

Youth Cultures among Immigrants: Rastafarian, Bhangra and New Muslim Youth Cultures in Britain

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Abstract

The study of youth culture seeks answers to the questions about youth identity, disruption, gender roles, social conformity, relationship with the previous generation, cultural and political participation and so on. Youth culture has been a well-talked matter in Britain since the 1920s. The Dandies and Flappers, Teddy Boys, Mods, Skin Heads, Hippies, Punks and Goths are some well-known youth cultures in Britain in the last century. However, though being a rich land for migration, the attention on the youth cultures or sub-cultures practised by immigrant youths is surprisingly low. In this paper, I am going to explore the Rastafarian culture of Caribbean origin, the Bhangra culture of South-Asian origin, and an attempt to form a cool version of Islamic youth culture in the UK.

Keywords: youth culture, immigrants, race, class, UK

1. Introduction

In the middle age, the population of Britain was almost homogenous. A study conducted by a doctor on his patients in late 18th century London found that only 1.66% of his patients were born abroad (George, 1951, p. 111). Though the immigration of African people to Britain was initiated during the 16th century primarily due to the slave trade, the number of black people settled in Britain was never too many and it received a halt after 1807 when the UK government banned slave importation in Britain (George, 1951, p. 8; Hosking, 1984, pp. 45–46). People from the Indian sub-continent started to come to Britain in small numbers in the 18th–early 20th century. However, the number of Indian and Black immigrations had a rapid rise after World War II with the British Nationality Act of 1948, which gave the right to the people of the former British Empire to live and work in Great Britain (Panayi, 1999, p. ix). The large-scale immigration in previously homogenous Britain created uncertainty and a few clashes between the locals and the immigrant West Indians took place in Nottingham and Noting Hill in the late 50s (Panayi, 1999, p. 15). The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 was made to put control over immigration, especially black immigration (Solomos, 1993, p. 63). However, the number of immigrants continued to rise, and it had a boost since the last two decades of the 20th century, which contributed largely to the fact that 13.4% of the total population of the UK in 2011 were foreign-born (“A summary”).

The concept of youth culture flourished in the 20th century due to more focus and research on adolescents. Before that, youth was counted as the extension of childhood or the preparation for manhood. Flexia and Norde included a variety of peer-grouping in the concept of youth culture: i) subculture seeks the connection between the youth and their class, generation, and ethnicity; ii) Microculture focuses on the importance of the values of the small groups in the daily lives of the young people; iii) gang represents the subaltern youths in most of the cases that allow mixing of different styles; and iv) counterculture talks about the historical moments where the youths were rebellious against hegemonic culture and viewed themselves as the alternative. The study of youth culture has expanded from its original home of leisure spaces of western urban youths and included the non-leisure spaces, rural and non-western youths, and also the people of preadolescence and emerging adulthood (2–16).

The rise in production in the post-World War II era due to new scientific inventions meant life standards were getting higher and consumer culture was getting expanded. Industrialization has contributed to more jobs and financial expansion. People have started to spend more on leisure and fashion. The schooling period has increased, and the age of marriage has also increased with the effect. Youth culture has become an important factor in easing the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham was a pioneer organization for cultural studies research in Britain in the latter half of the 20th century (Dworkin, 2012, p. 116). The Centre's research on youth culture heavily relied on Marxist and post-Marxist criticism, and the youth activities were mostly seen as a struggle against the hegemonic authority. The struggle was mainly on two fronts- i. against the previous generation, and ii. against the political structure and the newly articulated social order in the post-world war scene (Rethinking Youth Culture 1). The Marxist critics view youth culture from a conflicting perspective, opposite of the functionalist critics who interpret society as a combination of multiple structures, where each of these structures helps to maintain the stability of the society as a whole. For the Functionalists, the youth serve as an interim period where people leave the security of their parent's home and start to prepare for their own occupation in society. Youth cultures provide young people opportunities to mingle and share with their similar-minded peers which enables them to get a taste of life beyond the family, bridges the gap between home and the outside world and helps them formulate their own identities. A group of post-modernists, however, downplay the role of class, ethnicity and gender on social behavior, and put emphasis on lifestyle choices (Subcultural Theories). For a long time, youth culture critics have been preoccupied with young members who are flag-bearers or poster persons carrying the style of distinguished youth culture and the ordinary young people were overlooked (Bennet, 2015, p. 43). Contemporary youth culture critics are rather flexible in explaining youths as a group consisting of pleasure-seeking individuals rather than a group overtly society conscious and rebelling against institutions or orders, showing the genre shift from a classical youth culture standpoint (Subcultural Theories). With the introduction of social media, young people have got more opportunities for self-representation in front of a wider audience. The internet culture has helped the rapid circulation of new trends and styles, and thus current generation is more influenced by the global phenomenon than the earlier generation.

