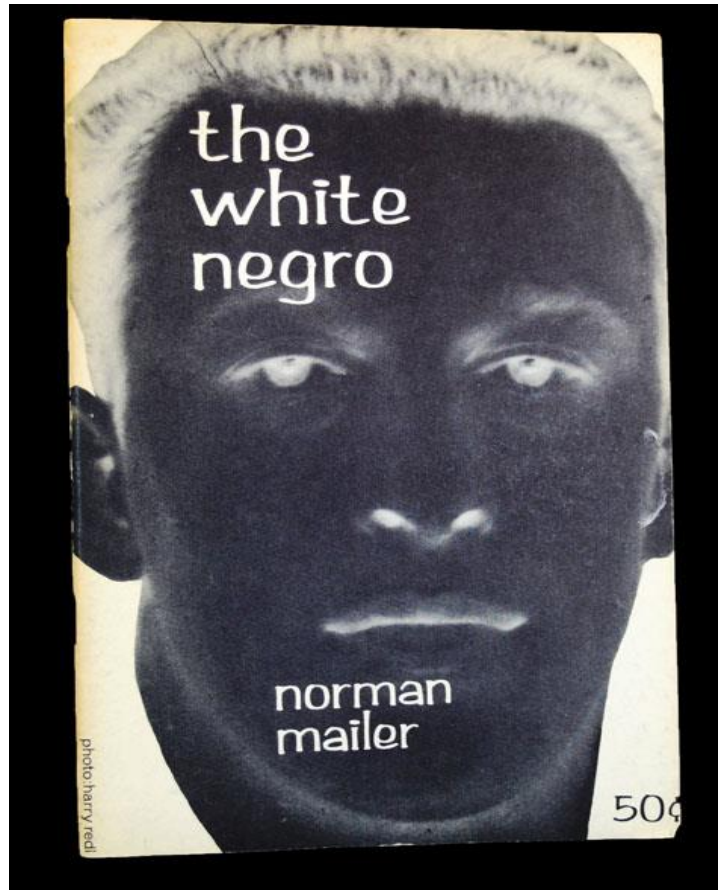


Norman Mailer and The Hipster

Dr. S. Shanmugiah

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Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer has always responded to every tone and vibration of the complex cultural realities of the contemporary American society. Right from the beginning of his creative career, Mailer's major concern is to check the unhealthy trend in the modern culture which has witnessed the fall of the individual man to mass man. In the early fifties, Mailer believed that Marxism would prove to be an effective means of restoring the individual to his rightful place in the society. But soon he realised its inadequacy as a radical concept as it has failed to bring out an equitable society and, on the other hand, it has established a society whose determining forces produced only its dissolution and not its reconstruction along the hoped-for

lines. With the failure of his early heroes against the oppressive totalitarian figures, Mailer moves away from his Marxist preoccupation with the social revolution and he becomes more concerned with a cultural revolution wherein a fuller realisation of all the possibilities in the individual is made possible. From this time onwards, notwithstanding the fact that he continues to advocate radical social change, there has been a shift in Mailer's emphasis from social redemption to individual salvation. The result is Mailer's formulation, by mid-fifties, of the philosophy of Hip which is discussed in his watershed essay "The White Negro". As Mailer himself says, "our search for the rebels of the generation led us to the hipster."¹

Philosophy of Hip

In the formulation of his philosophy of Hip, Mailer is deeply indebted to two of his mentors, Marx and Freud. Hegel founded his dialectic on the concept that the unity of reality is the product of divided and opposed elements. Marx applied this dialectical process to history which he saw in the form of class struggle and visualised its resolution in the triumph of the proletariat. Freud could see the ambivalence of human condition in love-hate, life-death, id-superego polarities, Mailer also emphasises the essential duality of human existence. For instance, Mailer's belief that life is continually forced to choose either new life or death is similar to Freud's formulation of ambivalence between the competing drives of Eros and Thanatos. Freud believes that this ambivalence is partly due to the conflict between the needs of the individual and the needs of the society and partly due to the essential nature of man.

Differs from Marx and Freud

Though Mailer draws much from Marx and Freud, ultimately he parts company with both of them. Mailer blames the authoritarian society for man's predicament whereas Freud feels that the social ills are necessary for continued human existence. Similarly, Mailer has lost faith in Marx's promise of salvation through socialism because the revolution of the proletariat still remains a cry in the wilderness. This has prompted Mailer to rely on his own theory and he offers the philosophy of Hip as an effective mode of reaction against the inauthentic and conformist way of American life.

Emergence of the Hipster

Detailing the circumstances leading to the emergence of the hipster, Mailer writes that our age is one of humiliating conformity and depression and everyone suffers from a collective

failure of nerve. The threat of nuclear annihilation is intense and one is faced with immediate extinction:

It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist - the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war...why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self...²

Life of Hipster

The hipster lives in the enormous present which is politically, socially and economically oppressive. In the absence of any meaningful theological, moral or political frame of reference, the hipster is left with no option but to rely upon his instincts. He knows that his salvation lies in a heightened readiness to maintain the emotional integrity and in his ability to remake himself in the context of death-dealing forces.

