

THE COMPLEX REALITY OF MODERN LIFE WITH HENRY JAMES**Bhanu Bhakta Sharma Kandel**

PhD

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Henry James is a writer of realistic who digs deep into the mind of his characters and comes out with very intricate human behaviors and relationship as human mind itself is. The main focus of his presentation is the difference between American and European society in which he presents European society to be snobbish with the pride of old civilization and cultural refinement but morally bankrupt and mentally corrupt and the Americans who have affluent life style and enough property with the nostalgia of the homeland of their ancestors who long for Europe and the people there but they are cheated and ruined without their knowledge. Henry James' three novels *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* have been taken for reference for discussion and MLA VIII has been taken help of in preparing the detail of works-cited. This discussion has been made in order to make it easier to know how sophisticated Europeans have been morally bankrupt and they victimize the innocence of the people from the other part of the world.

Key Words: Angst, bankruptcy, complex, corruption, experience, victimization

Introduction

Henry James is a literary figure who appeared on the literary scene of English speaking world at the end of the Victorian age which is considered to be very rich in the world of fiction. His novels deal with changing norms, values, ethos, tempos and ways of thinking in the Western world. He, as a realist writer of different stream, has brought all the realities of modern materialistic world to the public and let people watch and judge them. He has written the novels of massive and complex characteristics, and themes and techniques are extremely various because for him a novel is a 'living thing all one and continuous like any other organism' and art 'all discrimination and selection'. He has laid emphasis on enjoyment of art and worship of beauty because he is before all else, the novelist of experience imaginatively apprehended. He wants to understand life not merely to fling himself into it, because for understanding life well a certain detachment is also requisite. He embodies, therefore, as Quinn notes, the principle that experience itself is worthless until it has been interpreted by the mind and its significance assessed (154). On the level of the ideal– on the level of art– American fiction, as Spiller has noted, achieved in the novels of Henry James a kind of reality different from others (1039). This

reality is his response to the human predicament of his generation, which James felt with unusual acuteness because of the predicament of a sensitive mind. He has described what he saw and he has created what lay under what he saw. His novels are the chronicles of the complexity of life as it is.

Moral Bankruptcy of Sophisticated Society

What James has said about morality is automatically reproduced in aesthetic form in his fiction. James, in this context, has faithfully held the 'mirror up to life' that though he has reflected all the elements of a moral system, he nowhere has ordered them into a system. Though he is conscious enough of evil in this mundane world, nowhere directs his innocent characters to be aware of that but lets them do what they like and experience in the first hand. James, as a psychological novelist, comes closer to imitate life, or existential human reality. So his moral opinions, in his fiction, seem to be irrelevant as our moral judgments to anyone else or others' judgments on us are mostly irrelevant.

What we see is that as James lets his characters experience the world themselves, all experience comes to be against free will, that seems to be present in human affair but without more positive reasons for thinking so. His characters are always crazy of living and say "Live all you can, it's a mistake not to" (James 17). James thinks the root of immorality is poverty, economical disarray and he typically relieves his main characters of financial needs and we can assume that he does this in order to set them free from the partly determining force of poverty and the limited horizons of the very poor for in this materialistic world of today everyone craves for wealth rather than other spiritual virtues.

James places his characters, as Matthiessen says, ". . . on the scale of good and evil that is based on their 'awareness', the stage of sensitivity to which their consciousness advances" (146). The moral views of his characters differ under their condition of life; their moral attitudes are personal, deeply felt and 'real' in the sense of producing real work done. His characters are indifferent to religious dogma too to which morality could have been connected but they have exceptional awareness of spiritual reality.

If one observes the question posed by James, "How can a novel, since it is a picture moral or immoral "(James, Art of Fiction 7)"? One can see that certain depictions of life in a novel inflame the passions, present vice and depravity as attractive and in general allow the reader to see the conventional moral and social laws as impractical or even absurd. As art is representative, reproductive, it produces life as it is, if life is morally bland, has no reference to morality, then novel also will be bland and will have no reference to morality. But though one may not believe in the reality of the world, that doesn't prevent one from dying, doesn't prevent from mourning the deaths of one's loved ones. So, though the reality of novel is tentative, it is the reality which is relevant to man's moral life.

