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The Aesthetics of Ayn Rand's Novels

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Ayn Rand (1905-1982), the Russia-born, American novelist-philosopher, belongs to a category of her own in that she has exercised her craft with utmost care and clarity of goal. Her novels, as artistic products, proclaim her clarity about the nature and requirements of art and its importance to man. It took time for the world to understand the merits of her works and appreciate them because of the deeply entrenched feudalistic attitudes. Even after science has made deep inroads in the lives of men, the attitudes are slow to change. Rand had to face neglect, rejection and the hostile criticism because the rational outlook is hard to take root. As the human society evolves and acquires more of the scientific, industrialist and capitalist ethos, Rand's views of art and philosophy are increasingly understood and appreciated. This paper looks at Rand's concept of art, aesthetics and philosophy, and how she has consistently explicated them in her novels. Ayn Rand left Soviet Russia and went to the USA in 1926. She had seen the Russia before the Bolshevik revolution and after the revolution. When she understood that it was not possible for men to lead a rational and individualistic life of freedom under the Bolshevik dictatorship, she went to the USA where she settled permanently.

Ayn Rand holds that art is very important to man because it is "inextricably tied to man's survival- not to his physical survival, but that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survival of his consciousness" (The Psycho 17). Art gives the essentials of metaphysics in concrete forms which appeal to man at the perceptual level and get absorbed easily. As "man's metaphysical value judgments are involved in every moment of his life", man needs an integrated view of life-a philosophy of life. It is the arts that provide him the easy tools to construct a 'view of life'. Abstract philosophical concepts, moral and ethical values are too vague for many to understand, and take help from them in framing their world-view. Arts give them the models-the examples of the philosophical tenets- from which men understand the metaphysics of their place in the universe, and decide their course of action. For this, the artist has to have a clear idea of his own view of life so that he can present it for the world to see. Any work of art is bound to have a message in relation to the artist's world-view. The artist's purpose is to present his view in a work of art just for the pleasure expressing it. His purpose is not didactic but the pleasure of creation. According to Rand, the didactic element in a work of art is only a by-product. For the reader of a work of art, the mere contemplation of the work in itself is a reward, as he is able to enter the realm of the writer's thoughts which have the power to influence his outlook in some way or other. To achieve this effect in his work, the writer or artist has to go for value-selection-selection of the relevant things and incidents and characters. Rand defines art thus: "*Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgments*" (ibid 19).

As an ardent advocate of individualism, Rand, while in Russia during the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, understood that the Soviet experiment in collectivism was doomed to fail. The government brought the peasants and workers together in the collectives and trade unions thinking that the goal of universal prosperity would inspire them to work hard. When

individual's welfare and rights are neglected and trampled upon, no individual will be inspired to work for others. There is nothing wrong in that since man is basically wired to seek happiness. No normal man will be ready to suffer for the happiness of somebody else. Charity, first of all, should begin at home. Rand's first novel, *We the Living* (1936), is about man's plight in a dictatorial state. Its basic theme is the sanctity—"the supreme value of human life". The heroine, Kira, a slightly veiled portrayal of Rand herself, tells her friend, admirer and an influential Communist Party cadre-Andrei Taganov- that she does not like his party's principles and that it is doomed to fail. When he asks her the reason, she says that in spite of all the lofty ideals of creating a heaven on earth, the party will fail and change the heaven into a despicable hell by its single claim that "man must live for the state." She further asks him, "Don't you know ... there are things, in the best of us, which no outside hand should dare to touch? Thing sacred because, and only because, one can say: 'This is mine?' Don't you know that we live only for ourselves, the best of us do, those who are worthy of it?" (82). Rand's diagnosis of the Soviet problem and the portrayal of it in the novel were not readily accepted. The novel, completed in 1932, was rejected by many publishers in the USA on the ground that it presented a very grim picture of the Soviet Union. It was finally published by Macmillan in 1936. It took some more decades for the world to witness that what Rand had said about Russia in the novel was true and that her prediction about communism was also prophetic when the Soviet Union disintegrated. It is her philosophy that enabled her to foresee the final outcome of the Soviet dictatorship. Suffering and pain are not the natural conditions for man; work and happiness are his natural attributes. When a state tramples upon the natural leanings of men for freedom and happiness, there can be no progress in any field. On many occasions Rand has said that though the background of the novel is Soviet Russia, the conditions described in the novel are applicable to any kind of dictatorial country.

