new India from the cross currents of globalization and westernization is the underlying theme of all his writings. Thrust areas of his novels are the dreams and aspirations of the Indian youth and their exertion in the era of globalization. They see echoes of their lives in his stories of campus life, call centers, marriage, and love. They present perfect picture of Indian youth. As a result, the popularity of the author and his works increases among the mass. At this juncture, another Indian novelist, namely Amish Tripathi and his *Vayuputra Series* or the *Shiva trilogy* gives the impression of the new sensibility of Indian readers. It is reported that the book was a commercial success with 350,000 copies for pre-order, and an initial print-run of 500,000 copies. Eventually it became the fast selling book in India. Amish presents the Hindu gods as creatures of flesh and blood, like human beings, not as mythical beings. His conviction is that they achieved godhood through their karma, their deeds. He believes that the words Vishnu and Mahadev are not individual names; they are in fact titles, given to persons who are the greatest of leaders, who become god-like. And thus they can be easily included into the category of popular writers; where the word 'popular' is in the most literal sense.

Chetan Bhagat's style of writing is simple, coherent and clear with vivid descriptions and linear narratives. Most of the protagonists in his novels are named after Lord Krishna such as Shyam, Krishna, Han, Govind and Madhav. According to him, novels are perfect devices

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for both inspiration and entertainment and through which he disseminates his views and opinion about society and youth. The story line of *Half Girlfriend* beautifully highlights the so-called elite culture and the low culture in the Indian society, regional differences, false pride of high society, and a corrupt politician. The novel could be read from different realms, such as Indian's need of perfecting English speaking skills, for following one's dream and achieving it, fight against patriarchal society and establish one's own identity etc. Anyway the popularity of the novel is at its zenith due to the novelist's skillful handling of the subject matter.

The novel inevitably leads us to the popular culture. And here the word popular is more than the literal sense of the word. In the context of neo-industrialization and globalization, there is a trend of being more assertive of the concepts like self and identity. And all these lead to the emergence of the theory of popular culture. In his book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey offers six different definitions of popular culture. Popular culture is culture widely accepted or well-liked by many people. It is also considered as mass culture that is to say it is a commercial culture. It is mass produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers. It is a culture which is consumed with brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity. The popular culture is also defined as a culture originates from the 'people'.

It is in this juncture, theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer gain their relevance. They proposed that popular culture is similar to a factory which produces standardized cultural goods that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity. Consumptions of the easy pleasures of popular culture which are available through mass communication media make people passive and content. Even their limited economic status does not hinder them from enjoying these pleasures. According to these theorists, the inherent danger of the culture industry is the cultivation of false psychological needs that can only be met and satisfied by the products of capitalism. Another important theorist in the context of popular culture is Antonio Gramsci. His concept of hegemony tends to see the concept of popular culture as a terrain of ideological struggle between ruling class and the subordinates.

Theodor Adorno's coinage of the term "negative dialectics" is commendable in this context. He says, "It is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of the 'negation of the negation' later became the succinct term." In other words, he asks us to reject the idea that the outcome of the dialectic will always be positive but that we do so without leaving the dialectic behind as an explanatory model. We simply have to make it an open rather than a closed process. Adorno's 'negative dialectics' is designed to open up the yet unrealized possibilities at both the micro and the macro level, at the level of individual as well as collective psychology in order to overcome both individual and social suffering. It is the very contradiction between what is and what might be that allows us to overstep the boundaries with which we are constantly presented in order to create our endpoint, rather than simply sleepwalk towards it. This means that it is an attack on the objective basis of the revolutionary consciousness and liquidation of individualism. The masses, in Adorno's eyes, become completely powerless.

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Power lies with the culture industry. Its products encourage conformity and consensus, which ensure obedience to authority and the stability of the capitalist system. The ability of the culture industry to 'replace' the consciousnesses of the masses with automatic conformity is more or less complete. Its effectiveness, according to Adorno, 'lies in the promotion and exploitation of the ego-weakness to which the powerless members of contemporary society, with its concentration of power, are condemned.'

