Ontological Formation of the Otaku Subculture and Subjects in Bangladesh

A thesis presented by

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Introduction

-You live in Japan?

-No

-Profile e je deoa?

-দেহটা এখানে, মনটা ওখানে

The dialogue above was posted in the Facebook page of *Aniview*, a group known for poking fun at the Bangladeshi "*otaku*" communities by highlighting their idiosyncrasies. This post particularly satirizes the Japanophilic tendencies common in many non-Japanese *otaku*. The *otaku* subculture is thriving in Bangladesh nowadays, much the same as the rest of the world. Although it is not particularly well known among the general populace due to its niche nature, lately it is making itself known as a part of pop culture thanks to mass media. Apart from limited media coverage, be it placed or earned, not much work has been done in Bangladesh, unlike in Japan or the West, to address the issue for academic inquiry. Being affiliated with this subculture since childhood has provided me with much insight into this matter to discuss it in such manner. As for a working definition of the term *otaku* (お宅), nuanced nature of the term makes it quite difficult to translate from Japanese. Etymologically speaking, the term derives from the honorific version of "your home" and is metaphorically referred as the personal pronoun "you". The modern usage of this term is somewhat equivalent to the western notion of "geek" or "nerd". It can be understood as "avid fans" of varying interests (e.g. television programs, comic books, celebrities, travelling, electronics and gadgets, video games, automobiles etc.), that is to say, it does not refer to a homogeneous group of people but "a vast multiplicity of subjects, practices, and texts" (Lunning, 2010, p. ix). In 2005, Nomura Research Institute (NRI) classified 5 types

of *otaku* group with 12 major fields of *otaku* interests in

Japan. However, being *otaku* in Bangladesh comprises

mainly having interest in *anime,* abbreviated pronunciation of

"animation", cartoon shows of Japanese origin. There can be subsequent interests, the scope of

which can range from interest in other components of the said subculture (e.g. comics, light

novels, video games, cosplays etc.) to mainstream Japanese cultural

aspects (e.g. music, films, television series, cuisine, fashion etc.). It is important to note that there

is a tendency in the community to strongly distinguish *anime* from cartoon by reason of distinct

art style, subject matter, and origin. Technically such distinction between *anime* and cartoon is

rather superficial. I will acknowledge the differentiation only in terms of origin; *anime* is

Japanese cartoon. Although the term *otaku* has had negative connotations in Japan, it

is considered largely neutral in the rest of the world. [1] In case of Bangladesh, the term was

considered rather positive in the past as it provided people with the opportunity to construct a

somewhat concrete identity based on their newly found hobby and associate with the like-

minded. For instance, *MazeCity*, the first Bangladeshi *anime* community, started as *teamOtaku* in

2006. In recent times, the term has generated fair amount of contestation within the

community. While some award it with an elite status, others in their pursuit of authenticity

bring up the issue of its negative undertone in Japan to renounce it. With the term being either

revered or reviled, a more neutral term "anime watcher" has emerged. Despite the varying

opinions, I will be using "*otaku*" to describe the subjects of my inquiry due to the historical

appropriation of this term in the Bangladeshi context. The focus of this paper is to explore

the *otaku* subculture in Bangladesh from an anthropological perspective and understand the

subjectification and the subjectivity of both *otaku* individual and community.

History

Given the unusual nature of the topic, there is a need for backdrop. In order to trace the genealogy of *otaku* subculture in Bangladesh, I will be focusing mainly on the history of *anime* considering the significant role of *anime* in establishing said subculture. To concentrate more on the Bangladeshi circumstances, I will discuss the transnational part of the history succinctly.

Certain historicities, specifically Japan's relationship with United States in the late modern period, led to over-development of Japanese soft power. This facilitated the Japanese pop culture to flourish and eventually be exportable, e.g. *anime*. Although earliest instance of *anime* can be traced back to 1917, the industry truly expanded after World War II. By the 60s, *anime* made it to USA. Popularity of *Star Wars* in the 80s created a resurgence of *anime* in American television, notably of the science fiction genre. Back then, the norm was to treat *anime* as raw material to create new shows catering to the American taste. Worldwide distribution of the dubbed products began at the same time. American producers held the distribution rights of the dubbed shows in contrast to the Japanese retaining rights of the original. By the end of 80s, there was a shift from rewriting the script to sticking to the original with necessary localization, which coincided with the interest of ever-growing American fanbase (Ruh, 2010). Not all shows were dubbed though, some retained original Japanese audio and came with English subtitles.

