

COMPROMISE TO DEFIANCE: AN ETHICAL SURVEILLANCE OF JOHN DOS PASSOS'S U. S. A.

Sanil T. Sunny
PhD Research Scholar
Department of English
Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit
Kalady
saniltsunny@gmail.com

Abstract

After the Great War, the lives of the American people were disillusioned and they had conceded to sensual pleasure indifferent to any ethics and it greatly affected their lives. In many respects they were lost and beaten and hence called the Lost Generation. Dos Passos, in his U. S. A. trilogy which includes The 42nd Parallel, Nineteen Nineteen and The Big Money, sketches the Beat Generation which was dispossessed and in search of a secure identity. American citizens's professional ambition and sexual desire are elaborately perceived by Dos Passos. The characters of Dos Passos develop profligate relationships and indulge in pre-marital and extra-marital affairs without any regret. They drift, the more they drift, the more remote their chances of finding themselves. They cannot defy the seductive motives that come into their lives and they compromise with them. At the end many of them realise that sensual pleasure may not give the everlasting happiness and some of them die even without knowing this fact.

John Dos Passos is admired for his high quality of writing and technical innovations in the arena of American Literature. His works are glorified for his realistic portrayal of the lives of American people. The entire American nation is used as the milieu of Dos Passos's examination and his first hand experience in the First World War and the American social life helped him to 'photograph' the country authentically. American history from roughly 1890 to 1930 forms the fabric of the U. S. A. trilogy which includes *The 42nd Parallel, Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Big Money*. People belong to the Lost Generation are disillusioned by the war and they concede to sensual pleasure indifferent to any ethics and it greatly affects their lives. Spiritually they fail and suffer.

Most of the characters -almost all- of the U. S. A. trilogy never concern morality as a noble trait to be pursued. They flirt, from one person to another, without showing any sign of regret. They cannot defy whatever alluring incitements come across their life and they opt to compromise. They compromise to ethics, sense of justice or any kind of moral codes. They develop promiscuous relationships and indulge in deeds such as drinking and whoring which provide just momentary pleasure. While a few of them do this because of circumstances, others do it deliberately for the sake of professional success through which they achieve fame and money. Here man seeks for the temporary pleasure in involving the physical act of sex and forgets the fine aspect of everlasting emotional gratification. At the end, they realize that sensual pleasure may not provide the everlasting happiness and some of them meet death without even knowing this fact.

J. Ward Moorehouse is an opportunist who uses women only for his financial profit and as tools for sexual pleasure. He is a workaholic and always craves for physical pleasure to escape from

the tight work-schedule and monotony. His first wife is Annabelle Strang, a wealthy promiscuous woman; his second wife is Gertrude Staple, who helped him in his career. J. W. Moorehouse's immoral affair with Annabelle Strang leads him to marry her. It is Moorehouse who is seduced by Annabelle-physically as well as morally. It shows the changing face of American womanhood. His relationship with Annabelle reveals Moorehouse's strong attachment to self-help principles. He is naturally unresponsive to his wife's madcap hedonism and that relationship turns to be a failure. Moorehouse's inborn priggishness forces him to engross his economic capital using the relationship which he already has decided to give up. In the letter breaking off relations with Annabelle he writes:

I shall feel that when the divorce is satisfactorily arranged, I shall be entitled to some compensation for the loss of time, etc., and the injury to my career that has come through your fault. I am leaving tomorrow for Pittsburgh where I have a position awaiting me and work that I hope will cause me to forget you and the great pain your faithlessness has caused me. (*The 42nd Parallel*, 186)

The reasons tabled by him are only to show the utter degradation of his personality and morality. Middle class man's professional ambition and sexual desire have elaborately and skillfully been depicted here.

His second wife, Gertrude Staple also does not care about morality and bother about any kind of dignity in her behaviour. She does not hesitate to kiss Moorehouse on the road right in front of the house keeper in the blooming time of their love. Moorehouse's emotions are almost dead and hence he does not bother to have great passion towards women but submits himself to sexual pleasure on certain occasions with Gertrude. One interesting aspect is that though Moorehouse likes to visit the houses of prostitutes, he does not go for them very often as it costs fifty dollars. Further he is always nervous and has fear for a police raid and he would have been blackmailed by them to pay huge sum. It clearly presents the dilemma of Moorehouse. Though he wants to enjoy sex with prostitutes, he is not ready to spend money for it. He always has a pleasure seeking mind and does not have any sense of morality.

