

CONSUMERIST PURSUIT TURNS SPIRITUAL 'SEARCH': A RE-READING OF J. KRISHNAMURTI'S 'THE SEARCH'

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Abstract:

The most visible, all pervading and ever increasing aspect of globalization is consumerism. The theory of consumerism relies on the assumption that psychological state of personal wellbeing and happiness can be achieved only through increasing purchase of material goods and their possessions. However, purchase and consumption, failing to result in the lasting happiness, leads to greed and consequently, to a void of unhappiness. Solutions to these problems are always sought without; whereas, actually the global action should start with the individual, and evolve from within. J. Krishnamurti, in his poem 'The Search', analyses the nature of materialist (i.e. the present day consumerist) pursuit of human happiness and shows how transient it is. He insists on focusing on the problem; as the solution lies not outside the problem, but in the problem itself. The present paper explores how Krishnamurti's emphasis on 'understanding' converts the consumerist pursuit into a spiritual 'search' and culminates in perpetual happiness.

Key words: consumerism, globalisation, pleasure, desire, sensation, search, happiness, self-interest.

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Real education means that a human mind... not only is capable of being excellent in mathematics, geography and history, but also can never, under any circumstances, be drawn into the stream of society. Because that stream which we call living, is very corrupt, is immoral, is violent, is greedy. That stream is our culture. So, the question is how to bring about the right kind of education so that the mind can withstand all temptations, all influences, the bestiality of this civilization and this culture. We have come to a point in history where we have to create a new culture, a totally different kind of existence, not based on consumerism and industrialization, but a culture based upon a real quality of religion. (J. Krishnamurti, *On Education* 9, 12)

The most visible and all pervading and ever increasing aspect of globalization is consumerism. Globalization has opened the doors of the markets in various countries for the multinational companies. The MNCs, through costly but psychologically persuasive and manipulative advertising campaigns, have started propagating consumerism in order to increase their sale and capture new markets. Thus the nexus between globalization and consumerism begins. Consumerism refers to the excessive consumption of consumer goods without regard to the negative impacts on people and the planet (Dauvergne 2008; Princen et al. 2002; Stearns 2006). This continually rising material acquisition and accumulation is supposed to produce health and wellbeing. Hence, there is a vogue of planned product obsolescence, fast food and fashion, and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns for creating craving after unnecessary things.

Sometimes people unnecessarily purchase goods for novelty-seeking to explore aspirations and dreams of a 'good life', (Jackson 2009, p. 9) or an 'affluenza' where lifestyle is shaped by constant anxious desire for material acquisition (De Graaf et al. 2001)¹. Commentators equate it to a deadly virus: 'a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more'. (De Graaf et al. 2001, p. 2)²

The whole discussion on the concept of consumerism accentuates the psychological rather than the economic basis of consumption. The theory of consumerism relies on the assumption that psychological state of personal wellbeing and happiness can be achieved only through increasing purchase of material goods and their possessions. People, though naturally acquisitive and always want more, feel satisfied when their basic needs are comfortably met. If they were to say 'enough is enough' and opt for a life style of 'voluntary simplicity' by rejecting consumerism, the economy would face very serious difficulties. Hence, the capitalist ideology encourages to systematic marketing strategies and advertisements which are carefully oriented to select groups in order to create incessant craving for more in their minds.

But ads do much more than simply transmit information: they display and reinforce certain values, constantly affirming the association between happiness and consumption, between success in life and buying things, between sexual attractiveness and particular forms of consumption. These associations and images are part of the taken-for-granted culture that Americans learn from early childhood and make a life heavily oriented to consumption seem natural. (Norton August)

Jean Baudrillard claims that consumerism, or late capitalism, is an extension of his idea of the hyper real, i.e. a simulation of reality. The simulation is completed through the production and consumption of goods. One's purchases reflect one's innermost desires so

that consumption is caught up with one's psychological production of self. Postmodern consumers can never be fulfilled because the products they consume are only 'sham objects, or characteristic signs of happiness' and do not have any real power to bestow happiness to the possessor.' (Malpas 122, quoted in Todd). The empty, unhappy consumers have no choice but to consume more products with the hopes of finding fulfilment.

