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JOYCE'S "ARABY": FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *James Joyce's short story "Araby"* depicts *an adolescent boy's experience of the bleakness of reality gained* through the loss of innocence.The boy undergoes the tribulations of real life while *in quest of ideal beauty, love and romance. The story opens with a description of the Dublin neighbourhood–the 'blind' North Richmond Street at the end of which the boy lives with his uncle and aunt in an uninhabited house in conservative Catholic cultures. All these are intimated with dismal surroundings suggesting disappointment from the very outset. This gloomy and dreary atmosphere narrows down the boy's world and confines his spirit. Everywhere in his dark surroundings, the lonely, imaginative, and isolated boy seeks the 'light' and a relish of romance. Into this world of darkness appears a girl, Mangan's sister. To the boy, the girl is the embodiment of romance and ideal beauty. She is the light in his romantic fantasy, someone who will lift him out of darkness he believes. But, when he is entrapped in physical attraction with her, the girl becomes a threat to the boy's religious faith and likewise leads him away from a state of innocence because Dublin is "a place of asceticism where desire and sensuality are seen as immoral"[1]. The boy, however, wishes to win her over by bringing her a gift from an oriental bazaar, Araby, which, to his young heart, is also an epitome of ideal beauty and romantic grandeur. As the boy is growing up, the bazaar gets emblematic for the difficulty of the adult world in which the boy fails to navigate. His dreams crumble. This Araby, like a silent assassin, devours his all fancies and yearnings. He experiences a shattering epiphany, his boyish fantasies are dashed by the grim realities of life in Dublin and consequently he develops a new perspective on life. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to substantiate how a young boy gains experience through the loss of his innocence*

KEYWORDS: Araby, Adolescence, Disillusionment, Experience, Innocence, Love

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INTRODUCTION

James Joyce (2 February 1882 -13 January 1941) was a famous Irish, modernist writer of the twentieth century. "Araby", one of the most celebrated short stories in his collection of stories *Dubliners* (1914), reveals the state of mind of an unnamed adolescent in quest of ideal beauty, love and romance in the dull surroundings of the Dublin city, illumining the subconscious mind where dreams and desires lie dormant. The boy is the protagonist of the story. To evince his psychological world, the author employs the method of stream of consciousness. The story does not have much physical action; most of the battles fought for the quest are psychological in nature and take place in the inner recesses of the protagonist. However, the surrounds where the boy is grown up are frustrating and suffocating. So, to get relief, the boy pines for romance and love and thereby light. Right then, he is moved by a beautiful girl- the sister of his friend Mangan- who is also unnamed like him and obviously somewhat older than he. The girl thrills his senses and haunts his imagination. But, the ascetic culture of Ireland "refuses to admit romance"[2]. So, he is, he says, "confused" of both sacred and earthly love. Sometimes the girl is likened to a 'chalice', sometimes she is sensually desired. In his mind, she is both a saint to be worshipped and a woman to be desired. Actually, "the fantasy that she has become in the boy's mind works to undermine his religious faith and simultaneously creates confusing feelings of sexual desire."[3] "Before realisation of his sexual interest in Mangan's sister, the young boy dwelt in a state of sexual innocence and naivete."[4] The boy, however, going to Araby, painfully discovers that Araby is not the place what he has long dreamt of. He cannot buy anything. His dreams remain unrealised. He is disillusioned and this disillusionment makes him realise the incongruity between the loveliness of the ideal and the harshness of reality. Hence, the boy's quest, it can be said, ends in failure for drab reality but results in an inner awareness and a first step into manhood.

The story begins with a depressing description of the North Richmond Street. It is a 'blind' and 'quiet' street where the houses "gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces"[5] and seem conscious of the decent lives within them. To indicate its severity, Joyce here links decency and a stifled life together. The street's grim silence breaks only after school hours of the Christian Brothers' School. The boy lives in a deserted house of two stories filled with 'cold empty gloomy rooms' formerly inhabited by a priest. The back room of the boy's house where the priest died is also uninhabited and empty, except for some rubbish left by the dead priest and musty air having been long enclosed. During winter days, dusk falls here earlier than elsewhere. When the boys are 'set free' from the School, they are released into an environment where even play gives little pleasure because of biting cold. They used to play in the dark muddy lanes behind the houses and also in the dark gardens with ash pits and stables scattered here and there. When they return from play, it is all dark, and the light from the kitchen windows serve to illumine their way through the street. There is no open space, no sky and no light. The use of irony and symbolic images in the description of the setting represents the boy to be sensitive to

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moral decay of his surroundings. Sadly enough, there are no ideals about both spiritual and worldly love; no place of romance in Dublin. There is only preservation of empty ceremonies, false piety, and mechanical conformity to rules. This atmosphere of gloom and dullness seems to smother the boy as it were. In the midst of these sombre and discouraging circumstances, the boy craves for ideal beauty, romance and love and it is Mangan's sister who becomes an image to him of all that he seeks. He feels that he has found a romance incarnate and an image of holiness in the world of lost spirituality at the same time.

