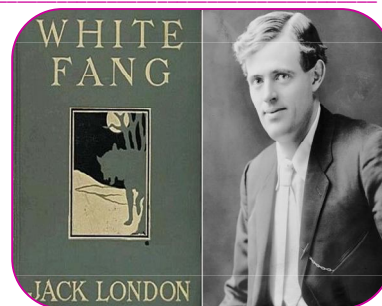




NATURALISM IN JACK LONDON'S SHORT STORY 'THE STRENGTH OF THE STRONG'

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ABSTRACT:

In this research paper I try to demonstrate how naturalism is reflected in Jack London's short story 'The Strength of the Strong'. First I explain naturalism as a literary movement. In brief I show the emergence of naturalism as a movement in American Literature. Further I proceed to consider realism and state the difference between the two movements. I demonstrate how Nietzsche's concept of 'will to power' plays a vital role in shaping the selected short story. A brief summary of the short story will follow and this will be followed by its critical analysis in the light of characteristics of naturalism.

KEYWORDS : *Naturalism, Survival of the Fittest, Will to Power*

INTRODUCTION

Naturalism is a late 19th and early 20th century literary as well as aesthetic movement. It is based on the post-Darwinian biology.

Literary naturalism derives mainly from a biological model. Its origin owes much to Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, based on his theory of natural selection. Darwin created a context that made naturalism- with its emphasis on theories of heredity and environment – a convincing way to explain the nature of reality for the late nineteenth century (Lehan, Richard. p. 47).

Naturalism applies the adaptations of the principles and methods of natural science, especially the Darwinian view of nature, to literature and art. In literature naturalism is the extension of realism. Naturalism portrays life but the portrayal of life is starkly realistic. Thus naturalism is the extreme form of realism. Naturalism aims at more faithful, unselective representation of life. The inclusiveness of life is lost in naturalism. Its focus is the dark, gloomy side of life. It completely neglects the happy-go-lucky life. Hence it is starkly realistic. It is not close to reality because life is a mixture of happy and sad moments. T.S. Eliot opines that Literature, like life, should be inclusive. But naturalism lacks this inclusiveness of life.

Naturalism differed from realism in its assumption of scientific determinism, which led naturalistic authors to emphasize man's accidental, physiological nature rather than his moral or rational qualities. Individual characters were seen as helpless products of heredity and environment, motivated by strong instinctual drives from within and harassed by social and economic pressures from without. As such, they had little will or responsibility for their fates, and the prognosis for their "cases" was pessimistic at the outset (Britannica).

Naturalism emerged in France in the last three decades of the 19th century. Its roots are found in the book *History of English Literature* (published in 1871) written by Hippolyte Taine. According to him there is a cause for ambition, for courage as there is cause for every organic action in the body. Though in literature naturalism began in the novels of Goncourt brothers, its true exponent is Emile Zola. His book "The Experimental Novel" marks the beginning of naturalism in literature in the true sense. In this book he looks at a novelist as a scientist. He believes that a novelist is no more an observer but a detached experimenter,

who subjects his characters' emotions to a series of tests and who works with emotional and social facts as a chemist does with matter.

One of the reasons of the emergence of naturalism in American Literature was the ineradicable Calvinism in Americans' nature. Calvinism is the belief in predestination and the doctrine of Original Sin. The Enlightenment gave a rationalistic view of the universe being directed by the force of nature. It offered a benevolent God identifiable with natural forces which could be measured and understood through the application of reason. In the latter half of the 19th century there was rise of scientific knowledge in the field of biology because of the publication of *Evolution of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1858. This scientific knowledge showed man as a chemism, damned by his weakness against the universe but not by the Original Sin. Apart from that after the Civil War there was rapacious and untrammelled industrial and political growth in America. Government used the laissez faire principle. There was a change in the economic pattern from individual enterprise into mass production, machine technology and industrial capitalism. Ordinary man became victim of sweatshops, starvation wages, unfair competition and erratic irresponsible price fixing. The rich men controlled the market, the jobs and at times even the government. In 1880s and 1890s severe business recessions brought about severe insecurity, suffering and even violence among the working people. Because of science, the machine came into being. The workers and the capitalists became servants of the machine. For the writer man was no more the highest species. He was replaced by scientific technology and machine. Among the notable American naturalists are Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London and chiefly Theodore Dreiser.

Realism is the portrayal of life as it is. It is impartial and not one sided picture of life because it has inclusiveness of life. It does not tend to ignore the happy life nor the gloomy one. It gives justice to the realistic portrayal of life. Like naturalism, incidents and situations are chosen from day to day life but the atmosphere or the setting is not always a slum or poverty stricken area as in naturalism. Here naturalism and realism differ. Sometimes naturalism tends to become a part of propagandist literature but that is not so with realism. In both naturalism and realism the experiences are ordinary but in naturalism everything is to the excess. In realism the treatment of material may or may not be amoral but in naturalism it is amoral. Naturalism shows man as a pawn, a helpless creature while realism shows him as the master of his fate, to some extent. In naturalism scientific determinism is important and hence the characters tends to lose faith in God whereas in realism there is faith in God. Naturalists tend to show pessimism in life whereas realists show pessimism as well as optimism in life.

