

## POSTMODERN VISIONS: CONSUMER CULTURE'S (RE)MAKING OF THE GAZE

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies have transformed traditional identities in such a way that we, as subjects of globalization and mass consumer culture, have become tremendously self-conscious of the 'gaze' which makes, breaks and molds us. Postmodern visions of (im) perfection reign on TV screens and other media which constitute the way others see us and we, in turn, see ourselves. In a postmodern world the self is, therefore, in constant flux in accordance with the language and images defined by consumer culture. This paper briefly discusses the effect of global consumerism as it enters into the social sphere, and also looks at the way the global aspect of consumerism has infiltrated the gaze emanating from Bangladeshi culture and tradition. It is thus creating, within the Bangladeshi subject, a site for consumer identity construction through which even traditional culture has become commodified.

**Keywords:** Postmodern consumerism, plastic self, advertisements, gaze, Bangladeshi culture.

Rooms crowded with unfinished visions  
Of objects beyond reach  
Empty, empty perverted house.

- 'Empty Black Haunted House' (Mansour 1720)

infiltrated the gaze emanating from Bangladeshi culture and tradition, thereby creating, within the Bangladeshi subject, a site for consumer identity construction through which even traditional culture has become a commodity to be marketed.

Postmodernity has drastically changed the way we<sup>1</sup> see and interact with ourselves (as opposed to the Cartesian self), others and our surroundings. Through the TV screen and other media, we are constantly being bombarded with messages and images of global consumerism which create a reality of their own. This simulated reality enters our lives and thoughts and thereby modifies our perception of the real. We, in accordance with what we see, hear, and regard as necessary to seem trendy, create and recreate our identities on a near daily basis. It appears that postmodernity is not only confined to the West rather it appears to be changing the way we speak, act and interact with others. This is the postmodern world where images are becoming the foundation of social truth. Nowadays, it is not our family tradition or national culture that motivates our thoughts and actions it is the dire need to be at a par with amoebic standards set by the media and consumer culture. It appears that, the global aspect of consumerism has

Sigmund Freud makes observations on the significance of language in his *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* by the following, "By words one person can make another blissfully happy or drive him to despair, by words the teacher conveys his knowledge to his pupils. Words provoke affects and are in general the means of mutual influence among men." (Freud 3) The realization of the 'mutual influence' of men through words, symbols and images that Freud mentions in his various psychoanalytic theories, becomes much more significant in discussions of contemporary identity. Images and language are associated by contemporary theorists to the manipulation of truth and construction of personal identity. Contemporary theoretical debates by Nietzsche, Lacan, Baudrillard, Derrida and many others of our time emphasize the role of language and images in molding the mind through direct and indirect persuasion. The instability of meaning, truth, and reality magnified by commercial intentions expressed through media images and language, create for the self a fluctuating field of reference.

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<sup>1</sup> 'we' in this context refers to us, Bangladeshis, as participants in a global consumer culture.

Undoubtedly, it is this power of language and images that the proponents of consumer culture have discovered and are continuously using to modify the all-consuming 'gaze'<sup>2</sup> of postmodern consumerism.

The power of speech, in this day and age of consumer culture, is realized and exerted through advertisements which are specifically designed and vocalized with the intent to create a false visionary standard which must be attained. Advertisements constantly appear in front of us in the form of TV and radio ads, newspaper ads, posters, flyers, leaflets, on the back of cartons, on bags, clothes almost everywhere. Brian Morean cites Alfred Gell who similarly comments, "Advertising does not only serve to entice consumers to buy particular items; in effect, it guides the whole process of design and manufacture from start to finish, since it provides the idealized image to which the finished product must conform" (As qtd. by Morean 9). The constant repetition of words denoting a certain object leads to the fixation of that object within the consciousness, therefore, a single word conjures up a whole image. This is the power of language. This powerful language accompanies a wealth of diverse images of (im)perfection which allude to the creation of a different (as opposed to constant) self who unwittingly allows his/her tastes to be manipulated. Baudrillard sees this interaction with media as affecting a "stupor" within of the masses. It leads to, in his view, "a radical uncertainty as to our own desire, our own choice, our own opinion, our own will. This is the clearest result of the whole media environment, of the information which makes demands on us from all sides" (Baudrillard 579). Simulated worlds of perfection demand us to choose particular types of clothes, fashions, beverages, and even soap brands in order to be unique (!). The irony of it is everyone wants to be unique so in choosing a particular brand the targeted consumer only complies and conforms to the general code of consumption. Ultimately everyone ends up wearing, drinking and using the same brands.

