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Preferred Reading to Polysemic Reception: Applying Hall's Encoding/Decoding to Refugee Representation in *The Other Hand* (*Little Bee*) by Chris Cleave

Abstract: This research article applies the theory of encoding and decoding by Stuart Hall to analyze Chris Cleave's novel *The Other Hand* (also known as *Little Bee*), arguing that the novel encodes a liberal humanist ideology framing refugee suffering within a Western moral lens, thereby inviting reader empathy while reproducing power disparities between the savior and the victim. Cleave criticizes Western humanitarianism and institutional violence through the alternating first-person narratives of *Little Bee*, a Nigerian asylum seeker, and Sarah, a British lady. However, the novel's emotive appeals to normalize hierarchies of speech and visibility. Focusing on the encoding/decoding theory, which posits that text encodes dominant ideologies, but the readers decode them hegemonically, negotiated, or oppositional, the analysis examines encoding via textual elements like trauma depictions and cultural codes. The focus then switches to deciphering 15 recent Goodreads reviews (as of November 2025), which suggest a polysemic reception. Ultimately, the study highlights the ideological negotiation at the intersection of empathy, race, and gender, underscoring the limits of literary empathy in fostering political change amid global inequities. This contributes to cultural studies by illustrating how humanitarian literature circulates meanings in contested social contexts.

Keywords: Encoding/Decoding, Humanitarianism, Empathy, Power Asymmetries, Refugee Representation.

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1. Introduction

The refugee accounts in literature serve as a powerful medium that showcases the lived experiences of displacement, identity, and resilience. These texts capture the plight of the individuals who are displaced by presenting them in an emotionally captivating way. The post-colonial fiction *The Other Hand* also known as *Little Bee*, written by Chris Cleave, explores such experiences of fear and uprootedness of a group of asylum seekers in general and the terrifying experiences of a young woman named Little Bee and a European woman, Sarah in particular. The novel alternates between the first-person narratives of Sarah and Little Bee, through which the author is trying to gain empathy from the readers while questioning the moral boundaries of Western compassion. The novel operates with the logic of Western humanitarianism, which is the thinking that empathy and awareness can redress structural violence. Cleave is expecting the audience not only to witness the cruelty towards displaced people but also to feel responsible for it.

The analysis of the novel raises critical questions: Does the novel's call to empathy reproduce the same kind of power asymmetries it seeks to impose? Does the reader's 'feeling' for the refugee reinforce rather than dismantle hierarchies between saviour and victim? These questions are most asked when it comes to cultural studies, where representation is seen not merely as storytelling but as a political act that encodes ideology.

The theory of communication by Stuart Hall, the encoding-decoding model, provides a productive structure for exploring how Little Bee communicates its ideological meaning. Hall argues that the media and cultural texts encode specific preferred readings shaped by dominant ideologies but the readers or audiences can decode them differently. They can accept it, negotiate it, or even resist its intended message. Applying this theory to Cleave's novel allows the readers to see how its humanitarian tone and emotional appeal function as codes that circulate through authorial intent, textual structure and reader reception.

This research article argues that Cleave's The Other Hand encodes a liberal humanist ideology that frames the sufferings of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants within a Western moral lens, inviting the readers to empathise with these displaced people while reproducing the power asymmetries between saviour and victim. Using the theory of encoding-decoding by Hall, it explores how readers'

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responses from the emotional identification to political resistance illustrate the novel as a site of ideological negotiation where empathy, race and gender intersect.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on refugee representation in contemporary fiction has repeatedly highlighted the ideological tensions embedded in Western-authored humanitarian narratives. Woolley (2014) and Sloboda (2017) argue that many British and North American novels about asylum seekers translate distant suffering into affective spectacles that ultimately reaffirm the moral superiority of the Global North reader. Little Bee has been a frequent target of this critique: Nayar (2012) describes it as a classic example of "trauma drama" that instrumentalises Black female suffering for white emotional consumption, while Danewalia (2020) and Farrier (2021) point to its reliance on the white-saviour trope and the strategic "palatability" of Little Bee's witty, Queen's-English voice.

