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An Altered Structure of Consumption in Post-Apocalyptic Worldview

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Abstract:

Consumption is a human practice that is exercised for ages in different forms. Without this practice the transaction system would have lost its purpose. In this paper I have tried to investigate how this consumption operates in a post-apocalyptic world. For this purpose I have selected one of the very popular texts of Richard Matheson called *I Am Legend* in which a binary existence of human and nonhuman entities are shown in parallel conflicts. The consumerist attitude of man and nonhuman communities differ to a large extent in their spatial existence and biological sustenance. Time, life and 'other'-ness play significant roles in every form of existence and in the post-society world the utilitarian survival creates a more critical condition for both the species. In this connection i have based my research on Foucault's theory of power and existence.

Keywords: consumption, consumerism, mutant, society, existence, heterotopias, space, transaction.

In terms of economics, consumption takes place in a societal territory and the concept develops itself upon the relationship between the earning, possession and expenditure. In a system of economy the function of consumption encompasses production, distribution and disbursement. Here we find a calculative mathematical function in which a consumer's subject position gets essentially relevant and it substantially purports itself become proportionally symmetrical or asymmetrical to the entire accumulated assets. A hypothetical assumption of the operational ground of futuristic consumption-ratio of a dystopian world after apocalypse can be sketched through the post-cataclysmic fiction where society reduces to a dysfunctional platform of power operation and there a dislocation of stable relation among agreement, communication and movement happens. The idea of consumption and transaction alters its functional positions and possibilities in a post-apocalyptic world set up. Man here does not anymore operate their societal functionality and standards upon money or the civilised system of economy. Man becomes more encapsulated into a hunter-gatherer entity and within a few days or a little more expanded tenure, man loses the significance of society and sense of collective identity.

A post apocalyptic world is all about nothingness in which every sort of sustenance has been exhausted or destroyed for human consumption or natural disaster. Civilised living of the pre

apocalyptic period has degenerated into subhuman living or primitive violence and the societal space of every few human lives after the apocalyptic occurrence has lost its subject position instantly. The standards, comforts and supreme facilities that have long controlled the civilised living and has differentiated a human living and an animalistic survival, have crumbled down through merely a single event. Thus the immediate scenario that are captured and portrayed in either the fictional picture or the cinematic visuals are the dark mist, the destroyed structures, the architectural breakdown, the tattered buildings, the fire-breakout, the dead bodies in extremely disordered shape, irregular or terminated supply of food, some un-dead men struggling to find sustenance or searching for their near and dear ones alive etc which not only indicate at the apocalypse through disaster or cataclysmic event, but also the apocalypse of a civilised life and the breakdown in the parameters of consumerism. A civilization and its growth of living standards is a positive and beneficial demarcation for the entirety of economic development and thus the movement of the civilised society depends on advocating the greater protection of the interests of the consumers which is the basic factor that defines the economic system and determines the success of the performance of a man's being posited in any subspace of the platform of the functionality of society. The comforts and the class division were also effectively based on the multilayered metropolitan structure and system that men used to live in. The cataclysmic event overnight changed it and hindered the normal operations and subverted the hierarchy into a dystopian egalitarianism of a classless community of a holocaust survivor. Previously the crisis in the stable pre-apocalyptic society used to rest on the interclass structural platform of society and after the cataclysmic event had taken place it became a unanimous collective crisis in which the socio-economic class distinction was also destroyed along with the destruction of the economy and the living standards. Apocalypse is a milestone to destroy the hierarchic system of social structure and make it a struggling directionless system of operation by a breakthrough of global holocaust. On the contrary the apocalyptic event also has shown the path of a dislocated and fragmented human cluster by which another alternative power relation is made. The new hierarchy was engulfed in atrocity due to the absence of any supervision of law, rule or jurisdiction. Money essentially lost its value and therefore the economic parity did not work out any more. The distribution of economic power on the social platform and the people existing on the social body totally collapsed and instead of money the new operation of power adapted the act of deposition of food and basic amenities that were to be achieved and possessed through violence, murder and primitive consumption ethics.

