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**Contextualizing the Existence: Consumerism, Capitalism and Commodification in Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections**

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**Abstract:** This paper explored Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, published in 2001, with the objective of tracing the portrayal of characters' mere existence as commodified. The paper analyzed the profound impact of consumer culture on characters, including the Lambert family members, and identified the capitalist forces that had fueled it. The novel's commercial success and the reception made it an ideal source to explore contemporary American society and life within the consumerist-capitalist nexus. The research chronologically traced problems of the characters as the novel was linked to medicalization, capitalist influence on family dynamics, consumerism, materialism, privatization, and class stereotypes and its connection to the capitalist agendas. Along with the characters and instances, the paper provided insight relating to the problem from literary theorists and critics like Benedict Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Ewen, Frantz Fanon, Paul Farmer, Michel Foucault, and Fredric Jameson. Through this study, the paper brought out the key insight on American society, its individuals, their struggles, aspirations, and discussed the ways the capitalist agendas had taken advantage of it.

**Keywords:** Existential Commodification, Medicalization, Consumerist-capitalist Nexus, Materialism, Capitalism.

**Introduction:** The commodification of existence, wherein facets of human life are progressively transformed into marketable goods and services, represents a critical axis of analysis in contemporary cultural discourse. In particular, the convergence of capitalism and consumerism has rendered individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and socio-political structures increasingly subject to economic valuation. This intersection is especially

visible in modern American society, where the capitalist ethos often permeates the most intimate domains of life. Literary fiction, with its capacity to mirror, critique, and dissect societal conditions, provides an ideal site for exploring such dynamics. Among contemporary authors, Jonathan Franzen emerges as a significant voice whose narratives reflect the tensions between individual agency and systemic economic imperatives.

Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001), widely recognized for its critical and commercial reception, offers a rich case study for investigating the pervasive influence of capitalist ideology. Through a detailed portrayal of the Lambert family, the novel examines the interplay of medicalization, materialism, privatization, and class-based anxieties, situating them within a broader critique of American consumer culture. The narrative's engagement with themes of familial dysfunction, mental health, and socio-economic aspiration underscores the extent to which capitalist structures infiltrate not only public institutions but also private affective lives. This study interrogates *The Corrections* through the lens of critical theory, drawing on the insights of Benedict Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Ewen, Frantz Fanon, Paul Farmer, Michel Foucault, and Fredric Jameson. These theorists provide conceptual tools to decode the novel's portrayal of commodified existence and to contextualize it within late capitalist society. By synthesizing literary analysis with cultural critique, the study aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations surrounding the cultural logic of capitalism and its representation in literature.

This inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* depict the commodification of human existence within the socio-economic framework of contemporary America?
2. In what ways do capitalism and consumerism shape the psychological, familial, and social experiences of the characters?
3. How do Franzen's characters reflect broader ideological critiques offered by cultural theorists such as Baudrillard, Bourdieu, and Foucault?
4. What does the novel reveal about the intersection of identity, class, and commodification in post-industrial American society?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which *The Corrections* critiques the encroachment of capitalist logics into the fabric of ordinary life, while also reflecting the anxieties and contradictions of a society governed by consumerist imperatives.

**Literature Review:** This review section deals with the work already done in the related area of the commodification of existence with the interface of consumerism and capitalism in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. Susanne Rohr examined the compositions and narrative strategies employed by Jonathan Franzen in his novel *The Corrections*, and this study investigated Franzen's work through the lens of Crackpot Realism and its implications for contemporary literature. Rohr asserted that Franzen's engagement with these themes aligns

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with the conventions of modernism and postmodernism but utilized a unique narrative strategy.

Christoph Ribbat examined Jonathan Franzen's influence on both the literary and media terrains in the United States and Germany. Ribbat provided insights into how Franzen's essays shed light on the changing topography of literature and the challenges writers face in the modern era. Aaron Lelito addressed issues about raising consumer culture either through recognition of semiological instabilities or an analysis of consumer practices. Through her work, she created the awareness of writers' position within the economy of cultural production that informed the content of the novels at the same time that it placed the texts in an engagement with the culture they critiqued. She examined Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Ishmael Reed's *Japanese by Spring*, and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, firstly to design primarily to consider the authors' commentary on contemporary American culture, and then to question the consequence of this commentary on the abilities to construct meaningful experience and individual identity within the context of the consumerism that defines these works.

