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A Critical Study of Jack London's Novel *The Star Rover*

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Abstract:

Jack London's *The Star Rover* is a masterpiece that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming tragedy. This book explores the mind of its protagonist, Darrell Standing, a prisoner destined for a life of cruel confinement, and is set against the backdrop of early 20th-century America. An analysis of London's work is presented in this paper, which delves into the character dynamics, historical background, and thematic nuances of the pieces. *The Star Rover* is fundamentally an investigation into the infinite potential of the human mind and the tenacity of the human spirit. The voyage of Darrell Standing extends beyond the physical walls of his cell, into the domains of existential reflection and philosophical encounters. This study also critically analyzes London's use of character development and storytelling. It analyzes Darrell Standing's multifaceted representation, closely examining his transformation from a damaged guy to a spiritual traveler. In conclusion, this critical study provides a thorough examination of Jack London's *The Star Rover*, revealing the work's philosophical nuance, intricate storyline, and historical relevance. By means of this investigation, readers get a deep comprehension of the novel's perpetual significance, confirming its reputation as a lasting classic within the literary fiction genre.

Key Words: History, Brutality, Reality, Identity, Philosophy.

The novel *The Star Rover*, also known as "The Jacket," by Jack London is a captivating examination of the indomitable resilience of the human spirit. The narrative focuses on Darrell Standing, a prisoner who uncovers a novel form of psychological escape while enduring the brutal realities of imprisonment. Standing, condemned to a life behind cells, creates a method of mental transcendence that enables his consciousness to travel through time and space. Through this metaphysical voyage, the novel explores the themes of identity, freedom, and the interconnectedness of all living creatures. A narrative that challenges societal norms and examines the depths of the human psyche is created by London's masterful storytelling and his profound comprehension of human psychology. *The Star Rover* exemplifies London's literary prowess by providing readers with a thought-provoking and spiritually enlightening reading experience.

The Star Rover is a novel which explicates the brutalities and violation of basic human rights in the modern day system of imprisonment. Order and discipline are dictated by the government, but it is the police who enforce it. Brutalities sometimes exceed the limit mentioned in the legal statutes. This is very much evident in the concept of straitjacketing which became another name for inhuman cruelty in state prisons in America in the twentieth century. Jack London based his character of Darrell Standing in *The Star*



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Rover on a certain prisoner called Ed Morrell. London spoke to him in 1912 and the bitter reality was unveiled. In an “Introduction” to the novel, Lorenzo Carcaterra notes the encounter of the two:

They first sat across from each other in 1912, and they sealed the friendship that began through a series of letters. London had petitioned the prison to have Morrell released – both from the dungeon that had been his home and the prison bars that held him captive. Morrell thanked the author by spending the bulk of that first meeting describing the months he had spent in the down-in-the-dark nowhere in San Quentin and the different forms of torture that had been inflicted by the guards.... The stories Morrell told London fed into the writer’s interest in both the study of criminology and the harsh methods of the penal system. Within days of Morrell’s departure, Jack London began writing his eighth and final novel. (“Introduction” xiii).

Though Ed Morrell provided the food for thought to Jack London he was greatly agitated at the cruel death of Jake Oppenheimer, another real life prisoner who features in his novel *The Star Rover* by the same name. As is evident from an interview to Sophie Treadwell:

I’m trying to get some of the ideas over to fiction readers. Do you know that today it is possible to sentence a man to solitary confinement in California? That it is possible for us to hang a man for assault and battery? That, in fact, last year in 1913 we did hang a man for assault and battery? Jake Oppenheimer was hanged for assault and battery here in your own State, in California. The straight jacket still obtains in our prisons. Didn’t you know that? Do I put any constructive ideas for prison reforms in this novel? No, I don’t. I just draw the picture of conditions as they are now. Have I any constructive ideas along these lines? Ofcourse I have. I would turn prison house into hospitals. My basic belief is one of pure determinism. Each person moves along a line of least resistance. We do what is easier for us to do than not to do. We can’t help doing what to do. (Sophie Treadwell. Is Jack London a Capitalist?).

