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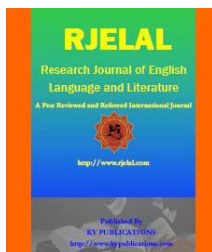
MISPLACED FAITHS AND DISPLACED LIVES: PETER CAREY'S *OSCAR AND LUCINDA*

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ABSTRACT

Peter Philip Carey, the renowned living writer of Australia has established for himself a fresh innovative ground in the Australian fiction. He is a distinguished Australian novelist, Short Story writer, Children's writer, Screenwriter, and Travel writer. He commands an international reputation along with the proficient Australian writers namely Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Thomas Keneally, Patrick White, David Malouf, and Tim Winton.

Illywhacker, the Second novel of Peter Carey was short listed for the 1985 Booker Prize. Later, his third novel *Oscar and Lucinda* was also short-listed in 1988 and further succeeded in winning this prestigious award. It won for Carey not only the first Booker but also the every prestigious award like the Miles Franklin Award, NBC Banjo Award and Foundation for Australian Literary Studies Award. It became the only second novel of Australia to win the Booker Prize after Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*. It was also adopted for a film in 1997. This recognition for the two consecutive novels promised Carey a wide international prominence.

Though *Oscar and Lucinda* seems to be an innovative attempt of historical novel to Carey's credit, it is characteristically different from Carey's previous novel, *Illywhacker*. As Robert Drewe observed: "Peter always surprises; he never goes back over old ground, which is the temptation in the literary world where your enthusiasts want you to write the same thing over and over" (Noted in Hassall 120). After the publication of collection of short stories and two of his novels, Carey moves back to nineteenth century in *Oscar and Lucinda*. The depiction of the gentle, generous and innocent characters are in striking contrast to the hyperactive, exploitative and violent behaviour which appear in the early fiction of Carey. This paper is an attempt to bring out the lives of the main protagonists named Oscar and Lucinda whose faith is misplaced resulting to the displacement of the lives.

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The critic A.J Hassall mentioned the interest of Carey - that his inspiration for *Oscar and Lucinda* was a vision of a church floating down the Bellinger River in northern New South Wales, and that the book was written to explain how this came to pass (Noted in Hassall 134). With this theme, Carey

enriched his novel *Oscar and Lucinda* by including the elements like romance, friendship, passion, humour, indigenous beliefs and culture, colonial domination and tragedy together.

The novel presents the parallel stories of the hypersensitive Englishman Oscar and an

Australian libertarian Lucinda Leplastrier. The scandal surrounding their relationship forms the main focus of the novel. The novel brings out the exploration of Carey into the fragile nature of spiritual, emotional and intellectual faith of these two characters mainly.

Oscar Hopkins is a very peculiar person not only in his physical appearance but also in his ideas and behaviour. He has a dead white skin, red hair, a chicken neck. He is called "Odd Bod," "Grinning Scarecrow," "Glue-pot," and "Mr. Smudge." He loses his mother and later prefers to leave his fundamentalist father. He is an unfortunate misfit, a compulsive gambler, an ardent Christian, an agonized lover, and a man who, at the lowest point of his deprivation, is capable of splitting the skull of his tormentor with an axe.

On the other hand, Lucinda Leplastier has eyes which are "gateways to a fierce and lively intelligence. She loses first her father and then her mother. Both Oscar and Lucinda were like young creatures that had lost their shells, not yet able to defend themselves. She is a gambler. She is more willful and courageous. She defies the conventions of the society and is ready to pay the price of it. These two protagonists Oscar and Lucinda get on willy-nilly in the conservative society.

Oscar has his brought up by a strict, religious father, Theophilus. As Oscar is fed up with his inflexible rules, he changes himself as a proselyte and goes to Oxford to study theology in view of becoming an Anglican priest. Within no time he realizes his incompatibility to this calling and soon gets captivated in gambling through which he gains a lot of money that he uses to pay off his personal debts and to help the poor. Thus, he endangers his soul when he has been in the divinity school. Nevertheless, he has great happiness in this way of leading life rather than studying religion. He often justifies himself with the philosophical thought that even believing in God is also a sort of gambling.