To understand why there was spiritual and moral decadence we must look at the concept of the 'will to power' propounded by Fredrick Nietzsche. Nietzsche believes that to understand the human nature biology is more important than psychology. He is of the opinion that our entire organic functions and intrinsic life can be explained with the help of the concept of 'the will to power'. He opines that there are some forces which are involved in the upholding of life processes such as feeling, thinking, spiritual functions and willing. These forces and their operation can be explained by the idea of 'will to power'. The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation. Its aim is the expansion of power. But the struggle for self-preservation (for existence) is only an exception. It is a temporary restriction of the will to life. Life is the expression of forms of growth of power. The aim of will to life is the expansion of power. The real fundamental instinct of life aims at the expansion of power. This aim ultimately leads to exploitation. The expansion of power ends ultimately in absolute power and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Therefore exploitation results in corruption.

The naturalism evolved by Jack London is different from that of other naturalists in the sense that it was influenced by his personal experiences.

Jack London participated in the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897, in the process surviving harsh wilderness conditions and collecting vivid material for the many Northland stories and novels he published around the turn of the century. Shaped by his study of Spencer, his readings in Marx, his admiration for Kipling, and his attraction to Nietzsche, London evolved a contradictory proletarian naturalism concerned

less with social equality than with an ethos of indomitability. Survival is the quintessential theme of London's Northland narratives. (Kennedy 165)

In his collections of short stories published after 1910, London depicted both the life he had known as a merchant sailor and the exotic places he had visited while cruising the South Pacific aboard his schooner Snark. He devised adventure plots set against striking natural landscapes, insistently dramatizing scenes of injustice in a starkly naturalistic order where only the fittest and fiercest survive.

Jack London's short story 'The Strength of the Strong' is a model example of naturalism. It proves the Darwinian thesis 'survival of the fittest'. The story does not have a protagonist. It is woven around a string of characters. It is set in a jungle. A character in the story named Old Long-Beard is the narrator of the story. He tells the story of his survival and that of his tribe to his three grandsons namely Deer-Runner, Yellow-Head, Afraid-of-the-Dark. The story is a journey of the narrator and his tribe from primitiveness to be a more civilized human beings. He tells his grandsons that there were two tribes namely the Fish-Eaters and the Meat-Eaters. The narrator himself belonged to the Fish-Eaters tribe. His tribe was not well formed; it was a very loosely connected group of men in their primitive stage in the process of their evolution. There was no unity among the members of his tribe. They did not socialize and fought among themselves. They took away each other's wives; even brothers in their tribe used to take away each other's wives if they were living separate. On the other hand the Meat-Eaters were united and hence they were very strong. They attacked and defeated the Fish-Eaters. Those who survived the attack learnt a lesson and united for mutual benefit. Gradually they formed a tribe and made rules of the tribe. They did not have any language. They gradually developed one. The tribe formed a council and made Fith-Fith, a man amongst them, their head. After his death, the tribe made his son Dog Tooth their head. However the new head started abusing his powers. He abused his position forming a group of like-minded but selfish people who did no work but derived the maximum benefit at the expense of those who worked hard. They exploited and deprived the members of their tribe of their due share in everything- land, food, money, etc. They killed everyone who revolted against them. They accused the rebels as attempting to break the tribe and take it backward and instigated the members to kill them. However, the Fish-Eaters were again attacked by the Meat-Eaters when they wiped out the former. Only Old Long-Beard and the Bug survived.

The title of the short story 'The Strength of the Strong' is very suggestive. It tells us about the Darwinian biology. The theme also takes us to the early stages in the process of evolution of man which was the primary concern of Darwin. Even though we have come a very long way in the process of evolution of man, we still fight today and hence the story is relevant even today. The story is basically about survival of man and his gradual progress as a human being through the various stages of evolution. The narrator of the story Old Long-Beard is one among the two witnesses of the progress of his tribe and its downfall. The story starts with the detailed description of the physical appearance of the narrator and his three grandsons that reveals that they are primitive men.

Old Long Beard paused in his narrative, licked his greasy fingers, and wiped them on his naked sides where his one piece of ragged bearskin failed to cover him. Crouched around him, on their hams, were three young men, his grandsons, Deer-Runner, Yellow-Head, and Afraid-of-the-Dark. In appearance they were much the same. Skins of wild animals partly covered them. They were lean and of meagre build, narrow-hipped and crooked-legged, and at the same time deep-chested, with heavy arms and enormous hands. There was much hair on their chests and shoulders, and on the outsides of their arms and legs. Their heads were matted with uncut hair, long locks of which often strayed before their eyes, beady and black and glittering like the eyes of birds. They were narrow between the eyes and broad between the cheeks, while their lower jaws were projecting and massive (London, Jack. london.sonoma).

The narrator further informs that though the members of the tribe lived close by they did not socialize initially. On the contrary, they attacked one another if anyone among them attempted to socialize. They are shown eating from the carcass of a bear which they have hunted. This underscores the Darwin's theory of the 'survival of the fittest'.