In their dissertation, Chalise and Bhola Nath illustrated the situation in post-industrial America through the dichotomy between consumer culture and the integration of the promises and the disintegrating effects of globalization. The study explored the dissociation in the lives of the characters from select works and the society they represented. The notion of globalization and the generation gap brought by this phenomenon caused disorder in the lives of characters through the illusion that drugs could cure depression and anxiety, passion over the financial market correction, and questions over sexuality and gender roles.

In their paper, Hosseini, Pirnajmuddin, and Abbasi examined Jonathan Franzen's particular version of realism in the novel, *The Corrections*, in terms of several seminal concerns, including the discourse of ethics, cognition, and social minds. As a post-postmodern writer, he conflated contemporaneity, timelessness, placelessness, and non-belonging of his time with naturalism's determinism and realism's detailed description to offer a new version of realism and neorealism or, in his own words, tragic realism. The authors of this paper concluded that Franzen displayed the complexity of the ordinary aspects of the lives of ordinary people to revive faith in ethical, humanistic, and even empathic responsibility, by describing the characters' appreciation of the ethics of complexity. These relations often involved accepting or tolerating human flaws as the juxtaposition of tragedy and realism suggests.

In their research paper, Nandhini and Saburunnisa analyzed the socio-cultural aspects of *The Corrections*, which illustrated in the context of the socio-cultural wars of the 1990s, with promising 'corrections' enhanced by the lost three Lambert siblings optimistically. By evading their parents' depressing protocol, the adults were attracted to the volunteer capitals of the eastern seaboard of Manaus and would continue in their lives.

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Franzen's *The Corrections* deliberately traced its account of the Lambert family within limited socio-economic contexts. This study concluded that the end of the twentieth century saw a shift in the American economic treasury, affected by the market reform mentioned in the title of the novel.

This review section analyzed scholarly papers related to the thematic line of this study. It was evident that there was a research gap to fill in the chosen area. The literature review concludes with a discussion of how Jonathan Franzen's novel, *The Corrections*, encapsulates his reflections on the future of literature and the fate of the author within the framework of a family narrative. This section highlights the seamless integration of Franzen's literary philosophy into the novel's thematic fabric, offering readers a unique lens through which to view the complex relationship between literature, media, and authorship. While existing scholarship on *The Corrections* has explored various dimensions of Franzen's narrative, ranging from his use of realism and cultural critique to his engagement with globalization and socio-economic structures, there remains an evident gap in addressing the systematic commodification of human existence as a unifying thematic concern. Prior studies have largely treated capitalism and consumerism as contextual backdrops rather than as central, structural forces that mediate identity, agency, and familial relations within the novel. Moreover, few analyses have employed an integrated critical framework that draws on a spectrum of cultural theorists to interpret the novel's engagement with the lived realities of late capitalism. This lacuna necessitates further inquiry into how Franzen's text articulates the conditions of commodified existence, particularly through the lens of intersecting literary and socio-political discourses.

**Analysis:** This section analyzes the commodification of existence by narrowing it down to capitalism and consumerism concerning the characters in the novel. Jonathan Franzen raises the notion that bureaucratic systems have the power to label certain mental states as "diseased," effectively reflecting the concerning trend of medicalizing mental health. The author, through the perspective of the character Chip, says:

"The bureaucracy has arrogated the right to define certain states of mind as 'diseased.' A lack of desire to spend money becomes a symptom of disease that requires expensive medication. Which medication then destroys the libido, in other words, destroys the appetite for the one pleasure in life that's free, which means the person has to spend even more money on compensatory pleasures. The very definition of mental 'health' is the ability to participate in the consumer economy. When you buy into therapy, you're buying into buying (Franzen 31)."

The above quote from the novel portrays the character Chip's dissatisfaction with the prevailing medical system. This can be viewed through the lens of Michel Foucault's extensive work on the medicalization of our society. Foucault's insight revolves around the idea that modern societies have increasingly turned to medical discourse to define and regulate various aspects of human behaviour, including the mental states. This

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medicalization of mental health has resulted in the tendency to pathologize behaviours and emotions that may not inherently signify illness but are framed as such to promote specific financial, economic goals, and motivations.

Franzen also portrays the intricate relationship between consumerism and mental health. The concept that a lack of desire to spend money can be interpreted as a symptom requiring costly medication testifies to the commodification of mental well-being. Furthermore, the destruction of libido and the appetite for free pleasures due to medication emphasizes the rising concerns on how capitalism affects intrinsic desires. This resonates with the views of Herbert Marcuse and his critical examination of consumer society in *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse argued that capitalism exerts control over individuals by diverting their desires towards products and consumption, effectively suppressing their pursuit of alternative sources of fulfilment and happiness.

