



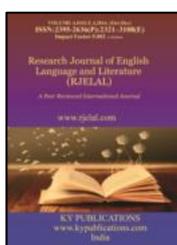
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DISINTEGRATION OF THE SELF IN MARTIN AMIS'S *MONEY: A SUICIDE NOTE: A SATIRE ON THE MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETY*

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ABSTRACT

British government under the rule of Margaret Thatcher shifted its interest from the progress of the Welfare state to privatization of business, marketing and consumerism which gave a rapid increase to commercialization. As the government policies change, media and advertising began to induce people to buy materialistic signifiers for conspicuous consumption promising the high status in society. It led to the importance of free market and individual entrepreneurship where greed has become the prime motive. This greed for conspicuous consumption is clearly demonstrated in Martin Amis's novel *Money: A Suicide Note*. The study shows that Amis's purpose is to satirize the declining state of the postmodern capitalist society of England which leads to the loss of selfhood, self-restraint, independent thinking. The narrator and protagonist of the novel, John Self is addicted to junk food, drinking, smoking, television and pornography. He represents the degrading world of consumer culture where a man has completely surrendered himself to the gratification of his physical pleasures in order to acquire a celebrity image. The novel reflects that the prevalent notion of celebrity image in this modern consumer society has exerted a great influence on human behaviour and attitudes. But this deceptive and mendacious image aims at befooling people because it is only an appearance not an actual and real success. Self's delusion that the monetary value is the only value brings his downfall. He is exploited by others due to his lack of self-control, authenticity and independent thinking.

Key words: Consumerism, self-restraint, money, disintegration, capitalism, loss of selfhood.

Martin Amis, who turns out to be a celebrity after the controversies and criticism he met with over his personal life and the alleged gender-bias, is one of the most significant literary voices of the contemporary period. His narratives, oscillating between realism and postmodernism, present the bitter truths of modern capitalist society. British government under the rule of Margaret Thatcher shifted its interest from the progress of the Welfare state to privatization of

business, marketing and consumerism which gave a rapid increase to commercialization. As the government policies change, media and advertising began to aggrandize free market and individual entrepreneurship where greed has become the prime motive. Amis deals with the devastating effects of this greed for conspicuous consumption in his novel *Money*. Amis is more preoccupied with the use of language, style and form than with the content or the subject-matter. His views on his

penchant for style are clearly expressed in his collection of essays and reviews, *The War Against Cliché* which was published in 2001. His frequent visits to America established Amis as a transatlantic writer which experience he has described in many of his novels, especially *Money*. The novel was based on his experience with Hollywood when he was hired for scriptwriting. It reflects satirically the political affairs of his time as well as the effects of cultural values of American society on British people. As Brian Finney comments:

In *Money*, while borrowing the techniques from the American novelists he most admired, he was able to locate the effects of American culture in his uneducated English protagonist, John Self. Self has been raised on a steady diet of popular entertainments, commercials, and porn through his absorption of American values that permeated the British media. From *Money* onwards, all Amis's novels will either contain a scene located in America or bring American characters to England, or both. (17)

The prevalent notion of celebrity image in this modern consumer society has exerted a great influence on human behavior and attitudes. But this deceptive and mendacious image aims at fooling people because it can be obtained only through its false signifiers. *Money* is one of the best examples presenting such devastating and self-deceiving impact of modern celebrity culture on human beings. Image conscious people, in order to attain affluence, high status and fame which are only appearance not actual success, depend on the conspicuous consumption of materialistic signifiers. The concepts of material consumption, the false appearance and money are interrelated. Commenting on the source of inspiration, Peter Childs remarks that "it suggests through the increasingly intense popular cults of celebrity and fame, to the commercial greed of 1980s" (44).

The novel reflects the spirit of the Zeitgeist. It premises on the loss of self, integrity, authenticity and self-restraint. As a critique of capitalism, it satirizes the growing interest in free market and privatization. The tempting and inducing strategies

of free market economy have largely changed people's lives and their way of thinking. In the absence of self-faith, morality and authenticity, the true value of life declined in the bleak world of late capitalist Western civilization.