After completion of his study, he travels from a Devonshire village to Sydney in order to become a clergyman whereas Lucinda Leplastier having the advantage of her mother's fortune after her (mother) death moves from New South Whales to Sydney to become the owner of a glass factory in

order to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a 'glass lady'. To win the love of Lucinda, Oscar sets his aim as to construct a glass church and transport it to outback of Australia. As they move towards their goal, they confront some sordid, hopeless, helpless and brutal events.

Oscar is an introvert and, Lucinda is an extrovert. Being aware of the fragility of the glass, Lucinda audaciously tries to start the glass works. Both Oscar and Lucinda are so much spellbound in their envisioned network of norms. Till Oscar and Lucinda meet each other in Sydney, Carey gives sporadic chapters to each of his two characters. Their first encounter which begins as that of a reverend and a confessor in the ship aboard Australia is an amazing turning point in their lives. Moreover, it has further directed their future as well as the history of Australian outback. The glass church which is a symbol of their love does not serve for the true purpose.

Carey very resourcefully binds these two divergent characters through their common interest in gambling i.e., the games of chances like cards, races, or in the flip of the coin. Oscar being an inveterate gambler often supports himself by thinking that believing in God is itself the biggest gamble of all. He opines that betting and the faith in Christianity are one and the same: "Our whole faith is a wager...We bet-it is all in Pascal...-we bet that there is a God. We bet our life on it. We calculate the odds, the return, that we shall sit with the saints in paradise" (OL.261). The sanctimonious nature of Oscar and Lucinda is widely evident in their respective approaches as they justify their passion for gambling. Oscar remarkably states that: "I cannot see...that such a God, whose fundamental requirement of us is that we gamble our mortal souls, every second of our temporal existence...It is true! We must gamble every instant (*instant italics*) of our allotted span. We must stake everything (*everything italics*) on the unprovable fact of His existence" (OL 261).

He further supports his views that "That such a God can look unkindly on a chap wagering a few quid on the likelihood of a dumb animal crossing a line first, unless...it might be considered blasphemy to apply to common pleasure that which

is by its very nature divine" (OL 263). Even Lucinda Leplastier too realizes her hypocritical concern towards the transportation of the church which is obviously expressed in her words, "she had not cared about the church. The church had been conceived in a fever. It was not a celebration of sacred love, but of their own" (OL 446).

Gambling, the captivating hobby of theirs gradually draws them close and gives birth to a strange kind of romantic relationship. Their absorption in gleeful game of cards spreads the impression among the people that they are misfits due to their immature and scandalous behaviour. Both these eccentric characters are not only lost in thought but also constrained and trapped by gambling, religion and societal norms throughout the novel. The critic O'Hara, John states in the preface to his history of gaming and betting in Australia that "Australians have long thought of themselves as a nation of gamblers-perhaps even the world's greatest gamblers" (Noted in Ryan-Fazilleau 22). When Oscar comes to New South Wales in the 1860s: "Oscar had never seen such a passion for gambling. It was not confined to certain types or classes. It seemed to be the chief industry of the colony" (OL 308).

An English man, Reverend Dennis Hasset having similar interest in the manufacture of glass accompanies Lucinda to Sydney. Oscar thinking that they are in love with each other outrageously determines to transport a church of glass to the outback or the remote wilderness against all the odds. He even tries to challenge and ignore his own hydrophobia as there is an inner conflict between his fears of damnation and the desire to prove his liking for Lucinda. This glass church also indicates his fragile and transparent affection towards her. Life, a mixture of assumed and unassumed events many a time challenges people to switch over to preposterous decisions. So it happens in Oscar's case. Oscar embarks on transporting glass church as a gift to Reverend Dennis Hasset. It is a clear instance of the sheer foolishness of Oscar. During the expedition, sometimes Oscar also desires to

devote his life to the dangerous missionary work in the outback of Australia.

