

Graffiti as a Youth Subculture: The Case of Bangladesh vis-à-vis Hebdige's Observations

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Abstract: This paper intends to study the implication of graffiti as a weapon of subculture in Bangladesh vis-à-vis its emergence as a new art form that symbolizes rebellion and a call for liberty, equity, and freedom. By dint of graffiti, the young generation of Bangladesh can express their desire to set themselves free from all the obstacles and let their inner voices be heard by others, which makes it the representative of the youth. This paper analyzes the multilayered and multifaceted terrains that graffiti behold and the way it contributes to the upheavals of youth breaking the shackles of oppression and taking an active part in the meaning-making process of the country. Lately, a surge of street art has been widespread, and through this, hopefully, the ruled class people, especially the youngsters, can voice their distress and address the authority. This paper will attempt to address and analyze all these issues in the light of the essay 'Subculture: The Meaning of Style' by Dick Hebdige.

Keywords: Graffiti, subculture, culture, youth

1. Introduction

Graffiti is a writing or drawing made on a wall or other surface, usually without permission and within public view. It ranges from simple written words to elaborate wall paintings. Graffiti or street art has always been considered as symbols or means of protests against tyranny, autocracy, exploitations, and, more importantly, capitalism. Since it often tells the tales of people from the ruled class or the general walk of life along with the youngsters, it has never been elevated to the realms of mainstream culture. As it has been done to rebel or revolt against the prevalent hierarchical norms of society, it righteously is a part of the emerging subculture of Bangladesh. As we know, subculture is a cultural group within a larger group, having different notions, ideologies, and philosophies rise of graffiti as a subculture is quite a

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new phenomenon in a restricted and developing country like Bangladesh, where many, if not everyone, is still pretty much bounded by the mainstream culture. However, as of late, graffiti has earned a place amongst the young people hailing primarily from the area. It has various effects on society. Young people tend to use graffiti as a means or resistance to their political disenchantments and disappointments-both in personal and political, voice their displeasure about the ruling class, let their dreams be known, and call for a change in societal ruling and oppression. It has a massive following among the educated youth. Working as a means to rebel against the status quo, graffiti is triumphing- as a spokesperson for liberty and equity.

2. Subculture and Hebdige

2.1 Subculture: It is a concept from the academic fields of sociology and cultural studies. Moreover is a group of people within a culture that differentiates itself from the parent culture to which it belongs, often maintaining some of its founding principles. Subculture is often a language of resistance by the mass people and especially the marginal or peripheral ones. It is a cultural group within a broader culture and, often, having beliefs, interests, and doctrines at variance with the dominant culture, which is also known as the mainstream culture.

2.2 Subcultures and resistance: Subcultures are interpreted as forms of resistance. Society is seen as being divided into two fundamental classes, the working class and the middle class, each with its own class culture and middle-class culture being dominant. Particularly in the working class, subcultures grow out of the presence of specific interests and affiliations around which cultural models spring up, in conflict with both their parent culture and mainstream culture. Subcultures are then new forms of collective identification expressing what is known as symbolic resistance against the mainstream culture and developing ideal solutions for structural problems. Dick Hebdige (1979) asserts, "Identity and resistance are expressed through the development of a distinctive style which, by a re-signification and bricolage operation, use cultural industry goods to communicate and express one's conflict." (p. 91). However, the cultural industry is often capable of re-absorbing the components of such a style and once again transforming them into goods. At the same time, the mass media, while they participate in building subcultures by broadcasting their images, also weaken them by depriving them of their subversive content or by spreading a stigmatized image of them.

2.3 The concepts of Hebdige: Dick Hebdige's concept of Subculture is a structuralist approach to understanding the styles of Britain's youth cultures. Hebdige argues that style, through the subversion of everyday objects, allows Britain's subcultures to symbolically separate themselves from the mass culture to which they belong. By defining this separate system of symbols, these subcultures challenge tradition, denying the context of the mass culture. In this way, otherwise powerless teenagers can be transformed into the socially significant punk rockers.

