
POPULAR WEB SHOWS – *High Culture Or Low Culture?*

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Abstract: With the growing availability of a multilingual array of TV shows, movies, songs, works of fiction, and various other genres of entertainment through the recently popularised online platforms, the grip of Popular Culture has fastened over the minds of the masses manifold in the recent years in every corner of the globe. However, contrary to the general notion, this culture does not just aim at entertaining people by providing them respite from their mundane lives but also compels them to contemplate contemporary socio-cultural issues. Consequently, in this paper, through the examples of a few very popular web shows, I intend to critically probe into this overtly novel culture and analyze how it influences the existing conscience of its consumers, leading them to have a better introspection of themselves and their milieu, in general.

Keywords: Popular culture, online platforms, web shows, entertainment, contemplate, introspection.

“Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow....” - Camille Paglia (1991)

Popular Culture is a discourse that has managed to garner the most polarising opinions about its academic significance over the years. One of the reasons for this divided opinion of the masses is the expanse of familiarity that it brings with it. The imperious exponents of the "high culture" (as Masson Cooley terms it) dismiss its relevance in the educational domain as they believe that, unlike the erudite canonical form, this form of culture is nothing but shallow entertainment. However, when delving deeper into its connotations beyond the detonation, it can be ascertained that it does not just aim at entertaining people by providing them respite from their mundane lives but also compels them to contemplate contemporary socio-cultural

issues. Consequently, educationists have begun to recognize the genres of Popular Culture in the realm of academia as a form of art with impressive literary and social implications. Professor Andrew Hoberek, an English Professor at the University of Mussorie who incorporates hip-hop and graphic novels into his lesson plans, explains, "My goal in my class ... (is) to teach people how to understand and appreciate art. You're teaching people not to think about language as transparent or obvious – (but) to understand hidden meanings." In 2018, in India, institutions like the University of Calcutta, for the first time, added Popular Literature into their syllabus, including texts such as Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Herge's *Tintin in Tibet*. In the West, a 'procedure syllabus' is implemented in the class, allowing learners to propose their preferred studies; this increases their interest and, thus, productivity in the process of learning. But, sadly, in India, most institutions still abide by the 'product syllabus' where the content of the study is predetermined. So, the inclusion of Popular Literature into the syllabi of various Indian universities in recent years proved to be revolutionary and also productive as the students, unlike the other unfamiliar texts, seemed more interested in these texts and, thus, were able to form their interpretations more freely. With the advancement of technology and the digitization of nations across the world, the prominence of Popular Culture has reached the farthest corner of the map. Thus, the growing availability of a multilingual array of TV shows, movies, songs, works of fiction, and various other genres of entertainment through the recently popularised online streaming platforms has fastened the grip of Culture over the minds of the masses manifold in recent years. In this paper, I will concentrate on the implications of the few drama series available on platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar. The reason is that although the pleasure of reading can never be contradicted, in the humdrum of our busy modern life, where our concentration span has been reduced to a few seconds, watching a series seems more feasible. Moreover, I chose to analyze series rather than films because I feel owing to the longer duration, series are capable of portraying issues in more detail. In the Indian context, the reputation of TV series has not been quite glorious in the past few years. With the advent of the telecom company Jio and its flexible data plans, we have recently become acquainted with the novel genre of web series. I have selected only a few such shows from the ocean that are available to analyze how these shows act like catalysts for their consumers to brood over the contemporary milieu portrayed, its implicit allusions, and their stylistic approaches.

