

SOCIAL PROTEST IN AMERICAN POPULAR NOVELS OF 1990S: A CULTURAL STUDY

Behzad Barekat¹ & Narges Sayyadi²

¹Associate Professor in Comparative Literature, University of Guilan, Iran,

²M.A. Student in English Literature, University of Guilan, Iran,

ABSTRACT: *It is sometimes or even commonly believed that popular novels are not as significant as elite novels and they are written and read solely for the purpose of entertainment. The main goal of this article is to show that popular novels have the same value and because they have a much wider audience, they have a stronger influence on people than elite novels. The article achieves this goal by proving that these novels are concerned with social protest. Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), Joe Klein's *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* (1996), Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), and Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) are five of the most well-known American popular novels in 1990s which addressed the social problems of the decade. The present article intends to examine social protest in these novels using the principles of cultural studies and according to some key figures in this field. The article offers a full investigation into these social issues in the novels: hardships of African-Americans, racism, patriarchy, hardships of adolescent life, hardships of living in a capitalist society, lost generation, consumerism, political corruption, immigration, assimilation and loss of identity. After examining all these issues, it is concluded that all these popular novels are concerned with social protest and thus they can be considered as significant as elite novels and maybe more significant due to their controversial quality and their wider range of readers.*

KEYWORDS: Social Protest, Social Problems, Popular Novels, 1990s, Cultural Studies

Introduction

The present study seeks to find traces of social protest in American popular novels of 1990s by using the principles of cultural studies. Social protest is a kind of protest against or a criticism of social behaviors—the clothes people wear, the way they behave in society, treat each other in working environments or any other social places— and most importantly a protest against social problems. According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (2006), social problems are social conditions that affect a lot of people and has adverse consequences for collective life (Turner: 582). In this research, 1990s is intentionally chosen because numerous popular novels were written in this decade and society was dealing with a lot of social problems including addiction, crime, drug abuse, poverty, HIV/AIDS, racism, discrimination, sexism, legal immigration, urban decay and gang violence during this specific time (ibid: 583).

Cultural studies was chosen as the framework of this article, because according to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (2006), it is composed of elements of Marxism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology, sociology, race and ethnic studies, film theory, urban studies, public policy, popular culture studies, and postcolonial studies (Turner: 109), thus it gives us the freedom to analyze social problems and social protest from different aspects and by considering a wider range of issues. Cultural studies involves examining the cultural phenomenon of a text; it tries to affect various social

and political interests and address the struggles of the society. It examines individual lives while attacking social ills simultaneously. According to Guerin (2005), cultural critics see themselves as resisting intellectuals and see what they do as an emancipatory project due to the fact that it goes beyond the traditional disciplinary divisions in most institutions of higher education (p. 277). They express their opposition to their own disciplines and also to many of the power structures of society at large; “they question inequalities within power structures and seek to discover models for restructuring relationships among dominant and minority or subaltern discourses” (ibid: 278). They examine the practice of everyday life, studying literature as an anthropologist would, as a phenomenon of culture.

The research has chosen five novels as representatives of this decade, namely: Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996), Joe Klein’s *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* (1996), Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997), and Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). The study tries to reject the idea that only elite novels are serious enough to work on social matters and wants to prove that popular novels can also do the same.

Julia Alvarez was born in New York, but spent the first ten years of her childhood in the Dominican Republic, until her father’s involvement in a political rebellion, that forced her family to flee the country, so many of Alvarez’s works are influenced by her experiences as a Dominican in the United States, and focus heavily on issues of assimilation and identity. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is one of them which details themes of cultural hybridization and the struggles of a post-colonial Dominican Republic. Alvarez illuminates the integration of the Latina immigrant into the U.S. mainstream and shows that identity can be deeply affected by gender, ethnic, and class differences.

Fight Club is a novel that has anti-consumerist ideas and it centers on an anonymous narrator. During the course of the novel, the narrator establishes a fight club and as it attains a nationwide presence, the main character of the novel uses it to spread his anti-consumerist ideas, recruiting fight club’s members to participate in increasingly elaborate pranks on corporate America. The narrator of the story is driven by the concept of mass produced individualism. He is a victim of life-style concepts and novelty. His life has become what he consumes. By showing that the main character of the novel is escaping consumerist life and is confused in this mechanical world, the novel is criticizing this way of life and is protesting against it.

Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics is a roman à clef, a work of fiction that actually describes real life characters and events; namely, Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign in 1992. It is a novel that shows the dirty world of politics which is full of politicians who are ready to tear each other’s throat to get ahead of each other; they are ready to do everything to defame each other in order to get fame and reputation for themselves. The politicians who are this novel’s characters are people who lie, play roles and even shed crocodile tears just to get the people’s support.

Toni Morrison has always been concerned about black experience, especially black female experience in her novels. In *Paradise*, Morrison examined the ways in which love is abused and/or fulfilled. The novel demonstrates the way that the manifestations of love determine not only the course of individual and familial interactions, but also can affect the character, direction, and health of the whole community. *Paradise* tells the story of lost women who find

themselves at the edge of an all-black town called Ruby. The focus on the women characters highlights the ways the novel portrays the gender differences between the patriarchal rigidity of the townsmen and the clandestine connections between the townswomen and the women at the Convent. The story also shows a gap between the younger generation and the older, and it is about change and refusal to understand for the sake of the past.

The New York Times bestselling coming-of-age novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) is an epistolary novel that follows the intellectual and emotional maturation of a teenager who uses the alias Charlie over the course of his first year of high school. The book is semi-autobiographical. The novel tells the story of a fifteen-year-old boy named Charlie who is coping with the suicide of his friend, Michael. To lessen the fear and anxiety of starting high school alone, Charlie starts writing letters to a stranger, someone he heard was nice but has never met in person. Critics have identified primary themes of teenage reality and (for adults) nostalgia in this novel. The book addresses a range of themes including sex and drugs dispassionately. Other themes include friendship, body image, first love, suicide, eating disorders and sexuality. All these matters are issues that teenagers in 1990s were coping with and, by showing them skillfully in the form of a story, the novel tries to make people sympathize with teenagers and their problems and make them realize the gravity of the situation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most of the works that have been written on *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* considered it as a novel that displays the hardships of immigration. In his book, *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*, Silvio Sirias mentions the fact that “*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* is a bittersweet tale characterized by its honesty. It details what life is like in a bilingual, bicultural family” (2001: 18). In their book, *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-sixties Literature*, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez also assert that the Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* can be considered as postcolonial and U.S. ethnic literature because it reflects the “sense of mourning for the motherland or the mother tongue” which is the definitive feature of this kind of literature (2007: 138).

A lot of articles were written about *Fight Club* and they looked at it from different aspects. In his article, “The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralizer,” Jesse Kavaddo (2005), a professor at Maryville University of St. Louis, argues that the Narrator’s opposition to emasculation is a form of projection, and the problem that he fights is himself. In this regard, Paul Kennett (2005) also adds that because the Narrator’s fights with Tyler are fights with himself, and because he fights himself in front of his boss at the hotel, the Narrator is using the fights as a way of asserting himself as his own boss. These fights are a representation of the struggle of the proletariat at the hands of a higher capitalist power.

Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics is a novel that attracted the attention of the press at the time of its publication for a while and several articles were written on it by critics on different newspapers. *The New York Daily News* described the book as a farce and praised it as funny, truthful, and as containing “uncannily accurate” portraits of its thinly disguised characters.

In his book, *The Literary 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time*, Daniel S. Burt says that Morrison’s inspiration for her themes and style

comes from her African-American heritage and its rich repository of potent stories, personalities, vernacular, and visionary power (2009: 443-4). She “comes from a long line of people who did what they had to do to survive. It is their stories she tells in her novels- tales of the suffering and richness, the eloquence and tragedies of the black American experience” (ibid: 444). In her book, *Contemporary Fiction*, Jago Morrison (2003) emphasizes that Morrison frequently refers to public and documented history in her novels; however, she is much more committed to its inverse: the private, undocumented, and every day. Her texts, as Jago Morrison rightly mentions, are interested in speaking about experiences of people who are unable to speak for themselves.