Though the study of British youth culture has been a long tradition in the British cultural studies area, the study of immigrant youth culture has never been a focal point of the study. Black youths, who had been subject to a long history of racism, were mostly given little choice but to choose between the British or Jamaican culture (Clarke, 1976, p. 99). Even though the number of people from the Indian sub-continent has been rising since the 1950s, there have been very few studies on the presence and the culture prevalent among sub-continental youth. The same is applied to young Muslims, as there is only a handful of research about Muslim youth culture in Britain.

In this paper, I am going to focus on the Rastafarians, the Bhangra culture and a relatively new attempt to establish a youth trend among young Muslims in the 21st century spread mainly through electronic communication. This paper will elaborate on how these three different types of youth cultures have flourished in Britain and their similarities and dissimilarities in the British context.

2. Rastafarian Culture

Rastafarians are a group of people, mostly consisting of youths from the Caribbean, who believe in a supreme God named *Jah*, which is the short version of the name Jehovah (Cashmore, 1979, p. 24). They believe that God exists everywhere and he is present in each and every individual (Clarke, 1986, p. 6). One of the common mottos uttered by them is "God is man and man is God" (Edmonds, 2012, p. 36). They believed the former Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974) was the Messiah figure of their sect who would lead them to the promised Zion, which is in Africa (Benard, 2007, p. 94). His value in the group was extremely important as some believed he was the incarnation of Jah while some others thought his appearance as the second coming of Jesus Christ (Edmonds, 2012, p. 34; Clarke, 1986, p. 65). The movement was initiated in Jamaica in the 1930s (Cashmore, 1979, p. 27). The followers of the movement shared a collective identity and a strong urge to go back to Africa, which they revere as a Utopia (Clarke, 1986, p. 70).

To the Rastafarians, Western society is Babylon which they reject for being corrupt (Edmonds, 2012, p. 40). In the British context, London is Babylon. The Rastafarians chose red, green and gold colours, which originated from Ethiopian and Jamaican flags (Barret, 1988, p. 147). Wearing dreadlocks and smoking cannabis became parts of the Rastafarian way of life (Cashmore, 1979, p. 25; Clarke, 1986, p. 47). Apart from the Rastafarians, many other black youths also followed the dressing patterns and styles of the group. It is also viewed as a rebel against racism, and some argue that the Rastafarians are, in fact, black supremacists as they thought of themselves as the chosen people. The Rastafarian movement in the UK is unique; as Cashmore pointed out, "The association between second-generation West-Indian and Africa was perhaps the most socially consequential phenomenon in the history of the black presence in England" (50).

The presence of Rastafarians in the UK was recorded in the 1950s as Sheila Patterson in 1963 wrote about the

emergence of a group of strange-looking black people in Brixton whom the local people confirmed as the Rastafarians (364). The movement gained popularity in 1970s England. The first real Rastafarian organization in London was established in 1971 and it arranged several campaigns for recruiting new members. The different looks of black Rastafarian youths did not create much astonishment as the people of London were already accustomed to the different outfits of Hippies earlier. By 1973, the Rastafarian culture in the UK reached its peak but at the same time, it also started to get divided into different groups as it did not have a strong organizational structure in the UK (Cashmore, 1979, p. 53–54). The death of Haile Selassie in 1975 was a big blow to the Rastafarians as it shattered their dream of travelling back to the Promised Land.

The Rastafarian movement has attributes that are commonly found in the debates about youth culture. Rastafarianism can be a vital component of subculture study, which stresses “structural connections of youth lifestyle and their relationship with class, generation, ethnicity, gender and territory” (Feixa & Nofre, 2012, p. 2). Almost all the followers of this movement were black and young, with very few exceptions, who felt a strong connection to their racial origin with a sense of revival and supremacy. The feeling of being the golden generation was present there with an attachment to the original birthplace Africa though they were distributed in different geographical locations. Rastafarians were also in a struggle with the hegemony of their respective places and their parental generation. Lianne Moulder points out: “With their critical perspectives on religion, identity, economics, ‘race’, racism, politics, culture and other issues, Rastafarians present a significant counter-hegemonic force, not only in the Caribbean but globally” (1). Rastafarians were also known for loitering in groups or gangs, and they established strong common beliefs within and among the groups. They were often scorned in mainstream society and in popular media, and also subject to laws attempting to suppress the movement like the ‘Unlawful Societies and Associations Act’ commonly known as the ‘Dread Act’ in Dominica (1) and even to murders like Coral Garden incident in Jamaica (5). The idea of a black God and African consciousness in the backdrop of slavery and colonial reality express the resistance against established cultural, religious and political institutions.