Jack London’s novel *The Star Rover* begins with a recognition or admission of a self within the self, a reality other than the present existing reality. The narrator recalls the memory of the past that remains buried in our subconscious mind. It is a voice which exist in us, is a very part of our own self. It is the self in its formation stage. This sort of philosophical beginning very well reminds of John Locke, the pioneer of



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empiricist philosophy, who said that human mind is a *tabula rasa* at the time of birth. In his book *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke averred that the mind receives myriad impressions from the outside which have an impact on our mind and like a blueprint it shapes our life. It is merely the outside world that shapes the self that humans are. Descartes, a rationalist philosopher, however, considered the body as an entity in itself and asserted “I think therefore I am”. Jack London, however, seems to emphasize the Freudian concept of the unconscious mind and believes that of the myriad impressions received some are channelized into forgetfulness, while others remain as traces. To the narrator of *The Star Rover*, dreams are a reality: “Our dreams are grotesquely compounded of the things we know. The stuff of our sheerest dreams is the stuff of our experiences.” (3)

Darrell Standing begins the story of his life in prison with a short introduction of his entry into the prison walls. He is on the extreme end of life; death by hanging has been sentenced and passed. Eight years ago, this Professor of Agronomy landed into the “total institution” (Goffman) on charge of murdering his fellow professor. Darrell, in the narrative, neither admits to nor denies the charge. However, all evidences were against him and he landed in the red walled institution. The interesting turning point comes a few lines later when Darrell makes it clear that he is to be hanged, but not on the charges of murdering the professor. For that he had already served solitary confinement for five years of the total eight years in the California State Prison of San Quentin. Then begins his tale of revolution; his protest against the struggles of life in the prison:

... Five of these years I spent in the dark. Solitary confinement, they call it. Men who endure it, call it living death. But through these five years of death-in-life I managed to attain freedom such as few men have ever known. Closest confined of prisoners, not only did I range the world, but I ranged time (TSR 5).

Darrell Standing, from the very beginning in the prison of San Quentin, is deemed incorrigible who was claimed to be against the institution. He refused to work in the jute mill and is therefore stamped incorrigible. Wayne Gillespie notes the observation of Clemmer in his context of imprisonment where he says that Clemmer described prison as ‘a community with a pecking order and value system that exists apart from and often contradicts that of the outside world’ (Stanko et al.63). In the world outside the prison, Standing may have gained eminence and his arguments might be positively heeded, but inside the house he will be deemed incorrigible, a revolutionary, a threat and danger to the institution.



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Imprisonment should, as Kennedy and Kerber suggested, involve a process of resocialization which involves instilling those values in an individual which are lacking according to the norms of the said dominant institutions (Gillespie). Such dominant institutions could include prisons, asylums, even the school, religious associations etc. In the penal system resocialization therefore involves instilling those values which the convict is lacking. This involves rehabilitation or giving teachings in moral values or educating the illiterate etc. In short, resocialization should aim at making the convict a better human being by imbibing values and good attitudes. However, in the case of Darrell Standing, he does not lack formal education, nor is he a hardened criminal. He has simply stood against the kind of work that the prison advocates. Asserting in favour of handlooms in the jute mill is no serious offence as it does not intend any kind of harm to any inmate or official; except that it in a way is a denial of power. That is why Standing “was given the dungeon plus the straight jacket” (TSR 8). Instead of becoming an institution of rehabilitation or correction, the prison house becomes an organization of torture and inexplicable brutality. Standing defines the story of this inhuman brutality by some cogs who act as agents of the institution in a broader perspective:

Two years of this witless persecution I endured. It is terrible for a man to be tied down and gnawed down by rats. The stupid brutes of guards were rats, and they gnawed the intelligence of me, gnawed all the fine nerves of the quick of me and of the consciousness of me. And I, who in my past have been a most valiant fighter, in the present life was no fighter at all. I was a farmer, an agriculturist, a desk-tied professor, a laboratory slave, interested only in the soil and the increase in the productiveness of the soil (TSR 9).

In the above passage Standing reflects upon how penal system squeezes even the last trace of all intelligence and talents in man and reduces him to an ineffectual being. Moreover, he also critiques in the following passage the imperialist policy of the most progressive nation in the world. Darrell says: “It was laughable to behold Science prostituting all the might of its achievement and the wit of its inventors to the violent introducing of foreign substances into the bodies of black folk.”(TSR 9)

This very observation accounts for the degree of racism underneath the mask of equality in the American culture. The American Dream it boasts of is a facade hiding the real. It is always a bitter reward one achieves after fault finding. So, it happened with Standing both in the Spanish-American War and also in the San Quentin prison. In the former he was demoted from the inert position of a quartermaster’s clerk



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and in the latter he was stamped incorrigible when he pointed out the stupidity of the prison system in their inability to be productive or creative except for inflicting tortures and that they are “fifty years behind the times...” (9).