Just like *Primary Colors*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was also a very controversial novel at its own time and maybe even now. According to David Edelstein of the *New York Magazine*, Chbosky captures the “feeling [that] you belong when among friends, yet you’d soon be alone” and notes that “the pain of loss ... [is] almost as intense as the bliss ... it’s nostalgia with an emphasis on nostos, pain [sic].” *Word Riot*’s Marty Beckerman said that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* connects with young people because its scenes are “so universal and happen to so many teenagers.” Chbosky wanted to convey respect for teenagers, to “validate and respect and celebrate what [teenagers] are going through every day,” and said that the novel is for “anyone who’s felt like an outcast.”

DISCUSSION

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents is a popular novel concerned with immigration, acculturation and loss of identity, which was one of the significant social issues of 1990s. Bhugra (2004) defines acculturation as “a phenomenon which results when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous first hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either one or both groups.” With acculturation, some aspects of identity are likely to change, including the concept of self, and this will be dependent upon the cultural context. The displacement of Caribbean people from their islands to the United States, for political or economic reasons, had produced a tension between the culture of the country of origin and that of the adopted homeland, one representing the past and the other the future of the immigrant. With language and immigration, come hidden rules, values and traditions. To accept new rules, however, often mean abandoning old ones. All of the characters of the novel, particularly the women, found themselves caught between the values of their old and new worlds. Werlock (2006) also argues that “though highly individual, the sister’s stories merge to present a multivoiced account of the process of acculturation and of the increasingly shifting cultural ground they tread. They attempt to find balance, to speak without an accent in every place and situation” (p. 636). As Day (2003) mentioned, the new identities that they are trying to achieve in the United States are at odds with the proper island life that they remember. Day (2003) continues to say that “as members of the privileged class, they miss the special pampering from the chauffeurs, gardeners, maids, and nursemaids of their earlier years” (p. 42-3).

Yolanda is the first central character the narrative introduces. She is also the novel’s most fully developed character. Her identity, her concept of self, is fragmented, as evidenced by all of her names: Yolanda, Yo, Yoyo, and Joe. From the onset of the novel, Yolanda is out of place with the language and culture of her homeland. Her appearance and dress is different from her same-

aged relatives. As Sirias (2001) rightly mentioned “Yolanda is on the island in search of her place in the world as well as of her identity” (p. 25). She is uncertain as to where she belongs and where she will find happiness- whether in the United States or on the island. Thus the reader learns that displacement, the feeling of never knowing where one belongs, is central to Yolanda’s character. Ranking high on the list of themes Alvarez explores is that of Americanization (ibid: 35). The novel can, to a great extent, be considered a treatise on this subject. After all, it is the difficulty Yolanda experiences with her Americanization that has turned her into a writer. The pain of being different, of being an outsider, compels her to document her existence in order to give it legitimacy. All of the novel’s personages, at one point or another, deal with the hardships involved in becoming an American. A theme apart from Americanization, but closely related to it, is the theme of cultural displacement- in other words, how a person feels awkward in an alien setting.

The use of Spanish words and phrases in the novel allowed one to experience the Garcias’ socio-cultural dualism and the richness of their heritage. The Garcias were lost between languages and cultures: Spanish and English, American and Latin American. Werlock (2006) also argues that “though highly individual, the sister’s stories merge to present a multivoiced account of the process of acculturation and of the increasingly shifting cultural ground they tread. They attempt to find balance, to speak without an accent in every place and situation” (p. 636). Indeed, the novel does speak of the joys and, yes, the pains of not belonging entirely in one world or the other. The sisters all suffer from cultural displacement, and the bulk of their displacement revolves around the issue of language. The sisters grow up speaking Spanish. Then, because of circumstances beyond their control, they are obliged to learn English- an experience that causes them considerable trauma. In one of the chapters of the book, we encounter Yolanda as a thirty-nine year old who now laments her loss of Spanish. She feels awkward speaking the language of her childhood. She has mastered English, but at the cost of losing her once native ability in her mother tongue. Alvarez ably mines this feature of the immigrant experience: the duality, linguistic and cultural, of living on the hyphen, of being a Dominican-American, and by extension a Hispanic-American.

