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IDENTITY AND THE QUEST FOR ETHICS IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH- 22*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will be exploring Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) in the light of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills' landmark work *The Power Elite* (1956). Mills in this work states that "The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern." This stance on the structure of power which operated in America after the World War II as examined by Mills is by and large the main concern of Heller's works as his works too accentuate an individual's position vis-à-vis the prominent institutions of post war America.

The main objective of this paper rests on Mills' theory of the power structure in America, whereby the working of these "big threes" that is, the army, bureaucracy and the corporate world of post World War II America and their ramification on an individual's identity will be explored. The paper's main argument will be to analyse the extent to which this post war setup as represented by Mills has effaced an individual's identity, and whether an individual is nothing but really a part of this "faceless multitude," docile and devoid of any sense of self or has Heller kept a possibility of some sort of resistance which will allow an individual to achieve freedom by negotiating its position in that setup.

"The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighbourhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern," writes C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), a renowned American sociologist, in his landmark work *The Power Elite* (1956). It will be relevant to mention that Joseph Heller started writing his first novel *Catch-22* in 1953 and it was published in 1961. It was a time when America had recently emerged as a superpower after the havoc of World War II. It was also a time when a new cultural movement of Postmodernism began. World War II was a globally devastating phenomenon. Horrific events which included the total annihilation of many big cities like Dresden, Berlin and Manila, the overall death of as many as fifty million people, the use of mass destruction weapons and atom bomb, was witnessed by the whole world.

Besides the tribulations of World War II, there arose large corporations in America during the war. Much before the World War II, there was a time when "robber barons" and rail road kings dominated the political and economic scene of the country. But after the war, numerous large corporations run by the elites came into being and these elites were at the top of the American society and largely controlled the country's economy as well. Following the War, the American mass society was increasingly pressed into huge urban concentrations and constituted a "faceless multitude" which had no influence on the vital decisions related to

their lives. According to Mills these major decisions were made by “overlapping cliques” of men from the very top stratum of corporate management, government, and the military. He gave the concept of the power elite which according to him are a group of people controlling the immeasurable resources of enormous bureaucratic organizations that directly or indirectly govern the industrial society of modern America.

As Mills states in his work, the power elite are predominantly the key figures of the three most important establishments of modern American society, namely, the Military, the Government, and the Economy. As these organizations were dramatically centralized and became the means of power as the war ended, it hence became important to analyse and understand the hierarchies of power operating within them. The leadership positions within these bureaucracies which are the real loci of power in America and dominate the society were occupied by the elite. As Frank W. Elwell has also stated, in America over the period of time the social structure has enlarged, centralizing the decision-making process and thereby placing this authority in the hands of men of similar social background and outlook, while diminishing the power and scope of other organisations and turning them into a mere subsidiary to the big three.

Roughly overlapping the time period of Mill’s work, when Heller came up with his first novel *Catch-22* in 1961, setting “the tone for a generation of Americans in 1960s,” the year is also remembered for U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s farewell speech, in which he coined the term Military-industrial complex as he warned America against it. He expressed his concern that the military and industrial America, which we see today as corporate America, as being too closely linked to each other. He was of the opinion that these groups will use the executive branch of the government to form coalitions that would protect their own self-interest. So taking into consideration this military-industrial complex, Mills in his work came up with the question of who actually is ruling America and called them the power elite. He further added that power elite are the politically, militarily and or economically dominant group of people, and that the Power Elite are going to make the decisions in order to protect their own power even when those decisions are not good for everyone in the society. Talking about the fate of a common man in the modern American society Mills writes:

'Great changes' are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own, but from every side, such changes now press upon the men and women of the mass society, who accordingly feel that they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power.

Hence, Mills’ answer to the question was that a class of military, business, and political leaders, driven by mutual interests, were the real leaders of the state. They were the real power elite and they were effectively doing their work protecting their self-interests beyond the control of democracy and regardless the interest of the society.

