

Joyce's "Araby": Love and Disillusionment

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Abstract: *James Joyce's short story "Araby" depicts an adolescent boy's disillusionment- disillusionment with love and reality. Brought up in dreary and dismal surroundings of Dublin with his uncle and aunt in an uninhabited house in restrictive catholic cultures, the boy seems to be lonely and repressed throughout the story. He pines for the relish of romance and love. But in the joyless and loveless daily lives of Dubliners, nowhere in his environment does he find an outlet for his feelings. All of a sudden, he finds a beautiful girl, Mangan's sister, into his dark world and the very girl is the light in his romantic fantasy, someone who will lift him out of darkness, he thinks. In his mind, she is both a saint to be worshipped and a woman to be desired. The boy, however, wishes to win her over by promising to bring her a gift from an oriental bazaar, Araby, which, to his young heart, is also an embodiment of ideal beauty and romantic grandeur. As the boy grows up, this bazaar gets emblematic for the intricacy and complexity of the adult world where the boy fails to navigate. He experiences a shattering epiphany at the end of the story. His childish fantasies are smashed by the bleak realities in Dublin and ultimately he develops a new viewpoint on life. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to show how a young boy is disillusioned with love and reality.*

Keywords: *Araby, Adolescence, Boy, Disillusionment, Epiphany, Love, Mangan's Sister, Reality*

INTRODUCTION

James Augustine Aloysius 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 psychological condition of an unnamed adolescent while in quest for ideal beauty, love and romance in the dull and deadly surroundings of the Dublin city, illuminating the subconscious mind where dreams and desires lie latent. The boy is the protagonist of the story. To represent his mental state, 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 he is growing up symbolise the disappointment that the boy is going to face. This gloomy atmosphere narrows down the boy's world and confines his spirit. Although the young boy cannot apprehend it intellectually, he feels it and so he seeks 'light' and romance everywhere. By this time he comes across an attractive girl, the sister of his friend Mangan, who is also unnamed like him and obviously somewhat older than he and it is she who becomes an image to him of all that he craves for. But when he proceeds in his quest for love, he comes into conflict with conservative and inflexible cultures which have little tolerance for idealism and romance. So he is, he says, 'confused' of both sacred and physical love. However, going to Araby after eager waiting for it from where he desires to buy his dream girl a nice gift, the boy agonisingly discovers that Araby is not the place at all what he expected it to be. His dreams crumble in the face of harsh reality. He cannot buy anything. He gets utterly disappointed and disillusioned. Therefore "Araby", it can be said, is a story of love and disillusionment.

The story begins with a disappointing description of the North Richmond Street. It is a 'blind' and 'quiet' street. Its grim silence is broken by the shouts of the boys of the Christian Brothers' School only after school hours. At the blind end of the street, there is a deserted house of two stories filled with 'cold empty gloomy rooms' formerly inhabited by a priest. It is detached from its neighbouring houses. In this house, the boy lives. The back room of the 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. The other houses of the street stand quietly with their brown and silent exteriors in spite of affluence inside. In this description, Joyce links decency and a stifled life together. There are other frustrating descriptions also. 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 cannot give them much pleasure because of biting cold. They are used to playing 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. However, the use of irony and symbolic images in the description of the setting where the boy lives shows the boy to be sensitive to the values of the society. 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 suffocate the boy.

Brought up in such an environment, the boy always remains mentally upset. While playing with his friends, he can see Mangan's sister when she comes at the doorstep of the house to call Mangan to his tea. He develops an intense interest in the girl. Sometimes he worships the girl from religious point of view, sometimes he is attracted by her figure and posture. On seeing her on the railing outside the 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"¹. "This vision of beauty only intensifies his already feverish passion for the girl."² He keeps on thinking about her all the time. He actually wants to be around her. But he cannot really get close to her or get to know her. Even he cannot express his love to her. Hence, he watches her from a distance without saying anything. In every possible way, he also tries to have a glimpse of her. Every morning at school time, the boy lies on the floor in the front room of his house peering 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. As soon as she comes out of the house, he takes his books, rushes out and not daring to speak, he follows her quietly not letting her know. 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.³

He does these same actions morning after morning although the girl is unaware of his liking. She does not pay any special attention to him. 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'⁴ and 'foolish blood' refers to an ardent desire to possess the woman sexually. Moreover, the boy is so infatuated with the girl that her image accompanies him wherever he goes, "even in places the most hostile to romance"⁵. 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."⁶ 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."⁷ Again due to the religious indoctrination, he struggles with culpability on account of feelings of natural sexual arousal for her. The 'confused adoration' and the guilt that it generates are both products of the 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.⁸