With the assistance of Mr. Jeffris who is a middle-class explorer, successor of Mr. Burrows and expedition leader, and his friend Percy Smith, Oscar sets off for Bellingen to deliver the glass church. Mr. Jeffris lavishly spends Lucinda's money on equipping the expedition. He, being a dehumanized person with his unlimited desire to explore the unexplored territories, violently kills many aborigines and defiles their sacred images in his way of supporting Oscar to inherit Lucinda's fortune. Oscar and Percy Smith can no longer tolerate the atrocities of Mr. Jeffris and they kill him at last. While Percy Smith considers this killing justifiable, Oscar is tormented by the sense of guilt. With this guilt and his act of betraying Lucinda with Miriam Chadwick, he welcomes an agonized death. Like Jude Fawley in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, he loses almost everything and faces a miserable death. After praying to God to destroy the church which he now considers "a product of the deuce's insinuations" (OL 509), and "panicking in the face of eternity" (OL 510), Oscar dies.

At the last, when Oscar encounters Miriam, the narration returns to the beginning, where the narrator's mother worships "the sacred glass daguerreotype of (his) great-grandfather" (OL 1), Oscar too proves himself unreliable by betraying the love of Lucinda and having sex with Miriam. His guilt conscience prepares him to be sunk along with glass church into the river. It seems that Oscar and Lucinda gamble not only on things but also on their mind, life and soul.

As a result their lives are shattered with irretrievable loss. After Oscar signing the marriage document, he is "disappeared forever from my great-grandmother's life" (OL 424), Miriam receives a letter from Lucinda, who writes "I made a bet in order that I keep my beloved safe" (OL 427). She meets Lucinda only once at "outside the court in Sydney" (OL 427) and later gets hold of the fortune of ten guineas (OL 429) from Lucinda. By the time Lucinda sends the cheque back to Miriam, the life of Oscar has already become the part of history, "By the time it was found, her letter was as fragile

as the body of a long-dead dragon-fly. It's juice was dry. It was history" (OL 428).

The past becomes meaningless and irrelevant just as the idea of church is shattered as it was not of any use to anyone and anymore. Afterwards, Lucinda changes herself as a liberated woman and starts a new life for herself. Here, through the character of Lucinda, the author provides with a possibility of escaping fantasies and living a productive life for one's own. Through the depiction of this love or anti-love story, Carey so meticulously delineates not only the hypocritical faith and the displaced lives of Oscar and Lucinda but also the experiences of the natives and aborigines during the Australian colonization.

Carey depicts the impact of Victorian theological beliefs and denominational conflicts through the relationship between father (Theophilus) and son (Oscar). Their relation resembles the story of *Father and Son* (1904), the autobiographical novel of the English poet Edmund Gosse, which presents his relationship with his father, Philip Henry Gosse. This novel depicts the childhood of Gosse during the period of 1850s and 1860s, his strict brought up by his father who is a zoologist and member of the Plymouth Brethren. The inclusion of details by Carey such as the name of Plymouth Brethren, the event of Christmas pudding, the preference of a father who was proud of himself for not having read Shakespeare or any other fictional work, strict religious views, knowing God's will through prayer, the belief that only the Plymouth Brethren will be saved on the day of Judgment etc., have similarities from the novel of Edmund Gosse.

Theophilus, father of Oscar seems to appear as a self-sanctimonious holy man. Being a fundamentalist Christian, he imposes many restrictions on Oscar. His strong belief in religion and in his denomination, in fact, leads him to the state of lack of genuine faith in God. He is very absorbed in his ideas and interests, and further he hardly takes personal responsibility for anything that happens in his life. Both Theophilus and Oscar are introduced in the early chapters of the novel in some of the slight comical incidents. When Theophilus punishes Oscar for eating Christmas

pudding, Oscar driven by his anger prays to God seriously (when they went to beach to collect specimens) for the punishment of his father.

Soon he realizes his mistake and prays to God to save his father from his penance. But, the divine taste of Christmas pudding and the violent treatment of his father make Oscar move away from the beliefs of his father. As he believes his father is wrong, he wants to choose among the four existing systems of belief which existed in his place Hennacombe: evangelism, Baptism, Catholicism, and Anglicanism. He draws four boxes on the ground, each box representing one of these belief systems: "They were a structure for diving the true will of God" (OL 32). Being confirmed that God will show him the way, he throws a 'tor' onto the drawing. It falls on the square which represents the Anglican Church and so he decides to join the Anglican denomination. Carey here shows familial isolation both in positive and negative ways where Oscar's father takes the divining stone from Oscar's pocket only to be hand in glove with the boy. But his attachment with his son proves to be an awkward and dispraised one.

