

# The Culture of Excess in the Postmodern World

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Received: 30 Aug 2021; Received in revised form: 23 Sep 2021; Accepted: 27 Sep 2021; Available online: 03 Oct 2021

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**Abstract**— *An age of universal commodification has created a culture based on excess. The world is going through a heightened phase of multinational capitalism. Capitalism produces desires in the masses according to the needs of production. The new modes of communication have intensified the process of commodification. The individual tends to have less value than the commodity. The body itself has to bear the signs of the consumer culture. The masses get weighed down by the system of images that constitute the simulacrum. All areas of intellectual activity become pervaded by historical, ideological and philosophical indeterminacy. Dehumanisation and fragmentation have become rampant in all realms of human activity. This condition of culture gets reflected in the literary text which becomes a prime source of excess.*

**Keywords**— *Excess, Commodification, Fragmentation, Dehumanization, Indeterminacy.*

## INTRODUCTION

This is an age of universal commodification where the logic of commodity production dictates the logic of culture. The varied realms of cultural activity now show the different manifestations of capital. As Susan Sontag has pointed out in *Against Interpretation*, “Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience” (13). The masses are now under the system of images that constitute the simulacrum. They show a tendency to withdraw from humanistic ideals as well as historical events.

## THE PROCESS OF COMMODIFICATION

The world is now experiencing a heightened phase of multinational and multiconglomerate capitalism. The commodity culture offers material pleasures to the masses but at the same time alienates them. Everything has undergone the process of commodification, and is now judged on the basis of its value in terms of money. Commodities are considered more important than human beings. In other words, human beings denigrate themselves by giving excessive value to commodities. Capitalist society also promotes narcissism for the sake of consumption. In *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, Donald Kuspit refers to this aspect as “the

psychopathology of capitalism, with its narcissistic hyper-realisation of life and simulation of ecstatic satisfaction” (290). The masses tend to define themselves with the identity provided by the capitalist society. The commodity form levels all hierarchies of value and deprives society of the very symbolic resources necessary for its own ideological authority.

The social structure in the postmodern world is not at all monolithic. It contains political, ethical, economic, and professional discourses which exist in a state of fluctuation and conflict. Nicholas J. Fox points out in *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health*: “All vie for control, asserting the advantages of one approach or another. When two coincide... there is reorganization, until another challenge comes from an expert or wielder of power comes along” (59-60). The operation of desire can be seen in such signifying practices. Desire is a fundamental principle ensuring the survival of capitalist society. Desire that is erotic, aggressive, and impulsive is released when meaning is destabilized. This is a “surplus or excess of desire, signifying the abundance of desire – ultimately signifying the fact that desire can never be completely assimilated into normal everyday life” (Kuspit 147-148). The object of desire is an other, which is unreal and hence unattainable. This excess of desire thus becomes symptomatic of the all pervasive commodification that flourishes under

capitalism. This desire is produced through the play of signs. As Linda Hutcheon has pointed out in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, this is “desire as satisfaction endlessly deferred, that is, as an anticipatory activity in the future tense; desire as fueled by the inaccessibility of the object and dissatisfaction with the real” (144). Desire cannot be resisted or overcome, since it has some sort of omnipotence. Catherine Belsey has pointed out in *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*: “Desire is in excess of the organism, conversely it is what remains unspoken in the utterance” (5). Desire always seeks that which is forbidden or unattainable in the cultural order. The signifier always creates and destroys the self, and hence the signifying subject can be found only in the other. At the same time it shows its presence everywhere.” In the twentieth-century, desire is more volatile than ever before—in operas and musicals, poems and pop videos” (Belsey 76). In the commodified society, desire is directed not at the human body, but at the commodity.

The process of commodification has been accelerated by the new modes of communication. Culture is now dominated by spectacles projected by the media. The advertisements shown on the media promote new modes of cultural consumption. They function as signs that help in the generation of false needs and desires. The perfect surfaces seen in advertisements are illusory, because beneath them lie gaps and fissures. It is an urban environment that the domination of advertisements is seen to the greatest extent. They transform the city into a collage of signs. Advertisements are also agents of dehumanization in that they project the female body in an exaggerated manner reducing woman to an object of sexual exchange. Apart from advertisements, the media provides continuous entertainment for the masses. Their already commodified mind is kept in a state of perpetual stimulation. Hypereality becomes the only credible thing for this consciousness. Capitalism makes use of technology to produce needs and desires according to the demands of production. Renate Holub has analysed these aspects in *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism*: “In that this culture industry engages in the ideal reproduction of consumers, it functions as a political and social institution designed to manipulate and control unconscious and conscious desires of the masses of the people” (174). The media makes people live in an eternal present and thus erases their awareness of history. The sophisticated modes of media reportage have also caused the nullification of history. When an event is reported soon as it occurs history disappears as such.

A world of material abundance would inhibit true freedom. Wasteful expenditure characterizes a bourgeois society where commodities are more important than

people. The individual loses his own value when he excessively depends on commodities. Thus the value of commodity in terms of money becomes the only recognizable value. In bourgeois society, a person's status depends on the condition of his being the possessor of a particular commodity.

