

Political Institutions and the Individual: Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America*

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Abstract

A nation or state is a humongous political institution that enforces law determining the freedom of a community, society, family or an individual and governs the respective people in form of various political systems viz. monarchy, democracy, republic, communism or dictatorship. The notion of changing the structured political system is massive agenda that depends upon the level of dissatisfaction among the masses and its desire to find new alternative to be governed. Restructuring of any political establishment has long-lasting impacts on people, both, for and against the change, generating unforeseeable and unparalleled implications for the community, society or an individual to live in.

Peter Carey's fictional project unearths the historically unrecorded voices of the plight and predicaments of the individuals under different systems of governance viz. colonialism, imperialism, monarchy and democracy. Parrot and Oliver in America captures the human experiences of the 'French Revolution' which was of course a drastic transformation of governance, from monarchy to democracy, but also ended in bloodshed and loss of the closed and relatives both for aristocratic and the rebels. The paper is an attempt to see the emotional grounds of individual experiences under different political institution particularly when sudden political changes seem paramount to be occurred but the same time leave long lasting wound in human psychology.

Keywords: Monarchy, Democracy, Aristocrat, Institution, Revolution, Individuals, Governance.

As a pedigree of an aristocratic family, *Parrot and Olivier in America* presents a genealogical delineation of monarchy, the 'French Revolution', democracy and their contrasting impact on the individuals. Set partly in France and partly in America, the novel describes the historical ending of monarchy through the French revolution, genesis of democracy in France and exercise of newly developed democratic system in America. The story is frequently narrated by two persons, a French man Olivier – the master, and Parrot – his servant. Both narrate the wide implications of the 'French Revolution' and their individual experiences under newly emerged democratic system in America. The entire story casts light on the facts that large historical and political dynamics bring myriad of adverse as well as affirmative deflections and mishaps in the lives of the individuals. Olivier is born into the family of French nobles who are tormented by the recent events of the 'French Revolution'. Parrot lives in England where his father works in a printing press. The 'French Revolution' also affects England and during the same period some workers are found guilty of forgery in a printing press. In order to hide their charges they burn down the printing. All the workers are arrested except Parrot who runs secretly to France. In France many aristocrats are exiled as danger of 'Revolution' is still menacing the people of France. Olivier silently attends some lectures on democracy with his friend Blacqueville or Tilbert who informs him that he is suspected of being a traitor and a spy. Olivier's mother finds him in danger of death, and with the recommendation of Tibert, sends him to America to study the prison system of the USA, but in reality she sends him to keep him safe. Parrot, an Englishman is appointed to accompany Olivier to America as Olivier's secretary.

Since the novel exposes the implications of the 'French Revolution', it is paramount to appraise the exercise of monarchical politics just before the 'Revolution'. French monarchy was a centuries old feudal monarchy based on different "kinds of feudal relationships between kings, aristocracy, clergy, and the rest of the population known as third estate" (Ware 353). In monarchical system of governance a king is considered as the part of divinity where all the affairs of a state are "dependent on one-man power and one man judgment, that is on the king" (Ware 353). Olivier Germount, the protagonist of the novel, immaculately delineates the absurdness of the ruling of the kings of France. He foregrounds that monarchical reign is responsible for the condition of each individual in French society. He, thus, comments on the monarchical ascendancy of France:

... a sixteen-year-old boy could see that France was a house of cards. The king died. The another king was crowned. You would think these changes calamitous, but it seemed to us that all the kings had a natural inclination to wish things to be as they had been before the revolution. Louis XVII was more placatory. Charles X was pigheaded. He did not understand that if he removed more rights from the people the edifice would collapse. (106)

The impact of great historical event, the 'French Revolution', on individual is the core issue of discussion in the novel. Carey dives into the ocean of history and brings to the surface emotions and feelings of individuals who have never been discussed in the books of history. The novel opens with the chapter titled 'Oliver' where Oliver, the protagonist, describes his individual experiences of the disaster of the 'French Revolution' on his family as well as personal life. Although, the 'French Revolution' is based on the noble principle of liberty, fraternity and equality yet it had its costs. "The 1789 Revolution was one of the greatest events in history, and, like other great events, it had its costs. Some of these were surely avoidable but others may well not have been" (Charles Issa Wi 381). The other face of the 'French Revolution' was catastrophic that caused thousands of people guillotined and several exiled. "Paris, where over 2000 persons were guillotined", Charles Issa Wi quotes French historical Pierse Goubert, "in 16 months. Of the 14000 victims who have been fully identified, less than 15 per cent were nobles and clergy men and merely 60 percent workers and peasants" (372).