The flaws in the Indian education system and its incompetence in allowing student to follow their innate passion have been a recurrent theme in various movies such as *3 Idiots*, *Taare Zameen Par*, and others. In 2019, a Hindi web show titled

Kota Factory, directed by Raghav Subbu for The Viral Fever broke this stereotype and attempted to provide a fresh perspective to get through this flawed and hopeless system – not by fighting against it but by struggling towards success along with it. The show has two seasons. It was initially streamed on YouTube, but in the second season, Netflix took up the show. The plot revolves around Vaibhav, who is an IIT aspirant. He comes to Kota, like many others, in the hope of fulfilling his goal. What makes the show special and unique is that it does not glamourize Vaibhav as a brilliant student. In fact, in the opening scene, it is shown that Vaibhav's father is trying to persuade the Head of the top coaching institute in Kota to Vaibhav's enrolment, assuring him, "Ladke mein dam hai. High school mein 90 percent marks laya tha (The boy is smart. He scored 90 percent in High School) (*Kota Factory*, Season 1, Episode 1- 'Inventory'). The reply that the Head of the institute gives is a tight thrash of reality-check for every aspiring student; he says –

...pure Bharat mein 7 lakh se zyada bachon ke 10th mein 90 percent se upar number aati hai... Aur IIT mein seats kitni hai? Matra 5273. Agar sirf 90 percent bachche bhi IIT ke exams dein, toh bhi 99 percent bachchon ka nhi ho payega. (more than 7 lakh students score 90 percent in tenth grade every year....And how many seats do we have in IIT? 5273. Even if only the students scoring more than 90 percent take the test for IIT, unfortunately, 99 percent of them won't make it).

(*Kota Factory*, Season 1, Episode 1- 'Inventory')

The show-creators also take another unusual step, choosing to make the show black and white, but not simply so. The show commences in the regular, colored version but as Vaibhav enters and sits in the lobby of Maheshwari coaching institute, the camera gradually pans to the TV screen playing an advertisement for the coaching classes, and then the screen turns black and white, highlighting how grim and hopeless his life, from this point is going to be. However, the novelty of this show lies in the fact that it does not focus on Vaibhav's exasperation but portrays how he adapts to this new situation and weaknesses, makes friends, and finally overcomes his odds. *Kota Factory* isn't a show about the hardships of IIT or JEE aspirants, but it gives purpose to the hopeless venture, "IIT isiliye karo kyuki tough hai.. Aur tough battle ladne mein confidence aata hai life mein" (Aim for IIT because it's tough. And fighting tough battles gives confidence in life) (*Kota Factory*, Season 2, Episode 1- 'Reasoning'). Through Vaibhav, the show traces the journey of a diligent average student who works very hard to overcome his shortcomings and earns his place among the rankers. He is portrayed as a "fighter student" with whom every mediocre could relate, giving them hope that they are not losers but they, too, have the potential to achieve their goal through perseverance and hard- work. One of the most important

aspects that this show calls attention to is the significance of a good teacher. The character of Jeetu bhैया, as the creators suggested, is an amalgamation of a few wonderful teachers that they came across while they, themselves were preparing for IIT in Kota. Jeetu bhैया is not a teacher who sugarcoats the truth and encourages his students not to brood over his failure and keep working hard, nor is he abominable like Viru Sahastrabudhee from *3 Idiots*. He is the only one in whose realistic advice his students find solace from the wretched reality. He refutes the cliché statement, “every child is special” as “bakwaas” (utter nonsense) and universalism the problems faced by every student, assuring them that they are not alone –

... tu koi unique personality nahi hai. Yeh problems hazaro bachon ke saath hoti hain. Agar problem a rhe ho, toh unhe dhund do...lambe samay tak agar nhi baitha jar ha hai toh bas baith ja. Challenge le ki main baithunga, uthunga hi nhi. Aur kya kiya tune? Apni problems ko dar bana diya. Aur dar seedha ego se connected hai aur ego ke nuksaan bahut hai par ek fayda hai, cheezen doable lagne lagti hain. (You are not a unique personality. Thousands of students face the same problem every year!..If you encounter problems, jostle with them!...Even if you are unale to focus for a long duration, just sit.... So, what have you done? You have turned your problems into a dare. And dare is directly connected to ego. Ego has disadvantages but it has one advantage as well. Things seem to be doable.)