Rand advocates egoism, individuality and rationality as a novelist as well as a philosopher. She says that man is endowed with reason-the tool of survival. If he acts rationally, man can survive and prosper; otherwise, he is bound to suffer. By advocating reason as the guiding principle of man, she advocates the natural corollaries of reason-ego, individuality, rational self-interest, freedom and self-dependence. For man to be a man, he should act on the basis of reason, and the emotions should be guided by reason. The heroes and heroines of her novels possess these qualities, and they are, understandably, non-believers in a supernatural power. The popular conception that ego is evil is passionately opposed by Rand in all her novels. It is the preaching of the ancient 'witch-doctors' and the 'Attila-type' dictators to keep men under their control. In her second fictional work '*Anthem*', a novella, Rand presents a dystopian state where men are numbered and governed by a collective. At the age of fifteen, all are allotted work and they live as different groups doing the allotted work. Their language lacks these words: 'I', 'My', 'Mine' and 'Ego'. In place of 'I', they use 'We'; and in place of 'My', 'Our'. This is an ingenious way of the government that was established after the Great Revolution. This is once again an attack on the Soviet Union and other dictatorial countries that try to belittle human beings. The slow and continuous propaganda that 'individual is nothing, and the state is everything' aims at dehumanizing men and making them semi-automatons. This method of eradicating ego from men is more subtle than the method of physical torture used by the Big Brother's government in George Orwell's '*1984*'. It is preposterous to state that man exists for the sake of state, and not vice-versa. But the state inculcates the feeling of the supremacy of the state by making the people recite the prayer every night: "We are nothing. Mankind is all. By the grace of our brothers we are allowed our lives. We exist through, by and for our brothers who are the state."

Amen” (*Anthem* 16). It is only when the hero and his beloved reach an abandoned mansion in the unchartered forest, they come to know from the books of the past what words were missing in their vocabulary: ‘I’, ‘My’, ‘Mine’, and ‘Ego’. The hero, Equality 7-2521, understands the meaning and power of these words and decides to make the word “EGO” his standard.

In the novel *The Fountainhead* (1946), Rand exemplifies self-sufficient ego in the character of Howard Roark. The ego, individualism and the self-interest that Rand advocates are not the same qualities that are conventionally represented by these words and practiced by the bullies, dictators and megalomaniacs. Howard Roark is dismissed from the University for not following the guidelines of his tutor in designing a building as an assignment. He designs as what he thinks to be proper. He gets some orders and builds some buildings that stand unique, heralding his individuality. When he does not get work, he goes to a stone quarry and works as a stone-cutter. Those who like his work search for him. He does not enter the competitions in designing buildings. But, Peter Keating, who graduates as the best student from the same institute, is always doubtful of his plans and asks Roark to correct his designs. The Wynand group news papers neglect Roark, and then give hostile remarks about his works. Roark is unperturbed by all these. He knows his ability, and he does not need others’ approval of it. He lives in himself. He has a self –sufficient ego that does not need other’s approval. When Gail Wynand, the newspaper- baron, wants Roark to build his house, he agrees to do it, for he was not disturbed by what the Wynand papers did to him. It is in Roark that Gail Wynand finds an impossible man- a man of unperturbed ego, and a prime mover. Roark is a rarity among the thronging millions of second-handers who seek their values in others. While Gail succeeds in breaking men known for their individuality, it becomes impossible with Roark, because it is not a pose assumed by Roark, but his innate nature. Roark tells Gail the problem that afflicts most men: “In the realm of greatest importance-the realm of values, of judgment, of spirit, of thought-they place others above self, in the exact manner which altruism demands. A truly selfish man cannot be affected by the approval of others. He does not need it” (605-6). Gail, who wields power by shaping public opinion through his papers, is unable to support Roark when he wants. The public opinion goes against Gail. Roark destroys a housing project building of the government. It is originally designed by him, because Keating wants to present it as his design. Roark does the design for cheap housing, but on the condition that Keating should construct it as it is planned by Roark, and he would not take any money for it nor he would disclose the truth behind the designing. He warns that if any changes were made, the consequences would be disastrous for both of them. But in the course of construction, some changes are made. Therefore, Roark destroys it with dynamite. In the court he defends his action saying that he designed the building for the payment that it should be constructed as it was planned by him. Since the payment is denied to him, he destroyed it as it is a monstrous distortion of his plan. The jury finds him not guilty. Peter Keating, who gets worldly success in the building trade, and in marrying the beautiful, intelligent and rich Dominique Francon, never enjoys the confidence, peace and happiness enjoyed by Roark. It is because he seeks value from others while he lacks it himself. Roark has the values in him, and he is not bothered about what others think of him. Even when Dominique, the lady he loves, marries Keating and then Wynand, he is not worried. When she offers to marry him and look after him, he rejects her offer. He tells her that she should not make the decision for the sake of his happiness. In the end she comes to him for that will be the only thing that will make her happy and he accepts her. The wrong kind of egoism and selfishness of Keating hurt him. The self-sufficient ego of Roark makes him an ideal man.

