Construing a Virtual Society: Passive Exclusion through Commercials and Television Shows

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how commercials and reality shows which dominate the world of the television permeate our sensibilities and psyches to construe a virtual existential space of us which is characterized by values and beliefs divorced from the social and cultural bearings which traditionally formed the mooring of our lives, beliefs and goals. These commercials and reality shows subtly and unobtrusively promote the interests of the multinational companies while making us bereft of any real, life-sustaining values. These would gradually force us into passive exclusion of sorts if we fail to conform to the virtual standards of progress and beauty proffered by the commercials and the reality shows.

Key Terms

Virtual society, dystopia, passive exclusion, commercials, reality shows

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This paper shall build upon the phenomenon of passive social exclusion as it is perpetuated through the advertising industry and the television. The commercials and television shows perpetuate a very subtle and pervasive form of social exclusion – passive social exclusion – which is as alarming and potentially fatal for our society as the active form of social exclusion with vested political, cultural and capitalistic interest. The commercials and television shows are, by virtue of their content and the manner in which they are structured, gradually but emphatically leading us away from the reality of our social situation and our cultural and historical roots. The result can be not only utter disillusionment with our identity and the state of our being, but a sick dystopia.

One of the viable definitions of social exclusion by K. Duffy asserts that it partakes of the inability to "participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life, [and] alienation and distance from the mainstream society"[1]. Indeed, Duffy's definition is an apt one in the sense that it catalogues all the factors crucial to describing and negotiating the concept. However, these essential categories of social empowerment may be cleverly manipulated to effect and strengthen the process of exclusion with the apparent beneficiaries becoming their gullible and unsuspecting victims. As Amartya Sen observes, "Social exclusion can indeed arise in a variety of ways, and it is important to recognize the versatility of the idea and its reach".[2] He further writes, ". . . [a] potentially useful distinction is that between active and passive exclusion. . . . When, . . . the deprivation comes about through social processes in which there is no deliberate attempt to exclude, the exclusion can be seen as a passive kind".[3] Although Sen is writing in the context of poverty, hunger and unemployment, the idea of passive exclusion is equally well-founded with regards to the socially established groups as the victims do not even realize that they might be the victims of a very complex socio-cultural, psychological and political process of exclusion through their commoditization as the puppets of mainstream cultural-economic-political complex. Let me start with the examples of commercials as the tools of social exclusion. An advertisement marketing a fairness crème is being floated over the Television these days. The climax of the advertisement makes use of the chess board and the visual highlights the black pawn being ousted by a white pawn with the tag line 'BLACK IS OUT, WHITE IS IN!'. Now, this might appear to be an apparently harmless visual with the only objective of marketing a beauty

product with the promise of enhancing the skin tone of the users and make them look beautiful. After all, what is wrong if somebody wants to look beautiful? (And what is so wrong about it, if such beauty is only cosmetic beauty?)The 'wrong' inherent in this and other advertisements becomes perceptible only when we deconstruct a cluster of such commercials and try to decipher the inherent structure and import of these ingeniously constructed and subtly manipulated visuals. I would like to cite a few more examples before dwelling upon the theory and the bearing power of advertisements upon our individual and social existence.

As the first case in point, when the Coca Cola was reintroduced in India in the mid 1980s, a commercial was filmed and continuously screened in the cinema halls and Doordarshan (The Indian Television), which brought together many film stars, sportsmen and pop stars of the times in a party situation, sipping Coca Cola. I was a young university student at that point of time and had this lurking feeling inside me that if I want to be accepted as a modern youth, I must also sip Coke like my role models from films and sports in the advertisement.

As the second case in point, a commercial pertaining to a laptop computer caught myattention. The visual captured the scene of a crowded state transport Bus in some part of rural India with a 'white' (British/American) passenger tortured by the body stench and uncivilized mannerisms exhibited by the ugly Indian passengers on the bus. Then suddenly one of these 'ugly' Indians draws out a laptop of a particular brand from a dirty bundle of his belongings. And lo! A miracle happens! All differences between him and the white passenger melt into the blue. The white passenger also possesses a laptop of the same brand. As such, 'black' and 'white', 'ugly' and 'beautiful' can now interact on a level playing field.

