Counter Hegemony: A Critical Study of Jeremy Robert Johnson's *The Loop*

P. Sherena[1] & Dr. Sidney Shirly[2]

[1]*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Scott Christian College (A), Nagercoil*
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

[2]*Associate Professor, Department of English, Scott Christian College (A), Nagercoil*
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

Copy Right:

Abstract
Popular culture can be defined as the dominating trend or vogue which prevails during a particular period of time. It is sure that such a prominent practice can eventually become a habit in the ones who follow it. This sort of a culture will be thought of as something worthy to be accepted. The research assumes such people as the proletariat group who unconsciously suffer without suspicion or questioning under the money-minded corporates. The current research explores the internalization of popular culture within the Gen Z. The Loop by Jeremy Robert Johnson acts as a postmodern text which throws light on such hegemony and acts as a counter-cultural text book and reconstructs misconceptions in popular culture. The research concludes that there is hope amidst crisis and youngsters can aspire for a more peaceful world by using their fragmented world as a tool to reconstruct an identity of their own.
Keywords: popular culture, hegemony, proletariat, postmodernism and identity

Cultural studies explores culture in every aspect possible. Culture has a mighty impact on one's behaviour. It is imbibed within an individual as they continue to interact with the societal environment they reside in. Human beings can be addressed as the end product of culture. It further resonates on the blurring of identity in humans as they get identified along with machines. The lines, "because you're not even human to them. You're a unit of something else. They rename you 'test subject or 'enemy', or they assign you a race or nation or a class–and then they don't have to think about you anymore" (255) indicate the oppression faced by them. This in turn means that they are not recognized as human beings. Machines act as extensions of body parts nowadays. The conspiracy of corporates enforced on this innocent group of people, can change them into cybernetic organisms. The novel The Loop highly criticizes this idea where humans are controlled like puppets and toys.

'Cultural hegemony' (Jameson 69) is a philosophical idea and a sociological concept that explains the domination of a particular social class over another. The Marxist philosophy explains this as the domination of the ruling class over the commoners. The proletariat accepts this domination and the dominator as they perceive this to be normal and true. The term was coined and popularized by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist intellectual in the 1930s. With the victim group's consent, the victimizer easily takes charge over them and eventually takes a complete control over their lives.

M.H Abrahams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham in A Glossary of Literary Terms Opine

Gramsci's most widely echoed concept is that of hegemony: that a social class achieves a predominant influence and power not by direct and overt means but by succeeding in making its ideological views so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression (208).

This kind of misinterpretation encountered by such a lower social group results in "False consciousness" (Abrahams 205).

False consciousness is a term proposed by Friedrich Engels. The term refers to the condition of the proletariat group which fails to acknowledge the oppression faced due to the domination of the government. The present chapter particularly showcases popular culture as the dominating force which exploits the Gen-Z who fail to recognize their position in a society which manipulates them in the name of trend or newness. Abin Chakraborty in his work Popular Culture (2019) asserts that unlike Althusser's absolutist concept of ideology, however, Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' is more fluid, especially since Gramsci accepts the possibility of subalterns rising to a position of hegemony" (50-51).

The mass media has a notable contribution in generating this false consciousness. In the novel, the broadcast uses signals from television and radio. This is synonymous with the evil effects of media addiction in the current scenario. The Gen-Z faces such struggles to maintain their status as the well-off. So they fake their identity and reality to satisfy the society they live in. They are made to feel that money is everything. Judah says to Lucy, "But it's like their parents passed on a sickness in the genes. Or it's the money. I don't know . . ." (34).

The power politics of the broadcast station can be found when the footage, of Chris Carmichael being shot dead by a group of police men, gets erased because the town's signals suddenly stop working. There is also a notification of an automatic download from an unknown number in Bucket's mobile phone which cannot be deleted by him. The tyranny of the people in authority is vividly portrayed here.

This generation in a way is more pessimistic and always expresses negativity in their social media accounts. Christopher Butler in his work Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction says, "This feeling that the mass media substitute images for reality arises in various ways, from the Marxist presupposition that we are all in any case the victims of a false consciousness brought about by bourgeois discourse, through to the liberal distrust of corporate restraints on free speech" (111).

