

COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITY FORMATION AND CONSUMER CULTURE: A STUDY OF NDIBE'S *FOREIGN GODS, INC.*

*FORMACIÓN DE IDENTIDAD COSMOPOLITA Y CULTURA DE
CONSUMO: UN ESTUDIO DE NDIBE FOREIGN GODS, INC.*

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Abstract

The dream of a cosmopolitan utopia and the idea of being locally situated yet globally connected has never seemed more plausible than today. Globality has made the vast supermarket of goods, home decor and exotic items locally available to consumers, irrespective of their geographical setting. The consumption of such goods from around the world has made so-called cosmopolitanism possible. In a way, Cosmopolitanism has acted as an emancipatory force capable of overcoming global inequalities. However, recent global economic trends suggest a contradictory nature of "capitalism-tamed-cosmopolitanism". Through the study of Okey Ndibe novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), the article argues that capitalism, which is an intrinsic element in global processes, tends to reproduce divisions, which cosmopolitanism claims to dissolve. The paper also addresses the nuances of Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism and its role towards identity formation. The analysis of the text suggests that there is a difference between 'cosmopolitanism of having' and 'cosmopolitanism of being'.

Keywords: Globalisation, Capitalism, Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism, Identity formation, Okey Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

Resumen

El sueño de una utopía cosmopolita y la idea de estar localmente situado pero globalmente conectado nunca ha parecido más plausible que hoy. La globalidad ha hecho que el gran supermercado de bienes, decoración del hogar y artículos exóticos esté disponible localmente para los consumidores, independientemente de su ubicación geográfica. En cierto modo, el Cosmopolitismo ha actuado como una fuerza emancipadora capaz de superar las desigualdades globales. Sin embargo, las recientes tendencias económicas globales sugieren una naturaleza contradictoria del “Capitalismo-domada-cosmopolitismo”. A través del estudio de la novela de Okey Ndibe *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), el artículo argumenta que el capitalismo, que es un elemento intrínseco en los procesos globales, tiende a reproducir divisiones, que el cosmopolitismo pretende disolver. El artículo incluso aborda los matices del cosmopolitismo estético-cultural y su papel hacia la formación de la identidad. El análisis del texto sugiere que existe una diferencia entre el “cosmopolitismo del tener” y el “cosmopolitismo del ser”.

Palabras clave: Globalización, Capitalismo, Cosmopolitismo estético-cultural, Formación de identidad, Okey Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

1. Introduction

Cosmopolitanism in the globalised world holds a general assumption that it transcends particularist boundaries of nation, culture, race and ethnicity. Philosophy of cosmopolitanism suggests that transnational flows of commodities, capital and technology have a strong connection with “free-floating transnational cultural orientation” (Holton 384). The economic transactions across borders surpass the control of territorially bounded States in the name of global capital. The spatial mobility of culturally privileged immigrants, distorts the local cultural repertoires by integrating their particularistic cultural resources. These migrants undergo a process of ‘incorporation’, ‘acculturation’ and ‘naturalisation’ in the ‘host country’. The phenomenon generates ‘transnational social space’ which is outside rigid organisational pathways. Kwame Anthony Appiah in his article entitled “Cosmopolitan Patriots” asserts that such “persistent processes of cultural hybridization” creates new forms of regionally inflected cultures that cosmopolitanism celebrates (619). The most promising aspect of such spaces is the evolution of new identity i.e. cosmopolitan identity. The theoretical analysis of cosmopolitanism regards it as a unifying force about which the above propositions can be sustained. However, the recent shift