3. Bhangra Culture in the UK

Bhangra is a traditional harvesting song in rural Punjab in India, where most of the people belong to the Sikh ethnicity. In the 1950s, it appeared in Hindi movies for the first time and since then, it was mostly presented as a symbol of Punjabi culture in front of a wider audience (Leante, 2004, p. 110). Bhangra is an important issue in the discourse of South Asian Youth subculture “because it made the Punjabi and indeed the South Asian presence in Britain visible and audible for the first time” (Bauman, 1990, p. 88).

In Britain, the traditional Bhangra was modified and made suitable for the new generations of immigrant youths. Alaap, Herra, Holle Holle, Chirag Pahchan, D.C.S and Golden Star were among the most prominent Bhangra groups in the UK. These groups used to get bookings for almost every weekend during spring and summer, mostly at weddings in the 80s (Bauman, 1990, pp. 84–86). Bhangra was identified as a cultural heritage to the Punjabi community in Britain, and the singers also expressed their wish to educate the Punjabi British youth about their culture through Bhangra. Channi Singh, one of the prominent Bhangra artists in the UK said:

Everybody was listening to black music or English music... and nobody had the identification of their own as far as... Indian culture was concerned. So, I thought, you know, “Why don’t I do something?” That, you know, I should bring our culture here... How shall I do it?” And I thought “Music is the media, that’s the best media to educate them” (Leante, 2004, p. 117).

South Asian teenagers were mostly forbidden from attending Night Clubs and Pubs by their parents because of social and religious restrictions. In the mid-80s, the “day timer” events consisting of Bhangra were introduced (Bauman, 1990, p. 87). Though the parents were not fond of this practice, they would rather have preferred their children to follow some touch of their own cultural heritage rather than follow the mainstream British culture. In an interview, Palvinder Dhani, another Bhangra artist, said:

Our young generation was going to clubs and listening more to English (music)... we needed to do something for our young generation... we wanted them to listen to our old music and get close to our culture as well (Leante, 2004, p. 117).

In the 80s, Bhangra was an important element for expressing identity for the young South Asian immigrants as it made their presence felt broadly for the first time in the cultural scenario of Great Britain and thus attracted many young people from different South Asian origins alongside the Punjabis and the Sikhs. There were also efforts to make band line-ups cosmopolitan by including performers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds of South Asian origin. For example- the band “Alap” had its line-up consisting of people from Punjabi, Gujarati, Pakistani, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds (Banerjee, 1988, p. 208). Thus, it has also

provided cultural unity among South Asians. Before the introduction of the Bhangra, many South Asian youths drifted towards the Black culture, but it gave them an opportunity to have fun with something of their own. Countercultural components were not present here as there was no report of being rebellious against the hegemonic culture but these youths tried to uphold one culture to which they felt they were more attached to and tried to create an alternative for themselves against the mainstream culture. Ethnicity, class and race in relation to this youth subculture were very evident. But gang culture was not very expressive here, and the young followers valued the taste of music and spending time with people having similar interests and backgrounds rather than creating a strong group based on ideology or power struggle.

4. New Muslim Youth Culture

The aim of this youth movement is to show that it is possible to have fun and enjoy modern facilities within the scope of Islam. The feeling of alienation from the mainstream also contributed to the rise of a new trend in fashion among the Muslim young generation in Britain. Capitalism also plays its part in the new branding of the 'cool Islam' with a new-found focus on religion and political Islamization. The scope of the business has increased as new products are emerging in the forms of clothes, music and newspaper to meet the demand of religious yet fashionable youths.

The relationship between Islam and Music is complex. The fundamentalist followers of the religion reject music altogether as satanic verse, while some others prefer songs without any musical instruments. The introduction of Muslim hip-hop can be seen as an attempt to find a cultural expression of the religious belief which seeks to catch the attention of a wider young population, even the people who are not ardent followers of the religion. The Muslim rappers claim that they are not spreading anything vulgar through their music, and therefore, it is not Haram or forbidden by the religion. Some of the lyrics of Muslim hip-hop are composed as praise for Allah and the Prophet. Alongside spreading religious messages, some of the bands also talk against violence, corruption and injustice through their music. The absence of sexual reference, vulgarity, drugs and partying are unique features of Islamic hip-hop (Herding, 2013, p. 95). Also, youth events take place around the year, organized by a number of organizations. They mainly disseminate religious, moral and community messages through these activities. Women are very active participants and organizers in these gatherings and they hold several leading positions in many organizations (Herding, 2013, p. 142).

5. Discussion

All three groups have strong affinities to their roots, albeit in different forms. The Rastafarians felt strong bonding with Africa and held a go-back to Africa campaign though most of them were originally from the Caribbean. This was mostly a connection to their racial root as they took Africa as their original homeland. For the Bhangra culture, people felt an affinity to the culture of their native land in Punjab. They were mostly first- or second-generation migrants and most of them still had strong memories of their motherlands. The other youth culture described here does not have a diasporic identity; rather, the followers are more attached to their religious roots.

