

HEB

**“A Need Without Feeling...” - The Politics, Economies and Aesthetics of
Addiction In William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch***

CASS

Agnibha Banerjee

Agnibha Banerjee, Ma In English Literature (second Year), University of Calcutta

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

Abstract


A pioneering text of the 'literature of addiction', William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* endeavours an unearthing of the politics, economies and aesthetics of addiction in a dystopian, late capitalist world where the 'grand narrative' of the American Dream has collapsed, creating an acute existential dread. As a reaction against this failure of meaning imposing structures, the Beats Movement of the 1950s embarked on an ardent quest for new forms of representation marked by an almost frenzied celebration of 'otherness' and alternate discourses of identity formation. The use and abuse of narcotics became one of the major vehicles for this counter-cultural discursive field, seeking a re-enactment of the Romantic motif of transcendence of hostile political and economic realities. This paper places Burroughs' text in the context of these conflicting discourses and strives to reveal the Beats writer's adroit use of the artistic license provided by the dissolution of conventional formalist narrative devices as a consequence of consumption of drugs, achieving a scathing critique of contemporary political aggressions, economic inequalities and heteronormativity. However, as the paper proceeds to argue, addiction, while being an effective aesthetic device for an escape from the suffocating totalitarianism of hegemony, ultimately fails to provide an alternate space for crafting protean identities independent of dominant ideology. This is because, as the paper concludes, addiction, limited and corrupted by the very hegemony it tries to subvert, ultimately reduces the subject to a malfunctioning grotesque commodity all too readily discarded by the capitalist order as the monstrous 'other' against which the power structure defines and validates itself as legitimate.

Keywords – Literature of Addiction, discourse, drugs, hegemony, other

Introduction

Food, as a culturally defined construct, attains its spatial and temporal 'meanings' within an ideologically rooted discursive field characterized by a wide array of discourses and counter-discourses. It is within this field of discourse that the consumable is differentiated from the non-consumable and is then placed in an unstable yet discernable hierarchy loaded with associations of class, age and gender. Within this hierarchy, drugs occupy a problematic position for while, as 'food', drugs are bound by similar discourses and counter-discourses of production and consumption, they have one unique feature which other substances signified as 'food' do not have- addictiveness. Defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as “the compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance characterized by tolerance and well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal”, addiction forces the addict into patterns of behaviour that stray from prescribed norms. This deviance from social mores, coupled with the all too evident psychological and physiological

consequences of addiction, allows the contemporary power structure to define and therefore limit the drug user as the 'other', against which the dominant ideology validates itself as

<i>Access this Article Online</i>	
http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

legitimate, moral and healthy. Such a process of legitimisation, however, glosses over the fact that it is some flaw, some lacuna in that power structure itself, that is one of the major factors which pushes individuals into drug use for it is often the misguided and misinformed promise of a transcendental escape from harsh economic and political realities that forms the primary motive of the addict. In this context, the paper, using the tools of Marxist criticism, postmodern theory, deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, endeavors an exploration of the politics, economics and aesthetics of addiction in William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.

Against the aggressive and rapidly shifting social ethos of a post-war, late capitalist America, the writers of the Beats generation - principal among whom were William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Kerouac - sounded an ardent clarion call for an immediate release from a ruthlessly consumerist society “in which the most 'freely' accessible items - bodies and ideas - seemed restricted” (Johnson 1), attempting to chisel for themselves alternate discourses of identity formation outside the suffocating circumference of dominant ideology. This dominant power structure centred around an all engulfing culture of consumption had as its pivotal function the transformation of individuals into consumers where, as Stuart Ewen points out, “the definitions of 'freedom' and 'choice' were being unified and firmly implanted in the conception of loyal commitment to political, religious and social arenas of brand names and consumer credit... To look different; to act different; to think different; these became vague archetypes of subversion and godlessness” (206-15). The 'American Dream' with its 'grand narratives' (to use Lyotard's phrase in *The Postmodern Condition*) of egalitarian development, liberty and the 'rag to riches' myth of self determination seemed subservient to this relentless means-end hegemony where life was increasingly totalized as a series of exchange relations in which humans mostly serve as a means of production and consumption. The acute existential dread in consequence of such a collapse of the meaning imposing narratives, further augmented by the nerve-racking tensions of the Cold War and impending nuclear apocalypse, created an atmosphere of paralytic terror from which the Beats writers endeavored to escape, and narcotics seemed to provide a way out, however illusory and transient.