in perspective regarding cosmopolitan studies has brought with it multiple tendencies, which is beyond “vague notions of openness to others” (Holton 383). Cultural differences are natural, and therefore something inescapable. In this respect, Rafał Wonicki justly claims that cosmopolitanism is “...an ideological answer to globalisation. It is an attempt not only to manage such facts as plurality of values and migrations but also to build a new, more adequate political vocabulary which would enable us to better describe our national and international reality” (272). Cosmopolitanism does not provide the proximate solidarities on the basis of which better institutions can be built. Writing of cosmopolitanism, Pheng Cheah cautiously comments that transnational interconnectivity cannot be a synonym for cosmopolitan conviviality. He asserts that “The world is undoubtedly interconnected, and transnational mobility is clearly on the rise”, but this cannot be taken “to imply that popular forms of cosmopolitanism already exist” (40–41). Craig Calhoun, who sees cosmopolitanisms not as a philosophy but as a social practice, maintains that “Most versions of cosmopolitanism are contained within liberalism.” which, over the course of time, has proved insufficient for securing a sense of belonging and community (105). Cosmopolitanism is an important response to globalisation, but not by itself an adequate one. He even emphasises on the need to “problematize its acceptance of economistic, modernising imaginaries, its typically inadequate attention to the formation of solidarity and the conditions for collective choices about the nature of society” (Calhoun 119). Capitalism, which is an intrinsic element in global processes, also has a strong affinity with cosmopolitanism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also identified the cosmopolitan nature of capitalism:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood (12).

Capitalism addresses the hope of openness to others as it has a “... tendency to transcend both local and national limitations, and to secure autonomy from external political and cultural controls” (Holton 387). It affirms the probability of strong connection between two nations. The earlier versions of capitalism, was embedded within relations, which were

dominated by local political and cultural preoccupations. It presented an ambivalent cosmopolitan nature of capitalism. However, the renascent global economic trend of the 20th and 21st centuries reveals that the theories of capitalism and cosmopolitanism are at cross purposes. Modern capitalism emphasises, on the “predominance of capital accumulation involving the commodification of labour power, together with cultural orientations toward a rational goal-directed pursuit of profit as a way of life” (Holton 387). The bourgeois do give a cosmopolitan character to the world market that effaces static and parochial institutions, but they do not have any “explicit interest in the substance of cosmopolitan norms to do with social justice, human rights, and cultural openness” (Holton 387). The concept of ‘capital without borders’ given by these so called cosmopolites, promotes deregulated flows of capital, and flatten political borders, but are nevertheless “committed to self-interest rather than to humanity as a whole” (Holton 389). Corporate leaders, asserts Sklair, think globally and follow “consumer-oriented global vision for humanity” (255-94). They do not necessarily involve themselves in any sort of cosmopolitan affiliation but rather nurture narcissistic ‘quasi-cosmopolitanism’. They retain wide social ties and involve themselves in friendships across cultural boundaries, but often maintain exclusive and “racialized conceptions of difference rather than active intercultural sharing” (Holton 391). Here, it is interesting to note what Cedric Robinson contends about “racial capitalism” (2). In the chapter entitled “Racial Capitalism: The Nonobjective Character of Capitalist Development” of his book, *Black Marxism* (2000), he asserts that capitalism was influenced by “particularistic forces of racism and nationalism” (9). He argues that, although capitalism was brought up by a unit of people, consisting European mercenaries from different civilizations, bourgeoisie from a particular ethnic groups; peasants from yet other culture; and slaves from completely different world, yet the expansion of capitalist society pursue racial directions. While discussing the tendency of European civilization, Robinson advocates that capitalism is shaped by ‘racialism’ and is introduced not to homogenise “...but to differentiate-to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into “racial” ones” (26). The above discussion suggests, that capitalist globalisation has not eliminated national spaces; it has made them more prominent. It is real, but not quite the uncontested and unambiguously positive transformation that some enthusiasts suggest. Okey Ndibe novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), also exposes the same contradictory nature of ‘Capitalism-tamed-cosmopolitanism’.