Hebdige considers a wide range of subcultures, from the infamous skinheads to the spiritual Rastafarians to the chameleon-like vibes. He takes an in-depth look at each, considering not only the why of their existence but also the how. He examines how style reflects and articulates the underlying principles of subcultures, both internally and in the context of society. In so doing, Hebdige explores concepts that are, at their core, inherently human.

2.4 Symbolism and Identification: The study of subcultures often consists of the study of symbolism attached to clothing, music and other visible affectations by members of subcultures, and also of the ways members of the dominant culture interpret these same symbols. Hebdige (1979) writes that "members of a subculture often signal their membership through the distinctive and symbolic use of style, which includes fashions, mannerisms, and argot" (p. 128).

2.5 Relationship with mainstream culture: It might be difficult to identify certain subcultures because their style (notably clothing and music) may be adopted by mass culture for commercial purposes. Businesses often seek to capitalize on the subversive allure of subcultures in search of which remains valuable in the selling of any product. This process of cultural appropriation may often result in the death or evolution of the subculture, as its members adopt new styles that appear alien to mainstream society.

Hebdige's (1979) study found out the following:

Like Duchamp's 'ready-mades' - manufactured objects which qualified as art because he chose to call them such, the most unremarkable and inappropriate items - a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon - could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion ... Objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in punks

ensembles; lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests in plastic bin liners. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip ... fragments of school uniform (white nylon shirts, school ties) were symbolically defiled (the shirts covered in graffiti, or fake blood; the ties left undone) and juxtaposed against leather drains or shocking pink mohair tops.(p. 181).

2.6 The meaning of style: Hebdige is the inherently oppressive quality of the dominant culture. He discusses the idea of subcultures as cultural noise, representing an interference in the mass culture. This noise suggests a blockage, an area where society has failed to address the needs of specific individuals. Style is what these needs are subversively articulated. By transgressing society's sacred definitions, subcultures call attention to these blockages. Either the dominant culture moves to correct these blockages, or else it assimilates, and thus nullifies the subculture's style. Ultimately Hebdige concludes that style cannot be understood outside of its context, conceding that none of the considered youth cultures would recognize themselves in the subculture. In attempting to understand subculture, imagination unwittingly fills the many blanks. Both writer and reader serve as mythologists, obscuring the matter with presuppositions and assumptions. Style is indeed found only in its living articulation as style.

3. Graffiti in Bangladesh

3.1 Graffiti and its terrains: Graffiti are writing or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or painted illicitly on a wall or other surface, often within public view. Graffiti range from simple written words to elaborate wall paintings, and they have existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire. Graffiti may also express underlying social and political messages, and a whole genre of artistic expression is based upon spray paint graffiti styles. Many groups and gangs use their form of graffiti to mark territory or to serve as an indicator of gang-related activities. In many regions/countries of the world, graffiti are predominantly composed/painted by youngsters to fulfill their call of rebellion, since almost everywhere, their dreams are shattered due to the different policies of the dominant discourses-imposed by the ruling power. The legacy of graffiti remains just in there.



Figure 1: 'A girl with a balloon stencil' an earlier example of modern graffiti.

Graffiti is also known as street arts and usually done by anonymous artists. In modern times, paint (mainly spray paint) and marker pens have become the most commonly used graffiti materials. In many countries, marking or painting property without the property owner's permission is considered defacement and vandalism, which is considered an offense. Nevertheless, they have gained acceptance due to the message they tend to deliver.

3.2 The emergence of graffiti in Bangladesh: Graffiti is a pretty new phenomenon in Bangladesh, and they have first come into Dhaka, the capital during the middle 2010s. From the student uprising to the football world in 2014- The walls of Dhaka had worn the colorful attire of graffiti which explicate the day to day life of ordinary folk, everyday words, familiar stories, arts, disappointments of youth and most importantly, a voice and protest which is led from the oppression and exploitation of the state apparatus.

Primarily, the advent of the materials (aerosol paint, brush paint) and the availability of technology leads to the uprising of graffiti. The artwork is still at its infancy and remains at the mercy of individual effort-mostly, as group graffiti culture can seem only in seldom.



