



A SOCIO-EDUCATIVE APPRAISAL OF LIFESTYLE IN MARTIN AMIS' *MONEY: A SUICIDE NOTE*

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RESUME

Le monde moderne se caractérise par un développement exponentiel de la technologie et du consumérisme, fruits d'un capitalisme accru. Dans un tel environnement, l'homme dit moderne est confronté à des dilemmes et à des contradictions dans les choix qu'il opère souvent. Étant à la merci de forces qui semblent échapper à son contrôle, la vie de l'homme dit moderne est souvent misérable et pleine d'illusions. Le but visé par ce travail de recherche est de montrer comment l'auteur anglais Martin Amis, à travers son œuvre *Money: A Suicide Note* peint quelques aspects de la vie que mène l'homme moderne. L'approche psychoanalytique a permis d'arriver à nos fins.

Mots-clés : homme moderne, société de consommation, capitalisme, illusion, éducation

ABSTRACT

The modern world is characterised by a high development of technology and consumerism, the fruit of intensive capitalism. In such an environment, modern man is confronted with dilemmas and contradictions in the choices he often makes. Being the subject of forces that seem to be beyond his control, the life of the so-called modern man is often miserable and full of illusions. The aim of this research work is to show how the English author Martin Amis, through his work *Money: A Suicide Note* paints some aspects of the life modern man lives. The psychoanalytic approach will serve the targeted role.

Keywords: modern man, consumer society, capitalism, illusion, education

INTRODUCTION

The modern and post-modern periods are characterised by an uncontrolled development in science and technology. However, the latter end up revealing themselves like Frankenstein monster. It is such remark that leads Mamadou Hamady Camara, while studying Edward Bond's *Jackets*, to state that:

Le paradis du post-modernisme souffre ... [des] tares. Il a « ses imperfections » – son « Satan » – de la même manière que le paradis de Dieu avait les siennes. Mais à la différence de Dieu, nous ne pouvons pas nous débarrasser de notre Satan. Vouloir extirper celui-ci de notre civilisation équivaudrait à essayer «de changer notre peau en changeant nos habits.» (Camara : 124) [The postmodern paradise suffers from other flaws. It has its "own imperfections" –its "Satan" –the same way God's paradise had its own. However, contrary to God, we cannot get rid of our Satan. To pull up the latter from our civilisation would be equated to trying "to change our skin while changing our clothes."] (My translation)

As it is clearly asserted in the above quote, the scientific discoveries alluded to the paradise are not only instrumental. Like Satan, they are also detrimental and man cannot do anything against. Likewise, Martin Amis, in his novel *Money:*

A Suicide Note rightly focuses on some of these imperfections of the modern man civilisation.

The aim of this research work is to show on the one hand how the English author Martin Amis, through his work *Money: A Suicide Note* paints the life style of John Self, laying emphasis on his behavioural orientations and their connotations. To achieve such a goal, the novel will be read from the viewpoint of freudian psychoanalytic theory. This theory attempts to provide universal models and explanations for the drives which underpin the way people behave. It also offers ways of interpreting the manner in which desire and pleasure, and other aspects of the psyche, manifest themselves. (Webster: 88).

1. The symbol of fiasco

The name 'Fiasco' strikes attention and seems odd in the text. Still taking it as a condensation, we come to realise that it carries a number of associations which converge symbolically in the course of the narrative which is a depiction of the modern society. In this respect, the name 'fiasco' could be read beyond its apparent and literal meaning or viewed beyond what it names. It rather prefigures the real description of Self's society. It implicitly illustrates the chaos of the civilisation in the sense that it could be read as synonyms of disaster, embarrassment, mess. In other words, such a name can be viewed as a device used to transmit a message according to which, the same a car leads man to a given destination, modernity is probably leading Self to a fiasco, a chaos.

Having lost any control over his destination, man stays powerless before the "powerful Fiasco", and the worst is that though his life causes him misfortune, his state of enslavement by the modern era forces him to blindly get stuck to his modern life and be still fond of the disasters life brings to him.

