



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Capitalism and Commodification of Sexuality: Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*

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ABSTRACT

Henry Valentine Miller, popularly known as Henry Miller is a modern American novelist who was famous for his autobiographical expression of sexuality in his novels. Miller presents sexuality from various angles. He is one of the exceptional writers who presents himself as a sexual hero and narrates his own sexual encounters. In *Quiet Days in Clichy*, Miller presents his sexual encounters during his probation days in a metropolis of Paris in early 1930s.

Miller's presentation of capitalistic and commercial impact of sexuality in the novella are quite significant as he is presenting himself as pornographic hero of the text. Also, presentation of sexual fantasies and their encounter with reality focuses on the contemporary urban and commercial sexualities. Miller is bold enough to present unconventional sexuality in his novella. The novella is significant on the background of twentieth century European metropolis and cultural, social and psychological aspect of the contemporary Europe.

Key Word: Henry Miller, sexuality, Paris, pornography, capitalism, commodification, culture and whores

Capitalism has become the dominant force since industrial revolution and thereby has affected and reshaped every constituent of human life, including human sexualities. Capitalism contributed to the growth of freedom, to a critical, responsible self. It also led people to loneliness by putting the individual entirely on his/her own feet and furthered the process of alienation. Simultaneously, the repressive energy of capitalism has certainly changed the world. Its central imperatives such as expansion, realization of surplus value and profit ensure certain indifference to the terrain, it is working on and through. According to Jeffery Weeks, during the blooming period of industrialization in England, the capitalist entrepreneurs were indifferent to the moral impact of their activities. Capitalism led everything including sexuality towards commercialization and commoditization.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes how capitalism fundamentally repressed almost all sexual pleasure in order to proliferate the creation of more capital, with the exception of reproduction (since it allows for more children) to be allowed in a capitalist society.

According to Foucault, by placing the age of (sexual) repression in the seventeenth century... one adjusts it to coincide with the development of capitalism and if the labour capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits

In modern societies, sex has not only become a form of consumerism, but also a 'thing in itself'. Capitalism has most dominant influence on the sexuality of women than that of a man. Women in capitalism are subjected to a widespread and deeply affecting type of alienation. Alan Soble calls this alienation 'the dismemberment syndrome'. Much of the dismemberment alienation experienced by women in capitalism is a function of male sexuality. It is not only that the sexuality is commercialized but the sexual desire is also commercialized. The Commercialization of sexual desire led to a more multiplicity of sexual relations and encouraged pervasive desires. That is what, Altman saw in the gay bathhouses and opines that this new pattern tended to undermine conventional morality.

Alan Soble, in his book *Pornography*, gives three interconnected manifestations of the syndrome: they are physical, linguistic and photographic dismemberment. Physical dismemberment is the separation of limbs from the trunk of the body during violent sexual or non - sexual assault. Moreover, this dismemberment is omnipresent. The second syndrome, linguistic dismemberment, is quite important. This is a practice to refer to a woman by using the names of parts of the body. (E.g. 'cunt' or 'piece of ass'). In such, her ontological

status is reduced to that of a part. The third manifestation of the syndrome is the photographic dismemberment of women's bodies that occurs in advertisements, movies, and pornographies.

Another major feature of capitalism is that the male sexuality is interconnected with the concepts of objectification, fixation (or partialism), manipulation (or conquest), and performance. In such case, a woman is taken as an object for the man, whatever personality attributed to her and her parts of body are stereotypically feminine, the passive outlet for the satisfaction of masculine desire. Men's tendency to approach women is seen most clearly in fixation, to achieve arousal and satisfaction. One of the consequences of the male sexuality is that it is highly visual as Soble exemplifies that pictorial pornography appeals mostly to men and not to women. According to him, man sees the female body at rest as an asexual and passive machine, inanimate, cool, inert, not yet "turned on" unplugged. This means that his task is nothing but to operate that machine and the woman's task is to yield and submit and allow herself to manipulate. In such a state of mind, the importance is attributed to the male performance. Male performance becomes then instrumental and sex is used to exhibit capacity. It is productive and quantifiable where penis becomes the centre of quantifying performance principle. This establishes a contributory connection between the components of male sexuality in capitalism with the dismemberment syndrome of women accompanying the alienation of women. Consequently, men, who exhibit these four traits refer to woman publicly, privately, and subjectively as "cunt" and "piece of ass" and get satisfied by dismembering pornography. Especially, pornography and advertisement function to reflect a male sexual interest in a woman's body as whole or in parts.

