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Fragmented Worlds – a Postmodernist perspective of Contemporary Literature and Society

Abstract

Postmodern writing styles merging with socio-cultural qualities of cosmopolitanism and metamodernism have produced literature that is intrinsically distorted and diverse. With characters regularly experiencing psychological insecurities, disillusionment and consumerist victimisation; we often witness stories of fragmentation, identical consumerism and identity crisis all over contemporary literature. The commonality of these stories, especially when focused on modern urban metropolitan locations is what this paper focuses on.

With issues relating disillusionment, self-inflicted isolation, frustration, crisis and a consequent insensitive society especially found in city-spheres; the paper shall attempt to understand the modern problems of lopsided growth in individuals in a world that is becoming more and more self-involved every day. By means of selected texts in literature, the paper shall recognise consumerism based issues of identities thereby collecting and possessing all strands of contemporary postmodernism together.

Keywords: consumerism, fragmentation, disillusionment, city spheres, postmodernism

I

Modernisation entails the amelioration of social spheres at various levels but one has to pay the price for this modernity in terms of not having enough time to satisfy emotional, social and spiritual selves. With the result one becomes a money earning machine for the

comforts of consumerist life. This malaise spreads in the entire society propelling a change in the normally held value systems hence resulting in bigger issues like disjointed lifestyle, frustration and disillusionment. The cumulative impact of all this on human life is their becoming a bundle of contradictions. Besides mental and emotional selves, human beings are psychological selves too and this balance gets disturbed in the changed, chaotic value systems of the rapidly changing society. With prime focus laid on the diversities of city spheres, this paper attempts to understand the socio-psychological conflicts faced by urban based educated youth who seem to be the most vulnerable victims of postmodern insecurities.

Confucianism once defined what it meant to be a citizen of the region (thrifty filial and industrious), now it is a transnational grid of pop stars, movies, television series, cartoons, and commodities that has brought a new identity (free spending, individualistic, and highly leisured) into being.

(Hillenbrand 716)

Rightly stated by Hillenbrand, the current postmodernist popular culture in urban atmospheres consists of repetitive presentation of flashy products that display ideal images, easily perceived achievable by its viewers. Having a history of exploiting consumers' deepest insecurities, the market tends to grow in strength and dominion over culture over time. The modern urban youth often attempts to believe that working harder every day shall make them achieve all those tempting, marketing gimmicks that ploy against the minds of potential consumers as various multinationals see them. These insecurities later enlarge and affect personality shapes of enticed individuals always running for those products that provide a temporary satisfaction to their inner instabilities. As a consequence of the above, such a society is born which is filled with insecure, hardworking, disillusioned employees constantly juggling between the distances of their fantasies and reality. Identity hence, as the above quote indicates, is a hybrid of self analysis as well as a factory product of all those well marketed trans-nationalised images that constantly encompass it through various media and markets. If we refer to Kant's cosmopolitan concept about the presence of a "universal community"; we may notice the commonality of various personality prototypes all over the world. With globalisation universalising the market all over the world, it has also led to the birth of young educated urban nationals that despite living in different parts of the world are very much similar to each other in attitudes, behaviours and tastes.

Globalised commercialisation and thought have hence together influenced us to become the citizens of a unified community that enforces its singular discourse of image representation, cultural consciousness and ideological superstructure based on which we all as individuals perform our actions. Being products of a singled out community hence, the action or behaviour of one person living in a globalised city of one part of the world can be easily paralleled with the actions and behaviours of another individual in another globalised city of the world with the two having no sense of existence of each other. The evidence of the existence of such individuals can be easily traced in the lines and phrases of peoples found in the stories of multiple postmodern authors writing their novels today. Being subjected to similar pressures of the market, social atmospheres, professionalism et.al., these individuals respond much in the same way thereby suffering from similar social anxieties, eating and sleeping disorders, substance abuse, isolation, alienation and disillusionment among other issues in the selected texts as well as in reality. The problems rising on a social and personal level in these societies thereby are much similar to each other and must be given attention within time.

