



Realization of American Dream as Self-realization in the Novels of Carol Shields

Dr. C. Dhanabal^a, Prof. R. Priyanka^b

^a Associate Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Tamil Nadu.

^b Assistant Professor of English, Urumu Dhanalakshmi College (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Tamil Nadu.

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Abstract

Every individual lives in angst and uncertainties. Narratives of individuals who achieve success or those who seem to have actualized great possibilities, offers a positive thinking in the reader. Novels which portrays lives of people who begin their lives humbly but achieve material advancements by innovative and creative actions provokes much interest and thought. Most people presume that such achievements are self-realization. They do not see it is not really self-realization at all. American Dream may often be associated with self-realization. The novels of Carol Shields may portray such achievements in most characters. The point is these are not self-realization because characters even after realizing their American Dreams continue to suffer from uncertainties and angst. They are not happy in the real sense of the word but are merely pleased. The paper studies this problem in the novels of Carol Shields and shows that upward mobility is not self-realization and neither is it soul satisfying.

Keywords: *Self-realization, Existentialism, Ontology, American Dream, Upward and Linear mobility, Perception, Angst, Being, Enlightenment.*

1. Introduction

The quest for identity and Self-realization is a deep conscious urge in every human being. Man's immediate necessity for survival and subsistence have caused partial forgetfulness of the real and existential Self. Man, rather, carries a perpetual dream to do something as a human endeavor which might make him or her discover an innate skill or talent unique, attractive and memorable.

Theorists have written enormously on ontology and on existentialism. They all point to the importance of "freedom" of man as a free and independent agent. Further, the Americans by some historical and cultural compulsions have constructed the idea of the American Dream. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines American Dream as, "the belief that everyone in the U.S. has, the chance to be successful, rich and happy, if they work hard" (7).

James Truslow Adams, an American writer and historian first used the phrase, "American Dream, in 1931. It refers to the importance of freedom as a right to every single citizen of the U.S., to aspire and achieve goals in their lives. The word, freedom, signified liberation, equality, rights and opportunities. The ethos is prevalent among Americans, Canadians as well as lot of people all over the world. It is the

factor that provokes a desire for upward and linear mobility towards better social status and quality of living. In brief, American Dream presumes or accepts success in life through goal-achievements as Self-realization. This idea or the ideological stance problematizes perception introspection of what happiness really mean existentially.

Martin Heidegger opines “that we had inadequately addresses the question of what Being is, and that the answer to this question would determine the future of human kind” (Habib 715). Jean Paul Satre understood, “the problematic nature of enlightenment assumptious” (Habib 317) and he supported the authentication of man’s existential being through achievements. Satre merely finds a substitute for enlightenment but only provokes a desire for another unreality which disables perception, freedom and happiness.

This paper is a discourse on existential troubles the characters face in the novels of Carol Shields. The statement of problem is the people both in America and Canada do find success in life and remarkably show great upward mobility but suffer from uncertainties, loneliness and angst. The novels persistently portray the American Dream of success in life as the prevailing contexts. It is not self-realization but a disabler of introspection leading to a failure in human relationship.

The paper is a general probing of Shields’ novels. They are *Small Ceremonies*, *The Box Garden*, *Happenstance*, *Mary Swann*, *A Celibate Season*, *The Republic of Love*, *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry’s Party* and *Unless*. The probe merely touches upon the evidences related to the problem stated in the previous paragraph.

In *Small Ceremonies*, Judith is an achiever as a biographer and married to Martin, a professor of English and has a daughter and son. She desires and hopes to move little more up to be a novelist because there is much more material success and popularity in it. Thing that Judith envies of Furlong are: “Beauty, fame, power, I have not been passed by after all” (22). There is a conversation between Judith and Meredith her daughter in which she expresses her hatred for Furlong. It leads her to a professional jealousy over Furlong who has recently realized the American Dream. His novel is accepted for publication and is also to be made a movie. Martin too achieves public recognition for his innovative material representation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. His work is accepted for display by Museums. John Spalding, too, after many earlier failures realizes his dream of becoming a novelist by publishers. These characters continue to be perplexed by pain, uncertainties and angst even while they realize their dreams. Malcolm Page’s in the essay dated 1980, writes:

Small Ceremonies does not, of course, solve the mysteries of the art of the novelist, of form, plot, use of fact, and the working of the creative imagination. Shields has shown how various and obscure the sources may be, the complexities of the inevitable association between fact and fiction. And in so doing, she has left us the conundrum of the association between her own life and work (Vol.113, P. 400)