2. Capitalism and cosmopolitanism

The protagonist of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), is a victim of such globalised capitalism. Ikechukwu Uzundu aka Ike, is a Nigerian-born New Yorker. He has an Amherst degree cum laude in economics, but his strong accent has barred him from being a part of the corporate world. Incapable to manage the materialistic needs of his African American wife and a widowed mother, he is forced to earn his living as a cab driver. He even turned towards gambling, but his ascending losses compounded his woes. The moment Ike discovers Mark Gruel's strange world of god collection in a magazine, he is entranced by the potential financial payoff of the business and makes a decision to steal the Ngene God. Even though he is disgusted by the "idea of a few wealthy individuals buying up so-called Foreign Gods and sacred objects" (Ndibe 59) he is able to ease his guilt conscience by reading an article "in an edition of New York magazine", which suggest that "in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund" (Ndibe 62). The Foreign Gods, Inc. store acts as a metaphor for the global capitalist society that promises circulation of cultural objects as an evidence of cosmopolitan possibility. Ike convinces himself that by bringing Ngene to "Gruels's gallery", he will make it global, and contribute to the powerful cultural current even though only among wealthy elites (Ndibe 59). Fuelled by desperation, Ike takes a flight to his hometown of Utonki in order to smuggle the war deity, Ngene, to New York. He feels the guilt of stealing the god and betraying his uncle Osuakwu, the "chief priest of Ngene", but his financial condition counterbalances his iniquity (Ndibe 62). Back at home, he found that Pastor Uka and he had the same designs on Ngene i.e. to uproot it from its native environment. The objectives of both men were different, but the ends were the same. After successfully smuggling the patron god of his village, Ike goes to Gruels's store to sell the Ngene but is struck by wonder. Gruels offers him a small price compared to the hundreds of thousands he estimated. Gruels further explains, "Frankly, I'm not looking to add to my African inventory. Not at this time. African gods are no longer profitable" (Ndibe 318). He even adds, "...Problem is, I have to look at market trends. And the odds are not in its favor" (Ndibe 322). The same Gruels, who play in the culturally cosmopolitan market of goods and sell deities from Africa to Papua New Guinea, refuse to accept the proposal offered by Ike. The given instance is the finest example of late capitalism, wherein the new global setting proves to be an uneven playing field for supranational identities.

Gruels's god shop, which possess 'array of gods' from all around the world, symbolises his 'cosmopolitan position' but not necessarily his 'cosmopolitan orientation'. Here, the former refers to 'cosmopolitanism of having' which, being framed on the basis of possession/consumption pattern, results in fake cosmopolitanism, while the latter suggests 'cosmopolitanism of being' which goes beyond this consumption-based cosmopolitanism and enables people to actively engage in other cultures. It is rather a state of mind, an attitudinal orientation, resulting in experiential cosmopolitanism. Overall, the novel is an acrid attack on the version of cosmopolitanism that celebrates the circulation of cultural objects as evidence of cosmopolitanism possibility. Here it is interesting to note what Ulrich Beck argues about cosmopolitanism:

Cosmopolitanism has itself become a commodity: the glitter of cultural difference fetches a good price. Images of an in-between world, of the black body, exotic beauty, exotic music, exotic food and so on, are globally cannibalised, re-staged and consumed as products for mass markets (150–51).

The result is a safe form of cosmopolitanism that permits the privileged consumer to be close to the otherness of the others, but not too close or too involved. In the novel, Gods Shop owner, Gruels, further states,

...[They] are no longer in vogue, that's why. Three, four years ago, they were all the rage. Even two years ago, they were still doing decent business. Every serious collector had to have three, four, five African gods. They flew off the shelf. Then things—tastes—changed. This is like any other business—it's prone to shifts in tastes ... African gods are not the inventory they used to be. They've gone cold. You want a great payday, then go get me an Asian god. They're big, Asian gods are. There's also a huge demand for Latin American gods (Ndibe 320-22).

His comment proves that, capitalist market works under some immutable laws. The global market is driven by popular culture and is always in search of the next "new" thing. According to Bauman, 'there is no lasting allegiance between consumer and their relation to consumption objects'. "Any commitment or pledge for loyalty is only valid 'until further notice'" (Aytekin et al. 199). Different cultural commodities that flow through the circuits of world commerce are influenced by consumer's consumption patterns.