Alongside, with international market grasping the psychological self of the entire populace, we face similar societal pressures and problems all over. With the boom of smartphones, internet and social network; the level of self-involvement, self-obsession, isolation and self inflicted alienation have all been observed to have increased in society. The modern world today faces the challenges of exchange of quality information between individuals on a personal level. Amidst the bling of fancy products and services, individuals today often fail to identify their realities and problems of the self and society. As a result we are stuffed with a society filled with competitive rats running aimlessly in a race they don't really know about. Their distanced self from their realities, their social pressures of performance in groups as well as work makes them aimless, confused, frustrated individuals who do not really know why they have been working so hard on themselves. With whole bunches of populace, especially in metropolitan regions feeling like that, we are faced with a whole community of insensitive, self-obsessed, self-involved, isolated, alienated and disillusioned men and women who together fill these commercialized metropolitan regions of the world.

The City and changing value systems: the most common characteristic of a city is perhaps its self-involvement. The modern city dweller is surrounded by the never ending images of city lights and traffic, a crowd full of strangers and skyscrapers, taxis and trains

along with clubs and discos to spend money on. One thing to notice however is that all these images are never complete. In the words of Hana Wirth-Nesher, a city and modern life,

“is a landscape of partial visibilities and manifold possibilities that excludes in the very act of inviting. But the effect of inaccessibility differs with each city dweller, according to the nature of his or her "outsiderness,"

(Nesher 9)

The sense of belongingness therefore comes off as an important facet in drawing a behavioural pattern of the modern urban dweller. His psychological conflict of being an outsider in a strange urban location is often ignored by the city he lives in. Consequently, he never feels a part of the place he's been living in for years thereby resulting in alienation and self imposed isolation among such individuals who do not seem to relate with their environments. Isolation later often becomes the cause of over-thinking of insecurities, self loathing, failed relationships, frustration and consequent disillusionment about various aspects of the self and the world. As we proceed with the paper, the research shall help the reader analyse how similar patterns of alienated behaviour is witnessed in the selected texts.

II

This paper shall study the existence of commonalities as well as the commonality of existentialism in such metropolitan identities in literary fiction, a familiar aspect found in most globalised societies today. Modern metropolitan culture, especially in developing countries like India, very frequently deports itself from the rest of the nation. It is highly cosmopolitan, high paced and immensely different from the rural environments of the rest of the country. Most metropolitan regions due to hybridity of cultures and environments therefore need to be collectively studied in order to draw relevant solutions to problems of identity. The texts selected herewith are, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, *After Dark* by Haruki Murakami, *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts and *Open City* by Teju Cole. All the selected novels have plots laid in highly industrious, metropolitan regions of the world. They mainly contain the stories of individualistic identities in relation to their cosmopolitan environments. Most identities in these texts suffer from a complex crisis that involves disillusionment, isolation and inner conflict rising out of frustrations related with metropolitan multiculturalism and incoherent urban environments.

The similarities between majorities of cosmopolitan youth of various countries, as mentioned before, render them in a position of being comfortable in their isolation. The characters in the selected texts share the same sense of love for solitude and also, in conflict, experience loneliness and hence frustration occurring due to lack of communication. Belonging to environments consisting of stressful professional positions, broken families and miscommunication with loved ones, these identities face similar sense of discomfort with themselves and the others. A common problem thus, rises out of the factors occurring within these sets of identities which may be paralleled with each other in order to have an in depth study of their problems. To know more about these identities, the concept of the 'City' as a unique location filled with dynamic value systems must be first analysed.