Fight Club

Fight Club protests against consumerism and capitalism. In this novel, Palahniuk tries to show the consumer society and its meaninglessness and the ways that people could protest against it and regain authority and control over their own lives. That is what Bernard Stiegler (2006) also points to: “consumption is intoxication; this has today become obvious. Hyperindustrial society is intoxicated, and the premier political question is that of disintoxication.” In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden is also trying to get disintoxicated from a consumption. He does that by abandoning all he used to own and by doing actions that totally contradict a common consumerist life e.g. starting a fight club and vandalism. The novel shines a light on the restlessness and powerlessness that folks could feel in late capitalist society. In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (2006), it is mentioned that “life in modern capitalist society is unbearably harsh” (Turner: 52). One reason is the unyielding need that everybody should work all the time; and the other is that life in modern capitalist society lacks a deeper meaning. Colleen Ortegon (2009) adds that the narrator has revolted against both the consumer society which had previously dictated the array of commodities he must own in order to be fulfilled and the job which has forced him to reduce his fellow human beings to nothing more than numbers in an equation. The narrator’s rebellion against being “too complete” and “too

perfect” according to the standards dictated by society, however, initiates itself with little conscious decision (Palahniuk 1996: 173). The world, which is only preoccupied with selling people different commodities, is slowly choking them. Starting the fight club can definitely be seen as an attempt to find a pleasure that was not commodified. The fights are a representation of the struggle of the proletariat at the hands of a higher capitalist power; by asserting themselves as capable of having the same power, they thus became their own masters. Kavaldo (2005) asserts that the fight club the Narrator founds protests against consumerist conformity, but its alternative Project Mayhem that evolves out of fight club does this better by taking far more of its members’ individuality- names, clothes, hair, identities- than consumer culture can (p. 11).

Minarik (2011) claims that since Palahniuk set the plot of the novel among the young blue-collar workers dissatisfied with the lives they live and filled it with true stories, great many of the readers found it easy to relate to, and with angry young men who form a considerable part of every generation (p. 50). These angry young men are the ones who are considered as lost generation. Palahniuk portrays the narrator as a dissatisfied white young man, who spends most of his time working for a big company, does not have enough excitement in his life, spends his money buying products he is offered in advertisements and generally feels alone.

The distractions in society are what make men become less masculine. As Abbey Gleier (2013) rightly says that when each character of the book discovers absence of fear, they are brought back to life like a phoenix, re-born from the ashes they are burned in. And as Palahniuk said, “Only after disaster can we be resurrected,” (Palahniuk 1996: 70). So it is the crisis of masculinity and the growing emphasis on gender relations and the masculine identity amongst middle-class white men in the United States at the end of the 20th century that seems to be the locus of this novel (Jacobsen 2013: 16). The narrator describes the situation as “a generation of men raised by women,” (Palahniuk 1996: 50) creating a picture of what the aftermath of women’s liberation, the feminist values that followed and the introduction of the ‘soft man’ in the sixties and seventies meant to young, white men growing up in the nineties. The clearest example of the feminized man is the testicular cancer group “Remaining Men Together.” The members in the group are men who have lost their testicles to cancer, meaning their manhood is completely cut off, so to speak. Physically, their locus of manhood is gone, meaning the gap between man and woman has been closed, biologically speaking. However, Palahniuk did not stop at the physical appearance; the men are not quietly sitting and conversing about cars and beer but talking about their feelings during “hug time” (Palahniuk 1996: 21).

Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics

Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics is concerned with political corruption. Mark Grossman in his book *Political Corruption in America* (2003) defines political corruption as a kind of “corruption that is perpetrated by men and women in elected and appointed offices” (p. xi). He continues to say that corruption also deals with ethics and how laws and ethics clash. In his book, political corruption is divided into four different categories:

The first is patently illegal behavior in the sphere of politics; bribery is a prime example. The second relates to government practices that, while legal, may be improper or unethical. To some people, patronage is such a practice [...]. A third meaning involves conflicts of interest on the part of public officials—for example, the

vote of a legislator who owns oil stock and casts his vote in favor of oil depletion allowances [...]. The fourth meaning also has an ethical, rather than a legal, basis: It related to political behavior that is nonresponsive to the public interest (ibid).

