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Culture as a Commodity in the Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee

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Commodification of Culture is a burning issue. We as Indians had a rich culture. The legacy however got diluted over the centuries and westernization brought in different parameters for evaluating culture in terms of globalization, urbanization etc. Upamanyu Chatterjee in his novels has pointed out the outcome of the impact of western culture on urban Indian youth. The paper is an attempt to understand this impact and highlight the mediums that have been instrumental in culture becoming a commodity.

Culture can be broadly defined as the signs, objects, activities, structures, and institutions through which we take meaning and pleasure from our social and material environment, express and define ourselves and communicate with others. Culture evolves, in part, through our creative interaction and engagement with cultural commodities.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1883) saw the forms of mass culture that emerged after industrial revolution and urbanization in the nineteenth century as homogenized serving only base instincts of human beings. People who enjoy popular culture are followers of mindless masses who accept anything before them without question or critique. He wrote 'Culture v/s Civilization' a dichotomy in social philosophy with the argument that the crass materialistic forms of culture which had evolved from capitalist democratic system were a threat to the progress of enlightened human society.

Cultural Studies recognises the all encompassing of cultural aspects in everyday life and explores popular culture in terms of economic and social relationships in the society. Cultural production and consumption can be understood as an industrial framework and that the goods and services produced and consumed can be regarded as commodities produced within the economic system. The term 'Cultural Industry' was coined by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School in 1947 as an image of the commodification found in mass culture. They saw Culture as being transformed by the technology and ideology of capitalism. Adorno suggested that the cultural goods 'are produced for the market and aimed at the market' (Adorno 34). This means that what dominates the production of cultural goods is the production of profit. The term 'cultural capital' is used because, like money our cultural knowledge can be translated into resources such as wealth, power and status.

The work of Stuart Hall on television and media audiences highlights the reception of television. Morley's work on television (1986) audiences is important as it not only considers audiences reception and interaction with their TV but seeks to locate this particular piece of technology with an understanding of its place and use within the everyday workings of the household and family.

India is bearing the onslaught of Cultural Imperialism. The present cultural sentiments in India have evolved from historical experience leading to it being heterogeneous in nature. We have a rich diversity in social and cultural practices and behaviour. A vibrant legacy was

handed down to us however, the global forces have pushed away the indigenous culture and marginalised it and projected it as outdated. It has been replaced by the common sense of the advanced capitalism promoting behaviours and practices of the West.

The cultural entrepreneurs have turned the environment of popular culture, into commodities for the global media to satisfy the cultural curiosity and sense of superiority of their audience. The Indian tribal dances, harvest songs, martial art forms of Kerala and other parts of India and innumerable other folk and art forms are picked out of context, enacted in studios and presented to the world as 'exotic' and primitive practices. This is how India is presented as mysterious in world fairs and on television.

Over the decades after independence, India became a populous urbanized society. The advent of popular culture developed along with and as a result of city life and growing consumer oriented middle class. Chatterjee has himself remarked in *English, August* through one of Madan's friend who has come to India from Chicago about Indians being blind to their own history, apart from being blind to the world outside (174). Madan was informed by his friend that she was visiting Lothal, about which Madan had not the faintest idea. Even where language is concerned the friend was well informed about Sanskrit being used in old civilizations in India whereas Madan was ill-informed. This particularly highlights the emphasis which as Indians we lay on knowing about our culture and the heights we reached as old civilization in this world. The Indian culture is deeply entrenched in the history and development of community. It has been the lifeline of communities and the various sections of the society. The culture that we value is hidden and invisible at the surface but it is sacred. Christine, Madan's friend was more informed and aware of history than Madan himself. His knowledge of America was also limited to the music of Lionel Ritchie which makes her all the more scornful.

The Indian urban youth blindly copies what he sees on TV channels. After the advent of cable TV it has become more forceful. Music as a subculture has had a very dominant impact on these youths who are clubbed as 'Generation X' community. In the 1980s, for students at the elite educational institutions in the capital city of the country and other metropolitans, the culture was westernized to a very large extent. Gen Xers are often called the MTV Generation. They experienced the emergence of music videos, new wave music, electronic music, heavy metal and, punk, rock and the spin-off pop, and hip hop. Compared with previous generations, Generation X represents a more apparently heterogeneous generation, openly acknowledging and embracing social diversity in terms of such characteristics as race, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, language, gender identity etc. The cultural object or product can take many forms, both materially as an existing object, and quickly as an experience, including songs, paintings, films, books, posters, cartoons and dramatic or musical performances.