The inability of the Western market to keep up with the expectations of the fanbase, both qualitatively and quantitatively, led to the 'cartoon' fans tapping the untapped market of '*anime*'. Although there indeed was a trove of *anime*, the language barrier made it inaccessible for most. "Avidness" of the "avid fans" came to play; fans started translating and adding subtitles

for other fans so that they too can enjoy the shows. Fansub, shortened form of fan-subtitled, like

official subtitles, can be traced back to the 60s. From its inception in the West, i.e. the United

States, to present-day, fansubbing arena remains predominantly Western. There were some who

tried to make a profit out of it back in the days but the adverse reaction of the syndicate soon put

a stop to it. In time, some sort of mutual understanding/agreement came to be between the

syndicate and the fans; only the dealing of licensed products will be considered as

piracy. Fansubbing grew with the growth of *anime* fan communities in the 80s and 90s. There

was initial moral support from some Japanese directors, producers etc. for fansubbing, not only

because fansubs promoted *anime* but also because of the tampering in the official dub or sub

caused them much dissatisfaction. Initially, the distribution of fansubs was limited to mailing of

VHS and Beta tapes but with the advent of internet things changed exponentially (Condry,

2010). This shift to IRC channels, file hosting services, and BitTorrent meant anyone from

anywhere with internet connection now has access to fansubs. Due to colonial

legacy, English is secondary if not primary language in many countries which enabled fansub to

sweep the globe. On the other hand, the official sites while being faster and more reliable in

terms of delivery, had to deal with licensing restrictions which in turn constricted distribution

and availability worldwide. Fansub sites by offering fansubs for free was able to bypass all

that. Though both forms were not above criticisms with merits and demerits of their own,

they provided the space for socializing in their forums and chat rooms. This created the

international community characterized by their uniformity (in their fondness for *anime*) as well

as diversity (in their background and interpretations).

      The formation of *otaku* subculture in most countries other than Japan, owes a lot

to its local/national TV channels for telecasting *anime* in the form of cartoon

shows for its children's segment. While few redubbed the shows in native language,

most countries including Bangladesh just aired the English versions.[2] In Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Television (BTV), a state-owned national TV station, was the only Bangladeshi television

channel till 2000. BTV started airing international programs in the late 80s. Aired

cartoon shows included *anime* titles like *Voltron: Defender of the Universe*, *The Jungle Book:*

The Adventures of Mowgli, *Kimba the White Lion*, *Samurai X* etc. The availability of cable

connection increased the scope. Cartoon Network, a channel dedicated to airing cartoons,

had quite a few *anime* in the midst of the shows it broadcasted, notably *Ninja Robots, Pokémon,*

Beyblade, Digimon, Naruto etc. It even had a specialized block, Toonami, for airing *anime* or

animated cartoons. Shows such as *Dragon Ball Z* and *Cardcaptor Sakura* were shown in that

block. *Pokémon* and *Beyblade*, both *anime* based on promoting products sell, swept the nation

with their craze. *Naruto* on the other hand gained a cult following. There were other channels,

e.g. AXN, Sahara One etc., that aired *anime* but it was Animax that first specialized in it. These

channels created the basis of today's fanbase in Bangladesh. Affordability of personal computers

by the middle class in the late 90s brought forth a thriving CD/DVD market. Along with films

and music, *anime* became available in the market, e.g. Rifles Square. Most were pirated copies of

official release not unlike majority of the discs for sale. Growing demand made copies

of fansub, "not for sale or rent", sellable and rentable in CD/DVD shops that were springing up

here and there. This marked an important transition for the fans, passive watchers became active

collectors. Collecting was accompanied by sharing which has become an integral part, a ritual of

sort, for the Bangladeshi *otaku*. In a 'meet', a meetup for the *otaku,* seeing people gather around a

laptop with pen drives and portable hard drives while awaiting their turn is a common scene. It

was the increasing accessibility of internet, with decent speed and price, that transformed a

pastime to the subculture that it is today. The shift from face-to-

face interaction between friends, neighbors, relatives, acquaintances, and seldom

strangers to social networking sites has become a defining characteristic of the

Bangladeshi *otaku*. Most will identify themselves through social networking groups. *The 1st*

Bangladeshi Anime Community - MaZeCiTy (TO) now has over 45 thousand members. There are

other such groups, number of which keeps increasing, including but not limited to *BD Anime*

Mayhem, Anime Institute of Technology, Anime Trolls, Aniview etc. Groups

are often based on institutions (e.g. *BRACU Anime Community, BUET Anime*

Community, Viqarunnisa Noon Anime Club etc.) or regions (e.g. *Anime Freaks of Khulna \m/,*

Anime Freaks in Rajshahi etc.).

As for I myself, my involvement with this particular subculture can be traced back to my

school days. Never being the athletic type, my pastime consisted mainly of reading books and

watching cartoon shows. I was mostly with my brother back then who only shared

my penchant for the latter. We would not only wait eagerly for the next episode to air but

also have detailed discussions about the shows. It was during my college years

that Animax swept me off my feet. Though I had an inkling that certain cartoon shows such

as *Cardcaptor Sakura, Pokémon, Naruto* etc. were not like the rest, I had yet to stumble upon the

term *anime*. It was Animax that sparked the 'avidness' in me. I saw my first show on Animax,

an episode of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, while attending a party at my uncle's. Something just clicked!

