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The Dynamics of the Individual and the Community in Lord Jim

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Abstract:

Marlow constantly struggles without conviction to bring Jim in the fold that he belongs to and label him as “one of us” but Jim defies any categorization and continues to hold the enigma even after the novel ends. It is difficult for the reader to judge Jim in purely objective way because he always appears in one or two-hand removed narrative. The individuality of Jim is always at odds with the situations in which he finds himself and hence even after gaining an immense power at one point of time, he remains at the mercy of what image people bear in their mind about him. This essay seeks to evaluate the engagement of Jim as an individual with certain ideals with the different kind of communities he interacts with and his final position within this conflict of individual self with societal norms in twentieth century.

Keywords: individual, community, isolation, romantic, symbolic, Lord Jim.

Introduction

“He was great- invincible and the world did not want him, it had forgotten him, it would not even know him.” (Lord Jim)¹

The greatness of Jim as proclaimed by the narrator of the novel is insignificant to the world at large. It does not add anything to the value repository of the milieu. His story does not exist outside the confines of Marlow’s narrative or a few very close people affected by his choices and life. Yet Marlow endows him with superior substance that enables him to be identified as “one of us.” The emphasis on this phrase is repetitive and hence becomes questionable. The credentials of Marlow himself as a narrator are suspicious and hence the question of Jim’s individuality and personality through the “mist” of Marlow’s overbearing voice can be answered only through a closer study of the novel. Written in 1900, at the cusp of a great transformation in the society and growing ambiguity about the concept of individualism, *Lord Jim* brings forth the turmoil of waning social values and dissembling personal integrity. Lord Jim, after whom the novel is named, is a symbolic condensation of these varied issues and he stands open for interpretations, one as good as another.

Patna and the blow to the self-ideal

The omniscient narrator clarifies that the desire for adventure and performance of some valorous deed arises in Jim by reading “light holiday literature.” Even Stein later diagnoses him to be a “romantic” and thus the values and ideals that Jim so ardently cherishes are not ingrained with any rigorous teaching and testing under an established system within the society but developed with self-imagination and idleness at personal level. No doubt the

failure of his ideals necessarily follows at each occasion afterwards due to lack of a cohesion between thoughts and actions. There exists a “heart of darkness” under the entire facade that imagination affords. Jim’s romantic egoism prevents him from recognizing his own weakness.² In Jim’s imagined adventurous overtures, saving lives, embarking on rough passages etc. he occupies the position of a super-human. He has claimed his individuality and prizes it above the collective exigency of the people in crisis. Prophetically, Jim does place his own life above the pilgrims on board the fated ship and takes a leap in utter confusing circumstances and unjustifiable reasons. At the moment of need, Jim freezes and becomes undecided and the justification of reason by Marlow for his “jump” from the ship occupies a greater part of Marlow’s narrative. Marlow employs at his service the “malevolent natural force” conspiring against Jim, inevitability of the sinking of the ship, the inability of facts to completely describe the event, the human tendency to achieve safety of self in situation of danger and noting that the breed of people who put others before the self are really rare in this world and the reasons alike which collectively appeal to the sympathy of the audience who are forced to acknowledge Jim as not an outlier but “one of us”.

The problematization of Jim’s individuality is achieved through juxtaposing it to the collective conscious of sailors’ community and then Bugis community. As an individual, Jim keeps transgressing their boundaries and beheld in their scrutiny at every instance. But the inner trial of Jim’s soul forms the core of Conrad’s novel. It is important for the individual to resolve the conflict through self-rectification and introspection. Jim fails to identify the problem that becomes his soft-spot later on and hit on by Brown at the most opportune moment. According to Marlow, the world did not care after his fate much; it was the struggle of an individual against his failed romantic endeavours within the confines of a society that cares only for “facts”. What Jim imagines him to be or what meaning Marlow wants to ascribe to him is of no consequence to any of the community. Jim, on the other hand, is never able to bury the corpses of his past failures completely because his diagnosis of the problem is defective and the self-punishment he imposes on himself are as much unnecessary as his romantic ideals in a factual world.

Unwelcomed and Isolated- Jim’s individuality is contrived

It is intriguing to note that every time after the crisis passes away, Jim feels the “certitude in his avidity for adventure” but drastically fails to achieve his set goals at the next opportunity. What weakness in the frame of his mind and personality makes him repeat similar choices and decisions? His actions are exaggerated in focus because he is denied any opportunity to mingle in a group and subdue his flaws. Initial reluctance to jump in the boat segregates Jim at the outset and later jumping into it without any thought makes him prone to the ridicule of the people already on boat. As Jim tells Marlow, “they could not forgive me for being in that boat. They hated it.” Even Jim faces an utter moral crisis right after and faces the torment of his conscience day and night. But Marlow suggests that it was more about the wasted opportunity that made him writhe in agony as in the face of adversity, he was not afraid of death (he was courageous in that sense) but afraid of the emergency (parody of his valorous fantasy).