Further, the universal structuring principle of capitalism is a commodity. The reification or fetishization of the commodity has effects in both the spheres of production and the sphere of consumption. In capitalism, the labourer is an instrument of production and consumption as well. This creates desensitisation of the body of the labourer. For desensitised body, a body that it engaged for hours at a time in non-sensuous activity, sexual activity becomes a release of tension. Marx describes the sexual activity of the labourer in capitalism as the human becoming animal. This commoditization of sex affects the realm of consumption. If sex is consumer goods, then the affection from sexual is separated, the sex partners are commodities and therefore they are bought, sold and exchanged in the market. The woman wraps herself nicely suggesting her body sexually and reciprocally man advertises strength. Then, it becomes a business and morality is far away from him as Jeffrey Weeks says:

“The purpose of business and morality is often clashed and the latter frequently lost.” (Weeks, 1985, p. 22)

The relation between sexuality and capitalism are also governed by the complex meditations through moral agencies, political interventions and diverse social practices. The economic changes affect sexuality. It also affects society which forms a close relation, sexual patterns and change in the relationship between men and women. The capitalism challenged the established concept of sexuality and this is perhaps the most profound revolution in the social as well as theoretical approach to sexuality.

Thus, sexuality that ultimately forms the moral vision and the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ has implications in multitude. Since it is a prominent human inspiration, it has also laid its impressions on literature of every culture. In the twentieth century, literature became bold and frank enough to reflect sex and led it to open discussion. Owing to the influence of Freudian and other psychological theories of psychoanalysis, the Western writers like D.H. Lawrence presented sexuality in literature with quite serious attitude and further the impressions are shown by many other writers. The Literature discussing and analyzing sex has always been the recipient of the bitter criticism of any conservative society driven by religion and patriarchal values. Therefore, it has been observed that the works of these writers created havoc as they were subversive to the contemporary established taboos. These works were largely welcomed by the people.

Miller’s novel, *Quiet Days in Clichy*. *Clichy* is a story of a penniless but hopeful struggling writer, Joey and his roommate and friend, Carl. They spend their days and nights trawling the clubs, cafes and streets of Paris, pursuing the carnal charms of the city. This short novel narrates how their endeavours result in a series of wild orgies and outrageous erotic adventures with an endless parade of wanton women, including a stoned neighbour, various prostitutes, a teenage runaway nymphomaniac and a beautiful but reluctant Scandinavian. In fact, prostitutes and whore are the products of capitalism. The book is significant for Miller’s presentation of Paris, the whores and some of the beautiful passages commenting on the situation. In one of his experiences, he narrates the French attitude to a whore:

“I remember the shock I experienced when I saw a whore fall dead drunk across one of the little tables on the terrace and nobody ran to her assistance. I was amazed and horrified by the stoical indifference of the French; I still am, despite all the good qualities in them which I have since come to know. “*It’s nothing. It was just a whore.... She was drunk...*” I can still hear those words. Even today they make me shudder. But it is very French, this attitude, and, if you don’t learn to accept it, your stay in France won’t be very pleasant.” (*Clichy*, p. 8)

A picture of starvation presented in *Clichy* by Miller is a grey outcome of capitalism as exploitation is one of the bases of capitalism. Further, the irony is that he starves in Paris, a glamorous city of fashions and trends. He presents the ferociousness of hunger, especially on the background of the prosperity. But at the same time, Miller's view that a whore is an ideal woman and commercialization of sexuality is both gratifying and convenient for the male. Simultaneously, he presents the perfection of feminine in this book, when he comments on NYS. He opines:

“There were no worms devouring her conscience, no cares which she couldn't throw off. Floating with the tide, nothing more. She would produce no children, contribute nothing to the welfare of the community, leave no mark upon the world in going. But wherever she went she would make life easier, more attractive, more fragrant. And that is no little thing. Every time I left her I had the feeling of a day well spent. I wished that I too could take life in that same easy natural way.” (*Clichy*, p. 51)

Miller here presents a brief critique on the relationship of a whore with society. The whore is the disdained and humiliated section of the sophisticated society. Moreover, it has a less contribution to the society on the basis of the orthodox moral standards. With his encounters with different whores and women, Miller presents his journey in search of self in the tumult of capitalism in *Clichy*. Carl, Miller's companion, reminds here Van Norden. In fact, these characters appeared repeatedly in his works. In this novel too, Carl calls Miller Joe, rather, they all call each other Joe or Joely. According to Widmer, it is a pleasant reminder not to take yourself too seriously.

