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## KNOWLEDGE IN MARLOWE'S DR FAUSTUS AND THE MODERN WORLD

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### Abstract

The Essay seeks to draw a parallelism between the allegory of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and the modern world. The essay argues that the knowledge economy has emerged as just another manifestation of the capitalist economy, that is of little relevance and use in addressing the real issues of poverty, welfare and security of the masses. As Faustus bargains his soul off, the modern world too haggles off its soul - the essence of humanity and dignity. Faustus offers it to Lucifer, modern world to pseudo-knowledge. Both Faustus and the modern world treat it as a dispensable commodity that can be used to extract leverage rather than as an indispensable sine qua non that defines their existence. This sell off occurs in their endeavour to conquer and cross the elusive entrance of the world of knowledge that continually teases and tantalizes by the inherent possibilities embodied in it. As Faustus was tempted by the lure of complete knowledge to eternal damnation, the modern world is lured by the temptation of the new vistas and unexplored fields often at the cost of empathy and care for basic values of existence.

### Key-Words

Faustus, Knowledge Economy, Existence, Nationality, Bargain, Science, Spirit.

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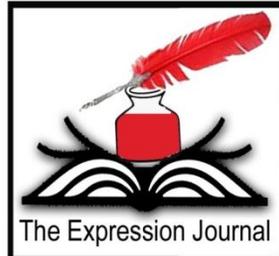
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The world of today is characterized by a thirst for knowledge that knows no slaking. The modern world knows no boundaries of knowledge, recognizes no limitations and admits no disappointment. Impediments, hurdles and mysteries all have to give way to modern man's perpetual curiosity and overwhelming desire for knowledge on all fronts across all disciplines. Dr Faustus' overwhelming thirst for knowledge subsequently appears to be a microcosm of the modern world's unending quest for knowledge. The resemblance between the world's infatuation with all kinds of knowledge – benign as well as harmful and Faustus' desire for totality of knowledge, thereby, is a strong one.

As Faustus bargains his soul off, the modern world too haggles off its soul - the essence of humanity and dignity. Faustus offers it to Lucifer, modern world to pseudo-knowledge. Both Faustus and the modern world treat it as a dispensable commodity that can be used to extract leverage rather than as an indispensable sine qua non that defines their existence. This sell off occurs in their endeavour to conquer and cross the elusive entrance of the world of knowledge that continually teases and tantalizes by the inherent possibilities embodied in it.<sup>2</sup> As Faustus was tempted by the lure of complete knowledge to eternal damnation, the modern world is lured by the temptation of the new vistas and unexplored fields often at the cost of empathy and care for basic values of existence. Medical science is a striking example of this facet. Newspaper reports scream hysterically that unwitting patients are being used as guinea pigs for testing of new medicines and techniques. The quest is typically Faustus like – the only difference being that while Faustus bears the consequences of his insatiable curiosity himself, the ordinary people bear the brunt of this raging desire for knowledge in the modern world. When at least 11 trials are conducted without proper informed consent on the victims of the world's worst gas tragedy – the Bhopal gas leak fiasco<sup>3</sup>, it is amply clear that the line has been violated. Another news report

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points to the dangers of possession of knowledge by minds that are yet not ready for it. Sexual knowledge transmitted by virtue of movies and television tends to make children sexually promiscuous<sup>4</sup>. Once again the analogy of Faustus holds true. The innocence and tenderness of children is signed off in return of knowledge which is not only worthless by way of being incomplete and embedded in fantasy but also dangerous to their development and by extension the society.

Where can the line be drawn? The question that Faustus failed to grapple with still eludes our comprehension. Centuries have passed and have been woven into the tapestry of the distant history yet the question still confronts us unanswered. The line between passion and obsession is rather thin and therefore very difficult to discern. Passion represents a strong longing for an object, a single mindedness but obsession is one level higher in that it entails a fixation - A strong attachment to a person or thing, especially such an attachment formed in childhood or infancy and manifested in immature or neurotic behaviour that persists throughout life. Fixated to the idea of complete knowledge with such alluring facets as resurrecting the dead, Faustus in his quest haggles off his soul to Lucifer through Mephistopheles for eternal damnation. Thereby he transgresses the line between passion and obsession. 'Twenty four years of boundless knowledge' is all it takes for a scholar to be doomed eternally – such a great price to pay for such a trifling object. One could argue from a psychoanalytic point of view that it is the domination of the death wish – the thanatos in Faustus which makes the idea of rebellion and the consequent doom exciting and worthwhile. It is repeatedly evident in the play that Faustus possesses a personality which is fixated to the idea of exclusivity and domination. It is not unnatural, thereby, in such persons to think of themselves as self-controlling and superior while embarking on destructive ventures. But the question we must ask is: Is this fixation worth it? We may ask the same about the world of today. Is its obsession with exploring the damning power of modern warfare worth it? Will it usher us really into an era of sustained peace and prosperity? Do the nations of the modern world do it only for the sake of ensuring the happiness of their citizens? It seems to me that the modern world emulates Faustus in that the nations try to be infatuated with the concept of exclusivity – an endeavour to construct an infallible identity that cannot be emulated. Faustus endeavours for an identity that will set him apart and superior to all the paradigms of knowledge known to man in his age. Logic, law, medicine and philosophy all are unattractive because the paradigms in those fields have already been set. It is magic therefore which Faustus must pursue to satisfy his yearning for an infallible identity and thus he comes to construe a sense of inflated identity (conjuror-laureate) Though Faustus represses the doubt several times yet in the end he is forced to concede that the price he paid for choosing to ignore his doubt was a fairly heavy price to pay. Will we realize the same? Have we already not realized it but prefer to enact a 'suspension of disbelief'<sup>5</sup>. The modern nations all try to outwit each other through technology and warfare and resort to knowledge for it. It is not out of a sense of bettering human life but out of a sense of false nationality fuelled by rhetoric and alienation. All that the modern world has done is to substitute Faustus' identity for nationality.