The isolation of Jim becomes more pronounced when Marlow visits Jim in Patusan. He notices how Jim has been started to be called Tuan Jim or Lord Jim but actually has become slave to everything that he has created and owns on the island. In Patusan, Jim finds a refuge from the world outside but he stands there in high contrast as a white male. He is protected there by his isolation yet stands out as the “only one of his superior kind”. Jim’s wish to become invisible after the Patna incident arises out of moral devastation but his stay at Patusan shoves him to centre stage of all the action occurring there. Jim’s lust for power, for control around himself, is fundamental to his imagination but his actual standing in the society is based on the community over which he exercises some rule. The place has given him “the certitude of rehabilitation” and this gets threatened on the intrusion of Brown and his companions. Lord Jim is thus actually a slave of his fatal instincts that make him weak at the most opportune moments. He is a slave to his conquests, his people, and his establishment because by this time his self is made up of fears and failures. And yet nobody cares for his story of redemption, except Jim himself and maybe Marlow but the struggle between self and society is real in Jim’s mind and brings the downfall of Jim at the end.

Patusan as the physical representation of Jim’s inner world

The assimilation of Jim into any community is not only difficult but nearly impossible as he loses even his self-created empire in the land of Patusan due to his utter isolation. Patusan, which is a symbol of his deeper thoughts, is detached from any outwardly influence and where he creates an image of self through dependence on certain ideals. If, as Octavio Paz would have it, “a landscape is not the more or less accurate description of what our eyes see...[but]...always points to something else, to something beyond itself...[as]...a metaphysic, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos,”³Patusan represents the deep-seated insecurities and unknown challenges to Jim’s idea of self. He is able to hold out on the desolate island as long as the inner conflicts are taking place but at the first invasion of a hostile group, he drops all his arms and is ready to let the situation resolve without ever putting up a fight. But the events do not follow as intended and end up in great bloodshed and mutilation of Jim’s self-worth, just like in the Patna event that happened earlier. The failures of Jim are cyclical and he is bounded by a Sisyphean task of building an image after a violent destruction. At both times, Jim is oppressed by the consequences of his actions and punishes self-first with self-exile and later with surrendering to Doramin who shoots him without flinching once. With nowhere else to go, Jim submits to his fate demonstrating the sacrifice of individual at the altar of collective conscience. The question to ask is whether Jim takes control of his situations or is he guided by community instincts that require a closure to the wound inflicted so mercilessly on their collective psychology.

The massacre of Dain Warris and his accomplices by Brown does not solely occur due to cowardice of Jim at the mention of Patna incident but also due to the treachery of Cornelius. Jim takes it upon himself to atone for the terrible event by submitting to the will of Doramin and this is precisely where he acts most courageously in his entire life. Jim had passively submitted to the legal enquiry earlier as well as he clarifies once to Marlow, “I may have jumped but I don’t run away”, but what marks the latter submission as worthy of more praise is that he had a lot at his stake, his love, “his people”, his loyal servant etc. this time to make

it a magnanimous sacrifice. To denigrate it as another instance of mute submission would be a terrible mistake. That Jim makes wrong decisions but stands by them says more about his fallibility as a human being within the realms of forgiveness. His choices are assertions of his individual thinking but not the act of complete detachment with the society. He still seeks power and prestige within the Bugis community and emerges as a revered leader. Only the varied narrative windows of Marlow, Brown, the girl and Tamb' Itam provide a mosaic picture of Jim and thwart any attempt at constructing a cohesive personality.

Marlow's role in creation of Lord Jim

Marlow is a self-confessed unreliable narrator and unprofessional storyteller. He confirms that his story of Lord Jim is tinged with bias and fragmented sources. It is through him that Jim becomes a reality for his audience and readers. The struggle, values, traits and aspirations of Jim are constructed by Marlow at leisure and devolved as a pastime for the travellers. But this novel is about Jim and not Marlow. It depicts the tragic events in the life of Jim and revolves around his psychological turmoil amidst testing conditions. The question here is not about the authenticity of Marlow's narrative but the conclusion to the character of Jim that the story works upon. The memory of Marlow, his letters, testimonies of various other characters are sources to construct a fully formed individual in juxtaposition to the social space that he occupies. Matthew G. Condon says, "The reader comes to find Jim struggling for the sovereignty of his own personal narrative- his struggle concerns his own personal confession against the overpowering confessional discourse of others."⁴