Fenian O'Hara McCreary starts his early career by selling pornographic books to rich wives. Mac gets mingled with so many girls among them Maisie Spencer is his dearest. His affair with Mona who is also not very particular about the moral codes also does not last long. She is afraid of nothing which is evident when she kisses Mac on his lips just in front of her parents. Her conduct shows the changing life style and mindset of American women. Mac finds a new friend Mc Creary. He says how his wife is bedridden since birth of their last child and claims that he loves his wife but he never stops himself from developing relationship with other women. He cannot sacrifice his sensual pleasure in the name of codes. He sings loudly: "Oh my wife has gone to the country, Hooray, hooray. I love my wife, but oh you kid, My wife's gone away" (*The 42nd Parallel*, 107).

Married life in California turns out to be a disputing affair for Mac just like many others. Then Mac is found in the little room of a poor Mexican girl named Encarnacion. In his objective description Dos Passos suggests the material poverty of the Mexican girl bemused by a time of upheaval and the spiritual poverty which she and Mac share: intimate strangers, locked in a primitive Mexican shack with its bed and its cheap icons. Dispossessed and in search of a secure identity, Mac drifts; the more he drifts, the more remote his chances of finding himself. Mac is a sympathetic character but not a true proletarian and his defeat is the defeat of the isolated individual. His moral standards fluctuate depending the time or situation.

In *Nineteen Nineteen*, Joe Williams, though he is intentionally good and can be justified with the reasons such as fate and ill luck, is another person who does not show any moral obligation

towards his surroundings. After having drinks with a strange man who said his name is Jones, he finds himself in the red light district:

Standing in the doorways of the little shacks there were nigger wenches of all colors and shapes, halfbreed Chinese and Indian women, a few faded fat German or French women; one little mulatto girl who reached her hand out and touched his shoulder as he passed was damn pretty. He stopped to talk to her, but when he said he was broke, she laughed and said, 'Go long from here, Mister No-Money Man... no room here for a No-Money Man.' (*Nineteen Nineteen*, 22)

He turns to the street before he remembers that he does not have a cent in his pocket. Here two phases of sex can be seen. One is physical hunger and the other is business. Joe stands at the first instance and the red district woman stands at the second one.

Another embarrassing experience that Joe Williams has to undergo is the night with the man who says his name is Jones. His wish to live with Mac intimately is a clear indication of homosexual attraction. This side of the Lost Generation Americans is seriously darker and it shows how pathetically and steeply the moral standard of them has fallen. At the St. Luce Harbour big buck niggers dare to offend the working class women loading bananas to the ships through their shameless gazes and it is clearly the downfall of the status of woman as a dignified being. It happens regardless of the ages and places to remind that the entity of woman is always being questioned. Joe wishes to have some hot moments with Della but he goes for hookers as he knows that she is not a hooker. Della makes it clear that it will be difficult to afford a husband who is away from home all the time and is very particular to know the amount he gets every month. When Joe asks about marriage Della replies that he has to wait until he gets a good job. Joe continues to flirt even after his marriage.

The Lost Generation men and women do not bother to have promiscuous relationships. Whether before the marriage or after it, they involve in physical relationships with others. They do not take such relationships seriously. Their conduct obviously presents the degradation of moral values and the institution of marriage in America in the early part of the twentieth century. Dos Passos delineates the moral corruption of such men in his works authentically.

Charley Anderson, a modest young man with a good family background, has no painful history to darken his hopes. But due to some family complications which have already appeared in *The 42nd Parallel*, he becomes an exile at an early age. His passion for sex is there in his blood. He loves Emiscah very much but his heart sinks when he knows that Emiscah is carrying Ed Watters's baby. Emiscah carefully and cunningly tackles Charley and he has to take the responsibility of some one's baby and its mother. For a man it may be the nastiest moment in his life. Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs are vogue at the time and the novelist has portrayed vividly the deterioration of the moral standard of the lives of people in his works. Here Charley undergoes great insult and agony and he seeks the help of drinks for getting out of misery. Even then he does not hesitate to go with Helen, a waitress whom he meets at a hotel and Liz, another girl he meets at a pub.

