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**GODLESSNESS Vs. GOODLINESS: AYN RAND'S ART OF
CHARACTERIZATION**

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ABSTRACT

Characterization in fiction is undoubtedly the combination of philosophical thoughts and ideas of the writer and therefore in order to study the vision of life reflected in the fiction of Ayn Rand, one cannot afford to skip devoting oneself to an analytical and comprehensive study of the characters in Rand's fiction. The 'Godless' refers to those characters who give in or blindly accept the evil designs of the society and the state – the juggernaut of collectivism, socialism, statism, mysticism, altruism that ruthlessly crushes the good – the 'goodliness' in the people, of the people and for the people. And out of the conflict between this 'godlessness' and 'goodliness' emerge the Randianness – the vision of life that Rand desires and dares to portray through her characters – with a focus on individualism, integrity, rational self-interest, reason and happiness as the ultimate virtue.

Keywords: collectivism, socialism, statism, mysticism, altruism, individualism, integrity.



Introduction:

Characters in a work of fiction echo the workings of the writer's mind – the writer's thoughts and philosophies. An analysis of the characters in a work of fiction adds to the understanding of the themes and motifs of the particular fictional work. Therefore, an understanding and analysis of the characters becomes inevitable for a researcher in order to read in-between the lines and grasp the hidden layers of meanings in a literary work. In order to explore Rand's vision of life through her fiction, the researcher cannot afford to skip paying attention to Rand's art of characterization. As a child, Rand had been particularly influenced by Aristotle, Maurice Champagne, Victor Hugo, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Respectively, these authors gave her intelligent, independent protagonists as role models, showed her the power of a complex story with larger-than life characters, and taught her about the importance of heroism and individualism.

Rand's Art of Characterization:

Rand's art of creating complex characters with a blend of the good and the evil, the moral and the immoral, the selfish and the selfless, the individualists and the collectivists – accounts for her mastery in the art of fusing philosophy with fiction. An analysis and evaluation of Rand's characters – from Leo Kovalensky to Equality 7-2521, from Howard Roark to John Galt – all serve to represent Rand's own struggle between faith and reason, conventionality and independence. It is indeed striking and surprising to note that she first wrote fiction and then diverted to philosophy because her characters brilliantly unveil the most significant tenets of her (later designed) philosophy – Objectivism – namely individualism, free will, ethical egoism with a towering spirit of loyalty to one's personal happiness and above all towards one's own life. The article shall also throw light upon Rand's art of creating extraordinary women characters – women of worth and substance – from Kira to Liberty; from Dominique Francon to Dagny Taggart – very much unlike the women of the then American society.



The prime focus of the present article lies upon Rand's supreme skill of rationalizing the irrational based on the realm of the ultimate virtue – Reason. Most importantly, Rand's vision of life largely depends upon her philosophical thoughts and ideas based on her own life experiences which could not have found a better way of expression other than Rand's characters. An analytical study of various major and minor characters from Rand's novels not only present a holistic picture of her philosophy of Objectivism but also serve as a defense against the critics who have condemned Rand on socio-ethical grounds.

Critical Evaluation of Rand's Characters:

Rand frequently declared her motive and purpose in writing to be "*the projection of an ideal man*"; all of her protagonists are heroes. Rand's interest in philosophy stemmed originally from her self-declared purpose to create heroic fictional characters for her novels – 'the ideal man' of Rand's dreams and vision. Her protagonists illustrate the virtues of rationality, production, and trade while the negative characters show traces of the vices of parasitism and power. The narrative dramatizes the struggle of producers against parasites and predators, and traces the consequences of that struggle across a whole society.

A Randian hero with a Promethean sense of life is characterized by radical individualism, moral strength and integrity of character, distinguishingly intelligent and emotionally balanced. Author Stephen Newman compares the Randian hero to the concept of the *Übermensch* created by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, saying that "the Randian hero is really Nietzsche's superman in the guise of the entrepreneur". The early traces of the Randian hero are found in Rand's earliest work (notably in *Night of January 16th's* Bjorn Faulkner and *We the Living's* Leo Kovalensky) and its best and fully matured version appear in her later works specifically in the novella *Anthem* (1938) and the novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

The stronger characters in her novel – Kira, Equality, Roark, Dagny, Galt and so on are capable enough to discard those dictates and conventions and lead their life by their own terms,



values and convictions and thus, Rand establishes the supremacy of individualism, integrity and above all reason. Rand's protagonists are movers and makers – architects, businessmen, inventors – passionate about their work and competent.