Rand's Novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1956) answers a hypothetical question, "What will happen if the prime-movers of the world go on a strike?" The novel presents the USA where all the leading industrialists, unable to withstand the governmental interference, leave their industries and disappear. Consequently production of all essential goods fall and scarcity of goods increases by the day. The process is started by John Galt, an engineer who develops a motor capable of functioning using the atmospheric electricity. He works in a Motor Company that comes up with a strange mode of rewarding the workers. The managers decide with the approval of the majority of the employees that each would work according to his ability, and each would get payment according to his need. The company, without knowing, or naming it, puts the communist principle into action. Consequently, the skilled workers lose interest in work, and the parasites present a list of pressing needs and get more as payment. John Galt challenges the management and walks out during a meeting saying that he will stop the motor of the world. It is he who makes the industrialists and other eminent persons realize how they are unjustly exploited by the state and society. The exploitation continues on the hope that they will not let go their passion for their work and industry. He convinces them to leave their work. They leave their industries and settle in Galt's Gulch, a secure valley tucked among the mountains. Dagny, the Vice President of Taggart Railways, puts up a new line to the industrial area with the new Rearden metal, and names it John Galt Line. She is apprehensive that the same evil that has swallowed other industrialists may come to her and Rearden. When she goes to inspect the railway, she is abducted to Galt's Gulch by Galt himself. She meets all the luminaries leading a very happy life devoid of any form of altruism. As things get worse in the country, the persons in charge of the government appeal to the strikers to come and make compromise with the government. They even arrest Galt and physically harm him. But they are unable to subdue him. When the head of the state is about to address the state, it is Galt's speech that is broadcast through the radio. Galt explains why he and his sort of men went on strike. Galt in his speech reminds the people that man's existence is based on the use of his mind-reason. He says:

A morality that dares to tell you to find happiness in the renunciation of happiness-to value the failure of your values-is an insolent negation of morality. A doctrine that gives you, as an ideal, the role of a sacrificial animal seeking slaughter on the altar of others, is giving you *death* as your standard. By the grace of reality and the nature of life, man-every man is an end in himself, he exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose. (Atlas 928)

Galt tells the people that he has given the industrialists and artists the weapon they lacked-the knowledge of their own moral value. He concludes his long speech by saying, "I swear- by my life and my love of it-that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine" (979). Galt and his friends return to the country when those in power give up their pretensions of power and authority.

Rand's insistence on reason as the basis for human action has many other qualities as corollaries such as egoism, individualism, freedom, democracy, and industrialism, and capitalism. These are interconnected, and the chain gets broken when a link is removed. In all these things, Rand presents new areas worthy of contemplation. To the incredulous readers, she

says in the postscript to *Atlas Shrugged* that her personal life is “a postscript” to her novels, and that she “means it”. She further says that it has worked for her as it works for her character.

A work of art inspires us at least on two counts—the matter and manner. Some work may appeal by the substance and some by the style. Some have the proper combination of both. Rand’s novels appeal immensely on both counts. Those who find it difficult to accept her philosophical tenets may accept, at least, that by a careful selection of the events and characters, she has crafted inspiring novels. The disagreement with the matter will not make them insensitive to their artistic merit. Rand’s clarity about esthetics and the value and function of art have greatly enriched her novels.

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