Solutions to the problems of globalisation and consumerism are always sought without (in technology, governance, laws, etc.). It doesn't make much sense because consumerism is basically a psychological response to the fast changing global conditions. Baudrillard points out that people purchase not just a product, but a piece of a 'language' that creates a sense of who they are. The consumer consumes more and more products for finding self-fulfilment through the activity. Hence, some experts stress the need to individualize responsibility by encouraging people to simplify their lifestyles and to sacrifice and 'downshift'. (Maniates and Meyer, 2010) They can avoid excessive consumerism by adopting lifestyles that are in closer correspondence with their values. Some others have suggested alternative notions of prosperity based on new concepts like: sufficiency (i.e., consuming within limits); sacrifice (i.e., living better by consuming less); attachment (i.e., retaining possessions longer); and plentitude (i.e., acknowledging multiple non-commercial sources of wealth) (Princen 2005; Maniates and Meyer 2010; Pretty 2013; Schor 2010, quoted in Lister). In other words, the global action should start with the individual, and evolve from within.

Mere social revolution, the change of the structure of society outwardly by physical revolution, inevitably brings about, as has been seen, dictatorship or the totalitarian State, which deny all freedom.... We have built this society; our parents, and their parents before them, have produced this corrupt structure and we are the product of that. We are society, we are the world, and if we do

not change ourselves radically, really very, very deeply, then there is no possibility of changing the social order. (Krishnamurti, *Beyond Violence*, 173)

All great philosophers have preferred to speak to individuals. According to them revolutions invite counter-revolution as a reaction and this cycle of action-reaction continues forever. The great revolutions in the world had changed the political and social structures outwardly, but could not defend their own principles. Though French evolution, American independence struggle, Russian Revolution gave great insight into universal human values, these values were repeatedly violated during their hay days and thereafter too.

Krishnamurti, in the poem 'The Search', analyses the nature of human happiness and shows how transient it is. He insists on focusing on the problem; for, the solution lies not outside the problem, but in the problem itself. One needs to understand the problem carefully in a focused manner without rushing to the solution. Using understanding as the key, only an individual can change, think, and act. Krishnamurti, in the poem, poses himself as a wanderer who has begun his search from 'the very foundation of this world of transient things'. Hence, he knows the 'passing away of all beautiful, joyous and pleasurable things'. He compares the world to beautiful rainbow which soon vanishes into nothingness. He speaks of many births he has spent in the transient pleasures of this world in the pursuit of the eternal. He went through the experiences of all possible roles e.g. 'the contentment of the wealthy, the woman of enticements, the beautiful and the ugly, the man of authority, the man of power, the man of consequence, the bestower and the guardian, the oppressed and the oppressor, the liberator and the tyrant, the arrogant and the free' and visited all possible places yet could not find 'that eternal Kingdom of Happiness'. Krishnamurti enlists all possible means by which he sought pleasure- Family, wealth, sensual pleasures, power, possession, donation, liberation, dreams, activism, creativity, religious pursuits, ceremonies, battles, pomp of the world. He engages himself in 'all these

passing ecstasies' of 'these fleeting realms', 'certain of their endurance.' (Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*)

This self- interest at the root of all structures of consumerist world is truly the problem which Krishnamurti underscores. Consumers' self fulfilment through purchases, as Baudrillard mentions it, is due to self interest which creates a 'desire for fulfilment'. Hence, Krishnamurti accentuates the necessity to understand 'desire'. 'Desire is the senses coming into activity.' (Krishnamurti, Saanen, 57) Krishnamurti says that self- interest is rooted in desire and desire is closely related to pleasure. Hence, it is necessary to understand pleasure. All human values, ideas, outlook, way of acting, and judgements are based on pleasure which is the active principle of life. It is important to know the point where pleasures interface with desire. The process of desire is as follows: one sees something beautiful (perception), then touches it (sensation), then comes the thought which acts to possess it; thought, by anticipating the pleasure, gives it duration. 'The moment thought, which is based on pleasure, interferes with desire, and then the problem of conflict, frustration, battle begins.' (Krishnamurti, *On Relationship*, 35)

Ultimately, the wanderer in 'The Search' realises that merely changing the objects of pleasure won't solve the problem. He understands that the limited self that tries to fulfil himself through these objects is the root cause behind all this confusion. Understanding the whole structure of desire and thought, he does not permit the thought to interfere with desire and it comes to an end. This realisation makes him resign everything like 'the mountaineer that climbs great heights, leaving his many burdens at each step' and annihilates his self like 'the gardener who kills the destructive weed of the garden'. Suddenly he feels that 'the robes of silence fall over the noisy world' and instantly, he finds 'the imperishable Truth, the eternal Happiness, the culmination of all Wisdom... deep in the heart of all things and in his own'.

