

## **The Female Body in Martin Amis' *Money: A Satiric Portrait***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores Martin Amis' *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) as a satiric portrait of the commodification of the female body in the market place. The paper argues that Amis is not misogynistic or anti-feminist, as many critics claim, but anti-capitalist. He uses means of satire to criticise sexual exploitation of young women in the world of trade. The discussion seeks to identify the satiric devices employed by Amis to showcase how women are rendered 'interchangeable goods'. It will be shown in this paper that Amis' primary preoccupation in *Money* is pornography, as a very profitable industry and as a source of income in contemporary society. Through mockery and satire, Amis illustrates the negative effects of capitalism on the life of the individual and society at large. The discussion concludes with the significance of Amis' satirical mode of representation, which shows that women are merely victims of a greed-driven business world and society.

*Keywords:* Capitalism, female body, pornography, satire, sexual exploitation

### **INTRODUCTION**

Almost all critics agree that Amis' *Money* is a critique of the materialistic trend of the 1980s and primarily aims at "unmasking the ideological underpinnings of Thatcherism" (Doan, 1990, p. 79)<sup>1</sup>. Carlos Silva (2004),

for example, notes that *Money* "combines a complex web of postmodern tricks and narrative devices with an accurate depiction of the 1980s and its materialist philosophy of self-development through material success" (p. 88-9). Nick Rennison (2005) further stresses Amis' *Money* as the archetype of the 1980s novel. Rennison points out that John Self, a protagonist, is,

*willing to sell what remains of his soul, in exchange for receiving all the immediate gratifications that consumer culture offers - excess. Excess is what this culture teasingly*

<sup>1</sup> Thatcherism is the name given to describe the political, economic and social policy of the British Conservative politician Margaret Thatcher, who was the leader of her party from 1975-1990. See James F. English (2006). *A Concise Companion to British Fiction* (Ed.). USA: Blackwell, p. 210.

#### *Article history:*

Received: 20 July 2010

Accepted: 25 January 2011

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*offers, if one has the money to pay for it, and excess -whether for booze, drugs, sex or food - is what Self craves (p. 8-9).*

On the other hand, many critics consider Amis to be a male author who has devoted his career to expose the vulgarity and the corruption of women. These critics believe that Amis writes from a “distinctly male perspective,” drawing on predominantly male literary influences, especially Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow (Parker, 2006, p. 55). He is, in the words of Charles Michener, a “big-cocked novelist” (*cited in* Parker, p. 55). James Diedrick (2004) also asserts that ‘masculine compulsion’ and ‘patriarchal assumptions’ inform Amis’ works, while Adam Mars-Johns argues that he “defends the sexual status quo” (*cited in* Parker, p. 56). Little attention is paid, however, to the novel as a satirical critique on the objectification of women.

This paper relies on Northrop Frye and Z. Mtumane’s definition of satire to argue that Amis is not as much anti-feminist, as he is anti-capitalist. While Frye views satire as a “tone or attitude” (1994, p. 76), Mtumane considers the satiric devices that express the critical attitude as he defines satire as a “verbal or written attack of a subject by the use of exaggeration, irony, sarcasm, [allegory], wit and ridicule for its folly and vice, with the intention of improving or correcting the existing state of affairs” (2001, p. 234).

### *The Sex Industry: John Self the Allegory*

As this discussion will show, Martin Amis’ *Money* focuses on the objectification of the female body in the sex trade to depict the monstrous nature of capitalism. Accordingly, pornography is seen as the mainstream industry in contemporary society. John Self, the narrator-protagonist, confirms this sex-money relation when he says, “I don’t know how to define pornography—but money is in the picture somewhere. There has to be money involved” (p. 291). In this novel, Amis frequently stresses the sex-money relation to establish the absurdity of the situation where pornography is not merely an art but a highly profitable industry for capitalists. Amis himself says as much in an interview, “it’s just a nasty way of making money for all the people who are in it” (*cited in* Tredell, 64). Douglas Kellner (1989) is very much in agreement with Amis’ satiric view as he notes that:

*In contemporary capitalism, areas once separate from exchange and commodification, such as sex, love, and culture, were becoming integrated into the system of exchange, and were increasingly dominated by exchange values and relationships (p. 53).*

Much of Amis’ satirical stance on the pornographic atmosphere is delivered through allegory. John Self is made into an allegorical object of scorn; in effect ridiculing the socio-economic forces that

condition Self's consciousness, and which eventually lead him to establish his own enterprise, and invest in the sex industry. The irony is that Self starts to practice this business after absorbing the major trends of the world market and the priorities of 'market forces'; his pornographic project, a film alternatively entitled "*Good Money and Bad Money*", which he intends to produce in collaboration with Fielding, is nothing less than an aggressive description of the nature of capitalists. Amis seems to be saying here that if you have money you can dominate and exploit women, and if you want more money, you can invest in pornography. Nowhere is this ironic 'truth' more obviously evident than in Self's description of Butch, an actress in his upcoming film. "She looks like a million dollars but she's also a very intelligent and sensitive young woman. I think she's got a great future in our industry" (p. 54). Harsh as it may sound, Self's comments vividly describe the materialistic view of the female body within the world of finance. It must also be noted that the use of the word 'industry' shows that pornography is an organised, manufactured product, and not merely a sub-cultural business.

Amis' bitter grotesque is honed further through the use of exaggeration, which shows the excessive ugliness of this situation, in which pornography is not only ubiquitous, but also shapes minds. This is why Amis (the character) and Self have "pretty much agreed that the twentieth century is an ironic age" (p. 231). That is evident in the characterisation of John Self,

the narrator-protagonist who justifies the states of his consumption of pornography:

*Can pornography now shape the clouds and hold all sway in the middle air? Wait...the rose, the mouth, the glint. Come on, if that is what it looked like then that is what it looked like. I am probably not alone in supposing that I am shaped by how I see things (p. 231).*

Obviously, Amis grotesquely depicts what Paola Monzini refers to as "the global boom in commercial sex" (2005, p. 24). John Self, the narrator protagonist admits his pornographic habits and blames the socio-economic atmosphere that has turned him into a pornographic addict. Pornography is seen as an essential aspect of contemporary society, and he, as a product of this society, is very much shaped by this, "...pornography is habit-forming, you know. Oh, yes it is. I am a pornography addict, for instance, with a three-mag-a-week and at-least-one-movie habit to sustain" (p. 44). Hence, through Self's overstatement and characterisation, society is shown to be akin to a prostitute, whose life is dominated by sex and money. Amis uses his narrator-protagonist as an allegory of Everyman to illustrate how individuals fall victims to the 'big money conspiracy'. In Self's admissions that he is being controlled by forces bigger than himself: "I sometimes think I am controlled by someone. Some space invader is invading my inner space, some fucking joker. But he's not from out there. He's from in here"

(p. 305)—Amis reveals the manipulation of society by hidden forces, which drive it towards a certain situation or behaviour. Ultimately, Self realises that the big “space invader” (p. 305) in his life is no more than his ‘moneymen’, Mr. Goodney Fielding, making Self the victim of a widespread conspiracy manipulated by the primary symbol of capitalism in the novel.

Basically, Amis’ locus is to ridicule, in Doan’s words, “the dominant (patriarchal/capitalist) ideology”, or to “undermine that ideology” (1990, p. 69). His intention, in other words, is to mock and expose the ugliness of ‘the human flesh markets’ where women are turned into merely “interchangeable goods” (Monzini, 2005, p. 3). Sex in general and women in particular, are important sources of profit-making in late capitalist society. Women are hired in night clubs, modelling agencies and advertising companies as a way of obtaining extra ‘surplus value’.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, while such institutions get a lot of money by selling ‘female bodies’, these girls only receive paltry wages in relation to the amount of work they do.

