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Quest for Identity, Desire and Dreams – the Resistance to the Consumerist Ideology in *Fight Club*, a Psychoanalytic Study

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Consumerism purports a set of values that suppresses the instinctual urges of human beings by creating a set of needs that has to be fulfilled, if an individual should be approved by the society, as successful and happy. *Fight Club*, the novel by Chuck Palahniuk and *Fight Club* [1999], the film version of the novel by David Fincher, shows that these set of values and version of reality, disseminated by the consumerist ideology, through several media practices and cultural tools, fools the individual to live a life of lie, alienation, loneliness and dissatisfaction. The repressed natural urge of human beings to emotional bonding with fellow humans, the desire to communicate and socialize in a meaningful manner, returns as various anti-social phenomena, in the social level and as insomnia, schizophrenia, sleepwalking and other mental illnesses, in the individual level. *Fight Club* dissects the ideology of consumerism and analyses the life of a prototype of an individual, who lives accepting and obeying the norms fixed by the consumerist ideology.

This article attempts to analyze *Fight Club* as a narrative that explores the ideology of consumerism, by studying how suppression of the basic instincts of a society led by consumerist values, crushes the natural urges, distorts the perception of reality and creates revolutionaries or terrorists, as one may choose to define them. Discussing the ideas of masculinity, femininity, power and conformity; *Fight Club* also analyses how these principles are defined and embedded in a consumerist society. *Fight Club* heavily borrows from the philosophy of the East, especially Buddhism, which proposes a minimalistic way of life.

‘There is always a return of the repressed’

Sigmund Freud.

David Fincher has portrayed the neurotic anxiety, loneliness, fear, identity crisis, schizophrenia and confusion of an evolving consumerist society in the film *Fight Club*, adapted from the popular novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk. This article attempts to analyze *Fight Club* as the saga of return of the repressed human self, the self being repressed by the contemporary socio-economic paradigm.

Fight Club is a quest for the identity of a human being in a society driven by material success and an attempt to investigate what happens to the wild, raw ‘homosapien’ which exists beneath the complex structure of what is established as ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’. The film stands for the acceptance and release of raw energy in humans, its creative potential, and mystery, showing how its suppression by the evolving and transforming social patterns of contemporary era gives rise to a neurotic, fearful, depressed, schizophrenic being, tormented by an alienated

and lost self. The film also shows how the repressed instincts of the human psyche attempts to find and create another world free from suppression, confusion and materialistic hunger of consumerist society. But the threat is that, the returning wild self, will attempt to destroy the paradigm that suppressed it.

In the film, a fight club founded by Tyler Durden, the alter ego of the protagonist, is a space for the free reign and unrestrained expression of raw masculine energy. The Fight Club is a secret society about which everyone knows. The first rule of the Fight Club is that 'You do not talk about fight club'. By establishing such a rule, the attempt to define and demystify the Fight Club is subverted. In a society which distorts meaning and creates a deceptive version of reality, Fight Club invents new ways of resistance to maintain its existence as a futuristic group that is founded for the release of very ancient urges of humans. In the Fight Club, everyone fights with bare hands and use no weapons. Defeating, killing or destroying is not the intention of a fight. A fight, they claim, makes them feel alive, high; and is addictive.

When the film begins the unnamed protagonist is tormented by chronic depression and insomnia. The doctor's suggestions have not only failed to uplift his mood, but the doctor has refused to prescribe sleeping pills. He says, "When you cannot sleep, you are neither awake nor asleep". In his quest for finding peace, he goes to support groups of various terminal illnesses, as suggested by his doctor. The unnamed protagonist is often found addressing himself as Jack, although no one else calls him by the name Jack. Jack has everything to call him a successful person in the modern world- a well-paying job, a condo furnished with state of the art facilities and he travels the whole country as a part of his job. But he is terribly disconnected from the self, is lonely and finds the 'perfect' life meaningless.

It will be interesting to note that all the support groups are full of people suffering from lifestyle diseases that are blown out of control. He goes to the support group of testicular cancer, where he meets Bob. Bob was a bodybuilding champion who conceptualized a highly popular TV show which popularized the notion of beauty of male body. Bob's body was considered to be the perfectly beautiful male body. But, by using too much of steroids for maintaining his muscular body he becomes a patient of testicular cancer. It is the drive to remain 'on top', and be successful in the materialistic terms he chose unnatural ways of 'improving' his body. Arguably, the root cause of Bob becoming a victim of testicular cancer is his conformity to the consumerist philosophy. Bob wanted to remain as the champion bodybuilder to stay 'successful' and amass more wealth. The pressure on Bob to maintain a muscular body is driven by the consumerist culture, which asserts material gain as the scale of success. Bob's testicles are removed, and due to hormone treatments, he grows large breasts. Hence, in an attempt to satisfy the demands of consumerism, and live by a standard proposed by consumerism, he not only loses all his natural biological masculine features, but grows breasts. The system to which he is conformed makes him rich but it robs his masculinity and abandons him in misery.