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<sup>2</sup> By the word 'gaze', one usually refers to the feminist coinage of the look of the male which limits and disempowers women. Here, however, I interpret the 'gaze' as the critical eye of society as formed by consumer culture by which one sees others and is in turn seen by others. The gaze once emanating from Lacan's mirror-image now seems to be produced by the media especially the TV screen.

Advertising, therefore, is not a display of products created for necessity it is rather a display of images of products which create needs, wants, and cravings. David Lyon discusses Zygmunt Bauman's critique of consumerism thus: "he does take consumerism to task for its 'duplicity.' It promises what it cannot deliver: universal happiness. And it makes false claims in solving the problem of freedom by reducing it to consumer freedom. . ." (Lyon 86-87). Freedom is seen in terms of freedom to choose. The options of choice do not consist in values, rights, and opinions but the freedom to buy lifestyles and express affluence. Modesty and moderate living is no longer something to be proud of. Today's teenagers are so afraid of what their friends think that they always have to have the latest fashion available in clothes and gadgets. They are constantly afraid of hearing – "If you don't have something worth having its not because it doesn't suit your taste, it must be because you cannot afford it" - from someone or another. The nature of shopping for food, clothes, electronics has changed from being done out of necessity. Now-a-days necessity is overshadowed by the want to keep in pace with the latest fad. America's 'throwaway' culture is gradually becoming ours too. Stuff has to be bought whether needed or not. Even the furniture is made to *end* before we do. Replicating the TV advertisements, every space, every thought, every word ends up having a commercial agenda.

Even body space has become an object of marketing with a strong commercial agenda. As Julian Murphet puts it, "the body . . . has been unleashed as an instrument of visual persuasion" which has resulted in "the excess of denuded body images in advertising, film and television" (Murphet 117) The human body has become a commodity. Body sexuality no longer involves "guilt, repression, or unspoken desire." Rather, it has become the "leading visual edge of our commercial culture" (ibid). The body not only becomes a vehicle for consumerism it also becomes a target for it. From skin tone to body shape everything is be targeted by commodification. Global culture has become a consumer culture that is obsessed with appearance. In such a culture the human body has itself become a malleable cultural product that can be conveniently transformed to fit the latest trends. This explains the obsession behind fairness products, cosmetics, body shaping and building apparatus etc. Murphet quotes the philosopher

Henri Lefebvre who, while talking of the postmodern subject, states the role of media "via the eyes" in the transformation process of the body "every kind of appeal, incitement and seduction is mobilized to tempt them with doubles of themselves in prettified, smiling and happy poses; and this campaign to void them succeeds exactly to the degree that the images proposed correspond to 'needs' that those same images have helped fashion" (As qtd in Murphet 117). The latest fashion in cars, clothes, electronics is what comprises the 'needs' of a subject of consumerism if one is to meet the expectation of the 'gaze'. This is the gaze which is applied to the mediated subject who now himself/ herself becomes a spectacle due to the scrutiny which befalls it as a result of Lacan's mirror being replaced by the TV screen and value systems becoming fluid as a result of this change. Every aspect of the gaze seems to be motivation for the commodification of the subject and all that it symbolizes.

The portrayal of identity in the advertisements of multinational companies working within our country go against political identity, that is based on citizenship in a national community. Ingrid Piller mentions Morley and Kevin's observation on the way identities are created through media portrayal in the following way - "contemporary cultural identities are hybrid, complex, and often contradictory, and the media play a crucial role in their reconfiguration." She continues - identities are "economic ones that are based on participation in a global consumer market" (Piller 155). In other words, TV ads do not treat the audiences as participants of a national identity and reflect the culture of a country rather, they target the identity of the audience as that of a global consumer. The TV screen produces images which become the standard of excellence that must be attained foregoing the fact that all these are just empty images, alluring maybe, but still empty.

The emphasis on "mediated experience" leads to a crisis of identity through identification with that which is seen on the screen. This happens because the language and images draw the audience into that world to the extent that it becomes impossible to differentiate between performance and reality. The simulation becomes a form of the real as these lifestyles are replicated in society through plastic (malleable) selves of postmodern visions. Postmodern theorists such as Jameson and Baudrillard, suggest that in a postmodern,

consumer society, anyone can conjure up an identity for him/herself because of the numerous identifications and wealth of subject positions offered by fashion, television, film and advertising. Thus gradually arrives on the scene the postmodern plastic self that can be molded into any form necessary to adapt to the constant shift in societal ideologies. In postmodern society the plastic self is the medium through which identity is tried on and discarded. The idea is to be as flexible as possible and to maximise experience as a consumer.