Miller showcases here his skill to sniff easily from illusion to reality. Moreover, the scene is significant for the manipulation of time and place. Such scenes are notable for the use of crude language and presentation of private things openly. He, in fact, rejects the idea of privacy as it is a product of social taboos and canons. Moreover, Miller is in a self-observing position, who tries to evaluate the materialistic world and its moral order on the basis of his own sexual encounters. Perhaps Miller is an exceptional personality who can impartially observe his sexual encounter with a whore:

“I undressed quickly, washed my cock out of politeness, and dove between the sheets. The *bidet* was right beside the bed. When she had finished her ablutions she began to dry herself with the thin, worn towel. I leaned over and grabbed her tousled bush, which was still a little dewy. She pushed me back dive for it with her warm red mouth. I slipped a finger inside her to get the juice working. Then, pulling her on top of me, I sank it in up to the hilt. It was one of those cunts which fit like a glove. Her adroit muscular contractions soon had me gasping. All the while she licked my neck, my armpits, the lobes of my ears. With my two hands I lifted her up and down, rolling her pelvis round and round. Finally, with a groan, she bore down on me full weight; I rolled her over on her back, pulled her legs up over my shoulders, and went at her slambang. I thought I'd never stop coming; it came out in steady stream, as if from a garden

hose. When I pulled away it seemed to me that I has an even bigger erection then when I plugged in.” (*Clichy*, p. 17)

Capitalism has also commodified and marketed fantasies. Pornography is one of the commodification of sexuality. Miller here presents his sexual fantasies and in order to accelerate the impact of fantasy, Miller uses crude and realistic terms rather than the use of more acceptable terms of standard language. Miller’s critic, William A. Gordon, is quite impressed by this feature of his works. He thinks that the use of such words by the novelist adds to the exactitude of fantasy. He opines:

“This is not the social level upon which Miller is communicating, but the most private level of the most private thoughts of all men, the level on which the obscene and the sacred meet. These crude Anglo-Saxon terms are precise because they are the most concrete words in the language, and fantasy is always concrete.” (Gordon, 1967, p. 88)

Miller projects sex in its variant forms, taking it indoors and outdoors. He also breaks the rule of privacy and liberates it by having more than one couple present or having several women and one man or several men and one woman.

The novel, *Quiet Days in Clichy*, is also significant for Miller’s showcase of the description of his encounter with more than one woman and also both ways active relations:

“As soon as we arrived I undressed and turned on the bath water. The girls were in the kitchen spreading the table. I had just gotten into the tub, and began soaping myself, when Adrienne and one of the other girls walked into the bathroom. They had decided that they would take a bath too. Adrienne quickly slipped out of her things and slid into the tub with me. The other girl also undressed, then came and stood beside the tub. Adrienne and I were facing each other, our legs entwined. The other girl leaned over the tub and started playing with me. I lay back in the luxuriously hot water and allowed her to twirl her soapy fingers around my cock. Adrienne was playing with her cunt, as if to say - All right, let her play with that thing a little while, but when the time comes I’ll snatch it out of her hand.” (*Clichy*, p. 69)

Commercialisation and commodification are two distinctive features of capitalism and this has not affected only to commodity market but to the human relationship also. Sexuality is a major path of human relationship which has been deeply affected by these capitalistic features. *Quiet Days in Clichy* is a presentation of Miller himself as a penniless but optimistic struggling writer. He is struggling for self in the capitalistic world. Presentation of wild orgies and outrageous erotic adventures are actually his endeavours to find self and to establish in the megacity. Metropolis is a product of capitalism and Paris is one of them. Further, whores and prostitutes are also production of commercialisation and thereby capitalism. Miller underlines the irony of capitalism. In this metropolis he is starved. His starvation is on two different levels: first, he badly needs food

and simultaneously the sexual appetite is keeping him uncalm. Irony is he is starved in a city where every happiness of the world is available and people from every corner of the world migrate to Paris in search of happiness. He is suffering in the glamorous city of fashions and trends. Whores or prostitutes are commercialisation of sex. Miller presents whores as ideal women as they do not hesitate to sell what they have and what others require for their bread and butter. They are boldly accepting capitalism and its consequences devoid of any hypocrisy. Miller do not hesitate to glorify whores in the novella.

Capitalism and pornography have deeply influenced the psychology of the contemporary generations. One of the forms of influence is illusion and fantasy. Pornography has created and marketed various sexual fantasies to the society, both men and women. Miller as a hero of this auto-novella has his own sexual fantasies, so do his friends. Miller presents himself as sexual hero of the novel as after commercialisation and commodification of sex in capitalism, male performance becomes instrumental and sex is used to exhibit capacity. He presents himself as a representative of the contemporary generation who effort to discover their fantasies in real life. Whores is the best way to realise their sexual fantasies. But at the same time, it is impractical to materialise fantasies. Miller's skill to sniff easily from illusion to reality is significant here. He loves sexual fantasies but never turns away from reality. Miller's presentation of sexual activities is sometimes quite unconventional. He never hesitates to present the description of sexual activities with more than one woman and also both ways active relations. *Quiet Days in Clichy* has not gained glamour like Miller's other novels but it is significant for his presentation of capitalistic view to sexuality. Miller's presentation of influence of capitalism and urbanisation (which is also unavoidable consequence of capitalism.) on most sensitive human activity 'sex' is exceptional as he is not merely presenting pornography or account of his sexual narratives but presenting sex as commodity, market and as commercial and capitalistic outcome.

Abbreviation:

Clichy: *Quiet Days in Clichy*

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