

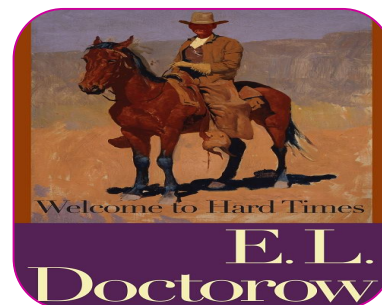


SHIFTING POLARISATIONS OF SELF AND SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS OF E. L. DOCTOROW'S WELCOME TO HARD TIMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to determine the extent of influence of the state/culture in rendering the self problematic as the characters of E.L. Doctorow's Welcome to Hard Times (1960), in one way or the other, are fighting for justice, fighting against the state's imposition of itself on the self. The novel, Welcome to Hard Times, is drafted in the tradition of a parody which is the most distinctive technique used in postmodern novel. The individual and society are seen as both paired and opposite. The individual is threatened by society and the social order is undermined by the individual disorder. On the other hand they are mutually constructed too. This is where the political and the philosophical meet and often collide in Doctorow. The activist in him fights the injustice of impositions as the artist concedes the necessity of the same imaginatively. It has been the social commitment of the author that made him often select the key moments of the American culture as the gist of his fictional mill.

KEYWORDS: *Self, Postmodern, Individual, Society, History, State and Culture.*

INTRODUCTION:

As a most acclaimed writer of America, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow has contributed some of the most admirable novels to contemporary American literature. His style is attainable and philosophically condensed, and he is honoured for his artful and meaningful prose. Doctorow wants to know how he can make use of the disreputable genre materials of the past in the present scenario. His very first attempt, a western, sets the configuration of his fiction: self-composition through narrative exposition and social analysis in a vicious cycle. From Blue, his first protagonist to the latest, the self-narrative-society circularity persists. Doctorow is the one in whom the mentioned constituents of the flux of the textual/human consciousness remain in a more or less balanced state. As John G. Parks has observed in his *E. L. Doctorow*, "Doctorow's fiction shows a willingness to take risks, to counter the tendency of a culture to monopolize the compositions of truth" (462). The complexity in Doctorow's conception of culture is a derivative of his existentialist leanings and faith in the cosmic nature of Evil. This is why even when he conceives culture as discourse-sensitive and sets out to determine the extent to which the privileged discourses of the past, the meta-narratives, have erected deceptive, exclusivist cultures, room for tension is left alive by the way individual and cosmic patterns of evil seem to challenge his own cultural logic. The way his fiction has evolved there has been a persistently shifting emphasis drawing and redrawing the spectrum that spans the limited space between individual and society, a space where culture dwells and which is in turn generated by it too.

The loss of consequence of the individual in the socio-political landscape is what Doctorow aims to fictionalise in the form of the struggle of the individual for self-realisation. The major factor that forces Doctorow to revive the seminal epochs of American history is the desire that he possesses to unravel the

consistent betrayal of people by society or the state. He does not merely expose it but more significantly proves how the establishments have consistently brought to public consumption a distorted reality of this betrayal through its literature. Hence, it is neither insignificant nor incidental that the novels of Doctorow attempt to diagnose the evils in its various manifestation and its moral and cultural orientations. From *Welcome to Hard Times* to *Loon Lake* form a prosaic of the American society from the closing of the frontier to the end of the Vietnam War and the thrust in them is on tracing the roots of evil in its cultural moorings and to analyse its repercussions for the individual society. Since Doctorow concedes the variability of narrative consciousness subsequent to the shifting polarisations of self and society. There is not any clear attempt to vilify only the communitarian aspect of culture dwarfing the part that the individual has to play in a responsible society. According to Doctorow, it is difficult to say where the self ends and the society begins. The complexity of the issue hence produces logical variability. Still, in it no way diminishes the demoralizing of existence engendered by cultural impositions.