Brought up in such an environment, the boy is already on a mission to win the girl over. He is always thinking about her. He worships her from religious viewpoint, no doubt but his lust for her is undeniable. He is attracted by her figure and posture. On seeing her on the railing outside her house, the emotional language he uses proclaims that his attraction is physical rather than spiritual: "Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side"[6]. "This vision of beauty only intensifies his already feverish passion for the girl."[7] That the boy is obsessed with her is clear as we observe that he fervently waits every day to have a glimpse of her. Every morning before school, the boy lies on the floor in the front room of his house peeking out through a crack in the blind of the door, watching and waiting for the girl leave her house for school. He is shy and still boyish. He rushes out, walks behind her quietly, not daring to speak. Close to the place where their paths diverge, the boy hurries to pass her as he expresses:

> Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the door step my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her.[8]

He performs these same actions morning after morning, in spite of knowing such behavior to be shameful. One thing here should arguably be noted that when a penitent comes before a holy figure, he is supposed to prostrate himself, and this is precisely what the protagonist does only to see her in the morning. However, even though he does never speak to the girl except casually, her name is like a summons to all his 'foolish blood'[9] which implies an ardent desire to possess the woman sexually. Moreover, the boy is so fascinated with the girl that her image accompanies him wherever he goes, "even in places the most hostile to romance"[10]. Her image haunts him in the crowds and noises of the streets of Dublin as well. In the bustle of the weekly grocery shopping too, he carries with him a feeling about her. But, "being adolescent, and educated by Christian Brothers, the boy's feelings of attraction are confusing, bedeviling and painful."[11] So, he always tosses between passions and religious indoctrination. "In glorifying Mangan's sister, in comparing her to a chalice, in praying to her, and worshipping her being, the boy is breaking the first of the Ten Commandments."[12] In this sense, Mangan's sister draws him away from innocence. The 'confused adoration' and the guilt that it generates are both products of the

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religiosity inflicted upon the boy by his elders. Maybe, the most direct and poignant moment of confusion is when the boy associates his love and passion for the unobtainable girl with the sacred Grail:

> I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration.[13]

Shortly thereafter, he again expresses his sensual desire for the girl in an unabated manner: "my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires."[14] Another example of passion of love is that in a fit of romantic longing, he returns to the back drawing room in 'a dark and rainy evening'. It was quiet in the room except for the sound of rain. The powerful feeling of aloneness allows him almost to slip from himself for a moment. He gives his feelings for her full release:

> "All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: 'O love! O love!' many times."[15]

This scene is the culmination of the boy's increasingly romantic idealisation of Mangan's sister.

One day, the long-cherished moment comes. Mangan's sister at last speaks to him. The boy is overjoyed, and his romantic mind is stirred to the depth. Really, when the girl, though casually, asks him whether he is going to Araby, a splendid bazaar that is coming to town, he gets so confused and excited that he cannot say anything as any eager lover often does. The boy superbly articulates his feelings:

> "When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to *Araby.* I forgot whether I answered yes or no."[16]

Then, turning a silver bracelet round and round her wrist, the girl also tells that she wishes she could go to Araby bazaar but can't, since she has to attend a retreat in her school. During their short conversation, the boy notices all the details of her. His eyes note flashes of skin and subtle movement of her. "The light from a street lamp illuminates the girl's figure, highlighting the white curve of her neck and the white border of her petticoat, and it touches upon her hair and her hand so that she appears to the boy as a Renaissance painting of the Madonna."[17] This image

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"the white curve of her neck" is, undoubtedly, sensual. Then, infatuated with the girl, the boy impulsively speaks: "If I go I will bring you something."[18] Actually, they don't say anything particularly interesting to each other. The boy never communicates his adoration to her. His love for her deepens inwardly. His true feelings come out in his promise to get her something. After promising a gift to the girl, the boy can think of nothing else but the girl and the bazaar. He can go to Araby-his soul 'luxuriates' in the very syllables of the mystically magic name. In fact, the boy's obsession with the girl transfers to an obsession with the gift, and with the bazaar where he will find it he hopes.

The internal battles begin to affect the days and nights leading up to the physical quest to buy a gift from Araby to draw her to him. He wishes to annihilate the tedious intervening days. He is anxiously waiting for Saturday evening when he will go to Araby, his dreamland, to gratify his romantic cravings he has been nurturing in his bosom in the midst of the stifling condition of the Dublin city. His imagination dwells so continuously on the girl that he cannot mind his lesson. He can only see her image. In this situation, he describes his mental condition in the following words:

> "At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read."[19]

Sadly, the young boy does not get any support from the adults he encounters during his quest as we see: "The adults that the boy encounters do not identify with him or his romantic outlook. His aunt thinks the bazaar to be a 'Freemason affair', his school teacher worries that he is 'beginning to idle' and his uncle completely forgets about his promise to supply the boy with money for his quest. It seems that none of the adults connect with or share the boy's romantic world view, as they are all too jaded.'[20] Despite this discouraging situation, the boy continues to love the girl. The mixture of joy, confusion, titillation, anxiety, and guilt generated by the mere thought of the girl makes the boy restless. He has lost patience with all of his regular activities. Any serious work of life seems to him 'ugly monotonous child's play'[21] and much less important than going to Araby and bringing something for Mangan's sister.

