

## **Identity Distortion Through Simulation And Hypermarket Culture; An Analysis Of Mohsin's The Diary Of A Social Butterfly (2009)**

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### **Abstract**

Mohsin's novel *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) is about the construction and distortion of human identity and the question of reality based on hypermarket. In the book, Mohsin depicts a world swamped with information and technology, where individuals seek truth through consumerism, information, and technology, whereas the border between truth and falsehood has faded away and the sense of individuality has collapsed. The primary characters, Butterfly and Janoo, are concerned with how they experience the hypermarket environment and how it affects their identities. (Baudrillard, 1994), who claims that the hypermarket world sells artificial as real, is the theoretical framework for this research. It also has an effect on all of us in the sense that we become progressively entangled in its web of simulations. As a result, this study shows how *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) challenges identity in a techno-consumer culture.

**Key Words:** Hypermarket, Simulation, Identity, consumerism, individuality.

### **Introduction**

Moni Mohsin seeks to convey the uncertain nature of reality and the individuals' distinct identities in the book through her comedic attempt at building other worlds, highlighting how people are imprisoned in a fake existence heightened by access to knowledge in the shape of news and consumerism. Thus, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the book *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) is more than a humorous remark about a group of social individuals getting together, but also speaks of the postmodern culture of a society caught in a labyrinth of information and consumerism. Her characters are neither inspired by the past or the present, but rather live in an unfathomable reality of the present. Hence the goal of the research is to show how modern society is existing in a hypermarket environment where digital technology and consumerism contribute to identity fragmentation.

Both Janoo and Butterfly in the aforementioned book are absorbed by information and consumerism. As a result, both information and consumerism are revealed to have a

considerable impact on society in general, and these characters in particular. This impact then leads to a better insight of how society functions in a hypermarket universe, and this research focuses on the functions of information, technology, and consumerism, as well as how all of these aspects interact to shape the minds of the characters.

As a result, the research raises questions about the underlying social and psychological issues that develop in such a hypermarket environment, as well as the personalities of those who live there. The research explores the tragic side of contemporary postmodern life and the purpose is also to analyze the negative effects of capitalism, consumerism, technical advancement, political, psychological, and social problems. Thus, the people and their experiences are viewed as ambiguous crises in which their intellectual and emotional boundaries melt and their subjectivity is questioned.

Butterfly and Janoo, the book's primary protagonists, place their trust in either technology or consumerism, and are forced to survive without their own thoughts, which is one among many outcomes of living in a world of hypermarket. Characters in the book become delusional as a result of consuming news, buying products or generally living in a consumerist world, and both of these situations are made impossible to escape; as a result of which they are unable to distinguish between real and unreal, or set their priorities, and constantly shift between the two.

These continually blurred distinctions between real and unreal, followed by doubt, leave us vulnerable to hypermarket. This hypermarket will seriously erode an individual's identity and, according to Baudrillard's theory. According to (Baudrillard, 1994a), we humans have lost touch with reality in a heavy media influenced commercial world, and instead engage in images, codes, and beliefs, which form a new reality he refers to as hypermarket. Some of the issues surrounding hypermarket may be traced to a consumerist society, which is predicated on commodity consumption for no other reason than to retain humans in a condition of mass assimilation.

Consequently, in this research, Mohsin's novel *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) is examined through the lens of Baudrillard to show how characters are influenced by hypermarket in their daily lives. The research also considers how modern information and consumerism control characters in the book, resulting in a split between them and reality, resulting in reality distortion and, as a result, identities. Furthermore, living in a consumerist world where they are not 'consuming' the product but are rather being 'consumed' by the hypermarket product, in which nothing is authentic and everything is manufactured develops characters' multiple identities.

**Thesis Statement:** The postmodern society is continually at odds with the boundary between reality and simulation, hence the characters in the text *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) struggle with distinction between real and simulated consumerism and seek for reality through information and technology; caught in a mesh of simulation which then results in disintegration

of their personal identities. Hypermarket culture and consumerism becomes the cause of the distorted sense of self in the characters.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The growing dissimulation of reality is implicitly causing the alienation of society by how reality was represented in representations (Debord, 1967) Visual depiction of reality ends up being more than simply a reflection of it; it also becomes its takeover through total identification (Ellul, 1988). Through media, we obsessively attempt to recover the Real but ironically, these efforts simply serve to hide the realities of the image (Benjamin, 1996).