(*Kota Factory*, Season 1, Episode 2 - ‘Assembly’)

One of his famous pieces of advice about how to be habituated to study for so long, which every student across streams must have attempted, said, “21 din mein koi bhi aadat lag jaati hai, koi bhi aadat chhoot jaati hai. Toh yahi karna hai.” (You can form or give up any habit in 21 days) (*Kota Factory*, Season 1, Episode 2 - ‘Assembly’). This show is remarkable given the fact that it does not merely depict the predicament of young aspirants, but it portrays the students of Kota who keep fighting against all odds – academic weaknesses, self-doubt, frustration, loneliness – and aspires to shine at the end without losing hope. It refuses to call the students who finally do not succeed in getting into IIT as failures, Jeetu bhैया elucidates, “War mein soldiers ladte hain. Ek side jeetti hai, ek side harti hai. Par war mein harne wale warriors kehlate hei losers nahi” (Soldiers fight in the war. One opponent wins whereas the other loses But those who lose in war are called warriors and not losers) (*Kota Factory*, Season 2, Episode 5 - ‘Packaging’). In this present world, where failures are more highlighted than successes, where everyone is engaged in a rat race, this show is an ointment to every person who carries the wound of failure in their hearts. Although the show is based on IIT and JEE aspirants, it is rather a microcosm of our society, where every individual has their own battles to fight, and life is all

about overcoming those battles, necessarily not winning each of them. This show being partially autobiographical, may also be considered as a fictionalised documentation of real live characters. In a strict education system, like India has, where students have to face comparison and competition at every step of their lives, studying the intricacies of shows like this will not only give them a knowledge about implicit indication of bitter truths through technical details and use of aphorisms but also a perspective to cope with the dire situation that might help in reducing number of suicide cases of young students in general.

Out of the critically acclaimed shows those talk about the disillusionment of the adolescents and its appalling consequences, the most remarkable one has to be *13 Reasons Why* (2017). It is an adaption of a book by Jay Asher of the same name. The show, places the character of Hannah Baker at its centre who had killed herself, raising pertinent questions on depression, bullying, drug abuse, rape and suicide. It incorporates the frame-narrative technique, in which Clay Jensen is the primary narrator who comes across thirteen tape recordings from Hannah that she recorded before committing suicide, explaining the reason of her drastic decision, and these play the role of secondary narrator in the show. Thus, very intricately, the creators provide a dual perspective of the truths that Clay and Hannah vouch for. Clay is the epitome of the introverted kid in class whom hardly anyone notices, while Hannah a newcomer, becomes swiftly popular in school, whom Clay too admires. When Clay starts listening to Hannah's tapes, he discovers that she has talked about thirteen people in each of the recordings, and how each of them contributed in her taking such a drastic step as to kill herself. The show stirs discussions on certain relevant issues portrayed through Hannah's dreadful experiences at high school – her intimate pictures were virtually circulated, the boy whom she trusted was the one to let those pictures to go around, she had fallen out from her only friends Alexi and Jessica, she was molested and then raped by Bryce Walker, the most popular kid in school and finally she saw Bryce rape Jessica while she was intoxicated. It also brings forth the toxic culture of bullying to the extreme point where Monte goes on to beat up Tyler and even forcefully sodomises him with a broomstick in the bathroom. One of the most ironic lines in the show has to be, "You don't know what goes on in anyone's life but your own" (*13 Reasons Why*, Season 1, Episode 9 – 'Tape 5, Side A'), which points out how self-centric we as a generation have become, where we consider nothing more important than ourselves and we do not care to know how someone else is doing. Among the thirteen tapes, Hannah dedicates one to Clay in which she describes how he is the only one who had always been good to her, but sadly enough, we as the objecting spectators, could understand the irony of the situation where Clay despite getting direct indications that Hannah was not doing well, left her to be by