In the novel, the 'French Revolution' breaks the monarchical structure of governance snatching the privileges of the aristocrats and the family of Olivier is exiled with other royals. The entire episode of the first chapter depicts the aristocrats banned in France living in different parts of the country in disguise. Oliver's family which has been very loyal to the king of France, before the 'Revolution', now lives secretly in Normandy after exile.

We live a quiet life – he says. In Normandy, in exile, he also says. My mother says the same thing, but more bitterly. Only in our architecture might you glimpse signs of the powerful familial trauma. We live a quiet life, but our courtyard resembles a battlefield... (4)

The dark side of 'French Revolution' affects the psyche of the growing generations where life is full of danger and insecurity for each individual of the society. Oliver narrates his childhood trauma of

the 'French Revolution': "The year before 1805, when I was first delivered to my mother's breast, constituted an age of inventions of great beauty and great terror – and I was very soon aware of all this without knowing exactly what the beauty of the terror were" (5). Revolutionaries killed a lot of aristocrats before him. He sees his own father fighting against the revolutionaries. He is kept in a hidden place in order to save his life from the revolution which imprints his mind with varied notions of violence. The momentum of the tragedy happened is so fearful and disastrous that Oliver's parents never disclosed the incident before Olivier:

I had a doubt that something cruel and catastrophic had happened before I was even born, yet the comte and comtesse, my parents, would not tell me what it was. As a result my organ of curiosity was made irritable and I grew into the most restless and unhealthy creature. (1)

Narrating his family history Olivier remembers the days of the expulsion of his family from France. His parents are imprisoned along with other aristocrats in *Porte libre* prison. In order to eliminate aristocracy from France many aristocrats are mysteriously removed from the prison. Oliver's childhood is completely scourged by the 'Revolution', however, what troubles him the most is that is the imprisonment of his parents: "My parents had been thrown into *Porte Libre* prison where every day one of their fellow nobles was called 'to the office' and was never seen again. In these months my father's hair turned white, my beautiful mother was broken..." (17).

Olivier notes the diminishing effects of the 'French Revolution' on his parents. Their aristocratic dignity is completely weakened and their bodies symbolize the decay of aristocracy in France. "My father? He became exceedingly formal and his skin took on a shining waxy sheen as if he were a clever copy of himself" (25). His apprehension is heightened when he meets King Louis XVIII. The King's air of monarchical dignity is completely diminished. Olivier compares King's indefensible body with an actor playing a role of King rather than a king bearing genuine power:

I shall never forget the impression Louis XVIII made when he came out to receive us; we saw an enormous mass emerge from the King's study, shuffling and waddling, this mass was topped by a fine and able head but the expression of the features was entirely theatrical; the king came forward with his hand over his heart, his eyes raised to heaven. (49)

The novel strikes hard at the nature philosophy of Rousseau which propagates children abandoning after a certain age. The second episode of the novel is narrated by another individual Parrot, an Englishman, son of printer, and like Olivier narrates his family history. In the beginning he quotes the lines from *The Social Contract* (1762) written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

Children remain tied to their father by nature only as long as they need him for their prevention. As soon as this ends, 'so wrote the great Rousseau', the natural bond is dissolved. Once the children are freed from the obedience they owe their father and the father is freed from the responsibilities towards them, both parties equally regain their independence. If they continue to remain united, it is no longer nature but their own choice which unites them; and the family as such is kept together only by agreement. (54)

Both narrators do not agree with the philosophy of Rousseau and never wants to be separated from their parents. Parrot says "My daddy and I were two peas in a pod" (54) and Olivier rejects Rousseau the philosophy of Rousseau arguing:

If I became – against all that God intended for me – a powerful swimmer, it was not because of the damaging teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but because of this good priest and my desire to please him. I would do anything for him, even down myself. It was because of him that I was continually drawn away from the awful atmosphere of my childhood... (9)

Conflict within an individual during the politics of change is the other significant issue of the novel. The young characters seem changing their mindset towards the implication of revolution. Oliver with his aristocrat friend Blackqueville reads Aldolphe Theiers' *Histoire de la Revolution Francaise*. Though they are staunch aristocrats and feel, "a violent hatred of the author who blamed the aristocrats for the sins of the revolution" (108), yet after analyzing the book feel themselves to be "liberal modern men" (108). The controversial rivalry between aristocrats and bourgeoisie creates an in-between stage for Olivier and Blackqueville and they decide to support neither aristocracy nor join revolutionaries:

For while the king's advisers tried to push back against the revolution and the bourgeoisie tried to push forward, we occupied a category of our won, trusted neither

by our own side nor the other, living in a constant state of contradiction and confusion, unable to imagine what our futures held. (109)

The genesis of democracy attracts many young individuals in France. However, the aristocrats oppose the idea of new system supporting, by and large, monarchy. Some intellectuals organized lectures on democracy secretly in many places. Olivier and his friend also attend these lectures: “Thus Blacqueville and I attended a great many of these lectures, side by side with citizens of all descriptions, very few of them with friends at court. We were diligent and earnest. We made notes” (109). In 1830s the situation gets worsened in France and aristocrats are targeted in many places. Olivier’s participation in lectures on democracy creates a problem among aristocrats. “We had no idea of the dangerous nature of the game that we are playing” (109). In order to protect her son Olivier’s mother sends him to America to compile a report on American prisons. In fact, she has no concern with American prison system and democracy, she only wants to save her son.

The novel, besides dwelling on the consequences of the ‘French Revolution’, is also influenced from the life of Alexis Tocqueville the writer of *Democracy in America*. “De Toqueville, like Oliver, visited America,” states Andrew Taylor “after the ‘July Revolution’, ostensibly to study its jails” (web). Like Tocqueville, Oliver is born in 1805 into a family of the old French aristocracy, to the parents who have been lucky to survive in the ‘Revolution’. Like Tocqueville, he is too educated by the family priest. Although there are dissimilarities between the two yet Carey himself tells in an interview to Bret Anthony Johnston:

My ordinal idea came from Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* where I found a much more qualified and complicated view of the young democracy that I had expected. Tocqueville allowed me to walk through a door and imaginatively inhabit the country which had been my home for twenty years. (web)

Parrot and Olivier in America is a bitter critique of newly emerging American democracy in the nineteenth century. After France the setting of the novel shifts to America where utilitarian face of American political system and materialistic society is revealed with its disastrous impact on individuals. The complexity of American society is analyzed as a blend of bliss and frustrations. Cynical opportunism is seen as the hallmark of American society, where each individual is made a machine of earning wealth. The character of Olivier like Tocqueville comprehensively portrays the

picture of American society based on newly acquired political setup. While completing the mission of evaluating the penitentiary and democratic system of America Olivier meets certain characters in America who completely change his proposition about Americans – as well established citizens of new democratic system. American mind sets are exposed through the characters like Mr. Peek, an American businessman and banker, and Oliver's friend, Mrs. Peek "an attractive and flirtatious woman" (308), Mr. Robert O'Hara an American servant of Olivier, Mr. Godfroy an American farmer and businessman, Miss Amelia Godfroy beloved of Olivier and daughter of Mr. Godfroy, Mrs. Dougdale a negro woman and an old American Mr. Dupancea.

In America Parrot and Olivier narrate the condition of penitentiary system of America. O'Hara, an American servant of Olivier, guides Oliver to visit the different prisons of America. The news of Olivier's visiting of American prisons is published in *The New York* by the American media:

I read, on the front page of the New York newspaper, that the French magistrate M. Garmont has arrived in the ship Havre, sent by the order of the Minister for Interior, to examine the various prisons in our country, and make a report on his return to France. To other countries, especially in Europe, a commission has also been sent, as the French government have it in contemplation to improve their penitentiary system and this means obtaining all proper information. (240).

The lines indicate that the American penitentiary system is a model and French government wants to improve its penitentiary system on the basis of the Americans. But when prisoners are visited by Parrot and Olivier, their terrible and inhuman condition is exposed before them. Growing materialism and avarice for wealth have made many individuals imprisoned. They visit several prisons in America – New York, Wethersfield, and Philadelphia and Connecticut. Parrot describes the exact condition of a prison in New York:

And at the very bottom of this space, directly in front of me as I entered, was the gibbet. If I had not been thoroughly frightened by then, I was now. Although every suicide inside the Tombs was politely hidden from the civilization outside its walls, this gibbet was in sight of every cell. (252)

Later, Parrot learns that many poor people have been imprisoned who are the victims of American policies. He again comments on the condition of the prisoners:

The prisoner's shoulders, so markedly stooped, were now drawn sharply back and he poked his head fiercely forward, his hope-filled eyes suddenly reflecting more light than you would think available in such a hole. (255)