Figure 2: A graffiti at Jahangirnagar University, which symbolizes freedom.

Often it has been noticed that students doing graffiti to voice their dreams and their coveted imagination through the barrage of creativity. This bunch of young people gives us-the Bangladeshis the hope that one day the 'change' will come - hand in hand with them.

In the earliest steps of out of norm graffiti art in Bangladesh, said that 'Chhobir Hat' in the University of Dhaka campus played a key role behind instigating these steps. Chhobir Hat aimed to change how art is captive among closed space galleries and aristocrats, to bring out the art in the open, for regular people. However, Chhobir Hat lastly turned to be an open gallery and failed to spread graffiti as a culture as the graffiti art is considered as a culture when it is found at random in various corners of an area or a city or a country.

3.3 As a subculture:

Macdonald (2001) states that: "You started writing your name around the neighborhood, you know, and as time went on you wanted to be more productive because you saw that people were doing more than just writing their name. So I went on to paint street arts" (p. 95).

Many people still tag the graffiti artists as vagrants, outcast people who have cut ties with the mainstream, but it is far from the truth. Many artists tend to paint due to express their thought and inner selves. The artistry they exhibit is also praiseworthy enough.



Figure 3: The artistic and bold side of the youth.

It has also been noted that the emergence of subcultures in Bangladesh has been multifaceted, some of them are constructive, and many are destructive as well- such as- ganja/weed culture. Practically this ganja culture does not call for a change; instead, those who adopt them are destined to be doomed-today or tomorrow. They might think that smoking marijuana will counter the mainstream culture; in reality, it does not. The authority has silently approved ganja as the bearers of this so-called 'subculture,' and their consciousness will never achieve enough strength to question the hierarchy.

Antonio Gramsci (1947) opines that: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms" (p. 81).

The emergence of graffiti as a subculture might help the new ones with their birth and finally eradicate the deadlocked interregnum. As the themes of graffiti are often vivid with the coloration of frustration and the subsequent protest it follows, the morbid symptoms of society, particularly in Bangladesh, could hopefully be gone.



Figure 4: Shubodh on the wall of TSC, DU- symbolizes the frustration of youth.

The reasons for the youth to get frustrated are many- but unlike Shubodh, escapement will not help their cause. Nevertheless, this graffiti of Shubodh is potent enough to put a question mark on the face of our 'system,' and it could be merely put like that- Have the authority been efficient or thoughtful enough to provide the youngsters any hope?

3.4 The acceptance of graffiti: It is often sidestepped that graffiti is still struggling to cement a place. Despite that, they have earned a position among the commoners, particularly youngsters. The structures can create a myth about the arts themselves. Both the signifiers and signified can be benefitted from that. The drawings or writings of the graffiti are slowly becoming the political language of resistance. Graffiti is also a great example of using a non-violent method of protest, with maximum effect. Branding or promoting might sound a bit clichéd, but the way they address and call for change is pretty extraordinary. Simply put, the acceptance of graffiti lies in the familiarity of their subject matter.

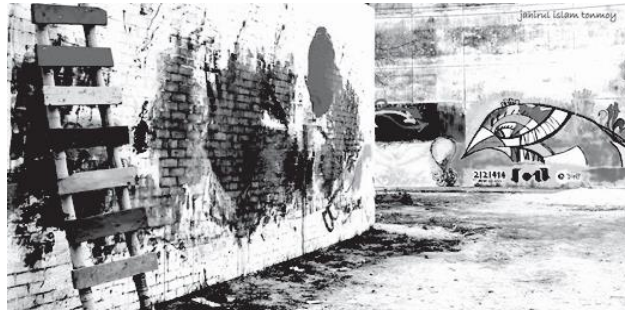


Figure 5: The color of youthful liveliness and the color of dreams.

