

CAPITALISM VERSUS HUMANISM IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF NANA KWAME ADJEI-BRENYAH'S *FRIDAY BLACK*

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Abstract : This paper aims to interpret the capitalist moves in mall culture and the motives of degenerating humanity in the select short stories of a young Ghanian-American writer, Nana Kwame Adjei Brenyah. The pompous lifestyle of postmodern world is attacked by the writer in the stories, *Friday Black*, *How to Sell a Jacket as Told by Iceking* and *In Retail*. The globalized world has given rise to many mass cultures. The cohabited popular postmodern culture seems to be elusive and pervasive. Capitalist mode of business has resulted in wage labour, poverty, exploitation and celebration of menial and materialistic things. Materialism is prominent in the capitalist consumerism. Human values are rejected and neglected. Nana Kwame Adjei Brenyah is a young American writer who seems to be much aware of the cosmopolitan world. His collection of short stories, *Friday Black* is poignant, surreal and appears as hard-hitting stones upon capitalism and urbanisation. He shows how the commodity based life will lead to a disastrous destination where virtue and goodness become cold and unnatural life becomes normal. This paper attempts to locate the aftermath of the urbanisation and commodity fetishism in malls and to uncover the possibility of a disoriented future. It explores how capitalism takes a toll on humanism.

Keywords - Capitalism, Mall culture, Consumerism, Manipulation, Inhumanity, Exploitation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Capitalism is a wide spoken term in the twenty first century. It has gained momentum through the critics addressing its growing consequences in people's lives. It is an umbrella term which has multiple layers of derivations and meanings. The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies defines Capitalism "as a mode of production premised on the private ownership of the means of production" (19). In cultural aspect, Capitalism gives rise to class conflict in terms of earning and lifestyles. Exploitation of the working class, commodification and commodity fetishism are the major characteristics of capitalism.

Today, after facing the industrial and economic revolution, the world has turned into a global market focusing primarily on profitable business. Many factories and industries are the outcomes of this business. People are driven into a different world of consumerism. Greed has overpowered the needs of the people. People had been consuming depending on their income. Now, they are being exploited and manipulated by the capitalist masters to procure more than their essentiality. Shops had been a source of essentialism. But now it has become a mode of entertainment and freeplay. Men and women have started to adopt the bourgeois culture. They forget the necessities of life and go after the illusionary globalised world. Gradually they drift from the natural human values and concerns. Capitalism through its proprietor customs completely tries to evacuate humanism. Nana Kwame Adjei Brenyah, who lives in America, has observed the insincerities of the capitalised society and has captured them in his short stories.

Mall is one such arena where variety of illusions and capitalist mode of consumerism can be seen. It is an unrealistic and pretentious place that seems to have almost everything under the sky. Mere commodities are displayed alluringly to exploit the consumers and the products become valuable while the labour it required is masked. This kind of concealed manipulation is called as Commodity Fetishism, which is a branch of Capitalism. SuperShells, Poleface™, Sleekpack, Fleeces , Coalmeister , SkinnyStretches, BurgerLand and BuyStuy are the commodities Nana refers to in his title story, *Friday Black*. These are multinational industries. SuperShells and Poleface™ are the popular cloth brands which manufactures expensive coats and denims. This is a clear attack on the modern trends followed by the youth and on the private industries that rules the global market. Every man and woman in the story literally shouts out the names of the popular brands. This shows how the American society is obsessed with materialism. They regard the clothes as something precious than their own life and values. They forget all their moralities and run after the clothes insanely. Attractive schemes,"gift card" and"winter sale"(151) are techniques used by the salesmen to project the brands and raise their material value.

The insanity of consumerism is portrayed by Nana. He describes how capitalist consumerism has brutally murdered humanism in the story, *Friday Black*. Black Friday is an occasional sales day of America, where people grab and swallow things in abundance for low costs. People literally push and hurt each other. The madness of the rushing crowd of the sales is realistically pictured by Nana. He says that there are "Blood stains all over the floor"(109). Customers are "Blood-messed humans with money in their wallets"(114). Malls work corporative during festive seasons. The narrator says "Christmas is God here"(110) as it brings much sales. The overpowering superiority and ambitious nature of the capitalist is seen when the narrator says "This is the prominent Mall. We're the biggest store...We're supposed to do a million over the next thirty days"(104). Nana seems to express contempt for Black Friday. The bizarre descriptions of Black Friday, is an attack on the postmodern mall culture. He describes the crowd during Black Friday.

Maybe eighty people rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside. Have you ever seen people run from a fire or gunshots? It's like that, with less fear and more hunger. From my cabin, I see a child, disappear as the wave of consumer fervor swallows her up (106).