Through the above monologue, Ndibe reveals that the capitalist market has nothing to do with cultural history of the artefact, but with the financial value that these objects hold. Once the cultural objects become outdated, they lose their economic value. The protagonist of the novel, Ike, becomes the victim of such deflation. Ruined by financial condition, he is forced to accept the meagre offer of fifteen hundred dollars. Later, when he tries to buy Ngene back, he finds out that it was sold to a Japanese buyer for a much higher profit. He was not really a collector, just happened to stroll in the store. Gruels tells Ike, "Its new home is somewhere in Japan. You should be proud that a deity that once lived in your village has traveled to Asia" (Ndibe 330). Thus, Ndibe's novel addresses the nuances of cultural complexity and power play of capitalist nations. It suggests that cosmopolitan consumption is merely a guise under which capitalism exploits cultural differences. Ndibe also suggests that capitalist society uses economic power to control the cultural value of different nations. In a way, the locally situated cultural products are in dialogue with globally hegemonic forces i.e. Capitalism. Each cultural product is given a price tag on the basis of the value in the market. When Ike visits Gruels's shop for the first time, he comes across clusters of short, squat showcases occupied by figurines of ancient deity. There were statues of Bambara water goddess, Fanti god, A Tiv god, Chi Wara deity, Efik rain god, an oblong statue, toothy statue, and the list is endless. As he skimmed through the glossy catalogue of statues, he witnessed that "each page was columned, with sections" like "inventory code", "name", "brief history" and "price" (Ndibe 3). While flipping through the pages of the catalogue, he came across the section called "Heavenly Inventory" (Ndibe 3). "The lowest price in the section was \$171,455; the highest \$1.13 million" (Ndibe 3). Each cultural item was paired with a price tag which, in turn, determined the position of a cultural product in the list of cultural hierarchy. The much 'in demand' a cultural product is, the higher price it holds. The inverse relationship between demand and price, determines the desirability of a cultural product among the elite class. Not only this, but consumers, at different times, and for different purposes, are willing to experience the sample of otherness through cultural artefacts regardless of their national afflictions. Globalisation, therefore, is not an event in which one form dominates the others. Rather, globalisation is the diffusion of all different styles across the globe. But one must not forget that "postmodern consumer experience is not one of committing to a single way of being or a single form of experience, the same consumers are willing to sample the different, fragmented artifacts"

(Firat 115 as quoted in Aytekin et al. 200). This is evident in the novel as well. The woman, who tore out a check of four hundred thirty-five thousand six eighty for “rotund and gargoyle-like, ocher in color,” statue, a minute ago, is ready for another deal with Gruels (Ndibe 313). Such random shopping or compulsive consumption is provoked when Gruels asks, “Can you look in early next week? Say, Tuesday? Are you in town?... I wanted it to be a surprise, but I can tell you. It’s a mountain deity from one of the indigenous peoples of the Philippines. Take my word: you’re going to be blown away. Absolutely!” (Ndibe 314). Thus one finds that capitalism does not create a smooth pathway for the cosmopolitan ethics to flourish. It surely helps in the diffusion of different cultural artefacts, but is strictly oriented towards pursuit of profit. The elite class, do give a cosmopolitan character to the world market, but they do not nurture cultural openness.

Ndibe also showcases how capitalist values seep into all factors of American life, especially interpersonal relationships as an immigrant. Due to a history of cultural superiority, the US propagates the message that it is a land of excess in its most fantastical form. The easy monetary success draws immigrants towards a world of success and affluence. This delusion of American opportunity, tolerance, and material excess set a higher standard in the mind of the majority of immigrants. However, despite its claims of wealth and opportunity, the American capitalist system consumes the very lives of such transnational individuals and becomes the revolving wheel of progress. This overwhelming capitalism even influences the mindset of migrants who constantly push themselves for better social standing. They endorse capitalist behaviour and demonstrate a similar pattern of basing relationships around such values. This is even showcased by the protagonist of the novel, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* Ike “when he met a woman, he calibrated his interest based on the likelihood that she would consent to marry him” (Ndibe 27). The marriage would grant him a green card and the chance to have a corporate job. Due to the overwhelming American mentality of capitalism, love and marriage in the US are thus reduced to their market value. In this context, it is interesting to quote David Harvey, whose writing illustrates the logic of this moment. “we move from a situation in which individuals can express their individuality and relate in human terms to one another to one in which individuals have no choice but to conform and in which social relations between people become replaced by market relations between things” (Olopade 147-48). Not only this, but even migrant’s drive, to move towards, such a nation, is instead administered by economic forces