The third example is drawn from an advertisement by a State Government from North India (incidentally, the advertisement is quite old and is not being circulated at present; however, this does not obliterate the signification which is sought to be highlighted) about the

education of the girl child. The scene is the interior of a rural household. The mother is trying to rekindle the smoking 'chullah' as she has to cook food. Her daughter comes running to her with the plea that she too wants to go to school like her brother. The mother chides her saying: "What will you gain by going to school? Help me to kindle the 'chullah' and learn to bake 'chappatis'. This is more important for you to learn." The little girl, rebuked by her mother, begins to sob. The noise of a tractor is heard outside. It is the father returning from the fields. The girl runs up to him, complaining: "Father! Father!" I want to go to school like my brother, but mother says 'no''. The father promptly replies, "Your mother is a fool. She doesn't know anything. I'll send you to school". This household quip is followed by an authoritative, urban voice in the background listing the various schemes launched by the State Government for the education of the girl child.

Before conceptualizing about the politics involved in the manner in which commercials are structured, it will be useful to understand the psychology operating behind such commercials. Some background information is therefore in order. J. Burckhardt is of the view that History is "the break with nature caused by the awakening of the consciousness"[4]. From the 19th through the 20th to the twenty first century, consequent upon the tremendous advancements in science and technology and the rise of a new class rooted in industry and commerce, the break with nature and the dawn of consciousness was coupled with the desire of this new class to consciously alter the reality of human existence. In the post-war era of global economy, capitalism is viewed not only in economic terms, but as a 'regime of accumulation' which, in the words of A. Lipietz, comprises of "Institutional forms, procedures and habits which either coerce or persuade private agents to conform to its schemas".[5] The commercials and the media, especially the television in our own context, turn out to be potent tools to persuade people to subscribe to things which are not natural to their background and environment.

At the psychological level, the commercials cited above or any commercial for that

matter, do not appeal to the conscious mind, but to the subliminal layer of our mind. Etymologically, subliminal carries the meaning of 'without awareness'. The subliminal can therefore exist and affect our mind without conscious awareness of what is happening to us oraround us. And from the standpoint of how these commercials are scripted, every text also has a potential sub text, which coupled with the subliminal message of a commercial, has very serious implications. Thus, 'whiteness' as a virtue and a value has invaded our psyches so potently and unobtrusively that not being 'fair' has continued to be a social stigma, an indelible curse, for innumerable women. Now, the subliminal promise offered by the advertisement about 'the' fairness product orchestrated with the carefully embedded sub text in 'BLACK IS OUT, WHITE IS IN!' imparts a never before strength and conviction to this age old parameter of social exclusion with the urban population, especially young girls in cities and townships, who might afford to purchase 'the' product(s) 'fairly' priced in the bid to become acceptable.

The second commercial posits technology represented by a branded laptop computer as a liberating and equitable experience. It transforms technology into a veritable god with the inherent ability to transform our lives in a charismatic way. However, technology can touch our lives only selectively is borne out by the sub text of the commercial itself: to be liberated by technology you have to opt for technology first. The other Indians who do not have the particular laptop will be perpetually doomed to be ugly, dirty and abominable breed of people unless and until they too can possess one. This is the encoded language of social exclusion which is bound up with the logic of consumerism. The logic is singular in its approach – who is (is not) to be co-opted into the hegemony of a superior or an elite group and at what cost?

The third commercial which is apparently a testimony to the welfare scheme of a progressive state government makes no attempt to conceal the patriarchal and hegemonic structure of society. The father (male) is superior to the female (mother) and the urban is superior to rural. The structure of the commercial does not leave any scope to space to question or doubt this hierarchical arrangement as visual after visual sinks into the subliminal layer of our consciousness. Thus, the socio-political and economic system inherent in the commercials affects and pervades not only upon individuals but also the socio-administrative

institutions.