In *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics*, examples of all these different kinds of corruption can be found. In this novel, examples of different kinds of corruption can be found. Because this novel is a roman à clef, a work of fiction that actually describes real life characters and events—namely, Bill Clinton’s first presidential election in 1992, real documents and evidence of political corruption during Bill Clinton’s presidency were used to make it easier to delve into all the scandals that happened then in 1990s. Although the novel is not a note-by-note recitation of the Clinton road to power, but it is able to novelize American politics. This novel beautifully portrays the kind of life politicians are leading and different kinds of political corruptions that exist in American society.

Gar Joseph (1998) describes politics as a place where black and white blend into gray, where principles blur into expediency, where doing “what is right” melts into “doing what is necessary.” This terrain of moral ambiguity is never more treacherous than in an election campaign, the subject explored by the novel *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* (1996). There really is a lot of soul-searching that goes into deciding whether to go negative against an opponent. Joseph (1998) continues to say that “there really does come that gut-wrenching time when a candidate must reveal his darkest secrets to his closest advisers so a counter-strategy can be prepared in case they become public.” Stanton’s Hillaryesque wife, Susan, balances her husband’s impulsiveness with a steely discipline. The price she pays for success is to swallow the humiliation of her husband’s affairs, albeit with the help of an occasional ashtray tossed at his head.

In his book *Political Corruption in America*, Mark Grossman (2003) talked about various political scandals during Clinton’s presidency that some of them were shown in the course of the novel. In the article “Books of the Time; A Roman a Clef to Recent Politics” published by *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani (1996) also asserts that the author uses the guise of fiction to say things (indeed, to fabricate things) about the Clinton campaign that could never be published as journalism.

Paradise

In *Paradise*, while Morrison focuses on race and gender, she tries to reach universals through the particular (Burt 2009: 444). She tries to remember details of African-American history that have been forgotten in American culture and history for a long time. In her essay, Stave (2007) mentions that “*Paradise*, as the title indicates, interrogates the concept of utopian societies, playing race and gender against each other in an exploration of the constitution of oppression.” In this novel, different forms of racism can easily be traced. According to Stave (2007), racial purity is one of the central issues engaged by the text. Another form is race-based exclusion. The African American people in the novel did the exact same thing to each other that the racist white America had done to them. The racism experienced by the forefathers of Ruby’s citizens has catastrophic effects on the town and its people. The social and economic consequences of white racism drives the Old Fathers, the men who traveled from Mississippi to Oklahoma to found the town of Haven, away from their homes after the Civil War to the haven of an all-black community, only to be rejected by lighter-skinned blacks in the event that inscribed itself on the group’s collective memory, the Disallowing. When they arrive, they are informed that

they are “too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders” (Morrison 1997: 14).

While racism is a key concept in *Paradise*, patriarchy is also another significant issue. In founding Ruby, the town patriarchs wanted a paradise free from the violence and racial prejudice, but, unknowingly, the town fathers tyrannized members of their own community. *Paradise* illustrated how men in a patriarchal system asserted authority over women, and rather than serving as their protector, became their abusers. The novel juxtaposes two communities: the all-black town Ruby and the all-female commune the Convent. The book begins with a chilling first sentence-“They shot the white girl first” (Morrison 1997: 1)- that calls attention to the interethnic community in the Convent that will ultimately become the object of violence for the menfolk of Ruby (Montgomery 2013: 103). The patriarchy shown in the novel was destructive and murderous. Gillespie (2008) also asserts that because the women’s independence seems dangerous and threatening to the men of Ruby since it does not come from them and they cannot control it, the men of Ruby believe the women must be destroyed (p. 136). The townsmen were all described as rigid and severe creatures that enjoyed watching the pain of women and their bitter life. They were so focused on their town-building that they forget both themselves and the families they were supposed to protect in the first place. Kareem Abdul (2014) continues to say that the silence of women in Ruby is another major issue. According to him, it is very difficult to hear a woman answering or saying their opinion of men out loud; they prefer to show their agreement with silence or nodding. And this, in itself, is the result of the existing patriarchy in the town.