The Box Garden is a different pie but the central ingredient is the taste of material success and public acclaim which runs in the minds of the major characters. Charleen, the run-away girl is placed as an editor among the academics. She is married to Watson, a professor. She says, “Watson – who did the grafting. Watson made me a poet” (150). She is a published poet now. Watson, too, from a simple background becomes a scholar, professor, researcher and a writer. He becomes a popular among the young students. And yet, he is dissatisfied with everything he has achieved. His rejections include his wife and son and everything called the establishments. He desires for enlightenment of the East and runs away from himself and life and living.

In *Happenstance*, Jack Bowman’s life goes well. He is a historian at the Great Lakes Institute in Chicago. His family life with Brenda and two children is socially strong. Brenda who was a secretary at his office becomes a housewife. She, later, takes up quilt making as a hobby. It grows into a passionate art and a rewarding occupation. She gains public attention as an achiever. She begins to attend national

level conferences. But one finds them in pain of uncertainties and troubled over interpersonal relationship. Bernie is Jack's colleague and only friend. He married to Sue. Sue pursues medicine and becomes employed as a physician. Their marriage collapses inspite for their affection for their invalid child an of their academic and material success. Jack's immediate neighbor Mr. Carpenter is a drama critic and at present is picking up acting. He is well known and is materially well-off. Mr. Carpenter tries to kill himself inspite of his success in life. These characters have realized their American Dreams and yet it availed them no existential freedom and joy. They have realized their innate talents but appear to have lost their way to real happiness. Isobel Armstrong in a review dated 3 January 1991 writes:

Part of the exuberance of the book comes from the way trivial scraps of experience are used to make and change the pattern of lives, particularly the detritus of the fast –food culture of Reaganite America – lifestyle columns, cooking, articles, gossip features, women's magazines, reviews, beauty tips, fake events, reportage. The characters are comically exposed to its coercive banality. Brenda, still escaping from pink bathrooms and matching towels, reads with wonder about strawberry rinse to nourish public hair, and catches herself regretting that she missed out on a televised love-in in the 1960s. Jack is haunted by a magazine article about men's inability to make close friendships and exasperated by his father's library of popular psychology...which movingly, does actually allows his father to change a little. And a mean newspaper review causes a suicide. (Vol.113, P. 431)

Swann – A Mystery is a novel that portrays the events in the life of characters and some who could ever stoop very low to reach the top. They are at times crazy for being in the public limelight, of being someone first and someone greater than the rest. Brownie and Jimroy rob and steal in their attempt to achieve greatness. Most others are willing to dishonor and disrespect fellow professionals. They are willing to fight or quarrel over petty things. The events at the Symposium exposes them. Everyone is trying to eat up Mary Swann's work is suggestive of a form of cannibalism. Sarah Maloney is well accomplished as a scholar, professor and feminist writer. She fulfils the credentials of success in life. And, at the same time, Sarah is full of uncertainties about her future, people, books and about Swann. She says she was "a person in the midst of depression" (39). Frederic Cruzzi is an editor and a publisher and is in public domain as an intellectual. To all standards and assumptions he has realized his American Dream. Like the rest of the protagonists he too is in angst. He lives with sorrow and remorse for having been, for only once, violent to his wife when she inadvertently messed up with Swann's manuscripts. The delegates at the symposium bark at each other trying to find faults and incapacity in others. It seems that what they have achieved or they hope to achieve further is not soul satisfying. Donna E. Smyth's in her essay dated July 1989 writes:

The loss of Marry Swann artifacts, memorabilia and poems, ism then, emblematic of other losses. Maybe this is why the novel ends with Mary's lost but reconstructed poem. "Lost Things", where the thingness of being-in-the-world withdraws itself, hides itself, sheds its human-shaped thingness to become:

Without a name

Or definition of form

Not unlike what touches us

In moment of Shame. (Swann)

...what really matters in Swann is the group of academics who have become, for the moment, a loving community as they piece together Swann's songs. ...a kind of existential divine comedy. (Vol. 113, P. 417)

The Celibate Season narrates the events in the life of Charles and Jocelyn during the months they lived apart in distant cities. Jocelyn had a job assignment as a legal counsel for a national Commission

on the feminization of poverty. Chas and Jock, as they called themselves, were constantly in touch with each other through the letters. As events progress, one finds, they make an upward mobility. Jocelyn would probably be made the chair person and so does Charles steadily establish himself as a solarium specialised architect. Even their teenage son shows of becoming an intelligent investor while being employed at a restaurant. Vance, Grey, Jessica and Catherine have already made themselves as public figures and are comfortably well-off. But, all of them without an exception to their status or power suffer from uncertainty and the general angst. Jocelyn and Charles are frequented by a sense of doubt, anxiety, guilt and remorse. There is a persistent feeling of dissatisfaction among most characters in the novel. They are pragmatically intelligent but are not existentially perceptive or introspective.