Furthermore, Oscar does not wholeheartedly accept the soft feelings of his father. This near and far sense of their love and affection is evident in various places of the novel, as when his father comes to meet Oscar at the Strattons, they have untouched relation - 'Theophilus carrying his buckets (OL64-71) or when Theophilus sees Oscar off on the Leviathan (OL 212-19)'. Many characters including Theophilus Hopkins, Lucinda, Oscar, Hugh Stratton are only able to understand the world in one particular confined way. This sort of narrowness and blindness to other views or interpretations has important repercussions relating to the story. Oscar once shares his faith with his friend Wardley-Fish and speaks about the act of reconciliation among different faiths.

"And do I believe that Balaam's ass really spoke to him in a human voice? Yes, of course. Although I hear at Oriel that I am quite out of fashion and everyone would have me believe that Jonah was not swallowed by the whale and that the

mother of our Lord was not a virgin, and all this from people who have sworn their acceptance of the Thirty-nine articles of Faith."

"So the ass really said: 'I am thy good and faithful ass. Why have you therefore smitten me thrice?' The ass spoke like this, to a man, in Greek?"

"I doubt it was Greek. Have you ever seen a starfish? Under the microscope, in cross section? Do you not think God created the starfish?"

"Of course," and Wardley-Fish who had, until that moment, been unscrewing his brandy flask, now screwed it up again and slid it back into his pocket.

"Then having Balaam's ass speak, even in Greek, would be a comparatively easy thing to achieve." (OL 112)

These words of Oscar saying that how natural science can be incorporated in the Christian faith is similar to that of Philip Gosse who argued that the theory of evolution has been made possible by God as a test (Noted in Larsson, Christer. 57). The beliefs that God has created the starfish and the act of Balaam's ass speaking are dependable on each other. If one is accepted, the other cannot be rejected.

Carey also depicts the disingenuous faith of Oscar. Many a time his interest in gambling overwhelms his religious morals. He considers the whole system of religious beliefs a spiritual gamble. Even though his words suggest religious expansion, it is indirectly associated with the decay of Victorian faith which is widely evident after the publication of *The Origin of Species*. As a student at Oxford, Oscar fails to develop his intellectual abilities and further increases his interest in games of chance. He has passion for racehorses and

"...produced sixteen smudge-paged clothbound notebooks in which were recorded not the thoughts of Divine Masters, not musings on the philosophy of the ancients, but page after page of blue spidery figures which recorded...the names of horses, their sires and dams, their position at last start, the number of days

since the last start, the weight carried at the last time, whether they were rising in class, or falling in class, who was the owner, who the jockey and so on". (OL 178)

The attraction towards gambling and his failure to understand Lucinda's love towards him finally leads him to death. The account of Carey about Oscar's death is a powerful example of the writing excellence of Carey:

A great bubble of air broke the surface of the Bellinger and the flying foxes came down close upon the river. When they were close enough for his bad eyes to see, he thought they were like angels with bat wings. He saw it as a sign from God. He shook his head, panicking in the face of eternity. He held the door-knob as it came to be the ceiling of his world. The water rose. Through the bursting gloom he saw a vision of his father's wise and smiling face, peering in at him. He could see, dimly, the outside world, the chair and benches of his father's study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. And when the long-awaited white fingers of water tapped and lapped on Oscar's lips, he welcomed them in as he always had, with a scream, like a small boy caught in the sheet-folds of a nightmare" (510).

As the critics Prashant Gupta and Sukhpreet Kahlon have stated Carey deals with the "...question of faith and doubt, sin, guilt, passion, pride and ambition the novel takes us on a journey that reveals the jagged edges and fissures that lie beneath any smooth retelling of the past" (Noted in Prashant Gupta and Sukhpreet Kahlon 112)

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