A few days later our cable provider added the channel. It was in the middle of class nine's second

yearly exam, we had three days off before the Physics exam. I ended up binge-

watching Animax, from morning to evening, (so not to get scolded) till my parents returned from

work, for three whole days. I do not quite recall how I did on that particular exam (I passed

though) but I cannot help but fondly remember those days as magical. With time my passion

subdued a bit but I was quite serious about my shows, to the point I would wake up three in the

morning to watch my shows uninterrupted. I further had a dictionary by my side so not to

miss even a single word. That in the long run improved and expanded my English Vocabulary, I

think. I also had the good fortune to meet like-minded others during that time. I was introduced

to the network that was gradually taking its shape. Along with few fellow *anime* watchers, I

came to know of ways to procure *anime,* a rare commodity back in those days. I spent quite a

bit buying DVDs of *anime*. This was a paradigm shift for me, while reducing my reliance on

television, it increased my interaction with others, for sharing cuts costs. Another shift happened

when internet connection became available. While there was no need to buy DVDs anymore, the

subpar speed made it somewhat necessary to keep in touch with the network. Besides the

utilitarian aspect, I think being able to relate to others with my hobby made me really

happy. And I did my best to spread the joy, from making free home deliveries to dumping large

collections of *anime* in university computer labs. I was even made an admin of BRAC

University's unofficial *anime* club's Facebook page, *BRACU Anime Community.* During that time

I arranged two meets of my own that were fairly well received. In addition to my personal

journey and my club interactions, various other meets that I have attended serves as the basis of

my research.

2. Reasons for overlooking the language barrier can be attributed to lack of

budget, skill, oversight etc.

Objective

   This paper aims for a comprehensive understanding of acculturation defined by Powell as

"the psychological changes induced by cross-cultural imitation" through appropriation

of Japanese *otaku* subculture in the Bangladeshi context. Despite the seeming ideological incomp

atibilities or contradictions

In other words, my interest lies in how such conflicted identities are being produced and

how the subjects are negotiating the contradictions.

Summing up the objectives of this research

1. I want to portray the otaku subject as the active agents that they are by locating their

    agency in the larger social context instead of common passive portrayal.

2. I am also interested in how the subjects address the inherent contradictions between the

    host culture and the subculture, especially in regards to morality, religiosity, and sexuality.

3. Lastly, by drawing parallel to religion I would like to gauge the scope of such subcultures

    in constructing reality for its subjects.

For this paper, the focus will be mostly on anime as opposed to other components of the

said subculture (e.g. manga, light novels, visual novels etc.), and while at it, a particular segment:

the Shōnen genre. Shōnen, literally "early youth (from ten to sixteen years old)" or

"youngster", targets, as its name implies, the adolescent boys with titles such as *Gintama,*

Naruto, Bleach, One Piece, Hunter x Hunter, Samurai X etc. It is by far the most popular More

precisely, the focus will be on the fans of this particular genre and the subjectivity it produces.

Of over 20 genres (ranging from usual action, romance, fantasy, science fiction etc. to unusual

harem, hentai, mecha, yaoi etc.), Shōnen is by far the most popular and widespread. While plot

wise each anime is unique, there are traits that are usually common in Shōnen anime, which include the theme of friendship, hard work, perseverance etc. Another common characteristic is the somewhat relatable protagonist who serves as the surrogate for the viewer. I am particularly intrigued by the effect that such anime with "good" to a fault protagonists have on the viewers. A few years back I went to Chittagong to attend a wedding ceremony and ended up meeting up with a shy girl from one such group. Inspired by *Naruto*, the protagonist of which is known for being bold and not giving up, she overcame her shyness and sought me out (something she did with others as well) to talk about and share anime. Such narratives of performativity through self-cultivation are quite common in the communities. ,

Significance

The significance of this research lies in its recency. Being able to map out the formation as well as the diffusion of a culture from its emergence provides us with important insights on humanity as a whole. Also in an individual level, the construction and negotiation of morality and the impact of such moral basis in the wider field is equally insightful. While the circumstance of Bangladesh is unlike Japan with its 2.8 millions of otaku and their 2 trillion yen market, it is important to have proper understanding of the Bangladesh–Japan relations in the contemporary context. In this era of neo-imperial globalization, marked by connection and disconnection, discerning the reasons for both is important to ensure evenness. Due to limitations, the concern of this study will focus more on the local and national effects than international ones.

A research in 2005 by Hamagin Research Institute estimated a ¥2 trillion market

Literature Review

In order to understand the formation of otaku subject, there is a need to understand subjectivity. From a Foucauldian perspective, subjectification entails being subjected and being autonomous.

In other words, individuals are not only objects upon whom power is being exercised but also subjects exercising power (Heller, 1996).

My understanding of subjectivity focuses on the subject's agency, which is individual's capacity to negotiate with other individuals and social structures.

From the viewpoint of otaku industry (not market), the otaku community of Bangladesh may seem irrelevant due to not having involvement in production and circulation, the first two stages of Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication.

their involvement in use and reproduction

Methods

This research primarily relies on participant-observation and in-depth unstructured interviews.

By attending various meets or meeting with key informants, I was able to get a good grasp of it.

My own interest and engagement with this subculture helped immensely in rapport building.

Documentary research on the sidelines helped only to structure the research.

Results

Discussion

Conclusions

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"an otaku doesn't commit a crime nor suicide

because they have to watch another episode of anime next week." - anonymous