The Fiasco, it's my pride and joy. Acting like a pal, I lend the motor to Alec Llewellyn while I'm in New York. And what do I return to? An igloo of parking-tickets and birdcrap, with a ripped spare, a bad grinding noise, and every single gauge resignedly flashing ... You should see the way the boys at the garage simply cover their faces with envy and admiration when the Fiasco is driven -or pushed or towed or, on one occasion, practically coptered- into their trash-strewn mews. It is temperamental, my Fiasco, like all the best racehorses, poets and chiefs. You can't expect it to behave like any old Mistral or Alibi. I bought it last year for an enormous amount of money. There are some ... who believe that the Fiasco errs on the side of ostentation, that the Fiasco is in questionable state. But what do they know? (*Money*, p. 93).

This excerpt raises a certain number of questions and shows a contradiction between the state of the car and the pride it brings to Self. On the one hand, it is curious to realise that this car which is in a disgusting way forces admiration. On the other hand, it is questionable how a sensible man can afford spending an enormous amount of money on a 'temperamental' engine, that is, an engine which does not work properly.

Still, an analysis of the above contradictions are revelatory of the incongruity of John Self and implicitly modern man's life.

Self is aware that the car does not work properly.

I drove home in my Fiasco, which apart from the faulty cooling system, the recurring malfunction with the brakes, and power steering, and a tendency to list violently to the left, seems to be running fairly reliably at present. At least it starts more often than not, on the whole. (*Money*, p. 141).

The fragility of the car which is demonstrated not only through the working of its engine but also through the state in which it is brought back after a ride prompts the reader to agree with those who think that "the Fiasco errs on the side of ostentation, that the Fiasco is in questionable state" (*Money*, p. 144). Briefly, the word ostentation which is defined as a situation in which "you deliberately try to show people how rich and clever you are, in order to make them admire you" (Ratray: 1160) is simply reminiscent of the lavishness that marks with stamps the modern civilisation. Consequently, this state of affairs makes free ground for failure, chaos, and disappointment. Put in simple words, the attitude of Self towards his car is evocative of how the modern man turns a blind eye before the social decay epitomised by the bad state of the car fiasco.

2. The esthetics of the rotten teeth

Another mechanism Martin Amis uses to discuss the corrupt nature of modern man is through the figurative image of teeth. With regard to *Money: A Suicide Note* the misfortunes the blind search for money and the corrupt morality bring to man are identifiable in the state of the protagonist's teeth.

It is not indicated which teeth are aching the protagonist but a close look at the molar reflects the picture of a crown which is among many definitions said to be "a circle ... worn by someone who has won a special honour."¹

First of all, the decay of Self's teeth is evidenced by the dentist Roger during his consultation:

I already have a trio of gurgling gimmicks in my mouth ...
'Have you had any discomfort there?'
'Pain, you mean? Pain? Yeah, lots. That's why I'm here.'
'Yes, well you would. Hello, seems to be some mobility ...I must just check the vitality of that one' ... 'Can you feel anything?'
...
'On the tooth? No.'
'Discomfort? ... minimal vitality' he murmured... 'What are you talking about? Talk right, okay? It's loose and it's dead and it's coming out. Yes? No?'
'I don't do extractions,' he said primly. You'll have to see MrsMcGilchrist about that.'
'Then just clean them', I said ...
'The gum's been traumatized by the shape of the root,' he mused ...

¹ Ibidem., p. 1092.

'Traumatized?' I sipped the fizzy liquid and expelled its tactful pink. Now you're talking'.

'Well the shape of the root is very unusual.' (Money, pp. 75-76)

In the analysis of the novel, not only are three of Self's teeth rotten when he was rich but also Amis is quick in informing the readership far ahead about the reasons of this rottenness through an extract of a chat he created between Self and Dawn: "I gave her all my face, and it's a face ... usually full of adolescent archaeology and cheap food and junk money, the face of a fat snake, bearing all the things of its sins." (Money, p. 14)

In the present context, 'face' is used in to signify the mouth. This is suggested by the snake which bears "all the things of its sins", that is, its venom not on its face but rather in its teeth. The association of teeth and snake serve in the quote to connote the poisoning of the modern man's life.