Serving a lifelong imprisonment, Standing gets acquainted with the prison vocabulary as well. He visualises that if intelligent men are cruel, then the stupid men are monstrously cruel. If Warden Atherton is a beast, the guards are demons or the devil incarnate. He defines the poet forger Cecil Winwood as a coward, a snitcher and a stool, and deliberately certifies the prison house for his choice of words. Cecil Winwood was a master in perverting the truth. The real life counterpart of Cecil Winwood is Sir Harry whose “suavity no doubt blinding me (Morrell) to his true character” (Morrell *Twenty Fifth* 37). It was Winwood who was the reason behind Standing’s entire life in the solitary confinement. Winwood, the master forger, a trickster, in order to shorten the term of his own imprisonment, played a double game. He duped the fellow convicts and also the authority. To the convicts who formerly distrusted him, Winwood told of his power in the prison by virtue of being trusty in the warden’s office and also having the run of the dispensary. On the other hand, he fabricated a story of prison break and presented it to the Captain of the Yard. He succeeded in convincing both the sides and created the illusion of dynamite gathered for prison break by showing a bundle of tobacco.

Nevertheless, the poor convicts, forty lifers, duped by Winwood, were caught redhanded when they were on the verge of escaping the prison. Darrell Standing was totally ignorant of the entire affair because he was serving five days in the dungeon and eighty hours in the jacket. He was given some break to recuperate. Disastrously Winwood named Standing as his fellow partner in crime, who had helped him in planting the thirty five pounds “non existent” dynamite in the prison and using which the forty lifers were planning a break.

Devoid of any commonsense or practical reason, the prison authorities believed Winwood and sealed the doom on Standing. Standing was believed to have hidden the non-existent dynamite. Winwood’s account of the plan of the lifers and its immediate enactment was verification absolute. The cumulative voice of the lifers against Winwood passed as falsification of facts – they were lying in order to save themselves. The reward to Winwood was immediate – “...Cecil Winwood, forger and poet, most despicable of men, was pardoned out.” (TSR 15).



It was simply that the lifers were not allowed to plead for themselves unlike the claim of many social scientists like Gillespie that the States have become more responsible towards granting rights to prisoners unlike in the earlier ages. Gillespie further notes that the prisoners' rights developed as a result of changes in society and spurred by its social and economic developments, class interests, reason and enlightenment. But London's narrative, we see, speaks a different story. Not only are the judgements based on partial truths and many times on falsehood; in absence of evidences, the treatment meted out is neither fair nor humane. Gillespie says that "Perhaps the most fundamental question relating to prisoners' rights is this: How do we punish fairly and humanely?" (Stanko et al.113). The unfairness of judgement is evident in the voice of Darrell Standing:

Truth lives, we are taught; murder will out. Well, this is a demonstration that murder does not always come out. The Captain of the Yard, the late Warden Atherton, the Prison Board of Directors to a man – all believe, right now, in the existence of that dynamite that never existed save in the slippery-gear and all too accelerated brain of the degenerate forger and poet, Cecil Winwood. And Cecil Winwood still lives, while I, of all men concerned, the uttermost, absolutest, innocentest, go to the scaffold in a few short weeks(TSR 16).

The forty lifers were rethrown in the horrors of the dungeon and Darrell Standing says they were guilty of "yearning after freedom" (16). Being a thinker-philosopher, Standing was able to endure the torment. Unable to achieve physical freedom, he switched over to a kind of spiritual liberation. It is not by devoting himself to religion, but by dissociating the soul from the body. The machinery of the state may lay hands on the body, but it cannot intimidate the soul of a man guided by free will. Before entering into a tale of his liberation, Standing interrogates the society. He questions the degree of hypocrisy that the machinery perpetrates even at the moment of hanging. The institution put on black scarf over the head and face of the convict in order to shield the horror of the deed. The hands are also tied up so that they might not get the chance to ease the throttle of the noose about his neck. Unlike the past brutalities, hanging is considered humanitarian mode of punishment. But Standing questions this act as no less brutal than that before. The face is covered not to shield the brutality, but they dare not look into the deed. The only progress is that earlier the authority gazed and now they shield. This is no humanitarianism but hypocrisy at its best. No one knows the horror inside the prison; how a convict is punished on false charges. The "cotton-wooled" citizens simply know that a convict is gone for good. The truth remains untold. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*



makes the similar observation while determining the change in the modes of punishment. 1