The question that forces itself upon us is: was this knowledge of any aid to Faustus? Did the

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bargain make him really happy? The question is a relevant one to the modern world. The allegory of Faustus affords no evidence of it. On the contrary there are enough hints in his frequent vacillations and his last dirge that it made him unhappy. I am afraid the answer for the modern world here too appears to be in concordance with that stared Faustus in the face when the devils of hell dragged him to his doom. No! The negative is written clearly across the wall and for all to see. The realm of boundless knowledge is just a ruse, a mirage that glittered across the desert of passion that invites the obsessed traveller to come and quench his thirst. Yet it is only a mirage and nothing sans disappointment and heartbreak can be expected out of it. Faustus found it to his peril and the world has already experienced the cataclysmic effects of it twice in the form of the havoc the two world wars and other mini wars have wrought upon it. The Frankenstein<sup>6</sup> monsters in the shape of improved knowledge of weaponry and refined techniques of attack and intrusion benefit none but only came to haunt the world in which the genesis of its creation lay. The obsession continues on an escalated scale to the present date: whether it is the obsession with the knowledge of atomic mechanisms to improve the atomic weaponry or the obsession with the latest technologies to refine the already cataclysmic instruments of war. What do we give in return? We haggle off peace, security, bliss and life.

The analogy is complete: Faustus bargained off his soul, the modern world also haggles off its soul – the essence of our existence: an opportunity to live a peaceful, prosperous, healthy life. Faustus was tempted by the aid of Mephistopheles, the modern world is tempted by his another variant termed as purported ‘scientific temper’ and ‘scientific inquiry’. Faustus got nothing but misery and damnation in return, the world too is pushing towards it. If any doubts exist, the chilling tales of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Iraq, Syria and other places which suffered the wrath of man’s knowledge should put them to rest. The point is that while the need to safeguard the borders is justifiable, the obsession with it is not. What is the fun of sinking millions of dollars into churning out missiles that can pierce deeper and deeper into other nations? Will they ever be utilized? I doubt it. A precursory nuclear war of retaliation between two nations will be enough to wipe out their existence and cause irreparable danger to mother earth. The chance to use this advanced weaponry. Of what use will then the knowledge of such warfare be? What is its worth? Clearly a rational mind will discern that it is a momentous wastage of time, money and effort. The thin line between passion and obsession has long been transgressed. Just like magic and philosophy did not act as Faustus’ saviours this knowledge and its manifestations won’t either be our benefactors.

The bargain struck by Faustus serves as a paradigm of the consequences that are entailed when man tries to interfere with the workings of Nature. Nature in her great wisdom thought it fit to conceal many a phenomenon from us. Although there are little doubts about the fact that man’s endeavour to unveil these phenomena has led to a vast improvement in his living standard yet it is increasingly evident that it is now fast metamorphosing<sup>7</sup> into an untamable passion. India sinks billions in planning expeditions to the moon and Venus. Pray what use will it yield? If India’s GDP could register a double digit growth without its astronauts having set foot on moon, surely the progress of common man is not dependent on it? Will it attract any foreign or domestic

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investment? Will it result in the yet to be electrified villages being supplied with agriculture? Will it remove the drought like situation that threatens to be the cause of umpteen farmer suicides? Will the discovery of water on moon yield any water to the majority of rural areas that still don't have access to portable drinking water? The answer is No. Did Faustus benefit one bit by viewing the procession of seven cardinal sins or the company of Helen's spectre and other umpteen bits necromantic knowledge? No. Yet he continued on his fool hardy mission and the world of today emulates him in transgressing the laws of nature far too often. Faustus used the pretext of limited use of traditional knowledge to seal the contract. Faustus in effect therefore tried to be his own deity challenging the concept of monotheism – God is all knowing. The modern world too uses the refrain of the limitations of knowledge to seal the contract of destruction and death. It too tries to be its own deity by a ruthless pursuit of scientific knowledge. The underlying fact that both fail to recognize is that totality of knowledge is a myth – a fascinating one, no doubt, but one impossible to fulfill. The universe and its secrets are far too many for man to ever think of unraveling them all. Had Faustus concentrated on devising cures for the sick or solving legal knots, eternal fame and bliss was his. But he chose infamy and thereby perished as Mother Nature doesn't take lightly to someone taking cudgels with it. Were the modern man to focus on improving the condition of his fellow beings rather than exploring elusive unfruitful endeavours, the world will surely be a replica of heaven that the good angel and his later avatar as a pious old man promise to Faustus. The heaven still lies awaiting, while Hell still tries to seduce men to misery.

