

Between Faith and Society: Re-evaluating Social Identity in Evelyn Waugh's Novels

Nitu,

Research Scholar,

(Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak)

nitukharb0129@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper will look at the complicated relationship between faith and the social identity in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. Waugh, in his fiction work, though widely regarded as a sharp satire with dark humor, is highly reflective of the moral and spiritual crisis of the twentieth century society of Britain. This paper examines the ways in which religious faith especially the Roman Catholic faith intersected with class, tradition and modernity in articulating individual and group identities through close reading of three highly prominent works; *Brideshead Revisited*, *Decline and Fall* and *A Handful of Dust*. This paper posits that in his depiction of faith, Waugh does not just state what is dogmatical, he states what is existential and displays the stresses of spiritual redemption, as well as social corruption. This paper shows that Waugh criticizes the shallowness of the aristocratic culture at the same time as exploring the way that the notion of social identity enables him to judge his stories once more by underlining the outlived Ness of the importance of faith in a fractured world.

Keywords: Evelyn Waugh; Social Identity; Faith and Religion; Catholicism; British Society; Satire, Modernism, Class Structure.

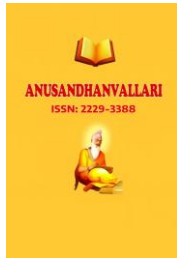
Introduction:

The twentieth century was characterized by radical changes in social, cultural as well as religious livelihood, especially in Britain, with the old models being confronted with modernity. In this regard, Evelyn Waugh works have a unique position and they present a critique of the social institutions, as well as a defense of the spiritual values. The novels of Waugh are well based in the conflicts between the faith and the society where he himself underwent conversion to the Roman Catholic and which disappointed him with the modern culture.

The literature development of Waugh came at a time when the British aristocracy was deteriorating, the religious leadership was fading away and the secularism ideologies were gaining momentum. His earlier writings, including *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930) take the satirical form of moral emptiness and frivolity of the upper classes in the interwar period. In his subsequent novels, however, especially *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) one can see a richer involvement in the issue of faith, grace, and redemption. These texts imply that social identity of the fiction of Waugh is not just a by-product of social class or the belonging to a particular culture but it completely is entangled with spiritual faith.

The paper aims at re-examining the role of social identity in the novels written by Waugh by looking at how faith is both stabilizing and a conflict. It addresses how the characters bargain their identities in a society that is slowly losing attaching to religious values, however is still plagued by the said values. In this analysis, the research maintains that Waugh offers faith as an important aspect of identity, one that defies the superficial attributes of the status and belonging.

Moreover, it is through the events Waugh offers, that a consistent conflict between the personal wish and the wish of society is betrayed. Characters like Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* and Tony Last in *A Handful*



of Dust are not able to adjust individual satisfaction in accordance with traditionalism and morality. These thought battles underline the greater idea about identity as a shifting and disputable construction, which is both internally conditioned and externally forced.

Reconsidering the novels by Waugh in terms of social identity, this paper makes its contribution toward interpreting the literary vision. It shows that the way Waugh approached the topic of faith is not a theological endeavor but a major social one, and provides the way faith and culture relate with identity in the current literature.

Literature Review:

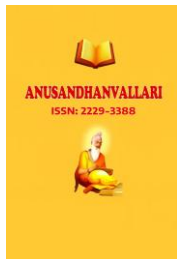
The current literature on Evelyn Waugh is an aspect of rich insights on satire, social identity, and religious consciousness in the twentieth-century British literature. John Carey (2008) explores the purpose of satire as a vehicle of elitism suggesting that a great deal of contemporary British writers resorted to humor and irony to avoid belonging to the mass culture. His interpretation places a lot of emphasis on the use of satire as a recall of intellectual hierarchy rather than a literary style, which can be especially applied to the case of Waugh where the author criticizes aristocratic and cultural pretensions. Developing these concepts, in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Carey (2009) examines the existing rift between the literary elites and the mass promoting the fact that modernist authors tended to express alarm about the emergence of mass culture. Such a paradigm assists in making sense of the ambivalence of Waugh in his attitude to the tradition and modernity.

Going somewhat deeper into the topic of fiction by Waugh, Gupta (2017) provides his own critical approach to the novelist, with the focus on the relationship between satire and social reality. According to the study, satire is a tool of social criticism, and the Waugh, through his works reveals moral vacuity and hypocrisy in the British high society. In the same vein, L. Davis (2020) examines the social absurdity notions in Waugh stories and opines that his narrative techniques indicate that the modern living is ridiculous and even disorganized. Davis emphasizes that Waugh creates absurd situations to discuss the breakdown of social conventions, which is why the notion of identity in his novels is undermined is emphasized.

Kumar (2019) discusses the theme of faith and moral crisis in detail based on her analysis of the *Brideshead Revisited*. The paper presents the importance of Catholicism to the moral and spiritual development of the characters in the novel, claiming that religious faith is a reverse element that can help oppose the process of moral degradation of contemporary society. This view is also reinforced by Rao (2015) who focuses on the theme of Catholicity in English fiction on a wider level but insists on the importance of religion as the source of the meaning and moral aspects. These studies both strengthen the importance of faith as a central element to the study of the issue of identity and humanity carried out by Waugh.

Scholars have also given a lot of observation to the order of classes and social identity in British literature. Mehta (2016) argues that class consciousness has a way towards character development and interpersonal relationship, implying that social hierarchy has always been one of the characteristics of identity. Similarly, Sharma (2020) examines how the technique of satire can be used to address the issue of classes divisions, and he states that the problem of inequalities and contradiction of the social system was frequently revealed by the twentieth-century British novelists. These observations are especially applicable to the work of Waugh where the issue of classes is also core and extensively investigated.