Very specifically London mentions through his narrator Darrell Standing that he stands not in a pre-Christian era, nor in the beginning of the Christian era, the time of Crucifixion of Christ but the year 1913. The real Jake Oppenheimer was also hanged in America in that very year. The incident therefore is taking place at a time when prison reforms were announced. The Civil Rights Act of 1871 allows inmates to make legal claims that the condition of imprisonment violates the Constitution. In the case of Darrell Standing, the prison authorities violated many such precepts on the basis of an imaginary hypothesis of Darrell having hidden dynamite in prison.

The forty lifers after they had been thrust in the dungeons decided among themselves that they would speak the “whole truth” and invoked God to their aid; but in an institution where unfounded truths govern ‘Little good did their truth-telling do them’ (TSR 18). They were thrashed up and ‘these beaten feverish men lay seven hours without water’ (TSR 18). In many prisoners’ account, for instance, one prisoner in Kentucky State Prison, as Anderson notes, the treatment was such that one felt live stocks were better treated.²

London protests against the helpless victimization of men on the ground of mere suspicion as in *The Star Rover*. In the judicial system, vigilance should be not only on the offenders or the convicts, but also on the machinery enforcing it, like the police, the prison administrators etc. However, the task of the judge ends with the passing of the verdict – guilty or innocent. The rest functioning is carried out by the other officials involved in the process. Once a convict is thrust inside a prison, he is under pan optican control; the all surveillance ensures him discipline, keeps him intimidated and under control. The outside world is closed before the convict and with that the outside also loses all interest in the man behind the bars. London shows this fearful inside when one is incarcerated. The constitution ensures that a man should be punished according to the degree of the offence committed and with proof of that guilt committed by the offender. But in reality, punishments are severe than the offence. The offence is not proved either. The San Quentin Penitentiary is soon transformed into a madhouse, a place of living death for the lifers. In an argument opposing the system of prisons, Jerome Miller claims “.. the system we have designed to deal with offenders is among the most iatrogenic in history, nurturing those very qualities it claims to deter..” (Espejo 29).

After subjecting the forty lifers to inhuman torture, and flinging them to the horror of the dungeon, it was now time for Darrell Standing, the prime suspect, to be interrogated. The most pathetic turn was that the lifers pleaded with Standing to yield to the dynamite. Everyone in turn, from the officers to the unfortunate



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lifers, believed Standing has somewhere planted the dynamite. His truth little availed him. All he could do is to speak the truth which none would believe. Standing says that “hanging is an easy thing compared with the way live men may be hurt in all the life of them and still live” (TSR 23).

Ironically, he perceives the outcome of truth in a society where he lives: Don’t you see? Our truth, the very truth we told was our damnation. When forty men told the same thing with such unanimity, Warden Atherton and Captain Jamie could only conclude that the testimony was a memorized lie which each of the forty rattled off parrot-like (23).

The tortures exhibited were such that they succeeded in squeezing the soul out of the body; none of the convicts were the same ever again. They were reduced to dehumanised, decrepit objects. Skysail Jack, Long Bill Hodge, Luigi Polazzo, the toughest of the prisoners were both mentally and physically broken – “Fully twenty-five percent of the forty have died in the succeeding six years” (24).

The authorities presented before Standing a do or die situation. He was either to confess to the dynamite or be condemned to solitary confinement the rest of his sentence, in his case, the entire life. Everything is decided by the authorities themselves. Standing himself points out the anomaly: Oh, no; California is civilized. There is no such law on the statute books. It is cruel and unusual punishment, and no modern state would be guilty of such a law. Nevertheless, in the history of California I am the third man who has been condemned for life to solitary confinement. The other two were Jake Oppenheimer and Ed Morrell. (25).

Many times, charges are fabricated against a person and held guilty. It is practically impossible for a man weighing under ninety pounds and being spent in solitary confinement for a long period to hurt a man of well-built physique and weighing one hundred and seventy pounds. Yet Standing was accused of assault and battery against a guard of San Quentin named Thomson. It is for this charge that Standing is to be hanged, and not for the charge of.



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