

Disappointment and Identity Upheaval in *the Sun also Rises*

Tajinder Singh*

Assistant Professor, English, Sanatan Dharma College, Ambala Cantt

Abstract – No American writer is more associated with writing about war in the early 20th century than Ernest Hemingway. He experienced it firsthand, wrote dispatches from innumerable frontlines, and used war as a backdrop for many of his most memorable works. During the First World War, Ernest Hemingway volunteered to serve in Italy as an ambulance driver with the American Red Cross. His war experience had changed him dramatically.

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Hemingway was a firm believer in writer's honesty in writing about things he has personally experienced, conveying in his work his own vision of life. The American author struggles to produce texts that truly reproduce his own experience, his own feelings in the reader and as a consequence, there is inadequacy in spite of the transformation undergone by the reality when rendered into the narrative. "Hemingway depicts a cruel, unbearable society which tempted man to forget his responsibilities, but he also showed that there were people in the society who could endure the unendurable and remain true to their moral tenets"¹.

Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, published in 1926 is one of his best novels. The novel is widely regarded as the conclusive version of the span that followed World War I. *The Sun Also Rises* tells the story of a group of expatriates entangled in postwar disillusionment and despair. The story revolves around the narrator, Jake Barnes and his love, Lady Brett Ashley, with whom he is unable to sustain a romantic relationship due to a war injury that has left him impotent. W.M. Frohock says that "Jake's physical disability is in large part a symbol for the general feeling of frustration and pointlessness of life"².

It delineates and celebrates the empty iconoclasm of the lost generation. It provides a peep into the life of anxious American expatriates settled in Paris in the early 20s, and below the surface runs yet another pursuit, that is, pursuit for meaning to relationships. The temper of emotional desolation dominates the whole novel. According to David Savola, the novel ultimately celebrates the relationship between human kind and natural world. In support of his view he says, "*The Sun Also Rises* is profoundly concerned with ecological considerations, as the passage of Ecclesiastes echoed in its title. The novel presents the main characters as aimless, displaced persons

without a secure sense of meaning or value and suggests that the characters could find that meaning and value in cultivating a more intimate connection with the natural environment. The novel criticizes conventional depiction of nature and calls for a literature that offers a more complex picture of the connection between humanity and the natural world"³.

Hemingway's works are reflections of the society. His storylines, characters, dialogues, everything reflects the society of twenties. While his contemporaries visualize women only as demigoddesses or coquettes, Hemingway as a true feminist, portrays his woman as human beings, striding through the same traumas and crisis as men and as emerging equally heroic, if not more, with them. Critics of Hemingway easily ignore the importance of his female characters. Brett Ashley has been at core of many critical expounding for decades. She has been put aside with devastating descriptions.

The nineteen twenties can be neatly described as a period of illusion between two severe political realities—the end of the First World War, which spoiled tolerant idealism and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which disgraced the entire social and political aura of the Jazz age. It was an era of disoriented psyche, novel-manners, self styled fashions, the search of new tastes, a search for personal identity.

In most of the countries in the West but especially in the United States, the nineteen twenties was a period of aggressive style in life: an era of novel manners, a commitment to a transitional authentic sense of fashion. That was a period of psychological experimentalism and new styles of personality. There was a criticism of the pre-war generation and of the civilization it had made: it

was a failure of communication, of social meaning and values and of morality. These failures were of crucial nature because they touched closely the dominating emotional and aesthetic needs of the younger generation which were not caused by the war but were revealed by the events of the war.

This decade was marked by the contempt for traditions and an eager wish to try out any suggestions regarding the behaviour of man. The 1920s was marked as a period of radical substitutions in morals and manners. Its stress was on disillusionment on the socio-political level mixed with visions of success on the personal level. The twenties saw the supremacy of youth and feminist freedom 20s marked an exhibition of a big chunk of the emerging literary generation expatriating itself to Paris. The centre of their writings was America. They developed a thinking that America is a inconstant society, but accepted it as a swiftly changing one and their reactions to the change were not always those of cries, but rather of desire to reconvert some of the American past into valuable treasure. They shared the confusions of the American society—its attachments to the past, its speedy rush to the future. Inevitable change was seen as new advances in technology, new social theories and two brutal World Wars which changed the image of the world forever. 20th century American literature did not reflect the romantic and spiritual world of the past for the harsh realities of modern society. The modernist writers focused on writing about real human fears, emotions and desires. First World War has created produced writers of American literature who profusely wrote on war and its destructiveness.

