

**Consumerism and Environmental Nuisance in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia***

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**Abstract**

The study aims to analyze Mohsin Hamid's novel "How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia" (2013) from the perspective of consumerism and "Environmental Nuisance" (Baudrillard 1998). Consumerism has become the cause of environmental nuisance that is defined as the polluted environment, extinction of villages, unending process of urbanization, social alienation, etc. This qualitative research work employs Jean Baudrillard's conception of consumerism and environmental nuisance and the methodology adopted in this research work is hermeneutic of situation. This study is significant because it is a contemporary and post-postmodern critique of Pakistani society from the point of view of ecocriticism. The study concludes that the consumer culture is promoted by capitalist and it causes a lot of damage to our shared environment.

**Key Words:** *Consumerism, Environmental Nuisance, Value, Capitalism, Post postmodernism*

**1. Introduction**

The term "Environmental Nuisance" is coined by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures (1998)*<sup>1</sup>. He defines the term by saying, "The advances of affluence -- that is to say, of the possession of ever more goods and individual and collective amenities -- have been accompanied by increasingly serious environmental nuisances which are a consequence, on the one hand, of industrial development and technical progress, and, on the other, of the very structures of consumption" (Baudrillard 1998). Consumption is not a new thing as it is related to the fulfillment of the basic needs of human beings but consumerism is different from it.

Moreover, consumption is an essential component in the daily life of human beings from commonplace and ordinary things too expensive and costly things. Consumerism or consumer culture is the current phenomenon consumerism or consumer culture is considered the passion of people purchasing expensive goods to participate as active member's consumer society. Baudrillard says that the capitalists have promulgated four logics that play a crucial part in consuming things. These four logics are discussed in detail in the section of the theoretical framework. These four logics have caused a lot of environmental nuisances in society.

## **2. Literature Review:**

In the post-modern age, consumerism has become the trend of life because it defines the system of values, social status, and it has also become a purpose of life. Human beings are valued, judged and dealt with according to the things they consume. Consumerism has set the criterion for different levels as, "Americanism became inseparable from consumerism, glamour defined mentalities, behavior, aspirations and patterns of consumption, as well as ideals of beauty"(Gundle 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays the main and primary focus of TV, magazines and newspaper is not only to provide news but they also promote consumerism as they guide the people about what type of food to cook even with the instruction about the preparation of food, about the selection of houses, their decoration and purchase. Magazines and newspapers also guide about clothes, tours, and trips as to increase the, "Capacity to spend, spend, and spend again, to work longer hours to earn more, to use credit and run up debt" (Smart 2010)<sup>3</sup>.

Consumerism is introduced and promoted by capitalists for their affluence and prosperity. Before the advent of the "Industrial Revolution, the people produced for their very basic needs without spare products. The industrialism (pre-modern age) of the Victorian age started a new era of surplus commodity and after 1<sup>st</sup> World War or in modern age consumerism was limited to upper classes. In the post-modern age, after 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, American culture of consumerism and fetishism of sign spread in the middle class, "Civilization which the Americans have invented .... a fractal, interstitial culture...a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture - you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies" (Baudrillard 1988)<sup>4</sup>. In post modern age after 1990 consumerism has become the way of life, a yardstick for the measurement of morality, character and respect. The results and consequences of

consumerism are very fatal and disastrous in the form of environmental nuisance i. e global warming, autism, polluted water, social alienation and too much waste.

### **3. Research Methodology**

In this paper, Hamid's Novel "How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia" (2013)<sup>5</sup> is selected to discuss the issues of environmental nuisance with reference to Consumerism and Capitalism. Qualitative method is used for this study with the approach of hermeneutics of situation. The analysis of the complex consumer age cannot be done by using the method of postmodern age namely hermeneutics of suspicion. Hermeneutics of suspicions is a method that is used for multiple interpretations of a literary text and to interpret meanings and codes of signifiers, "hermeneutics of situation designed to size up and respond to contemporary Capitalism" (Nealon 2012)<sup>6</sup>. Hermeneutics of Situation is the approach with single interpretation and explanation for understanding today's economic condition that avoids multiple possible interpretations. The necessity for single and one interpretation is obvious as the globalization does not condone the multiplicity of possible meaning. Multi-nationalism results the uniformity and generalization in economic, social and political situations and single interpretation suits the situation of globalization. In the novel, the use of you shows this ubiquitousness.

