

Body As Commodity in The Modern Era as Portrayed in Fiction

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Abstract—One of the defining anxieties of modernity has become the commodification of the human body. The body in contemporary fiction is depicted not just as a biological entity but as a commodity constructed by capitalism, technology, consumerism, surveillance, and systems of power. Contemporary fiction interrogates how bodies are bought, altered, disciplined, sexualised, and exploited in socio-economic structures. The paper explores themes of consumer capitalism, the gendered commodification of the body, biopolitics, digital identity, and technological manipulation in selected modern and contemporary fictional texts. Drawing on Marxist, feminist, and posthuman literary theories, the paper argues that fiction reflects and critiques a world in which bodily value is determined by increasing market logic and visibility. The select texts, such as *Brave New World*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *American Psycho*, expose the dehumanising consequences of reducing the body to an economic resource.

Index Terms—Body Commodification, Biopolitics, Posthumanism, Consumer Capitalism, Technological Bodies, Dystopian Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

The body has always been central to literature because it is the site where identity, desire, labour and power are experienced. In the modern era, however, the body has become increasingly entwined with capitalist systems that turn human existence into consumable value. Bodies are presented in contemporary fiction as things that can be swapped, dominated, augmented or exploited. These stories expose growing anxieties about the ways economic systems construct physical identity and human agency.

The commodification of the body is the process by which human corporeality acquires exchange value in

social and economic systems. As Karl Marx argued, in a capitalist society, labour power becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold on the market (Marx 270). Contemporary theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard argue that modern societies discipline and regulate bodies through systems of power, while simultaneously transforming them into signs circulating within networks of consumption and surveillance (Foucault 25; Baudrillard 131).

Fiction has always served as an effective vehicle for examining social issues because it enacts the psychological and ethical consequences of commodification. Modern fiction continually shows that in dystopian societies, hyper-consumerist cultures, and technologically mediated futures, the body is no longer simply personal; it is also political and economic property. This paper examines the representation of the body as commodity in fiction in relation to capitalism, gender,

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMODIFICATION OF THE BODY

The idea of commodification is largely based on Marxist theory. Marx argues that capitalism commodifies labour and reduces humans to economic productivity. This logic, in modern societies, extends beyond the workplace to the body itself. Bodies are made quantifiable, marketable, and profitable across industries such as fashion, entertainment, medicine, advertising, and biotech.

Michel Foucault speaks of 'biopower,' where institutions exercise control over bodies through discipline and surveillance. Schools, prisons, hospitals

and governments regulate human bodies to increase social control and productivity. Fictional narratives often imagine dystopian systems in which bodily autonomy is exchanged for political or economic stability.

Similarly, feminist theorists say that women's bodies are disproportionately commodified under patriarchal capitalism. Beauty standards, reproductive control, and sexual exploitation objectify the female body. Fiction often depicts the escalation of commodification by gender as the downgrading of women to reproductive or aesthetic functions.

Posthuman theorists further complicate these notions by examining technological interventions in the body. In speculative fiction, bodies are cloned, engineered, digitised, or modified. Technological capitalism seems to treat human life as material that can be reproduced endlessly.

III. THE MARKETING BODY AND CONSUMER CAPITALISM

One of the most explicit representations of the commodified body is found in fiction that focuses on consumer culture. American Psycho is a novel about a society obsessed with appearance, status and consumption. The protagonist, Patrick Bateman, perceives himself and others as commodities in the capitalist marketplace. Physical attractiveness, fitness, fashion brands and bodily perfection become markers of economic value.

The novel depicts capitalism's production of an emotional vacuum by converting identity into surfaces. Bateman's obsession with grooming rituals and brand-name products is symptomatic of a culture in which the body is an advertisement. Human relations become transactional, and violence itself becomes another mode of consumption.

Similarly, Fight Club critiques consumer culture by portraying men alienated from authentic bodily experience. The narrator's dissatisfaction stems from living in a commodified world where individuality is replaced by corporate identity. The body becomes both a site of rebellion and a target of capitalist control. Physical violence in the novel represents an attempt to reclaim bodily authenticity from consumer systems.

These works reflect broader social realities in which media and advertising industries define bodily worth according to market standards. Fiction exposes the

psychological damage caused by equating human value with consumable appearance.

IV. GENDER AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN'S BODIES

Women's bodies are often imagined as sites of economic and political control in contemporary fiction. The Handmaid's Tale is a compelling illustration of reproductive commodification. In the dystopian Republic of Gilead, fertile women are just reproductive vessels, their bodies the property of the state.

The novel criticises patriarchal systems that deny bodily autonomy but commodify women's reproductive capacities as economic resources. The handmaids are valued not for their personhood or their human qualities but for their biological function. They are the nameless, the identity-less, the free-less; they are the commodification of the woman's body.