In the introduction by Graham Sleight in Richard Matheson's *I AM Legend* we find in a nut shell the story of Robert Neville's life after apocalypse. He is the only unaffected man on earth who has not turned a violent post-civilised metamorphosed mutant and therefore the power relation between him and all other existing nonhuman communities have turned atrocious and rivalrous because these two different classes of survivors have been in contention for their opposite ideologies of consumption ethics. In the world of pre-apocalyptic societal set up, initially these biologically metamorphosed men used to be the minorities and marginal subjects while after the apocalypse of the earth the people of the world have not anymore retained as the biologically discursive human entities and therefore the incident of Robert Neville's remaining miraculously unaffected, is what makes him an

'other' or in Foucauldian terms an 'unreason'. It is the necessity of both the communities to make it a world of the habitation of any single entity that might never be countered by any existence of 'other' and therefore the dystopian egalitarianism necessitates the situation of Robert Neville to turn either a submitted subject to the mutants or to be on a guaranteed security of a macro-political surveillance. But the conflict of power continues and both the groups create their own rigid ideologies to develop a dialectical power relation.

By the daytime, Robert is a hunter which he does by searching the undead through the debris of civilisation and this he does in a primitive mode that was never suitable for a civilised urbanised consumerist life. The habituated postmodern consumerist turned into a post-society hunter-gatherer changing his behaviour into that of a primordial savage. Therefore, indispensable sacrifice of manners takes place in his new world-space, involuntarily assigned to him, which was more essential where he had to survive by gathering food rather than buying it. Thus resistance was less necessitated than that of the biological needs and basic supplies. Food was not anymore available through transaction in the non-consumerist post-society context and therefore money and capital meant nothing in the new world with which the consumerist-identity decayed. The transformed population of the world on the contrary has also stepped outside the discursive norms in which society previously used to run itself and they have created their own post society ethics of consumption in which their societal identity has entirely collapsed and their collective hunt has created an alternative choice of nonhuman consumerist ethics in which their collective desire is to pine for Neville's body. Thus food is a basic need that ultimately drives both the communities into contradictory acts of anarchy.

The imaginary post-apocalyptic fictions portray an unreal space in which multiple possibilities of termination of the stable order are portrayed. The alternative choice of societal picture shows that, both the communities, existing in the dystopian world, have their individual rationality and framed functional pattern of survival in which a macro-politically stateless and boundary-less world is portrayed where the platform of any localised survival-space is subcategorised in territorial sub-domains where collective decision of the surviving species dominates. As there is no omnipotent controlling supervision or any surveillance of authoritarian power, therefore a state of anarchy is unleashed. The process of apocalypse may be sudden or gradual, but power comes up as an essential medium of operation to fulfil the general or individual interest and in a post-society world where the only remaining interest to exist is to consume the least privilege through brazen struggles in a non-societal behavioural notion. The very fundamental amenities are the reasons in a post-apocalyptic world for which the civilised man such as Neville and the primordially instinctual mutants of an extra-society space create their own operational boundary of power. Food is one of the most valuable objects to consume and possess, not through a civilised process of transaction but through a Darwinian survivalism where the world lives in red tooth and claw. The state machinery is no more operational and the power has concentrated on the parameter of the arbitrary success of accomplishing consumption of food. The case is unfortunately identical for Robert as well as the mutant community and thus a human existence does not anymore make any difference except endangering the existence itself on a planet of 'others', because he himself is an

essential raw object to be consumed as food and thus his being different means turning himself victimised in a context where the consumption ethics have changed and he no more retains with any possibility to re-establish the societal order of human behavioural pattern except ineffectively comprehending the danger of the situation, resulting an unpredictable annihilation or subjection to the nonhuman act of consumption of food.

Neville miraculously remains unaffected that represents the human race of the pre-apocalyptic times while the mutated albinos living in groups represent the forthcoming doom of the world in a society-less state. Unlike the civilised people of the society, these mutated survivors have only one task to accomplish which is hunting and that also at nights. There was an urge of individual growth and development in the pre-existing societal system of living which has been supplanted by the alternative choice of action in an objective mode where the essential exclusion of individual happened and collective ethics worked. The subjective deposition of sustenance ended with the end of society and the sloth of humanistic prayer and petition narrowed down to the last man surviving- Robert Neville. Thus the scope of development in the micro-social context decreased almost to nothing and instead a nihilistic democracy came into functionality where everything is operated in terms of instinct and as a consequence intellect lost its supremacy. Robert remained to be the last example of individual consumption and practice of individual materialistic quantitative deposition. This gives us a hint that after the withdrawal of socio-economic distributive balances a society remains only with the unity between its subjective units and distribution of individual power forms a collective unit by which a macro-political collective crisis can be handled. The mutants have formed a radical opposition to the human ethics to such an extent that they even deny the schedule of daytime work as was practised by the civilised people. Thus the mutants represent the ideologies of the existential reformers and the angst of the misanthropes.

