

Adolescence and Crime: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Vish Dhamija's *Unlawful Justice* and John Grisham's *The Boys from Biloxi*

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Abstract

Cultural Studies covers the interdisciplinary fields of the social structures concerning race, class, gender, ideology, nationality, and ethnicity. Literature is strongly connected with this as it is a reflection of life. People belonging to different countries give importance to their own culture. The British - Indian writer Vish Dhamija, known for his legal thrillers and crime fiction portrays the life of young Maheep Singh, caught for his criminal activities and brought before the law in his legal thriller fiction, *Unlawful Justice* (2017). John Grisham, one of the best-selling American authors is famous for his legal thrillers. His legal thriller fiction, *The Boys from Biloxi* (2022), focuses on the lives of two immigrant families and their sons, Keith Rudy and Hugh Malco. They grow up as friends, but destiny separates them. As the adolescent crimes are increasing day by day, it is mandatory to create an awareness regarding that. The crime can be caused intentionally and unintentionally, situational flaws are sometimes acceptable but getting aware of it will be relevant to overcome or avoid such situations. The present article analyses the American and Indian cultures and the crime in the of the adolescent boys through a socio cultural perspective. As the country, cultures and punishments may differ but crime is common throughout the world. Furthermore, this paper not only

focuses on Indian and American culture besides the life of adolescent boys and parental responsibility.

Keywords: Adolescent, crime, culture, legal thriller, sociocultural analysis.

Introduction

Legal thriller is a type of crime fiction genre that focuses on courtroom drama, the lives of the characters, and the legal system in general. Significant roles will be played by the judges, lawyers, deputies, cops, victims, and criminals. The legal thriller *Unlawful Justice* (2017) henceforth mentioned as *UJ*, of Vish Dhamija portrays the impact of culture and society on the life of Mandeep Singh. This fiction also brings out the boy's criminal and mischievous activities carried out in his adolescent psychology. *The Boys from Biloxi* (2022), hereafter mentioned as *BB*, is a legal thriller where the two boys Hugh Malco and Keith Rudy start their journey as friends in their boyhood, but find things completely changed when they grow up. The book covers various legal issues and other incidents that happen in a corrupt world where one thing leads to the other. The common things in both authors' books are the lifestyle of the boys, their adolescence, crime, psychology of violence, silence and the impact of culture. *The Boys from Biloxi* took place in Biloxi, America whereas the *Unlawful Justice* takes place in New Delhi, India. Biloxi is known for its coastal area and legal as well as illegal activities. The New Delhi of Dhamija is not much into Western tradition but it has its own rules and regulations to be followed.

Indian and American Culture

India is a secular country with twenty-eight states, eight union territories, and seven hundred eighty-five districts with various cultures and traditions. According to NDTV "India's population is of 1.44 billion." Each state and each district have its own tradition and culture. The Indian culture is reflected in the way people speak their language, they express themselves through their artifacts, the style of their dressing and the food they consume along with their eating habits. They are supposed to abide by certain rules and regulations to maintain their tradition and solidarity.

American culture is different from Indian culture. Indians and Americans are diverse in their language, food, lifestyle, professional life, family and social life. While India has many languages spoken in different states, America has different regional

dialects. Indian food has a mixture of spices and flavors, and it includes traditional vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. American food is less spicy and it includes food items like hot dogs, hamburgers, cheese and so on, while Indian food is a mixture of rice, lentils, millet and so on, even though changes have occurred in all these due to Diaspora.

Indians give much importance to the attire they wear. They insist on women wearing neat and traditional kinds of dresses and they are supposed to cover their bodies so as not to expose themselves. Americans do not care about covering their bodies completely as they do not have a particular dress code. When American women are allowed to wear t-shirts, skirts, shorts, denim, or any other dress they like or the ones which make them feel comfortable, Indian women are supposed to wear traditional dresses which almost cover the entire body, like sarees, salwar, kurta, and long skirts, to safeguard themselves. It is felt that women are abused because of the modern, chic, and attractive attire they start wearing due to the Western influence. However, that cannot be mentioned as a reason for the abuse because even among people, who wear the Indian traditional attire, abuse takes place. This clearly shows that the Western cultural impact alone is not responsible for the increase in offences in India.