Stephen Zavestoski, quite appropriately mentions the postmodern theorists such as Bourdieu, Baudrillard, Featherstone and Jameson, in writing about the manipulation of self in relation to increased consumption. These theorists, he observes, "see the proliferation of goods in consumer societies as resulting in schizophrenic individuals struggling to create identities in a world of transitory and ephemeral signs and meanings. The instability of the self in a postmodern consumer society, these theorists suggest, facilitates social stratification through consumption as a statement of difference. . . .consumption has become a fundamental mode of self-formation and self-expression"(Zavestoski 175). The obsessional drive towards material goods has tremendously modified the way people consider themselves and also others around them. As the possession of material goods become an indicator of status, social stratification is all the more evident. These goods have become extensions of the self in the sense that only successful individuals have the capability to acquire them. The validity of self is embedded in the successful procurement of products as consumers of varied items of luxury. Everything seems to be about the gratification of the body and the senses. As a result, society seems to be spinning on an axis of superficial and transitory fluid images that represent human existence as a whole. The stable ego is forsaken and instead, "there is a valuing of an ego, made for playful, fluid maneuvering through symbol systems" (Farrell 267). It is a simulated world where everything is motivated towards creating the consumer who has a self-centered longing to fulfill all his needs.

In his "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard mentions a "media-saturated consciousness" that denotes the end of "interiority" and of "autonomous and authentic subjectivity." We organize experience through media. The

postmodern world is a world saturated by media messages which ultimately shape the identity of the postmodern subject. This blurs the line between reality and fiction. In “The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media,” Baudrillard comments, “Now the media are nothing else than a marvelous instrument for destabilizing the real and the true, all historical or political truth” (Baudrillard). Baudrillard’s comment rings true throughout, in the way postmodern societies have given up on traditional truths and have become dependent on simulations. This is especially true for the American society which has totally given up on traditional values regarding an adherence to them as a sense of weakness and sign of old-fashioned mentality inadaptable to the contemporary social scene. The same can be said of Bangladeshi society which is now gradually moving towards being a mirror society of America. It is as Lyon observes, “From TV ads to soap operas, mediated experience is involved in contemporary constructions of the self. The global and the local have never before interacted in such intense ways in routine daily life.” (Lyon 76)

The mega-malls of Dhaka and changed scene in familial relationships is indicative of the fact that our youth culture is going through the same cycle of cultural and identity reformation as the American youth culture of the 1960’s. The then emerging youth culture with its “new found spending power for fashion, motor bikes and pop music” (Lyon 74) is much like that which is noticed throughout the country and especially in Dhaka these days. The excessive spending which shows itself to be a necessity; the craze with fast food and fast language (speaking swiftly as if they were at the point of a gun !), along with constantly changing styles is what the youth of today are made up of. All of the new radio stations have our youth speaking so swiftly it seems that their words are carelessly bouncing all over the place. Sometimes it is, as if, the unending interior monologue of Molly in Joyce’s *Ulysses* was being spoken aloud. At other times the language reminds one of postmodern signifiers having no link to anything solid as it is constantly used for flirting and playing around, therefore, normal meanings become irrelevant. There is no depth in what is said. Every utterance is for fun.

It is, as if, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque desire for spectacle is propelling our youth towards a lifestyle hitherto unthinkable for their age. For example a

student, after earning Tk.10,000 from tutoring during the summer vacations doesn’t contribute to the family fund or buy his parents something special rather he goes off and buys a stereo system with Tk.9,000/- and considers himself quite the man for buying something he needs without having to ask his father/mother for the money. The nature of *needs* have, therefore, changed. It is not that our youth are not doing anything constructive, they are but somewhere along the line it all bubbles up to having fun and *showing* others that you care.

Instead of earning to sustain a moderate living and support family needs, one earns to enjoy life in excess. The relentless pursuit of wealth in order to consume material goods is taking its toll on relationships and one’s sense of identity. It is no longer enough to live life, rather everything has to be about fun and friends, at the expense of family scenes gradually fading out of the picture. No more do children have time for their parents and vice-versa. No more do teenagers have time for their grandparents. Residents of quiet and empty apartments wallow in self-pity as children grow up and, seeking a life of utter fulfillment, leave their parents alone in old age. This is an echo of America, in the here and now of Bangladesh whether we are willing to accept it or not. There is no more sacrificing of desire because elders do not approve. All of this because day after day we are being told that life in plenty is the only life desirable. Media creates a world of fantasy where everything has the possibility of being perfect.