Fitzgerald and Hemingway have presented the most pungent literary version of the America in 20s. The common experience they shared in the First World War was of deep disillusion. The ethical and moral values seemed hollow and at the lowest. The war and experience in Europe had equipped the young Americans with new maturity and a broader outlook. As they had been freed from their suffocating home atmosphere and were armed with their European experiences, the literature produced by them was more soulful and significant. They could see American habits and outlooks objectively and so write about them honestly.

Hemingway has presented the temper and true colours of 20s through his writings. The writer of nineteen twenties who truly depicts the strain and crisis of the times is surely Ernest Hemingway, who in *The Sun Also Rises* brilliantly portrays the post war tensions, pressures and situations. The novel is a dramatization of the psychological, emotional and spiritual isolation of the post war generation. Hemingway has presented in this novel the post war realities of separation and obscurity in human relationships, emotional coldness and spiritual death with great clarity and intensity. He reveals that his generation has “lost its guiding purpose and has

been driven by time, fate or nerves into the feverish atmosphere of strained passion”⁴. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway has been mainly pre-occupied with showing the after-effects of war on those who have experienced war and the pain and suffering inflicted by it. As a realist Hemingway has brought out the obscurity of values, the oblivion, the hollowness and frustration of his contemporary world. The novel not only depicts the isolation of lost generation but also proposes a way out of this atmosphere of spiritual barrenness and moral confusion. He shows the positive key of life also which revolves around humane values such as love, sympathy, a sense of human harmony, empathy and commitment, to the values of friendship.

The war served as a presiding background of all Hemingway’s fiction in the 1920s. Hemingway’s position as an apprentice writer surrounded by women probably explains the important challenge posed to him by feminists. His response to the bohemian and sexually permissive environment that the feminist movement induced was ambivalent. Turning away from the sexual anarchy of the times, Hemingway adopted a kind of philosophical primitivism.

The main spirit of twenties was marked by a general feeling of disruption related with modernity and a break from traditions. In 1920s, through 19th amendment, women got the right to vote, attaining the political equality, they had so long been fighting for. The 1920s saw significant changes in the lives of women, as a generational gap began to form between the new woman of 1920s and the old traditional generation.

The Sun Also Rises not only exemplifies the themes common in modern American literature but it also presents Hemingway’s personal belief system through complex characters. The characters in the novel are urban cosmopolitans, freed from their economic and moral roots and to explore the pleasures of time, the consumption of new styles in sexual relationship. One such character is Lady Brett Ashley. Brett is one of Hemingway’s richest female characters; her personality gradually emerges as an intriguing blend of femininity and masculinity, strength and vulnerability, morality and dissolution. She stands out as one of Hemingway’s most developed female character. In the novel Brett enjoys a unique position of power. Brett Ashley exemplifies the modern woman in her struggle for a post Victorian identity. Viewed from the perspective of American literary history, Brett Ashley is a dramatically new character who is radical like those new woman figures, who, were emerging in the twenties. Michael S. Reynolds associates her with the “new women of the period (post-war era) who had been sexually liberated and who came of the age with the movie sex symbol woman of

the first Freudian generation for whom it was mandatory to discuss sexuality openly".⁵

Though Hemingway nowhere commits himself to the question of social suffrage of women and he does not assign them a separate limited sphere but rather makes them participants in the same questions with which men are engaged regarding the meaning of life, such as sexual liberty and war, speaks volumes for his support to the woman's cause. He puts women on the plane where they duly share with men the quest of the human spirit for the meaning of life, where in fact the gender differences cease to exist.

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Corresponding Author

Tajinder Singh*

Assistant Professor, English, Sanatan Dharma College, Ambala Cantt

tejibrar24@gmail.com