In the article “American Culture | Overview, Characteristics & Examples” Amanda Knapp talks about the American people and their culture: “it [American culture . . . hold[s] multiple values that are largely representative of the culture as a whole. Some of these include independence, love of privacy, belief in equal opportunity, insistence on punctuality, relative informality, respect for personal ambition and achievement, directness, and orientation towards the future.” Americans are pleasure-loving and their hobbies include camping, gaming and entertainment. When the Indians enjoy their vacations participating in festivals, and family get-together with their relatives and friends, Americans tend to avoid gatherings and prefer to do something they love. Both cultures give importance to some sort of entertainment to reduce their professional and personal stress. Even while celebrating certain festivals, Indians follow some traditional performances and rituals whereas Americans are not so.

The journal article “American Indians’ Cultures: How CBPR Illuminated Inter-Tribal Cultural Elements Fundamental to an Adaptation Effort”, Jumper-Reeves, L. and et

al., point out “Members of marginalized groups do not have identical experiences of disempowerment. This complicates efforts to identify cultural elements shared by diverse urban American Indian communities that may not interpret experiences in uniform ways (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).” Both countries have marginalised people – the blacks in America and Dalits/ untouchables in India – despite the differences in their lifestyle.

The lifestyle of people living in India and America also differs. Drinking, gambling, and one-night stands are common in America whereas the Indian culture does not encourage such things. Americans can have multiple marriages until they feel good and comfortable with their partners or they may be in a live-in relationship. The Indians follow strict rules and rituals regarding marriages, and the live-in relationship is seen as something illegitimate.

The most common crimes committed by adolescents all over the world are theft, drug abuse, sexual assault, and violation of rules. These crimes are increasing day by day as the adolescents are not aware of the consequences of committing such sins. Moreover, people want to lead a carefree life without bothering about the results of their actions. As long as they can derive pleasure, they do not mind indulging in any kind of activities. In India, the highest juvenile crime rate is noticed in Maharashtra whereas Maryland in America stands first in that.

Western culture gives importance to personal freedom, equality, individualism, a friendly hug, clubs, parties, and entertainment whereas the patriarchal Indian culture does not give freedom to people. Indian men and women are not treated equally and are expected to observe abstinence; between the opposite sexes, no friendly talk or touch is allowed free. There are so many restrictions found in Indian society. Sometimes, these severe restrictions make people break them and go in favour of other cultures. When rules are broken people are answerable not only to their parents but also to the society. Similarly, the legal system/constitution of America and India and the procedure they follow are also diverse. In the contemporary India, many things from the Western culture are adapted and incorporated though a few things are strictly prohibited even now.

The Adolescent Boys: American versus Indian

Keith Rudy is the son of Jesse Rudy, a lawyer and District Attorney. Hugh Malco is the son of Lance Malco, an underworld don and boss of the Dixie Mafia. Keith and Hugh are thick friends and star players in the baseball game. Keith and Hugh along with their other friends enjoy their life and simple parties. Keith is good at studies, whereas Hugh is interested in his father's business. *The Boys from Biloxi* brings out the impact of bad company in the life of Hugh: "Hugh met Nevin Noll at a pool table in the rear of the Truck Stop. Nevin gave him a pack of cigarettes, then a cold beer, and they quickly became friends. He taught him how to shoot pool, play poker and black-jack, and the basics of betting on horses and football games" (BB 38). The new company of Nevin Noll and the things he introduces bring about a dramatic change in the life of Hugh.

After completing his schooling, Keith takes his father as his role model and joins the law school. Hugh on the other side, loves to follow his father's footsteps and joins his dad and the mafia gang. As a father, Lance does not try to teach Hugh good things; instead, he feels happy that after him, Hugh will take care of the Dixie Mafia. Jesse Rudy has always wanted to 'Clean the Coast' and he does many things towards it. He closes the nightclubs of Lance and collects evidence of Lance's illegal business and gets him arrested. This incident enrages Hugh, who becomes ferocious and, in his anger, he plans to threaten Jesse. He bombs the office of Jesse, and in the explosion, Jesse dies, though killing him is not Hugh's intention. Keith Rudy takes up his father's career as a lawyer. His father's death shatters him and the news that his friend is behind this adds fuel to the fire that is already burning in his heart. Even though he wants to take revenge, he waits patiently allowing the law to take its own course. He rises to the level of Attorney General and his patience brings Hugh to the gas chamber. When Hugh confesses to him that he has not intentionally killed his father and "Bombing his office in the courthouse would be the ultimate warning. I swear we had no other plans to hurt anyone" (BB 452), Keith feels sorry for him. However, things have gone out of his control, when Hugh realises his mistake and he has to count his last days waiting for the gas chamber.