In the Republic of Love, Tom is well-placed, economically independent. He is a popular radio jockey and by all standards he should be a happy person and at peace with himself and the world around him. Fay is a folklorist. She has a good position at the National centre for folklore studies. She is from a rich family and they all live close by. She is free and independent who choose to live with men sans marriage. She pursues a research work on Mermaids. Fay and Tom are suffering from loneliness inspite of having achieved success in life and inspite of the company of friends and families and well-wishers. They feel an urgency for real freedom and love. Tom is lonely with three failed marriages and Fay is now single after her recent decision not to marry Peter of a live-in relationship. Romance seems an impossible proposition for the protagonist. At the same time they feel very lonely. The love of independence and their desire for love to solve their loneliness seem to be at logger head with each other. Rita Denovan's in her review dated April 1992 in describes the situation.

Is this naivete'? As if Fay's and Tom's own existences aren't enough to convince them, all around they witness the wreckage of love, the compromise they have made. Fay looks to her parents' settled life and finds it suffocating (yet, ironically, will later distraught when her father leaves her mother) Fay says, "No one should settle for being half-happy" And her friend answers "Really?" As Fay later observes: "The lives of others baffle her, especially the lives of couples". Yet, despite the evidence of disastrous manifestations of Fay and Tom believe. This is underlined in Fay's folklore studies, for example when she describes folk credulity: "Believers...develop an aptitude for belief, a willed innocence" (Vol. 113, P. 433)

Fay, Tom and other characters live by their desires. Desire is not love. American Dream is a desire and Self-realization is a desire too because it is directed towards a carrot or away from a stick. Desire can never be the road to happiness. It is a road only to pleasure or pain. Tom and Fay find themselves for the first time at a party. They develop trust and love. They pass through the hurdles they create for themselves and after a temporary setback they perceive what real independence and love mean and have nothing to do with the American Dream.

The Stone Diaries portrays the lives of Goodwills and Fletts who are neighbours in rural Manitoba. Goodwill and Flett are employed at the limestone quarry as skilled workers. Their income is enough to live independently. Cuyler Goodwill's young wife dies of child labour. Cuyler is in anguish over his wife's death but his new born baby is taken care of by his neighbor Mrs. Flett. Cuyler erects a giant tower on his wife's grave. His hieroglyphs on limestone illustrate his love. It draws him away to a lucrative position at a limestone company in Indiana. He becomes rich and a public figure. Daisy, after Mrs.Flett's demise, is taken back by Cuyler and educated. She is married off to a rich and attractive young man. The fellow dies on his honeymoon trip. Cuyler, her father finds a wife for himself. Later, Daisy travels to Barker's place and she and Barker get married. In her middle age Barker who was much older than her dies. After her husband's death, Daisy becomes a great gardener and a popular Columnist under a pen name Mrs.Green Thumb. She begins to enjoy the success of life with a large family of children and grand children as well the company of her close friends. Her daughter says, " It was as though she had veered, accidentally into her own life" one finds even the delivery boy, who accidentally caused the death of Clarentine, become a millionaire but guilt-ridden.

The real and obvious picture is that the lives of most characters in *Stone Diaries* are angst filled. Daisy's daughter sitting beside her deathbed thinks of asking her mother if she was happy in her life and does not dare to ask as she feels it improper. The upward mobility was not soul satisfying to Cuyler, Mr. Flett, his son Barker or to Daisy. The novel has plenty of human experiences both engaging and problematic but do not connect with existential freedom or happiness. Anita Brookner in her review dated 4 September 1993, writes:

"I have said that Mrs. Flett recovered from the nervous torment she suffered some years ago, and yet a kind of rancor underlies her existence still: the recognition that she belongs to no one". This marvelous sentence is extracted at random from [The Stone Diaries] Carol Shields' account of an unremarkable life, one which fulfils its promise to the very end, and, more, one which will put them in mind of a more established social order, now apparently lost, in which there was an element of honour in upward mobility, and in which all ends happily, or at least as happily as final dissolution will allow" (Vol. 91, P. 167)