at play. Many immigrants, academics, professionals and technical experts work in an array of settings which include multinational and transnational corporations. These individuals are driven by opportunity and material success. They vest their interest in constantly furthering economic progress and have nothing to do with cross-country relations and cosmopolitan identity formation. Similar instance is seen in the novel, where Ike comes to the US with the hope of gaining financial security. He has graduated from Amherst College and has high education credentials. Even though he has been working as a cab driver for almost thirteen years, yet his dislocation from his native land is not motivated by the idea of becoming a cosmopolitan. Not only him, but women of his village also display similar behaviour. When Ike visits his mother's church in Nigeria, he is greeted by "a lineup of women driven to insane distraction by dreams of American matrimony and dollars" and hoping to be his bride in America (Ndibe, 144). Thus, we find that the economic logic of global capitalism necessarily dominates an individual's lifeworld and has nothing to do with cosmopolitan orientation.

3. Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism and identity formation

Another idea that Ndibe puts forward in the novel is the connection between Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism and identity formation. The novel, which centres around the high end "God Shops" triggers few questions in the minds of the readers i.e. Can cultural consumption and contact with foreignness result in cultural mutation? Can appreciation for cultural products construct new transnational relations? And can Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism shape the contours and trajectories of cosmopolitan identity? Now, global culture appears to be a driving force of cosmopolitan ways of being. The strong attraction and curiosity for products from elsewhere, having little or no localised references has resulted into marketisation of cultural products. Exchanges of cultural goods provided people with a range of possibilities to access exoticism, curiosity and strangeness. "As a fundamental part of this process, these goods – from tropical fruits and flora, to home decorations – can be produced and consumed through cosmopolitan frames of meaning which work with material affordances of objects and activate their cosmopolitan meaning through interpretive rituals and use practices" (Woodward and Skrbiš 130). The circulation and proliferation of such cultural contents "favors the shaping and re-shaping of imaginaries of the world, insofar as every piece

of art or cultural icons is supposed to be specific to a place, a culture and an aesthetic canon” (Cicchelli and Octobre 47). The rise of social media and digital technologies has expedited the circulation of cultural products and facilitated the growth of global cultural industries. This internationalisation of cultural repertoires and such patterns of cultural consumption have given rise to a new concept called aesthetic cosmopolitanism. The concept came into prominence in the mid 1990’s which suggested a process of “cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different nations” (Szerszinski and Urry 468), or as having taste for ‘the wider shores of cultural experience’ (Tomlinson 202). “Aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism” is based on the distinction between the culture of others and the culture of one’s own. Thus, when an individual, as a member of a specific nation or an ethnic group, has a taste for cultural products indisputably belonging to a nation or ethnicity other than that of their own, they exhibit aesthetic cosmopolitanism. This variant of cosmopolitanism, achieved through aestheticization of everyday life, has become a typical feature of modern societies. This phenomenon has contributed to the construction of self-image and redefining social relations. However, Inglis consider such cultural consumption as “fake cosmopolitanism” (738). Some critics believe that cosmopolitan amateurs assert their stance of openness to others through “feeling, reasoning and negotiating” (Cicchelli and Octobre 50). In fact, many young people decide to consume a cultural product, the way it stimulates their curiosity for exoticism. But such exoticism for foreign goods is not enough to build a cosmopolitan identity. It is merely defined as “self-fashioning” (Greenblatt 1) or “self-conscious cosmopolitanism” (Conradson and Latham 248). The instance in the novel, of a Japanese buyer, buying the African God at a much higher price is the finest example of such self-fashioning cosmopolitanism. The Japanese buyer is driven by aesthetic and exoticism but has no real encounter with otherness. Critics like Calhoun, Jubas, Vertovec and Cohen, doubt that such cultural consumption can genuinely lead towards cosmopolitan engagement. These critics often cite the inherently paradoxical nature of such cultural commodification and consumption. Heldke argues that such consumption of difference through commodities like “ethnic” foods and traditional outfits may result in so-called cosmopolitan pleasure but indeed it preserves consumer’s unawareness about other cultures (22). Even Calhoun asserts that consuming these products might seem culturally broadening, “but they are not hard tests