herself. The show-creators also ingeniously merge realism with fantasy. After Hannah's death, Clay is distraught, and in his agony, he seems to have periodic visions of Hannah where she talks to him. These conversations that he has with her imagined self, is a sign of Clay's declining mental health, dealing with Hannah's death and also facing his conscience that says how he failed her in so many ways. *13 Reasons Why* does not only portray Hannah as a victim, it also highlights how Hannah had made certain conscious choices that later led to her doom. The show instead of only sticking to Hannah's storyline also explores the exasperation of other characters and their struggle in dealing with the conscience of the wrongs they had committed. It portrays Clay's journey from the heartbreak and shock of losing his beloved to continuing his life with new hope. Most importantly, the show focuses on mental health. It is loaded with themes of such repugnant social issues that it provides a disclaimer before every episode for any people with history of clinical depression or any other mental health issues to avoid watching the show as it might trigger their past traumas. In India, where we have negligible amounts of awareness when it comes to mental health and the concept of consent, watching these kinds of shows (in discretion) and analysing them, will definitely add to a wholesome form of education for every student.

Sex education in India is the most farcical form of the term. Puberty is that stage of human life in which if not directed in the right direction, a child is doomed to be disillusioned. Study about human sexuality, other aspects related to it and its consequences should be the major subject-matter to help them become aware to be able to lead a safe and responsible sexual life. It should have been the subject, taught with sincerity and concern. Students should have been able to communicate their queries freely with the teacher. But instead of this, in India, sex as it is, is considered a taboo, and sex education has, thus, been reduced to mere identification of the reproductive systems. This leads to absolute lack of sexual awareness among the teenagers, who have meagre knowledge about contraceptives and the health hazards that could be caused by unprotected intercourse. As a result, teenagers and young adults tend to engage in irresponsible sexual activities resulting in their premature pregnancies and major wastage of youth power. The Netflix fiction series, *Sex Education* (2019), came as an antidote to this ailment of misinformation. Otis is the protagonist of the show, who has innate ability to provide sex advice inherited from his mother, who is a professional sex counsellor. He, in collaboration with Maeve, starts providing sex advice to the students of Moordale High as a side business. Although started as a mercenary venture, Otis' advice worked wonders for his schoolmates. The show does not just restrict itself in providing information about sex between heterosexual individuals but also talks about homosexual orientation, the

sexual difficulties faced by young homosexual individuals, tabooed topics like excessive sexual urge, douching, masturbation, the over-sized penis, erectile dysfunction, and many more. It is like a sexual counsellor for its consumers. It also traces issues of domestic violence through the character of Adam, parental pressure through the character of Jackson and drug abuse through the character of Maeve's mother, Erin. In the present era, when progressive nation like the US is "considering eliminating the constitutional right of women to have an abortion" (*Times of India*, May 10, 2022), it has become urgently necessary for young adolescents and teenagers to be sexually aware and responsible. Shows like this could act as a very powerful educational tool in that case.

Period drama is such a genre which has successfully been able to interest masses across ages. Authors such as Jane Austen, Francis Burney, Emily Bronte and others have attracted our attention with the fairy-tale versions of their unrealistic love-story where a young girl has to go around trying to secure an eligible bachelor as her husband, so that she doesn't have to spend rest of her life as a spinster. The subplots of the storyline focus on how her family lacks the ability to pay dowry and she being the 'angel of the house' compensates for that lack. The Netflix period drama series *Bridgerton* (2020), based on the Regency Era in England, portrays these aspects but not merely so. The show is an adaptation of the book series of the same name by Julia Quinn. The series is about the eight siblings of the household of Viscount Bridgerton, and how they find love. The narrative of this series is again quite interesting. The plot is revealed through the eyes of Lady Whistledown, who is the author of a local journal, that publishes hot-gossips of the town, around the time of the social season in London during which aristocratic ladies from all over the world came flocking to be introduced into the "marriage market". This show stands out from rest of the other period dramas as it very aesthetically adapts from the original series, with essentially 'white characters' and incorporates characters from various other cultures like Indians and Afro-Europeans without indulging in cultural appropriation. They do not replace white-characters with the characters of colour for just the sake of it but provide appropriate backstory for it. In the first season, for the character of Simon, the Duke of Hastings, in a flashback his father elucidates to him about their Dukedom, "We have been granted this line. The monarchy itself has declared it. But it will only remain ours so long as we remain extraordinary" (*Bridgerton*, Season 1, Episode 2 – 'Shock and Delight'). This also explains how Queen Charlotte is also a lady of colour – her father was a Duke too. Nicola Coughlan, who plays Penelope in the series, elaborates (through a tweet which was deleted later), "If you're seeing *Bridgerton* and thinking it's anachronistic because it's brilliantly diverse and in glorious technicolour – you are correct. We are serving you 'Fantasy' Regency London.