In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs uses addiction to narcotics as one of the major vehicles for the creation of a countercultural discursive field, seeking a reenactment of the Romantic motif of transcendence of belligerent socio-economic and political conditions. The use and abuse of drugs is thus effectively turned into an aesthetic device, as Burroughs, by focalising his narrative through the drug addict Bill Lee struggling with baffling disjointed hallucinations in consequence of a rapidly alternating sequence of withdrawal, recovery and relapse, releases his text from conventional formalistic narrative devices limited by, among others, linear narrative, spatial and temporal fixity and stable narrative voice. Deeming these worn-out conventions incapable of representing the meaningless flux of contemporary consumerist existence, Burroughs' experimental novel is characterised by the absence of any stability of narrative voice, robbing the reader of the illusory security of objective points of reference as narrative perspectives hasten through time and space without causal logic. The Beats writer thus achieves the creation of what Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulations* calls the 'hyperreal', that not only stimulates physical and temporal locations but replaces them, resulting in the production of world of “total simulation, without origin... without a past, without a future, a diffusion of all coordinates” (125), a world that self reflexively emphasizes and comments upon its own artifice in order to liberate both the characters and readers from incarceration in the ideological constructions of the 'real world'.

This is perhaps best evident in *Naked Lunch* from the Burroughs' depiction of Interzone, a surreal, orgiastic wasteland of drugs, depravity, paranoia and endless, gnawing addiction. Interzone's collage of cities creates a malleable space where any and all cultures become possible, either mixing and sharing traits or transforming from one to another in a partial fluid interchange. Hierarchies disintegrate as a protean culture of multiplicity and change eventually embraces all and favours none in the chaotic cacophony of “high mountains flutes, jazz and bebop, one-stringed Mongol instruments, gypsy xylophones, African drums, Arab bagpipes...” (*Naked Lunch* 99). Sharing much in common with Mikhail Bakhtin's

conception of the carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, Burroughs' circus world releases both the characters and the reader from the bounds of hegemonic narratives of geographically and culturally imposed contexts into an alternate site of constant possibilities for hitherto ostracized discourses of identity formation. This destabilisation of space is complemented and augmented by a distortion of time which is revealed to be not a neutral objective reality but a product of language, tainted by the dominant power structure. Achieving more than a jagged chronology, interrupted by jumps, anticipations and flashbacks, reflective of contemporary society's lack of cohesion, Burroughs' narrative experiments, evoked through the drug infested brain of a heroin addict, distort chronology to such an extent that time itself provides no firm context, running amok with the inclusion of characters who are not bound by time (the Mugwump, for example) and the blending and blurring of genres - the novel is part journal, part drug manual, part satire, part dystopian fiction, part erotica. Decades are skipped over in the space of a few sentences: "Time jumps like a broken typewriter, the boys are old men, young hips quivering and twitching in boy-spasms go slack and flabby... shivering in dirty underwear, probing for a vein in the junk-sick morning" (*Naked Lunch* 79). Thus, for Burroughs, drug induced hallucinations provide the necessary aesthetic tool for the creation of a discursive field outside the hegemonic constructs of time and space, outside what the oppressive power-knowledge structure defines, limits and validates as 'history'.