Krishnamurti declares,

As I have found, O world, The Truth, the eternal Happiness,

So do I desire to give.

Come let us consider together, ponder together and be happy together;

Let us reason together and bring forth Happiness. (Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 34)

Thus knowing the truth about the nature of human happiness and its true place, Krishnamurti elucidates the process of transient joys and their consequences:

Many pleasures leading to many sorrows,

Many sorrows to greater sorrows,

Continual strife and ceaseless small victories.

(Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 34)

'The struggles, achievements, and deaths' of man in this world are like 'the delicate bud' which:

Suffering the long winter,

Blossoms forth and gives delicious scent to the air,

And withers away before the setting of the sun. (Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 34)

Every person in this world of transient things is a wanderer who wants to perpetuate happiness- eternal happiness as saints understand it- by changing objects and attempting to create an unbreakable chain of fleeting moments of happiness thereby. Krishnamurti observes and enlists a series of experiences which foreshadows consumerism of the present. He speaks about people seeking happiness in addiction, fashion, sadism, vanity, craving for amusement. They engage themselves in the activities related to commercialism, status symbols, refined taste, hedonism, obsession for costly material possessions, greed, for the same purpose of being happy; and in this pursuit, they become a bundle of contradictions, unawares.

They become corrupt and polluting and licentious. They run after falsely prestigious notions of branding. It happens so because:

The machinery of thinking is essentially based on pleasure; it is like and dislike. And in pleasure there is always pain. ... Our thinking is based on pleasure. Though we have had a great deal of pain, not only physically but inwardly, a great deal of sorrow, a great deal of anxiety, fear, terror, despair, they are all the outcome of this demand to live and establish all values in pleasure. (Krishnamurti, *On Relationship*, 35)

According to Krishnamurti, the root cause behind these illusive pursuits of happiness is the dependence of mankind and 'second hand life' that they live:

Thou hast been taught to lay thy foundations in another, To hear with the ears of another, To feel with the heart of things another, To think with the mind of another; Thou hast been fed with the enticements of transient. (Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 40)

All our knowledge comes from without which is based on somebody else's experiences and experiments. The people are 'nourished by laws, by governments, by philosophies', 'nurtured by false truths and false gods', 'stimulated by false desires', 'fed on false ambitions'. They look to their happiness

In the transient,
In the fleeting,
In the objective,
And they find it not.

Such is their fleeting and unsatisfied happiness.

(Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 40)

According to Krishnamurti this kind of search for happiness without any attempt to understanding it is 'an ordinary, bourgeois living'.

To be like the rest of men; with their worries, with their corruption, violence, brutality, indifference, callousness. To want a job, to want to hold on to a job, whether you are efficient or not, to die in the job- that is what is called ordinary - to have nothing new, nothing fresh, no joy in life, never to be curious, intense, passionate, never to find out, but merely to conform. That is what I mean by ordinary. It is called being bourgeois. It is a mechanical way of living, a routine, a boredom. (On Education 9, 12)

Krishnamurti doesn't stop at describing the nature and causes of this malady mankind suffers from, namely consumerism leading to 'ordinary, bourgeois, mechanical way of living, a routine, a boredom' but provides precise solutions for that too. He asserts,

When you begin to be aware choicelessly of your self-interest, to stay with it, to study it, to learn about it, to observe all the intricacies of it, then you can find out for yourself where it is necessary and where it is completely unnecessary. It is necessary for daily living—to have food, clothes and shelter and all the physical things—but [not] psychologically. (Krishnamurti, Saanen, 55)

In the same tune, he says in the poem,

When thou art free, untrammelled,
When thy body is controlled and relaxed,
When thine eyes can perceive all things in their pure nakedness,
When thy heart is serene and burdened with affection,
When thy mind is well poised,
Then, O world,
The gates of that Garden,
The Kingdom of Happiness,
Are open. (Krishnamurti, *From Darkness to Light*, 45)

Krishnamurti's poem 'The Search' displays his exceptional understanding of the pursuit of pleasure and happiness which is at the core of man's life. One can sense his in-depth knowledge of this flow of materialism in the modern garb of consumerism. The sharp ray of light, not of knowledge and reasoning, but of understanding converts the consumerist pursuit into a spiritual 'search' and ends in getting the gates of the kingdom of happiness widely opened.

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