Yet another facet in which the bargain of Faustus acquires a similarity to the modern world is the perusal of knowledge which leads to the development of 'false consciousness'<sup>7</sup>. The modern world is engaged in a production and propagation of knowledge that is superfluous at best with no basis in either fact or truth. Propaganda, pseudo-secularism, radicalism and consumerism<sup>8</sup> all conspire in the production and currency of knowledge that is misleading and is presented as the gospel truth and attractive. The sole reason is to serve the vested interests of imperial superpowers, right-winged parties that thrive on hate and alienation and multi-national industries that throw all humanism and empathy to the winds (driven by a strong *lassies'-faire* and profit ethic). The resemblance to Faustus here is particularly powerful. Faustus was lured by the prospect of knowledge that in effect was no knowledge at all. An illustration would be inquiring the whereabouts of hell to which Mephistopheles gives a very vague reply:

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd  
In one self place; for where we are is hell,  
And where hell is there must we ever be:  
And, to conclude, when all the world dissolves,  
And every creature shall be purified,  
All places shall be hell that is not Heaven.

The analogy is a simple one. Just as Faustus is tempted into indiscretion by the lure of false vague knowledge presented under the garb of exclusivity and desirability, similarly the

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modern man is lured into false knowledge by the mire of dazzle, subversion and pretension. Thus while Faustus haggles his soul in the dream of knowing every pleasure, knowledge under the earth as he is tempted by the image of standing apart from and superior to the crowd, so does modern man. By the worthless knowledge pumped into him through advertisement he is lured into consumerism as he falls to the temptation of possessing something which will attribute more power to him. It could be a whitening cream, a shaving razor or a perfume: each promises him that it shall bestow him with exclusivity and uniqueness. It plays on man's desire for power and superiority of which Faustus stands as a paradigm of by exploiting his vulnerability of submitting to the ideal set by 'conformity'<sup>9</sup>. The result man is doomed to plastic debt, stress, drug abuse, hypertension and all kinds of troubles. In other words, he surrenders his body and his soul to the devil who has just reincarnated in different forms. Faustus and the modern man thereby fall for the same thing: promise of elusive knowledge that will make them superior but ultimately fails to do so.

As it is the modern world has failed to comprehend the irony like Faustus of Mephistopheles' assertion: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it". Faustus did not revoke his contract, the question is Will the modern world of today revoke it?'

## End Notes

1. Ulysses: Tennyson Alfred: Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untraveled world, whose margin fades  
For ever and forever when I move
2. [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk): section Asia: Without consent: how drug companies exploit Indian 'guinea pigs': (10.30 pm 28-08-2012)
3. The Times of India: 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012: Exposure to sex in films makes teens promiscuous
4. Suspension of Disbelief: Suspension of disbelief or willing suspension of disbelief is a term coined in 1817 by the poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative.
5. Frankenstein: genre: Horror: A novel by Mary Shelly in which a scientist creates a monster Frankenstein that causes great harm to it and others.
6. Metamorphosis: Franz Kafka: "The Metamorphosis" (German: Die Verwandlung, also sometimes termed "The Transformation") is a short story by Franz Kafka, first published in 1915. The story begins with a traveling salesman, Gregor Samsa, waking to find himself transformed into a monstrous vermin. It is never explained in the story why Samsa transforms, nor did Kafka ever give an explanation. The story is often taken as a tale of existential despair that embodied itself in the world after the world wars.
7. False consciousness is the Marxist thesis that material and institutional processes in capitalist society are misleading to the proletariat, and to other classes. These processes betray the true relations of forces between those classes, and the real state of affairs regarding the development of pre-socialist society.

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8. Consumerism is a social and economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-greater amounts.

9. Conformity is the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms.<sup>[1]</sup> Norms are implicit rules shared by a group of individuals that guide their interactions with others and among society or social group. This tendency to conform occurs in small groups and/or society as a whole, and may result from subtle unconscious influences, or direct and overt social pressure. Conformity can occur in the presence of others, or when an individual is alone. For example, people tend to follow social norms when eating or watching television, even when alone.

People often conform from a desire for security within a group—typically a group of a similar age, culture, religion, or educational status. This is often referred to as groupthink: a pattern of thought characterized by self-deception, forced manufacture of consent, and conformity to group values and ethics, which ignores realistic appraisal of other courses of action. Unwillingness to conform carries the risk of social rejection. Conformity is often associated with adolescence and youth culture, but strongly affects humans of all ages.

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