3.5 Being and bringing the 'CHANGE':

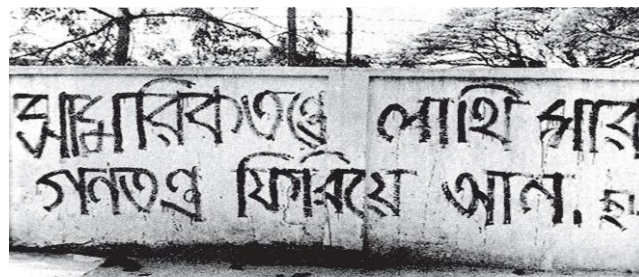


Figure 6: A wall art in the 1990s calling for 'change.'

This wall art translates "kick the autocrat out and bring democracy back"- which had become a famous slogan during the 1990s, especially in the student movements. They tried to bring and be the change, which they did successfully. The autocratic government had to step down due to the continuous pressure from the people. Furthermore, these street arts played their distinctive roles in that movement.

4. Graffiti as the language of the resistance of youth

4.1 The flight of essence: For Bangladesh, the wall has always been a canvas of art, a manuscript of an epic for political activists. The British, the Pakistani regime, and the military rule of Bangladesh, writings on the wall have been a harbinger of a change. The scions of a generation spearheaded it. During that period, the walls have been a powerful platform to paint as a protest. Even now, the indomitable spirit of the Liberation War and Language movement is still contemporary, and various wall arts do uphold these spirit.



Figure 7: A wall art depicting the language movement in 1952.

Being inaugurated and conducted by youth- the indomitable spirit has been portrayed through wall arts. The language movement has become successful due to the sacrifices made by the youth, the students, and commoner youth, to be exact. The flight of essence remains their solidarity and boldness.

4.2 Art as a representative of youth: Artistry has always been given a high place in a society like us. The blending of graffiti with art is sure to attract more youngsters to raise their voices about their discomfort. They tend to express their



thoughts, feelings, needs, and, more importantly-dreams through these arts.

Figure 8: 'Hobedi?'-will the (emancipation) come?

Every single human being is a born lover of freedom, and during the youthful stage, the yearning for freedom is even far-reaching. That 'Hobedi' art asks the question of liberty, and the caged sun explicates the delayed yet sure freedom, which is inevitable. Be as it may, the authority is yet not ready to accept the change, let alone letting it happen. That does not hinder the marching of emancipation.

4.3 Critic of capitalism: Graffiti in Bangladesh is becoming a powerful medium for criticizing capitalism. The capitalist authority does not believe in equality; instead endorses the already privileged class. It works as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), as coined by Louis Althusser. Capitalism also promotes urbanization in the name of development- by destroying the Mother nature. It recognizes nothing but money and beholds the consumerist notion in its first place. The emergence of graffiti has evolved in being a harsh critic. The ruled are bound to conform to the so-called 'hierarchy'- which has been devised to spread capitalist ventures.

The anti-capitalist graffiti artists try to illustrate the devastation and destruction of it and make the people aware of the subsequent effects-which might just be pretty alarming. Suppose, if we destroy our nature for the sake of industrialization, will it ever forgive us?

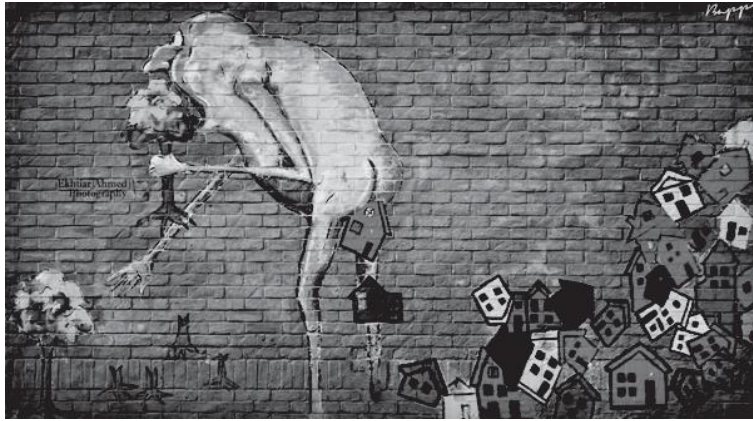


Figure 9: Capitalism destroying trees and accelerates urbanization. This graffiti in Jahangirnagar University vividly illustrates the grotesque effects of capitalism.