Set in 1981 and published in 1984, *Money* is a story of John Self, the narrator and protagonist whose life is made of "fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs" (67). He has made his money by making low-class television advertisements and by using the images of scantily clad women to sell sex as a commodity. Now he plans to make a film on his own life under the financial support and guidance of his producer American Goodney Fielding, a failed actor, who promises Self to make him a star and very rich in the film industry. He beguiled Self by stimulating him to spend money lavishly, which according to him is essential to acquire a celebrity image. He says:

Shape up, John. It's an embarrassment. It looks bad to the money men. Take a floor at the Gustave. Hire a jet and have a weekend with Butch and Caduta in the Caribbean. Go buy a case of champagne and pour it all over your dick. Spend. You're no use to me when you fly coach. Fly supersonic. Fly sharp end. God damn it, Slick, fly right. (181-82)

Self's name suggests ambiguity which has made him susceptible to others' false and superficial praise of him. It is the lack of self-control and temptation towards celebrity image that makes him vulnerable to Fielding's plot and drives him to his downfall. He is so much self-made and self-absorbed that he does not discern the vicious motives of Fielding.

Amis reflects his post-human satirical attitude towards late capitalist society where man has become a product, a consuming machine and his identity has become a matter of commodity. In one of his essays, he makes it clear that "the lost-self theme works so powerfully on us- perhaps we all feel it. Perhaps, as we speed into the future, we all feel that something has been left behind" (qtd in Gregson 132). John Self, whose life moves around his pornographic hobbies, shows the instinct of "an animal – eating and drinking, dumping and sleeping,

fucking and fighting _ and that's it" (M 277). His duplicity and artificiality lies in the fact that he relies on materialistic signifiers to satisfy his carnal desires while making himself an unnatural product who has no self- respect, dignity, self- control and independent thinking. He has human body but does not have human spirit. He says:

My clothes are made of monosodium glutamate and hexachlorophene. My food is made of polyester, rayon and lurex...My brain is gimmicked by a microprocessor the size of a quark and costing ten pee and running the whole deal. I am made of junk_ junk, I'm just junk. (265)

Amis plays with the technique of the double to deal with the multiple concerns in the novel. He gives his own voice to the narrator and his own name to the scriptwriter of the film in the novel. The characterization of the novel indicates at the authorial identification which is a metafiction technique of postmodernist writers. Amis got his inspiration from Nabokov who said "Never identify with a character, identify with the author" (qtd in Finney 127). The presence of a character and an author stand- in "Martin Amis" suggests Amis's inclination to play with this technique. In addition to this alter- ego, there are Fielding Goodney, the writer Doris Arthur and Martina Twain who serve Amis's purpose of taking full control on his text. Self's identity, splitting into multiple voices reflects the fragmented culture, inauthentic and amoral life of his time. Disintegration of the self into multiple selves refers to the lack of authenticity. According to Gordon Slethaug:

the double in postmodern fiction explores a divided self in a fragmented universe. Its mission is to decenter the concept of the self, to view human reality as a construct and to explore the inevitable drift of signifiers away from their referents. (Slethaug 3)

Early in the novel, Self complains of his hearing problems: "Owing to this fresh disease I have called tinnitus, my ears have started hearing things recently, things that aren't strictly auditory. Jet take-offs, breaking glass, ice scratched from the tray" (1). But this fresh disease later develops into a mental

torture which shows his unrestrained and meaningless world. He says: "I heard computer fugues, Japanese jam sessions, didgeridoos. What is my head up to? I wish I had some idea what it's got in mind for me" (5). Culturally ignorant Self has completely surrendered himself to the gratification of his physical pleasures as promised by advertisements. He dislikes educated people. Money is a symbol of high- status and identity for him. The pestilential and devastating effects of consumerist discourse on Self are clearly exhibited. He says that: "I feel invaded, duped and fucked around. I hear strange voices and speak in strange tongues" (77). He describes the four "distinct voices" as "first, of course, is the jabber of money", the second is "the voice of pornography", the third is "the voice of ageing and weather...the ever weakening voice of stung shame" and the fourth is "the real intruder" which has "the unwelcome lilt of paranoia, of rage and weepiness" (104).