Robert Neville is living a human life possessing various amenities that are altogether denied to every other existing creature of the world. In the post apocalyptic world he becomes the representative of the metropolitan consumerism with his acquisition of material comforts such as a well protected shelter, assistance of many scientifically experimented advanced technologies, the human food, the preservation technique, the reading of books, the theatre hall, the music system, chess playing etc which essentially highlight the fact of his pre-crisis class consciousness and his urge of being in an unhindered life of consumed comforts that were well available before the world changed. On the contrary the mutants are posited on symbolic non-conformist subject positions who are dedicated to destroy all the last remaining of human consumerism. They are radical nihilists who never stay in inaction. When Neville becomes the only human remaining to represent the old urban metropolitan life there the mutants become the symbol of the new order of broken consumerism. They are religiously dedicated to change the preservation of consumption. On the contrary all the protective measures taken by Neville are to maintain those comforts that he has preserved with great struggle. To be human is to be social and society keeps on upgrading its living standards and therefore Neville's efforts are essentially human effort to remain into the societal boundary. Not only in the perspectives of conflict but the comforts are also replications of the previous social living. He watches film in a very comfortable a metropolitan consumerist's pattern

choosing the best seat to have the best experience of the scenes projected; he appreciates the movie even after nobody is there to share. Thus he follows the general human reflexes to substantiate to himself that he is still human and his pre-apocalyptic subject position remains unchanged in spite of his being a human other. He knows that the critical comments about the films are useless and are practically spoken or exchanged to nobody yet he speaks to form an imaginary conversation to give a meaning to his words, languages and expressions. By this he opens another avenue to live in human terms. Language is a fundamental way of asserting the identity of any person which he tries continuing in spite of not having a single human entity to keep on his conversation. In this world he does not need to talk but survive safely but as a human the intellectual thoughts of the complex critical mind of a man remains always active to opine about every happenings around him. This thought process is actively expressed through language which Robert wants to prove to himself repeatedly so that he can assure himself that he is still a man. In the world where there is a massive breakdown of communication, language can be great 'dispositif' (Foucault) to continue faith in human-hood and make himself satisfied with the continued evidence that he is not eroding into animality of chromosomal alteration. Consumerism thus helps him to be a human.

Robert tries to create a make-believe world for himself and his every act, starting from his self-talking to his dressing up, is a self assurance that that the concept of society lives with him till he lives. This is an alternative choice of optimism. The excuse he makes to himself is that the existence of life is measured by the parameter of availability of comforts and urbanism. He trusts on the faith that he still lives on the same town and nothing has drastically changed and urban living is still possible and he can do anything to keep the faith up. He goes to watch a movie chosen by him or drives a car to roam in the day are all his subjective choices to avail all those urban comforts as compensation to his realistic seclusion of singular existence. He never wants to lose the space he has created for himself. His own territory within which he survives is a historical space of exception in a post society world which is unique and unconquerable. In the past he lived as a part of society and as a human but now after the cataclysm, the human existence has gone down to a secondary identity, to a marginal level, an 'other'. He still remembers the time of man into a societal collective identity which he has lost forever. He was then not a singular identity neither was living as an outcast, but with the change in collective survival ethics, the disciplinary order changed and with it changed the power relation and the humans extinguished except him. This shows Robert's desire not to be excluded but rather to be a part of collective existence. On the contrary he cannot live a life choosing the non-human mutants by submitting to them. Robert prefers a certain death than becoming an uncertain victim. Robert in this case chooses to fight against thousands. It is very hard for him accept the discursive notions changing in such a short period. In Foucauldian terms when a society categorises the mad people as the 'unreason' then they are subjected to confinement as a part of the disciplinary order; but in this case Robert himself is a part of the rational world and his judgemental parameters are all following the notions of the human order of reasonability while the new world is based on non-human behavioural structure in which Robert's reasons face challenge and they become 'unreason' against the previously established discursive notion of 'reason'. The new anarchy is therefore an impossible hypothesis to be followed by Robert and therefore he being the