The world is continually changing into a place where the lines between reality and representation are constantly blurred due to the employment of hyperreal pictures in media to promote things, and where everyday items grow increasingly absurd (Perry, 2002). There is also the progressive fading of illusion and the loss of reality (Zizek, 2016)) as well as the knowledge too is changing its nature in image-saturated environment (Boorstin, 2004).

This research takes a qualitative approach which is built upon the work of theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), who centers his philosophy around social issues. Baudrillard's work is driven by the ideas of simulation, hypermarket and replication of reality, which reflect the contemporary world experiences where our reality is simulated through the ideas of hypermarket. According to him, we live and experience worlds that have already been created and replicated.

(Baudrillard, 1994) in the book *Simulacra and Simulation* talks about the idea of hypermarket which absorbs people in, and excludes the outer reality from their experience, and "human experience is more of a simulation of reality than reality itself" (Ibid).

"Society has become dependent on simulation, and it has lost contact with the real world," writes (Baudrillard, 1994a). With the further blurring of boundaries, simulacra takes a center place where once real was and what we experience is thus only a hypermarket, which is a product of replication and is thus manipulated and fake.

The book based on a collection of columns in Pakistani-English literature, *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009), showed a hybrid and creative English and Urdu intermixed profile of a fictional Lahore socialite 'Butterfly' in her self-absorbed preoccupations (Rabinowitz & Oxford University Press, n.d.) Females are viewed as weaker and subservient in comparison to males but *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) looks into the reverse gender roles and stereotypes (Razzaq & Hashmi, 2022).

Moni Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) "focuses on social chatter amidst political mayhem in contemporary Pakistan" (Kanwal & Aslam, n.d.). The diary shows how, despite the bombs exploding around her, the political and economic crisis in Pakistan is easily brushed aside by butterfly-like gossip sessions with her pretentious friends. At first look, it seems impossible that the time during which Pakistan became one of the world's most insecure countries should be amusing to anyone and rightly so, (Kamal, 2018) calls the book a satire on elite society residing in Pakistan.

(Haq, 2014) draws on the use of journalism in South Asian literature as assistance to the readers through Moni Mohsin's *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) while (Karim, Skunk Girl, Khan, & Mor Asma Iqbal Qazi, n.d.) calls the book a chick list, so much so, that

(Laskar, 2022) calls it voice of new Pakistan. Though the book spans a wide variety of topics, this research will be focusing on the culture of consumerism and excessive information, which results in a hypermarket postmodern world and, as a consequence, disorientation.

### **Methodology**

Character analysis is the process of evaluating a character's characteristics, significance in the tale, and conflicts. This also entails considering the character critically and developing judgments. This study employs Stanton's (1965) character analysis approach, in which the term 'character' refers to characters who appear in the book as well as "the blend of interests, wants, emotions, and moral beliefs that makes up each of these individuals" (p. 17). According to him, the most crucial aspect of character analysis is the character's own words and behaviour. Every remark, every action, according to Stanton (1965), is not just a step in the story, but also a representation of character. Thus, in order to make conclusions, this research will analyze speech and actions depicted via speech of two of the primary characters, Butterfly and Janoo.

### **Depiction of Hypermarket in The Diary of a Social Butterfly (2009)**

The Diary of a Social Butterfly (2009) is a fictionalized portrayal of Butterfly and her husband Janoo's real-life problems, centered on the difficulties that rule their everyday existence. As a result, she is preoccupied with in-laws, money, vacations abroad, shopping, expensive clothing, domestic staff, BMWs, real estate, and Bollywood. Janoo, on the other hand, is preoccupied with larger events of the moment, such as 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, climate change, and global warming. Thus, the book is an attempt to reflect the socio-political trends of the world we live in through their lives: the clash between civil society and the army, the rise of consumerism, the growing cultural alienation of the wealthy, the gradual breakdown of law and order, the media revolution, and the many pains of hypermarket globalization.