What Tony Tanner observes in this context is that James is himself to use many immoral themes in his own books but it is the treatment rather than the use of such themes which shocked him (5). He, therefore, criticizes the moral problems, the lasting conflict between the selfish and the selfless, the worldly and the moral world (29). Thus, for Henry James the themes of a novel can be any type as the living of life itself is not very straightforward.

Life and Living It

Henry James deals much in his novels about life, the difficult and lonely life that one is compelled to live in this modern world being conscious of 'loss of one's life'. His young men and women discover that they have not the courage to live and push aside wistfully or with revulsion the life as if it was empty cup. What he says in this respect in his autobiography is that, "Live all you can, it's a mistake not to" (127). It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life (171). It, in a sense, can be called an American *Angst* of life, life in his sense is a waiting, waiting the death by living the instance. To live is to be deeply scared and not to live is to lose all. People in modern world, as James presents, live between hue and cry and with the sense they live in a sort of hell, Dante's inferno- for non of his protagonists have the stigmata marketing the veteran of the battle of life.

Living for him is so dangerous that the panting pursuit of danger is the pursuit of life itself in which danger awaits us possibly at every step and faces us at every turn. His protagonists (mostly Americans) live a life of prosperity and the doom of a life of leisure, travel and self-cultivation may not be at once apparent, yet there are penalties attached. His protagonists do, as he has said in his autobiography. "Seeing, sharing, envying, applauding, pitying, all from too far off, and with the queer sense that, whether or not they would prove to have had the time of their lives, it seemed that the only time I should have had would stand or fall by theirs" (416). Every character in his novel seems to find life larger than his/her own.

Art and life are somehow the same for him and within the paradise of art he breathes the 'air of life' and feels the flush of achievement. He cares much the adventure of art which is the adventure of life and urges his characters to live the life and to feel 'living' their life of whatsoever type it may. His characters' activities seem to be dominated by his personal experiences and his beloved 'consciousness', the chief subject matter of his works seems to be nothing more than an artistic presentation of the idea of *tabularasa* being written upon by experience. His characters are rather passive and a person with him is more an observer than anything else (Raleigh 56). What Krook observes in this connection about his leading American characters of Henry James is very relevant that almost always what the Europeans at the start find engaging and fascinating in the American national character, they find in the end desperately irritating and intolerably boring in many instances (9). The Americans are portrayed to be more innocent and gullible character in Henry James' novels.

Domination and Victimization

Henry James is the hater of tyranny, who always advocates, through his writing, against oppression, the sordid petty oppression, the domination of one upon another. Though domination of different kinds is his theme, he has used the theme not to establish domination of one on other but to reveal the effects and its consequences produced by it because he is always in favor of personal liberty and rights of individual choice. He is an author who *shows* but doesn't *tell*. He reflects his story indirectly through a mind or a particular character and his choice of words, sentences and situations reveal the author's values.

James, however, is concerned with the subtler forms of pressure- especially moral manipulation or victimization, whether by one person acting on another more or less consciously or by a social group whose assumptions and attitudes without, much deliberated intention, crush life and spontaneity. It seems that his interest is centered exclusively on the forms of domination,

and he is equally interested in what it is in the victims that lay them open to the fate determined for them by others.

Most of his protagonists- especially girls- are a free spirit, trapped by a calculating world with a certain taste and sophistication and the dramatic focus is sharp and clear. His novels are more than a moving account of the way in which one person can be used by as another and victimized without his/her notice. The used character, who steps in the purest confidence, finds suddenly the infinite spectrum of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with dead walls around at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness with exaltation and advantage, it leads rather downward and earthward where the sounds of other lives easier and freer can only be heard from very far and above.

The characters whom James uses- mainly Europeans- have the power to spoil or hamper the life of other people- the Americans. His European characters behave so cunningly that they present themselves before the Americans as if they only were the epitomes of the developed culture and civilization. They practice as though the etiquette they practice is only the example in the world worthy to be followed. When they get intimate with the exotic American characters, they deliberately or accidently knit such a cobweb that they never let the exotics to come out of it so that they can prevent themselves from the corruption or the end of their innocence, ignorance and fortune. Therefore, Jamesian heroes are not hero(s) with thousand faces but victims with thousand faces. Both the victims and the victimizers are ultimately victimized.

