

The Lofty American Dream And The Gloomy Nightmarish Reality In Pre-War American Fiction

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Abstract: Litterateurs and literature express Zeitgeist which is the quintessential accretion of all the political, economic, social, cultural and religious characteristics of a particular Age. American literature has revealed a tremendous influence of such contemporary factors and contemporary American fiction is considered to be 'inseparable' from the American Culture. The two have greatly shaped and influenced each other. The fiction of 20s and 30s portrays the splendid American dream -threatened and blasted by the overwhelming contemporary reality and challenging conditions of existence in America. This paper dwells on the pre-war ethos and scenario of America as reflected in these novels. It also explores the distinctive concerns and vision of the pre-war novelists as presented through their narratives and protagonists.

Keywords: zeitgeist, American fiction, pre-war, post-war, American Dream, nightmare, ethos, vision.

Introduction

The issue of survival, though central to all Western literature and thought, has had more urgency and pressure in America - a land where things change at a lightening pace, throwing man ruthlessly on the parapet to confront the 'final question'. In the war-years, in addition to the trauma of 'unearned suffering' seeping in from death-camps to atomic-bombed cities and war-torn countries, the Americans also had the poignant awareness of poverty, racial and gender discrimination, political protests and the immense threat posed by modern science and technology, ushering in a state of complete chaos. Nourishing people on a variety of fantasies, the media and multi-media radically altered the modes of social existence in a world 'extensively homogenized' yet 'intensely fragmented' where nothing seemed to hold and individual had a Hobson's choice between nihilism, despair on one hand, and surrealism of mass society and Superstate on the other. This crisis of Self emanating from man's growing alienation from his 'true self' has received remarkable explication in *The Study of History* (Arnold Toynbee) and *The Decline of the West* (Oswald Spengler).

The Pre-war American Scenario

The pre-war and the post-war American fiction have their distinctive tone and tenor. The pre-war fiction is clearly marked by an all-pervasive note of extinction and despair. Malcolm Bradbury, in his perceptive study, sees the twenties as "a decade of illusions, political ignorance, flaunted capitalism, materialism, isolationism and intolerance." (64) The undercurrent of the prewar mood in the U.S. was well-captured by T.S.Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The catastrophe was initiated by the First World War that destabilized the world order and plunged the European continent into the darkness of despair. America, despite its economic gains, experienced the shock of immensity of war and cultural disorder. In addition, the postwar American political developments like Versailles Treaty, the Red Scare, the extension of prohibition through the Volstead Act - all augmented the feelings of political failure, purposelessness and cultural void. With God declared dead, metaphysics considered an idle and time-wasting exercise, and men becoming only statistics; the morals, spirituality and ideals became redundant. The 'lost generation' sentiment of *The Sun Also Rises* typifies the nihilistic undertones of the times and increasing uprootedness of the generation.

The great Depression of 1929 was another major crisis of tremendous significance not merely in the socio-economic arena but also in literary moods and methods. The closure of banks and factories, collapse of farming and industry, unemployment, wide-spread poverty and pain made Fitzgerald describe it as 'the closure of jazz age'. Europe, too, was passing through an economic and political turmoil. The expatriate writers who had stayed in Europe through the surrealist revolution made, what Malcolm Cowley described an 'exile's return', for the reevaluation of the world. They came back to America, the country turned in on itself and its economic and social problems. In what is termed as the "Novel of social consciousness", the writers like Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos and James Farrell sharply put focus on the incompatibility of the social and spiritual needs of the sensitive individual or the milieu in which he is caught. America seemed steeped in excessive materialism and consumerism which had rendered man and his values meaningless as Faulkner sums up in his description of the crisis of the times: "America has not yet found any place for him who deals only in the things of the human spirit except to use his notoriety to sell soup or cigarette or fountain pen" (*Harper's Magazine*). The family structure was disintegrated and the crime rate, number of suicides and psychological cases registered a steep increase. To quote Ihab Hassan, "Eros himself has been maimed in our country, we see the symptoms of melody all around us and quarrel over the diagnosis" (*Radical Innocence*). Marxist standpoint had

also lost its impetus due to various factors like debates over the Spanish Civil war, impact of the Moscow trial, relative success of Roosevelt, New Deal and Signing of Nazi-Soviet pact. The ethos of the times has so adequately been summed up by Amory Blaine, the hero of Scott Fitzgerald's first novel who knows that he belongs to "a new generation dedicated to the fear of poverty and worship of success, grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken." (*This Side of Paradise*)

The Pre-War Literary Scene

With the rather pessimistic and cynical literary legacy of Naturalists and other writers like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Mark Twain, Edith Warton, Upton Sinclair, the pre-war novelists of 20s and 30s went ahead to mirrorize and critique the American scenario. America was confronted with multiple crises at the social, political, cultural and economic levels. Industrialization and urbanization with their harsh dark reality, urban poverty and systemic corruption were a big let-down for the economic prosperity promised by American Dream. The widened gap between the rich and the poor further aggravated the economic crisis. The brutal realities of two wars - the Civil War and the World War I shattered in their aftermath the splendid romantic ideals of heroism and glory. The continuing racial and gender-inequality with related atrocities, injustices and the racial and cultural violence also disillusioned people with the promised egalitarian world of American Dream and the lofty ideas and ideals of freedom and equality. Increasing materialism, moral and spiritual degradation with erosion of human values, the extreme hollowness and superficiality hidden underneath the external and outwardish glitter of Shining America- all these stark realities intensified the disillusionment with American Dream and the writings of the period are understandably permeated by alienation, negativism, meaninglessness culminating in an overall ethos of apocalyptic doom and gloom. The American novelists of the period have captured the physical, psychological, moral, religious and spiritual dimensions of the crisis at the personal, social and national level.