#### **Theoretical Framework:**

Jean Baudrillard in "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign" (1981)<sup>7</sup> has given four logics to value the commodity. These logics are the reason behind consumerism and they are the basic tools used by capitalists. Moreover, these logics are the cause of environmental nuisance.

#### **a. A Functional Logic of Use Value:**

The use value of the commodity stands for its functional status or instrumentality of an object. The natural or anthropological need of people is called "use value" and "functional value" as the functional value of a pen is that it is an instrument of writing. The reason

for purchasing a pen is its function of writing. Use value is named by Baudrillard as “theory of need”, “logic of utility” and “logic of practical operations” (Baudrillard 1981).

**b. An Economic Logic of Exchange Value:**

The second order is called the “exchange value” (Baudrillard 1981) of a thing. An object can be worth of many values, for example, the cost of one pen can be equal to more than one pen. Exchange value is called the “logic of the market” or “logic of equivalence” (Baudrillard 1981).

**c. A Logic of Symbolic Value:**

The best example of the “Symbolic Value” (Baudrillard 1981) is the wedding ring as fashion and consumerism cannot play a destructive role for the ring. Wedding ring possesses the attributes of symbolic exchange. A person can throw, destroy or change a ring according to fashion but the wedding ring cannot be changed with the change of fashion as it is the symbol of love and affection.

**d. A Logic of Sign Value:**

An object attains sign value when it is used to distinguish between classes, for example, a car has become a sign of affluence but a bicycle is considered a sign of poverty as “Today, we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods” (Baudrillard 2002)<sup>8</sup>. Capitalists are exploiting and looting people by using the logic of sign value. They try to fascinate people to purchase the trendy things by advertisement in which rich and celebrities are shown using afore mentioned, the industrial designer Brooks Stevens remarked in an interview, “Our whole economy is based on planned obsolescence ... We make good products, we induce people to buy them, and then next year we deliberately introduce something that will make these products old fashioned, out of date, obsolete” (Smart 2010)

**e. Environmental Nuisance due to Consumerism:**

The term environmental nuisance highlights Baudrillard’s concerns about waste material, pollutions of all types, shortage of agricultural land, the process of urbanization and the squandering of global, natural resources. He blames consumerism for all the disastrous effects as he says that consumer society no doubt has provided more and more things to consume, but it has certainly caused waste and degradation as pollution in the form of

noisy environment, polluted air, and filthy water that has caused environmental destruction. In this context, waste is described as a spectacular squandering and he argued that it has a functional role, providing economic stimulus for mass consumption. Conspicuous consumption provides happiness but it is temporary and ever shifting as the change in trends inaugurates new craving for latest version. If we do not participate as an active consumer, it results an unstable identity, autism, and poverty. Although consumption brings satisfaction and happiness but the whole process of consumption also brings happiness as first of all locating the goods, selection and choosing then purchasing etc. These activities work as an escape that allows people to get rid of boring routine work and it also provides temporary happiness. Nowadays identity is measured up with active participation in consumer culture rather than in previous activities of production as “Identity and status are acquired and social inclusion or integration is achieved primarily through participation in consumer activity” (Smart 2010).

Autism is the key feature of post postmodern age as neurosis was the characteristic of modernism and schizophrenia was the characteristic of the post-modern age. Autism is described as a psychological state of mind in which one feels it difficult in interacting with others. The emergence of new technological means of communication has enabled people to interact with others without social interaction. The autistic individuals prefer solitude to empathy as, “.... derivatives gadgets like iPod hold their users in similarly isolated private worlds” (Kirby 2009)<sup>9</sup>. In the recent world of technology people prefer to be identified as active consumers and they have to meet the standards of consumer society because they need to be acknowledged by society but as the poor people lack money and recourses to do that that’s why they are socially excluded from the circle of useful member of society. The poor then tends towards crime because they want to be active consumers, “The lives of most young criminals .... revolve around the acquisition and display of consumer symbolism” (Smart 2010).

#### **4. Research Question:**

The main and overarching question of the paper is following:

- What are the effects of consumerism on a society that is obsessed with consumerism?

### **5. Research Objectives:**

The main objective of the article is

- To highlight and explain the disastrous effects of consumer culture in the form of environmental nuisance.

### **6. Analysis:**

The novel is divided into twelve chapters which consist of twelve steps leading towards consumerism and fetishism of “sign value” and “exchange value”. In the contemporary society of postmodernism, the commodity has become a criterion in every field of life as, “The commodity is a code.... the fundamental code of our societies.... makes things communicate” (Baudrillard 1981).