### **Identity Construction in The Diary of a Social Butterfly (2009)**

Both Butterfly and Janoo have opposing personalities from the beginning of the novel. Butterfly is always consumed by materialism, and her life revolves around and is preoccupied with wearing high-end clothing and makeup, as well as purchasing high-end luxury purses and spectacles.

“Everyone is talking about it at weddings, darses, parties, everywhere” (2009, p.1)

But real life and social attention is not enough for her, in the process of consuming products she gets consumed by the products so much that she wants to be seen not just in her surrounding society but around the world, a consequence of globalizing hypermarket:

“..it would have been so much nicer if it had been BBC, then whole world could've seen my yellow Shamael Jora.” (Mohsin, 2009, p.5)

And even when she thinks her consumerism can rest and what she has is enough, it never is:

“Now, I am fine with shahtooshes and things. In fact, I have four-one beige, one green, one brown and one navy blue-and-grey rewindable.” (Mohsin, 2009, p.18)

Because she is suddenly reminded of all products everyone around owns, and gets totally 'consumed' in the process:

“I remembered that all my coffee crowd have jamawars.” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 18)

But she isn't only obsessed with her personal appearance; she is so absorbed by the consumerism culture that she insists that even the commodities she uses in her everyday life come from branded stores, as if the experience of using them would be any less if they came from somewhere else. The consequence is that she is confused between her choices, indecisive whether she wants to live in one part of the world or other, thus constantly living in the fear of missing out.

“I'd much rather live in my Kothi in Gulberg with my cook, driver, maid, dhobi, bearer, gardener and chowkidar than my old condom in LA.” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 26)

As a result, popular department store brands such as Al-Fatah, Kitchen Cuisine, McDonalds, Vogue, Nestle, and others are frequently mentioned:

“All of Al-Fatah, Kitchen Cuisine, Saleem Fabrics, dry fruit-wallah, Ehsan Chappals, even Book Gallery where I buy my Vogue and Harper's, they would all die if it were not for me!” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 28,29)

So much so, that she even evaluates relationships around her on the basis of products they consume, thus illustrating the point that instead of using the products to our use we become heavily influenced and manipulated by hypermarkets out there:

“And who knows how Furry sneaks out in the Suzuki early in the morning (lest she be recognized in her Merc) and buys her sabzi herself? And pretending never to shop anywhere but Pace and Al-Fatah.” (Mohsin, 2009, p.11)

Butterfly was not just content with “...latest copy of vogue lying open beside me” or “Filipina maid” and “Kitchen Cuisine cartons and massive bottles of Nestlay ka pani” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 85) but with being seen by others, almost as if she is living a life to show it to others: “But I am damned if I'm creeping off to Changla with nobody to watch” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 85)

### **Loss of Truth in The Diary of a Social Butterfly (2009)**

Another consequence of the ongoing surveillance culture in the present hypermarket world is identity fragmentation, where instead of living with some anchored beliefs and notion of oneself, one constantly shifts get-ups, places, and identities to fit in, to get accepted, to cater maximum attention. However, the truth gets lost somewhere in the middle. Everything becomes a world of Simulacra, from the media we consume to the clothes we wear to the food we eat to the beliefs we hold.

Butterfly too sees the “point” of her life in showing and being seen: ‘Point? I'll tell you what's the point. Parties are the point. Seeing is a point. Being seen is a point. Coming on TV is the point. ...enjoy is the point. Shopping is the point.’ (Mohsin, 2009, p. 136)

As a result, her daily routine is consumed by her need to be seen. Even when she is sitting alone in the privacy of her TV room, she mentions programmes like Kaun Banay Ga Crore Patty, demonstrating that the concept of attention and being seen has gotten so entrenched in us that we see this option as a genuine and authentic part of our existence.

“.. I were sitting in the lounge, eating strawberries and watching Kaun Banay Ga Crore Patty..” (Mohsin, 2009, p.12)

This constant scramble to get our hands at the best of commodities has also commodified our behaviour which has resulted in loss of ourselves at all levels; from personal to spiritual and intellectual.

“You should change your locker at the bank and hide the key. And you should take jonkers’ name off your house and put it in your own again. And you should pack away your good shawls and your silver. And then, you should pray.” (Mohsin, 2009, p.17)

Thus, it is material things that get prioritised in our daily lives leaving behind our physical, spiritual and intellectual selves.