Mrs. Rajan, wife of Collector of Paal, felt strongly that it was imperative that India had the right exposure abroad (*English, August* 187). It was necessary for such myths to be exploded that it is the land of cringing natives, and snake charmers, elephants and Tantric rites. The World Fair's were organized by Indian government not only to gain financial assistance to look after the natural calamities that were terrorizing people in rural India but also to breathe life into certain art forms which were dying quite death. In the wake of assistance in monetary form and a market which could swallow anything in the name of folk art which was "timeless" or "authentic" or "primordial" Indians managed to carve a niche. The incorporation of local art forms in an international art market eager for original and pure as

was embodied in commodities which were products of ancient indigenous craft traditions brought about significant changes in works of art and disruptions in the social organisations of local art practices.

In *English, August*, when Agastya goes to Jompana, he sees the earthen lamps and he goes back to the city, in the drawing room of an affluent family, which talks about 'art'. The carved earthen shades, the handiwork of exploited tribal potters decorated the sugarcane stalls in Jompana. These would sell in urban markets at exorbitant prices. They reflected the materialistic status of the buyer. The presence of such artefacts in affluent homes brought prestige and a feeling that I-no-longer-belong-to-the-common-group-but-a-class-apart-and-belong-to-the-cosmopolitan-audience. The art is not appreciated but its value is determined by the benefactor. The art becomes a commodity. Baudrillard in *For a Critique* mentions that we have lost all sense of use-value: "It is all capital" (82). Everything is measured in terms of money we have become immune to sweat and tears of toil of the labourer.

MTV changed the social, political and the cultural world not only in India but in the world. The subculture became dominant with a number of artists performing and earning a great fan following. The music became a vehicle of protest as it changed forms. Artists like Scott Joplin and Ella Fitzgerald, who were descendents of Afro-American parents, were pianists and well versed with classical forms also. It is important to understand how these artists came to occupy a prominent place in the world of music.

Agastya's contemporary is Mahendra Bhatia who is also posted at Madna as Assistant Forest officer. In Delhi, Bhatia was 'just one more urban Indian bewitched by America's hard sell in the Third World'. (75) Bhatia, with his Indian motorbike, weird T shirts, was fond of singers who won the Grammy Awards, called rupees bucks and loved being called 'Mandy' just as Agastya preferred names like English or August.

In the tribal areas of Jompana and Mariagarh in the novel *English, August* the Bollywood music was constantly heard in video parlours and sugarcane juice parlours. Agastya hears a Hindi film song and in that area only half the population could speak that language. The tribal's have very little exposure to the urban cultures of the country in which they reside. Only through Bollywood and the Hindi film music are they able to relate to the glitters of the metropolitans.

The advent of cable TV certainly changed the life style of the urban youth and it also created awareness about various cultural differences and similarities in a nation as diversified as India. The heterogeneity in society became more pronounced. In Jamun's generation which was more influenced by TV not only for channels broadcasting foreign programmes but also a variety of Hindi soaps, TV became a major source of entertainment. Taking advantage of growing technology and its reach, Kasturi became a script writer for a soap called *Cheers Zindagi*. Its popularity was magnificent. Soap operas focus on domestic themes of homes and family, love and betrayal in a fantasy world of money and opportunity and emphasize emotions and affairs of the heart. They are all narratives about contemporary lives. Usually, it is stated that soaps cater to women audience rather than to men.

He has also included street theatre in his novels. Street theatre is a combination of theatre and activism performed in an open space such as a street, open lot, slums, railway stations, parks, university campus, in front of a factory or worker's quarters etc. The actors are able to interact directly with the audience. The purpose is not only entertainment but also to educate

audience about social issues and hopefully effect social and/or political change. It is about empowerment of the oppressed. In Indian street theatre, most activists view themselves as a part of a wider social and political movement. Rajni Suroor's theatre, *Vyatha* which means agony in hindi, was supported by government funds.

Therefore, Chatterjee's use of popular culture in his novels brings to fore the richness of forms some of which are not used however to achieve the objectives though. The consumer oriented society and politicalisation of cultural forms is swamping the public disposition.

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