Wealth: The Root of all Evils

James has given the central role to wealth, prosperity, in his novels for he is well aware of the present age that it is always hungry of wealth and materials, dominated by the role of commodities, of money, which causes everything either good or evil. In this world of capital, the human existence, power, prestige and status and even spirituality and morality depend upon wealth. Lionel Trilling in his essay "Manner, Morals and the Novel" holds the opinion, "The poverty . . . generator of illusion" (73-4). Money is the medium for good and bad that makes for a fluent society. Money or wealth is taken as the root of all sins since ancient time. The poor peoples, stricken by poverty, get themselves ready to commit whatever type of sin to solve hand to mouth problem and the rich ones, who always crave to pile their riches up by whatever mean they can. Wealth on the one hand, is the means to gather the ends of human basic needs and on the other; it is the cause of hypocrisy of luxury, the source of crimes.

James, as a novelist of social reality has the characters (Americans) who are charmed and beguiled by their European counterparts. The Americans, who are innocent and upright as well as open and kind hearted are deceived, destroyed and cast away by the European people who are arrogant, bias, corrupt, greedy and insolent. The innocence and good-will of the Jamesian protagonists is exploited and abused without their knowledge. They come to know all the deception against them only after they are sucked fully hollow. American people, in James's novels, are always abundant with wealth and Europeans, mostly youths, the 'economic-parasites'. The 'parasites' get hold of the 'abundants' anyway as if the Americans were the people of paradise whom they applaud very much with their lip service and succeed to win their innocent hearts. They, after all, swallow the 'ell' inch by inch and ultimately betray their 'Adams' or 'Eves' who had no idea of the forbidden apple.

"James's world . . . of later fiction," Tony Tanner maintains, "is far from being a pretty one; that on the contrary, it is morally as ugly . . . that a tiny handful of decent people wander

through it ..." (35). It is a greedy society in the midst of which James finds himself living and he is "too honest, too responsible, too scrupulous a writer to whitewash the society" (Tanner 36). His characters, as Krook has stated, are either always exceedingly rich or poor in the sense that they are generally exceedingly rapacious (5). There are many eagles, loose baggy monsters who always seek to prey the doves moving around and flying free with abundance of their financial sources. And, it is one and only reason that financial concerns bring the complexities and complications between the people near and dear, and it is James who records this in its full stature.

James, indeed, despises this materialistic society which has no tinge in the least of any spiritual insight. It only runs after money, money the main cause of betrayal, 'Judas complex'. It has been a problem of not only one and certain society but the whole world. It seems to be clear that people in the world only crave for wealth committing every sin neglecting and forgetting that:

Purses of gold are like the dirt on your hands,
What can be done with wealth?
Better to eat spinach and nettles,
With happiness in your heart. (Hutt 24)

People have forgotten or have no idea that money is a charming thing to follow but a horrid thing to meet.

Psychology: The Study of Human Consciousness

It is not fair enough to say only James is a realist novelist because as D.H. Lawrence in his essay "Morality and the Novel", says, "Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance" (57). However, James and his novels are realistic with difference in accordance with his time. The central features of his realism are trope of vigilance, the emphasis is put much on internalization and the focus is on individual over collective experience.

All novels, as Milligan Ian states, it might be said, are psychological novels (89). Even the first novelist Samuel Richardson was clearly interested in the psychology of his characters. It is not, however, until the novels of James that the psychological process itself becomes a theme for special treatment. Ian further says that the centre of interest throughout his (James's) novels is his characters consciousness (90). James's novels are often been reproached for lack of action because the characters, specially the protagonists, act very less physically and they cannot offer any thrilling actions. What they do the most is 'reflect' through mind, thinking and recollecting their experiences. Yet, he is intense, and has dynamic quality, a high degree of intimacy with his characters. He is, as Joseph Conrad has said, "the historian of fine consciousness" (qtd. in Hazell 36). Edward has noticed that there are unbelievable situations in his books, unthinkable observations and conversations (157).