As the narrative progresses, Gary's concerns regarding his son Caleb's new interest in fixing the surveillance system in the house illustrate the effects of consumerism and capitalist influences in the family dynamics. Franzen portrays it through the dialogues of his characters Gary, his wife Caroline, and his son Caleb. He writes:

“Gary shook his head. He'd had many hobbies when he was a boy, and for a long time it had pained him that his own boys seemed to have none at all. Eventually Caleb had figured out that if he used the word “hobby,” Gary would green-light expenditures he otherwise might have forbidden Caroline to make. Thus Caleb's hobby had been photography until Caroline had bought him an autofocus camera, an SLR with a better zoom telephoto lens than Gary's own, and a digital point-and-shoot camera. His hobby had been computers until Caroline had bought him a palmtop and a notebook. But now Caleb was nearly twelve, and Gary had been around the block one too many times. His guard was up regarding hobbies. He'd extracted from Caroline a promise not to buy Caleb more equipment of any kind without consulting with him first (Franzen 155-156).”

The above quotation examines the balance between personal passions and the relentless pursuit of material possessions within a society driven by capitalism. Caleb's “hobbies” reflect the prevailing consumerist mindset in contemporary society. Initially, his interests were driven by genuine passion, but over time, they have become opportunities for his mother, Caroline, to engage in consumerist behaviours. Literary theorist Fredric Jameson points out in his work titled *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that consumer culture often transforms personal interests and hobbies into marketable commodities.

Caleb's hobbies have been commodified as Caroline frequently acquires the latest gadgets for a child under twelve, driven by capitalist agendas. Gary's skepticism and insistence that Caroline consult him before purchasing more equipment underscore the

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tension between individual autonomy and consumerism. In the context of Jameson's analysis, Gary's actions represent resistance against the consumerist logic that seeks fulfillment through the constant acquisition of goods. He recognizes the need to regain control over consumerist tendencies that threaten to overshadow his son's genuine interests. The quoted passage from the novel illustrates how consumerism and capitalist agendas not only impact individuals but also infiltrate and shape family dynamics, where the line between private interests and commercial desires often blurs. These forces are also intertwined with the pursuit of uniqueness and the pressure to be extraordinary in a materialistic society. Jonathan Franzen further explores this theme in the following pages of the novel through the character Gary, whose desire to enjoy his wealth and leisure contrasts with the pervasive sense of discontent and competitiveness around him.

“Oh, misanthropy and sourness. Gary wanted to enjoy being a man of wealth and leisure, but the country was making it none too easy. All around him, millions of newly minted American millionaires were engaged in the identical pursuit of feeling extraordinary—of buying the perfect Victorian, of skiing the virgin slope, of knowing the chef personally, of locating the beach that had no footprints. There were further tens of millions of young Americans who didn't have money but were nonetheless chasing the Perfect Cool. And meanwhile the sad truth was that not everyone could be extraordinary, not everyone could be extremely cool; because whom would this leave to be ordinary? Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively uncool? (Franzen 197)”

The above passage sheds light on how consumerism and capitalism push individuals to strive for uniqueness and extraordinary experiences, often at the expense of the ordinary. Jean Baudrillard, in his book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, and Stuart Ewen, in *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, have explored how consumer culture encourages people to define themselves through their possessions and experiences. In the novel's context, the new American millionaires represent the desire to acquire status symbols and unique experiences as a way of asserting their identity and social standing. This pursuit of the extraordinary reflects the commodification of individuality in a consumer-driven society.

The passage also raises concerns about the effects of this unrelenting drive for distinctiveness. Fredric Jameson's view of “waning of affect” in postmodern society suggests that, under the influence of capitalism, culture becomes infused with superficial, commodified versions of art and ideas, making it challenging to recognize authentic, meaningful expressions. In the novel's context, people who are constantly trying to stand out and be cool may become emotionally detached and devalue the commonplace as they become focused with their own appearance and social standing. This demonstrates the complicated way capitalism and consumerism interplay. From one perspective, they entice with the appeal of personal uniqueness and extraordinary encounters. From another

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perspective, they promote a culture of conformity and competition, which makes people less appreciative of everyday elements of life and frequently leads to disillusionment.