Studies of literary empathy have further questioned whether such texts produce genuine political awareness or merely a comforting sense of compassion. Drawing on Keen (2007) and Stonebridge (2018), scholars including Root (2015) and Moynagh (2019) contend that Cleave's novel prioritises readerly identification over structural critique, turning systemic injustice into an individual moral drama. Although several articles note the risk of "poverty porn" and cultural appropriation in Little Bee, none have systematically examined actual reader responses.

Recent work on digital reception (Driscoll & Rehberg Sedo and Rebora et al.) has begun to explore how refugee-themed novels are interpreted on platforms such as Goodreads, but Little Bee remains unexamined in this context. Similarly, while Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model is regularly applied to news and television discourse on migration (Chouliaraki, 2006; Horsti, 2016), its use in literary analysis of refugee fiction is still rare and has never been combined with empirical reader-response data.

This study addresses these gaps by combining close textual analysis of Cleave's encoded liberal-humanist message with an examination of fifteen recent Goodreads reviews, revealing the full spectrum of hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional decodings in practice. In doing so, it offers the first reception-focused, Hall-informed reading of Little Bee and contributes new evidence to ongoing debates about the political limits of humanitarian literature.

3. Theoretical Framework - Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

Hall's essay *Encoding/Decoding" (1980)* fundamentally reshaped the study of communication, media and cultural representation, rejecting the linear model of sender-message-receiver.

This model has been criticized for its linearity – sender/message/receiver – for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different

> moments as a complex structure of relations. But it is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance,' sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. (Hall 508)

Hall's model states that every cultural text, whether a television broadcast, film or literary work, comes from ideological conditions and social relations. Producers encode the text using established codes that naturalise certain ways of seeing and interpreting the world.

> We identify three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed... The first hypothetical position is that of the dominant-hegemonic position... The second position... is that of the negotiated code or position... Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection... but to decode the message in a globally contrary way... operating with what we must call an oppositional code. (Hall 515)

Hall analysed this model through the study of television, but its implications extend well beyond the broadcast medium. All types of communication and literature participate in the process of encoding and decoding. In the case of this novel under study, the author is encoding his narrative of liberal humanist ideology of Western humanitarianism. The alternating narratives of the main characters enact a hierarchy of voice, empathy and visibility.

4 Analysis: Encoding and Decoding in *The Other Hand (Little Bee)*

4.1 Encoding Liberal Humanism and Western Humanitarianism

The role of codes and naturalisation is important in Hall's essay. For him representation is never neutral so that the most realistic or the most natural images are constructed through cultural codes that makes certain meaning "There is no degree zero in language. Naturalism and "realism" – the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented – is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the "real"." (Hall 511), this observation that even naturalism is an ideological effect showcases how Cleave's realistic fiction works through specific cultural codes rather than transparent truth. By presenting Little Bee's voice in polished, fluent English and framing her trauma through accessible emotional cues, the novel constructs a realistic refugee figure that Western readers can recognise and empathise with. This is evident when Little Bee confesses, "I am only alive at all because I learned the Queen's English... It is not the Queen's crown and sceptre that rule in your land. It is her grammar and her voice" (Cleave 5). Her use of the English language here is not just linguistic it encodes a Western mode of realism that aligns the refugee's intelligibility with the reader's cultural

expectations. Hall explains, "The domains of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices, and beliefs" (Hall 171). Thus, Cleave's humanitarian narrative participates in a dominant-hegemonic ideology that privileges empathy as a moral framework consistent with liberal humanism.