Vish Dhamija's *Unlawful Justice* opens with the description of a young boy, who started smoking and drinking at the age of thirteen. On his Seventeenth birthday, his

friends gift him a prostitute and he spend the night with her. He could do anything he likes as he is given complete freedom. The author says, "Maheep Singh didn't love his parents, but he didn't despise them either. They provided all the money and gave him enough leeway to carry on with his life" (UJ 3). He is not reared responsibly by his parents, who would give him whatever he wants even after knowing that it is not necessary for him. On a certain day, he drinks alcohol and in that inebriated condition, he loses his presence of mind. The filthy thoughts that fill his mind make him run towards Vamini, whom he supposes to be his girlfriend.

The author describes his condition, "He was delusional without being aware of it. His brain wasn't working because the blood was rushing to somewhere between his legs" (UJ 7). When he enters Vamini's house, there is no one except Baby, the maid's daughter who works in Vamini's house. Without any scruples or fear that he has entered the house of a criminal lawyer Diwan, the father of Vamini, he asks her to have intercourse with him. The nature of Manheep comes out when he tells her,

"I'll give you five thousand rupees.' . . . , In that moment, he grabbed her hair and dragged her to the floor. Her dress rose higher as she struggled to escape. . . . 'Please spare me, I promise I won't tell anyone this ever happened. Please ...' Then with both his hands he grabbed her hair, raised her head and banged it with all the force he could summon, against the stone floor. . . . Semi-conscious, she surrendered to her attacker. Manheep unzipped, . . . and pierced Baby (UJ 10)."

This issue is blown up and a case is filed. Both adolescent boys Hugh Malco and Manheep Singh turn out to be evil and abusive as they lack parental care and control. Even though these things happen in different places, the society they live or the people around them make an impact on the individual's character.

Adolescence, Crime, and Parental Responsibility

In the "Journal of Adolescent and Family Health", Alexa C. Curtis opines "'Adolescence'" is a dynamically evolving theoretical construct informed through physiologic, psychosocial, temporal and cultural lenses. This critical developmental period is conventionally understood as the years between the onset of puberty and the

establishment of social independence (Steinberg, 2014).” Adolescence is a period in which they see noticeable physical changes and develop attitudes to show off themselves.

Lev Vygotsky, the Russian Psychologist in his book *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978) introduced socio-cultural theory that states,

“Vygotsky saw in the methods and principles of dialectical materialism a solution to key scientific paradoxes facing his contemporaries. A central tenet of this method is that all phenomena be studied as processes in motion and in change. In terms of the subject matter of psychology, the scientist's task is to reconstruct the origin and course of development of behavior and consciousness. . . . Vygotsky applied this line of reasoning to explain the transformation of elementary psychological processes into complex ones. The schism between natural scientific studies of elementary processes and speculative reflection on cultural forms of behavior might be bridged by tracing the qualitative changes in behavior occurring in the course of development. . . . The developmental method, in Vygotsky's view, is the central method of psychological science. (7)”

In the analysis of the two boys of Biloxi, one is very good and the other is not. This shows that the environment in which they live as well as the society have a lead role in building up individuals. They have lived in the same place, but their characters are not the same. Keith has good company and spends quality time with his lawyer father and he has a circle of people with good social standing. While analyzing the life of Hugh the circumstances in which he has grown up are quite different. His father Lance, the leader of Dixie Mafia feels proud when Hugh starts drinking. Once Hugh's mother tells Lance that she finds some ominous change in Hugh. Lance replies that Hugh is not a kid anymore and he is just growing. Hugh's bad companion Nevin Noll makes him enjoy the worldly pleasures that later endanger his life.