Judah's cat being injected with a hypodermic syringe, hints at the idea of passive acceptance of ideas without refusal. The idea of 'Hypodermic Needle Theory' (Articona 72) where passing of information is linear, is infused here. The novel opens with the podcast named "Nightwatchman" (3) an anonymous voice who calls himself as, "the only man brave enough to tell you the truth, the one media source you can depend on" (3). Chinenye Nwabueze and Ebere Okonkwo in "Rethinking the Bullet Theory in the Digital Age" opine:

The bullet theory or hypodermic needle theory postulates that the media (needle) injects the message into audience mind hence causes changes in audience behavior and psyche towards the message. This theory therefore refers to mass media audience members as passive and hence at the mercy of mass media contents. It therefore holds that persuasive media contents achieve the desires attitudinal change from the target audience. (3)

Lucy being a victim to this impending situation faces so much of emotional and mental trauma. She could not meet up with the societal needs in the place she lives in. Even in her school a particular group of students take the upper hand. They are the Brower Butte kids. She even falls for the rich men like Nate Carver who have lot of money. The hospital named St. Andrews and the IMTECH are the money-making industries. The novel thus leads one to notice the oppression done in the name of development by corporate industries.

People like Judah, express their satisfaction with the new industries popping up for the land source and compensate it with meagre jobs for the people. Judah says:

Even at that point, I think they were telling us different things. Whatever they believed would keep us motivated, working through the all-day crunch . . . There was a sense of security in not always wondering if grants would come through. They paid

to move us out and even helped us find a house. Paid off my med school loans. (205)

The companies like Big Data, IMTECH and other large centres try to build their industries. The Nightwatchman podcast says, "I want to believe that these massive companies have the people's best interests in mind. Maybe they'll create a beautiful symbiotic relationship and jobs and money will rain down like mana and our corporate benefactors will usher in a new golden age of peace and prosperity" (8). This shows how material world has gained high importance in this culture.

IMTECH is a biomedical industry where a secret act of corruption happens. As a high-tech industry, with the developing technological advancements, this industry tests human beings by inserting a particular infectious device. "The company –best known for AcceptSkin©, a synthetic silicon tissue used to prevent the rejection of bioelectric implants in medical patients –recently captured minor media buzz after being granted a mind-boggling 2,835 patents for what it claims will be a single piece of technology" (102). It gives signals and sounds from under the skull in the youngsters of Turner Falls which makes them uncontrollable killers.

The company while giving an interview says, "As integrated Medical we changed the way human body interacted with needed implants" (103). They do not reveal the conspiracy theory behind this implant and eventually turn the people like cyborgs. They are carefully portrayed in a typical corporate like manner by Johnson. Even though there are oppositions against this industry, they just say, "Well, you've always got a few pessimists who skew negative so they can appear clairvoyant if something goes wrong" (104).

Cyborgs are cybernetic organisms. The term was coined by Manfred Clynes in 1960. They are partly humans and partly machines. Cyberpunk is the science fiction genre in connection with cyborgs. It is one another way to criticize the false consciousness of people. Fathima Sherin, a professor of English in the article, "Exploring the Human-Machine Interface: Artificial Intelligence and Cyborg Theory in Literature" declares:

Cyborgs in literature can be used to critique and subvert dominant power structures such as patriarchy and capitalism by challenging traditional notions of identity and embodiment. Cyborgs blur the boundaries between the organic and the technological, highlighting the constructed nature of human identity and the potential for hybridity and multiplicity. . . Furthermore, cyborgs can represent a challenge to capitalist structures, which are often based on rigid separation of labour and production. (371)

The cyborg attack of the loop catches Lucy, Brewer and Bucket from the "East Bear Caves" (38). Lucy begins to find violent and horrible teenagers becoming like monsters. "Before Lucy recoiled and pushed flat against the cave wall behind her, she noticed a shape on one of the girl's skin" (91). The affected ones speak like machines accepting the order of their authority. "'Override protocol failed. Ops dispatched'" (19).