for the relationship between local solidarity and international civil society” (105). Cosmopolitan consumption results in what Ghassan Hage asserts, “multiculturalism without the migrants” and “foreign-ness without the foreigners” (118). The basis of cosmopolitan identity is the encounter with cultural and national realities of others. This can be only achieved through mobility, either physical or virtual. Cosmopolitan individuals can navigate in a hybridised “global context” (Molz) and can “switch between cultural codes” (Dharwadker) only through mobility, reflexivity and curiosity (Cicchelli and Octobre 53). Thus cultural artefacts, in itself, are incapable of creating such competences and developing such aspirations. The act of such consumption can only be defined as an elitist consumerist behavioural pattern, where sophisticated class distinguishes themselves from others by tasting cultural differences. Aytekin Firat et al. assert that such consumption has symbolic meanings as it is a social process which makes basic cultural classes prominently visible.

...luxury products are not consumed physically, and core products become of secondary importance; image is consumed instead. These kinds of products are viewed as a reflector of social class or lifestyle. Thus, for the elite, consumption choices become a reason for being. In fact, consumption is an important element to participate in social life and improve social relations (186).

A consumer society is organised around the display of consumed commodities through which an individual gains prestige, identity, and social standing. The “foreign-ness” of a cultural commodity is valued by the elite class as they are symbolic markers of class identity. Baudrillard asserts that such commodities are not solely characterised by exchange-value and use-value, but also by “sign-value - the expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on - that becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption” (Firat et al. 194). The consumerist society uses a system of signs to signify social status and prestige but this system of signs has nothing to do with the formation of cosmopolitan identity. An instance of such elite consumerist behaviour is also seen in the novel where Gruels sells a Mayan marvel deity to a woman, who is in search of a gift for her divorced brother.

“...I’d like something amazing for my brother. And this should do.”

“Birthday?” Gruels asked ... “No, divorced.”

“Josh?” Gruels sounded incredulous.

“Yes, darling—you know I have only the one brother.”

“He and Heather parted ways?”

“Oh, Mark, have you been living in a cave again?”

“No, really,” said Gruels. “I’m sorry to hear it.”... She related how Heather had run away with another woman, leaving Josh crushed.

Finally, Gruels said, “A man dumped by his wife for another woman deserves some spectacular gift. You can’t get better than this.” He glanced up at the deity. “This, here, is a Mayan marvel.”

“And what are you asking for her?”

“Twenty thousand—eighteen thousand for you” (Ndibe 5-6).

The scene highlights how the perception of ‘foreignness’ is contextualised among the affluent class. The above instance suggests that the woman uses cultural objects as a means to gratify her and her brother’s elitist self. Here, the cultural object is evaluated on the basis of its economic value, and not on the basis of its cultural history, meaning and worth within a community. Its position is merely reduced to an object of gift-giving (luxury consumption) which reflects one’s own image to the other members of the elite. The practice itself represents the height of elitism, showcasing a piece of foreign culture as a sign of worldliness and taste as opposed to a true appreciation of different cultures. Even in an early scene, the same obsession is witnessed in Giles Karefelis, whom Ike has picked up outside the United Nations Plaza. Giles is presumed to be a European diplomat, as he holds an accent which has a “trace of foreignness” (Ndibe 15). He is the last passenger of Ike’s cab ride to whom he introduces to Gruels’s gallery of Foreign Gods. While conversing with this elite passenger, Ike asserts that there is a gallery called Foreign Gods, Inc. which buys and sells gods. The word ‘Foreign’ fascinates Giles, as he sets aside his paperback and responds to Ike’s attempts at conversation:

“I will write a book someday,” he said.

“You will?” the passenger asked quickly. “What about?”

“About Foreign Gods.”