The voice of money is everywhere. The entire world of Self is centered on money. He defines everything in relation to money. As he says: "money is always involved" (19). Amis deploys Self to satirize the degrading system of twentieth century where money has enslaved everyman. Self says:

Maybe money is the great conspiracy, the great fiction. The great addiction: we're all addicted and we can't break the habit now. There's not even anything very twentieth century about it, except the disposition. (354)

The postmodern man is so affected by money conspiracy that he finds no escape from it. Everybody is involved in this conspiracy. Self is hopeless: "Jesus, it's an outrage. It's a scandal...you just cannot beat the money conspiracy. You can only join it" (221).

Pornography consists of sex and money where sex means money. Self describes it while telling about his making love with his deceptive English girlfriend Selina Street: "While making love, we often talk about money. I like it. I like that dirty talk" (143). All his hobbies, activities and attitudes are pornographic in nature as they revolve around

money. His narrative is characterized by the use of slangs and obscene words. When he gets a chance to develop a true relationship with Martina Twain, he finds himself hopeless and irresistible to money-god.

“The voice of ageing and weather” describes Self’s wishes to gain the promises of eternal youth and to escape death and old age. He is aware of his fat body and bad looks. He knows that Selina does not love him. She is with him only for his money. But he is very upset to gain healthy and athletic body. He wants to fix this problem by money:

The mirror looked on, quite unimpressed...I cleaned my teeth. Combed my rug, clipped my nails, bathed my eyes, gargled, showered, shaved, changed – and still looked like shit. Jesus, I’m so fat these days... can money fix it? I need my whole body drilled down and repaired, replaced. I need my body capped is what I need. I’m going to do it, too, the minute I hit the money. (5-6)

He is fascinated by the idea of physical enhancement. He promises himself that when he becomes a rich person he will go through cosmetic surgeries and will “go off to California for that well earned body transplant” (20). This superficiality and image-consciousness of consumer culture is the failure of integrity and selfhood.

The fourth voice of “the real intruder” depicts the inner-consciousness which Self starts to gain in the company of Martina Twain. But all his dreams to have a pure relationship with Martina are spoiled by his girl friend Selina. Self constantly travels between London and New York which leads to his dislocation and unsteady identity. He is aware of his loss of belongingness in the world: “I’ve lived here for ten years now and nothing is mine” (64). Though Self is addicted to everything that is squalid, he is able to get the sympathy of the reader. At one point, he becomes sad for his little knowledge:

Oh Christ, the exhaustion of not knowing anything. It’s so tiring and hard on the nerves. It really takes it out of you, not knowing anything. You’re given comedy and miss all the jokes. Every hour, you get weaker. Sometimes as I sit alone in my flat in London and stare at the window, I think

how dismal it is, how hard, how heavy, to watch the rain and not know why it falls. (184)

The sub-title of the novel is appropriate as money in the form of greed to consume abundantly shows its fatal and destructive nature: “dollar bills, pound notes, they’re suicide notes. Money is a suicide note” (116). Money is the first requirement to get anything taking place on this earth for Self, be it love, sex, happiness or other materialist commodities of life. There is no value of culture, ethical judgment, emotions, self-control and love for Self as they are not based on money. He commodifies even love and sex as a part of money exchange. The moral beliefs, ethics and cultural forms are distorted by the consumerist discourse in order to stimulate people’s desires. Self is tempted by the promises of these deceptive paradisaical pleasures which lead him to “the cheapest ever”. Talking directly to the reader, he admits his extravagant spending on unworthy things:

And you hate me, don’t you. Yes you do. Because I’m the new kind, the kind who has money but can never use it for anything but ugliness. (58)

At the end of the novel, it is revealed that he was being exploited by his money-backer Goodney Fielding and the other money-men or the fake actors. In the beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that Self revisits his past life after a failed suicide attempt but shows no clear signs of redemption. Amis uses the character of John Self to reflect the disintegration of the self in the wake of post-war capitalist society of England in 1980s. Self represents the condition of declining postmodern world by portraying the dystopian vision of consumer culture. He is a postmodern man who knows no bounds to gratify his insatiable desires in order to acquire a celebrity image which is false and deceptive. In this process, he becomes isolated and unconcerned with the other members of his community and does not want to establish and maintain any relationship which is not based on money.

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