The prime focus of the totalitarians are the teenagers and young adults who seem to be passive victims of cyber technology. Brian McHale in "POSTcyberMODERN-punkISM" opines, that "It is this latest phase of the interaction that, on the SF end of the feedback loop, has acquired the label 'cyberpunk'. In this systematic perspective, cyberpunk can be seen as SF which derives certain of its elements from postmodernist mainstream fiction which has already been 'science fictionalized' to some degree. . . "(253-254).

Lucy even imagines a day "she thought may be fifty years away from being able to turn humans into what she called the "universal animal', that between 3-D printed cartilage and epidermal electronics and nanotechnology we might be able to allow humans to emulate the best qualities of other creatures in nature" (207). Inferiority develops as a result of this cultural hierarchy of rich and poor. Judah expresses his feelings:

'Yeah…you guys know right? That shit never changes. Even when I was a kid. Different guys, same attitude. I lived over past Westerhaus, if that gives you some idea of how I was growing up, and I'd look at those kids and imagine having what they had, all those opportunities, no serious worries, and I was so jealous. And later, when I was selling a little weed, those guys wanted me around, so I'd hang with them. Their cars were cool, I guess. Sometimes I got laid

rolling with them. But I was always nervous. Just something about them that felt…off'" (31-32).

The way peer groups join together and oppress the lower group like the poor is expressed as "Lucy pictured the way boys' faces would change when they were in a group together. It happened with girls sometimes too. She was treated differently for her tanned skin. "The few times she'd tried to be social with the Brower Butte kids, she'd felt like either an accessory – "My Ethnic Friend—or a curiosity to be studied like a bug under the magnifying glass until they got bored and decided to start pulling off wings" (32).

Lucy was adopted by her White parents, since she was an orphan. "They connected her with a school advocate to help her with the cultural and linguistic transition, but Lucy stopped meeting with her once one she realized how those visits made her feel alien, as If she were a different species needing special handling" (67). Her mind voice often says her, "No wonder they treat you like you're weird" This makes it clear that she should "laugh at some dumb jokes" (70) if she wants to be accepted by this culture.

In general, popular culture has its own influence in every aspect of life. Currently Bizarro evolves as a genre and in turn becomes a fan fiction due to its immense fan base. It is written in a manner which parallels the weirdness of the popular culture. The Loop addresses the whereabouts of the technological craze in the globalized world. It acts as the reflection of the current cultural scenario where the Z generation lives. Dr. G.D. Choudhary in "Essential of Young Adult Literature" says that, "When a culture is undergoing a lot of changes due to scientific advances and technological developments, and expects to undergo more, it's hardly surprising if stories about these changes become popular as a way of expressing people's feelings (optimistic or otherwise) about change "(92).

The shift from a postmodernist fragmented world and shallowness in the mindset of people to the hopeful metamodern world is the expectation of Gen Zs. Johnson's bizarro fiction clearly depicts the real-world situation faced by the younger generation of today.

Works Cited

1. Abrahams, M.H. & Geoffrey Galt Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 11th ed., Cengage Learning, 2020.
2. Articona, Bernard V. "Gen Z's Attributes, Characteristics, and Linguistic Creativity in Different Social Media Platforms". International Journal of Research Publications, vol.103, no.1, 2022, pp.70-82, https://doi.org/10.47119/ IJRP1001031620223385
3. Butler, Christopher. Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press, 2006.
4. Chakraborthy, Abin. Popular Culture. Orient Black Swan, Edited by Krishna Sen, 2019.
5. Choudhary, G.D. Essential of Young Adult Literature. Cyber Tech Publications, 2015.
6. Jameson, Frederic. Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Duke University Press, August 2006.
7. McHale, Brian. "POSTcyberMODERN-punkISM". Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology, Edited by Niall Lucy, Blackwell Publishers, 2004, pp.247-263.
8. Nwabueze, Chinenye and Ebere Okonkwo. "Rethinking the Bullet Theory in the Digital Age". International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communications (IJMJMC), vol. 4, no.2, 2018, pp. 1-10. http:// dx.doi.org/10.20431/2454-9479.0402001
9. Sherin, Fathima. "Exploring the Human-Machine Interface: Artificial Intelligence and Cyborg Theory in Literature". JETIR, Vol. 10, no.5, May 2023, pp.370-373,https://www.jetir. org/papers/JETIR2305147.pdf.