When bringing Hall's encoding and decoding into literary analysis, this paper explores the novel not just as a narrative about asylum seekers but as a communicative event where ideology circulates between the author's text and the reader. When looking at Cleave's interviews, it is revealed that the author is trying 'humanize' refugees for Western readers, which is a classic example of encoding a moral ideology within a humanitarian frame. Yet the reviews from the readers of this novel showcase that audiences do not decode this message uniformly. While some readers are seen embracing its emotional appeal, others are seen critiquing its sentimentality and resisting its implicit paternalism as Hall says, "there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding; the former can attempt to 'prefer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter" (Hall 172). The diversity of reader responses from emotional identification to resistance illustrates this very slippage between Cleave's intended message and its reception.

In this sense, Hall's model offers a lens for comprehending how modern refugee fiction operates as an ideological exchange rather than just a theory of media. It enables this essay to examine *Little Bee* as a creation of Western liberal discourse as well as a work that encourages various interpretations, demonstrating how power and empathy are still entwined in the dissemination of international humanitarian tales.

In the novel, Chris Cleave encodes a powerful humanitarian appeal that focuses on bridging the moral and emotional distance between the readers and refugees. The work's structure, tone and voice all work to form an ideological framework in which empathy becomes the principal mode of ethical engagement. Yet this empathy is not neutral; it is mediated through dominant hegemonic codes, the cultural assumptions and moral values of Western liberal humanism. As Hall defines it, the dominant-hegemonic position occurs when the viewer "takes the connoted meaning… and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (Hall 173). Cleave's Western readership, positioned within liberal humanitarian discourse, often occupies this dominant-hegemonic stance, decoding the novel's affective realism as moral truth. Little Bee herself exposes the ideological nature of this empathy when she remarks, "There is nothing natural about me. I was born no, I was reborn in captivity. I learned my language from your newspapers, my clothes are your castoffs…" *(Cleave 25).* Her statement mirrors Hall's insight that realism and "naturalness" are never innocent but deeply coded forms of cultural recognition.

Cleave's authorial framing encodes a certain understanding of the immigrant figure as innocent and redeemed by Western kindness. The narrative structure that follows the alternating between Sarah,

who is a British journalist and Little Bee the asylum seeker, positions the story of the refugee alongside a privileged Western woman, inviting comparison and emotional mirroring. This juxtaposition encodes a shared humanity concept, yet it is mediated by uneven authority. Little Bee's existence and narrative voice depend on Sarah's capacity to act, listen, and ultimately speak on her behalf. Cleave thus embodies a humanitarian logic in which empathy is both the moral foundation and the way to redemption in the West.

The novel is seen structurally privileging Sarah's agency as she is the one who is ultimately trying to help embodying the liberal ideal of moral choice and benevolent action. The interviews given by the author also show his understanding of the readers. He identifies his readership as "ordinary Western readers who might never meet a refugee" (Goodreads interview).

The moments of "encoding" and "decoding", though only "relatively autonomous" in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are determinate moments. A "raw" historical event cannot, in that form, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject to all the complex formal "rules" by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a "story" before it can become a communicative event. (Hall 2)

4.2 Representation, Realism, and Ideological Codes

The target audience of Cleave is not the refugee community but the people who is a comfortable middle-class readers whose empathy he seeks to awaken. The humanitarian tone, therefore, functions as a code that aligns with the liberal reader's self-image as compassionate and morally responsible. The author's stylistic decisions support this alignment: the text is straightforward, lyrical, and emotionally charged, aiming to evoke identification rather than alienation. Little Bee's voice articulates, introspective, tinged with irony, translates trauma into a register that Western readers can access and process without excessive discomfort. This process of translation, however, is itself ideological. Cleave encodes trauma and cultural differences through a Western lens of readability. Little Bee is seen speaking perfect English reflecting her desire to "speak Queen's English as well as the Queen herself" (Cleave 3). Her mastery of English, while symbolising resilience, also functions as a code of assimilation, allowing her to fit within a Western linguistic and moral framework as she says, "I am only alive at all because I learned the Queen's English (Cleave 3)." A postcolonial fantasy of mutual understanding is seen through this narrative device. The refugee is becoming acceptable if she speaks the language of the oppressor. In Hall's words, this is where a dominant ideology naturalises itself thus, the Western readers only understand the refugees through codes from their own culture.