Much-awaited Saturday at last comes. But possibly, nature does not conform to his mission. In the very morning, the boy is cast into a depression just because he misses his usual ritual of lying at the parlor window and following Mangan's sister to school since the air is pitilessly raw. While such opposition can be viewed as physical in nature, it functions as more of a bad omen than a threat to the boy's well being. Afterward, when the boy is waiting for his uncle to return home to give him money for the bazaar, we feel the boy's frustration mounting. He wanders through the empty gloomy rooms of the house singing. He is so caught up at this point in

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internal fancies and passions, and so excited about the bazaar that everything seems to be repulsive to him. The ticking of the clock, the cries of his playmates outside, the gossiping of his neighbour Mrs. Mercer irritate him. The boy despairs of being able to go to Araby. At nine o'clock at night, the uncle comes back possibly after having visited a pub after work. By now it is quite late. But, the boy still wants to go and "he overcomes these struggles, being wholeheartedly determined to acquire a gift for his 'lady', in order to attain her physically"[22]. So, on receiving the small sum of money for the bazaar, after nine o'clock at night, when "people are in bed and after their first sleep"[23], he begins the agonisingly slow journey sitting alone in a third-class carriage of 'a deserted train' through darkness in slow motion, like a nightmare. When a crowd of people at Westland Row Station try to press their way onto the train, the porters move them back saying it a special train for the bazaar. All who go on a quest for the high and the holy must go alone. No one is included in the boy's quest too. The boy is very much a solo journeyer, with the 'image' of the girl to keep him company.

But, very much to his surprise and shock, the boy senses the absurdity of the whole scenario when he finally does arrive at the bazaar. It is ten minutes to ten; it is too late, just as the bazaar is closing. "Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness"[24]. The boy "finds Araby much like North Richmond Street, empty and dark with few people."[25] Again, he is struck by "a silence like that which pervades a church after a service"[26]. "In that dark silence the boundaries of his small, private world of the imagination dissolve."[27] The Araby turns out not to be the most fantastic place he hoped it would be. Rather, it is exactly the sort of disappointing bazaar. He is shaken seeing two men counting money on a 'salver'- a symbol of the moneylenders in the temple. After that, approaching hesitantly another stall still open, he examines 'porcelain vases' and 'flowered tea-sets' but they are far too expensive for him. Worst of all, however, is the vision of sexuality- 'a young lady' is flirting with 'two young gentlemen' at the door of the stall. In a sudden flash of insight, the boy can see the parallel between his love for the girl and the two gentlemen's 'love' for this 'lady'; like theirs, his love for her is also for physical attraction. In a sense, he is being hypocritical and vain like the adults, although at this point he does not know it. Besides, the woman who the boy thinks should attend him grudgingly asks him if he wants to buy something. The tone of her voice is 'not encouraging' and she is asking him so, just 'out of a sense of duty'. Feeling unwanted by the woman, he says, 'No, thank you'. As the woman turns and walks away, he realises that his idealised vision of Araby is baffled, along with his idealised vision of Mangan's sister and of love. He cannot buy anything from Araby, and neither can he taste the glamour and the grandeur of the place he dreams. Basically, the place is meant for commercial purposes. Before coming here, the boy was in the dream world. Now, he is quite helpless. Realising that his thoughts of Mangan's sister and Araby have been nothing but dreams, the boy stands alone in the darkness with his shattered hopes. He cannot do anything to materialise his dreams. As he leaves the bazaar, he hears "a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out"[28]

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symbolising that there is no hope for him anymore. He remains a prisoner of his modest means and his abysmal city he tried to escape. "As the upper hall becomes completely dark, the boy realises that his quest has ended."[29] But, the 'quest' is not fruitless in a sense, because it helps the boy come to self-knowledge. He, therefore, admits to himself that he has become a victim of his own vanity. When he realises that his dreams of holiness and love are inconsistent with the real world, he gets angry and anguished, not towards the Church, but towards himself as "a creature driven and derided by vanity"[30]. He is, at last, alienated with reality.

CONCLUSION

Considered from the above critical analysis, it can be said that the story "Araby" culminates with the protagonist experiencing Joycean epiphany which results in realisation and maturation and this epiphany ultimately devours his innocence. Thus the boy achieves an internal transformation, an objective viewpoint, and insights into reality. Facing harsh reality in Araby, he realises that life is not what he dreamt it to be. His pursuit of ideal beauty, love and romance is thwarted. His maturation has helped him in better understanding the world, as he is not likely to be tricked again so easily by his imagination. Disappointed and hurt, the boy also experiences that romantic desires do not coincide with the values of Catholic Dublin. He learns to constrict his imagination, to repress his emotions, to apply himself diligently to the everyday practical concerns of life. His loss of innocence "prepares him for his life as an adult in early twentieth century Dublin; a life sapped of dreams."[31] Actually in constructing the young boy as powerless to avert his dismal destiny, Joyce adequately criticises Ireland's "climate of religiosity holding the children of Ireland in bondage."[32]

End Notes

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