*True, the chicks on the ramp provided some variety. None of them wore any pants. At first I assumed that they got paid a lot more for this. Looking at the state of the place, though, and the state of the chicks, I ended up deciding that they got paid a lot less (p. 29).*

<sup>2</sup> ‘Surplus value’ is a term coined by Karl Marx to refer to the excess of the value of the product over the value of the wages which are paid to the workers. See John A. Hughes et al. (2003). *Understanding Classical Sociology: Marx, Weber, Durkheim*. London: Sage.

In another context, Self obtains extra information about the exploitation of these girls: “the deal being as follows: the punter pays the agency... 15 per date, of which the chick gets two. That’s right: two quid... So naturally the girls do a bit of business on their own account” (p. 153). The need for money forces them to sell their bodies, but the real benefit is that of the employer, and not themselves.

*I saw her performing flesh in a fantastic eddies and convulsions, [...], so rich in pornography, that she does all this not for passion, not for comfort, for less for love, the proof that she does all this for money (p. 39).*

Amis’ use of taboo words and expressions heaps further humiliation on the subject and reflects the ugliness of the situation, a scorn expressed through words such as ‘pornography’, ‘booze’ and ‘erotic’. These words are used by Amis to mock all parties involved in the pornographic industry. In the absurd scene where girls are auditioned for the film, the skills being looked for are not related to something useful, but the girls’ ability to expose their bodies. “We would like to have you take your clothes off please” (p. 184). These expressions, as well as the situation as a whole, exhibit the vulgarity of the entire pornographic industry that misused and abused women. Hence, John Self as the embodiment of market ideology is used by Amis to indirectly mock the greediness of capitalists who instead of producing

something beneficial for humanity, invests rather in female body to get extra profits.

Thus, Amis carefully employed his major characters, such as using Fielding as an allegory of a capitalist and John Self as Everyman to unpack the impact of capitalism upon society; in doing so, Amis suggests that all members of society are the victims of such hidden forces. Amis' ridicule lies in the idea that while capitalists pretend to work for the welfare of the society, they in fact use their power to mislead and exploit the masses, with the commodification of women being a case in point. Perhaps, this is what leads Amis to question the meaning of the so-called contemporary civilisation and development as his narrator-protagonist asks: "Is this success? Is this money? Is this promotion?" (p. 300). While he mocks the sanctity of the civilisation project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through these questions, he is, at the same time, skilfully involving the reader, by casting doubts on social phenomena that are usually taken as a given. What Amis is doing is not seeking answers from the reader, but rather motivating him to think and react against such a situation. He seems to call for a moral revolution against social injustice in general and the commodification of the female body in particular.

#### *Freedom of Exploitation: Amis' Militant Irony*

The overtly blunt use of taboo expressions notwithstanding, Amis' critical stance is largely delivered through irony. He employs dramatic irony to ridicule his characters, who are representative of a distinctly

20th-century phenomenon. Dramatic irony—in this case, allied with the usage of the grotesque, which is used to show the absurdity of the situation and the vulgarity of capitalists, as in the following scene:

*The first candidate came flouncing across the floor. She was a big dark honey ...Anyway, after a while, during that sun-bleached, snowblind vigil of booze and lies and pornography...The routine was the same, and Fielding had them in and out of that door like a chainline vaccinator. It's a time-honoured custom in our industry, the easy going atmosphere you try to create while auditioning young women for roles of an erotic nature (p. 184).*

While the situation provokes scorn and indignation towards the pornographic industry and all the people involved in it; it is Self that appears to be the target of ridicule. While he is supposed to exploit and misuse these girls, he later realises that he himself has been exploited and misused by other capitalists. The irony thus lies in the character of Self, who is painfully unaware of his own reality, of the plan being woven by Goodney, which is to lead him to failure, not success. This affirms what John Peck and Martin Coyle state on the use of irony in the novel form, "irony is often used to reveal the inadequacy of the characters' view or grasp of events" (1993, p. 149).