Bob, whose testicles are removed and has grown large breasts symbolizes the effeminate men conformed to the consumerist social paradigm. Jack, the protagonist, is able to shed his repressed feeling for the first time when he buries his head inside Bob's large breasts. Jack falls asleep that night. Bob is not only a tragic character, but he is a symbol of men who lose their true essence and natural 'masculinity' while trying to satisfy the standards set by consumerism.

Masculine traits are those that are generally attributed to men, and, feminine traits are those that are generally attributed to women by a patriarchal paradigm. Like women were effeminized in a patriarchal society, both men and women are effeminized in a consumerist society.

The patriarchal society effeminates, women and tames her wildness, to serve its purposes by repressing her natural and wild instincts. This is done by manipulating the formation of identity of both men and women, when they are children. When these children grow up they will be the faithful servants of patriarchy. Consumerism employs similar practices to deepen its roots in the society.

In the book *Consumerism in World History, the Global Transformation of Desire*, Peter Stearns defines consumerist society as follows:

Consumerism describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display. They become enmeshed in the process of acquisition –shopping – and take some of their identity from a procession of new items that they buy and exhibit. In this society, a host of institutions both encourage and serve consumerism, from eager shopkeepers trying to lure customers into buying more than they need, to product designers employed to put new twists on established models, to advertisers seeking to create new needs. (v)

Consumerism achieves its success by manipulating the identity of modern citizens, by feeding them a pre-designed life purpose, set of ideas to live by and capturing them in a reality which is constantly deceiving him. The qualities described as masculine and feminine, and their bond with consumerism and patriarchy is obvious in the narrative. The so called masculine qualities of wildness, bravery, courage, confidence, leadership, power of choice etc. are not recognized by the consumerist paradigm, as they are detrimental to the paradigm itself. But the meaning of all the above mentioned qualities is re-adjusted in a way that serves the consumerist culture. Patriarchy too recognized these qualities as dangerous for its propagation and ‘purged’ women of these qualities by polarizing these otherwise neutral qualities as masculine and asserting and enshrining qualities convenient to patriarchy- passive, submissive, weak and wispy - as feminine. Any quality that is a threat for the propagation of patriarchy is considered as anti-feminine. What patriarchy did and does to women, consumerism does to both men and women - taking their power of and leaving them in an illusion of power of choice. Only disillusionment, like the one experienced by the unnamed protagonist of *Fight Club*, can reveal that there is actually no choice and the enchanting picture of the power of choice painted by consumerist culture in its maze of products is a farce.

Within a year, Jack gets addicted to support groups and starts attending meetings of various support groups, using different aliases. When the presence of a woman, Marla, who is a support group addict like Jack annoys and makes him feel self-conscious, it becomes impossible for him to cry. Slowly he falls back to insomnia.

The film further explores the psychological recesses, sensibility and humanity of the protagonist and how he struggles and negotiates to find his place in a social structure that fails to support, understand or nurture his instincts and emotional necessities.

During the blackouts of insomnia the repressed self of Jack emerges, and the version of Jack standardized and subjugated by consumerist society is at rest. The hidden self of Jack, Tyler Durden is all that Jack wants to be. He is an independent soap maker who makes homemade soaps opposed to the branded and manufactured soaps of huge companies. He makes the soap from the best fat in the world, i.e. human fat, snuck out from the garbage of liposuction centers. The liposuction centers represent a beauty culture which serves the cosmetic industry. The cosmetic industry is a huge consumer industry that purports certain body aesthetics and practices to sustain it. Durden digs a tiny hole in it by selling handmade soaps made from human fat snuck out from the garbage of a liposuction center. He sarcastically comments to Jack about this, “We were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them.”

The emergence of Tyler Durden, Jack's alter ego, is his own method of resistance and escape from the octopus clutches of insanity induced by the strict patterns of the society which tries to make Jack conform and live the way as designed by the consumerist economy.

One of the most famous dialogues of Tyler Durden while mentoring Jack is this:

TYLER DURDEN: You are not your job. You are not your wallet. You are not your fucking khakis. You are not your bank account. You are all the singing and all dancing crap of the world.