As there is a possibility of mistakenly identifying the hipster with the beatnik, Mailer considers at length the similarities and differences between a beatnik and a hipster. According to Mailer, the hipster and the beatnik share only limited common characteristics such as "marijuana, jazz, not much money and a community of feeling that society is the prison of the nervous system."³ But the differences between them are prominent. The hipster comes out of a muted rebellion of the proletariat whereas the beatnik comes from the middle class. They significantly differ in their bodies, dresses and in their attitudes towards sex and violence. As the beatnik has a good mind than a good body, he does not approach orgasm as a way out of the modern predicament. On the contrary, the hipster actively pursues apocalyptic orgasm as a positive means of asserting his healthy existence. The beatnik, with his dislike for violence, is often a radical pacifist whereas the hipster does not hesitate to move towards murder.

Square as the Antithesis of the Hipster

Mailer presents square as the antithesis of the hipster. According to him, one is a hip or a square in the quality of one's reaction against the day to day events in a totalitarian society. The hipster places the inviolability of the self above all things whereas the square makes a

humiliating compromise with the conformist way of life much to the detriment of the well-being of his psyche. At every crucial juncture, the hip is totally alive to his instincts and hence grows a little, but the square, on the other hand, dies a little at every challenging moment as he is trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society. The hipster is aware of the soul dying before the body and hence he strikes with all his might against the social deterrents which might deaden his spirit.

Collective Embodiment – a Philosophical Psychopath

Mailer says that the hipster is the collective embodiment of the black man, the 'philosophical psychopath' and the mystic. Mailer admits that the Negro is the source of Hip. Like the hipster, the Negro is a psychic outlaw, because he does not share the dominant culture of the wasp. As a Negro belongs to a minority race, he is constantly faced with a risky life. No experience can be casual to him as he lives with constant danger right from his first day. When he walks on the street, he always has a fear that violence must visit him on his way. Hence, he has only two alternatives before him: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger. In all these respects, the Negro is an essential hipster and has absorbed the existential synopses of the hipster.

Mailer calls the hipster 'a philosophical psychopath'. In order to make his intended meaning clear, he asks one to understand the difference between the psychopath and the psychotic and then the distinction between a criminal psychopath and his philosophical psychopath. Mailer states that while the psychotic may move in and out of his insane state, the psychopath maintains a constant, long-term, anti-social attitude and is not characterised by the hallucinations and other dramatic symptoms displayed by the psychotic.

Mailer says that the psychopath is under a compulsion to create a new nervous system in order to keep pace with the fast-changing world. Generally, the instincts of the people are stifled by the dead weight of the institutions of the past. Hence, they become passive victims of a dictating society. But a psychopath often discards the conventions of the society. In exploring the relationship between the psychopath and the society, Mailer seems to subscribe to the Freudian view that society exists at the expense of the individual's liberty to satisfy his needs. In any society the individual has to make a lot of sacrifices by delaying the gratification of some of his impulses for the welfare of the society as a whole. Yet Mailer decisively differs

from Freud in his insistence on resisting the social deterrents. While Freud feels that the sublimation of one's instincts is the foundation of civilization, Mailer's psychopath finds this sublimation an impossibility and hence becomes the enemy of the society.

Philosophical Psychopath vs Criminal Psychopath

Mailer distinguishes his philosophical psychopath from a criminal psychopath. The criminal psychopath is a rebel without a cause whereas the philosophical psychopath is also a rebel, but a rebel with a cause. The rebelliousness of the criminal psychopath is aimed at satisfying the pressing needs of his psyche alone and he is totally incapable of exerting for the sake of others. The philosophical psychopath also yields to the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy, but he is interested in codifying the rich knowledge that he may gain from his new experience. As the hipster is aware of the nuances of his needs and actions which are so alien to the unreasoning drive of the criminal psychopath, he can learn more about his inner nature and study the possible ways of achieving self-fulfillment. In fine, he is a self-conscious psychopath. In his enthusiasm for knowing about his nature, the hipster comes close to the mystic.

The hipster embraces a conception of life in which

... incompatibles have come to bed, the inner life and the violent life, the orgy and the dream of love, the desire to murder and the desire to create, a dialectical conception of existence with a lust for power, a dark, romantic and yet undeniably dynamic view of existence, for it sees every man through each moment of life forward into growth or backward into death...⁴

Mailer posits his faith in the innate goodness of man and feels confident that men, given the opportunity to purge his violence, will not destroy but recreate himself. Mailer in his abundant faith in man's ability to remake himself shares his thought with a few other thinkers like Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. One can easily understand the close relationship between Nietzsche's superman and Mailer's hipster. Tracing the literary tradition of Mailer's hipster, Robert Ehrlich writes:

Mailer locates his hero firmly within a literary tradition. A number of critics have indicated the similarity between the hipster and Melville's Ishmael... It is not surprising that he has also modelled the hipster upon the Dostoevskyan hero who is often trapped by intense contradictory feelings... The introspection which is the result of this emotional turmoil suggests the Proustian sensibility with its willingness to explore the roots of feeling in the past...⁵