What is at stake here is that Amis makes use of irony to clearly illustrate how late

capitalism has created this pornographic atmosphere, in its practitioners' quest for more profits and wealth. Self, the "embodiment of the market ideology" (Edmondson, 2001, p. 148), expresses the age succinctly when he states:

*So now I stand in the porno emporium, on the lookout for clues. I flick through the wax-smelling gloss of a cassette brochure...Oh, world, oh money. I suppose there must be people who want all this. I suppose there must be people who like all this. Supply and demand, market forces (p. 299).*

John Self, the deluded narrator-protagonist appears too ridiculous as he sees and speaks of the world of money through the gate of pornography even though his film project does not exist yet. Mockingly, he admits that he has chosen the right project, built on 'market logic' and 'supply and demand'. Ironically enough, however, the overstatement above signifies the widespread 'sex trade' business in 1980s, where, according to Amis, sex in general and the female body in particular became a highly profitable industry, given that Self's frequent reference to pornography as an 'industry' implies that it is a systematic and profitable business, rather than a subcultural fetish. The social atmosphere motivates and encourages investment in this 'nasty business'. It could be argued then that Amis' satire is, actually, directed towards the capitalist system that created such socio-

economic conditions. Like any investor, Self is well aware of the situation, and very much falls under market forces, 'supply and demand'.

Irony as the dominant weapon of Amis' arsenal to deliver his satire primarily functions to illustrate what can be referred to as the freedom of exploitation. That is to say, Amis ironically exposes how capitalists hide their exploitation under the mask of false promises such as success and promotion. Girls are truly misled by companies and agencies that totally humiliate and misuse them under the pretence of making them famous 'stars. As Paola Monzini (2005) notes, the growing commercialisation of sex is a characteristic of "capitalist society which created an island of 'sexual freedom' within a social landscape otherwise tightly controlled and regulated" (p. 21). Through his sharp ironical view, Amis depicts how those girls freely and blindly offer themselves and their bodies for investment, believing in fame and wealth. John Self clearly expresses this view when he comments:

*We sat them down and gave them a drink and asked the usual stuff. They didn't need promoting: you see, they really did think it was possible, likely, certain that money and fame had fingered them, that exceptionality had singled them out (p. 184).*

Ironically, however, this 'exceptionality' is also exactly what Self believes in. He

imagines himself to be a powerful player who manipulates other people for his personal satisfaction. While he laughs at the girls, however, he himself appears ridiculous as he thinks that his intended project will bring him more money and fame. Like the girls, the ignorant protagonist finds himself trapped in a web of conspiracy, manipulation and betrayal of which he is the final target. As Edmondson (2001) notes "[t]hat Self has been debased and then used and humiliated by the symbol of his own ideology is a masterful irony" (p. 152). What is at stake is that such conceited notions go beyond increasing contempt and scorn for him or the girls, and are an indictment of society at large: Self and the girls are merely victims of capitalist ideology.

The absurdity of the situation is further ridiculed through the character of Vron, the wife of Self's stepfather. Using Vron as a caricature, Amis bitterly mocks such groundless belief in fame and popularity. In a disgusting manner, for instance, Vron explains to her stepson, in tears, how proud she is of herself being included in a book where her naked body is on display; "Vron had... [shown] her prospective stepson photographs of herself having a handjob with no clothes ... at throaty length and with hot tears...she has been creative" (p. 166). Obviously, it is the idea of creativity instilled in her mind that motivates her to expose herself publicly in search for fame: "I was always creative John, she said again and again" (p. 166). In this way, Vron appears very ridiculous to the reader as she imagines herself to be an artist, with her

insistence on her own creativity showing the paradoxical nature of her character. This paradox, however, renders her a subject of contempt and scorn. What Amis seems to be suggesting here is that such a paradox is created by ideology; in other words, Amis' attack is not directed at Vron per se, but the society, particularly towards the economic system, that created someone like her. Vron's illusions are the result of the "market forces" (p. 71) that dominated and misled people's minds during the 1980s. Like Self, Vron is also completely deluded by the atmosphere that surrounds her, showcased by Amis through his use of dramatic irony:

*'You see John...if you have...the creative gift, John, then I think you've got to- to give of your gift, John. John. Look at this. She turned the page. Here Vron reclined on a kittenish white carpet, one leg...one hand busy in the central... 'You see how much I'm giving there, John? That's what Rod kept saying to me, the photographer, John. He kept saying: 'Give, Vron, give!'' (p. 167).*

Vron as Amis' target of poignant and indignation is created in such a way as to evoke the feeling of contempt and disgust towards the existing social affairs. Even though the situation may provoke laughter, being so confident of her creativity, it is meant to shock and humiliate. Amis intentionally and fully exposes the dullness and stupidity of the 'so-called creative stars'. He, in other words, mockingly

draws our attention to the fact that this is no more than abuse but not an art. Amis reserves similar contempt and scorn for the socio-economic system that facilitates the exploitation of women and has reduced them to mere commodities. Vron's photographer and instructor then becomes a symbol for the companies and agencies that financially exploit women bodies to get extra profits, as evident in the way he aggressively motivates Vron to show off more of her body. The use of words such as 'gift' and 'give' suggests that Vron is giving herself over freely to the market audience, with the only motivation in her mind being the promise of being a star.

Ironically, Amis seems to question how much art is really involved in such a situation, and what exactly constitutes a star, and the answer, we find, is proffered in the text: the 20<sup>th</sup> century is "an ironic age" (p. 231). This is actually an indicator of the moral degeneration of contemporary society, and the changing values in such a society, where corruption is called fame, and exploitation is called freedom. Amis appears to imply that put together, the promise of fame, fortune and freedom, are tantamount to a 'freedom of exploitation'. This is perhaps what leads Amis to question the reality of the situation, when the narrator-protagonist ironically comments, "What's this state, seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad—okaying bad?" (p. 29).

*Supply and Demand: The Cheapness of Chicks*

Other than by applying satire through irony and allegory to criticize the commodification

of women, Amis makes use of other devices, what Robert Harris (1990) refers to as "the list" such as simile and metaphor. These literary devices are particularly utilised to portray and ridicule the valuelessness of women in the market place. Indeed, a very significant satirical view that sums up the whole of Amis' argument on the value of women is delivered through the use of simile. As the 'money expert', Frank advises Self, "You just take women and use them. Then you toss them aside like a salad" (p. 112). Obviously, Frank does not consider women as subjects capable of entering into a contract, but rather as objects or commodities to be bought and sold for a specified time (Monzini, 2005). More importantly, the simile above shows that a woman is not only a commodity, but a very cheap one, with the insignificance and cheapness further indicated through the use of words like 'use' and 'toss'. These words would also imply the high supply of such commodities on the market, since the more available a commodity, the cheaper it becomes. This is indeed what Amis seems to suggest. Amis' sharp razor is thus directed to the socio-economic system that makes such a commodity too common in the market place to keep its value at a minimum. Another example which further illustrates the exploitation and the devaluation of women is presented through the character of Selina who according to Self, works "like a dog at Helle's boutique. Only Helle's boutique isn't just a clothes shop: it's a sex shop too" (p. 250). This analogy shows that Selina has lost her humanity and is reduced to a mere dog that works on

demand. Furthermore, Selina's devaluation through the use of the simile above reveals her exploitation as a worker. By comparing her to a 'dog', Amis bitterly attacks the sex trade in which a woman is completely mistreated, objectified and devalued, all of which are the result of the exploitation of women in the world of business.