This dialogue problematizes the way an individual's identity is formed, or how an individual places himself in the society.

Tyler Durden can be interpreted as the archetypal raw male energy residing in the collective subconscious urging to break free. Tyler Durden is an echo of every human whose instincts are suppressed by the modern consumerist society, which is a faithful servant of neo-capitalism. Even though the majority of human civilization has been removed from the raw, natural, wild habitat, they are struggling to connect with a modernized world whose purposes they cannot fully comprehend. According to Tyler the human community that was once hunters and gatherers, are now just gatherers- gatherers of products.

The loss of warrior consciousness is exposed when Tyler Durden poses an assignment for the members of Fight Club. They have to go and fight with a complete stranger and let him win. But the problem is that in an effeminate society, no one is willing to get into a fight. The warrior instinct in every person has been mellowed down. And as Durden puts it, “people would do anything to avoid a fight.”

While the tamed women conform to patriarchal norms, the tamed men conform to the norms proposed by consumerism. The conformity to the system, cheating his wild self, is probably what keeps Jack an insomniac.

Durden questions the way a modern man lives and asks him to find his life purpose. He also rejects the notion that a modern man who fulfills the standards of consumerist ideology is happy. Anyway, Jack is not happy after fulfilling whatever he has done to be the part of the

modern consumerist civilization. Tyler Durden takes him back to the animalistic, raw masculinity from the orderly, indifferent society that has effeminized him.

Fight Club analyzes, how, the meaning that usually passes for the idea of ‘civilization’ or modernization, is constructed and defined by the consumerist discursive practices, of which commercialism and materialism is an essential part; and, this version of meaning has ripped, abused and suffocated the natural urges of humans.

Jack has a well-paying job, fully furnished condo, and a car. He is ‘successful’ according to the standards proposed by the society in which he lives. He is a citizen who enjoys the power to purchase. But he is also an insomniac, suffers from depression and is terribly lonely. He is dictated and bullied by his boss. He has traded his freedom for acquiring all the aforementioned objects that makes him successful. His days and nights are controlled by his boss. It might not be a wild interpretation to describe him as a new age slave – a slavery maintained for the lifestyle he ‘enjoys’. This slavery gives him the power to be a consumer.

When his condo is blown up by a homemade bomb, it marks the end of Jack, the white collar slave. He goes to Tyler who takes him to a tattered building where he lives and Tyler is not sure who owns that building. Tyler Durden who appears with his fiery dialogues calls those like Jack slaves with white collars.

Durden says, “We do job we hate, to buy shit we don’t need, to please people we do not like”.

It is shocking and pitiable what the citizen of a modern world has to do to gain acceptance.

Every historic period attempts to standardize the perceptions and experience of every society through various discursive practices. Consumerism is one such ideology that has shaped the perception of contemporary society. The aesthetics, lifestyle, identity, purpose of life etc. are all controlled and colored by this ideology. So, individuals are immersed in this maze of distorted perception about themselves, past, present and future. *Fight club*, propounds a way to escape this distorted view of life and living beings by returning to the primal self and answering the call of primordial instincts to fight. Both in sex and fight bodies intertwine to feel alive. At this fleeting moment of liveliness, humans return to their higher self.

In the consumerist paradigm, personal history, opinion or perception has no value and all that is valuable is the semblance to the standardized versions of everything. Any individual in the consumerist society is struggling to reach the completeness of the standardized version of perfect life. They have no any aim or dream other than that is supplied by the media culture- MTV culture- postmodern culture in which they grew up. Everyone is made to believe that they are going to be a rock star or celebrity someday. The disillusionment of this dream has wrecked the personality of anyone who is like Jack and the discontent of the unachieved dream prevails as anger which is directed at none. Consuming resources in a particular manner has become the yard scale of success. And this everlasting need created to consume retains the state of white collar slavery forever.

Fight Club also paints a contrasting picture of consumerism and minimalism at their extremities. When Jack is a victim of extreme consumerism, Tyler comes in as a savior, advocating extreme minimalism which has Buddhist undertones of letting go of everything. When Jack has everything, Tyler Durden has no possessions.

The consumerist society tries to define a human being, based on the ability to consume the products produced by its economy. This is based on a person's job, bank balance, house, material assets like car etc. The value of a human being is determined by value of the things he or she possesses and consumes.

The situation is tragic as Tyler Durden puts, "things you own end up owning you".

While conversing with Jack, Durden says again,

TYLER DURDEN: Advertisements have them chasing cars and clothes, working jobs they hate so they can buy shit they don't need. We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place. We have no Great War, or great depression. The great war is a spiritual war. The great depression is our lives. We were raised by television to believe that we'd be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars -- but we won't. And we're learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed-off.