Bright, Bold and Beautiful”. While portraying female characters, Daphne has been titled as the “Diamond of the season” who smoothly fits into the ‘angel of the house’ archetype, Penelope can be considered representing the contemporary women authors of that era who used pseudonyms in their published works, to avoid public humiliation, the character of Eloise breaks the stereotype and transcends beyond. She refutes being in love as an “accomplishment” and considers it frivolous unlike her sister Daphne, and stresses, “Do you know what *is* an accomplishment? Attending university! If I were a man, I could do that, you know. Instead, I shall have to stand by and watch dear Mama appear proud because some man would like to admire my sister’s face and hair and fill her up with babies!” (*Bridgerton*, Season 1, Episode 2 – ‘Shock and Delight’). This very monologue of Eloise would definitely remind the viewers of what Virginia Woolf suggested in *A Room of One’s Own*. Her disinterest in attending balls and operas also reminds us of Katherine Mansfield’s approach to life. The show, thus, although provides the pleasures of enjoying a period drama does not succumb to the orthodox conventions of the past era. Rather, it stirs its consumers to ponder upon the inconsistencies in the timeline, and acknowledge liberal views that would make the world a better place perhaps. One of the most significant issues raised in this show is the fact that women were kept in the dark about the concept of human reproduction until their marriage, after which they are expected to learn everything by themselves. This is so poignant in the Indian context, where a norm of the Regency era in England, is still being followed. Even in present India, young girls are hardly made aware of their sexual development, out of the fear that the knowledge might encourage them to be engaging in rampant sexual activities, but the reality is just the opposite. Simon aptly highlights the idiocy of such a convention, “I am laughing at the absurdity of how little mothers tell their daughters” (*Bridgerton*, Season 1, Episode 3 – ‘Art of Swoon’). The show explores the outcome of such lack of knowledge. Daphne marries Simon well-aware that he can not become a father, but the irony is despite Simon explaining it to her clearly, she fails to fathom that he willingly chooses not to have a child and he has no such physical inability whatsoever. Later, when Daphne realises that Simon voluntarily avoids having a child, she feels betrayed as she feels he lied to her. The core of the whole misunderstanding is her lack of knowledge about the process of conception. The artistic and social impact of this show is immense, the innumerable intricacies, like colour-palette of the characters’ costumes and their analysis could bring out new interpretations each time. In the second season of this show, Indian characters were cast for major role, the theme song of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* was incorporated in the ‘haldi-scene’ of Edwina’s marriage – this was a huge step towards universalization of art form, which could be possible only through Popular culture.

Professor Andrew Hoberek, tracing the evolution of Popular culture, quotes, “the history of modern culture is a history of popular entertainments evolving into art.” The progressive journey of Popular culture from racist, homophobic, misogynistic TV-shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Office* to shows such as *Bridgerton* and *Sex Education* that bear a sense of inclusiveness, shows that this modern culture has come a long way and has the potential to be academically accepted. Also shows such as *Mandaar* directed by Anirban Bhattacharya points out a new approach to the adaptation of canonical literature. Thus, setting aside Popular culture as only a means of entertainment would be our folly. It is time that we extend our vision about this pervasive culture as an insightful artistic form, exploring the subtleties of which will enrich our minds with new approaches to literary interpretation and research.

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