Seeds of the Hipster

Though the seeds of the hipster can be seen even in his early novels, only in his later novels has Mailer created heroes encompassing the essential traits of the hipster. Marion Faye, the satanic saint in *The Deer Park* represents the first sketchy prototype of Mailer's hipster. He is born of an illicit union between his lower-caste mother, Dorothea, and a European prince. His illegitimate birth immediately casts him in the hipster's role as an outsider. He chooses a new direction for him in order to save himself from the destructive society of Desert D'or while all other characters take to the worn-out paths of an exhausted civilization. As a student Faye is a rebellious boy smoking, drinking, doing whatever was not allowed. This strange behaviour of Faye continues in his later life also and he becomes a pimp. He knows that the world is a rotten one and to live in that world, one has to adopt rotten ways: "if the world is a whore, then Faye will be her pimp"⁶. Faye resembles the hipster in his courage, emotional integrity and intense thirst for total freedom. Again he is an incipient hipster when he voluntarily seeks to live with danger. Finally he is a typical hipster in suggesting that nihilism is the only answer for the decaying world:

So let it come, Faye thought, let this explosion come, and then another ... until the sun god burnt the earth... Let it come for all of everywhere, just so it comes and the world stands clear in the white dead dawn...⁷

Stephen Richard Rojack of *An American Dream* is a full - fledged hipster hero. Like a hipster, Rojack places the inviolability of his self above everything else. For him the health of his soul is important and he will allow nothing to imprison it. In order to save his soul and escape cancer (Mailer believes that people acquire cancer mostly by conforming to the deadening conventions of a mass society), Rojack has to encounter violently one evil after another. He has always considered his marriage with Deborah, "a devil's contract."⁸ She is a

standing symbol of his inauthentic past and an embodiment of all the destructive and negative aspects of his present existence. He decides that he should murder her if he is to lead an authentic existence in the present. The murder of the evil spirit gives him a new life and a new grace. This newly gained grace has made it possible for him to engage in a series of hipsterean tasks in a record time of thirty two hours. Thus Rojack, by following the course of a hipster, achieves individual salvation. Rojack is a typical hipster in his search for apocalyptic orgasm and finally achieving it with Cherry. Rojack also incarnates a few other essential traits of the hipster in a much greater way than the other heroes through his faith in external forces, reliance on magic and gift for intuition.

D.J. of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a hipster in as much as he seeks authentic existence. He rejects everything that is inauthentic and shows a readiness to court violence and encounter dread. D.J. is convinced that he can never grow with the type of inauthentic hunt undertaken by Rusty and party because they use enormous weapons which are too much for the hunt. Hence he breaks company with the hunting party and goes with Tex in the dark night deep into the Alaskan forest in search of authentic experience. There he is faced with the presence of immediate death all around and experiences intense dread. This authentic experience of heightened awareness enables him to purge the dead habits of the past and feel as if he is a fresh being. Mailer's philosophy of Hip has brought him to existentialism. He calls the hipster an American existentialist. Mailer states that his peculiar brand of American existentialism is different from French existentialism. He offers his views on existentialism in a significant passage in "The White Negro".

To be an existentialist one must be able to feel oneself.... One must be aware of the character of one's frustration and know what would satisfy it... To be a real existentialist (Sartre admittedly to the contrary, one must have one's sense of the purpose whatever the purpose may be...⁹

Differs from Other Existentialists

Mailer differs from other existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger in his insistence on the religious nature of the search and his rejection of the absurd. When Mailer pits his American existentialist against the death-like quality of modern society, the existentialist is aware of the nature of his frustration and the meaning of his search. Mailer can never accept any encounter

with nothingness. For him, the absurd may be an uninhabitable terrain, whereas for Sartre, "it is the only terrain - a battleground upon which man seizes meaning for his existence by exercising his freedom to choose and to act." ¹⁰

Mailer's existential heroes alienate themselves from their societies to a certain extent. But unlike other existential heroes, they never alienate themselves from their own selves, for, in Mailer's scheme of things, alienation from oneself is to lose the very instinct to live, which is the negation of life. Hence his hipsters like Faye, Rojack and D.J. reject the society, but they struggle to retain rapport with their own selves. By relying on their selves, they hope to react against modern life that is "Schizoid".¹¹

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NOTES:

1. Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (London : Panther Granada Publishing, 1985). p.269
2. Ibid, p.271
3. Ibid, p.302
4. Ibid, p.275
5. Robert Ehrlich, *Norman Mailer: The Radical as Hipster* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1978) p.5
6. Harper, Howard M, Jr., *Desperate Faith : A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike* (Chapel Hill: University of North California Press, 1967), p.112
7. Norman Mailer, *The Deer Park* (London : Panther Granada Publishing, 1978), p.161
8. Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (London : Deutch, 1965) p.18
9. Norman Mailer, *Advertisements*, pp.273-74
10. Harper, *Desperate Faith*, p.133
11. Norman Mailer, *Advertisements*, p.165.

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Dr. S. Shanmugiah
Former Registrar
Tamilnadu Open University
Chennai – 600015
Tamilnadu
India
shanmugiah.sham@gmail.com