Doctorow's literary career begins with *Welcome to Hard Times*, published while he was working with the Dial press. To launch himself as a novelist, he writes the story of the destruction, construction and re-destruction of a western frontier town. It is also the story of Blue who seeks the futile narrative consolation of recalling the history of the town through his sceptic ledgers. The banner Doctorow has hoisted with the title of his debut novel,

Welcome to Hard Times is forcefully suggestive of the whole of his fiction. It is as much about the hard times the world is for the characters of the novel as it is about their efforts to make themselves welcome it, or of the struggle of making it welcome them. Doctorow has illustrated on the condition in which he came to write his debut novel. Reading a fair amount of westerns as an editor in a film company, he sums up how the western world of the frontier really might have been. His contrapuntal concept of the west as a treeless plain triggers the text. Hence the factors which power his contrapuntal concept of the west need to be probed. The hoard of writing which has grown out of the myth of the frontier land, whether in the form of formally certified history or of fictional text which bases itself on such histories, lean densely on the imagined. It needs not be claimed that this fiction and myth are not far removed from the popularised version of history publicised by the formally christened culture. Hence *Welcome to Hard Times* is a welcome of the type that the de-romanticised frontier extends to a settler just as it is a call to survey the hard reality eclipsed by the frontier myth.

Falling in line with the myth conceived by the latter America, the myth of the frontier has underlined the early cultural objects of the undeveloped America. The western is a popular genre that lets itself be employed as an eminent tool of the myth of the frontier land. For a novelist like Doctorow, the western proves to be the ideal starting-point in this running saga of re-visioning of the American history. The theme of the frontier has exercised defining influence in the establishment of the American cultural values. Those like Frederick Jackson Turner go to the extent of attributing the precisely American characteristics of individualism and democratic features to the influence of the frontier. As reality and concept the west both shaped and is acclimated by the American imagination. The nation's fascination with the frontier has given it a myth of indestructible properties as the nation expanded and industrialized. Doctorow's initiatory travel to the bowels of American politico-myth turns the romantic myth inside out, in the process raking up an immensely de-mythicized reality. He uses the genre of the western in order both to draw upon the obsessions which readers have of the genre and to play against these obsessions in a radical manner.

The time honoured formula of the western has always been the conflict of the old and the new, wilderness and civilization. In *Welcome to Hard Times*, though it is evidently between the Bad Man and the immigrants, it is never really as straight as that, *Hard Times*, unlike the glorified west of the stock Westerns, is at the mercy of several things of the Bad Man, goldmine, Railway Company, etc. It is not a land which can yield plenty before the entrepreneurial determination of the America-inspired individual. Instead, it is one in which the individual is at the receiving end. As the novel unveils, one after the other the cardinal myths of the west are revealed and denied. Individualism, nationalism, democracy -- one by one these follow ideals

which are the base of the mythical American exceptionalism are rendered extremely suspect, impossible to withstand a critical examination.

For instance, take entrepreneurship, the commerce which installs itself and prospers, to begin with, is whoring. In the first and second incarnation of the *Hard Times* those who frequent it are regularly the ones who come for digging the golden ore, who come down, drink and whore during the weekends. A two-in-one, bar in brothel gratifies them, Zar, the Russian who runs the brothel in the revival of the town is a sheer businessman, rarely witnessing any nationalist or democratic arrogance. As the town prospers feeding on the fading gold dreams and the rising hopes of being granted formal statehood, anxiety caused by unemployment catches on. Violence and robbery become on and off. As a consequence the Bad Man comes back. Whoever opens shop in Hard Town does so in mere financial concern and the rise of the Bad Man can sensibly be attributed to this self-centred money-mindedness, extremely unlike the democratic mythic west.

In Doctorow's frontier town, commerce appears to have taken origin quite intensively that humane sentiments and casual acquaintance become unattainable. Commercial transactions tend to describe relationships of the town. It is not a plainly cooperative of give and take but of give to take. With the singular exception of Blue, the whole occupants of the town rarely see the manifest fate of the American individual. The polarisation of the individual and the self, which will immensely receive the accent in the later Doctorow, has started to grow here in the context of the myth of the frontier and the individualism of the ideal type it fosters. Of the founding fathers of the town, of those who are around during the first attack of the Bad Man, only bloc remains to build a future from the spoils of the past. Unlike the protagonists of his novel yet to come, Blue almost accomplishes it in the material sense of the attempt. Contradictory to the given legend, in *Hard Times* the individual does not thrive on his chosen isolation in the Western frontier; instead, he experiences the keenness and inadequacy of loneliness. The hatred of the landscape on the one hand and that of man emanating from his self-centeredness on the other expose the mediocrity of the formally circulated myth and it amounts to a formal critique of the prevalent essentialist history.