On his fourteenth birthday, Hugh along with his friends, goes for a cock fighting and drinks beer. The author points out “While his[Hugh's] classmates told dirty jokes, swapped girlie magazines and fantasized, Hugh was enjoying the real thing at every opportunity” (BB 39). When his friends spend time on silly things, he enjoys ‘the real

things' with a hooker, Cyndia Mundrock. He starts with small mistakes like drinking, smoking, hooking, and robbing, and finally ends up with a murder, which costs him his whole life. His environment and the irresponsible behavior of his father make him lose his fortune taking him to the gas chamber whereas Keith Rudy's environment and his father's care, encouragement and love mould him and take him in the right path leading him to the position of an Attorney General.

Mandeep Singh, in his adolescence, starts smoking at the age of thirteen. When his father Singh drinks alcohol, he gives his son a sip. Loving the taste, Mandeep starts drinking. The author describes,

"He was eighteen, spoilt rotten by his parents, particularly his doting mother, Jaya. Not that his father, Maninder Singh, ever really, truly endeavoured to stop his wife from indulging the male heir, born after three daughters. Daughters were supposed to be reined in, their freedoms curtailed, but a son should be exempt from any and all discipline, Maninder Singh believed. . . . His dad had occasionally allowed him a sip or two from his own drink at parties earlier, but that was enough for him to start liking it (UJ 1)."

On his seventeenth birthday, his friends give him a surprise by hiring a hooker so that he can have pleasure and enjoyment. This incident creates lust in him and makes him abuse Baby, "He closed his eyes and, instead of Vamini, Baby flashed. Young and blithe. And she was a servant in his dad's client's house" (UJ 9), which is described in the fiction in the following manner,

"Oh! Baby exclaimed finding him so close.

"Take your clothes off,' he said without warning.

"What? No. Please move away.'

"I'll give you five thousand rupees.'

"No, I don't want your money, please go.'

In that moment, he grabbed her hair and dragged her to the floor. Her dress rose higher as she struggled to escape. He held her loose hair with his left hand,

brought down his right hand and tore her thin nightdress in one swift, violent motion. (UJ 10)"

Baby begs him to leave her but driven by lust, the intoxicated Mandeep forcefully and harshly beats her. Finally, he achieves what he wants by injecting him into her. Such incidents happen in India also. The article "Adolescents and violent crime" states "Overall, juveniles (legally described as adolescents under 18) are responsible for only 19% of all violent crime committed in the United States. However, the peak age incidence for violent offenders is 18, well within the spectrum of the adolescent age grouping. Over the past 10 years, arrests for juvenile crime have increased by 67%." This shows the increase in crime rates among the adolescent age groups due to lack of parental care and self-awareness.

Grisham and Dhamija, through their books bring out the connection between adolescence and crimes that happen because of the impact of culture and addiction towards alcohol. When an individual becomes addicted to drugs or alcohol, there is a possibility of increase in crime. Hugh's life is spent in honky-tonks, drinking, enjoying with hookers and love for money and power that have made him lose his control. Furthermore, in Mandeep Singh's life, the encouragement of his father to drink alcohol, and smoke and his friends' support spoil him. A comparison between the two countries' culture and tradition reveals how vastly the Western culture differs from the Indian culture. These two legal thrillers bring out the same concept of adolescent mistakes happening in different countries. The problem here is the age group as well as the impact of the culture. The culture or tradition will affect the adolescents as this is the period for them to show off in front of others.

Socio-cultural Perspective

Socio-cultural studies deal with the impact of society and culture on the lives of individuals. No one is born bad; people change when growing up. Usually, the children will grow up having their parents as their examples or people with exemplary character. An analysis of the legal thriller fictions, *The Boys from Biloxi* and *Unlawful Justice* using Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, shows the impact of parents and surroundings on the adolescents. As the *Bible* says in Proverbs chapter 13, verse 24, "He that spareth his rod

hateth his son: but He that loveth him chasteneth him betimes."When parents fail to teach their children how to distinguish between good and bad, they cannot visualize a secure future for their wards. It is not necessary to teach them discipline by beating them or using harsh words; a word full of love and concern will make a great difference and change in the children's life.