As we observe the socio-cultural background of Postmodern societies in city spheres, we may take a literary voyage to observe the realistic portrayal of frustration, disjointed lifestyle and disillusionment in the face of changing value systems in select Postmodernist works, viz., *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, *After Dark* by Haruki Murakami, *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts and *Open City* by Teju Cole. The inhabited cities of all the protagonists represent the exclusion and inaccessibilities they come with depending on their race, gender and class. When the city appears to be biased, impudent and often presumptuous with implications of microaggression for protagonists like Julius and Balram; it feels highly polite, protective and even timid at occasions for protagonists like Lin and Mari. All this is a result of the racial and gender superiority of the characters. The "outsiderness" of each character is what defines their perception of the city and they tend to like or dislike it on the basis of their background and social acceptance. Delhi is as unpleasant to Balram, a low class and caste outsider, as New York is unpleasant to Julius, a black Nigerian. On the contrary, Mari being a young Japanese girl finds the streets of her city more welcoming and protective than the walls of her home. Lin, despite being an outsider in Bombay is loved by every character mostly because of his racial superiority to Indians and therefore finds Bombay to be the best city in the world.

The strike of capitalism has eventually turned almost every globalised nation into a follower of the American Dream hence leading to its unavoidable detriments besides advantages.

"The city provoked ambivalent attitudes and feelings in many who were thrilled by the opportunities it afforded for their self-realization"

but who, sometimes hypocritically, also feared its vices and abhorred the crudity of its life.”

(Cholupsky and Grmelovo 2)

Julius in *Open City* highly detests being in New York. Yet, he cannot stop himself from wandering around New York's locations and resisting the idea of going back to Nigeria. Murakami in *After Dark* notes how a gigantic metropolis contains, “human being[s] with a different face and mind, and at the same time each is a nameless part of the collective identity”. It is the same ‘collective identity’ of Bombay in *Shantaram* that defines the Indian community and makes it so lovable to Lin.

The postmodern urban society hence is faced with a complex capitalist, multicultural and a harshly individualistic culture filled with ambitious yuppies working hard for stability. The stability which these youths look for however, lies within and is a consequence of the feelings of otherness in a complicated society along with the rapidly increasing conflicts within their psyches. In other words, the frequently thrilled yuppie at the sight of new opportunities is also under immense pressure to perform well in career and life. At the same time, multiculturalism and microaggression distances this youth from his society hence leading to feelings of uprootedness, otherness and desperation. A similar attitude for urban works of literature is reflected in Petr Cholupsky and Anna Grmelova's *Urban Spaces in Literature*.

“What urban literary works have in common is that they reflect the discursive heteroglossia that resonates in the texture of each city, at the core of which lies an ultimate otherness on the personal, social, cultural and political levels that permeates and determines the modern city dweller's everyday experience.”

(Cholupsky and Grmelovo 2)

Consequently, this prompts such people to either avoid or compromise with their societies. As we see in the selected texts, the protagonists Julius, Balram and Mari, being socially ‘othered’ by people, dislike their societies and hence choose to remain silent, despondent and selective in their choice of friends. They would rather prefer being alone, comfortable in their solitude, than mingle with people who do not understand them. In contrast, Lin, who is an extrovert and a racially ‘superior’ man, chooses to compromise with

his open environments and acquaints himself with his society by living with them in the slums. All protagonists however are at constant conflict with their feelings and cannot comprehend their own desires. The alienation and crisis occurring out of lack of mutual understanding becomes obvious as we see them constantly make and break relationships with the different characters they meet. Besides being socially 'othered', the reason behind the creation of such a distance between our characters and the society is their fear of being judged or being unwanted. A thing in postmodern society might be right for them and wrong for the others. This is why all foreigners in *Shantaram* carry masks ahead of their hidden personal identities.

Furthermore, people like Julius, Balram and Mari are afraid of being misunderstood or not being understood at all. They distance themselves from all for their temporary mental peace and solace. Julius and Mari hardly befriend any one including warm people from their own communities. This is perhaps because this would provoke them to face the reality of their discomfort with their place in the society. In order to not disturb their apparently peaceful comfort zone of staying in their metropolis, these characters fall prey to the instant gratification of their minds' desire to escape their internal conflict. Balram on the other hand remains self involved and becomes a silent observer of the unfairness of his hypocrite, biased society. This leads him to suppress his anger to the limit where he loses it and kills his master.

