

## Reading Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*: Cultural Oddities and Their Social Impact

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**Abstract:** *Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange (1962) portrays the disintegration of the traditional British culture and the rise of a new youth culture in revolt which produced violence and perversity. This youth culture started pervading the layers of the traditional British culture. The 1960s had found the British culture assuming a distorted shape both in values and norms - a culture completely opposite to its original tradition in terms of the socio-economic changes that took place following the Second World War. The postwar generation had to peep into the collapsed world from a perspective quite different from the previous one because of the rising tension emerging out of a new threat from nuclear war hanging overhead. This paper seeks to explore the extent to which the newly emerged culture affected the young generation and brought about chaos and disorder in British society.*

Anthony Burgess's profound concern in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) is with the emergence of a new youth culture, also called subculture, in the 1960s. There is no denying the fact that this youth culture was opposed to the old tradition based on values and norms that formed the basis of British social life. The novel provides an explanation for the sub-culture which developed in Britain as a resistance and opposition to structural problems after the post-war destruction of the working-class community and its traditional values. Burgess observed that the working-class culture was dominated by middle-class values through

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hegemony; that the young people born in this working-class culture started negotiating for their own culture. So, they built a subculture in their own way in order to be autonomous and different from their parents. This young group was trying to seek for solutions to their problems of unemployment, low pay and educational disadvantage. They joined the subculture and expected it to provide solutions to their problems. But ironically enough, as Burgess views, this subculture failed to solve their problems.

The fact that remains with the subculture is that it only suggested a solution on a symbolic level: by dressing in an upper-class style, for example, a working-class youth could present an image and a status he could never achieve in real life. Subcultures constructed styles taking symbols out of their contexts and placing them into a new context. This recontextualisation invalidated conventional meanings and was easily seen as a provocation. Subculture organized a group-identity and formed a homology which found expression in objects, dress, appearance, language, styles of interaction and music. The boys of the younger generation who were known as hippies started revolting against the norms of the time as those norms seemed to them conservative. This youth revolt resulted in the creation of a counter-culture which eventually turned into a social revolution throughout the western world. As this new youth class began to criticize the established social order, new theories about cultural and personal identity began to spread almost all over the western world. The hippies of *A Clockwork Orange* question the traditional British culture and create their own culture which involves the rotten and dirty mentality. Their depravity in the new culture stops at no end. They find pleasure in murder, rape, robbery, hooliganism and terrorism. Burgess narrates them as the evil segments of the society who feel the thrill of theft and violence.

*A Clockwork Orange* presents the *Mod* subculture originated in London in the late 1950s and peaked in the early to mid 1960s. The term *Mod* derives from modernist. The mod lifestyle is sometimes referred to as 'modism'. Elements of the mod lifestyle include music, clothes and dancing. The 'Teds' (Teddy Boys) also known as the 'Mods' who emerged as a subculture group in London in the 1960s having a dandy-like style consisting of strange dress which was a fashion of the day, such as, an Edwardian style suit, suede shoes, three-button suits, Fred Perry and Ben Sherman shirts, Sta-Prest trousers and Levi's jeans, cropped hair, short- hemmed trousers and

very narrow brimmed Trilby hats commonly referred to in Britain as pork pie hats. The 'mods' had shorter hair as they thought of long hair as liability in industrial jobs and in Street fights. The short haired 'mods' also came to be known as the skinheads in Britain later on in the 1970s. They wore conservative suits, narrow trousers and short hair. Although they still fought on the street, they were highly interested in fashion and dancing. The Teds sought entertainment in gangs. Very much involved in fashion marked with traditional female expression, they tried to compensate with violence and a tough attitude. The Teds were associated with disturbance by the media and elder people and were called 'folk devils'. Burgess was very much concerned about the emergence of such an ill subculture group in British society. On the very first page of *A Clockwork Orange*, he has vividly depicted a candid picture of the dress style of the Teds. The band of young boys were dressed in the height of fashion, which in those days was a pair of black very tights with the old jelly mould as we called it, fitting on the crotch underneath the, tights, this being to protect and also a sort of design you could viddy clear enough in a certain light, so that I had one in the shape of a spider, Pete had a rocker, Georgie had a very fancy one of a flower, and Dim had a very hound-and-horny one of a clown's listo...Then we wore waisty jackets without lápels...We wore out our hair not too long and we had flip horroshow boots for kicking...These sharps were dressed in the height of fashion too, with purple and green and orange wigs on their gullivers...Then they had long black very straight dress...they had little badges...with different maichicks' names on them-Joe and Mike and Suckville...Dim *was* very very ugly and like his name, but he was a horroshow filthy fighter and very handy with the boot!