Gramsci defines hegemony as a cultural and ideological means whereby the dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class. This is achieved by the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. An early exposition of Gramsci's ideas says that the hegemony of a political class meant that, that class had succeeded in persuading the other classes of society to accept its own moral, political and cultural values. If the ruling class is successful, then this will involve the minimum use of force, as was the case with the successful liberal regimes of the nineteenth century (Joll, 99). This argument means that the prevailing culture in a society at any point in time is an outcome and embodiment of hegemony, of the 'consensual' acceptance by subordinate groups of the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant groups. The extent to which the subordinate groups genuinely consent to the hegemony of the dominant group is open to question. However, Gramsci does contrast hegemony with coercion, thereby stressing, unlike most Marxist theories of ideology, their mutual importance. In Gramsci's theory, subordinate groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically forced to, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reasons of their own. For example, hegemony is secured because concessions are made by dominant to subordinate groups and its cultural expression will reflect this. For Gramsci, popular culture and the mass media are places where hegemony is produced, reproduced and transformed.

The concept of cultural hegemony is pulsating in the novel, *half girlfriend*. Listening to Madhav's Bihari English other boys laugh at him. "His friends laughed. Over time, I learnt that people often ask what they call a 'rhetorical' question — something they ask just to make a point, not expecting an answer. Here, the point was to demonstrate that I was an alien amongst them." (8). Madhav Jha comments on the smile of his interviewers: "I didn't think it was a good smile. It was the high-class-to-low-class smile. The smile of superiority, the smile of delight that they knew English and I didn't" (9). The interviewers show their hegemonic attitude while they say "Your answers are sensible, but your English is terrible" (12). They just establish the hegemony of English language by opining, "English is no longer a foreign language, Mr Jha. It is a global language" (13). The sense of supremacy of the other boys and also of the interviewers is carved out of the supremacy that the society has attached to the English speaking community. And here, the working of the hegemonic structures is at its peak. It is the culture industry that defines the characteristics of a person – the high and the low class is determined by various equations that prevail in the society.

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Cultural hegemony is very obvious when the character Riya is presented in the novel. She is really a beautiful looking, tall girl. When she appears in the basketball court, other students make comments on her. But it does not make her jerky or inferior in any way; instead she is calm and she resumes the play. Abandoning the love of Jha, she gives consent to marry Rohan because he promises not love, instead 'adventure, travel and excitement' (88). Rohan, is the finest example of cultural hegemony in the novel. The novel gives evidence for his 'heavy British accent'. When Riya was sick, Rohan sends a giant bouquet of three dozen fat pink roses with thin silk ribbons tying them together. And thus instead of valuing the genuine interest and feelings, the new society is training us for a 'patterned thought' which can rightly satisfy the claims and demands of the 'culture industry' that is emerging. And as rightly said by Adorno, "The ability of the culture industry to 'replace' the consciousnesses of the masses with automatic conformity is more or less complete". Again in the two parties hosted one in connection with Riya's birthday at Delhi and the other in honour of Madhav at New York, there is a reflection of the underlying structures of hegemony. Madhav is not even daring to go in his own humble suits, instead he borrows his friend's white shirt to have better look. Cultural hegemony is vivid in the depiction of New York City and in the life style of Shailesh and Jyoti.

The narrator is very certain about the cultural hegemony in our land. He says, "If there was no Battle of Buxar, or if it had had a different outcome, the British may not have ruled India like they did. There would be none of the 'English high class, rest low class' bullshit that happens in India. There would not even be a St. Stephen's College. Just imagine, if only the jokers in Buxar had done things a little differently, maybe the white man would be speaking Hindi and Bhojpuri would be the new cool"(98). Madhav Jha's mother also makes very clear what this hegemony is at all. They have a better understanding of the unavoidable clutches of the society, but they are helpless. She says, Madhav Jha also has become like the people of big cities, "The over-educated idiots in big cities. Whenever they don't understand villagers, they call them, uneducated and old-fashioned" (100).

The phenomenon negative dialectics is also apparent in the novel. Madhav Jha has an identity by which he could be very much proud of. He belongs to a royal family of Dumraon, Bihar and his mother runs a school as their own and works with the villagers. But the phenomenon of negative dialectics is at work in him in the presence of the so-called English types and he feels inferior to them. He easily forgets his royal identity which none of the other boys possess. He asks other boys how to reach the interview venue and as they laugh at him for his Bihari English and he just runs towards the building (8). The issue of the powerlessness of the masses and the supreme power of the culture industry is getting reflected here. He says, "Without English I felt naked. I started thinking about my return trip to Bihar. I didn't belong here – these English-speaking monsters would eat me alive" (10). He has high motive in life compared to the other guys who simply roam about. He wants to learn more about society, the reason for their village's backwardness, the causes behind the differences based on caste and religion etc. But his self-esteem is diminished in the presence of interviewers and while he talk to anyone whom he think better off. When he meets Riya, who later turn as his 'half girlfriend',

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he feels that hers is perfect English and he felt nervous to speak to her (15). The ideological struggle that is there in the mind of Jha reaches a perfect peak, when he encounters Riya. The supremacy of the one is firmly established as against the other.