Charley cannot detect the moral corruption and later his loose sexual morality and his heavy drinking habit result in the loss of his wife, his jobs, his fortune and finally his life. Without any sign of remorse he develops promiscuous relationships with the girls who come on his way. Bobbie, Doris, Evenline, Gladys, Madam X, Margo and the list seems to be endless. His deception is precise when he tries to seduce both Anne and her sister Gladys. Gladys, only to show her moral decay, too encourages him. To add to these horrors, Doris stops and mocks him when he starts to speak of marriage. Also she reminds him about precautions:

He got her to take her dress off. 'You know you told me about how dresses cost money.' 'Oh, you big silly. . . Charley, do you like me a little bit?' 'What's the use of talking. . . I'm absolutely cuckoo about you. . . You know I want us to be always together. I want us to get mar__' 'Don't spoil everything, this is so lovely, I never

thought anything could be like this. . . Charley, you're taking precautions, aren't you?' (*The Big Money*, 203)

Here Charley is being mere a tool for the girl's pleasure. It is clear that Charley's life undergoes a spiritual decay because of the absence of moral values. It is this absence which makes his life a failure. Unfortunately, he never realises his own short comings and failure.

Dick Savage, another important character of Dos Passos is set apart by his aloofness and fondness for privacy. There is a note of petulant self-regard which so often characterizes Dick. His temperament is weak, narcissistic and undeveloped. He is not ready to adopt moral values or a good standard in his life. Thus his drift into the Moorehouse limbo, where words simply have a pragmatic exchange-value like money, is plotted by the blind eruptions of self-pity, which display Dick's lack of moral resources. In his younger days, when Hilda has tried to seduce Dick, he just manages to push her off and denies sleeping with her. But later on he is subjected to a large scale infatuation and he has given up his morally upright character.

The duplicity of Dick is revealed to the readers when he has refused to give a child to Anne Elizabeth in the zenith of their relationship. He does so just because he wishes for a definite career. He keeps all his sentiments at a distance and continues to be very conscious about the materialistic climate around him. Stanley Cooperman in his work, *World War I and the American Novel*, writes: "Richard Savage eliminates both assertion and act and ultimately becomes what he most despises...He gives up his identity to indifference and success" (105). Savage does give up the chance of saving his integrity in a manner that makes each stage of his capitulation an authentic crisis which he declines to face. Unlike Mac, Savage is not born to hardship. But in a world in which freedom has to be struggled for and positive choices are never easy, he invariably chooses the soft option. He represents the educated young men of the Lost Generation who preferred silence and compromise to defiance. Though Dick has the impulse of defiance, he sneaks out of every difficulty. Through cravenly asking permission to explain his position, he ensures that the matter of his seditious correspondence is dropped; and he makes Anne Elizabeth pregnant without having the intention of marrying her.

Dick's romantic self-image shows that he is already in the sphere of self mystification. Through his sharpness of using words and by the amplitude of his imaginative conception, Dos Passos extends the meaning of Dick's failure, revealing both the wantonness of the self-enclosed soul and the social infamy. Dick shrugs away the real choices and chooses his failure with integrity and love.

Dos Passos adeptly brings out the downfall of the status of women in the Lost Generation. His novels record their inferior and often debased social position. References to the female world frequently point out its absurdity and emptiness, as well as the desperation with which women attempt to infuse the domestic life with significance. Specifically, Dos Passos's selective hand forces the novels to portray authentically the violence against the female sex. Rape, physical abuse and murder of women become increasingly commonplace as the novels progress. Even more alarming, perhaps, is the female's self inflicted violence. Women are not only physically ravaged by men, in at least some instances they are miserable enough to seek vitiation by their own.