only 'other' turns a separatist and his life ideal of pre-crisis time is protected in the shield of consumerism. The present space witnesses a critical isolation from the collective existence, but submitting to it will claim his human identity. Therefore consumerist survival turns not only a defence mechanism but also a refuge through escaping the non human existence. He acts in such a manner that it seems that in his isolated solitariness he has an alternative choice of willing suspension of disbelief that originated from his human imagination. He prefers to drive even for a very short distance to cover and his logic is that he can never tolerate uncomfortable living. The various natural residues of resources of the pre-apocalyptic world, still present, are stored by nature and are sufficient for him as he is the single human unit to put them in service. Robert consumes the residue for his societal living. He again lives in his imaginary space to give shape to his singular survival and willingly acts unrealistically to sell his old car and does a pre-cataclysm imitative act of an untrue car dealer to whom hypothetically he is supposed to sell his old car and exchange a new one. This shows the fact that in a world where money is not anymore a functional mode of transaction, the act of selling and buying is an obsolete practice and therefore the structure of the system of consumerism is a nonexistent factor. Much like Robinson Crusoe, Neville too keeps a track of the dates, weeks and months and thus creates a sort of self-constructed 'heterochroneity' (Foucault) in which he manipulates his space and time and his own consumerist make believe life is controlled by his trusted participation into his own spatial beinghood in a world of extinct human race. The various behavioural patterns followed strictly by him are marks of his forceful restraint to remain a human being. This is not a fact that he was unaware of the existence of the mutants or their nonhuman attributes, their alternative community and its asocial behavioural pattern, hostility or consumption ethics; alternatively this is also a substantial fact that he has started living more as a human than usual. His behavioural direction has turned more dedicated to the etiquettes of living which was not so prompt in the pre-destruction times. The relative worth and value of being a human is far more viable when it is a life hypothetically of the last human to survive and the permanent extinction awaits close. He celebrates being the last life on earth, wears special dresses for dinner, velvet jacket and satin shirts on Sundays during having his meals, goes out often to a ride for a change in the great world of debris, takes the idol of Caesar as a human character and plays chess with it, drinks wine, makes a cosy dining and drawing room, adapts the conservative upper middle class life, believes in the agreed effort and false consolation that the world is still perfect and everything is in its place, gives consolation to the self that the reality of the mutants is a dream to be broken soon while the true unreal is his own faith on sociability.

Thus he is a preserver of consumerist tradition to keep on optimistic faith upon human living-ethics which is natural for him being a secluded identity having a space of 'unreason' (Foucault) while on the opposite the mutants can be viewed as the nonconformists to these traditions of human living by their instinctual denial of all established norms and making the 'unreason' the discursive notion of the new world. According to Foucault, unreason is social subject to be confined and therefore in spite of being the only and most learned socially aware human unit, Neville had to keep himself confined and his reasons are no reasons at all when the revolutionary doctrine of the mutants advocates destruction of social system for its own sake and create an alternative society of nonhumans without the hegemonic supervision

and panoptical surveillance. The mutants can be compared to anti-institutionalists and when Neville represents order, they on the contrary must remain counter discursive against the pre-apocalyptic ideologies of human traditions, behaviours and power relations. Neville's struggling singular efforts to consume and live with the past was collectively opposed by the mobo-crazy of the mutants. Neville's endeavours of consumerist social beinghood is conscientiously opposed by the anti consumerist denial of human reality by the mutated destroyers of order and hierarchy. Neville's voice was not permitted to rise although the new society cannot be called a totalitarian regime because except on Neville it was egalitarian on them for the given time and context. The modus operandi of the new society was initiated by a revolutionary metamorphosis of anti-noetism where superiority of human space, intellect is denied and disagreed. Neville too at the end had to submit through death and they did not allow the last human life to exist on earth. The radical nihilism of the mutants created an replacement of human survival and substituted it with primitivism, uncivilised savagery and a deliberate denial of urbanised morals and metropolitan consumption method. The radicalism was purported to abolish the prevailing system of human survival, practices and institution. The last of the humans dies in isolation and he becomes a legend by not his life as the last survivor, but by his end as the last human death declaring another uncertain world waiting for another violent extinction or the apocalypse,

"He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that...he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed. And abruptly, the concept came, amusing to him even in his pain.

A coughing chuckle filled his throat. He turned and leaned against the wall while he swallowed the pills. Full circle, he thought while the final lethargy crept into his limbs. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever.

I am legend." (Matheson, 160)

The occurrence of death was the last action he could participate as a human and therefore he enjoyed death thoroughly and comprehended the fragmented time of his human entity coming into the fullness through death. His identity of being the last man contributes to his placement in the historicity of time from which he survived only a fragment and the micro-social space he occupied within his life-span of the post-apocalyptic time placed him permanently in the spatial continuum to make him a legend through death. The heterotopian epiphany arrives at the juncture of leaving the identity of the last human, realising the act of entering the space of death and becoming a part of history of spatial permanence.

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