

The Sociology of Roald Dahl's "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat"

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Roald Dahl is one of the most widely read and influential writers of the twentieth century. He has already been acclaimed as one of the greatest storytellers of our time. He is considered not only a very successful children's writer but also an adolescent's and an adult's writer. He is known for brilliant characterization, appropriate language and innovative narrative structure. Besides, his great sense of sociology (in the sense of his societal view) may also have a positive effect on readers. Here, sociology focuses on how individuals think, feel, act and interact between/among themselves and how some of the intimate relationships (such as, a relation between a husband and wife) change their colour and importance with the passage of time and the change of economy. It has been observed that his view of society apparently appeals to adolescents because it closely reflects their own perspective. Further, young adults often experience feelings of rebellion against the adults trying to socialize them, which is depicted in Roald Dahl's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of adults (Telgen, 1980). In addition, the tendency to turn away from parents and reject the authority of adults while they seek to establish unique identities is taken as the characteristic of the social development of adolescents (Slavin, 1997).

The genesis of this article lies in a fairly big, stitched-on Introduction to his story "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat." Dahl introduces the story by commenting on the ruthless practice of American women marrying men, using them, and divorcing them just for financial gain. He further adds that these poor, overworked men meet in bars and console themselves with stories in which they win over such evil forces. The most famous of these stories is "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat." This is a story of a dentist and his duplicitous wife. The main objectives of this article are to answer the following questions:

- a) How do two individuals (especially a husband and a wife) think, feel, act and live in a developed country like the USA?
- b) In continuation of the above question, can we view Meehan's (1976, quoted in Yazdani) work as a hypothesis that states: A story is an account of goal directed behaviour of a set of characters - their interactions with each other and with the world?
- c) Is American society governed by some fixed social ethics/norms like what is right or proper or are individuals free to live their lives of self-fulfillment?
- d) Is the desire to live a life of self-fulfillment (maintaining their self-identity) true not only for women but also for men?
- e) Is the search for individuals' self-identity in the story likely to be influenced by existentialism and/or transcendentalism?

- f) To what extent has consumerism affected the intensity and warmth of social relationships?

As mentioned earlier, this is a story of a hard working dentist and his duplicitous wife, Mrs Bixby. Mrs Bixby leaves home once a month apparently to meet her old aunt in Baltimore, but really she spends the time with her lover the Colonel. This practice of meeting with the Colonel every month goes on. But on a particular occasion, she receives a parting gift from the Colonel. She opens it on the train while coming back home. She is amazed to find an extremely beautiful and valuable mink coat. In a note the colonel also explains that the relation has now come to an end, but Mrs. Bixby instead of feeling shocked or sorry of losing a relationship feels extremely happy and elated in getting a very valuable gift from her lover. Immediately thereafter she starts scheming to think of a convincing story she can tell her husband about where she got it. Finally she decides to visit a pawnbroker and borrow \$50 against the mink coat and receives a blank pawn ticket in return. When she gets home she tells her husband that she found the ticket in a taxicab and he promptly explains how they have to claim it. Since she does not want to be recognised by the pawnbroker, she lets him go to claim the item after he promises that he will give whatever it is to her. He calls her from his clinic next morning only to tell her that he has already received the item and that she will definitely become happy to receive it. She feels surprised when he places a mangy mink stole around her neck. She pretends to be happy but secretly plans to go back to the pawnbroker to accuse him of changing the coat for this worthless item. On her way out of the office, she finds her husband's secretary, Miss Pulteney passing by wearing the beautiful black mink coat that the Colonel had given to Mrs. Bixby.

Now this simple story speaks volumes about the social fabric (especially the man- woman relationship) of the American Society in 1960s. The whole story witnesses a wonderful portrayal of adultery and its possible consequences. Mrs. Bixby's secret affair with the Colonel and the dentist's involvement with his secretary are a mockery of the institution of marriage. Roald Dahl himself confesses it in the stitched-on introduction of the story:

The basic theme of these stories never varies. There are always three main characters – the husband, the wife, and the dirty dog. The husband is a decent clean living man working hard at his job. The wife is cunning, deceitful and lecherous, and she is invariably up to some sort of jiggery-pokery with the dirty dog. The husband is too good a man to suspect her. Things look black for the husband. Will the poor man ever find out? ... But wait till suddenly, by a brilliant manoeuvre, the husband completely turns the tables on his monstrous spouse. The woman is flabbergasted, stupefied, humiliated, defeated. The audience of men around the bar smiles quietly to itself and takes a little comfort from the fantasy. (p. 70)

