

Implosion of Meaning: Postmodernist Approach to Douglas Coupland's *Generation X***Dr. Namdev Kashinath Patil***Assistant Professor, R. B. Madkholkar Mahavidyalaya, Chandgad, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

The present research paper deals with the postmodernist approach in analysing Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X* where there is a hyperreality everywhere which is the outcome of an implosion of meaning. Baudrillard uses the term of 'Implosion of Meaning' as one of the key concepts in creating hyper reality in postmodern world. Douglas Coupland is a significant postmodern writer who has represented harsher realities of society where his characters find difficulties in every opportunity of living successful life. He succeeds in depicting the implosion of meaning that has created duplicate copy of reality which is indistinguishable from the original where human being is trapped; and the sense of being trapped in Disneyland further leads him to live a tormenting life. The present paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the theoretical ground; the second section analyses the novel in the light of the theory developed; and the third section concludes the paper with some of the research findings. Thus, the present research paper will be a modest attempt in dealing with hyperreality created out of the implosion of meaning in Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X*.

Key Words: implosion of meaning, hyperreality, artificiality of life, *Generation X*

Section I

According to postmodern theorists, twenty first century is the world of information explosion, where every aspect of life is influenced by the technology, post industrialization and media culture. In such a world, human being is living merely an illusionary life. He is isolated from the real aspects of life. Even he is not living a life in real sense but only constructing a scene. Instead of exchanging real objects that may be felt by sense perception, he merely exchanges the information with the help of symbols. That means he is living a virtual life and not real. Jean Baudrillard has concentrated his thoughts around this virtual reality of life. The virtual reality is one that enables to experience the computer

generated duplicate world as if it were real. But according to Baudrillard, the postmodern society is already living a life of virtual reality through its interaction with reality TV shows or TV news, or establishing a successful communication rapport via email with unknown people.

Baudrillard's assumptions about the hyperreality are based on Marcel Mauss' economic theory. In his *The Gifts* (1953) Mauss points out changing pattern of exchange in the society. He says that in past ages, there was a gift exchange system in which things were exchanged. This traditional pattern of exchange is replaced by the commodity-exchange system in which goods is exchanged for money. But Baudrillard says that this commodity-

exchange system is also replaced by exchange of signs. These signs are endless, meaningless, and more ambiguous as they are words and images instead of things. Anything can be exchanged by signs. Baudrillard uses the term 'the code' for this interchangeability of signs. The code converts reality into the system of signs which provides everything with a meaning and a value related to other things. As reality is transformed into the system of sign which further produces stability, difference and meaning in the universe by creating binary oppositions. The code creates exact duplicate copy of original which cannot be identified as a copy. Baudrillard points out that the contemporary culture is a reproduction or exact duplicate copy of the original. Baudrillard uses the term simulation to this process of reproduction. Disneyland, opinion polls are the examples of such a reproduction which are indistinguishable from original.

Baudrillard's argument in his essay "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media" (1983) about the production of artificial meaning rather than actual is another key concept in evocating the hyperreality of life. According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern society information is excessively generated in the form of media messages. The media messages have multiple networks of simulations and supposed to have ability to provide structure and meaning to the society and, ultimately, a reality to which he called "alpha and omega" (80). However, the belief that information will provide meaning and structure to the society is shattered as it itself is collapsing which further results in creation of duplicate meaning. He says that

the hope is collapsing "because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content" (*ibid*).

Section II

Douglas Coupland's debut novel *Generation X* presents the hyperreality of life, where the sense of liveliness is vanished from the life and man is shown helpless before the listless situations of his life. It depicts the plight of its characters, who attempt to escape themselves from the mechanical life. They feel that their lives have become imaginary stories and if they continue to live in this mechanical world, they will not survive. The world of digital technology creates simulacra of the real world, which is unable to give them the sense of reality and authenticity of the human emotions and compassion. Their actions do not represent what really they want, but it is just the manifestation of the biological needs, which is another halve of the technology. The life in this world is a series of routine work which gives the pseudo-meaning and fake purpose to their lives. Though, their thoughts are influenced by the mechanical routine, they are aware that it is not possible for them, as Claire states, "to live a life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. Either [their] lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them" (8). So, they move to the desert in order to avoid being consumed in the materialistic world by rejecting the "culture of semi-disposable Swedish furniture, fast food and designer labels" (Gray 758).