The world of Burgess's Teds is a world of violence, brutality and juvenile crimes. It is an immoral world in all respects. Set in a dystopian future, the novel portrays its protagonist, a fifteen-year old boy Alex who in collaboration with his friends known as droogs, Dim, Pete and Georgie sets out on a diabolical orgy of robbery, rape, torture and murder. Alex indulges in murderous violence—"an act of rebellion against an especially numbing social machine."<sup>2</sup> The setting for the novel is a soulless urban decaying society, a stinking world which "lets the young get on to the old like you done, and there's no law nor order no more."<sup>3</sup> Nothing but perversity, violence, crime and guilt prevail in this stinking world of Alex. This world is riddled with anti-social acts. In the course of the action of *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex and his friends commit numerous anti-social activities - a fact which his

parents are not at all aware of. The novel begins with the decay of moral dignity and respect for cultural values among the teenagers Alex, Pete, Georgie and Dim. Alex, along with his friends, swoops on an old man and snatches his money and breaks his umbrella just for enjoyment. His ugly nature reveals itself in the act of humiliating the feelings of the old man that he expresses in the letters to his wife:

Old Dim gave up his umbrella danàe and of course had to start reading one of the letters out loud, like to show the empty street he could read. 'My darling one,' he recited, in this very high type goloss, 'I shall be thinking of you while you are away and hope you will remember to wrap up warm when you go out at night'. Then he let out a very shoomny smeck — 'Ho ho ho' — pretending to start wiping his yahma with it....Then we smashed the umbrella and razrezzed his platties and gave them to the blowing winds.. .that was only like the start of the evening and I make no appy polly loggies to thee or thine for that.<sup>4</sup>

Alex is a bloody sucker of violence which is indicative of the truth that he is incapable of moral values and dignity a hero clings to for ennobling himself. In brutality and violence Alex resembles Golding's Pincher Martin. Golding calls Martin a painted bastard who robs everything which belongs to others. Burgess's Alex is "a right brutal bastard.. .contemplating the actions of the forces of evil, the workings of the principle of destruction."<sup>5</sup> Again Alex and Pincher Martin stand on the same footing in terms of anti-heroic qualities and the abuse of free choice. Pincher Martin, inspired by his sense of free choice of evil actions, is finally destroyed. Similarly Alex is victimized by his own, false vision. He freely chooses the evil courses and is finally taken away by moral degradation out of which he cannot escape. Alex fails to raise himself to the status of a hero because he stresses that his delinquency and moral fall are entirely a matter of free choice of evil and of his deliberate self-assertion:

...that self is made by old Bog or God and his great pride and radosty. but the not self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self. And is not our modern history, my brothers, the story of' brave malenky selves fighting

these big machines? I am sériou with you, brothers,  
over this. But what I do I do because I like to do.<sup>6</sup>

Alex has fallen — fallen down to the deep ditch of moral rottenness and decay. He stops at no depravity and violence. His fallen nature leads him to committing the ugliest crimes and ultra-violence. Alex enjoys violence through the attacks of the victims.

*A Clockwork Orange* presents the subversive youth culture of the 1960s—the years from 1960 to the end of 1969 denoting the complex inter-related cultural and political trends in the west, particularly in Britain, France, Italy and West Germany. The historians, journalists, and other objective academics nostalgically participated in the counter-culture and social revolution of the time. The decade was also known as the Swinging Sixties because of the libertine attitudes which emerged during this decade. Rampant drug use became inextricably associated with the counter-culture of the 1960s. The decade also identified itself with the exciting, radical, and subversive, events and trends. Burgess's boys 'revolt' against the traditional British culture on the ground that it is a rigid culture unable to contain the demands for greater individual freedom. They do have a strong desire for breaking away with their parental culture considering it social constraint. The boys abuse freedom in the name of new fashion and style. They all indulge in subversive activities and disturb the normal flow of British social life. These boys create a moral panic and terrible violence in the British society.