Larry's Party is like a long parable on people who find success in life by hard pursuits. Larry passes through life's maze and of his own making and reaches the centre. From a florist he becomes a profitable garden maze designer for the super rich. Dorrie his first love and wife too becomes an accomplished lady and is the Vice President of Sales for a national Sports wear Chain. The only difference between them is that while Larry is lost at the middle of the maze Dorrie keeps herself safely out of the maze. Dorrie's success in life is kept away from occupying the centre of her consciousness. She keeps her freedom and love intact. Beth, Larry's second wife also moves up the ladder and does well in her upward mobility, from a scholar to a writer and finally to be the head of the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Sussex. She enjoys all the freedom she can as feminist would wish. The other characters too are accomplished and live in their floating fantasies. Diane Turbide, in her review dated 29 September 1997, says,

"Larry remains endearing, not because of his eccentric occupation, but because he is so intent on understanding himself. Unsettled at 40, he cannot even take his own suffering too seriously. He cringes at the words 'midlife crises' or 'male menopause', those trumped up diseases of trite and trivial contemporary man". (Vol. 113, P. 445)

Larry and his friends do not find a self realization and neither are they free from uncertainties that still hurt them.

Unless, the novel, opens with a list of Reta's achievements narrated by herself. Tom, her husband, is a physician. They have three daughter in their teenage and Norah is the eldest aged nineteen. Reta is a translator of a living popular French writer Danielle Westerman's books. Reta has already published books and is moving up the scale and is working on a novel for her publishers. Reta says, "All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant" (1). Pretty soon Norah's action problematizes the complacent and self sufficient attitude of Reta her mother. A season of uncertainties, sorrow and pain pursue Reta Winters. Norah leaves home and sits under a lamp post in the Toronto street corner cross legged like a yogi and with a begging bowl on her lap and a sign board on her chest with 'GOODNESS' marked on it. The rest of the story fill and expose the existential ignorance of people who are all successful in life. They do not see or understand Norah's immense moral strength as she sees the state of nothingness and nullity in the lives lived before her eyes. At the end Reta accepts her failure of knowledge saying, "What a guessing game we play with this child of ours...all our efforts are based on conjecture" (263). Norah is able to go beyond self-realization to transformation of the Being. Jane Ciabattari in her review in dated 12 May 2002 writes:

“Unless, Carol Shields’ 10th novel, is a thing of beauty – lucidly written, artfully ordered, riddled with riddles and undergirded with dark layers of philosophical meditation upon the relative value of art, the realistic possibilities for women “who want to only to be fully human” and the nature of goodness, the enduring human dilemma also worked thoroughly by Saul Bellow. What is goodness? How can goodness survive in the face of evil? How should a good woman or man –live?” (Vol.193, P.315)

2. Conclusion

In conclusion and in connection with American Dream and the fallacy of associating it with self-realization, it would be relevant to refer to W.H. Auden’s poem, *The Unknown Citizen*. Auden mimics the official language in reports. The reports are: “The Bureau of Statistics”, “Union reports”, report’s of “Social Psychology”, “Producers Research and High-Grade Living”, “Public opinion”, research, “Eugenists” and “Teacher’s report”. These reports cover everything in the life of the citizen and do not say whether the unknown citizen had a heart or a soul. The scale of material success and plenty ignore the questions: “Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd”. The poem represents every aspect of the content of American Dream. It also represents the content of the modern consciousness. It has no space or freedom for the spiritual transformation of the being.

American Dream motif runs almost as a pattern in Carol Shields’s novels. It keeps the reader animated and enjoying the momentum like those of Books on Success in life. Barbara Frey Waxman in her essay (2002) says, “They do not total up to a coherent vision of human existence, but do seem to act as Shields’ cautionary message for readers encouraging us to find ways to minimize life’s loneliness and maximize opportunities for productive, intense interactions with other people” (vol.193, P.327). Anita Brookner in her review (1993) says that, “Carol Shields’ account of an unremarkable life...in which there was an element of honour in upward mobility...” (Vol.91, P.167).

The Dream is necessary to make one’s life comfortable. The point is that it is not all and everything in existence and achieving success in life is not self-realization. One also needs insight, perception and the transformation of the Self..

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