4.4 Student uprising and Graffiti: Graffiti has a significant role in being the spokesman of the student uprising. Student uprisings do take place to protest or revolt against any dominant rules or discourses, which negatively affect the interests of the nation or the students themselves. It has also been noticed that the rage of students can lead to drawing graffiti, which enables them to express it in a constructive, non-violent way. Thus, compelling the authority to give in and negotiate- finally fulfilling their legal demands. Graffiti do not demean them or their position, preferably the non-violent way they adopt, teach students.

4.4.1 The Case of Jahangirnagar University: Jahangirnagar University has always been known as a place where students raise their voices if they sense anything negative is imposed on them or demand justice. From the violence against women to bring justice to a murdered student- the students have been vocal. All these have been displayed through the various wall arts they have made.

This place is abundant with graffiti, and any outsider may find it odd to see all these. The sonorous call for change is empowered with these arts.



Figure 10: A new art which is against the repression of students.

Many students were wrongly accused of an attempt to murder case, and the authority had to withdraw the case due to the powerful, spontaneous student revolt, the alleged students have been set free of charge.



Figure 11: Jahangirnagar against violence- justice for Zubair.

Some derailed students have brutally killed Zubair Ahmed, a student of the department of English, and the wall art depicts the call for justice towards him. The wall art accelerated the movement and attempted to punish those who were behind the heinous crime.

4.5 Empowerment of the masses: Graffiti enables the masses or the commoners to raise their voice against any repression, oppression, illegal affairs, and question the dictatorship or any kind of impositions- which further the process of accountability of the state device and keeps them on the right track. This way could destroy any chance of bigotry, nepotism, and favoritism.

The rise of graffiti is a big question mark against the validity of the age-old traditions which have been in use to subvert the voice of the commoners.

If the state or authority is responsive and interactive with the ruled ones, then they feel empowered and can participate in the meaning-making process vis-à-vis their opinion. They will no longer feel alienated, disenchanting, or ostracized from the state they live in. That active participation is necessary to maintain the regularities, and graffiti can show the right way to the rulers.

5. The meaning of style

Hebdige (1979) found the following:

The relationship between experience, expression, and signification is, therefore, not a constant in the subculture. It can form a unity that is either more or less organic, striving towards some ideal coherence, or more or less ruptured, reflecting the experience of breaks and contradictions. Moreover, individual subcultures can be more or less 'conservative' or 'progressive,' integrated into the community, continuous with the values of that community, or extrapolated from it, defining them against the parent culture. Finally, these differences are reflected not only in the objects of subcultural style but in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful. (p.138).

The meaning of style in terms of subculture lies in the fact that how it represents us and vice versa. It is a statement that gives expository notions about our standings and doctrines

5.1 Shubodh- the ephemeral raconteur: Sometime in the summer of 2017, a series of graffiti began popping up around Agargaon, Dhaka. They depicted a man with scraggly hair and beard, fleeing with a caged sun. A good number of graffiti decorate the headquarters of the National Meteorological Department, next to the Old Airport. A second graffiti was found on the wall of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Government Boys' High School nearby. The third was found near Purobi Cinema Hall in Mirpur 7.

The messages read:

Subodhtuipaliyejaekhonshomoypokkhena: Flee Subodh, time is not on your side

Manushbhalobashtebhulegechhe: People have forgotten how to love

Tor bhaggekichunei: Nothing is written in your fate

The graffiti has been well-received by a generation weary of the gratuitous toil of Dhaka's life. The young can relate the graffiti to the plights they experience daily. The more aged audience finds a reason to reminisce about the campaigns from their youth. The pressure builds up, stress mounts on us by families, friends, and teachers. It all makes way for despair owing to the little motivation and reason for anything. We live a life of monotony and conformity. Being the fleeting sense of decency-Subodh is the beacon that reveals the tyranny and oppression all around us. Which is why Shubodh wants to flee from the grasp of the 'postmodern' life-where even breathing seems. Shubodh represents all the repressed youth and searches for the forte of escapism.