Keith Rudy from *The Boys from Biloxi* does not stop with planning things properly; he knows to execute them also. Grisham says, "His plans were to join his father's firm in less than three years" (BB 163). Keith grows up emulating his father; even though he and Hugh have been friends, he does not get involved with him in committing crimes. He studies instead and gains the confidence of his father, who discusses legal issues with him. He starts leading a reputed life and has a good social status. Spending quality time with adolescent children will help groom them to shine in a better way. In the case of Hugh Malco, his father is not in a good position but is only the head of the Dixie Mafia and he is notorious for his irresponsible deeds. His association with Nevil Noll, his father's right hand turns Hugh's life upside down and wins the appreciation of his father. When parents fail to teach the real or good things, the money they give or the examples they leave will never help their children. They only make them commit crimes without any sense of guilt or fear. As per Vygotsky's concept, the environment of both boys has a huge role in framing their future.

Like Lance Malco, Mandeep Singh's father is irresponsible. The novel *Unlawful Justice* brings out the outcome of an adolescent when alcohol allures him. The author describes his condition as, "Two drinks later, the liquid made his mind wander. He put on a Coldplay CD but got bored after a couple of tracks. His mind was somewhere else. He thought about calling Vamini, whom he thought was his girlfriend, but who was just a friendly, good-natured, well-mannered pretty girl. Vamini was the only child of Priti and Vansh Diwan, Both advocates" (UJ 4). Instead of teaching him good qualities, his father encourages him to drink. This finally ends up in his abusing the girl, Baby. Hugh Malco or Mandeep Singh cannot be blamed for their behavior; the culture, people around them, and their father's irresponsible behavior create an impact on their lives, leading to depravity.

The sense of guilt and realization that one has done something wrong, will teach the adolescents many things and change their lives. Moreover, the victims who fall a prey to their lust suffer a lot by their actions. To overcome such situations, the victim should be bold enough to say 'no' and beware of sexual assaults too. The National Institutes of Urban Affairs recommends a few points to create awareness among adolescents in the article "Violence and Crime Against Children and Adolescents in India",

- "Sensitise general public about violence against children through media campaign, development of appropriate public advocacy tools and IEC materials
- Self-defence training and information on "good and bad touch" to be included in school curriculum
- Sensitise children about legal protection from crime in the form of documentaries or plays in schools
- Regularly carry out sessions on anger management and sex education in schools and colleges
- Create child friendly one-stop help centers to provide counselling, guidance and referral services to victims and ensure their full recovery, development, and social re-integration"

The above-mentioned points would help create awareness not only among Indians but also people of all countries and help them overcome such situations. Lifestyles keep changing but that does not determine the life of an individual. In the present world, the common thing people often say is that due to the impact of Western culture, adolescent crimes are increasing leading to several dangers. But the reality is that neither tradition nor culture decides one's character; when one realizes his/her own self, nothing will go wrong. Parental love and concern and the responsible society will create a good environment for people to live a better life.

Conclusion

The Statista Research Department while analyzing the "Number of serious violent crimes committed by youth aged between 12 and 17 years in the U.S. from 1980 to 2021"

stated "In 2021, there were about 123,000 serious violent crimes committed by youths between the ages of 12 and 17 in the United States, an increase from the year before. However, this is still a significant decrease from 1994 levels, when violent crimes committed by youths hit a peak at over 1.05 million serious crimes". In the present busy world, the role played by parents has become less, even though they have a huge responsibility in shaping their children's lives. As many parents are busy in their professional lives, spending time with their family and children is decreasing. Moreover, some parents give gadgets to their children, while doing their work. The children get addicted to them as they spend more time with them. In some cases, the children are taken care of by the maids because of which there is a lack of parental love. Yearning for love and other such negligence on the part of the parents and society become the reasons for the negative attitude the children develop which slowly makes them commit crimes.

In Conclusion, what the American juvenile reports say regarding adolescent crimes could be noted as they state that two to four percent of boys get caught in such crimes and that abusers should be punished in all countries. Big shots may escape from the law through legal loopholes. When justice is rendered impartially, considering all equal before the law, and when parents take up their responsibility seriously and play their role conscientiously, children will become responsible citizens like Jesse Rudy. When the world is filled with parents fulfilling their responsibility, and children understanding that their parents are working only for their good with profound concern and love for them, what other thing can one desire?

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