Consumerism feeds by focusing on the insecurity and uncertainty of life and offering a pseudo world by creating desire and hope and an illusion of security amidst its web of products, which are the elements that create and propagate this illusion. Buying 'stuff' or ability to buy 'stuff' is the proposed way to salvation and peace. Like a state that employs a panoptic surveillance, with the power of its discursive practices, consumerism induces its own discursive practices that propagates and flourishes its ideology. This is achieved through various media practices and cultural tools.

Fight Club examines the contrasting philosophies of consumerism in which humans search for happiness by amassing 'stuff' and that of minimalism in which people experience that possessions do not bring happiness. For instance the belongingness felt by the brotherhood of *Fight Club* is honest and intense when compared to the white collar slavery experienced by an employee. What an individual actually wants is drowned in the plethora of what he is supposed to want and have. This situation is created by the strong undercurrents of certain social paradigms and structures and practices acquired by our 'civilization' post industrialization. The production oriented industry has shifted to the consumer oriented industry. Every individual is defined according to what he or she consumes. The 'products' are not only the tangible nicely packaged objects purchased from shops, but the intangible ones like ideas, education, culture, relationships etc. are also considered to be products. The process of identity creation revolves around the possibility and ability as a consumer. The new mantra is 'I consume therefore I am'.

The re-emergence of the repressed natural instincts of Jack, as the raw and wild Tyler Durden has acquired great admiration among the audience. Tyler Durden and his *Fight Club* have achieved a cult status among the new generation struggling to find meaning of life amidst the chaos of global consumerism.

Tyler Durden, or when Jack becomes Tyler Durden, he is able to make love with the suicidal, self-hating Marla, another support group addict. But Jack cannot remember his sexual encounters with Marla when he was Tyler Durden. The protagonist behaves as a male only when Tyler Durden emerges and Jack is asleep.

Tyler Durden, Jack's repressed self, doesn't stop with mentoring Jack and starting a Fight Club with Jack, he launches a project called 'Project Mayhem', whose first rule is 'nobody asks questions'. Project Mayhem, first grows into an anti-social group that practices vandalism against the structures and symbols of corporatization. It then evolves into a terrorist organization that makes homemade bombs to demolish the whole city, which is the symbol of urbanization.

Nadine Klemens says in *IKEA Boys and Terrorists: Fight Club in the light of 9/11*,

He [Fincher] calls for a discussion about consumerist values. Both Palahniuk's novel and Fincher's movie describe how people live today. They are self-centered and occupied with living their lives as comfortably as possible; the solitary aim of their lives is to build a nest- but what happens when their nesting instinct is satisfied? They get bored and do not know what to do next. Then they are stuck in their daily routine and their brains stop thinking. When they finally realize that something in their lives is wrong, that they do not know for what purpose they live, they search for thrills in order to escape their meaningless existence. In Fight Club, people turn into terrorists so as to give a meaning to their lives.

When the legitimate ways of expression are repressed, whatever is repressed, returns in an uncontrollable manner trying to dismantle the very paradigm that has repressed it. Jack's condo was blown up by his alter ego- Tyler Durden, the whole city is blown up by the members of Project Mayhem. Fight Club affirms that the repressed always returns and the return of the repressed will not be a pleasant experience.

The complex tracks of human psyche explored in the Fight Club through Jack and his alter ego, Tyler Durden resonates with any individual from a consumerist society. While Jack is the tip of the iceberg, Durden is the major part submerged in water. He is the totality of Id or subconscious. The consumerist paradigm fulfills the function of the super ego that tries to regulate Durden and Jack is the ego/ conscious mind. The film exposes the inner recesses of the human community, by exploring Jack's psyche through Durden. While Jack is the prototype of an individual in modernized consumerist society, Tyler is his hero/ savior who will save him from the web of world that makes no sense to him anymore.

The repressed self of the protagonist, Jack is the symbol of a repression experienced by a society led by consumerist ideology. This repressed self, returns, as it always would, and creates imbalances to destroy the paradigm that is responsible for its repression. In the film it returns as 'Project Mayhem', executed by the Fight Club members and overseen by Tyler Durden. Project Mayhem dismantles buildings that symbolize urbanization, industrialization and consumerism, with homemade bombs. The narrative, magnificently warns the society, about the probable results of contemporary lifestyle, and also offers several streams of thoughts that may be capable

of reviving the contemporary urban culture from decadence. *Fight Club* is indeed a mirror held to the face of a decadent system which requires immediate attention.

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