The boy, shortly thereafter, again expresses his sensual desire for the girl: "my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires."⁹ Again on one rainy evening, the boy in a fit of romantic yearning secludes himself in a soundless, dark drawing-room and gives his feelings for her full release. This emotion of love finds an enchanting expression when he utters:

"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."¹⁰

At last one day, surprisingly, Mangan's sister speaks to the boy. He is very thrilled, and his romantic mind is stirred to the depth. Really, when the girl, although 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. Then the boy splendidly 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."¹¹

The girl again dolefully tells him that she wishes she could go to Araby bazaar but cannot, 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."¹² This image "the white curve of her neck" is, undoubtedly, sensual. Then, so obsessed with the girl, the boy impulsively speaks: "If I go I will bring you something."¹³ Actually they do not 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. To him his subjective feeling of love is the only reality. All the other things have no importance to him. Now going to Araby becomes his business. He takes permission to go to Araby on Saturday. He can go to Araby-his soul 'luxuriates' in the very syllables of the mystically magic name. Araby, with its mysterious eastern name, becomes as unfamiliar and alluring to the boy as Mangan's sister. It too fulfils his need for romance, and he idealises it as he idealises the girl. 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 appointed day Saturday. The boy wishes to annihilate these tedious intervening days. He is anxiously and impatiently waiting for 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. So passionate in love, the boy can only see her image. In this situation, the boy 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."¹⁴

The young boy miserably has to encounter so many difficulties and troubles on his way. He does not get any support from the adults 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."¹⁵ 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 because he cannot go to Araby for these works. He remains so absorbed in his thoughts that he cannot concentrate on his studies. Any serious work of life seems to him 'ugly monotonous child's play'¹⁶.

Much-awaited Saturday at last comes. But possibly, nature does not conform to his mission. The boy's ecstasy turns so easily to frustration and doubt. On 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 spending money for the bazaar, he

feel the boy's frustration mounting. He wants to go at once. Nevertheless, he has to wait the whole day. He is so caught up at this point in internal fancies and passions, and so excited about the bazaar that everything seems to be repulsive to him. Yet he has to go to school. He sits staring at the clock. When its ticking begins to irritate him, he goes upstairs leaving the room. He is so impatient that he feels irritating to talk to Mrs. Mercer who has come to see his uncle. He is feeling cold and gloomy. He goes from one room to another singing. Really, 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"¹⁷. 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"¹⁸, 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. The desertedness of the train, its delay, and slowness all symbolise gloom and a kind of disappointment that the boy is going to face. 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. He enters the bazaar by handling a shilling to a weary looking man.

But very much to his surprise and shock, the boy is disillusioned and dismayed by the appearance of the bazaar when he finally does arrive there too late. He is haunted by dullness, darkness and mechanical activities of the real Araby which contradicts his oriental and exotic fantasy about the ideal Araby he creates mentally. Going to Araby, he observes that "Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness"¹⁹. The boy "finds Araby much like North Richmond Street, empty and dark with few people."²⁰ Again, he is struck by "a silence like that which pervades a church after a service"²¹. "In that dark silence the boundaries of his small, private world of the imagination dissolve."²² 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 does not find anything romantic there. 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. The sexual atmosphere of their exchange confuses him. 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 the girl 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. 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"²³ 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."²⁴ But, the 'quest' is not fruitless in a sense, because it results in an inner awareness and a first step into manhood. 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"²⁵. Then he is sad and dejected.

CONCLUSION

Viewed from the above critical analysis, it can be said that the story "Araby" culminates with the adolescent protagonist experiencing disillusionment and frustration. The Araby, like a silent assassin, devours his all fancies and yearnings. His pursuit of ideal beauty, love and romance is thwarted at the end of the story. Of course, disillusionment ultimately brings him realisation and maturation. Thus the

boy achieves an internal transformation, an objective perspective and maturing insights into reality. Facing harsh reality in Araby, he realises that life is not what he dreamt it to be. 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 correspond to the values of Dublin. Knowledge acquired from disillusionment prepares him for his life as an adult in early twentieth century Dublin. Above all, Araby "is not just a romantic disillusionment and frustration that the story renders, it is more of a philosophical one where the problematic borderline between illusion and reality is at stake"²⁶.

END NOTES

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