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A Farewell to Arms: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract:

This article proposes to study Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* in terms of involvement and detachment as its major theme. Frederic Henry, the protagonist, has been living a life at a superficial plane, meandering through his numerous affairs and participation in war without being actually involved in either. His life has no meaning and purpose, thus he uses love and war, both serious issues otherwise, to escape from his inner self. However, as the novel progresses, his experiences in the war and affair with his love Catherine make these two involvement so meaningful that his life acquires a new purpose, making his involvement grow beyond mere transitoriness to a transcendence, where his perspective to both war and love becomes one of detachment, where he grows beyond his selfish desires to embrace others, where concern for them makes his life more meaningful. This study attempts to trace Henry's growth from involvement to detachment, resulting in his acceptance of life as it is.

Keywords: Involvement, detachment, War, Love, Realization, Growth.

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* centres round the themes of the World War, disillusionment with war and love, theism and atheism, rootlessness, chaos, man-woman relationship but the theme of involvement and detachment finds a place of prominence in the novel with special reference to the development of its chief character, Frederic Henry.

Involvement is participation, an indulgence and conformity. It is a craving, a clinging. It refers to being engrossed in, tied to, an existence within a certain convention. Detachment, on the other hand, refers to separation, aloofness, dissociation, alienation, renunciation, etc. It is an act of coming apart, a questioning of the existing conditions. Since every human being exists at two levels, namely the personal and social, his natural tendencies or bent of mind determine his indulgence with his personal self, where he is more interested in the inner yearnings of his self and is not much bothered about the external world or society. On the other hand, the man who is more at ease with his social self, is more interested in life outside himself. His life is marked by an adherence to an external code of conduct and living up to the expectations of the outside world. Thus involvement with the personal self may result in a man being detached from the social self and vice versa, thereby hinting at the close link and simultaneousness between involvement and detachment.

Life being a quest, man is involved in the serious business of reaching the reality of his identity, his entity, his very existence. He may get involved with his self or the society and be detached from the society or the self as a consequence. Moving through the stresses and strains of life, he shifts between the two spheres of involvement and detachment to reach a more comprehensive, sustainable and mature understanding of the reality of his self and life. Involvement is characterized by unification, fulfillment and a sense of achievement, and

detachment is marked by isolation, nothingness and frustration. However, both involvement and detachment are marked by disinterested self-centeredness.

Involvement and detachment occur mainly through love. Love, however includes self-love and love for the other person or other things. This journey from self-love to love for the other person or from the love of the other to self love may lead to, or result in growth, wisdom, maturity, and sometimes frustration too. In terms of the Bhagwadgita, any attachment worth the name is no attachment or involvement if it weakens the will, the emotions or man himself. Rather attachment or involvement should be something that detaches a man from himself and makes him identify with others as his duty or karma. It provides him with an inner strength to realize himself and his duty which further helps him to think and act in a detached manner where selfishness ceases to be and transcendence and altruism come to the fore.

A Farewell to Arms (1929) is a novel revolving around involvement and detachment, and Frederic Henry, the narrator-hero, becomes the centre for all observations. Getting involved or detached seems to be a habit, a temperament with him. It seems to be a part of his personality- be it love, war, family, studies or his surroundings.