The Bell Jar also explores social expectations of female identity through the filter of bodily discipline and standards of beauty. Esther Greenwood is forced into conformity to constricting ideals of femininity and shows how patriarchal culture objectifies women as objects of social consumption.

Contemporary fiction and media frequently depict women's bodies as curated products for public consumption. The culture of social media exacerbates this commodification by reinforcing the self-branding of physical appearance. This is increasingly reflected in fiction, in depictions of characters whose worth depends on visibility, desirability, and digital performance.

V. BIOTECHNOLOGY AND THE EXPLOITED BODY

The most recent technological advance has extended the commodification of the body into biological and genetic realms. Never Let Me Go has cloned humans who were raised solely for organ donation purposes. In the novel, bodies become biological resources to be controlled, for medical gain and social good. Exploitation is normalised in the novel, and the clones are treated as disposable products rather than people with feelings, dreams, and personalities. Ishiguro rails against a world where scientific progress is valued

above ethical responsibility. The body is commodified into transferable parts, human life into utility.

In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley imagines a society in which human beings are industrially manufactured and conditioned for economic stability. The slogan “Community, Identity, Stability” encapsulates the state’s prioritisation of collective productivity over personal freedom. Human reproduction itself becomes mechanised through the “Bokanovsky Process,” reducing the body to a scientifically engineered commodity designed for social efficiency. Huxley’s dystopia reflects what Michel Foucault terms “biopower,” a system in which political authority exerts control over biological life. Foucault argues that “the body is directly involved in a political field” (Foucault 25), suggesting that modern institutions discipline and regulate bodies to maintain systems of power. In Huxley’s world, bodies are valuable only insofar as they contribute to economic and social stability. The novel proposes that the technological domination of bodies results in the abolition of freedom and the authentic human nature. These fictional works find their resonance in contemporary concerns about organ trafficking, genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery and reproductive technologies. Does technological capitalism inexorably turn human life into biological stock?

VI. SURVEILLANCE, DIGITAL IDENTITY, AND THE VIRTUAL BODY

In the digital age, bodily commodification extends into the virtual realm of representation. Social media platforms encourage the curation and monetisation of individual identities through images, performances and data production. Fiction is increasingly representing bodies as digitally mediated commodities.

In cyberpunk fiction, such as *Neuromancer*, the body is treated as a technological commodity rather than a stable human entity. Case dismisses physical existence as merely “meat” (Gibson 6). Molly’s surgically enhanced eyes and retractable blades demonstrate the cyberpunk notion that the body is malleable hardware and market forces dictate its shape. Physical upgrades, unavailable to most people, often mirror economic disparity, reflecting the link between economic power and physical enhancement.

Digital culture also turns personal data into economic capital. Much of today’s dystopian fiction deals with surveillance societies that track, monitor and sell our bodily movements, our behaviours, and our biometric information. These stories show that commodification is now not just about flesh, but about digital identity too.

This correlates with the current conditions in which visibility online has social and economic value. Fiction critiques capitalist systems that commodify human experience into data streams for profit.

VII. RESISTANCE AND RECLAIMING THE BODY

Contemporary fiction, while depicting exploitation, also imagines resistance to commodification. Characters often seek to reclaim bodily autonomy through rebellion, intimacy, memory or self-destruction.

Storytelling itself is an act of resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Offred insists that “if it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending” (Atwood 39), demonstrating how language preserves her agency. In *Fight Club*, Tyler’s belief that “it’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything” (Palahniuk 70) frames pain as liberation from consumer culture, yet the narrator’s realization that these are “Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth” (Palahniuk 98) exposes the destructive consequences of ideological extremism.

Equally, in *Never Let Me Go*, emotional bonds resist the dehumanising infrastructures surrounding the clones. Their ability to love and to create art shows that we cannot be entirely defined in terms of biological utility. It could be well understood from Kathy reflecting on Tommy:

“I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold on to each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it’s just too much. The current’s too strong. They have to let go, drift apart” (Ishiguro 274).

Such acts of resistance suggest that fiction not only passively reflects commodification but also questions the capacity of oppressive systems to sustain human dignity.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Contemporary fiction portrays the body as vulnerable to commodification in capitalism, patriarchy and technological expansion. Dystopian stories, psychological realism and science fiction reveal systems that transform humans into consumable goods, biological resources or digital products.

Works such as *Brave New World*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *American Psycho* illustrate that commodification dehumanises people by reducing identity to economic function and market value. These texts are critical of systems that regulate bodies via surveillance, reproduction, consumerism and biotechnology.

At the same time, fiction stresses the persistence of human emotion, memory and resistance. Characters are within commodified systems, seeking ways to reclaim bodily autonomy and personal identity. Modern fiction thus serves as both a warning and a critical reflection on the treatment of the human body in contemporary society.

The depiction of the body as a commodity in fiction ultimately exposes the core fissure of modernity: the struggle between human dignity and the economic systems that seek to commodify life itself.

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