Likewise, Martin Amis uses also the same symbol in *The Rachel Papers*. He provides Charles Highway who is an educated young man but depraved by his sexual attitudes with rotten teeth.

Take, for example, my mouth -literally a shambles. My milk-teeth wouldn't go away, they just curdled, although politely moving over to accommodate my grown-up ones. At the age of ten I must have had more teeth in my head than the average dentist's waiting room. Soon, I used to think, they'll be coming out of my nose. Then months of high-powered surgery involving metal strips, nuts, clips, bolts ... you name it. For two years I went about the place with a mouth like a Meccano set.²

It stands out from this extract that nothing can be done by the doctor in order to remove the rotten teeth, nor to cure them or even to replace them by fake ones. That is also stated in *Money: A Suicide Note* by the fact that Self has not taken in consideration, the dentist Roger's advice to go and see Mrs McGilchrist for an extraction. He rather opted for a cleaning of the rotten teeth. All the obstinacies of Charles Highway and Self merge with the idea of the impossibility to heal the modern man from the moral decay prevailing in their environment. The rotten teeth being used to reveal the hidden reality of the modern era culture and civilisation.

3. Illusionary happiness

This idea of illusionary happiness the modern man derives from all what he can find as best in his civilisation is expressly formulated as follow:

[w]e all seem to make lots of money. Man, do we seem to be coining it here. Even the chicks live like kings. The car is free. The car is on the house. The house is on mortgage. The mortgage is on the firm -without interest. The interest thing is: how long can this last? For me, that question carries an awful lot of anxiety - ... are we greedy! Are we shameless! I once saw Terry Linex, that fat madman, take a grand out of petty cash for a

² Martin Amis, *The Rachel Papers*, (London: Vintage, 2003), p.29.

weekend in Dieppe. ... We estimate that Keith Carburton spent £17,000 on lunch in fiscal '80, service and VAT non compris. You should see their freehold townhouses and bijou Costwold cottages. You should see their cars -the Tomahawks, the Farragos, and Boomerangs. I've been ripping off the firm and the government too, for five years now, and what have I got? A hired sock, a Fiasco and the prohibitive Selina. (*Money*, p.78)

The verb 'seem' used in the first sentence of the quotation is a forceful one that supports the opinion according to which, the fact of making lots of money and enjoying all things it can offer such as expensive cars, a memorable expensive weekend, expensive meal in the most comfortable restaurants and beautiful houses, are mere appearance.

The same idea is reiterated in Self's murmur:

Deep down, I'm a pretty happy guy. Happiness is the relief of pain, they say, and so I guess I'm a pretty happy guy. The relief of pain happens to me frequently. But so does pain. That's why I get lots of that relief they talk about, and all that happiness (*Money*, p. 74).

The illusionary happiness John Self talks about and that the modern man thinks he enjoys is made explicit in this quotation. By analogy, it can be compared to a wrapper which covers the unhappiness of the modern man life and which gives it a glittering image. The quotation draws the reader's attention on the fact that the modern man is cocooned into a perverse and illusory glamour and from this standpoint, he cannot really talk about happiness. Even if John Self deems himself content, the reader, through the subtle narrative ability of Martin Amis and the tragic irony he uses, notices that John Self is not happy and has not experienced true happiness as such. This idea is inferred from the assertion according to which even if "the relief of pain happens to me very frequently [through drinking most of the time] ... but so does pain". Such remarks can lead to redefine the life of the modern man as a string of rosary of pain that is intermittently mixed up with periods of fake relieves provided by either drinks, drugs or games.

It is finally this disgust for the modern man's life that forces John Self to end up acknowledging, despite all the material possessions the author endowed him with, that "I live like an animal -eating and drinking, dumping and sleeping, fucking and fighting -and that's it. It's survival. It's not enough" (*Money*, p. 257). From this quotation, it is flagrant something is missing to make life fully enjoyable for Self. He will acknowledge this lack during one of the periods of serious thoughts he experiences during his stay with Martina Twain.