James makes his protagonists think much rather than act and judge the situations and circumstances around them. Their minds are so dynamic that they bring all the actions in their minds acutely and reflect them out-making them introverts. The novel, with James, David Daiches maintains, ". . . had been moving toward a greater increase in psychological subtlety, or at least in the increase of the apparatus for psychological diagnosis . . ." (1154). He further says, Henry James in particular has brought a new precision and complexity into the description of states of mind (1154).

He analyses, interprets and composes subtle, exciting and finished social situation and the effects on his characters' minds with his eyes fastened exclusively upon the psychological aesthetics of the people and the social aesthetics of their attitudes towards one another. His later novels concern much on perception, experience and mental reflection. These dramas (of perception) are widely considered to be his most influential contribution in the world of novelistic art, the craft of fiction. His stories are the graphic pictures of the growing consciousness of the major characters, depicting their emotional contours. Every movement in his plot is a concomitant of the transformation of the psychic personalities. The development of his plot is invariably inter-linked with the attainment of emotional maturity by the characters involved.

Human Relation: Alone Amongst the Buzzing Crowd

It is the universal fact that one comes alone and naked in the world and has to leave it the same way though one comes in contact of many people around right from the lap of one's mother. But the relations differ in types: 'selfless' and 'selfish'. James, a vigilant observer of the society, sees no relation immune from selfishness of any kind, even of one's parents. It's not clear why but he presents his characters from almost a rootless family, free from family responsibilities and driven by their impulses who ultimately meet their fate in this materialistic, money-minded and unscrupulous society which exploits and destroys its innocent members. He presents the modern society as if it always were a 'fool's paradise' and a 'necessary evil'.

Love and fidelity are the virtues he admires the most, the love that accepts and forgives (and refuses ever to admit defeat), the love that will (does) not claim even a just reward, lest one should seem, even to oneself to have wrought pure deeds for the hope of gain; the forgiveness that reaches out, saves and redeems those who are redeemable. James is always satirical to present the society that the society at large is always the enemy of an individual and only the little society, the intimate group of real friends who have somehow managed to break down the walls of individuality that separate them is worth anything or is really possible as a true society (Daiches 1155). If society is necessary, yet it is inevitably corrupting for him. That is why his characters enjoy to remain alone, alienated and isolated.

Though his characters live in a society, it is always small, they always feel themselves insecure from each other, different in breeding and tastes and temperament with psychological condition. The people in (his) world, as Krook observes, "are very difficult to recognize them for what they are; and it is because they are so appallingly deceptive that they are so dangerous and destructive" (24). Each has different eye to view the world and the friends, one feels isolated and alienated from others. Lovers feel alone, friends feel one and alone and nuclear society in which they live is separated into nucleuses because everyone feels oneself the nucleus of the world, the world is not worth living with companions because no one does anything for nothing here.

Conclusion

Henry James' major fictions are remarkably parallel in structure. *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* though represent various phases of his creative life, reveal a pattern of structure that recurs. His plot is a graphic picture of the growing consciousness of the major characters, depicting all their emotional contours. The development of each of his plots is invariably interlinked with the attainment of emotional maturity by the characters involved. The study of these novels reveals certain conspicuous parallels and

establishes a pattern as, the dislocation of the major characters from their relations, certain chances offered which are apparently alluring, the psychological state of characters, the double set of characters- one young and the other elderly, marriage as a crucial factor.

The protagonists of all these novels are Americans who go to Europe dislocated from their comfortable native location and taken into a new environment. Isabel Archer (*The Portrait of a Lady*), Milly Theale (*The Wings of the Dove*) and Maggie Verver (*The Golden Bowl*) all go to various places in the old world. None of these suspects the unpleasant consequences of their dislocations but consider as rare opportunities offered for their betterment. Isabel Archer is greatly excited to see the old world because she has 'a great desire for knowledge,' Milly Theale starts her pilgrimage to Europe fascinated by the cultural richness of the old world, Maggie Verver too is enchanted by the generations of history in Europe, its annals, archives and libraries. All these Americans are enticed by the chances offered to them and they cling to these offers without hesitation. Surprisingly, all these characters encounter similar consequences for their actions. There is one more character, Kate Croy, a European in *The Wings of the Dove* who is offered to chance, though not an attractive and exciting one. She is offered some assistance by her Aunt Mrs. Lowder but ultimately she cuts off her all the connections with her people even to her father, sister and lover Merton Densher.