#### THE GENERAL ECONOMY

It is the same source of wastage that occurs in the socio-cultural realm. When superfluous resources are not used for raising production or the standard of living, it gets squandered in wars, pollution and so on. Unnecessary expenditure and wasteful orgies characterize such a society. In *Raiding the Ice Box. Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*, Peter Wollen has analysed Bataille's concept of excess: “Bataille posited that every ‘restricted economy’ based on production, utility and exchange is shadowed by a ‘general economy’, in which an excess or surplus is freely spent or wasted, with no presumption of return” (27). Man's innate impulse to waste takes the form of conspicuous consumption in capitalist society. A negative and destructive natural impulse takes the form of a postmodern orgy. It will ultimately lead to the annihilation of the self. However this scenario of waste gives pleasure and also provides escape from restrictions. Dysfunctional and heterogeneous elements will dominate this culture. For example it will encourage the extravagant decoration and display of the human body. A perversion of sexuality as something voyeuristic, narcissistic, and fetishistic is created by the mass produced media images. A human body that is colonized by signs is visible here. Pornography becomes a product of the realm of culture under these circumstances. A voyeur's world has no history or depth. It is concerned only with the fleeting present and hence is superficial. Geraldine Finn has pointed out in *Why Althusser Killed His Wife: Essays on Discourse and Violence* that he is in a complex political set-up adept in “the subjugation of bodies and control of population under the mystifying sign of Sex” (60). He is in a political set-up where the bodies of the masses are subjugated by a sexuality which is projected through a network of signs that generate mystification and seduction. In capitalist society, the female body is colonized by the signs of fashion and sexuality. Her body thus becomes a space for the free play of signs of cultural excess. Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury discuss the evolution of the postmodern world in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*: “This was an age of the media, the record, the new message system, the multiplication of styles, the accelerating confusion of levels of reality” (371).

Such a historical situation has itself given birth to a condition of excess. Hence historical, ideological and philosophical indeterminacy prevails in all areas of intellectual activity. The glorification of the present is itself an outcome of the disappearance of a sense of history. The spectres of violence and terror have fragmented culture. The postmodern world is a post-holocaust, post-ideological, and post-political one. History is now perceived as a chaos of events. Democracy and capitalism are on the verge of becoming universally accepted political systems. However a sense of apocalypse and global crisis, has only increased. Whatever historical experience there is in this world is one that is hybrid and mixed. It is an experience that crosses the boundaries of nations and ideologies. Though liberation and democracy are spreading across the world, the repressive state apparatus still exists in some countries. This apparatus creates a society of surveillance where every act of individual is surveyed by the state. There the power of the state operates through the signs of ideology. The state needs only the fragmentary picture of the individual got through its network. Thus it contributes to the process of dehumanization and fragmentation in society.

#### THE NOTION OF MULTIPLICITY

There is constant research and intertextualising in all fields including literature. The new technologies are changing not merely the methods of production but also the mechanics of writing. Many styles and many codes exist together, and this aspect causes the slippage of meaning. This condition is seen in many literary texts. Postmodern critical viewpoints acknowledge that there are many truths and many realities. Literary texts hence exhibit the loss of signification. They promote multiple readings and interpretations leading to an excess of critical theorising: "The same indeterminacy that prevails in accounts of physical world is equally present in the philosophy of serious literary criticism as it struggles without any certainties to construct an adequate usable account of itself" (Ruland and Bradbury 418). Language itself due to the rise of structuralism, has become a system of signs that can be used arbitrarily. As far as literary texts are concerned, the reader plays an important role in determining their meaning. The postmodern text is replete with literary references, parodies, pastiches, allusions, quotations, and a host of other devices. A variety of languages, styles, registers, genres and intertextual citations are crowded together in them. They provoke the reader to resort to deconstructive strategies. The strategies of deconstruction give great importance to the response of the reader. Deconstruction focuses on the instability of meaning which characterizes these texts. It is a strategy

that evades any finality. It deals with oppositions like male/female, good/bad, speech/writing, and so on. It attempts to reverse the cultural hierarchies. Peter Barry has analysed this aspect in the introduction to *Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory: A Selection of Critical Essays*:

The play of *différance* through every level of the text means that we constantly encounter *aporias* (*cul-de-sacs*) where our search for meaning is blocked, leaving us with a tissue of gaps, slippages, discontinuities, and lacunae before which a critic is as helpless as any other reader. Deconstruction is the kind of reading that results: its aim is to trace and explore the self-contradictions and discontinuities which result from the play of *différance* and ultimately defeat the possibility of coherent communication. (14-15).

It is even said that the meaning of the literary text is created by the reader. Hence there is no ultimate or final interpretation for the work of literature. The text becomes a site for the play of meaning. Hence it shows the defeat of language itself as a tool for the communication of meaning. At the same time, postmodern fiction is characterized by the death of the author. This concept denies the possibility of a text having a unified source or origin. The text just facilitates the interaction or conflict between different writings. The text also reflects the process of fragmentation that is seen in the world outside. The systems and absolutes that have been broken down in the world find representation in it.

#### CONCLUSION

The postmodern culture shows a condition in which everything has exceeded the powers of comprehension of the senses. The writing that emanates from this culture exhausts all the possibilities through excess. The texts so produced lack referential qualities, because signs outrun signification in them. The texts face the prospect of a chaotic excess of meanings. Thus literature becomes one of noise and redundancy. It is also one of silence that evades interpretation. The reader finds himself immersed in an excess of matter in a condition of indeterminacy.

A study of the commodification of culture cannot avoid an inquiry into the very nature of culture itself. Culture in one sense is surplus and excessive, but there is in human beings the tendency to transgress and transcend this condition. In human nature there is the urge for

exploitation of others for one's own prosperity. He goes on accumulating wealth and revels in the luxuries generated along with it. Thus it can be seen that excess lies at the core of the entity called man. This excess derives from the unending processes in nature which involve unlimited resources.

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