



# Semiotics & Youth Culture: Analysis of Urban Upper Middle-Class Youth Culture in Preeti Shenoy's '*When Love Came Calling*'

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## Abstract

Preeti Shenoy's novel, 'When Love Came Calling', depicts the life of young people from upper-middle-class urban India, through its protagonists Puja and Arush. Shenoy's work is an introspective journey as well as an analytical document that offers an insight into the realities of the upper-middle-class urban youth in India and their similarity or rather differences with that of their western counterparts. This paper attempts to shed light on the urban youth culture in upper-middle-class communities in India through a semiotic analysis of the symbols and signs used by Shenoy in her work, 'When Love Came Calling'. The present study analyses the portrayal of the urban youth culture prevalent among upper-middle-class youth through a few broad perspectives which include, lifestyle, communication aspects, and ethical and professional aspects. The paper first sets a broader context through the conceptual framework that applies to the study of youth culture and then undertakes a semiotic analysis of the text by evaluating the signs and symbols used to depict the urban upper-middle-class setting in the novel.

## Keywords

Urban Youth Culture, Semiotics, Cultural Studies, Youth Culture

## Introduction

"Culture is that complex whole which encompasses knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, conventions, and other talents and habits acquired by a man as a member of a society," writes Sir E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Cultures* (Sardar & Loon 4). Sewell Jr. elaborates on the original definition of culture by defining it as a taught behaviour of the entire system of ideas, conventions, myths, habits, etc. that is passed down from one generation to the next. It differs from nature in this way. Art, music, theatre, fashion, literature, religion, the media, and education are examples of subfields of a culture where this process of meaning formation and transmission is realised.

In his book, *Mirror for Man*, Clyde Kluckhohn analyzes culture from a variety of angles. He starts by defining culture as a group of peoples' overall way of life, where a person who grows up in a certain civilization acquires from their group a set of beliefs, emotions, and social traditions. In this sense, culture serves as a repository for collective wisdom and learning. Culture is also seen as a system of learnt behaviours and their abstraction, according to an anthropologist's theory of behaviour (Geertz).

For a deeper understanding of the term "culture," Pramod Nayar cites Raymond Williams, who states that: "Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organisation, since our way of living, the process of communication is, in fact, the process of community: the offering, reception, and comparison of new meanings, leading to the development of new meanings" (Nayar 19).

Research on youth culture, their expressions in texts, photos, music, styles, and other similar parts of life are tied to culture and are still growing in importance in the current context. The first attempts to study teenage culture may be found in Stanley Hall's 1904 book "On Adolescence," which marks the beginning of research in this area. The greater field of cultural studies and the studies of youth culture got intertwined, and in the 1970s it paved the way for the expansion and diversification of studies on youth culture, evolving in several nations like the United States of America and spreading to Britain (Fornäs and Bolin).

When culture and cultural studies are examined through the prism of semiotic theory, they are defined through an interdisciplinary approach to generate the meaning of symbols, signs, and images. This semiotic analysis is essential for comprehending the urban youth culture in India among various social groups.

The study of signs and symbols and how they are used or interpreted is known as semiotics. The study of "semiotics of culture" is a branch of semiotics that aims to characterise culture from a semiotic perspective, which understands culture as a system of symbols and signs (Chandler). Thomas Sebok coined the phrase "semiotics of culture" for the first time in 1977, and Irene Porttis-Winner popularised it in the 1980s (Lorusso).

Three thinkers and their theories are credited for the development of semiotics: Ferdinand de Saussure, the Father of Modern Linguistics, Charles Peirce's Pragmatic Philosophy and Charles William Morris' Behaviourist Semiotics. The modern semiotic theory has also benefited greatly from the work of other theorists and philosophers including Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, and Julia Kristeva. Because of Ronald Barthes' writings, the application of semiotics to study culture first emerged in the 1960s.

This paper attempts to apply semiotics to the study of youth culture in Preeti Shenoy's novel "When Love Came Calling" released in 2020. The characters in Preeti Shenoy's novel belong to an upper-middle-class section of society. Their lifestyle, clothing, communication styles, socio-cultural and psychological realities and professional aspirations are replete with signs and symbols that are analyzed with the help of semiotic theory and cultural studies.

## Discussion

When Love Came Calling explores the lives of young people hailing from the upper-middle-class sections of urban India and the luxuries they can afford as a result of their status and money. Throughout the novel, the author employs subtle usages of symbols that indicate the reality of the lives of these upper-middle-class youth and how distant they are from the grim realities of a world that exists beyond their comfortable sheltered lives.