Disillusionment among postmodern literary characters is a common aspect often discussed by scholars. The presence of disillusionment in each character of the selected texts is highly prevalent. The idea that a new place is the ideal escape to all problems is what all characters in the novels do. They hover around in cities and even countries meeting new people and yet remain the same frustrated, disillusioned identities that they are. Despite of living and making associations with people around various places and countries, these men and women are still clueless about their problems. They are highly disappointed and under immense psychological conflict and frustration when they realise that no place in the world can provide them with the freedom they desire. Lin escapes prison and his country leaving behind his family and friends only to realise later that he "will never be really free". Likewise, Balram escapes Delhi and becomes a fugitive like Lin but being of a different mind and character he enjoys his escape and believes that being on the run "has its share of fun". The difference of circumstance between these characters is also the background of their disillusionment. One was a criminal and an addict; a free man once; while the other was caged in the 'Rooster Coop' which provoked him to commit crime for the same freedom. It is the

disillusionment of Lin which turns him from a family man into a criminal while Balram's disillusionment lies in his expectations from a master who seems to be kind only in appearance. Both however face reality with shattered hopes in the end and forge ahead in the world of crime and deceit.

Frustration in all the characters is highly visible on observation. None of the characters in the novels selected is content with their lives. All of them live a life of solace and loneliness while being absorbed in consumerism. Their inability to find a companion, their lack of expressiveness, their feelings of otherness and desolation along with their identity crises all contribute in the highly frustrated life which they project into numerous consumer products and intoxications for distraction. This consumerist attitude further distances them from their ugly realities thereby making it even harder to come into terms with their inner conflicts. Julius works overtime for days in order to have an escape in the form of a long vacation in Brussels. He decides Brussels to be his destination in order to find and catch up with his grandmother but fails to find her after very few casual attempts. Lost and disillusioned, he comes back to New York which regularly annoys him with racial bias and even violence. Likewise, Mari roams around in the darkness of Tokyo in order to escape the ugly reality of the lack of communication between her and her sister. Both Mari and Julius are introverts who repetitively and almost contemptuously reject social approaches by people for they are already cynical about their expectant microaggression. The lifestyles of all the characters being highly consumerist makes them engage in several consumerist distractions along with turning them into alcoholics, heroin addicts and smokers. Each book contains incomplete stories. Almost every important character in each of these selected books has a story unrevealed to the reader. These half-told and half-untold stories are what make up the literal and figurative unfinished character of the protagonists and are also symbolic of the recurrent half-images or "partial visibilities" of a city as mentioned by Neshar.

The value systems in a highly urbanised metropolis which has a multitude of cultures and peoples therefore remain undetermined. Morality as a fluid postmodernist concept puts most actions done by these characters under the benefit of doubt. We never know if the crimes done by Lin in *Shantaram* are morally wrong or the "wrong things done for the right reasons" as he says. Similarly, Takahashi in *After Dark* displays the same confusion of being unable to separate right from wrong – "It's hard to tell good from bad", he says.

Furthermore, the modern urban citizen; like Julius, Mari, Balram and Lin; is so distressed about his present and anxious about his future that the concept of a society is itself blurring inside his mental framework. All that these characters end up in is self-involvement, isolation and intense consumerism. Julius of *Open City* is a workaholic, music addict and a regular alcohol drinker; Mari ends up smoking with people nearly the entire night; Lin is an alcoholic and a heroin addict and Balram involves himself in stealing, alcoholism and even prostitution. The existential crisis of each of these characters is easily visible and so is their attempt to escape their respective realities.

One common behaviour that each of these characters involve in, is therefore repetitive consumerist activity which is used as a defence mechanism in order to feel safe and comfortable with their isolation, alienation and disillusionment.

In Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*; the scholar talks about the strong control of consumerism on postmodern societies. Baudrillard proves how contemporary society has been living under the spell of objects and their conspicuous consumption which in turn has made people temporarily satisfied about their lives.

'We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life, where all activities are sequenced ...where the 'environment' is total – full air-conditioned, organised, culturalized.'

(Baudrillard 29)

The dependence of the postmodern subjects on 'canned environments' hence makes the individual no longer concerned with object utility but rather with the unified signification that a group of objects give in totality. Such consumerist behaviour is common not only in the actions of the protagonists but also in minor characters. Didier, Ula, Modena, Karla, Takahashi, Kaoru, Ashok, Pinky, and many more are obsessed with consumption. They consume objects, products and even human bodies as commodities for their temporary relief from the self. Balram likes to visit malls and hotels and even goes to the extent of camouflaging his identity by dressing like his master to take a secret visit to the Sahara Mall in Gurgaon. The Leopold Cafe of *Shantaram* is the centre of consumerist intoxication and masked identities coming together to make a signified whole of psychologically distorted victims of substance abuse. Similarly, Denny's of *After Dark* is the ideal cosmopolitan consumption centre of Americanised foods along with being a place for smokers and alcohol

abusers. The problem of consumption therefore pushes these characters into an unconscious, symbolic darkness that makes them unaware of moments when their minds are completely captured by the clutches of consumerism. It is the glitz and the glamour of the consumerist market that eventually involves them into consumption to such an extent that they forget how they feel. The absence of feelings and presence of unrecognised emotions therefore becomes the cause for their disillusionment and alienation. Consequently they become frustrated, socially passive, angry and sometimes even psychopathic. These issues therefore give rise to the problem of dehumanisation in modern societies today.

Dehumanisation is highly visible in the selected texts. We notice the use of men and women as not people but commodities in the form women prostitutes in these books. Karla, Lin, Mari and Balram, all experience emotional impotency and end up becoming insensitive and even murderous in their actions. The heart wrenching sight of Ulla, a prostitute deserting her lover Modena tied to bed and cut to pieces; the regular murders in *Shantaram*; Ashok and Balram's involvement in multiple relationships and prostitutes; the exploitation of the working class in both *The White Tiger* and *Shantaram*; Mari and Karla's lack of emotional response to people; Balram's murder of his master; the invariable presence of racism, gender marginalisation and upper class hegemony in all the books are all vivid examples that justify the presence of dehumanisation in the respective societies of all these novels.

In the quick process of rising capitalism and cosmopolitanism, self love seems the only asset that ensures these characters to survive. Self love or self-assurance comes within them only when they choose to live alone in their bordered world of fantasies not being visited by any intruder. While they feign loving themselves, these people end up distracting themselves in excess consumerism which dehumanises their 'self' as well as their societies. Fighting amidst severe capitalist competition, these characters remain suspicious of generosity from others and contribute in the development of a society that cares only about itself.

The narrative style of each of the selected texts is also typically postmodern with cosmopolitan leanings. The presence of fragmentation in the texts denotes the fragmented worlds of each of its characters hence indicating their disillusionments and distractions at the same time. The singular presence of a narrator in *Shantaram* and *The White Tiger* makes us view only those parts of the story which are solely experienced by Lin or Balram hence making us construct the mental states, characters, situations and stories of other characters through their minds. The half spoken words by most characters and the muteness of Mari and

Julius coupled with traits magic realism in *After Dark* thoroughly make the texts fragmented. A parallel of narrative fragmentation can also be drawn with the truly fragmented worlds of each of these characters who are physically and psychologically distanced from everything.

Rising problems of insensitivity amidst modern youth; their development as “half-baked” men and women in the words of Balram; the birth of prejudiced societies that feed only a racially superior section leaving all humanly kindness behind are therefore few of the many problems arising in our consumerist, cosmopolitan global community. An attempt therefore must be made to psychologically train the people to become fully developed, less chaotic and generous identities who recognise their individual selves instead of being half-developed escapists that they are today.

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