One of the other issues discussed in the novel was the issue of generation differences which the novel illustrated by showing the differences between Old and New Fathers in various ways one of which is using the Oven as the symbol of these differences. The Oven is a monument to the past for both the communities of Ruby and Haven. The structure reminds the communities of the struggles that they have endured as they tried to establish a home where they can be free. In spite of its rich heritage and historical significance, it has negative associations for the younger generation of Ruby’s townspeople. Gillespie (2008) believe that “these young people experience the Oven as an oppressive and weighty symbol that they perceive as a kind of weight tying them to a past they believe they would like to move beyond” (p, 140). The young people of Ruby do not fully understand how important the Oven is to the town. Some young people desecrate the Oven by painting a fist on the structure in an attempt to change its meaning to something more expressive of the ways that they want to redefine Ruby. The argument about the message that was originally inscribed on the Oven reinforces the conflicts that the young people are having with the older members of the Ruby community.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

The Perks of Being a Wallflower shows teenagers as they really are in all their complicated, messy and endearing moments and it is approached by many as one of the most honest literary portrayals of teenage life within the last decades. In *Washington Post*, Stephanie Merry (2012) asserts that this young adult novel can be a memo of the importance of inclusiveness: the protagonist, high-school freshman Charlie, is rescued from bleak loneliness by a circle of friendly misfits who embrace him, his shyness and all and just like that, “a sweet-natured kid transforms from outcast to cohort.” The primary mission of the story is to show how loneliness can find its way into companionship, and to acknowledge that we rise above adolescent despair

by surviving it together. What Charlie offers to youth is the simple affirmation that they are not alone in their struggles, an affirmation which makes a tremendous difference for many teens in their day-to-day lives. According to Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has convinced some teenagers to choose life over suicide; if you speak to a random sampling of high school or college students anywhere in America, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* inevitably emerges as a favorite novel. According to Angel Daniel Matos (2013), "Charlie's brutally honest letters manage to convey the story of an adolescent trying to evolve from a passive observer of life to an active participant" rather than simply narrating the account of a teenager trying to deal with intense issues within the context of 1990s America. He continues to say that Charlie's progression from a passive to an active participant is not an overnight change, but rather a very difficult and gradual process. He develops a clearer sense of the world through the difficult process of integration in his friendship group and through his immersion in new experiences such as drug use, masturbation, visits to the Rocky Horror Picture Show, and exposure to different literatures. At the end of the novel, Charlie becomes conscious of the fact that although he is not directly responsible for the person he is, he has the power of choice, and the power to steer his life in another direction if he intends to.

The fact that Charlie tries marijuana does not come to us as a surprise because substance use is pervasive among youth in many cultures and countries around the world. Substance abuse, especially in combination with depressive symptoms, represents a particularly serious risk factor for suicide attempts and completions. Adams (2003) points to the fact that "although marijuana is an illegal substance in the United States, the trends in use across 1990s was toward increasing numbers of 8th-graders, 10th-graders, and 12th-graders using marijuana and increasing frequency of use" (p. 452).

One of the other important issues that the novel portrays is the issue of sexual abuse. Near the end of the novel, Charlie remembers the fact that he was sexually abused as a child by his deceased aunt Helen, which explains why he is so repressed and has difficulties participating in life. Throughout the entire novel, Charlie's unwillingness to be active in life and his desire to remain in the background as a passive observer are, to a great extent, because of this repressed childhood memory.

One of the other issues pointed in the novel is homosexuality. Patrick and one of the high school's star football players, Brad, are having an affair. When Brad's father finds out, he beats the boy up and Brad responds by turning on Patrick. This shows the fact that people couldn't deal with this issue in a sensible scientific way and accept it as a fact of life and because of that many people especially teenagers have difficulty discovering their feelings towards the same sex and more than that they can't even talk about it freely with their family and friends and this repressing of feelings can cause a lot of psychological problems for them in the future.

The novel also shows the influence of the peers on adolescents. According to Nurmi (2004), adolescents in a particular peer group exhibit many similarities compared with adolescents in other groups (p. 96). While Charlie, as an adolescent, was under the influence of his parents, but his peers and friends were also involved in the ways in which he dealt with the transition into adulthood and their role was more important than that of parents'. Selection and socialization into peer groups might be assumed to play an important role in the ways in which adolescents deal with the transition into adulthood.