Stately houses and luxurious living conditions are the indicators of the lifestyle habits of the urban middle-class youth. The protagonist, Puja, hails from one such palatial house, which her father christens "Life is Paradise " in an attempt to make their home a paradise where they have the finest that the world can offer. The name however is quite ironic when compared to the reality of the lives and relationships of the people who inhabit this so-called paradise.

The novel's protagonist, Puja also comes with the same kind of issues that stereotypical 'rich' kids are often stated to have across multiple fictional and non-fictional narratives. Her parents want her to discover an area of interest and pursue it but Puja nonchalantly states that she has 'two' passions: one is scrolling through Instagram and posting pictures and stories; the second is spending away time sitting on the wicker sofa at the far end of the wooden-tiled balcony of her house facing the ocean. Her response symbolizes the lack of understanding about the reality of life, the hard work needed to earn money and the disinterest towards finding a real passion. As long as they are under the wings of their wealthy parents, shielded away from the world with everything that money can buy, they would not need to worry about trivial things such as a 'passion'.

Puja is a representative of the rich young population who are unaware of the lives of people from other strata of Indian society. While Puja lives in a room replete with all the luxuries that her parents can afford to provide, lakhs of families in India live in a single room, much smaller than hers, owing to the lack of proper and affordable

housing facilities in the cities. Puja's room symbolises the divide between the urban rich and urban poor in India's cities.

Thus, it is not a surprise when Puja is shocked at the sight of the simple room allotted to her at Ashwathy Bhavan, in Wayanad, where she is made to volunteer against her will, by her mother. Her choice of words to describe the room, which is tiny and shoddy according to her standards, is “terrible”. Like many other youngsters who belong to the upper-middle-class clique are ignorant of the world that exists beyond the boundaries of the luxurious life that they lead. In such a scenario, it is natural, albeit ignorant and thoughtless, for Puja to have used the term she did to voice out her immediate reaction to the sight of the room.

The products that an individual uses or rather the products that an individual can afford to purchase are a symbol of their class and socio-economic status. Puja's home and specifically her room is filled with high-end products that symbolise her family's wealth and status. With such status comes multiple people at their disposal to carry out everyday chores for them. Puja again is an example of such an individual, who is like a lost fledgling trying to figure out her life in a setting that is entirely foreign to her senses. She is shocked to see another person of her same age, Arush, living a life of independence and self-sustenance, despite coming from a foreign country. She meets Arush at Ashwathy Bhavan and is astonished to see that his room is organised and pristine. Her room on the other hand is messy and disorganized, looking almost uninhabitable. The rooms offer an insight into the difference in the culture of upbringing and emphasis on independence that prevails in different regions of the country as well as that within different classes of society. Ultimately, the rooms themselves become a symbol of the different lifestyles led by two youngsters of the same age inhabiting the same space at that point in time. For Puja, however, the sight of Arush not only brings awe and an ounce of shame introspecting on the condition of her own but also brings along a feeling of home and belonging. In this context, it is interesting to note how a place that she once called ‘terrible’ becomes the same place that offers her the feeling of being home, something that she has yearned for but never had the chance to experience at her own home which her father calls ‘paradise’.

Within the dichotomy of the upper middle class and middle class, and youth culture in India and youth culture in the West, lie the differences and similarities between the two youngsters, Puja and Arush. Although their perspectives on life differ drastically, their music preferences are quite similar to each other. Puja recognizes a familiar song being played from Arush's room, almost immediately and they both gush over the album. Music becomes a symbol of unity and familiarity between two people coming from two different backgrounds. Or rather, it is a unifying factor between an Indian upper-middle-class youngster and upper-middle-class or middle-class youth from the West, since the music, clothing and food preferences of young people belonging to these sections have access to such cultural commodities.

In this context, it is interesting to note how clothing, too, is symbolic of social class and status. Arush finds Puja's choice of clothing to be exactly similar to those worn by his peers in the UK. She wore denim shorts, open-toed sandals and a white t-shirt that had writing on it saying, 'Not Your Type'. Puja, a stranger, seemed familiar due to her clothing style and mannerisms which were reflective of a west influenced upbringing. With the spread of globalisation, young people are heavily influenced by the socio-cultural commodities exported from the West, resulting in a sense of familiarity across territorial boundaries. Puja's clothing becomes a symbol of such a sense of familiarity of the known in a place that is mostly unknown to Arush, a British citizen.