Here one may object Dahl's somewhat harsh observations of a wife, which is reflected in his use of many negative adjectives for women like 'cunning', 'deceitful' and 'lecherous'. Besides, he seems to be taking sides with husbands by using the following expression for them - 'too good a man to suspect her (wife)'. However, he seems to have a clear image of the third person spoiling the purity of a marital relationship and he is always labelled as a 'dirty dog'. Further, he does not have the same degree of harshness for husbands developing extra-marital relationships. Here, he appears to have a good faith in the age-old social tradition. In fact, values are beliefs that are anchored into our subconscious (Wood: 1995). And they are learnt and developed through parental training and discipline. Now for a marriage to work, the fundamental values of authority and virtue (like love) must be operational. Otherwise the marriage is doomed. In fact, one should not forget that marriage is a microcosm of a culture. A culture develops institutions to meet the fundamental needs of society. Further, as individuals have values, so, even a society has collective values. The glory of Rome and the grandeur of Greece reflect these ancient cultures. However, all these values appear to be ignored in the contemporary American society resulting in an epidemic of divorce. The statistical summary of divorce between 1940 and 1993, provided by National Centre of Health Statistics in America, reveals serious problems with the institution of marriage in the USA. It indicates that divorce since 1940 has risen significantly so that the ratio of marriages to divorces has gone up to 2 to 1. Some of Roald Dahl's striking and shocking observations about divorce are worth quoting:

Divorce has become a lucrative process, simple to arrange and easy to forget; and ambitious females can repeat it as often as they please and parlay their winnings to astronomical figures. (p. 70)

Succeeding generations of youthful American males are not deterred in the slightest by the terrifying pattern of divorce and death. The higher the divorce rate climbs, the more eager they become. (p. 70)

Young men marry like mice, almost before they have reached the age of puberty, and a large proportion of them have at least two ex-wives on the payroll by the time they are thirty-six years old. (p 70)

This problem, in fact, strikes at the very heart and soul of American culture. Roald Dahl's story appears to give Americans in particular and other nationals in general a wake up call to save our sinking value system.

The second striking point about the story is the glorification of consumerism in the society. In fact, in the USA, the world war II generation (1940-1960) became materialistic, had business expansion and grew rich (Wood:1995). Consumerism is a good philosophy for the growth and development of human beings but when it is glorified at the cost of some of the

finer values and healthy tradition, it looks ugly. In the story Mrs. Bixby has been shown having an intimate relationship with the Colonel for eight years. When she realizes that she will not be able to see him any longer, she recovers so fast of the loss that she instinctively comes out with an utterance, 'What you lose on the swings you get back on the roundabouts.' In addition, a great length of the story is full of her excitement on and reaction to the mink coat she gets as a parting gift from the colonel. She looks at it, examines it, touches it and gets transported to a dream world away from problems and miseries. Such is the magical effect of that mink coat, which is not merely an object to her but a heaven body that transforms her entire being:

Her whole personality had suddenly changed completely. She looked dazzling, radiant, rich, brilliant, voluptuous, all at the same time. And the sense of power that it gave her! In this coat she could walk into any place she wanted and people would come scurrying around her like rabbits. The whole thing was just too wonderful for words!

Here Dahl very cleverly makes a mockery of the people's (especially women) craze for consumerism. He says boldly that they want to use even a sad and gloomy event for their materialistic gain.

America is the land of opportunities for women. Already they own about eighty-five percent of the wealth of the nation. Soon they will have it all. ... The husband's death also brings satisfactory rewards and some ladies prefer to rely upon this method.

One really needs a great courage to tell this kind of truth to the whole world.

The third important idea about the story is to peep into the psyche of the characters of the story and discover why they are found to throw social norms and regulations to the wind. Here it appears that they are governed by existentialism. In fact, it was during the Second World War when Europe passed through a phase of death and destruction and naturally it was a good period for existentialism movement to flourish. The most important advocate of existentialism was the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980). The fundamental concern of this school of thought is the study of being. It stresses the fact that a human being has no essence if he does not think/work for his existence. He has liberty to choose and decide and, therefore, to make or mar himself. In fact, if he allows himself to be swayed away by the mood and necessity of the society, he is bound to suffer endlessly. Herein lies the difference between a thing and a being. Things are only what they are. But the human being is what he can be. He can add flavour and essence to his life by following the dictates of his being/instinct. The human being, unlike things, is free to chase and realize his dreams. But he is reduced to nothingness, when he behaves as others demand of him by conforming to the standards of accepted values and by adopting roles assigned for him. In this way, he loses the autonomy of his moral

will, his freedom to decide and thus becomes inauthentic because he behaves as a conformist ignoring his own dreams and aspirations (Akram : 2002). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (quoted by Conrad:1981) tries to sum up the basic philosophy of existentialism in the following sentences:

Your conscience is your own; follow it. Your convictions are your own; act upon them. Your life is your own; live it.

Naturally, by 1960s we find people violating or less confirming the social or ethical norms. On the other hand, they are found asserting their self-identity even in her freedom of love and sex. The traditional institution of marriage requires loyalty and faithfulness on the part of both the husband and wife. However, Mrs Bixby seeks fulfilment in the company of the colonel whereas, Mr Bixby enjoys the friendship with his own secretary, Pulteney. In this way, they make a complete circle because both search for happiness out of the traditional institution of marriage.

To sum up the whole discussion, it can be safely said that the story is great not only in narrative structure and dialogues but also in highlighting some of the social facts of Americans in 1960s when the story was written. It also brings to the fore human psyche of American people and their rebellion against the tradition and existing value system in an attempt to assert their identities and live lives of fulfilments. Further, it highlights their excessive love for consumerism even at the cost of some of the finer aspects of life.

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