The above analysis of the commercials in question makes it aptly clear how the society becomes passive victims of the process of exclusion. There is only one option available – if we do not choose to condescend to the existing structure, we will soon become outcastes of sorts. The process of passive exclusion is not limited to commercials alone. It has impinged upon our social, cultural and national symbols also in attempting to subvert them. The market is deciding how we would celebrate our national and religious festivals; it decides how we wish our dear ones on birthdays and anniversaries and so on. However, the forces of the market do not stop here. The market rather seeks to control and direct our very identity, which is worse than social exclusion on the basis of caste, creed or gender. Mahsweta Devi's contention in her story "Douloti", for instance, that the dalits and the tribals do not recognize India as their nation, nor does freedom has any meaning for them is well founded. Her story(ies) are incontestable statements of social and political exclusion of these people. However, the market is working subtly but certainly to erase the very notion of a national identity to make all of us feel like social destitute.

The serialization of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and later their cartoonization has a grim and a crucial dimension often overlooked. I remember when these great Indian epics were serialized over the television, this was touted as a great enterprise to educate the masses about them and also to uphold and preserve them. I did not agree with my teacher who persuaded me to think otherwise. But now, having watched these serialized versions again and again over different channels, I am convinced that he was not wrong. Each scene is framed by advertisements at both ends. These commercials, as argued above, with their strong sub text and appeal to the subliminal stay longer and more pervasively with us that any of the climactic scenes from the epic itself. I tried to find out from many of my own students the name of the Kaurava brother who dragged Draupadi to the court during the 'cheer-haran' scene. I found to my utter dismay that while they could remember the colour of Draupadi's saree, they did not know the name of the Kaurava brother in question.

So much about our knowledge of the epics which delineate the social, cultural and moral dilemmas that are central to the determination of the value system of our social set up.

But what bothers me is the palimpsest involved in such representations. Milan Kundera, the famous Czech writer once observed: "The first step in liquidating a people . . . is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world will forget even faster".[6] The metamorphosis of our cultural epic heroes into cartoon characters has more serious implications. The elderly people might still be able to negotiate this phenomenon in a relatively reasonable manner with the quality of their faith in the epics sustained by years of witnessing Ram Leelas and Krishna Leelas on the public stage. However, the adolescent mind easily catalogues the cartoon incarnations of our epic heroes with the likes of Tom and Jerry or the magical gadget operating toons like Doraemon.

The elite urban and the economically sound semi-urban/rural population are fast becoming passive victims of the politics of market economy which is driving them away from their social and cultural roots and turning them into gullible consumers of serialized social fad operas promoted by commercials which pop up at intervals of less than five minutes, constantly invading our psyches with the inevitability of the products being advertised. Thus we become inadvertent citizens of a consumer universe in which our status is no more than a zombie upon whom products are thrust after ascribing us needs which we might not even feel left to ourselves.

It is not surprising that 'Brands' tend to become our identity. We are vicariously being fed with things we do not require. The Reality Shows alienate us from the reality of our existence by offering ascribed values like the ascribed needs created by commercials. In addition to be beautiful, smart and intelligent, it is equally imperative to be abusive, scheming and scandalous to be able to emerge victorious in Reality shows like 'Big Boss'. Youngsters and children selected to participate in dance and music based reality shows not only have to suffer humiliation at the hands of 'superior' judges, but they also get initiated into an alien culture of cut-throat competition in order to succeed. And the irony is that while the losers in a competition are relegated to the background without even a whim about their condition, even the winners become immortal only for a few seconds on the silver screen. A report

about Reality Shows in 'The Times of India' has a lot to reveal. To quote at length from the report: A drama queen host shoots off vulgar, sexually explicit questions at a contestant on

her show. On another show, young men are made to slide over the oiled bodies of white women as a "task". And the latest indignity meted out to a contestant was to administer him an enema when his partner failed to answer a GK question. The bizarre world of Indian reality shows seems to be hitting new nadirs with every passing season, the very recent 'AIB Roast' being the latest howler in the row. It's a deterioration that has caused some serious concern to onlookers but reality show producers are unapologetic, maintaining that they are not showing anything objectionable.