These pre-war writers had first-hand experience of the major event of the century and War for them became the symbol of general collapse and personal disillusionment. War brought about a metamorphosis in the vision and lifestyle of the novelists and their entire outlook on man and his relationship to the universe, history and culture reflected a transformation. The politico-socio-cultural condition of the post World War I period and its impact on sensibility finds its most profound and poignant expression in the novels of the major novelists of the era. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer of twenties, felt and expressed the intensity of American experience of the times. Starting from his first book *This Side of Paradise* (1920), a 'consciously decadent book' (Malcom Bradbury), his fiction presents the negative ethos of the age. His novels *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), *Tender is the Night* (1904) *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *The Last Tycoon* (1941) all present in one way or another disastrous situations, decaying and disoriented characters, degenerating society, collapsing culture and failing heroes. William Faulkner is another important contributor to the American fiction. His novels *Soldiers' Pay* (1925) *Sartoris* (1927), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom Absalom!* (1936) portray a world where central figures undergo extreme disorientation or psychic damage. The note of despair, anxiety and degeneration becomes more intensified in his novels of thirties. Ernest Hemingway, wounded on the Italian front, endured a permanent scar on his psyche and his early novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) present a tragic and nihilistic reality as the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* desperately struggles to find a 'separate peace'. *To Have and Have Not* (1937) captures the moral disarray of a generation adversely affected by the economic depression. Dos Passos in his novels *Three Soldiers* (1921), *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and above all, *The U.S.A Trilogy* (1937) has covered the evolution of nation from 1900 to the late 1920s. The twenties and thirties as portrayed by Dos Passos were the times characterized by the growing mechanization, commercialisation, materialism and consequent disintegration and dehumanisation. Henry Miller in his novels *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), *Black Spring* (1936) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) has portrayed an exhausted milieu and has presented sex as a destructive act in a death and excrement-ridden world. Leslie Fiedler has called his novels as "genuine depression novels" (Malcom Bradbury 117). and George Orwell designates him as "completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer" ("Inside the Whale"), nonetheless Miller's portrayal of a decaying and disintegrating order offers some significant insight into the spirit of the times.

Even the less illustrious novelists of the times have generally presented a negative picture of self, society and universe. Nathanael West, James T. Farrell, Thomas Wolfe and others in their own diverse ways portray a scenario on the brink of apocalypse, meaninglessness of life and historical and political chaos. They have recorded their own disgust over the material and spiritual chaos. The themes of social displacement, urban ghettos and man's consequent loneliness and alienation unravel the travails of human personality disintegrating under enormous pressures.

Most of the major and minor novelists of twenties and thirties have taken up the threats of war and social issues in their novels. Two types of war novels were attempted - novels which portray the endless horror, suffering, terrible battle-scenes and inhuman torments of the war and secondly and more importantly, the novels where war becomes the apocalyptic metaphor of a wastelandish world, as in, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby* and William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay*. Both types of war novels, however, deal with death and despair

in war. The Social Novels of the period also reveal a lack of faith, are replete with pessimism and seem to be wallowing in sorrow and despair. Van Wyck Brooks has made a highly pertinent comment :

Even when these writers are fighting for social justice, they still picture life as hardly worth the trouble of fighting for it. Their tone is cynical, bleak, hard-boiled, hard-bitten and life for them is vain, dark and empty,-,They seem to delight in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretense and everything noble a humbug. (14-15)

Wright Morris in *The Territory Ahead* observes that the bane of the writers of pre-war era was that life constantly overwhelmed literature. The pre-war fiction, indeed seems to be a literature of exhaustion with a pre-dominant note of nihilism and despair. Frederick J. Hoffman has made a very apt observation which seems to capture the spirit of prewar novels :

its major literary scenes were often grim and forbidding. The pressure upon the individual was formidable. Literary heroes felt it intensely and their behaviour is often acutely melancholy. (446)

Conclusion

The novels written during the period by the major and minor novelists of the time have portrayed an all-engulfing chaos and any pronounced attempt to transcend the anxiety and anguish of the age seems missing .The significance of the American fiction of 20 and 30 lies in the fact that it truthfully captures the ethos of America during these decades and presents a critique of the catastrophic socio-eco-political scenario. The 'lost generation' tormented by nihilism , uprootedness, meaninglessness in a spiritual, cultural and moral wasteland- the picture is one of unrelieved gloom and America seems a 'landscape of nightmare'. In fact, this phase was a unique phase in the history of America , as never again in the decades to come, America experienced such throes of multi- dimensional crises. After having once reached this abyss , America resurged and made her presence strongly felt in the global scenario. This period can be viewed as a horrific Halt in America's journey to becoming a world Superpower- an impoverished period but one which enriched America and the world in literary field as the works written during this period in America turned out to be international classics- symbolically and universally representing the 'wastelands' across Time and Space.

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