As the narrator attend Riya's Birthday party his mind wails: "Suddenly, in this lap of luxury, I felt lonely. I missed home, my hostel room and my mother, all at the same time. It is funny how class works. The moment you are placed in a higher one, a part of you feels terrified and alone" (50). By the time he returns his home town his mind setup is fully shattered. He is no more proud of his home land or his royal lineage or his people. He says, "There is nothing spectacular about my hometown. It is a small place, less than three kilometers across on any side. Its only claim to fame is being one of the oldest princely states of India. My family had something to do with that achievement. However I don't know if I can feel proud for what my ancestors did ten generations ago"(98). And he considers his fellow Biharians as "old-fashioned and uneducated" (100). The dilemma of the transition of the cultural values and the supremacy of certain emerging globalised trends over others and the imposition of these cultural values by various actors of the society are leading us to the realization that the inextricable clutches of the hegemonic structures are prevailing in the society. During the annual cultural festival of St Stephen's boys from all over Delhi University had gathered there and they spoke loudly in Hindi and they whistled every time a pretty girl came on the stage. But the so called high culture of Stephanians did not approve of it and they hated it. They were too dignified to express their lecherous feelings in such a public manner. Nonetheless they ogled, but in a 'dignified' manner (81).

The novel also showcases certain other aspects like globalization, cultural elitism, cultural change, anomaly that is prevailing in the cultural transition etc. The process of globalization carries with it various positive and negative consequences. It has been interpreted in two contradictory ways. The positive side is that it is an opportunity to develop in economic sphere and the negative side is that it is a challenge to the age-old cultural identity of India. Chetan Bhagat delineates these aspects in the novel. And the so called cultural elitism is also visible in his writing. St Stephens College, the interview board, Madhav's half girlfriend Riya and Rohan her half boyfriend - all are part of this cultural elitism. Cultural change is explicit in the Indian scenario presented by the author. There is always a craving in the mind of the supposed low class to become like the elite group who enjoy luxurious settings and relaxed lifestyle despite their total lack ultimate happiness. The trends of the society can be rightly analyzed in the context of popular culture. The society is now unsure about what is right and wrong, who is right, who is wrong; to what extent something is right or to what extent something is wrong. The people are in the clutches of some kind of unseen and indefinable powers. They just run after something or the other, without much a serious thought. They are not fully aware of the value of their life or they are unaware of their potentiality. The helplessness of the individual and indigenous societies is utilized by the power structures.

As Adorno has rightly commented, "Individual's integration within the culture has the deep effect of restricting the development of a critical awareness of the social conditions that

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confront us all”. According to him, culture industry promotes domination by subverting the psychological development of the mass of people. Adorno conceives the culture industry as a manifestation of identity-thinking and as being effected through the implementation of instrumentally rationalized productive techniques. Gramsci’s insights about how power is constituted in the realm of ideas and knowledge – expressed through consent rather than force – have inspired the use of explicit strategies to contest hegemonic norms of legitimacy. Gramsci’s ideas have influenced popular education practices as well.

As a conclusion, it can be argued that Chetan Bhagat has firmly rooted his ideas on society, especially his views on younger generation. People are after what is considered as high, sophisticated, pleasure giving and so on. They are unable to make a critical reasoning or logical thinking as their subconscious is muted. They cannot think what is good for them or they cannot try for what they actually want. And in all these irresponsible ‘cool’ actions and attitudes of this generation, Bhagat identifies the clutches of the culture industry, the hegemonic structures and the rampant ideology of negative dialectics. And they can be identified with the trends in popular culture. As rightly said by Criss Jami Killosophy, “Popular culture is a place where pity is called compassion, flattery is called love, propaganda is called knowledge, tension is called peace, gossip is called news, and auto-tune is called singing.”

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