What's more, even contestants play along in this clearly TRP-garnering game. A former contestant points out that reality shows are sure-fire launch pads for a career in soaps, and participants are willing to do just about anything for this. Any wonder then that the vulgarity on Indian television continues unabated?[7] After reading this report, I was reminded of a character from a novel *Ek Chhithda Sukh* (1979) by the late Hindi novelist, Nirmal Verma, a young girl who comes to India from London because she wants to explore this legendry country, but finds that India is a 'theatre' and chooses to stick to real theatre. Whatever the relative merit of this cursory observation, I want to return to the basic premise of my note at this juncture – that the commercials and the TV shows are passively drawing us away from our social, cultural, emotional and even economic reality and construing a virtual society for us without any real moorings. Whether it is the commercials, the serialized-fictionalized representation of our social reality – and, Oops! I should have mentioned the urban middle class reality, as it is this class in particular which is the unsuspecting victim of all this – we are being led into an ethereal, hyper world where everything is in a state of postmodern fluidity, a world of 'Pastiche'[8], without any relevance, meaning, significance and legitimacy. This is a world of evanescent moods and feelings, of individuality, privatized sensibility and success being the only morality. The reality of this world is spectatorial and even bizarre, marked as it is by appearances, trendiness and gift-wrapping.

While the social exclusion and inclusion are issues of fundamental importance for any society, particularly, a democratic society, and empowerment of the hitherto marginalized category of people is being sought by special action groups and democratic institutions, the market economy with its grip on the Third World has initiated a convoluted process of exclusion through apparent inclusion. Under the processes of Market Economy with the

commercials as its *modus operandi*, availability of clean drinking water is not the norm of a healthy, civilized society, but the desire and the capacity to gulp soft drinks to quench your thirst. It is not the ability to be 'yourself' which is the parameter of your worth as an individual and a member of a society, but looking 'sexy' by conforming to the standards set by branded beauty, clothing and styling products. It is not important to think what you think and feel what you feel, but to think, act and behave like your role-model from a television or a Reality show. You are then included as the worthy member of an elite, ethereal society only to be excluded from your actual socio-cultural roots.

Indeed, this a form of passive social exclusion against which there is no active support either from the political system or social activist groups. This form of exclusion acts like a hook worm in the intestines which surreptitiously entangles a part of our society and is very difficult to eradicate from the system. The initial feeling of subscribing to this market culture may be a euphoric one, but it is like eating food our body metabolism is not trained to absorb and digest. As such, the end point is most likely to be an unhealthy state of affairs in which we are able to neither digest nor secrete the things we are being fed with.

This brings me to the concluding part of my note about the unapparent outcome of this form of passive social exclusion. In a story by Mahasweta Devi, which she translated into English as "Madhu: A Fairy Tale" [9], the administrative agencies try to feed certain tribals who are on the verge of extinction due to hunger with the food that they do not eat. When the tribals refuse to eat the food which does not suit them because of its systemic inadequacy, one of them is sedated, removed to the hospital and is injected with vitamins and other minerals. As a result of this forced food supplementation, the tribal metamorphoses into a

monster feeding on every kind of 'machinery' that comes his way. A fairy tale, the effort to create a virtual utopia for the tribals gets distorted into a dystopia. This story is a potential warning about our fate as well if the utopian ideals proffered by the commercials and television shows are allowed to subvert our social identity in the manner that it is covertly attempting to accomplish.

Notes and References

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[2] Sen, Amartya. (2000). *Social Exclusion: Concept, Application, and Scrutiny*. Manila: Asian, p. 9.

[3]ibid., p. 14.

[4]Burckhardt, J., *Reflections on History* (1959). London: S. Allen & Unwin. p. 31.

[5]Lipietz, A.(1987). *Mirages and Miracles*. London: Verso, p.112.

[6]Kundera, Milan. (1981). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 159.

[7] "Nothing is too Vulgar", Report on Indian Reality Shows, The Times of India, 15 April, 2012.

[8]Pastiche means imitation, satire, lampoon or parody. The culture of pastiche may be viewed as the de-culturation resulting from the parodist representation of our cultural reality on the television.

[9]Devi, Mahasweta. "Madhu: A Fairy Tale". Trans. Mahasweta Devi in Pankaj K. Singh Ed. (2003). *The Politics of Literary Theory and Representation*. New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 97-110.