“How dare she correct my Kinnaird College English when she only went to a bechara college like Home Economics and that too on sifarish? And how dare she talk about my few extra ounces when she herself looks like Marilyn Brando in his last years?”

(Mohsin, 2009, p. 27)

On the other hand, Janoo, as he listens to and absorbs the constantly available information through news is in a deep mire of manipulated reality. And though the outer perception of himself is that he knows a lot and better than everyone else, there is a distance between himself and truth. The effects of this distance are seen when he cares so much that it results in compromise of his cognitive abilities.

“Janoo, I think so, is having a nervous breakout. All day, all night, he rants about bore-bore things likes Talibans amd Al Qedas and jihadis and wahabis and suicide bombers and ISI and God knows what-what else.” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 153)

There is a constant struggle between individual characters as well, when each try to prove their idea of reality as truth and logical while denying the other.

“ ‘But you have no interest in writing or books or politics or activism,’ he said. ‘Or anything worthwhile, for that matter.’

‘Why, ji? Don’t I have interest in society? Don’t I have interest in hotels? In events? In going out and about?’” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 56)

But though Butterfly’s formula of escape from destruction of the world around is consumerism, her identity too gets fragmented in the process:

“‘And what my hour of need?’ I replied. ‘My Dr Seebag cream is gone, my YSL Rouge Eclair is finished, my La Perla bras have become dheela-size Allah ka shukar is same but elastic’s gone-and my shoes are looking so last year.’” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 47)

### **Identity Distortion in The Diary of a Social Butterfly (2009)**

From trying to wear MAC lipsticks, Versace and taking a trip to London and trying to conform to Indian standards of living because of her liking for Bollywood, she constantly struggles with her real identity, and in between is where all the loss of identity occurs.

“Maine itna enjoy kiya dancing all those Indian ke Bollywood numbers keh pooch hi na.” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 34)

And not only does she sees herself through these products but reality is so distorted for her that she now wants the world to conform to her ideas of truth and reality, thus hypermarket does not just consumes one individual but rather creates a system of simulations that asserts pressure on those outside to conform to these as well:

“I mean, they should know from just looking at us with our jimmy Shoe shoes and two-two-carrot diamond solitary studs in our ears and our nice-nice, fair-fair skin that we are nice, rich, khaat-peeta, khandani types who’ve been to London hundred-hundred times.....Nor are we beardos-weirdos who are getting to drive planes into their buildings.”

(Mohsin, 2009, p. 52,53)

Her idea of identity keeps shifting from fair to dark, from jamawars to cotton joras as she experiences her reality in fragments:

“But I’m so spired by our neighbours’ big-big planes that I’ve decided to become Indian also. I’m going to get thalis, wear saris, become a vegetarian and put that red stuff in my partition. I’m also chucking my ‘Fear & Lovely’ because The Look is also dark-dark. My mission in life is to be just like all my new best friends across the border. I’ve even started speaking like them.” (Mohsin, 2009, p. 107)

As a result, in a technological world of materialism, individuals are cut off from reality through consumerism, and technology, and the capitalist world is focused on consumerism in a simulation where re production and replication become the central goals.. Newer products are similar to the ones preceding them, and any difference is seen as a fault. As a result, although people desire diversity via goods, capitalism strives to homogenise them as much as possible.

“So your drawing and dining should have only one or two pieces. No glass-fronted almaaris stuffed full of jahezi silver, no Begumi piles of multicolored silk jamawar cushions, no big-big land-escapes in big-big golden frames, no chandi-layers, no jhoolas and Sindhi furniture, no cut-glass vases and bowls, no porcelain figurines, not even Lladro from Harrods.”

(Mohsin, 2009, p. 123)

The characters, thus, are estranged from themselves. Baudrillard supports the idea that, “once separated, detached from the self, the self secretly contained in the commodity, and vanishes into the marketplace never to be seen again” (Clarke, Doel, Merrin, & Smith, 2008). Hence characters constantly feel isolated and distanced.