Henry remains detached right from the beginning of the narrative. He gives all the details of the locale with photographic accuracy and preciseness remaining detached in the sense that he gives no hint about his own identity or about the locale he is making a mention of. Henry does not “have a sense of belonging to the world or the society” (Lohani and Verma, p256) in which he has been brought up. He has drifted apart “from established moral and religious values and cultural moorings” (Lohani and Verma, p256) and become a loner due to the ‘impersonality and anonymity, of urban life” (Bhalla, p2). This has resulted in his “basic urge to escape” (Bhalla, p2), which has made him get involved in war. He finds no meaning, sense of direction or any motive in his life. He gets involved in the outer world, to be more specific, in the war and ‘simple pleasures’, in an attempt to escape his involvement with his own self. He wants to escape his self as he feels he cannot confront it and hence the only alternative for him is to forget his self, get himself detached from it and be involved in the world outside. His involvement with the world outside is, may be, due to his hope that he might find something to ‘cling to’ in the otherwise world of meaninglessness and purposelessness. Henry has no relations with his family back home in States. He had come to Italy to study architecture but leaves it to get himself enlisted as a volunteer in the Italian army. There is virtually almost no communication between Henry and any of his relations back home. Since Henry finds no purpose, no meaning in his life, he tries to find one in war, hoping to come across the “old moral and social values, including the masculine code of conduct and behavior.” (43) War provides him with a respite, an escape from himself, wherein he can get something to hold on to. He just wants a detachment from himself and for this he can get involved in anything and he doesn’t mind even if it is war. He has neither any feeling of love for Italy nor any feeling of hatred for Austria. He joined the Italian army as “I was in Italy... and I spoke Italian.” (25) His involvement with the war is just a refuge from his feeling of rootlessness, purposelessness and meaninglessness. War to him is not a material reality as he feels that it hardly has the potential to harm him in any substantial manner. It is as unreal to him as a war in a movie which poses no threat and danger to the spectators. His involvement in the war here is detached in the sense that he wants to escape from his inner self and reality outside. He is yet to learn, experience and reach the stage where involvement and detachment

lead a mature and wiser realization of the reality – a total surrender based on a wise acceptance of the reality as it really is.

When Henry goes to the front at Plava for an offensive and gets seriously wounded in an explosion that the reality of war is actualized for him through his near death experience. Passini dies and a number of others get killed or wounded. He experiences a similar death-like feeling when he undergoes a knee operation in the American Hospital in Milan. These two experiences of near-death that Henry undergoes are a result of war. Now war to him is no more unreal and something distant. It becomes a reality to him which has the potential to shake him out of his complacency and make him realize that war is a reality which threatens to destroy. His earlier involvement with the war marked by casualness and perfunctoriness now becomes an involvement of a saner and wiser type based on the realization of the reality and it further leads to a separation from it gradually. Through his involvement with war, he is involved with the humanity around. While at the front, Henry goes to arrange food for the drivers without considering the risk to his own well being. Here he is detached about his personal safety and is more bothered about others which show his growing concern for others. Here he is not the same Henry interested in his own well being alone. He cares for others and feels responsible towards them. His interest which used to be limited to his self grows to be an unbound concern and care for others. Henry gets seriously wounded but he tries to get closer to Passini and put a tourniquet on his legs, though Passini dies in the meanwhile which again shows his involvement with others with no expectation in return. He is no more detached from the world around in a bid to flee from the responsibilities towards it. Now, he has got conditioned to be involved with others. When the doctors at the dressing station are attending on him, he is more concerned about others. He says: "I'd rather wait ... There are much worse wounded than me. I'm all right." (57) This shows his sense of involvement in life and its affairs throwing light on his broadening and comprehensive involvement.

While undergoing treatment at the American Hospital in Milan Henry falls in love with Catherine. This leads to a shift in his priorities and involvement. He gets more involved with Catherine and war to him is no more his immediate concern. The ideas and values he had considered sacred and glorious lose their appeal and meaning for him. He discerns the gap between the hollowness of traditional ideas and ideals and the clichés and slogans that justify war and the real war situation he is placed in. He comes to realize the hollowness of the modern warfare where individuality and individual virtues are no longer valued. Modern war is merely a mechanical thing which is fought not on the basis of personal valour or bravery but mechanical strategies highlighting the absence of the need for individual potential and capability. During the retreat Henry jumps into the Tagliamento, bidding farewell to war forever. Here Henry thinks that he has detached himself finally and completely from the war. He has 'made a separate peace'. He feels it is no more his show now. He stops reading the newspapers as he does not want to read about the war. He just wants to forget about the war. This is the point of his final detachment from war. He had joined war to detach himself from his self but war fails to provide him with sustenance. The retreat exposes to him the brutality, cruelty and lack of understanding and humanity in the world of war. His involvement with the war was an attempt on his part to find a meaning and purpose in his life but his experiences teach him that there is no meaning and purpose in war. War is a mere chaos, confusion, a medley where things are not straight and any attempt to comprehend it is doomed to end in disillusionment and bitterness. He goes in for a

separate peace in his detachment from war but this detachment pushes him towards involvement with the world of love crystallized in his relationship with Catherine.