In the 1960s the Nadsat language had emerged as an aggression in the English language. The Nadsat language became an inseparable part of the new youth culture. The British youths had developed a tremendous love of this language in their daily life. The Nadsat language was mainly used by the youths to address themselves as different from the aged people who had an undying love for the English language. It is English with a polyglot of slang terms which Burgess's boys love. The main sources for these additional terms are Russian, Gypsy, French, English slang and other miscellaneous sources, such as, Malay and Dutch also contributed to the emergence of such a language in the 1960s in Britain. The large number of Russian words in Nadsat is explained in *A Clockwork Orange* as propaganda and subliminal penetration techniques. Burgess was basically concerned about the disintegration of traditional cultural values and the rise of youth ill subculture based on crime, perversity, violence and brutality. With

cultural changes in British social life, the sign of cultural decay started to take a substantial form which was found to manifest itself in the lack of respect and honour to the traditional British culture. Using the Nadsat language became a fashion of the day for the so-called mods and teds. Burgess's hero Alex is a Mod-a product of a culture of constant change. Burgess has realistically portrayed the rise of a tendency among the young generation towards using the Nadsat language which is evident in the following lines:

Droogs, aren't we? It isn't right droogs should behave thiswise. See, there are some loose-lipped malohicks o'c'er there smecking at us, leering like. We mustn't let ourselves down...There has to be a leader. Discipline there has to be. Right? .None of them skazatted a word or nodded even. ..I was surprised and just that malenky bit poogly to sloosh Dim govoreeting that wise.. .So off we went our several ways, me belching arrrrgh on the cold coke I'd peeted. I had my cut-throat britva.<sup>7</sup>

The boys are accustomed to frequently using the Nadsat words such as 'droogs', 'maichicks', 'smecking', 'skazatted', 'malenky', 'poogly', 'sloosh', 'govoteering', 'peeted', 'britva' all of which are indicative of the violent nature of the mods. They speak in other language to make a false show of their fashion of life. They vow to maintain discipline but their language suggests that they have received an ironical reversal to chaos and disorder. The entrance of the Nadsat words in the British culture obliterated the purity of the English language. More specifically speaking, the Nadsat language had been a threat to the English language. Impurity in language turned into a fashion for Burgess's mods.

Burgess's true genius lies in using the Nadsat narrative which his hero Alex adopts while speaking to adults and people of high order to fool the outsiders who, he apprehends, might ward off his plan for committing violence and creating fear. But in conversation with his parents Alex uses Standard English. When he is alone and is accompanied by his fellow 'droogs' he speaks in the Nadsat language. Even when he, along with his accomplices, launches attacks on the victims, Alex speaks in standard gentleman English with a polite voice. The use of the lyrical language and Nadsat language masks the horrible imagery of the actions of Alex.

Slang is a part of the world of *A Clockwork Orange*. It might be right enough to say that the most fascinating thing about the book is its language. Alex and his droogs frequently use slang- 'odd bits of old rhyming slang' to fashion themselves. Alex represents the disease and backwardness of the British society in the 1960s. In the night, he wanders the streets with his droogs and creates fear and disturbance in the Nadsat narrative. Alex is unpredictable, dirty, ugly and violent not only physically but also with his words. He forgets the words of his own language and invents and uses the words of other language. The only merit, on the whole, he deserves is his handling the Russian vocabulary in a masterly fashion. It has a wonderful sound, particularly in abuse, for example, 'grahzny bratchny' sounds better than 'dirty bastard'.

The British teenagers of all economic strata developed a taste in beat and band music by the artists Georgie Fame, The Animals, Small Faces, The Who, The Yard birds and The Spencer Davis Group and The Rolling Stones. Pop music became a dominant form of expression for the young. The band like Beatles contributed to the formation of youth culture. Youth-based subcultures such as the mods, rockers, hippies and skinheads became popular in the 1960s. Burgess's boys are fond of the British beat, pop and band music which provides them with thrill and sensation. These thrill and sensation make them more crazy and perverse in nature. As an inevitable part of the sub-culture, this music produces in the boys the heavenly feeling and bliss. Alex gets his stereo playing the pop music by the American Geoffrey Plautus and feels enraptured:

Oh, bliss, bliss and heaven. I lay all nagoy to the ceiling, my gulliver on my rookers on the pillow, glazzies closed, rot open in bliss, slooshying the sluice of lovely sounds. Oh, it was gorgeousness and góргеosity made fresh. The trombones crunched redgold under my bed, and behind my gulliver the trumpets three-wise silverfiamed, and there by the door the timps rolling through my guts and out again crunched like candy thunder. Oh it was a wonder of wonders...! broke and spattered and cried aaaaaah with the bliss of it. And so the lovely music glided to its glowing close.<sup>8</sup>