“Foreign, did you say? Foreign what? It’s hard to understand your accent.”

Ike brushed off the hurt. “There’s a gallery called Foreign Gods, Inc. They buy and sell gods. That’s what I plan to write about.”

The passenger guffawed. “Why, that’s a neat idea.”

Ike felt elated, awake. "It's going to be interesting."

"Where?"

Confused, Ike gave no response.

"Where's the gallery?" the man elaborated.

"Oh, here in New York. On Vance Street, number nineteen" (Ndibe 19-20).

The above mentioned dialogues indicate that Giles's interest in Gruels's god shop is only awakened by the words "gallery called Foreign Gods Inc." as it promises him a setting where he can gratify his socioeconomic status (Ndibe 19). In the later scenes of the novel, the same Giles is seen in Gruels's shop. While having a dialogue with another customer, who happened to be his acquaintance, we are made aware about Giles's so-called elitism. The woman asserts "I fear you're now going to raid all the good gods. It's like you, isn't it?" to which Gruels remarked "Mr. Karefelis went on a binge the first time he showed up. Two weeks ago. He's slowed down a bit" (Ndibe 312). The conversation suggests how perceived difference is valued by moneyed masses, and so is transformed into a commodity that helps them maintain an unequal status quo. Here, it's interesting to note what David Wright, asserts about the processes of consumption:

The processes of consumption can transform the meaning of objects, removing them from their position in commodity circuits and placing them in the realm of everyday life experience, where the meanings of things are not determined by the objects themselves but in their relations with their owners. (351)

The cultural products are used as a tool for social stratification. The consumption of cultural diversity distinguishes the wealthy suburbanites from the working class counterparts. It is this desire to maintain such class distinctions that forces these elites to pay a hefty price for cultural goods. Even "Ike felt momentarily woozy" after witnessing that there exists, a breed of rich who can "write a check for half-a-million dollars or more without flinching" (Ndibe 313). Ghassan Hage in his book *White Nation* (1998), using Bourdieu's framework suggests that "such practices always involve a position of symbolic power and dominance. He sees this ability to pick and choose as a form of appropriation by a dominant culture through means of symbolic manipulation. In this way, such means of cross-cultural engagement

are politically charged and result in contradictory tendencies. On one hand it displays the potential to construct forms of ethical cosmopolitanism, and on the other it is a form of appropriation whereby cultural difference is consumed, subsumed and ultimately dominated” (Skrbis and Woodward 738-39). The act of buying the cultural form for social profit is an example of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation, when used to empower social order, makes cosmopolitan identity an impossible proposition. Thus, one finds that aesthetics must not be confused with ethics, as there is no guarantee that the lifting of cultural horizons and the development of hermeneutic sensibilities will be followed by the evolution of global totality.

4. Conclusion

The above study tries to propose a theory of connections between capitalism and cosmopolitanism. The outcome suggests that capitalism undermines the racial solidarity and politics of belonging. Capitalism supports racialized understanding of authenticity and valorization of ethnicized cultural commodities. This in turn nurtures the hierarchization of cultures and creates racial inequalities. Through the novel, Ndibe suggests that modern capitalism is nothing but perpetuation of neocolonial systems of valuation. Thus, we find that the principles of capitalism are antithetical to the ethos of a cosmopolitan project as the particularistic claims of cosmopolitical affiliations is a mirage, under which, capitalism exploits cultural differences. Capitalism constricts opportunities for cosmopolitanism to grow, as the doctrines of capitalism tend to reproduce divisions, cosmopolitanism claims to dissolve. Another key question discussed in the paper is: can cultural consumption be an aid towards the formation of cosmopolitan society? The outcome suggests that consumption of cultural products does not necessarily lead to cosmopolitan openness. It is true that the aesthetic of such cultural products may ignite engagement across borders and can “...represent the gradual and sometimes discrepant infiltration and uptake of aspects of cosmopolitanism into the practices and outlooks of everyday citizens” but such transnational interaction cannot assure cosmopolitan identity formation as such identities are grounded in the moment of transition (Kendall et al. 123).

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