The reader is informed by the narrator in the beginning of the story that he has just finished telling his grandsons how his ancestors and he himself left the caves to make the trees their abode. So the beginning of the story marks a significant step in the process of evolution of man. The reader is further informed that the use of language by them is in its initial phase. 'He did not exactly say the words recorded, but he made animal-like sounds with his mouth that meant the same thing' (London, Jack. london.sonoma). The narrator reports that they were unaware of the strength of unity and hence they used to fight among themselves. Since they also did not socialize like members of a civilized society they were constantly afraid of one another. They did not have any social norms like rules of taboo and incest and hence they used to take away one another's wife. In short, 'might is right' was the rule that prevailed. 'Afraid-of-the-Dark' adds that brothers no more take each other's wives like they did earlier if they start living on a separate tree. The reader is informed of the gradual evolution of norms of a civilized society. He narrates the incident of a concerted attack on the Sea Valley where they lived by the members of the Meat-Eater tribe who lived in the Big Valley. In this attack almost their entire tribe was wiped out. Although there were only ten Meat-Eaters and they outdid the sixty Fish-Eaters as the latter did not know the strength of unity.

There were no words used to communicate among the Fish-Eaters. Absence of language of words for communication and its gradual evolution as a means of communication underscores the primitiveness of man. "It was a great talk we had, and it was hard talk, for we did not have the words then as now with which to talk. The Bug made some of the words long afterward, and so did others of us make words from time to time" (London, Jack. london.sonoma).

The reader is further informed how rule of laws came into existence and how law and order was maintained in the tribe. Laws were used to keep the tribe together. They were used to protect the weak members of the tribe. Gradually the tribe realized that they do not have time to attend meetings frequently and therefore they chose Fith-Fith, a man amongst them as their Chief to make decisions on their behalf. The narrator informs how they started living in grass houses which they built behind the shelter of the stone wall to protect and of the farming they started. The reference to two hands and two legs as four legs implies the primitive nature of man.

The reader is informed about the rise of many anti-tribe elements and men with vested interests gradually. First there was the division of the land that was free and belonged to all among the members of the tribe. Three-Legs and some others got most of it and even those who got it they sold it to others in return with corn, fat roots, bearskins and fishes. So most of the land was now in possession of Three-Legs and some other men. There arose from nowhere Big-Fat who claimed that he is the man of God and mediator between the tribe and God and supported Dog-Tooth, son of Fith-Fith and the new Chief when the latter became bigger than the council. Big-Fat was joined by Sea-Lion, the strongest man in the council. Soon he was appointed deputy to Dog-Tooth.

Soon Little-Belly developed a big fish-trap that could catch many fish. The narrator informs that when the same was attempted by his father he was prevented by Dog-Tooth and when his father complained to the council he was killed by Sea-Lion. His father's murder was justified by Dog-Tooth, Little-Belly, Three-Legs and all those who held land. Henceforth no one dared to challenge Dog-Tooth and his men. "...after that all men were afraid to stand up in the council, and there was no more council" (London, Jack. london.sonoma).

The array of incidents of exploitation of the vulnerable tribesmen continues; in fact, it intensifies as time progresses. There was no rule of law. All were not treated equally. Dog-Tooth, Big Fat, Sea-Lion were more equal than others. Rules did not apply to them. Dog-Tooth married three women. Any attempt by any tribesman to challenge their supremacy was considered as an attempt to break-up the tribe and other tribesmen were warned of an attack by the Meat-Eaters. No one wanted work and therefore they appointed others to work for them. Big-Fat appointed Broken-Rib as priest. Little-Belly and Three-Legs and Pig-Jaw appointed many men as their guards and servants. Thus more men were taken away from work so that those that were left worked harder than ever before. It seemed that men desired to do no work and

strove to seek out other ways whereby men should work for them. "... as the days went by we who were left worked harder and harder, and yet did we get less and less to eat" (London, Jack. london.sonoma).

Many tactics were used by Dog-Tooth and his coterie to divert the attention of the disgruntled tribesmen from their dissatisfaction. Bug, who became a singer of songs for Dog-Tooth, sang songs of pride of being Fish-Eaters, the chosen of God and the finest men God had made and dying fighting the Meat-Eaters, doing God's work. His song enthralled them and made them forget their hunger and charged them to kill the Meat-Eaters. He used every trick to justify what Dog-Tooth and his companions did. Days passed and the men who worked did not get enough to eat, and the men who did not work ate too much. This made many tribesmen weak; many children die. And suddenly they were attacked by the Meat-eaters who killed everyone except the narrator Long-Beard and Bug.

Thus Jack London with the short story 'The Strength of the Strong' attempts to shed light on the intricate relationships between civilization and wilderness, survival and comfort, struggle and comfort. He also demonstrates how the Darwinian thesis of 'survival of the fittest' and Nietzsche's concept of 'will to power' shapes the story. His characters in the present short story articulate an intuitive wisdom about natural law.

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