Mocking the dominant historical narrative of the frontier, the women of *Welcome to Hard Times* are no longer the base of the familial bond. All women in the novel are prostitutes; the only exception being Molly has left the profession after getting disfigured in the fire. In his sense of remorse, Blue takes her and she is sarcastically the one admired for a time by Zar's harlots for being a wife. The only Family of the novel is that of Blue, which is created by himself, Molly, and Jimmy fee, the son of Fee who is killed by the Bad Man in his first mass-murder. Jimmy Fee too gets into the family of the man for the reasons which brought Molly to him. This changing blend of substitutes serves for the family in the modified version of Doctorow, replacing the conventional family as the source of prosperity: A Mayor, a onetime prostitute and an orphan. That the unit could not even rise to the status of the metaphorical family serves to signify the way the text is deliberately written.

The bashful mayor, the vindictive wife substitute, and the strange boy never blend into one. The bashfulness of the mayor is not totally on detail of the ever-present probability of the second coming of the Bad Man; it equally springs from the way he has failed her when the Bad Man came first. Molly's revenge is as much towards the Bad Man as it is towards Blue. When the Bad Man comes next to be overpowered, it should expose the mayor of his egotisms, she thinks. Jimmy, the strange boy is fed further by Molly to be ready as a sure shot when the Bad Man appears again. She detaches the boy away from the Mayor successfully. This determines the family portrait in Doctorow's Western. These characters never rightly belong to each other and all vanish with the sole exception of Jimmy who takes over the legacy of the Bad Man. Like the transactional contingencies which temporarily materialise into relationships of the evidently emotional type, in *Welcome to Hard Times*, the familial bond too is made on necessities and apologies of the ideological nature. An attack on the myth is an attack on the performers and preservers or the myth as well. If the formal emblem of recognition for the myth is issued by the state then it gains currency and the foolish people become all the more receptive to its consumption. His rationale for his approach in *Welcome to Hard Times* involved "...that I liked the idea of using disreputable genre materials and doing something serious

with them. I liked invention. I liked myth" (36) says Larry McCaffery in "A Spirit of Transgression." The West is the vehicle of the counter-theme in *Welcome to Hard Times*.

This is where Doctorow normally trains his fictional guns on the way in which the state takes its citizens for a ride and rejects them the realization of the dreams which the state itself has caused them to desire to. Still, the ultimate source of evil is left tentative. Doctorow explores the elusive nature of evil and the contributions of the individual and the state in it. The Bad Man is characterised as a complicated cross among the self-destructive attitudes of the humans, the cosmic evil and the extreme capitalistic inclinations. As in no other text to follow, *Welcome to Hard Times* reflects the ethical-aesthetic amalgam of Doctorow and the narrative symbolizes the dilation in the narrative sensibility.

From *Welcome to Hard Times* to *Loon Lake*, the major fiction of Doctorow unarguably foreground the dual tendencies of Doctorow's fiction through the split of self-narrative-society inclinations, the ways the two polarities approximate one another in the novels mirror the play of consciousness of the narrative. All the novels of Doctorow come heavily down on the oppressive cultural scenario of America. But still *Welcome to Hard Times* analysed above in terms of its critique in the American culture in specific and of the human condition in general permit the presence of deterrents other than those of cultural origin. As the narrative or narrator allows the inability to fix the sin of the society in the denial of selfhood, the investigation pieces itself into metaphysical, existential and epistemological fragments. The complexity of meaning one self and knowing meaning is what the liquidity of narrative consciousness finally affirms in Doctorow.

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