The major psychological cause of these major characters' acceptance of the offers provided to them is that they are either orphans or emotionally alienated or both. Isabel has two sisters but they are married and have their own lives to look after and do not provide any companionship to her. Milly Theale has 'nobody'; all five members of her family, including her parents have died, leaving her an orphan. Isolated and unmothered she enters Europe to fall a prey in spite of her other strong markers, her big house, big fortune and big freedom. She craves the company of people to overcome her loneliness and is too innocent to see any evil in them. Kate Croy, too, in the same novel, has no mother but has a father who takes her as an asset having a certain material value to prosper through her; she has only a crowd around her but not a companion. Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl* also suffers the same plight. All these alienated orphans in their excessive excitement to be in the midst of great crowds of people, in their attempts to identify themselves with the people whom they admire, encounter utter failure.

The other case of structural parallelism found in these novels is that each novel consists of two sets of people who influence the central characters and actions either directly or indirectly. The elderly people, having a close relationship to the major characters play the roles surprisingly similar to one another are, Mrs. Touchett, Mrs. Lowder and Mr. Verver. They exercise direct influence over them, indirectly creating new and unexpected turns in the plots. Mrs. Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady* intends to help Isabel. In her enthusiasm to help her niece, to introduce her to the old world, Mrs. Touchett brings Isabel to Europe from America making her an heiress of a great deal of money which becomes a decisive factor for Isabel's tragedy and changes the whole course of life. Mrs. Lawder in *The Wings of the Dove* tries to take the strings of Kate's life into her own hands through her offer but the condition laid down by her complicates the situation. Mr. Verver, an American gentleman of *The Golden Bowl* creates confusion in his daughter's life through his excessive love. In this way, whatever be the differences in the consequences of the actions of these characters, all of them add complexity to the plots and lead the major characters to the peak of their emotional experiences. The other set of Henrietta Stackpole of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Mrs. Stringham of *The Wings of the Dove* and

Mrs. Assingham of *The Golden Bowl* play the identical roles that of a confidant. Henrietta keeps Isabel's consciousness awake entering her life at crucial moments and reminding her of her grave mistake, Mrs. Stringham though pale in comparison with the others is a constant companion to Milly till the latter's death and informs Densher that Milly knew his duplicity, Mrs. Assingham too works for them, all the characters, especially Maggie.

Another noteworthy feature in these novels is that the key role is assigned to marriage. The characters or say parties involved are invariably Americans and Europeans who differ totally in their approach to life and the world. James has used marriage of these two different entities as a strategy to promote an understanding of human nature in general and of self in particular. Isabel's tragedy is interwoven with her marriage, is exploited to be 'made use of'. Isabel rejects the alternative offered by her former suitor, Goodwood, and remains with her husband in order to conceal the crack in her marriage. The problem of Kate in *The Wings of the Dove* and that of the prince in *The Golden Bowl* are again connected with marriage. Their poverty comes in the way of marrying their respective lovers and leads them into unpleasant situations. If the prince's marriage with Maggie, in *The Golden Bowl*, fulfills her desire to have a European alliance, the marriage of Mr. Verver and Charlotte adds complexity to the situation. Henry James, it seems, is so much interested in marriage but he never lets his husbands and wives to live their married life happily even if their marriage is successful. He shows that there is something, probably the psychological difference that keeps people somewhat aloof from the nearest companion also.

Henry James, above all he is the choreographer of modern materialistic, inhumane and money-minded world where every dweller of it suffers from selfish friends and the one whom one believes. The isolated life, difficult modern human psychology, modern complications of living life, social evils, which are the realities of modern life, are the important aspects of this novels that are well represented.

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