Language is a crucial marker of culture and social status. While English is considered to be a language accessible to a section of society above a certain economic class, how it is spoken and the words employed by the said class of people in their daily conversations, especially among the youth, symbolize the cultural influences. In *When Love Came Calling*, Arush asks Sujit, Puja's boyfriend, about her school days, to which Sujit replies by describing Puja as a "real-time bomb" - a rather confusing terminology for Arush. Sujit clarifies by explaining that Puja was a rebel and got into trouble often and hence "a real-time bomb", ready to explode at any given minute without notice.

Today, the majority of young people across various socio-economic classes, spend their time on social media applications such as Instagram, Snapchat and the like. For many of them, everything they do, say, see or hear, is meant to be published on social media. Real-time posting is a trend that has caught up in the psyche of the youth and they are constantly in the search of finding an 'Instagram worthy' picture. This is substantiated by Sujit's remarks on seeing the bright blue sky and deep blue-green-hued mountains as they go hiking, where he exclaims saying that the climb was Instagram-worthy. His reaction to the view is symbolic of the socio-psychological reality of today's world - moments getting confined to the virtual world of Instagram and our perception of things around us getting limited to whether it is worth posting on social media or not.

Interestingly, how we have interpersonal communication with people has also undergone a monumental change. Most people have two personalities while communicating - one, that they use in face-to-face conversations and another which is virtual, usually used while communicating over text. We can take the example of Arush, who in real life is shy, and gentle and carefully uses words to express himself and his emotions while speaking to Puja but there is a noticeable difference in his demeanour the moment they begin conversing over text. Arush is no longer the shy boy she knew at Ashwaty Bhavan but is spontaneous and flirty, using emojis to communicate his emotions. This symbolizes the general trend among people today of being able to express themselves more confidently while being in their comfort zones, shielded by distance and the screens of their devices - emojis being the most popular symbols of expressing emotions in the virtual world of communication.

The personality and the psychological makeup of the individual are greatly influenced by economic, cultural and social status. Arush, a British citizen born to parents with Indian origins is caught up between two worlds as a result of his parents' attempt to impose their ideologies on their child. Arush is British in every way possible but

his name and physical features are an explicit reminder of the fact that his roots are Indian. This creates a conflict of identity for Arush because while he is British in spirit and by citizenship, there is a part of him that wants to know more about his roots, something he is not exposed to as a result of the compromise between his parents to raise him as British while only keeping his name Indian. This conflict of identity plays a huge role in Arush's life because it leads him to opt for international voluntary work in India so that he can learn more about the land to which his roots belong.

Puja's sense of identity and belonging is questioned at her own home where she feels misplaced among her own family. She is constantly asked to pursue her passion but in reality, they expect her to only engage in a professional pursuit befitting of their family status. For a youngster, who has lived a sheltered life at her palatial house, volunteering at Ashwathy Bhavan is more or less an opportunity to get in touch with her roots, despite having always lived here. While Arush's conscious efforts are directed from the sense of living away from a reality he would like to explore, Puja is forced to undertake it at the behest of her mother, only to find it turn into an enlightening experience.

Throughout the novel, the choices made by these upper-middle-class urban youth symbolize the dichotomies that exist in the culture and thought processes of young people belonging to the same age group and economic section. On one side, it pushes them to tread unknown territories and learn from the world around them and their own mistakes. On another side, it inhibits them from absorbing the realities of the world around them, choosing to stay unaware and within their comfort zones.

## Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to understand the cultural signs and symbols associated with the urban upper-middle-class youth culture in India. Each of the characters in the novel represents the realities of the upper-middle-class section through varied signs and symbols, which are at times the same across different groups of people or vastly distinct. It offers an insight into the similarity between upper middle-class youth culture in India and that in the West, while also offering room for introspection about the culture of upbringing prevalent among the same section in India and the West and the existence of self-independence or the lack thereof among the youth. Their language, their high-end clothing and gadgets, health-conscious food habits and other such economic markers make them the creamy layer of society, seemingly devoid of problems that money cannot solve but that does not make them immune to the problems that plague human beings when it comes to familial and emotional relationships. The novel offers not only a one-sided view of the luxurious life of these young people but also shows them bare their hearts out at their most vulnerable points in life. Preeti Shenoy's subtle use of signs and symbols in the lifestyle, food habits, clothing, educational and professional aspiration and emotional bonds prevalent among the upper-middle-class youth and their cultural significance and impact allows us to analyse it effectively through semiotics.

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