FINDINGS

Looking at these novels as a kind of social protest, in itself, is a new idea. All these novels are considered popular: many copies of them were sold; films were made based on a few of them; some of them were controversial and there were a lot of debates about them on media; and people talked about the direct influence of some of them on their lives. And this is where we realize the importance of popular novels and their effect on people. From sociological point of view, popular novels are very important; because they have a wider range and more numbers of readers, their effect is greater and more significant than elite novels.

The first question this article proposed was if popular novels are concerned with “social protest” as such. The answer is ‘yes’. Popular novels can be as significant as elite novels. However there is a wide range of popular novels and maybe some of them are intended solely to entertain people and they don’t have much to say, many of them have some important points to discuss including the novels that were chosen for this study. Most of American popular novels in 1990s have taken social matters existing in that decade into account and traces of direct or indirect social protest can be found within their lines.

The second thing that the article intended to investigate was the main features, issues, orientations and goals of social protest in popular novels. Social protest was illustrated in all these novels by showing all the social problems people were dealing with in 1990s and by criticizing people’s and governments’ social behaviors. Each one of these novels focused on one of the main issues of the decade: *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* dealt with immigration, assimilation and loss of identity; *Fight Club* focused on capitalist society, lost generation, escaping consumerism and regaining individuality; *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* illustrated political corruption; *Paradise* showed African-American history, racism and patriarchy; and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* showed hardships of adolescent life i.e. drug abuse, depression, suicide, love relationship, pregnancy, family-related problems, homosexuality, sexual abuse and disillusionment. Popular novels don’t deal with these social matters harshly and don’t look at things in a black-and-white manner. Showing these social matters and the plenty of problems they cause people is a kind of criticism in itself and can make more people aware of the current issues of society and the existing grave situation, so it can be considered as protest because it intends to cause fundamental changes in the nature of the state itself or it may seek more narrow institutional reforms, including those that are required to support changes in people’s personal lives by encouraging people to create social movements and by influencing the government to take action to solve social problems.

The third question this article tried to answer was that how it is possible for cultural study approach to present a deeper determination of these social protests. Cultural studies is a multidisciplinary study of culture and it has a sociological rather than an aesthetic viewpoint. Rather than making use of traditional forms of literary, artistic, or musical criticism, it makes use of social sciences such as politics and semiotics. Cultural studies is composed of elements of Marxism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology, sociology, race and ethnic studies, film theory, urban studies, public policy, popular culture studies, and postcolonial studies among which media and popular culture are prominent topics which includes high as well as popular arts, literature and speech as well as newer media (Turner 2006: 109). Cultural studies involves examining the cultural phenomenon of a text; it

tries to affect various social and political interests and address the struggles of the society. It examines individual lives while attacking social ills simultaneously. According to Guerin (2005), cultural critics express their opposition to their own disciplines and also to many of the power structures of society at large; “they question inequalities within power structures and seek to discover models for restructuring relationships among dominant and minority or subaltern discourses” (ibid: 278). They examine the practice of everyday life, studying literature as an anthropologist would, as a phenomenon of culture. And this is what all these novels did.

CONCLUSION

The paper discussed social protest in American popular novels of 1990s; 1990s was the scene of lots of social issues in The United States. In order to do so, among all the popular novels written in this decade, a number of them including *Paradise* (1997), *Primary Colors: A Novel of Politics* (1996), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), *Fight Club* (1996), and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) addressed these social issues. These novels helped people understand these issues better and made them realize they were not alone in their sufferings. The fact that these novels are concerned with social protest was discussed and features, issues, orientations and goals of social protest were explored and analyzed in all of these novels. In doing this, the ideas of several critics lighted our way.

The novels chosen for the study were interrelated; they were chosen in a way to cover most significant social issues of 1990s which was the time span chosen for the research. Each one of the novels tried to focus on a different topic which was controversial at the time. They are related in the way that if you look at them as different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the whole thing gives a clear picture of all the social problems different kinds of people of different ages, races, genders and professions were dealing with at the time. Exploring and analyzing these novels that are considered as social protest help people understand that these so-called popular novels are as significant as elite novels and they have something to say and because a great number of people buy and read them, from the sociological point of view, they are much more influential than elite novels.

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