But although Amis seems to criticise women for responding negatively to the situation, and offering themselves for investment at such a low price, the virulence of Amis' message is largely reserved for the society that creates this situation, particularly to those who have shown no respect for mankind by investing in such a 'nasty' business. The very fact that Self receives advice to 'invest' in a female body from a money expert depicts the extent to which such an industry has become common in the world of trade. Amis' view is further stressed when Self is rendered sympathetic with the plight of these women, blaming society for exploiting them; "These working-class women, they're like a sheep trail. It obviously takes it out of you, being working-class. There is a lot of wear and tear involved. And pubs can't help" (p. 139). Self's comments show that the women involved in pornography are just as susceptible to exploitation as other workers, with the cheapness, oppression and humiliation of their profession implied through the aforementioned simile, where they are equated to animals. Amis' depiction of the suffering of women is projected through the sharp contrast between appearance and

reality: the women who entertain the public are themselves the tortured ones, stripped off their humanity and used like animals and objects that have neither human value nor sentience. Feinberg (1967, p. 3) notes that "the essence of satire is revelation of the contrast between reality and pretence". As a satirist, Amis carefully utilised this contrast to highlight a significant issue pertaining to the mistreatment of young women in contemporary social system.

The following extract further elaborates Amis' use of figures of speech to attack the socio-economic system that encourages the sexual exploitation of women; "You know how it is with the street women in hot cities, in concrete jungles. It's not that the weather brings them out. It's just that the weather takes most of their clothes off" (p. 299). Two important figures of speech are used here, a metaphor and personification, through the words "jungle" and "weather". While the metaphor stresses the difficulty of city life for women, the personification explains the way in which that life is difficult. With "concrete jungle", Amis depicts how ferocious city life can be for women, suggesting the presence of primal instinct and primal fear. In other words, this suggests that the city is not a safe place, but is rather a habitat of ferocious and wild animals — with the wild animals being the capitalists, the exploiters. Furthermore, the personification also shows that women are unwilling subjects in the wild jungle. The weather here can stand for the social atmosphere which compels women to sell their bodies. Such an analogy vividly

describes the huge influence of the social system on individuals and society. Amis purposefully exaggerates the situation and carefully interweaves the two figures of speech to suggest that the social atmosphere has created a 'jungle' in which women very much fall prey to wild animals. A view that is further emphasised through Self, who admits towards the end of *Money* that the sex trade is nothing but a money conspiracy; it is a "psychotic industry...Not even an industry—a conspiracy, a money conspiracy" (p. 316).

Distortion is another literary technique employed by Amis to criticise his society. This literary device is read as parallel to exaggeration in which the author changes his perspective on certain matters by isolating an ordinary surrounding or by "stressing some aspects and de-emphasizing others" (Harris, 1990). The distortion is mostly done by Amis through the description of a sexually-oriented society. The narrator-protagonist, for example, mockingly remarks on the scarcity of food in the street: "This restaurant serves no drink, this one serves no meat, this one serves no heterosexuals. You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed, twenty-four hours, but can you get lunch?" (p. 158). Hence, Amis intentionally "distorts" and "magnifies the bad" qualities of his society in order to "make isolated instances seem typical" (Feinberg, 1967, p. 90). He employs distortion, in other words, to ridicule a society built around perversion—which, paradoxically, supplants essential human needs, evident in the use of a rhetorical

question which highlights the stark nature of the situation. Implicitly, Amis is attacking the greedy capitalist system which has created such an atmosphere in the first place, as a result of market forces.

## CONCLUSION

As Gilbert Highet notes, satire functions to "wound[s] and destroy individuals and groups in order to benefit society as a whole" (1962, p. 26). That is to say, the significance of satire lies in its essence, the exposure of the contrast between reality and pretence (Feinberg, 1967). With these views in mind, it may be argued that Amis' satire is intended to correct female sexual exploitation in late capitalist society, at least by making the reader aware of the existence of this element, by shocking him or her into reaction. Using the means of satire, Amis vividly depicts the widespread domination and exploitation of women. What is important to note is that Amis uses satire as a platform to clearly illustrate the absurdity of the current social affairs. He aims to create awareness among individuals of the dangerous consequences of the free market economy, where money becomes the god that everybody worships, and where women are reduced to cheap objects. What makes Amis' satire more subtle and interesting is the use of devices such as allegory, irony, exaggeration and distortion. These elements are properly employed to create a vivid satiric portrait of the existing social affairs.

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