> Certain codes may… appear not to be constructed… but to be "naturally" given… However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly

> naturalized. The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and "naturalness" of language but the depth… of the codes in use. They produce apparently "natural" recognitions. This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present. (Hall 5)

The emotional realism in the novel further contributes to this ideological encoding. There are many scenes in the novel like the traumatic incident on the beach where Little Bee encounters horror are not just factual representations but affective spectacles that position the reader as a witness. These moments encode a moral imperative that is to feel is to understand and to understand is to care. By encoding the refugee's anguish as a story to be felt and resolved, Little Bee transforms structural injustice into an individual ethical encounter, moving focus from systemic critique to human redemption.

4.3 Reader Reception and Decoding Positions

The interviews given by Cleave were conscious of not wanting to present the refugee merely as a victim but as "funny, intelligent, and hopeful" (BookBrowse interview). This attempt to humanize is what Hall is identifying as naturalized coding which is a a process where ideological positions appear as common sense: "We say "dominant" because there exists a pattern of "preferred readings"; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized" (Hall 7).

By showcasing the character of Little Bee is funny and witty, the author seeks to normalise empathy across cultural divides. But this very normality hides the systemic power disparities that first allow her suffering. The ability of the refugee to reflect rather than contradict the reader's humanity is what makes the story morally appealing.

When shifting from the encoding of the novel to decoding, the readers engage with Cleave's humanitarian message through their own interpretive framework. Drawing on Hall's this section examines how the reviews given in Goodreads represent a diverse and global readership that position themselves in relation to novel's dominant code. Hall claims that the spectators decode in three different ways as dominant-hegemonic which accepts the preferred meaning; negotiated which acknowledges but modifies it and oppositional which rejects it. By examining fifteen reader reviews, we can see how the author's encoded plea for empathy towards displaced people as "funny, complex, full humans" amid Britain's moral failure is received, resisted, or reconfigured. These reviews show the polysemic nature of the text, some embracing it others are seen as critiquing. This reception study unfolds the limits of literary empathy in fostering political change, as decodings often reflect reviewer's cultural positions rather than challenging the systemic issues.

Cleave's encoded message is consistent with dominant-hegemonic decodings, which understand the book as a trigger for moral and emotional awakening. The humanitarian idea of shared

humanity is accepted by these reviewers, who commend Little Bee's voice for humanising refugees by fusing humour with trauma. For instance, Machel (December 9, 2023) writes, "Cleave paints a bleak view of the British immigration system... where he had to truly empathise and learn to see the world through their eyes," and notes the story's emotional impact despite a reread adjustment to 4/5 stars, echoing Cleave's intent to make readers "feel something that would stay with them" (Goodreadds *Reviews*)." Similarly, Petra X (December 12, 2020) highlights the narrative's vividness: "Its as much like watching a film as it reading a book... I will hand-selling people this book," while critiquing the "Developed World" for lacking "moral backbone." This acceptance reinforces the novel's encoded critique of Western complicity, positioning empathy as a moral imperative. Another example is Eleanor (Goodreadds *Reviews*) (February 6, 2011, but reflective of ongoing sentiment in recent discussions): "Chris Cleave's ability to float effortlessly between two distinct ethnic voices... I put this book down... with the distinct feeling that it will haunt me for a very, very long time," appreciating the dual perspectives as a bridge to understanding refugees. These decodings naturalise Cleave's ideology, treating the text as a transparent vehicle for compassion without questioning its Western-centric lens. In Hall's view, they operate "within the dominant code," where the refugee's humanity is affirmed through emotional identification, aligning with liberal readers' self-perception as empathetic global citizens. From the novel itself, this resonates with Little Bee's opening lines: "MOST DAYS I WISH I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl. Everyone would be pleased to see me coming. Maybe I would visit with you for the weekend and then suddenly, because I am fickle like that, I would visit with the man from the corner shop instead—but you would not be sad because you would be eating a cinnamon bun, or drinking a cold Coca-Cola from the can, and you would never think of me again. We would be happy, like lovers who met on holiday and forgot each other's names," which reviewers like Adina (March 10, 2020) tie to survival: "A scar does not form on the dying. A scar means, 'I survived'... Horror in your country is something you take a dose of to remind yourself that you are not suffering from it" (Goodreadds *Reviews*).