Keeping into consideration the concept of power elite while looking at Heller’s *Catch-22*, one can with ease observe the operating of power elite. Mills’ view of “the interlocking bureaucracies of industry, the administration, and the military, as new centres of power” is something which is duplicated in the major works of Heller. But the question remains is that even though this group of people are politically, economically, or militarily dominant, making decisions to safeguard their power regardless to whether or not those decisions are good for the country and its people, but have they actually managed to efface an individual’s identity and strip him of all control over his own life. And whether an individual is nothing but really a part of this “faceless multitude,” docile and devoid of any sense of self or has Heller through his satire kept a possibility of some sort of resistance and protest which will allow an individual to achieve freedom by negotiating its position in that setup.

Considered as one of the greatest works of the twentieth century, *Catch-22* is primarily a historical novel, based on Heller’s experiences as a bombardier with the 12th Air Force in the Mediterranean in World War II. The novel having a distinctive non-chronological style, presents Yossarian, a U.S. Air Force B-25 bombardier and a number of other characters, on the island of Pianosa, in the Mediterranean Sea, west of Italy. Though several themes flow with one another in the novel, of which the most conspicuous theme is that of a powerful military-industrial complex subjugating an individual and stripping him off his identity and making him just a part of the faceless multitude, *Catch-22* can be seen as essentially a protest novel set against “the interlocking bureaucracies of industry, the Administration, and the military, as the new centres of

power....," which being an air bomber himself in World War II, Heller had closely watched and stringently censured in his work. As the novel ridicules and exposes a "malevolent, mechanical and incompetent world" that contains within it the "humbug, hypocrisy, and sheer stupidity" of the American mass society," it also becomes a profound study of human victimhood. Absurdity at various levels of life reveals not only the inherent victimization but also its different dimensions. Behind the façade of absurdity, black humor and satire there is a pathetic image of the victim. Right below the boisterous laughter there is a deep pathos of human suffering since all comedy camouflages human tragedy. Joseph Heller calls his hero "the nice guy victimized". The comic art of Heller is full of human victimization and laughter in him becomes 'a prologue for some grotesque revelation'. All laughter presupposes a victim. When asked to comment on the humor of his work, Heller said:

I tried very hard in *Catch-22* to take out anything that would only be of a humorous nature, that didn't contribute to the feeling of absurdity... I don't want to be humourist. Humor in *Catch-22* was not the end but the means to an end.

*Catch-22* gives us a powerful rendering of the horrified sense of what mindless authorities are prepared to do to the individual in order to achieve their ends, assert their authority, and justify their system. David Seed states that "in a novel where individuality is constantly under threat from the administration, it is not surprising that it avoids a realistic depiction of character."

Heller's picture of the American armed forces is well grounded and he explicates the psychological state and internal motivations of members from many ranks and position. Resonating Mills' theory of elite power over the clueless masses, Heller fleshes out the inner-workings of the socio-political machine that drives warfare. Throughout the book one can observe the spread of misinformation and deceit from every angle and catch a glimpse of the forces at work behind every mandate and restriction. This helps the reader to understand the perspective of both Colonel Cathcart, who continually raises the required number of missions in order to get promoted, the perspective of Yossarian, who like many of his war mates are left with no choice but to put their lives in danger. As Mills notes:

... it is the consideration and the chances of laurels, which they acquire by the service. 'The soldier compares himself with his fellows, and contends for promotion to be a Corporal: the Corporals vie with each other to be Sergeants: the Sergeants will mount breaches to be Ensigns: and thus every man in an army is constantly aspiring to be something higher, as every citizen in the commonwealth is constantly struggling for a better rank, that he may draw the observation of more eyes.

One sees Heller projecting a similar situating through the character of Cathcart and many others like him. Colonel Cathcart represents a group of those inhumane and selfish officers, who can do anything to achieve their selfish motives: "Colonel Cathcart wanted to be a general so desperately he was willing to try anything, even religion." Cathcart evaluates himself in terms of "feathers in his cap" and "black eyes" – "Colonel Cathcart lived by his wits in an unstable, arithmetic world of black eyes and feathers in his cap, of overwhelming imaginary triumphs and catastrophic imaginary defeats. He oscillated hourly between anguish and exhilarating, multiplying fantastically the grandeur of his victories and exaggerating tragically the seriousness of his defeats." He focuses on surface details such as the number of missions that a man flies, rather than the success of those missions or the lives of the men flying them, hence ignoring the big picture.