Further in the novel, Franzen draws attention to the similarities between black-market Lithuania after giving up to privatization of government-owned bodies such as Airlines, Ports, and Phone lines with free-market America. He highlights several key aspects of consumerism and capitalism, encompassing wealth inequality, the crumbling distinctions between private and public sectors, the anxiety of the wealthy elite, the insecurity of ordinary citizens, and the role of luxury in driving the economy. He writes:

“Chip was struck by the broad similarities between black-market Lithuania and free-market America. In both countries, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few; any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors had disappeared; captains of commerce lived in a ceaseless anxiety that drove them to expand their empires ruthlessly; ordinary citizens lived in ceaseless fear of being fired and ceaseless confusion about which powerful private interest owned which formerly public institution on any given day; and the economy was fueled largely by the elite’s insatiable demand for luxury. (In Vilnius, by November of that dismal autumn, five criminal oligarchs were responsible for employing thousands of carpenters, bricklayers, craftsmen, cooks, prostitutes, barkeeps, auto mechanics, and bodyguards.) The main difference between America and Lithuania, as far as Chip could see, was that in America the wealthy few subdued the unwealthy many by means of mind-numbing and soul-killing entertainments and gadgetry and pharmaceuticals, whereas in Lithuania the powerful few subdued the unpowerful many by threatening violence.” (Franzen 430-431)

In the quote above, Franzen illustrates how a small group of capitalists exerts control over the masses in society. To delve deeper into this quotation and its implications for consumerism and capitalist agendas, Fredric Jameson's analysis of the cultural and economic characteristics of late capitalism can be applied. Jameson posits that consumerism is crucial for maintaining the dominance of the capitalist system in advanced capitalist states. He argues that individuals' minds are diverted from the harsh realities of capitalism through mind-numbing entertainment, technology, and luxury goods, suggesting that consumer culture often serves as a form of “cultural anesthesia.” Jameson's critique of wealth disparity in capitalist societies aligns with the passage quoted above, which highlights the concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few. He examines this issue by noting the lack of significant distinctions between the private and public sectors.

His conclusions about the impact of late capitalism on both the affluent and working classes suggest that the anxiety of the wealthy elite and the fear of job loss among ordinary citizens reflect the competitive and deceptive nature of capitalism, where individuals are constantly driven to protect their economic interests. The role of luxury in driving the economy underscores Jameson's concept that consumerism and the desire for luxury goods

are key indicators of the functioning of capitalist societies. The influence of a few elites over the less privileged majority in America through entertainment, technology, and pharmaceuticals, and in Lithuania through the use of violence as a means of control, highlights the different strategies employed to maintain authority in diverse social contexts. Through these instances, using the character Chip, the novel portrays consumerism and capitalist interests, drawing connections between the underground economy in Lithuania and the free-market economy in America. As the novel progresses, it explores the complex relationship between consumerism, capitalist agendas, and national identity. Here, the character Gitanas grapples with the dilemma of how to be a patriot in a globalized and consumer-driven world. The novel illustrates this in the quotations provided below:

“What do I do now,” Gitanas asked Chip, “when the invader is a system and a culture, not an army? The best future I can hope now for my country is that someday it looks more like a second-rate country in the West. More like everybody else, in other words.” “More like Denmark, with its attractive harborside bistros and boutiques,” Chip said. “How Lithuanian we all felt,” Gitanas said, “when we could point to the Soviets and say: No, we’re not like that. But to say, No, we are not free-market, no, we are not globalized—this doesn’t make me feel Lithuanian. This makes me feel stupid and Stone Age. So how do I be a patriot now? What positive thing do I stand for? What is the positive definition of my country?” (Franzen 447)

The aforementioned quotation encapsulates the challenges associated with patriotism and national identity as depicted through the dialogue between characters in the novel. Gitanas' discontent with the system and culture imposed upon his nation under the guise of globalization and modernity raises questions about the expression of his patriotism. Unlike warfare, where participation on behalf of a nation serves as a validation of patriotism, the characters in this context are rendered passive, compelled to accept the prevailing circumstances without resistance.