Marlow's interest in Jim is same as the curiosity of many others of the community who were stunned by Jim's leap out of the ship. He says that the details of the matter concerned him "no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct." Yet his search at personal level for an excuse for mysterious actions is as inexplicable as the event itself. Marlow declares that the matter was beyond the limitations of institutional setup and hence those "who haven't seen him and who hear his words only at second hand the mixture of (Marlow's) feelings" can also not be fair judges of Jim's conduct. Even his words fail to paint him in his true aspect and capture only the impressions and desires of Marlow. Dale Kramer notes in "Marlow, Myth and Structure in Lord Jim", "Lord Jim is pervaded by a speculation that the individual is not left totally to his own resources in the search for truth. Indeed, interpretation of experiences is pronounced in Lord Jim in such a way that they take on the aura of a social morality."⁵

Understanding Jim

Marlow describes his quest to read the mind of Jim as walking in the "mist" and he is only able to see Jim in glimpses. Listening to Marlow's narrative is quite the same, only the distance from the protagonist is enlarged. So Jim that the readers receive is not the Jim they wish to understand. Certain sort of fatality in Jim's behaviour defines his whole existence and his fate rests always in other's hands. His submission to the circumstances is lethal and he is never able to rise beyond the opinions and judgements of the community he identifies with.

Conrad places his protagonist in an ambiguity that is both ethical and personal and the enigma sustains even after the novel ends as the sense of self is disoriented enough to be incapable of receiving any justification of its actions. Dorothy Van Ghent describes this technique of Conrad: “The tale Conrad prepared to narrate was a tale in the manner of the older classical dramatists, wherein law- whether divine as with Aeschylus, or natural, as with Sophocles- is justified to the self, whatever its agonies of discovery. But he managed to do a tale that put both the law and the self to question, and left them there.”⁶ Being a modernist man, the individuality of Jim is challenged in the face of ruthless circumstances and every time it is the same feeling of external forces “reaching up with a boat-hook and pulling (him) over”. Jim does not own up his choices but ironically takes the responsibility for them. This is a small gap that always prevents him from a complete realization of self.

Even in Patusan, Jim is only “nearly satisfied”. Being a romantic, his fulfilment always lacks some desire and he cannot completely associate himself with his surroundings. He fights back any kind of assimilation into a larger group and wants to maintain a separate self at the cost of no self-identity at all. Contemporary times disturb the bounding forces of the society and force upon the man alienation and disillusionment. Modern man always finds the centre shifted and no identity pole to tie oneself to. Marlow finds in Patusan no availability of another example to compare Marlow to. Dain Warris is a worthy candidate but neatly placed in a well-knit community, he is “one of them”, he is an ‘other’. Jim cannot even form a deep friendship with Dain Warris, just a comradeship in war. Thus, Jim is severed from the folds of a community with an undeveloped self which he tries to rebuild within Patusan but fails utterly because the ethos of Patusan do not match the fundamental frame of Jim’s personality. Jim’s moral disposition, an acute sense of honor, leads him to accept his community’s code of responsibility and to judge himself by it. His conception of himself hinges on his adherence to the code, and his conscious will endeavours to choose as the code dictates. But he has felt his conscious will mastered by urges he could not control and has seen himself violate the code which sustains his self-image.⁷ There is no cohesion achieved in the interior or exterior world and Jim finds no place to turn to at the end.

Conclusion

“Woe to the stragglers! We exist only in so far as we hang together. He had straggled in a way; he had not hung on; but he was aware of it with an intensity that made him touching.”(Lord Jim)

Jim is situated at the flux of individual aspirations and societal norms. Hence, the sense of self depicted by Conrad here is dynamic, unstable, undefinable and in continuum. It is constructed and reconstructed through the entire novel and Conrad places it in the moral universe to highlight its predicament. The individual self is fragmented, antithetical to romance and exposed to the scrutiny of society. The individual is located within the society and those who try to break the boundaries are condemned to anguished life. But the torments suffered by Jim are self-inflicted on his psychology and though he digresses, he moves out of the community on his own accord. The awareness of desecration of code provokes some sympathy in the audience but he is never redeemed even after finding a position of power in

Patusan. Jim does not breach the faith of the humanity, but a particular community at both instances and thus the breach is felt to be more pronounced and intimate. Conrad depicts modern man to be vulnerable to make mistakes and provides opportunity for atonement but certain fundamental substance in the make-up of both individual and society resists the harmony of their functional sphere. Ideally, both individual and society should influence each other for progressive development but they tend to dismantle the process of construction of a stable whole. The interaction between the two proves to be fatal to both Jim and the Bugis community at the end and yet the continuing enigma ensures there is still space for better interactions and interpretations.

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