The creation of this aesthetic space outside the hegemonic discourses of the 'real world' using language filtered through the shattered consciousness of a drug addicted brain further allows Burrough to, as Christopher Breu points out in his essay 'The Novel Enfleshed: *Naked Lunch* and the Literature of Materiality' using the tools and terminology of Lacanian psychoanalysis, "access the real via the symbolic... using the symbolic against itself to expose that which it attempts, but fails to account for: the real." A Lacanian reading of language in Burroughs is also aided by Burroughs' conception of language as a virus. Like the Lacanian symbolic, language is, for Burroughs, an infectious yet necessary imposition on material life, a system of social control structuring one's very conception of reality. If, as Burroughs asserts in *Nova Express*, "word begets image, and image is virus" (48), Burroughs and Brion Gysin reveal the capacity of the word and the image viruses to construct reality in *The Third Mind*: "'Reality' is apparent because you live and believe it. What you call 'reality' is a complex network of necessary formulae... association lines of words and images presenting a prerecorded word and image track", fashioned with implicit ideological objectives. In *Naked Lunch*, this constructed reality is contrasted with the fragmented consciousness of the addict, characterized by forms of materiality - the ever present but perpetually elusive traumatic intrusions of the real - that exist as the disavowed excess of any discursive or symbolic coding. The novel binds together the real as materiality and the real as trauma, presenting materiality itself as the traumatic repressed in an exploitative capital system. Layers of interpellated discourses of subjectivity (to use Althusser's terminology) thus peel away and what surfaces beneath the symbolic matrix is the real - that which perpetually resists and evades symbolisation. This erupts everywhere in the text, syntax breaks down and language is reduced to a sterile meaningless play of isolated signifiers. Thus, as 'anti-novel', *Naked Lunch* evokes the collapse of structures of representation with consumption of drugs as means of unearthing the trauma of the real, means of representing the unrepresentable, the inevitable failure of which questions the ideological discourses that formulate and condition modes of representation.

This critique of the dominant power structure is perhaps best evoked by the staging of the traumatic return of the materiality of the body and its relationship to the economic underpinnings of late capitalist existence. The body in *Naked Lunch*, as the site for a multiplicity of conflicting discourses and as the medium of drug injection, is deformed and mutilated by the larger workings of political and sexual economies. The reconstituted flesh of this body thus opposes the imagined coherence produced in the Lacanian mirror stage; it often appears as degraded and fragmented, a fragmentation and disintegration Burroughs depicts as the barely recognizable (as 'human') nightmarish bodies of the drug addicts, perforated and mutated by exploitation and addiction:

The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines... sex organs sprout anywhere... rectums open, defecate and close... the entire organism changes colour and consistency in split second adjustments. (*Naked Lunch* 9)

The coherence of the body - or the image of coherence - and what is presented is abject subjectivity in its unhinged chaotic flux. Such transmutation is variously produced by addiction, sexual exploitation and economic exploitation, but most notable perhaps is how the biopolitical economy impacts the body, reshaping its substance and producing radically new forms of embodied that elude symbolic fixity. These forms are in continuous transformation, and the bodily and political-economic in constant interchange. This process of commodification, intimately bound up with the body, which, reshaped by processes of commodification and junk (drugs), represents the body itself as one of the central commodities circulated in the pages of *Naked Lunch*. The novel details a biopolitical culture of consumption and sexual predation in which the bodies of teenage youths have become the primary commodity exchanged in the deterritorialized space of "the City of Interzone where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market" (*Naked Lunch* 89).

The novel's sexual economy where the body functions as 'food' for a gluttonous capitalist order is also conjured in the chapters 'Hasan's Rumpus Room' and 'A.J.'s Annual Party' where non-consensual and consensual sex acts are performed for the entertainment of a sadistic and voyeuristic bourgeois audience: "Rocco bat backed by pink shell. The air is cloyed with a sweet evil substance like decayed honey. Men and women in evening dresses sip pousse-cafes through alabaster tubes" (*Naked Lunch*, 63). On stage a "boy" is simultaneously raped and hanged by a "mugwump", Burroughs dystopian science fiction figuration of posthuman being, completely transformed by drug abuse. Mugwumps "have no liver", are addicted to "sucking translucent, coloured syrups through alabaster straws", and in turn "secrete an addicting fluid from their erect penises which prolongs life by slowing metabolism" (*Naked Lunch*, 46). The fluid is fed upon by addicts called "reptiles". Functioning only in an exploitative economic environment at once consumerist and sexual, its transformed flesh figuring the promise of transcending death through perpetuating life, the Mugwump perfectly embodies the biopolitical economy of *Naked Lunch* where body itself is commodity, body itself is 'food'. The body of the addict is therefore not merely the body that as consumer consumes the narcotics but also the body that as an expandable and replaceable commodity, fuels the capitalist order.