American society of mid-nineteenth century is seen as hypocrite, business minded, brutal, full of greed and selfishness through the characters in the novel. Mr. Peek a banker and American friend of Olivier is a selfish businessman who describes himself. I am a mathematical man. It is my hobby and my interest" (297). In another conversation with Olivier, he says "As American we must allow the possibility... my dear Olivier, this is not your ancient France (292). When Mr. Peek shoots down a pigeon while going to New York with Olivier, Olivier comments: "I was shocked by Peek's animal spirit" (299). Once Oliver visits Peek's house and finds Mrs. Peek to be a hypocrite and flirt. "Mrs. Peek" comments Olivier, "is a charming woman, an attractive as can be flirtatious as you earlier foresaw" (308). During one of his prison visits Olivier gets familiar with Godfroy family. Mr. Godfroy is a successful farmer and businessman. His daughter Miss Amelia Godfroy is a beautiful hardworking business person with a separate farmhouse. According to Olivier, she "was also very practical" (444). Olivier falls in love with Amelia. Amelia equally responds his love but their relation breaks up due to aristocratic mind set of Olivier. He loves her internally but he cannot return to France with American wife as per the expectations of his aristocrat mother. Mr. Duponeceau is an American old man who many a time make Oliver realized about the real philosophy of American society saying "there is a restlessness of spirit and a greed for wealth which it would be hard for you to understand. I thought, Miss Godfroy. Restlessness of spirit" (326).

In Philadelphia Olivier is invited to a musical party by a 'distinguished Philadelphian' Mr. Walash where he comments on the "The American who are by nature as cold as ice" (319). Later he hits hard on Americans "Dear God, the American are brutal. I as dispatched like a wounded doe, killed with fast hard cracking of the neck" (550).

The novel also sees individuals under democracy, as an political institution, a political system that imparts excess freedom to the individuals. Olivier's aristocratic mind set cannot digest such freedom to the individuals and favors republicans, Craiutu and Jennings, who express discontent with number of aspects of the American democracy. Olivier seems dissatisfied with this system and dismisses American system as model for France:

I had not known America would look like this. In my innocence I had hoped to find here a model for the future of France, or at least some sign as to how, if democracy was unstoppable, we might at least safeguard our future with certain principles or institutions. (295)

Democracy brings fortune for each individual of society providing him equal opportunities but “these fortunes” argues Edward Persen, “were made not by upstarts but by men whose parents and grandparents had already accumulated sizable estates. Only such men were able to survive the recurrent financial panics of the 19th century” (139). However, among the abundance of shortcomings in American political setup Olivier finds himself comfortable with some aspects of democracy. Comparing the master-servant relations in monarchy and democracy Olivier states that servant in democratic system can any time be a master with his efficiency which is not possible in monarchy.

In a democracy, however, both parties know that the servant may at any moment become the master and that he has the ambition to do so; the servant is, therefore, in both parties’ understandings, no different from the master. (487)

One of the paramount features of democratic system is the freedom of an individual life. Oliver feels that personal life of an individual can only be felt in a democratic structure. In Connecticut when he privately meets his beloved Amelia Godfroy without any interruption he is comfortable with the system. “To arrange to meet and talk together in private world, in France, have been a matter of some complication, but America was not France” (392).

Carey’s contemplative analysis of the transition from monarchy to democracy divulges the enormous imperfections and flaws of various political institutions and their destabilizing impact on the individual’s life. He exposes myriad of problematic aspects of the aristocratic system where freedom of individuals is snatched and fear of the God is injected in their minds in case they stand against the divine king. In this sense Carey’s main character Olivier is the best example of a person whose mind is installed by aristocratic ways of life. The idea of aristocracy haunts him throughout the life. Thus, different modes of politics devastate his life and in the novel he seems to be a complete failure. Politics and the condition of individual can be observed when Parrot describes entire political changes illogical. Analysing the different changing processes of political system Parrot states that if the basic concerns are not addressed, the change from one system to another does not make sense.

Democracies and monarchies, it does not matter – the world is filled with poor men tortured by the state. The rich make an endless supply of them, and when the Americans won their independence the King must find a new place to put his prisoners. (340)

Casting light on the historical transition of political system and its impacts on individuals, “Carey shows that democracy is set to repeat the injustices of its unacknowledged past. Its failure can only be corrected by recognizing the symptoms of its illness and treating their root causes. This initial step in this process is to acknowledge that democracy, whether in Europe or in the New World, does not come from nowhere, but emerges from a pre-existing set off values and habits that must be accounted for” (Mathews 74).

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