An undying, towering and passionate love for life is a distinct characteristic in almost all the strong characters of Rand. Kira (*We the Living*) loses everyone and everything she loves to a vicious totalitarian system, but retains her passionate love for life. Roark (*Fountainhead*), condemned to work in a quarry, perhaps forever, never succumbs to bitterness or hatred towards those who have deprived him of his life-blood—(architecture) building. Francisco's house in Galt's Gulch (*Atlas Shrugged*) metaphorically symbolizes the virtuous hero's strength and ability to value life even in the face of sorrow: the "silent, locked exterior" of the house speaks of the sorrow and solitude of Francisco's years of painful renunciation of the woman and the work he loves, but the interior filled with an "invigorating brightness", symbolizes the sorrow overcome by his affirmation of life. (Rand 1957 [1992]: 710).

Moreover, there are numerous instances in her novels that also clearly make us believe that Roark, Dagny, Rearden, and Rand's other heroes and heroines have kind and generous characters. When Mallory looks up at Roark, he sees "the calmest, kindest face"—though "a face without a hint of pity" (1943: 321), and Keating tells Roark that he is "the kindest man" he knows for not dredging up the past and throwing it in his face now that he is down and out (1943: 574–75). Kelley (1996) and Smith (2006) give instrumentalist arguments for elevating the status of the virtues of benevolence in the *Objectivist Ethics*.

On the other hand, the negative characters in Rand's fiction – characteristically referred to as second-handers or looters, are men without substance of mind and character – formless and lifeless as they appear - with names such as Wesley Mouch, Peter Keating or Ellsworth Toohey. They are parasites who depend upon the ideas and labour of others.



In the novels of Rand, if one of the characters is portrayed as weak and untalented, he or she certainly needs the society and the state. Weak and untalented characters are always in the effort of being a part of the whole, i.e. the system or the society, in order to hide their incapability. They support government initiatives in the name of socialism and their moral standards are flexible depending upon the situation they are into. For example, Rand describes how Peter Keating became successful in the architect Guy Francon's office as follows:

The men in the drafting rooms loved Peter Keating. He made them feel as if he had been there for a long time; he had always known how to become part of any place he entered; he came soft and bright as a sponge to be filled, unresisting, with the air and the mood of the place. His warm smile, his gay voice, the easy shrug of his shoulders seemed to say that nothing weighed too much within his soul and so he was not one to blame, to demand, to accuse anything. (Rand, 2003, 45)

Keating, an architect by profession in *The Fountainhead* fails to show any originality in his art and merely produces copies of what has existed before. The names Rand chooses for the important characters in her novels are indeed symbolical. The name of 'Keating' creates a rhyme with 'cheating' which best describes his character. His psychology – the parasite in him, the second handedness he lived upon is best explained by Rand through the following lines about Keating in the novel *The Fountainhead*.

He felt nothing but immense uncertainty when his sketches were ready.... He had chosen the style of the Renaissance because he knew the unwritten law that all architectural juries liked columns, It looked good...it might be good...he was not sure. He had no one to ask. (Rand, 2003, 185)

His weakness in defending his values, reason and ability is the basic reason why he has a tendency to integrate with the society and traditions. He is loyal to the classical architecture as opposed to Howard Roark who insists upon the modern architecture emphasizing originality and innovation. Indeed, the aim of naming him "Howard Roark" is to create a rhyme with "hard



rock” in order to emphasize his loyalty to his principles- his integrity and individuality - as opposed to Peter Keating (Baker,1987, 51).

This conflict between the strong and the weak characters in her novels represent the conflict between different values - freedom, justice, self-interest, happiness, progress, rationality on one hand while slavery, injustice, suffering, sacrifice, fear, force and irrationality on the other. Instead of being judgmental, Rand is wise enough to leave the choice to the readers.