The Western outfits used in TV commercials intended for our audiences (Bangladeshi) and the open flirting designed into the message of the products represent a world of unstable relationships where everything is taken at face value. Toothpaste ads with enticing breath that draws the opposite gender closer, soap and powder fragrances that attract in the same way, energy drinks that show teenagers dancing in a frenzy, all add to this validation of flirtation and irresponsibility in the name of freedom. The “passive aggressive” woman becomes openly inviting to playful gestures of attraction. Garments aggressively revealing body contour and images of bathing and flirting are so prominent that (in the vein of consumerism), either you buy a second TV or give up any sense of propriety concerning what and what not to watch in front of your parents. The underlying messages, therefore, through repetition, suggestion and desensitization are manipulating and

(re)constructing the way we think. And for good or for worse we end up being much more liberal in our moral judgement, yet much more conservative in our standards of beauty.

In our culture, skin colour has not been as much of an issue as it has been in American society. We are accustomed to seeing varied skin tones in our citizens. There is no complexity of European white ascendancy in our country. Yet, certain fairness creams are shouting out – fair skin for all - in such a manner that it has become an obsession with men and women alike. Previously acceptable skin tones are now put under scrutiny of the 'gaze' created by the media supporting consumerism. No matter how much talent you have you have to be fair and beautiful for it to mean anything, is the underlying message of a quite popular fairness cream. The repetition of these ads make the need to be fair so overpowering that it diminishes any sense of self esteem an unfair toned girl would wish to possess. Like Pecola in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* a strong feeling of lack consumes mostly all women who have uneven skin tone; a sense which the media is now-a-days also instilling within men. At times it is amusing to see how all the insecurities that previously only women were prey to are now also becoming issues for men. All this is the effect of consumerism as it produces more and more targets for commodification.

Commercial stunts are associated with spectacle and marketing strategies instead of manipulation. In our country, companies get away with using language to manipulate the truth as contemporary society allows for a greater deal of tolerance. Recently (just before eid), there was a newspaper ad of a certain mobile company which offered a mobile set at a certain price apparently for only *one day*. Everyone was rushing to the stores. News spread that in Dhaka, all was sold out. Then, amazingly the TV shows an ad of the same offer but this time there is no time limit. So, consumer culture does not care for truth or even near truth. It is the sale of the product that matters. The consumer is a target for manipulation and victimization.

In this highly commercialised culture of a globalised economy that transgresses all political boundaries, an untainted national culture is gradually becoming more and more difficult to find. National culture, with a stable collective self-image, maybe the most victimized in the

commodification process. Just before any national day observance there is a buying spree of new saris and fatuas, cd's with patriotic songs, Bangladeshi flags etc. It is, as if, the patriotism of the whole year has been concentrated into a display which is essential for its validity. It is especially interesting to watch the live unedited feed of the placing of wreaths on monuments throughout the country during any such observance. The pushing and heaving of people just to be within the range of the camera proves how much of a display this has become. The camera eye becoming, for all, the gaze which must be caught and appeased. The carnivalesque feature of this display with subjects of nearly all age groups struggling to stay inside the gaze is equivalent to what happens on a daily basis as the consumer self-consciously leads a life conforming to that seen and heard through the media. We see children holding flags and balloons in the same spirit having no clue as to the amount of importance that differentiates one from the other. All knowledge of the observance of these days is superficial. Most children and teenagers have no clear concept of those days except for the fact that it is a day when offices are closed and parents can take them for an outing. What happens in this search for 'jouissance' in all sectors of social life as the consumer consciousness takes over all sense of moral and social well-being is that subject experiences life as "a succession of instants", and is "condemned through the ubiquity of mass images and commodified information to live in a timeless now rather than the centering, full time of meaning and history." (Wicke 14-15) There is a continual sense that meaning is in the present and neither in the past nor in the future. But without the past there is no tradition and without tradition there is no meaningful present or future. David Harvey quite rightly observes that, "the assertion of any place-bound identity has to rest at some point on the motivational power of tradition...The irony is that tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche." (Harvey 303)

To sum up, the subject positions within postmodern societies are highly susceptible and largely created by images and language produced by the media. Powerful language and images lead to the creation of volatile identities of the consumer market which submerge national identities beneath layers of carnivalesque jouissance. In which case even

tradition becomes a commodity. The society and culture of Bangladesh is also falling prey to this change in value systems due to the globalization of an all consuming consumerism. I fear that in the not so far future, as we continually transform ourselves to appease the gaze of global consumerism, it will be extremely difficult for us to explain to others what aspect of our beings we actually refer to when we call ourselves Bangladeshi.

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