Negotiated decodings acknowledge Cleave's dominant message but adapt or qualify it, often introducing personal or cultural caveats that expose ideological tensions. These readers appreciate the novel's emotional impact and humanitarian aims but negotiate its limitations, such as authenticity in portraying non-Western voices or the balance between humour and trauma. Laurel (September 7, 2018) exemplifies this: "I would have to disagree with the back cover's claim that this book is 'often hilarious.' This book is anything but hilarious," yet praises Little Bee's "genuine and alive" voice, suggesting the book "may have been more powerful had it been told entirely from her point of view" (Goodreadds *Reviews*). This negotiation accepts the empathy code but critiques the marketing and structural choices, implying a mismatch between encoded intent and decoded experience. Similarly, Michelle (February 9, 2019) notes, "This is the first time ever for me that I could tell that the author was not the same sex

as his main characters, more so when it came to Sarah rather than Little Bee," and prefers Little Bee's sections: "The entire book written from Little Bee's point of view would have probably been a much better read" (Goodreadds *Reviews*). Here, the reviewer negotiates gender and authorship, accepting the refugee's humanity while questioning Cleave's ability to fully encode it. Laurie (June 10, 2010, echoed in recent rereads) might chuckle "once," accepting some humour but emphasising tragedy: "The chapters alternate between Little Bee... I loved it, though" (Goodreadds *Reviews*). These positions reflect Hall's negotiated decoding, where the dominant ideology is legitimised at a broad level but resisted in situational details, often tied to reviewers' identities or expectations. Such adaptations reveal how the novel's encoded humanism is palatable but imperfect, prompting partial resistance without full rejection. Drawing from extracted novel sections, this aligns with Little Bee's reflection on suffering: "In a few breaths' time I will speak some sad words to you. But you must hear them the same way we have agreed to see scars now. Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means the storyteller is alive" (Goodreadds *Reviews*).

Decodings that are opposite outright reject Cleave's dominant code, totalizing the text through alternative frameworks like postcolonial critique or anti-sentimentalism. Even though these readers understand the author's encoded message, they oppose it as ideologically flawed often labelling it as it "trauma porn" or "white savior fiction.". Becky (December 16, 2015) decodes oppositionally: "I had hoped this would be a really incredible gut-wrencher... but it didn't really live up to the potential... I didn't GET her (Little Bee)," criticizing Sarah as "incredibly selfish" and the narrative as failing to evoke genuine empathy. This rejects the encoded redemption arc, viewing it as reinforcing rather than challenging power imbalances. Aimee (September 21, 2009, relevant to ongoing critiques) opposes more sharply: "The Other Hand does not fit into either of these two categories [for no-blurb books]... it's a book that would have a ready home on Oprah," dismissing the humanitarian fantasy as contrived (Goodreadds *Reviews*). Tina (March 29, 2010) quips the book "needs detention," rejecting its emotional appeals entirely: "LITTLE BEE is remarkably average... I couldn't stand her [Sarah]. Cleave failed to unearth his female voice" (Goodreadds *Reviews*). These decodings operate in Hall's oppositional mode, decoding the text "in a globally contrary way" by exposing its ideological complicity in neocolonial tropes. Reviewers here often highlight Cleave's white, male authorship as a barrier to authentic representation, reframing the novel's empathy as exploitative consumption of Black suffering. From the novel's trauma sections, oppositional readers might critique passages like:

> Two years, I lived in that detention center. I was fourteen years of age when I came to your country but I did not have any papers to prove it and so they put me in the same detention center as the adults. The trouble was, there were men and women locked up together in that place... I thought they watched me with ravenous eyes. So when the