**Discussion:** Literary theorist Benedict Anderson, in his seminal work “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,” explores the concept of imagined communities and their role in shaping collective identity. Anderson posits that nations are not inherent or pre-existing entities but are socially constructed, imagined by their inhabitants. He argues that the advent of print capitalism, characterized by the dissemination of printed materials and the establishment of a common language, was instrumental in shaping the notion of nationhood. Gitanas' predicament aligns with Anderson's assertion, as individuals adapt their understanding of nationhood to evolving historical and cultural contexts. Gitanas exemplifies this point by expressing a desire for his country to emulate Western nations, thereby adopting Western consumerist and capitalist values as a means of modernization. The reference to Denmark, with its appealing harborside bistros and boutiques, underscores the allure of Western consumerism as a model for progress. Gitanas' apprehension about feeling “stupid and Stone Age” if his country does not embrace free-market capitalism and globalization underscores the pressure on nations to conform to global

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consumerist norms. Through the character Gary, Franzen illustrates how individuals from specific socioeconomic backgrounds are often negatively perceived and treated, primarily due to their limited access to consumer goods and services. He writes:

“Poor people smoked, poor people ate Krispy Kreme doughnuts by the dozen. Poor people were made pregnant by close relatives. Poor people practiced poor hygiene and lived in toxic neighborhoods. Poor people with their ailments constituted a subspecies of humanity that thankfully remained invisible to Gary except in hospitals and in places like Central Discount Medical (Franzen 468-469).”

Franzen's depiction of individuals grappling with economic hardships, who engage in behaviors such as smoking, overeating sugary foods, becoming pregnant through direct relations, practicing poor hygiene, and living in challenging neighborhoods, underscores the damaging stereotypes and biases often linked to poverty. These stereotypes justify labeling those in impoverished conditions and falsely perpetuate the notion that their circumstances arise from personal failures or moral shortcomings. Pierre Bourdieu's work resonates with the themes in this quote, particularly in his book “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste.” Bourdieu discusses how consumption patterns and cultural practices serve as indicators of social class. He argues that individuals from the upper class often have access to goods and services deemed prestigious, while those in the lower class are frequently excluded from these forms of consumption, which are unfairly devalued and stigmatized. Engaging in behaviors labeled as unhealthy or enjoying products like smoking and fast food can be seen as a consequence of limited economic resources and a reflection of the structural inequalities that shape tastes and consumption patterns. The portrayal of impoverished individuals as a subspecies of humanity highlights the dehumanization and invisibility that often accompany poverty. This concept resonates with Frantz Fanon's work, “The Wretched of the Earth.” While Fanon's writings primarily explore the dehumanization of colonized peoples, the idea of dehumanization can also be applied to the stigmatization and marginalization faced by impoverished communities. Furthermore, the reference to “Central Discount Medical” in the quote hints at the commodification of healthcare. This phrase suggests that healthcare services for low-income individuals are perceived as inferior and discounted, reinforcing the troubling notion that access to quality healthcare is treated as a privilege rather than a fundamental human right. This commodification of healthcare aligns with the work of scholars like Paul Farmer, who, in his book “Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor,” explores how economic and political forces contribute to health disparities and unequal treatment of marginalized populations for personal gain. The intertextual deployment of theoretical constructs from thinkers such as Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Jameson in relation to Franzen's narrative has not been systematically synthesized within a single analytical framework. This lacuna underscores the necessity of the present analysis, which aims to contribute to literary and cultural discourse by bridging this critical gap and offering a nuanced, theory-informed examination of how *The Corrections* stages the commodification of life under the pressures of consumer capitalism.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, this paper delved into the portrayal of characters as commodified entities in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. It examined the profound impact of consumer culture on characters, including the Lambert family, and identified the capitalist forces driving this phenomenon. The novel's reception in contemporary American society made it an ideal lens through which to explore life within the consumerist-capitalist nexus. This study highlighted the challenges faced by the characters, such as medicalization, the influence of capitalism on family dynamics, consumerism, materialism, privatization, and class stereotypes, all linked to capitalist agendas. The paper drew on insights from literary theorists and critics like Benedict Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Ewen, Frantz Fanon, Paul Farmer, Michel Foucault, and Fredric Jameson to address these issues. Ultimately, the paper provided key insight into American society, its individuals, their struggles, and aspirations, and discussed how capitalist agendas have exploited these elements.

The findings of this study underscore the ways in which *The Corrections* functions not merely as a family saga but as a trenchant sociocultural critique of neoliberal rationality and late capitalist subject formation. Through its portrayal of commodified identities, privatized care structures, and market-driven behavioral norms, the novel articulates a broader anxiety about the erosion of authentic human experience under the dictates of consumer capitalism. By foregrounding the interplay between individual agency and systemic constraint, Franzen's narrative reveals the pervasive infiltration of market logic into the most intimate spheres of life. This analysis, therefore, affirms the novel's significance as a literary intervention into ongoing debates about autonomy, social justice, and the cultural logic of advanced capitalism, while also contributing to the broader field of literary studies that interrogate the socio-political ramifications of economic ideology in contemporary fiction.

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