Reggae music was a vital part of the Rastafarian movement. It gave much exposure to the Rastafarian movement worldwide. It also provided the spark to this movement, as Cashmore points out,

Whilst it is debatable whether the 'possible physical and revolutionary position' existed as a tenable reality or was merely an affection of the authors' imaginations, it is certain that reggae most surely represented the most articulate and invective form of protest music to ever emerge out of the Caribbean (p. 101).

The Bhangra culture was based on Punjabi music, which was brought and modified according to modern tastes by the Punjabi migrants in the UK. Many Islamic rappers claim that religious reference is present in mainstream hip-hop; they are only trying to bring it to the centre of their music (Mandaville, 2009, p. 157). Though Muslim hip-hop is growing as a genre, it is still not been able to attain mainstream recognition either in the Muslim community or in the wider hip-hop community.

The reaction to these youth cultures and the relations between the older generations and the followers of these cultures are mixed in those particular communities. The tendency of the extended family is higher among the South Asian and Muslim communities, where many live with their parents even after reaching adulthood and forming their own families. Youth group mingling for most of them serves a functionalist purpose, enabling them to enjoy time with peers and helping them to understand the outside world beyond family. It is a source of psychological and emotional support. Especially, for first-generation young migrants, the peer-group activities and gatherings help to fill immigrants' void.

The Rastafarians had an uneasy and often combative relationship with their parents' generation as they moved

away from the earlier generation with a new religion, ideology and belief in black supremacy. While talking about the relationship between the Rastafarians and the black community as a whole, Cashmore describes,

The breach with the parental culture was articulated through calling parents ‘brainwashed, ‘misguided’ or even ‘blind: ‘They (older blacks) are not in a conscious state of mind. They still believe they are perhaps inferior’; ‘They are bound to fall’. Acceptance of the Rastafari for the overwhelming majority symbolized their complete dislocation from their parents and the moral order they represented. Mutual accommodation occurred for some, but only at stages where both parents and children became more tolerant of each other’s belief (p. 66).

The Rastafarian movement aligns more with Marxist conflict theory. Johnson-Hill comments, “Babylon is evocative of everything that is wrong with the white Western capitalist world” (p. 257). By denouncing Babylon, Rastafarians denounce capitalism and materialistic endeavour in search of their own Utopia. The conflict took place in several spheres: the rejection of authority, conflict with the earlier generation and condemning organized religion.

The tension between the blacks and the white majority has made the black youth group organize different black rights movements in the UK, which in many ways influenced Rastafarianism. The consciousness among Muslim youths about their religious identity has been heightened in the UK in post-9/11 and post-7/7 attacks. As a result, the new generation of Muslims feels more connected to religion, and a religion-centred community feeling is unfolding. The stereotypes about these groups haven’t helped either. The representation of the Rastafarians was not always favourable in the media, as people were suspicious about the use of dreadlocks and cannabis. The *Reading Evening Post* in June 1976 termed the whole group as criminals by stating “West Indian Mafia organisation called Rastafarians... an International crime ring specialising in drugs, prostitution, subversion and blackmail.’ Its syndicated members were said to favour fast cars, wear their hair in ‘long rat’s tails’ and walk about with ‘prayer sticks’—trimmed pick—axe handles” (Cashmore, 1979, p. 58). The Muslims as a community are subject to suspicion for the acts of terrorism in the post 9/11 era, and it leads to creating a collective consciousness within the group too. Overall, the relationships between these groups with mainstream British society are sometimes a bit uneasy. The Rastafarians reject Babylon as the epitome of corruption and long for their Zion in Africa. The characteristics of western culture have some fundamental differences from Muslim ideologies. The cultural difference between the UK and the South-Asia is also notable.

6. Conclusion

These trends are followed by the people who only choose to follow them and are not universal in the communities. They are not followed by the majority of the black or Muslim or South Asian youths in the UK. The number of followers outside the specific community is also insignificant. There are white Rastafarians, but they are very few in number. Bhangra songs have been listened to by other South Asians alongside the Sikhs, but only the Sikhs identify it as their own. Although there are many Rastafarians nowadays, it originated in 1930s Jamaica, and the culmination period in the UK was the 1970s. The Bhangra culture, originally from rural Punjab, reached its peak in the UK in the 80s and 90s. The new Muslim youth culture has spread through the internet in the 21st century. Overall, these groups and their activities in the UK were not prominent enough to be considered within the mainstream youth culture in the UK. None of these cultures had the UK as their birthplace. They are originated from elsewhere and imported into the UK by immigrants or through the advancement of electronic communication.

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