Figure 12: Shubodh is fleeing as the time is not in favor of him, representing the disillusioned youth.

5.2 Creative Emancipation: It is something that gives the feeling of emancipation through creativity. The joy of creative force provides with the vibes of imaginary emancipation.



Figure 13: The freedom of thought.

Music and vivid imageries can free someone from the shackles of tyranny, and the graffiti depicts this.



Figure 14: Break the chain, set the mind free.

This artwork elaborates on the human tendency of setting him/herself free. By freeing the mind, one can be unchained him/herself from any world affair(s).

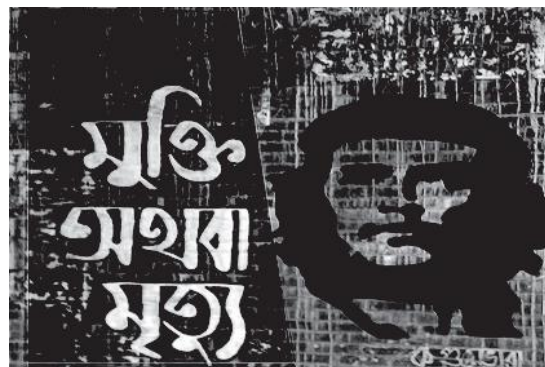


Figure 15: Freedom or death

This wall art is possibly the most significant and most potent way of expressing one's desire for freedom, depicting Che Guevara- who has preferred death over independency. The most powerful thing on earth is a human soul on fire- that means a free mind can sparkle like fire.

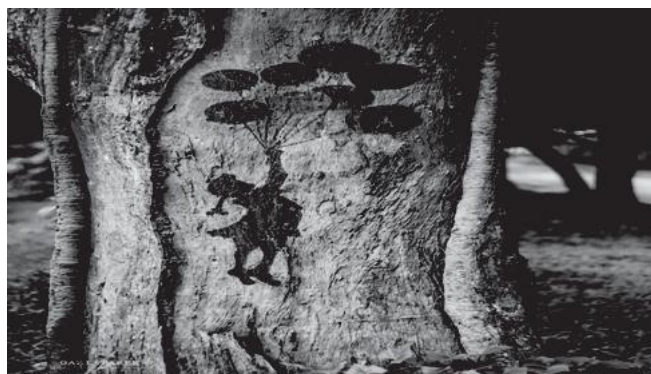


Figure 16: The girl with freedom.

It is the little girl who is free, and with her balloons, she is floating through her trajectories.

6. Conclusion

It is quite extraordinary that the emergence of graffiti has taken Bangladesh by storm, so to say. Though it has long been known, the effectiveness and consequences of them have pretty recently been discovered. Graffiti is the tale of the everyday people, youngsters, and the repressed ones. The values and doctrines of any subculture are often at war with those of the dominant culture. As the rulers impose their exploitative means to oppress the ordinary people, they are pretty alert not to let it gain an easy pass into the mainstream culture, lest it should make them uncomfortable to keep going their autocracy. Graffiti has been practiced mostly by youth and more of a youth subculture in Bangladesh. The artists are often anonymous. However, their anonymity is a bold statement of the solidarity and the freedom of thought they believe. The advent of graffiti is a blazing testament of the spirit of youth, and what lies beneath is their indomitable nature, which is not a subject to subversion rather upholds the sense of solidarity and equity they share. Graffiti are those invisible threads that link the youth and commoners together, and as time goes by, it will only get strengthened. A powerful language of rebellion and

a steady means of resistance, graffiti as a subculture has experienced a meteoric rise, and the power of positivity it brings within can never be undermined.

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Paper should begin with an introduction and rationale stating the research problem and unique contribution of the paper in the literature.

Based on the rationale analysis, broad and specific problems of the paper may be set. It is important for the author(s) to clarify the objectives of the paper before beginning the methodology and analysis.

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