“SO many decisions I have to make these days. Like whether to have floors pulled up and central heating put in. So cold it gets now, for atleast one full month. And gas heaters are so last millennium.”

“And whether to have my eyebrows lifted and my neckline lowered.” (Mohsin, 2009, p.127)

Consumption plays an important role here. We live in a world where commodities are transformed into signs. Consumption of goods and items is central to the postmodern world. Our wants are created by society, and we, as humans, must separate ourselves in order to earn purpose and social position. This never-ending quest for identity and meaning making through consumerism and commodification leads to distance from each other as well as self-isolation (Powel, J. (2007). As a result, we do not expend commodities for their utility but in order to gain individuality and reputation by replacing signs:

“If it’s one thing you can never have enough of, it’s Versace dark glasses. And Goochy bags. And diamonds. And Plots. And Prados. And servants. And bank accounts.”

(Mohsin, 2009, p. 137)

The contrast gets manifested in Butterfly's own behaviour at a party:

"I tried a sushi nivaala but it tasted all kacha-kacha. I think so they'd forgotten to cook it. So when no one was looking I quickly spat it out into a bush, wiped my mouth, reapplied my lipstick-MAC ki Russian Red-and teetered off to the dance floor on my six-inch heels." (Mohsin, 2009, p. 35)

### **Dichotomy and Loss of Selfhood in Hypermarket**

Because there is no innovation, there is no distinction between genuine and false. We live in a civilization where copies have mostly replaced originals. According to Baudrillard (1994), we live in a civilization that is entirely made up of simulacra, or simulations of reality. "All dichotomies between appearance and reality, surface and depth, subject and objects, collapse into a functionalized, integrated, self-reproducing cosmos of simulacra controlled by simulation models and codes," according to Baudrillard (Kellner, 1991; Powel, 2007). The book is full with situations that demonstrate the blurring of lines between reality and fake:

'And instead of obsessing about the war on tourism and weapons of mass destruction and Guacamole Bay thousands of miles away, you should be paying more attention to what's going on in your neighbour's house.' (Mohsin, 2009, p. 82)

So, it's difficult to know whether to focus on domestic or international issues, ordinary lives or larger-scale events that are upsetting our lives. When Butterfly takes part in a demonstration, it raises the question of whether the goal is to live for the cameras and an artificially built existence, or to oppose beliefs and wrongs that we think are taking place:

"On the day I sun-blocked my face, neck and hands, donned a new cotton jora (can't wear silk on jalooses, I am told it gets sweaty), put on my new Channel ki sunglasses with the huge rhinestone Cs, and laced up the bright white Nike boots I'd bought from al-Fatah a night before. The whole world shook when we marched through Liberty market raising naaras and posing for TV cameras." (Mohsin, 2009, p. 74)

Even sorrow and loss in the actual world are viewed from afar and do not have the same impact as they should. We have become oblivious to these difficulties as if they are untrue due to our over intake of knowledge as a commodity:

'What do you mean, "no damage"? asked Janoo, in his best Sarrhial voice. 'Nine people died and you say no damage was done?'

'But dekho, na, darling, I don't know these people,' I replied reasonably. 'How can you expect me to feel sorry for them?' (Mohsin, 2009, p. 115)

The preceding examples further exemplify the argument that there is no reality; what might have existed as real has vanished over time which further proves Baudrillard's writings that we live in replicas or illusions of things. The hypermarket reality is thus a realm of uncertainty, alienation, and identity dissolution. People attempt to gain identity and purpose in this world by accumulating goods and get swallowed further into a world of commodification.

### **Conclusion**

We arrive to the conclusion that hypermarket has an impact on personal identities. Mohsin depicts a fictionalized world, but very much the world that we live in drawn in several

simulations or hypermarkets, demonstrating the real and fake are indistinctive paving a path for hyperreal instead. Butterfly's crumbled identity as a character, shifting from one situation to another situation and shifts between identities further demonstrates the argument in the *The Diary of a Social Butterfly* (2009) depicts a technology-driven consumerist society in which commodities are presented as sophisticated realities which in fact distort reality. The quest thus becomes cyclic and endless because there is no escape from consumerism and in the process the characters of the book as well as human beings in life too get consumed by the hypermarket.

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