Being one among the elite running and dictating the military setup of Pianosa, Cathcart subordinates the interests of others to the satiation of his own egoistic dream of climbing up in the military hierarchy and of being immortalized by the media. To get his picture published in *The Saturday Evening Post* he can stoop to any level – "here's a picture of a colonel in *The Saturday Evening Post* whose chaplain conducts prayers before each mission. If the prayers work for them, they should work for us. May be if we say prayers, they'll put my picture in *The Saturday Evening Post*." Through Colonel Cathcart's character Heller aims to portray someone who is a part of very top stratum of the military and who makes decisions only to safeguard his own power regardless to whether or not those decisions are good for the common and clueless soldiers working under him. In Heller's world the life of one man amounts to a generalized symbol of status for another.

The chain of command in *Catch-22* is the labyrinthine bureaucracy whose twists and turns are determined by self-serving pseudo-logic. This is most apparent in the principle from which the book is named –

*Catch-22*. *Catch-22* is first brought up when Yossarian pleads with Doc Daneeka to be grounded for insanity. Doc tells him that even though he claims to be insane, he can't still ground him because of *Catch-22*: "Can't you ground someone who's crazy?" "Oh, sure. I have to. There's a rule saying I have to ground anyone who's crazy." "Then why don't you ground me? I'm crazy." Because Yossarian asks to be grounded, he is not obviously insane, and, therefore, can't be grounded: "Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy." So the principle proved Yossarian to be completely sane even though he claimed to be insane. In fact, this *Catch-22* situation had become a symbol of total breakdown of normal human relations and the existence and practice of self-aggrandizement and individual monomania. The catch appears throughout the novel, sometimes named and sometimes not, as the driving force behind every selfish or illogical decision or mandate. It is an instrument for those in power, for those elite few, which amounts to "might makes right", employing seemingly logical abstractions to direct common people into concrete danger and even death.

The characters like Kraft, Halfboat, Flume, Hungry Joe presented by Heller signify a group of naive masses who are being gulled by a powerful few running the system just to meet their own ends. They are all victims of a cruel death. Heller presents the *Catch-22* logic as a profound and potential source of victimization. Snowden's death in the novel has great moral and psychological implications. The very movement and direction of the novel is largely dependent on the horrible death of Snowden. It has a very profound and lasting effect on the mind and mood of the characters. Its grim spectacle keeps recurring. It is revealing to note that the death of Snowden is narrated four times in the novel which magnifies the audacity of the fact that a common soldier is nothing more than a part of a "faceless multitude" whose identity or even his right to live is being taken away from him.

*Catch-22* gives us a powerful rendering of the horrified sense of what the authorities are prepared to do to the individual in order to achieve their ends, assert their authority, and justify their system. As Mills has stated, "the generals and admirals—those uneasy cousins within the American elite have gained and have been given increased power to make and to influence decisions of the gravest consequence." Seed states that "in a novel where individuality is constantly under threat from the administration, it is not surprising that it avoids a realistic depiction of character."

In the highly bureaucratized set up of *Catch-22* "'Identity' is a matter of papers rather than flesh and blood, where people may pointlessly die to satisfy the authorities' desire for a meaningless pattern" (Tanner 73). Yossarian, whose life, like all others is insignificant in the eyes of authority, is constantly harassed by the fear of death. In such a situation, the central conflict is, of course, Yossarian's struggle to survive the war either by flying the required number of missions, or by getting himself removed from combat status. In each purpose he finds himself constantly blocked: "but Twenty-seventh Air Force says I can go home. And regulations do say you have to obey every order. That's a catch. Even if the colonel were disobeying a Twenty-seventh Air Force order by making you fly more missions, you'd still have to fly them, or you'd be guilty of disobeying an order of his." The authority is just toying with the very freedom and life of the people under it. Colonel Cathcart keeps raising the required number of flying missions and the military system functions by illogical and unjustified commands and principles of *Catch-22* which "empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever it suits their cruel whims..." For Yossarian, just like for all others, the war keeps prolonging.