Into this exploration of the exploited body as both commodity and 'other' is rendered, as Jamie Russell points out in *Queer Burroughs*, "the rhetorical complex scripted by contemporary homophobic discourse" (26) which Burroughs ironically participates in only to debunk the parochial heteronormativity that constructs and conditions it. Perceived as a "terrible disease", in part augmented by the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) which argued that sexuality far from being a rigid heterosexual/ homosexual binary was an unstable spectrum, same-sex desire was not merely taboo but also associated with the monstrous against which the white heterosexual masculinist self defines itself as 'normal'. In *Naked Lunch*, as in *Queer*, *Junkie* and *Wild Boys*, there is a consistent association of the addict with the homosexual. What unites these two ostracized groups in Burroughs' texts is more than just the commonality of experiences that comes from being relegated to the fringes of society, it is the coerced participation of both these marginalised segments in the contemporary discourses of monstrosity and disease that ultimately steers them into the same umbrella of the 'other'. The text, by enacting the monstrosity it portrays in the disturbing acts of sadism and humiliation performed on queer boys, ultimately achieves a scathing criticism of institutionalized patriarchy and heteronormativity as it is after all for the 'entertainment' of a so called 'pure' bourgeois heterosexual audience that these acts are performed, an audience guilty of, Burroughs insinuates, harbouring in their own psyches those very cravings they condemn in the 'other'. The dominant/ other binary is therefore subverted and destabilised in the performance of onstrosity Burroughs directs in *Naked Lunch*.

It is therefore evident that multiple discourses of 'otherness' are effectively used by Burroughs not merely to

transgress but to completely overhaul existing meaning imposing structures which by definition operate on brutally exploitative and exclusionist ideologically coloured principles. In this context, as the paper has endeavored to argue, addiction functions as an aesthetic device through which the text questions and criticises its own textuality, and in doing so enables an investigation of representation (or more accurately the structures of representation) itself. *Naked Lunch* is thus meta-linguistic because while itself being a text, a linguistic construct, it simultaneously and self reflexively comments upon not only its own status as text but upon language as an ideologically 'infected' tool of representation. Burroughs suggests as much in the "atrophied preface" that concludes the novel:

The Word is divided into units which be all in one piece and should be so taken, but the pieces can be had in any order being tied up back and forth in and out fore and aft... This book spill off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yips and the slamming steel shutters of commerce... The way OUT is the way IN. (*Naked Lunch* 191)

The "way OUT" of the limiting discursive fields of an increasingly totalitarian, ruthlessly capitalistic and suffocating homophobic hegemony is thus, for Burroughs, not a wistful drug induced delusion of escape but a conscious and active participation in these discourses to reveal their inadequacy and brutality. Drugs in *Naked Lunch* therefore function both as an aesthetic device for release from sordid reality as well as a metaphor for limitless control: "You see control can never be a means to any practical end... It can never be an end to anything but more control... like junk" (*Naked Lunch* 137). As a metaphor for control, heroin or "junk" is represented as the ultimate commodity in what Burroughs describes as the "algebra of need" in the "Introduction" to *Naked Lunch* which is presented as the ultimate perverse evolution of the late capitalist culture of consumption. Such a network of interrelations fueled by inescapable addiction - and therefore potential endless demand - makes narcotics "the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy." (*Naked Lunch* 39)

The algebra of need fuelled by drug addiction thus supports itself by creating dependencies, not only in its intended "victims", but also in its perpetrators. As Lupita puts it in *Naked Lunch*, "... selling is more of a habit than using" (15). Thus while Burroughs describes "a world of manipulated needs" that "serve mainly to keep those who satisfy them in power" (16), the control of this dominant order is "far from absolute", for its members are "driven by their own need to control and dominate" (16). The urge to impose control is hence itself revealed to be a self incarcerating drive, and both the controller and controlled are locked in intertwining structures of dependency. Burroughs, through an investigation of these interlocking structures of need, exposes also how narcotics supersede the traditional level of commodity relations to operate in all walks of life, becoming ubiquitous in political, social, and sexual control systems as well as in biological relations and drug dependencies. This quasi-economic, quasi-biological scenario thus sarcastically mirrors the "essential logic of capitalism" which Martyn J. Lee in *Consumer Culture Reborn: The Cultural Politics of Consumption* describes as entailing "a compulsion for the constant accumulation of capital, and... an insatiable appetite for accelerating the rate at which this accumulation occurs" (59). This effect is achieved, Lee asserts, by extending "the commodity form into previously non-commodified areas of social life" through "the creation and commodification of a greater diversity of social needs" (87). Drugs by virtue of their addictiveness appropriates the vast plethora of economic, social and psychological needs of the addict, the entirety of whose increasingly frugal existence begins to revolve around "the need for another shot... a need without feeling and without body, earthbound ghost need" (*Naked Lunch* 120). Burroughs therefore lays bare the complex mechanism by which the dominant power structure itself creates the need it strives to fulfill, as is evident from, among others, the notorious Dr Benway's self-indicting ironic comparison of bureaucratic structures to cancer:

The end result... is cancer. Democracy is cancerous, and bureaus are its cancer. A bureau takes root anywhere in the state, turns truly malignant like the Narcotic Bureau, and grows and grows, always reproducing more of its own kind...

Bureaucracy is as wrong as cancer. (*Naked Lunch* 134)

Narcotics, Burroughs suggests in *Naked Lunch*, is one of the means by which the bureaucratic capitalist structure ensures this control, an example of how the state “invents needs to justify its existence” (134) for “The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to the product” (17)

It can thus be concluded that addiction merely offers an illusory escape from the strangulating totalitarianism of hegemony, ultimately failing to provide an independent discursive field for forging protean identities untainted by dominant ideology. As an ideologically motivated construct of the existing capitalist power structure, use of narcotics, Burroughs emphasizes in *Naked Lunch*, far from functioning as a vehicle of protest against the oppressive order, actually serves to consolidate the complex networks of control, dependency and exploitation through which this order operates. This is because drug abuse, by reducing the addict to a dysfunctional, grotesque and endlessly replaceable and replaced commodity all too readily disavowed by the power structure, further instills fear of deviance in the subject. The subject is subtly made to contrast himself against the addict, relegated to the abnormal 'other', a comparison which assures him of his own 'normality'. Italo Calvino in *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* notes:

Repression must also allow an occasional breathing space, must close an eye every now and then, alternate indulgence with abuse, with a certain unpredictability in its caprices; otherwise, if nothing more remains to be repressed, the whole system rusts and wears down. Let's be frank: every regime, even the most authoritarian, survives in a situation of unstable equilibrium, whereby it needs to justify constantly the existence of its repressive apparatus, therefore of something to repress (99).

In *Naked Lunch*, the addict is ultimately compelled to perform this reactionary role as 'junk' reduces him to the monstrous 'other' against which the capitalist power structure defines and validates itself as legitimate. Since one is inevitably shaped by the discourses one inhabits, Burroughs must fracture his own message even as he transmits it. This fragmentation of meaning imposing structures of representation is, however, a necessary part of the reader's emancipation for it instigates him to conduct a radically sceptical investigation of all the commodified discourses he is spoonfed in every facet of his life in contemporary times. The reader is further ardently cautioned against the misguided fetishizing of narcotics as wistful means of escape, a warning particularly relevant at a time drug trafficking and drug abuse are rapidly on the rise. A study of the politics, economics and aesthetics of addiction in William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* thus reveals that the text neither espouses hegemony nor promises transcendence, igniting instead a bold and direct confrontation of the exploitative mechanisms within which one lives: “let them see what they actually eat and drink. Let them see what is on the end of that long newspaper spoon” (205).

References:

- Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses .” *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, Monthly Review Press, 2001, pp. 85-126
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 2009
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulations*, Trans. Sheila Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994
- Breu, Christopher. “The Novel Enfleshed: Naked Lunch and the Literature of Materiality.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 57, No.2, Summer 2011, pp. 199-223, jstor, www.jstor.org/stable/41698742
- Burroughs, Williams S. *Naked Lunch*, Penguin Modern Classics, 2015
- Nova Express, Grove, 1964
- Burroughs, Williams S. and Brion Gysin. *The Third Mind*, Viking, 1978
- Calvino, Italo. *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, Trans. William Weaver, Vintage, 1983
- Ewen, Stuart. *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, McGraw-

Hill, 1976

Johnston, Allan. "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writing of the Beat Generation." *College Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 103-126, jstor, www.jstor.org/stable/25115269

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Trans. Bruce Fink, Norton, 2006

Lee, Martin J. *Consumer Culture Reborn: The Cultural Politics of Consumption*, Routledge, 1993

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984

Russell, Jamie. *Queer Burroughs*, Palgrave, 2001