Eveline Hutchins's life is a series of sordid love affairs, both before and after her marriage. All of her life she tries to escape from boredom in indulging sensual pleasures. Beginning with a Mexican who is her first lover, she has a succession of affairs. Eveline Hutchins's neurotic, brittle worldliness is described in many passages and in one such passage, Dos Passos delineates:

Late that fall Eveline came home one evening tramping through the mud and the foggy dusk to find that Eleanor had a French soldier to tea. She was glad to see him, because she was always complaining that she wasn't getting to know any French people, nothing but professional relievers and Red Cross women who were just too tiresome; but it was some moments before she realized it was Maurice Millet. She

wondered how she could have fallen for him even when she was a kid, he looked so middleaged and pasty and oldmaidish in his stained blue uniform. (*Nineteen Nineteen*, 188)

Thus Eveline is worldly and shrewd and evincing the intense energy of sexual passion. Later she has a brief affair with Charley Anderson. Dissatisfied, she decides at last that life is too dull to endure and dies from an overdose of sleeping pills. Her death reveals the emptiness of her life. Though she indulges in many affairs, they only provide momentary pleasures to her. They do not have the power to stop her suicide and bring happiness to her life.

Annabelle Marie Strang, the wealthy, amoral woman who has become J. Ward Moorehouse's first wife also does not have moral dignity in her life. When she sees him for the first time, it is she who tries to trap him through her dark eyes and they set him tingling. Dos Passos brings out their moments of sensuality:

One night was very warm and she suddenly suggested they go in bathing. 'But we haven't our suits.' 'Haven't you ever been in without? It's much better. . . Why, you funny boy, I can see you blushing even in the moonlight.' 'Do you dare me?' 'I doubledare you.' (*The 42nd Parallel*, 169)

Moorehouse marries her but his happiness doesn't last for long. She starts courtship with Joachim Beale, a young architect who is very rich. One night Moorehouse finds them both drunk sitting with very few clothes on in Annabelle's den in the top of the house. It is clear that she intends to use Moorehouse only as a screen for her disgraceful and immoral conduct. She prefers the company of foreigners, bohemians, and ambitious young Americans.

Margo Dowling, another instance for amorous life, makes her own way in the world and becomes a film star after many amatory adventures. For getting exposed to fame and money, she poses nakedly in front of the camera before her first sexual affair with Charley Anderson. Margo wishes to have love affairs but does not like it to interfere with her career:

Margo let out a shriek and let her head drop on the back of the chair. She got to laughing and couldn't stop laughing. 'No, honesty, Cliff,' she spluttered. 'But I don't want to marry anybody just now. . . Why, Cliff, you sweet kid. I could kiss you.' He came over and tried to hug her. She got to her feet and pushed him away. 'I'm not going to let things like that interfere with my career either.' (*The Big Money*, 346)

She is ambitious and never bothers about the means. She only concentrates the results. Also, she viciously uses her amorous advances to build up a career and to reach her goals.

Della Williams and Anne Elizabeth Trent are other two important female characters who lead amoral life. Although Della is cold to her husband, claims that she is modest. She believes that during the World War I, it is her patriotic duty to entertain men in uniform and give all she can to them, much to her husband's chagrin. Anne Elizabeth Trent, called Daughter is a wild young girl from Texas who makes the wrong friends. She is as bold as a man. One day, seeing a police officer kicks a female picketer in the face, Daughter attacks him with her fists. In Europe, as a relief worker, after the World War I, she falls in love with Richard Ellsworth Savage and becomes pregnant by him. In Paris, she goes on a drunken spree with a French aviator and dies with him in a plane crash.

From the analysis of the trilogy the readers could understand how the Lost Generation is weakened morally. Dos Passos has adeptly brought out the moral degradation of the society by his characters. Their sensual appetites only give satisfaction for temporarily. The lack of spiritual notion makes them suffer and they are not happy at all in their life. They develop relationships which are shallow and seek bodily pleasures which are short lived. Almost all the characters in the trilogy are accountable for their own fate and ignobility. Lack of family bond causes people never feels guilty and they seduce themselves and others. There is no proper communication among the family members and they never support their parents, siblings or children. This is evident when Charley Anderson has

tried to seduce the sisters Anne and Gladys. The reader becomes startled when Gladys too encourages Charley. The trilogy analyses how the Americans lead morally degraded lives and it brings a sense of despair and uneasiness to their lives. It clearly displays that sensual pleasure as a forbidden fruit that tempts the life of the American youth and lead them to a horrible end and guilt consciousness. The U.S.A. which Dos Passos describes is thus a place of death, a land of futility and a hole of barrenness. In it, the best and the worst must be defeated; for defeat can be the only answer for the inhabitants of a world in which all goals are unattainable and the most powerful gods are corrupt.

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