The world of *Catch-22* puts a big question mark on the idea of identity, choice and freedom of common soldiers, which are being subdued by the authority in hands of a few. This world is, to Yossarian, a spurious culture, one which does not meet the basic needs of its members – above all, the need to survive. Authority, duty, and patriotism are all called into question, and Heller demonstrates that when those in authority lack respect for life, as in the case with Yossarian's commanding officers, obeying authority can only be self-defeating. Heller thus argues that in such an authoritarian system where even one's right to live is being taken away and where "Big Brother's Watch" as in Orwell's 1984, is a sinister code that determines every official move in the squadron and eliminates all chances of individual freedom, the individual must take his right of survival and freedom back.

Heller's account of World War II gives a picture of a world where bureaucracy and capitalism go hand in hand in setting up an authoritative and exploitative environment stripping a person of his individuality. In the words of Mills, the a few power elite in the upper circles of military, making the decisions and controlling

the lives of masses "have assumed positions of decisive political and economic relevance, and how, in doing so, they have found many points of coinciding interests with the corporate rich and the political directorate of the visible government." This picture is symbolized by the characters like Milo Minderbender. Milo begins his career as a mess officer and rapidly acquires power and prestige with a black-market syndicate. His syndicate seems to rely on absurd schemes, such as selling eggs in Malta for 3B, buying them back for 7B, and selling them again for 5B. Milo employs instrumental reason to exploit the bureaucracy, convincing people on both sides of the war to participate in his racket by appealing to their desires.

Milo exploits war for profit by trafficking various goods from obscure regions all over the world through a well-connected network of powerful army personnel. He tries to achieve his ends by any means whether legal or illegal, and then he gives his own reasons to cover his foul acts: "Bribery is against the law, and you know it. But it's not against the law to make profit, is it? So it can't be against the law for me to bribe someone in order to make a fair profit, can it? No, of course not." Capitalism and globalism are two essential elements in America's post war expansion and global business model. Milo operates as a symbol of the capitalist spirit, unrestricted expansion and global growth with one object in mind- profit. Milo reduces human life to potential profits and losses, just as Cathcart reduces to feathers and black eyes.

Reducing the common soldiers to nothing but "faceless multitude," devoid of any right to make personal choices, as is mentioned by Mills in his *The Power Elite*, Heller paints a stark picture of warfare and modern America, in which people are nothing more than faceless masses and mere tools for profit or prestige and life is reduced to a figure or a statistic. His depiction shows the fallacy of the traditional war narrative. In Heller's view, neither war nor capitalism is driven by strong ethical purpose. Their perpetuators are short-sighted and selfish people who manipulate reality and endanger lives while mitigating their responsibility and rationalizing their actions. The bureaucracy is a machine of injustice and exploitation, ungrounded and unreasonable, consuming people and things in order to achieve the short-term goals of those guiding it.

When Yossarian decides that he has done his part to defeat Nazis, his principal duty is to save himself. Yossarian's dissertation, then, is an act of affirming not only his survival but also his identity: "Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger anymore, but I am." With his departure to Sweden, Yossarian escapes Catch-22 and all the absurdities it stands for. His departure is the concrete representation of his spiritual renewal, "I'm not running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life." By doing so Yossarian ceases to be a pawn of the elite run military system and transcends his victimhood and the meaningless relations with other people as well. In making Yossarian desert the war, Heller suggests that the assertion of freedom makes credible and authentic one's rebellion against an unjust and corrupt authoritarian system. The ethical strength of Yossarian lies in his Christian ethic of Universal benevolence exemplified by his life in Sweden: "Yossarian's rebellion is not a carefully considered moral repudiation of this world, but the fundamental human cry that people do not want to live like this- a gesture which though not directly moral in itself, makes a criticism of life by its implications."

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