Alex is a youth indulged in dirty acts which certainly make him appear as a morally deformed being that pursues creature comforts and seeks to satisfy physical hunger through brutality and savagery. He rapes two 10-year-old girls Marty and Sonietta. To them Alex is “a beast and hateful animal. Filthy horror.”<sup>9</sup> He rapes and murders Alexander’s wife, tortures and ultimately kills an old lady. His moral decay and rottenness reach such a stage from which he does not find even the slimmest chance of escape. This evil-prone boy Alex is busy building “a right dirty criminal world”<sup>10</sup> which produces dirty hooligans. Burgess expresses his profound concern about the rising disorder and anarchy in British society. As a conscious citizen he is poignantly pained at the disordered social scenario of the sixties. In deep shock and awe he witnesses a terrible world of criminals and hooligans engulfing the entire gamut of the British social life: “What sort of a world is it at all? Men on the moon and men spinning round the earth like it might be midges round a lamp, and there’s not no attention paid to earthly law nor order no more”<sup>11</sup> Burgess seems to complain against the authority for not paying attention to deterioration of law and order in the society. The collapse of order and law, Burgess finds, is resulting in social unrest and chaos. The world Alex and his mates live in is a dark world, a world of horrible acts, crime, murder, sexual violence, rape, robbery, hooliganism, a world peopled with villains and criminals. In the world of Alex and his droogs, all relations with other human beings are instrumental means to a selfish, brutal, hedonistic end. As an individual belonging to the ill culture Alex is entrapped within the egoistical self of his own, a slave of insatiable greed.

Self-realization does not have positive impact on Alex to change his life. Alex is arrested and imprisoned in the State jail for murder and rape. In the prison cell he is psychologically tortured. The Ludovico Method is applied to Alex in prison as a means of turning him into a good and heroic figure. Alex is shown horrific films depicting scenes of extreme violence, pain and suffering films of the kind of violence that he himself committed. At the sight of the films he feels strongly nauseous, deeply distressed and within some minutes he begs them to stop the films. The sickening films of Nazi violence leave him “committed to socially acceptable acts, a little machine capable only of good.”<sup>12</sup> He seems to be regenerated through sufferings in the prison cell, a purified self. An optimistic note echoes in what Alex says:

...all this drasting and ultra-violence and killing is  
wrong wrong and. terribly wrong. I’ve learned my



lesson, sirs. I see now what I've never seen before. I'm cured, praise God.. it is wrong because it's against like society, it's wrong because every veck on earth has the right to live and be happy without being beaten and toichocked and knifed. I've learned a lot. oh really I have.. .The old days are dead and gone days. For what I did in the past I have been punished. I have been cured.<sup>13</sup>

Apparently self-realization seems to have dawned on Alex. But his regeneration and self-realization resulting into futility as his ultimate fate is left unusually unresolved. We come to know that Alex is contemplating marriage and a settled life. But the ending of the novel suggests that Alex fails to start a new life — a life free from crime and violence. He forms another group of hooligans including Len, Rick and Bully to start an *evil* life again as before. Obviously Alex's return to his early dirty and rotten life suggests that he is incapable of going back to the main stream of traditional British culture. Alex, after achieving self-realization, abuses it and returns to take evil courses. It certainly indicates that Alex is failing, and failing decisively to achieve a good and respectable life. To the last he remains a part of the world of crimes and criminals. The youth culture makes him a prisoner of the world of crime and violence. This youth culture or counter-culture completely fails to rectify him and make of him a man acceptable to the society. Through the newly emerged youth culture Burgess exposes the dark side of British society.

**Notes:**

- 1 Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 5-6
- 2 Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since the Thirties* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986) 180
- 3 Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 14-15
- 4 Burgess, 10
- 5 Burgess, 77-86
- 6 Burgess, 34
- 7 Burgess, 26-27
- 8 Burgess, 29
- 9 Burgess, 39
- 10 Burgess, 69
- 11 Burgess, 15
- 12 Burgess, 122
- 13 Burgess, 92, 117

**Works Cited:**

1. Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
2. Stevenson, Randall. *The British Novel Since the Thirties*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986
3. Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.