Something is missing from the present too. Wouldn't you say? Mobile, sprangled and glamorous, my life looks good on paper anyhow -but I think we're all agreed that I have a problem. Not so? Then what is it? Brother, sister, do the right thing here and let me on it. Help me out. You'll tell me it's the booze ... the booze isn't brill, I warrant, but the booze is nothing new. Something else is new. I feel invaded, duped, fucked around. I hear strange voices and speak in strange tongues. I get thoughts that are over my head. I feel violated ... inner cities crackle with the money chaos -but I've got money, plenty of

it, I'm due to make lots more. What's missing? What the hell else is there? ... (Money, p. 67).

The above excerpt appears as a conflict between Self's consciousness that helps him present a true account of his miserable life and his unconsciousness which is symbolically said to be the 'strange voices'. There is then a stream of consciousness which might be a deliberate way the writer chooses to let the reader also reflect upon the source of true happiness. Living in an era of consumerism, Self struggles by all means in order to have lots of money in order to satisfy his material addiction. John Self who stands for each and every one of us has been bestowed with all the attributes of modern life -lots of money, carnal pleasure, food and drinks, material property- and still he is not genuinely happy. This stream of consciousness could be read as a call of Martin Amis to each and every one of us to reflect deeply and to consider the fact that all the things that surrender us mainly provide us an illusionary happiness if we do not use them in the right way.

4. The Prince of Wales as a Role model

A writer does not only show the social realities. As teachers and guides, they also propose answers to problems the humanity is confronted to. It is in this vein that studying the character of the Prince of Wales is crucial

He [the Prince of Wales] was ... profoundly grateful that he had been taught self-discipline at an early stage in his life. Self-discipline, said the Prince, seemed to him absolutely essential to any kind of civilised existence. ... boy I [Self] wish someone had taught me self-discipline -when I was young, when you learn things without really trying. They could have taught me pride, dignity, and French while they were at it. I wouldn't have had to lift a finger. But no one ever did teach me all that stuff. I've endeavoured to teach it to myself. I sit around trying to teach myself self-discipline. I can't be doing with it, though (it just isn't enough fun, self-discipline), and I always end up going out for a good time instead. (Money, pp. 72-73)

This account of the childhood of the Prince of Wales contributes to his successful adulthood. In fact, The Prince in the quote is grateful towards his parents for teaching him self-discipline. It is worth insisting on the fact that the word "discipline" is polysemous. For example, if we turn to the dictionary, we have as possible definitions the observance of rules, teaching; the ability to control your own behaviour and punishment for not obeying the rules. However, in the analysis of this quotation, the meaning that fits is an alternative the alternative of training proposed by Doctor Fitzhugh Dodson in his work *Tout se joue avant 6 ans*: " 'Entraînement.' Le mot *discipline* contient le mot *disciple*. Quand vous disciplinez votre enfant, vous l'entraînez vraiment à devenir votre disciple, à vous d'être son professeur."³This

³ Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson, *Tout se joue avant 6 ans*, (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Marabout, Mars 2009, p. 181.

quotation revives in our mind William Wordsworth's famous quote according to which "the child is the father of man."⁴

Childhood is an important stage in the life of all human beings. It is a period during which each human being forges his personality by imitating a role model, a personality on which top other values will be encrusted. It is also important to stress that this role model should be a morally and intellectually sound person, for even if Dodson is recommending parents to be their children's coaches, he is alluding to responsible ones. It is in this order of idea that he (Dodson, 93) believes that the first thing to do to a child while they are still in their 'first adolescence' is to help them set up reasonable limits to their actions.⁵ In a similar vein, while reflecting upon the origins of a child's good personality, *the Watch Tour* comes to the following answer after asking a series of questions:

*Comment l'être humain apprend t-il à aimer? En étudiant la psychologie? En lisant des guides pratiques? En regardant des films d'amour? C'est avant tout grâce à l'exemple et à la formation que lui donnent ses parents. L'enfant qui voit ses parents le nourrir et le protéger, communiquer avec lui, le tout dans une atmosphère pleine d'affection, comprend ce qu'est l'amour. Il apprend aussi à aimer si ses parents lui enseignent à observer les principes salutaires du bien et du mal.*⁶
 [How does human being come to love? Is it by reading psychology? By reading practical guides? By watching romantic films? It is first of all thanks to the good example their parents give them. The child who sees his parents feed and protect them, communicate with them, all these in a caring atmosphere, knows what love means. They also learn how to love if their parents teach them how to observe benefic principles of good and evil.]
 (My translation)