The plot of the novel revolves around the life of three characters Andy, Dag and Claire

and their journey to Mojavo Desert to escape from the commercial culture of their metropolitan world. This act of leaving the society and culture is a central scheme of the novel, which creates a place without any presupposed implications, where everything is without its traditional meaning. The trio think that desert is a perfect place, where they can lead a peaceful life. They do not like cultural and social impositions and think that life is possible only when it is free from all social norms. For them various activities that people do in the desert, as Claire mentions, "Take nude Polaroids," "Hoard little pieces of junk and debris" etc. is a life (GX 9). Thus, in the desert of Palm Springs, they find a real life without any social and moral botheration. Desert is a 'sanctuary' for them which make them feel free from the morals and ethics of the middle-class life. They feel that living a middle-class life is only buying the advertised stuffs and imposing it on life as its meaning. In order to escape from such kind of life, they have marginalized themselves and denied to participate into the ways of world. They want silence which they find in the desert.

Andy, Dag and Claire realise the hyperreality of their lives which is nothing but the mess of commodities, which they have bought from the market. This realisation enables them to understand their actions as additional machines to the huge industrial system. Andy realises the hyperreality of his job at Portland in the magazine office which leads him to escape into the Mojavo Desert. There he accepts a low paid job as a bartender, where he meets Claire while tending a bar.

Like Andy, Claire is also fade up with her job as a garment buyer – daywear. She is also not happy with her family, which is always busy in making fun or having talk about sex. Everyone thinks and behaves differently than others, so she thinks that God has chosen them randomly and put together to make a family. The life with these people is like a life spending on Disneyland. She says: "Imagine having to go to Disneyland with all of your brothers and sisters at the age of twenty-seven. I can't believe I let myself get dragged into this. If the wind doesn't knock this place down first, it'll implode from a lack of hipness" (37). She realises her world as merely a Disneyland, where nothing is real and even though all look like real. Her realisation of life with Disneyland parallels to Baudrillard's analysis of hyperreality when he writes: "Disneyland is presented as an imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and America that surrounds it are no longer real" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12). Thus, Claire realises that her surrounding is just like a Disneyworld where the real world is simulated. This kind of world is twice removed from reality that gives her experience but which is a hyperreal rather a real. To escape from hyperreality, she accepts the offer of Andy and moves into the desert.

Dag also leaves his job from the advertising (marketing) only to escape himself from the sick atmosphere of the office. The people who are working there are yuppies who only work for money and strive for the materialistic pleasure. In the world where Dag lives, money is the prime motif of

man's life. For them the meaning of life is materialistic prosperity without any spiritual implications and humanly emotions. This emotionless and mechanical life leads one towards the hyperreality. He realises that people are lifeless, and live life like cattle, where the work become the action of life and the health is subsidiary, where the corporal greed ignores the "Sick Building Syndrome" making workers ill (19). Dag's experience of marketing sector leads him to realise that he is not living a real life which he supposed. He says that "marketing had . . . taught [him] to not really *like* [himself]. Marketing is essentially about feeding the poop back to diners fast enough to make them think they're still getting real food. It's not creation, really" (27). He realises hyperreality of the world that "produces a society of surfaces, performativity and a fragmentation or fracturing of rationality" (Lane 91). So, to avoid interaction with the virtual reality of life Dag escapes to the desert where he meets Andy and Claire.

The trio at desert try to find meaning to their lives. Andy and Dag accept job as a bartender in Larry's bar. The introduction of Andy and Dag's employer, MacArthur as Mr. M. into the narrative is another example of hyperreality which reminds the theory of Gregson that puts forth the use of fragmentary names to focus the textuality of that character. Gregson points out that such a textuality of the character emphasizes its role as merely artificial. He further thinks that "it . . . leads to deconstruction because it motivates the characteristic desire to reveal that what claims to be real or natural is actually artificial, is actually fabricated" (4). The examples of such fabrications are,

according to him, 'initials' or 'blanks' which draw the attention of its artificiality.