In the first chapter “Move to the City” it is described that the people of the village have limited needs that’s why they consume only primary things to live without consuming secondary luxury items as fast foods or glamorous fashionable clothes and shoes. Hamid explains the situation in these words, “Your (village child) anguish is the anguish of the boy whose chocolate has been thrown away, whose remote controls are out of batteries.... This is all the more remarkable since you have never seen any of these things” (Hamid 2013).

Capitalists have used different traps in the form of different facilities such as education, good houses, better jobs, amusement parks, cinemas, etc. in order to attract people to move to the cities. The urban lifestyle is based on the logic of consumption while on the other hand rural lifestyle is different as the people of the village are producers rather than consumers as the mother asks her husband that she wants to be shifted in the city as he earns a big amount i. e ten thousand which makes him a rich man but the husband replies city is a place where ten thousand is not a big amount. This shows that people of the city have become consumer because of the logic of exchange value and sign value. The increase in consumption causes more profit for capitalists while cities are their markets to fascinate and allure people.

In the first chapter, the writer highlights the fact that the consumer culture causes environmental nuisance as a consumer society indulges in the consumption of more and more goods and consequently it pollutes the environment as our living space: air, soil, and water. The industries are to make the goods for consumption and the industrial waste is dumped in rivers and streams moreover, the land occupied by the gigantic factories

become infertile as the water of brooks is used for manufacturing goods and the rivers are also used as drainages to dump the wastes of factories.

In the third chapter environmental nuisance is shown in the form of social alienation as active consumers are included in the mainstream of the society while on the other hand the people who do not participate actively in the activity of consumption are excluded from the society. The locales of the affluent and the deprived are separated according to the standards of consumption as the rich are active consumers who use luxury items. The rich and the poor live in the same society even they live very close to each other but the distance is created by a significant divide as it can be an open sewer, a railway track, or a very narrow ally. Environmental nuisance is caused by the high consumption rate of petrol that causes smoke and toxic materials. The polluted air and smog blur the shine of the stars.

The dangerous impact of consumerism has not only polluted the environment but it has also penetrated in the education system. The degrees are purchased by the rich students but on the other hand, the poor students work hard. The hero belongs to a poor family as his father is a poor chef who cannot give his son a better future. The hero is serious about his studies to make his future bright and in addition he becomes an idealist because he wants to be included in the social circle of the university. The hero is considered poor because he does not possess the things that have sign value like a car, expensive cigarettes, invitations of parties and well-to-do friends. The rich owner of the father shows her social exclusion from the poor people by not leaving her car because of the dirty locales and polluted environment.

Hazards of consumerism are also expanded to every field of life as religion has become a commodity. Religion is used for many worldly purposes to get power in the name of religion, as funding in the name of religion and financial aid. These aspects show that religion has become a poisonous grand narrative that is used for negative purposes other than spirituality. In the novel, the poisonous and negative use of religion is shown in the form of university organizations that condemn the consumption of hash as it is forbidden in Islam but on the other hand, the organization does not forbid the use of unfair means in the examination system. The hero in the novel grows beard and enters in circle of that organization for the sake of support, money and social prestige. The wealthy pupils get the support of administration by bribing them “wealthier pupils and corrupt administration” (Hamid 2013). After the realization of the true nature of the organization

the hero removes his beard as a protest because the organization does not keep its promise of providing money for the treatment of his mother.

The name of the fifth chapter is “Learn from a Master”. The chapter describes the short cut of becoming rich in the world that is mad for consuming more and more things. For consuming the goods and objects, wealth is necessary and a poor can get wealth by using unfair means. The hero learns the unfair means from a master as the writer says that learning from a master can save time and it also provides the tricks to get money from unfair means. The process of never-ending urbanization is another example of environmental nuisance as people from village migrate to city that makes the overpopulated cities more congested, crowded and suffocating as “Dusty new arteries feeding this city.... choked with traffic day by day” (Hamid 2013). Cities are swallowing villages and rural areas either by the process of urbanization or because of factories. The hero describes the preferences of farmers who sold off their lands to the owners of factory owners.