Theoretically, Pramod K. Nayar (2013) offers a concise picture of the modern literature and cultural theory, which is helpful in the analysis of the themes of identity, modernism, and cultural changes. His writing allows one to better see how the novels by Waugh can be viewed using different critical approaches such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies. To this, Patil (2018) touches upon modernism and moral



decadence specifically in the novels of Waugh, noting that his literary works are influenced by a more general cultural crisis with its search of traditional values and emergence of existential anxiety.

Generally, the literature that has been reviewed suggests a high academic consensus concerning the importance of satire, faith, and class in defining the thematic interests of the fiction by Waugh. Nevertheless, though each of the separate studies is devoted to such specific aspects as elitism, religion, or social critique, the more comprehensive approach, in which all the aspects are studied within their mutual influence on creating the social identity, is still required. This paper attempts to fill this gap by providing a thorough reconsideration of identity in the novels of Waugh and putting it within the framework of faith and society.

Analysis of the study:

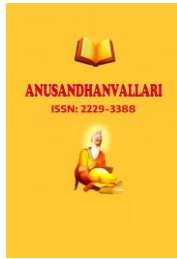
The Evelyn Waugh works offer an interesting reflection upon the topic of the social identity as something fluid and contentious that is guided by the internal beliefs and external effects of the society. It is not only that in his novels critic Sotomayor simply represents identity as being passed down through blood or a lack of it as a social job, but also constantly remoulds and redefines it with the arrival of personal experiences, ethical decisions, and culture change. The characters created by Waugh tend to be confused in the fast-paced world where classic identifiers, e.g., aristocratic background or status, are becoming weakened. This identity crisis indicates the greater fears of the modern Britain of this century because people are torn between the burden of the past and the doubts of the present.

Faith and religion, especially Catholicism, take the leading role in the literary fantasy of Waugh, as a sense of the right way and a doubtful element as well. His conversion to Catholicism indeed had an impact on his writing as it modified his interest in writing about musty themes of sin, grace, and redemption. In *Brideshead Revisited*, religious faith is also not depicted as a dogmatic and fixed dogma but rather as a changing and frequently mysterious factor, which determines human fate. The story's characters that accept or defy faith show the intricate manner in which religion cuts across the pervasive aspects of individuality, underscoring the conflict between the divine and the individual or the Hinduism and human independence.

The British society as depicted by Waugh is characterized by the critical consciousness of its inflexible standing of classes and its progressive demise in the face of modernity. His earlier satirical writings, such as *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies* reveal the barren nature of upper classes, and this depicts a world full of superficial values and social conceits. By using ease of cuteness as the weapon of satire, Waugh destroys the belief in high social standing of an aristocrat, showing the precariousness of the system that places so much importance on the looks instead of the content. His criticism does not only revolve around people but also organizations that perpetuate these hierarchies and this idea suggests that the old social structure is weak and obsolete.

Meanwhile, the romance with modernism at the same time depicts the reaction of Waugh to the contemporary cultural and intellectual changes. Though he makes use of such modernist devices like irony, fragmentation, and complexity of the plot, he is not persuaded by the anti-traditional and anti-moral tendencies of the movement. Rather, Waugh applies the concept of satire as a weapon of mocking the dissolution and hollow spirituality of contemporary existence. The contradiction of the modernism in his piece of writing is seen: he is searching the new meaning in the world that lost its spiritual base, but is still haunted by it.

Lastly, the theme of class organization is also woven into the theme of exploring personal identity and religious beliefs by Waugh. His novels are also characterized by a very stratified society with strong distinctions in classes, with the social mobility being minimal and accompanied by tension most of the time. Nevertheless, Waugh entertains the permanence of these divisions as well since he demonstrates the way these divisions are defeated by the weakness in morality and cultural shift. The characters with various social statistics are united



and made to interact with one another to reveal how the class lines are all false, and that social standing cannot be utilized in determining who individuals truly are. Waugh through this subtle observation therefore ends up doubting the authenticity of class-based identity, as he focuses more on the significance of moral and spiritual values in defining the human experience in the long-run.

Final Conclusion:

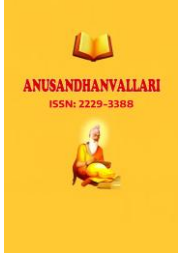
To sum up, Evelyn Waugh novels provide a very deep reconsideration of social identity by the complexity of the faith and society relations. It is found in his works that identity is not as absolute and established based on the factors of the person, class, social stand, etc, but it is a changing and developing reality conditioned by moral choices, cultural pressures and spiritual consciousness. Waugh, by using his venomous satire over the British society, brings forth the shallowness and corruption of old class systems, and, at the same time, questions the morals, which shape contemporary life.

Faith, in this case of Catholicism, is at the core of his fictions and it is a highly contentious subject that has been the gateway to redemption. The characters of Waugh tend to struggle between the carnal and the spiritual, and therefore exemplify the trickiness of having faith in religion in an ever-secular and disintegrated world. This conflict helps highlight his further complaint against modernity, which he describes as being characterized by moral dislocation and dehydration.

Finally, the novels that Waugh created imply that social identity is impossible to comprehend completely without referring to the presence of faith and ethical consciousness. As much as he is critical of the strict hierarchies of the British society and the excess of modern culture, he is simultaneously supportive of spiritual values and their ability to offer coherence and meaning to human lives. Waugh combines the themes of religion, social standing, and modernism, which is why the issues concerning the inability of an individual to balance their individuality with the conflicting interests of faith and community render his work highly topical both to his time and today.

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