Thus, Andy, Dag and Claire set their lives working with macjobs and sharing the stories through which they can realise themselves. Their jobs are low paid and low prestigious, which can only satisfy their needs. In fact, "they work so that they can enjoy a life outside work," where their job has not dominating role over them but they are dominating their job (Codrington, Web). They share either imaginary or real stories to find meaning of life, but the stories they present explore the situation of these storytellers. In fact telling stories are their efforts to find a meaningful way that can make their lives worthwhile. It is the only one way they find to express themselves in the absence of any absolute narrative ground. So they make the stories to narrate the incidents they encounter. A dialogue between Andy and Dag from the chapter entitled 'New Zealand Gets Nuked Too' reveals the reason behind making the stories:

"Dag, what the hell are you doing in Nevada?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"I don't know –"

"Then make a story out of it. Where are you calling from?" (GX 68-69)

This situation creates the question whether they are living a real life or an imaginary one. Then, Dag makes the story of Otis to tell Andy about his experience, which exposes the perception of a human being through the mediums like television or photograph as merely illusive which does not tell actual story. Otis gets a postcard of

nuclear mushroom cloud which is too small than he regularly has seen on the television. So, he goes to Nevada to see the actual size of it, but finds that: “*atomic bomb mushroom clouds really are much smaller than we make them out to be in our minds*” (70). This argument leads to remember Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality in which he mentions that postmodern society is already living in virtual reality. This story also reveals the contemporary fact that the perception of world, which a man has in the present period, is greatly influenced by media. The explosion of electronic media has changed the definition of knowledge that is not fact which can be judged in the light of logic and reason, but on the contrary, it is just media generated information that devours its own content. The story of Otis reveals that the influence of media has distorted the reality and has promoted the feeling of hyperreality.

For the characters of *Generation X*, living a real life outside the society is still possible. But for that, one must be able to free oneself from the materialism of the world. Claire’s friend, Elvissa has the perfect understanding of real life. She is aware that the pleasure that materialistic world gives is not a real life. Like Andy, Dag and Claire, she is also in search of true life. In her journey, she meets the trio. She asks them about their real life experiences and expects them to tell the experiences which are different from their materialistic surroundings, as she says, “Fake yuppie experiences that you had to spend money on, like white water rafting or elephant rides in Thailand don’t count. I want to hear some small moment from your life that *proves you’re really alive*” (91).

This statement clearly differentiates between the experiences which they have bought by spending money and which is very much influenced by the advertisements, and the real experiences which they gain in the vacuum of the materialistic implications of their lives. Their earlier interactions with the world are their purchased experiences which are unable to give real life experiences to them. Real life is far different from the materialistic world. The experiences of this materialistic world become more tormenting when Andy returns home for the Christmas. He finds the life of his friends boring and depressed one. According to him, life should not be in the way his friends are leading. Some of them have moved out of the town to avoid this boredom and depression, some of them have purchased houses, which lead them to lose their personality. He thinks that the only moments they live a life is in their dreams which are also not true but merely an imagination of having something. They look at the job only as the drudgery work and to escape from such a situation they involve themselves into the entertainments. Even they are not living with each other in real sense as they are not emotionally attached with each other. This description of Andy reveals that the contemporary generation is losing their real sense of experiencing the life and addicted with the materialistic commodities. Unlike Andy, his friends are unable to adopt a life without any predetermined purpose or any cultural meaning; they are trapped in the hyperreality of the contemporary world.

Andy never feels that he is living a real life at home. He begins to see hyperreality in every moment he spends at home. Even the

events like Christmas are remained only to exchange gifts. In such a situation, he finds lifelessness of his life. He feels a life only when he receives a phone call from Dag: "A brief phone call from Dag reassures me that life exists elsewhere in the universe" (144). Thus, the novel explores the hyperreality of life through the characters whose sense of life is shaped by the materialism of the world, which has no meaning outside its own universe.

Section III

The analysis of the novel *Generation X* clearly indicates the hyperreality of life which is essentially the result of implosion of meaning. The characters of the novel

always feel that the society in which they live is artificial and cannot provide meaning to their lives. This sense of meaninglessness of lives leads them to escape from the social norms and find a place in the desert where they can lead their lives in their own way. They feel free from the morals and ethics of the middle-class life. They feel that living a middle-class life is only buying the advertised stuffs and imposing it on life as its meaning. They realise the world as merely Disneyland, where nothing is real and even though all look like real. This kind of world is twice removed from reality that gives them experiences but which is a hyperreal rather a real.

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