In the light of the afore-mentioned quotations, discipline can be reduced to love because with reference to several literary works, man is composed of flesh and soul, the latter which in turn accommodates good and evil. However, human nature has the propensity to let the pig in him⁷ dominates over the good manners, and by so doing man gets involved in vices, making of his life a misery, a tragedy. If modern man can liberate good manners and allow ethics to transpire throughout his actions, the quality the world will offer as role model will be love which embodies ethics and good virtues, in other words the humanity in man. These are the fruits of discipline Dodson and Amis are aiming at in their respective reflections.

Besides the fact that the Prince's educators' have the wit to dissociate what is right from what is wrong, they fully play their role by teaching him the right thing to do. They help him draw sensible borders to his actions and behaviours when it was still time. This is the reason why the Prince, once a grown-up person, can better

⁴ William Wordsworth, *My Heart Leaps when I Behold*, in *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language*, (London: Trident Press International, 1996), p. 1851.

⁵ Dr. Fitzhugh Dodson, op. cit., p.93.

⁶ *La Tour de garde Vol 124, N. 13: Comment apprendre à aimer*, (France : Editions les Témoins de Jéhovah de France, 1^{er} Juillet 2003), p. 4.

⁷ William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*, (Lagos: Spectrum Books Limited, 2003).

appreciate the great role played by his mentors in his tender age after comparing himself to several people he encounters.

As a result, he is grateful for being taught the right thing at the right time which is 'at the early stage of life', that is, when he was a child. If the education of a person is missed during this crucial period in man's development, it is his whole life which is disoriented. He may try hard, but at the image of a grown-up tree to which it will be difficult to dictate a shape, it will be highly hard to such a man to acquire new values. In this order of idea, though Self realises how important self-discipline is and no matter how hard he tries to re-educate himself, to teach it to himself, he never succeeds. He always finishes realising that he is in fact struggling with values which seem more powerful than his good will.

This clearly explains why, though John Self has reached the epiphany in the company of Martina Twain who plays in his life the role of the dedicated mother and the lovely sister, the former ends up stepping back to his old habits. This idea has been summed up in the following quote:

At sickening speed I have roared and clattered, I have rocketed through my time, breaking all the limits, time limits, speed limits, city limits, jumping lights and cutting corners, guzzling gas and burning rubber, staring through the foul screen with my feet on the horn. I am that fleeting train that goes screaming past you in the night. Though travelling nowhere I have hurled with blind purpose to the very end of my time. I have lived headlong at a desperate rhythm. I want to slow down now, and check out the scenery, and put in a stop or two. I want some semi-colons. Maybe Martina will be my big brake ... I can't change, but maybe I can just sit back, with a drink, and let my life do all the work. (*Money*, p.288).

In the search of happiness, modern man thinks everything is allowed and he lives without any respect, without setting any limit that should delineate and safeguard human actions. He finally entraps himself in a civilisation which submerges him completely and in front of which he becomes really powerless, reason why he had "lived headlong at a desperate rhythm". When he realises at long last the type of miserable life he was living and wants 'to slow down and check out the scenery', it becomes impossible for him to change.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the lifestyle of modern man dominated by pleasure, illusionary happiness. In Amis' selected work, it is quite obvious that the concept of a decayed world has been underscored among many other depictions in the symbol of Self's car: the fiasco. Secondly, the same idea is embedded in the portrayal of decayed teeth. Thirdly, it is illustrated through the illusionary happiness the modern man enjoys. Finally, the character the Prince of Wales might have been created to stand for the voice of moral values and is probably used to show what is expected from parents to save the world from the moral degeneracy.

In the same vein, some critics in their analysis of *Money: A Suicide Note*, come to the following conclusion which summarises perfectly the ideas developed in the present essay. The plot of the novel, though excessive (Doan, 71) and "not wildly exciting" (Stein, 28), involves the destruction of Self, a cathartic destruction that ends in hope, an ending that Amis himself calls "happy" (Haffenden 14).

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