Henry's involvement with Catherine is in reality an attempt to detach himself from his inner self. She is just a welcome diversion for him from the routine visits to brothels and prostitutes. He considers his relationship with Catherine as a game of bridge, just a game where there is no need of will and commitment and where one could keep oneself at a safe distance and yet enjoy the show. He had consciously and deliberately thought of going in for a mere 'game' with her but is unable to control himself now. Till now he had always tried to stay aloof and separate from any serious involvement but now he finds it beyond him to do so. He wishes to hold on firmly to his new involvement which brings forth the hope to him that his life has some meaning and purpose and that all is not vain. He feels he is "crazy in love ... God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with anyone. But God knew I had." (25) Henry thus gets involved in love – love that is "supposed to be an outcome of a spontaneous emotional reaction, of suddenly being gripped by an irresistible feeling." (Fromm, p51) His involvement with Catherine which had earlier been one devoid of a serious involvement becomes one wherein he detaches himself from that casual and indifferent approach towards her. The four basic elements of love – "care, responsibility, respect and knowledge" (Fromm, p28) can be seen in his love for Catherine. He feels responsible for her in every way and is really serious about her. He respects her wishes and desires, even something as silly and funny as growing his beard. His self gets merged into her. There is a total merger, a union where surrender is the keyword in their relationship. They surrender to each other completely with all love, affection and sincerity. He felt totally committed to her. His love reaches the stage of spirituality of which the priest had talked of – the stage where passion and lust are left behind and the involvement is one which involves sacrifice and service. "When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve." (69) This stage in love is marked by the feeling of doing something for the beloved person with no expectation in return. It is "primarily giving, not receiving." (Fromm, p257) At the same time it means just 'giving' and not 'giving up' or 'being deprived of'. Here Henry is no more the man who was interested only in the gratification of the desires of his self. His limited self gets unbounded where Catherine becomes all important to him.

From a casual and indifferent approach towards love and Catherine, Henry's approach becomes one of deep involvement but in a detached manner. This detachment is a detachment from the feeling of the urge to escape, and of being away from responsibility. It is a serious and detached involvement, not a passive one where there is no feeling of indifference, aimlessness, rambling, meandering, roving etc. His attitude is no more one of escape but of encountering the reality. He is involved in it and at the same time detached from it – he has reached the stage of maturity and wisdom which one attains through experience and realization of the reality as it is and its total acceptance. Henry's bidding farewell to war seems to be an act of detachment, an escape but the reality is he cannot escape it. While out of war, he has the feeling of playing "truant" (212) indicative of his involvement and detachment at the same time. Likewise at the end of the novel when he is all alone with dead Catherine in the hospital, after shutting door at the nurse and turning off the lights, he doesn't feel any good. He feels, "like saying good-bye to a statue" (287) and is pondering on bidding farewell to 'arms' which fate has forced him to bid. His underlying disillusionment with war and then with love, that is Catherine, helps him

transcend the physical barriers and reach a higher spiritual level where he realizes that detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it and that detachment consisted in getting involved with the world. When he learns of the death of the new –born baby he cries in anguish “I wished the hell I’d been choked like that.”(282) He has now become capable of caring and understanding. Here the fatherly emotion has triumphed while earlier he was not at all interested; rather he never cared for any filial relations. Henry sees his life neither as a failure nor as a defeat as he transcends his emotional needs. Henry does undergo a change in perspective.

He does not return to the Rinaldi position where there is nothing but emptiness and dryness underneath; nor does he embrace the faith of the priest. He accepts the reality in which death is a fact every bit as real as sex, but he also accepts the reality of a love which he helped to create and the fact is also as real as death.(Rovit, p40)

He reaches the state of acceptance where he realizes the truth of life and accepts its inevitable conclusion. “Ripeness is all” (Muir, p186) is what he ultimately reaches. He gets evolved, rather transcends, all fears, anguishes, frustrations and disillusionments and reaches the stage of detached involvement wherein detachment and involvement are not two separate aspects of life but one making the person feel the “double experience” of the “mingled waters”(Mattheissen, p118) - of involvement and detachment.

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