People go crazy after things that they rarely come in terms with the reality. They literally forget the real world and run after the illusionary visions of the mall. Many people lose their lives in the rush. Nana points out the idiosyncrasy of the customers who behave inhumanely. "Black Friday is a special case; we are still a hub of customer care and interpersonal cohesiveness," mall management said in a mall-wide memo. As if caring about people is something you can turn on and off"(108). This shows the negation of the mall authorities towards the people. The sale is a kind of instigating people to become superior citizens. People have the tendency that they must be rich and popular. The capitalist consumerism has created an illusion that being famous and wealthy are the keys to success. So the people have become devoid of any human values and they fervently gobble up the things.

Manipulation is a significant trait of capitalism. Nana shows how a sales man manipulates the customers to buy things. A shrewd sales manager knows how to tackle the customers and to kindle their interests. This is a capitalist move where the sales man becomes a performer rather than an assistant, who must serve people. For the capitalist, people are mere commodities as the narrator says "I've said the same thing, the same way, to so many different faces"(155). When a family visits the mall, the salesman observes the personalities and acts suited to their interests. He says "I smile at the kids quickly. I set my jaw and keep thoughtful look on when I make eye contact with Father. When I look at Mother. I imagine my own mother; I smile with all the love of the world in my eyes"(151).

Some kinds of tricks are used by the employees to attract the consumers. Sales men manipulate the customers to buy unneeded things. The Neo-materialist approach can be seen in the story 'How to Sell a Jacket as Told by Iceking', where one buys unintended things. The narrator says "Florence made a girl who came in for a hat for her boyfriend leave with a new fall wardrobe"(150). The salesman dresses up himself to grab the eyeballs of the kids and youths. He becomes the "orbit" and "master" for his customers (155). Today men and women have adopted consumerism as their lifestyle. This has an effect on their decision-making. The capitalist salesman becomes the authority of the customers, who fail to notice the manipulation. The salesman proclaims himself as an "Iceking - lord of the winter sale season". He knows that he will rule the hearts and minds of the customers.

Ultimately, Nana shows the inhuman nature of the postmodern culture in the story, *In Retail*. Levels of idiosyncrasy block the little goodness of humans. When a sales woman, Lucy, jumps off the building due to work pressure and her cringing income, people take pictures and record videos of her tragic fall. The people neither feel distressed and try to save her nor are the mall authorities concerned of her death. Nana says;

The sick part was...the people pointing or snapping pictures with their phone...You'd think the mall would maybe close for a few hours. Let people gather themselves. Maybe light a candle or something. Nope. Buy One Get One stops for no one (164).

The mall continues to run the sale in spite of its employee being dead. Nana portrays an impending dystopian world where people lack human emotions. He says that being an employee of a mall, one has to learn to find happiness on himself. Nobody will come up to them to ask about their wellbeing. Helping the customers makes the saleswoman happy. The narrator wishes that she could have saved her if she has seen her. But there is no time to think of any goodness, mercy and cure here. She must take care of her little child and so she should continue to work. Every human is concerned of the other humans, the value which has been universal since the evolution of mankind. The exploitative capitalist notion burdens the workers that they do not even have time to think about the tragic death of their co-workers. Nana writes "Go back to counting jeans. Think about anything and count. Don't think about how a small part of you wishes you'd seen it. Her standing on the railing of the fourth floor. Lucy, flying. Count"(164). The wage labourers are distracted from human values and despite being known of their exploitation, they continue to work for their livelihood. They do not have the power to defend themselves and question the authorities for justice. Nana shows what really matters to the capitalists."In the mall the only truths that matter are the kinds you can count. Sales goals, register tills, inventory. Numbers are it. Everything else is mostly bullshit"(150)

Contemplating on the effects of capitalism gives a diluted picture of humanism. Nana mocks at the superficiality of the postmodern world where only materialism matters and nothing more. The capitalists rule the society through commodities. The involuntary involvement of the people in capitalist consumerism is due to manipulation. Sales men and women become the mouthpieces of the capitalist. They deceive people using sugar-coated words and by creating a self-doubt in their appearances. The deceptive dressing of the salesmen attracts customers. These techniques are guided by an invisible force. They follow the neo-colonial route of ruling the people without their knowledge. Insaneness of the customers is the evidence of the capitalist rule. They create circus-like malls, where people watch and enjoy the attractive performances. The employees are tortured physically and mentally by overwork and less payment like animals in circus. Urbanisation has given an outlook of sophistication through shopping in malls. But no one is able to record the things that happen behind the illusionary screens of the malls. It is an occult system that utterly dehumanises the people and their minds. It is a time of awakening for the people to collapse the audacity of the capitalist by reverting to the basic human values that connects them with their fellow-beings.

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