The chapter six is “Work for Yourself” that shows the tendency of selfishness in the world of materialism in which one must not bother to help or work for others without payment. Help has become a costly service and a commodity, as the writer is not in favor of help without payment. This shows the hazards of consumerism in the form of unsympathetic and selfish attitudes towards fellow human beings. In the consumer age of post-postmodernism human beings are used as a commodity as the exchange value of the hero has increased with increase in his income. The pretty girl is ready to date him when he says to pretty girl that he makes a lot of money. The pretty girl does not like the profession of the hero as a waiter and his uniform of a waiter, because of his low sign value in comparison to the uniforms of pilots, soldiers, doctors, etc. The environmental nuisance is clear when the hero indulges in an illegal business in which bottled water with fake seals is sold as his home is used as a workshop where he uses tap water that is boiled on gas-cylinder. Further, he uses cotton sieve to remove visible impurities after that used mineral bottles that are collected from the waste of restaurants, these bottles are filled and sealed by a pair of simple machines. The mineral water business proves successful in rising Asia as the corrupt politicians do not pay heed to the sanitary system for the betterment of the country, “.... neglected pipes are cracking, the contents of underground (Hamid 2013). The use of mineral water has also become a sign of status as the rich can



afford the consumption of mineral water. This happens because of overconsumption that causes an environmental nuisance in the form of polluted water.

Chapter seven is “Prepare to Use Violence” which shows the dark side of the materialistic world which is obsessed with consumerism as in consumer society there is competition among capitalists for monopoly and domination in the consumer market. The capitalist does not hesitate to use violence and they try to kill other capitalists as in the novel the hero is attacked by another capitalist, the assassin pointed a pistol at his cheek and warns him about his murder. The crimes are the results of boosting consumer culture and creating the environmental-violence. The process of urbanization and its environmental nuisance or consequences of consumerism are shown in the chapter as there is an unending process of migration towards cities and the expansion of cities causes the scarcity of agrarian land, “Where a few years ago were only fields.... unplanned development having yielded instead...other tossed up from regional towns and villages to seek their fortune” (Hamid 2013). Capitalism flourishes on the expansion of cities because it increases consumption and the capitalists thrive on conspicuous consumerism. Karl Marx condemned capitalism on the ground that it exploits laborers but in the consumer society capitalism exploits consumers by selling them expensive articles and ever-changing trends of products the hero, “.... thrived to the sound of city’s great whooshing thirst” (Hamid 2013).

Chapter eight is “Be Friend a Bureaucrat” which shows the hazard of consumerism as the society of consumers has changed the criterion of friendship, “It is on befriending the right bureaucrat that your continued success critically depends” (Hamid 2013). Moreover, consumerism has also materialized the abstract and sacred relations as the hero wants to be friend of a bureaucrat for material gains as “we reach a situation where.... all passions and all relationships, are now abstracted (or materialized) as signs and as objects to be bought and sold” (Pawlett 2007)<sup>10</sup>. The hero wants to increase his worth or exchange value in front of a politician. He uses expensive commodities as an expensive car, a uniformed guard, computer etc. to make an impression of a wealthy persona.

The title of chapter nine is “Patronize the Artist of War” that shows the sign value and exchange value of having military status. The military status highlights the environmental nuisance of lower classes or the classes other than military status. The writer builds a contrast by describing the privileged social stance of military area and he

says that the non-military people are even deprived of electricity or there is scarcity of electricity to light their houses. The serenity of military housing system is also a sign of their prestige as they desire for serenity and calmness while the non-military people and poor live near the railway tracks and busy roads.

The title of chapter ten is “Dance with Debt” which shows the tragic end or after-effects of consumerism. The hero wants to meet the demand of the market and he also wants to beat his rival capitalists, for this purpose he takes a loan from a bank. He is not able to pay his debt because he is deceived by his brother-in-law who steals his money. The hero starts his business by dishonest and illegal means and he ends up by a tragic end. The deception of the brother-in-law shows the catastrophic effects of consumerism as the brother-in-law wants to survive in a society of capitalists and he needs money to become a capitalist so that he can get his share from a society which is obsessed by consumerism. He steals money from his boss who is his relative too, “The lives of most young criminals .... revolve around the acquisition and display of consumer symbolism” (Hamid 2013). Money is the primary source for living in the post-postmodern era because one should be part of consumer society that demands a lot of money. The poor cannot be the part of consumer society and they are excluded from the main society as, “Having less means having less to anesthetize you to your life” (Hamid 2013).

The last two chapters “Focus on the Fundamentals” and “Have an Exit Strategy” also deal with the destructive effects of consumer society in which people have to loot or deceive someone for their survival as the hero is looted by his brother-in-law and pretty girl is looted by robbers.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Consumerism is a very important tool of capitalism and by using this tool the capitalists sell their products on a gigantic scale and they get a huge profit. In the process of making a huge profit, the capitalists are devouring rural areas. Moreover, the consequences of consumerism are called environmental nuisance which are crimes, social exclusion, air, water, land pollution and congested overpopulated cities.

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