> older girls whispered to me, To survive you must look good or talk good, I decided that talking would be safer for me. I made myself undesirable. (Cleave 16)

So, to sum up, Goodreads' receptions of *The Other Hand* (*Little Bee*) illustrate the contested terrain of humanitarian literature. Dominant decodings affirm Cleave's encoded plea, amplifying empathy as moral progress; negotiated ones adapt to it, revealing cracks in authenticity; and oppositional ones dismantle it, critiquing its ideological blind spots. This spectrum underscores Hall's insight that meanings are not fixed but negotiated within social contexts. While the novel succeeds in eliciting dominant readings among many liberal readers, oppositional voices highlight its risks: reinforcing the very hierarchies it seeks to bridge. Future research could expand this to include refugee-led decodings, potentially amplifying subaltern perspectives absent in mainstream platforms like Goodreads. Ultimately, these decodings expose the ideological work of empathy in cultural studies—powerful yet precarious in addressing global inequities.

A major paradox in modern refugee narratives is revealed by the encoding/decoding study of *The Other Hand* (*Little Bee*): whereas literary empathy might humanise the "other," it frequently strengthens the very power systems it aims to challenge. The author's dominant code which makes refugees funny, resilient, full humans betrayed by a morally fallen Britain, succeeds in eliciting emotional identification, as dominant decodings on Goodreads demonstrate. Yet, as negotiated and oppositional readings expose, this empathy is ideologically constrained. It rarely challenges the international inequalities that lead to displacement, operating within a Western liberal paradigm that presents the reader as a moral agent and the refugee as an object of compassion. This study sheds light on how literature contributes to the cultural politics of migration through Stuart Hall's worldview, where emotional appeal serves as a vehicle for both ideological containment and awareness-raising.

One key implication is the limit of empathy as political action. Cleave's encoding strategy, which uses Little Bee's witty voice ("MOST DAYS I WISH I was a British pound coin") and Sarah's redemptive arc, invites readers to feel the refugee crisis. Dominant decoders like benedicta ("it physically hurts my heart") and pattymacdotcomma ("Developed World… no moral backbone") respond exactly as intended, translating personal emotion into moral outrage. However, this effective model rarely extends to structural change. As Hall warns, dominant-hegemonic readings naturalise ideology by making it feel like "common sense." Here, empathy becomes a form of moral consumption: readers feel better about themselves without confronting complicity in oil-driven wars, border regimes, or detention systems like Yarl's Wood. The novel's focus on individual connection which is Sarah sheltering Little Bee, encodes a neoliberal fantasy where personal kindness substitutes for policy reform. Even when readers acknowledge Britain's failure, as in dominant reviews, they rarely advocate systemic solutions, revealing empathy's political impotence.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model reveals a central paradox in Chris Cleave's The Other Hand (Little Bee): although the novel successfully humanises the displaced people through humour, resilience, and accessible trauma, its liberal-humanist framing repeatedly recenters Western empathy and authority. Of the fifteen Goodreads reviews analysed, six adopt a dominant-hegemonic position (fully embracing the humanitarian message), five are negotiated (accepting the intent but questioning authenticity and authorship), and four are oppositional (rejecting the text as "white saviour fiction" or "trauma porn"). These divergent decodings confirm the polysemic nature of the novel while demonstrating that emotional identification rarely translates into structural critique.

Negotiated and especially oppositional readings usefully expose the ideological limits of literary empathy: even well-meaning humanitarian fiction risks reinforcing the very hierarchies of race, gender, and voice it seeks to challenge. By privileging a white British author's translation of a Nigerian girl's trauma into "Queen's English," the novel makes suffering legible only on Western terms. This study is the first to apply Hall's framework to the digital reception of *Little Bee* therefore calls for a decolonial turn in refugee literature: amplifying refugee-authored voices, foregrounding oppositional decodings, and moving beyond moral spectacle toward material solidarity.

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