Besides the male characters, Rand’s female characters also deserve due and sincere attention. The female protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged* Dagny Taggart, has been described by Rand as "the feminine Roark" which clearly reveals her drive and desire behind creating women characters of substance and strength – both mental and moral. Her women characters are explicit in the expression of thoughts and ideas, reflect a strong value system of their own and are ready to risk their own lives in order to uphold the ideals that they value so strongly. Unconventional and radical in their thoughts and ideas, Rand’s women are confident, courageous and visionary prepared to face the consequence of their actions and decisions all by their own.

Rand’s own views about women are put clearly through the words of John Galt. Galt’s climatic speech wherein Galt outrageously condemns the restrictions and traditions imposed upon women in the name of virtue, society and religion. Galt states that women have been, since centuries, taught: “*Women’s good is to give up her personal desires, to deny herself, to renounce herself, surrender....*”

This image of ‘the virtuous woman’ – an epitome of self-sacrifice, self-denial, the selfless – has passed on from generation to generation. But Galt rejects and denounces this traditional image of woman in his speech when he asserts: “*The desire not to be anything is the desire not to be.*” (pg.961)



Thus, Rand touches upon the ultimate issue – the issue of existence. Rand’s feminist perspectives receive further and clear interpretations through Rand’s spokesman – Galt as he asserts in his speech in the *Atlas Shrugged*:

“Woman has to be woman, she has to hold her life as a value, she has to learn to sustain it, she has to discover the values it requires and practice her virtues...Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one’s values”

Thus, Rand surfaces as an outright upholder of women rights and women freedom cutting across barriers of time and place as far as feminist concerns are concerned. All of her women protagonists, be it Kira, the Golden One, Dominique or Dagny Taggart, although physically weak and fragile in appearance, stand firm on their own ground – holding to their own life, their dreams and passion, their goals and ideals. Rand’s women portray a kind of radical approach in the way they deal with issues that come their way in a collectivist society trying to curb every inch of individualism. Under the pulls and pressures of collectivism, mysticism and altruism that even Rand’s male protagonists strive hard to sustain through, her women are capable and strong enough to maintain their individual entities as human beings with a profound sense of dignity and integrity on personal as well as professional grounds. Thus, Rand’s literary craft and genius gets revealed in her ability to draw characters (though rooted in the 20th century American society) that hold persistent relevance in the past, present and the future so far as issues pertaining to women and feminism are brought under focus.

From Rand’s male characters to her female characters, another aspect worthy to be put under consideration as far as her characters are concerned is the aspect of man-woman relationship in her novel. This aspect holds not only fictional but also philosophical significance. She rejects the mind-body dichotomy which can be clearly understood by putting Dagny’s (heroine of *Atlas Shrugged*) connections under an analytical lense. Rand goes a step further as she asserts that a relationship between ‘two self-actualized equal human beings’ is



one that is raised from the mere physical to a metaphysical level, from the flesh to the spirit and from the mere worldly to a spiritual level. Such a union is and can only be possible and realized between two souls who share a similar and strong value system. Dagny, in *Atlas Shrugged*, clarifies this point as she reveals the truth about her physical relationship with Rearden over a radio broadcast as:

“It was the ultimate form of our admiration for each other, with full knowledge of the values with which we made our choice. We are those who do not disconnect the values of their minds from the actions of their bodies....” (Atlas Shrugged:792)

Thus, Rand elevates the level of sexual relationships from the ordinary to an extraordinary, spiritual and metaphysical level – from the mere union of bodies to a union of values that one looks up to in the other and vice versa. This can be observed in the relationships between the male and the female (protagonists) in almost all her novels – the initial relationship between Kira and Leo and the later one between Kira and Andrei in *We the Living*, the one between Equality and the Golden One in *Anthem*, that of Dominique and Roark in *The Fountainhead* and of course at its height in the *Atlas Shrugged*.

Rand thus rejects the typical feminine traits that women over the centuries have been carefully taught to imbibe and develop. Quite contradictorily, Rand puts forth her radical ideas through the words of Dagny in the novel *Atlas Shrugged*: *“I feel that others live up to me if they want me...” (Atlas Shrugged: 355)*

Thus, Rand elevates the level of women and inspires generations of women to stand on a firm ground, uphold the values and ideals that dignify their character and seek the fulfillment of their goals and dreams. This best relates to Rand’s vision of a heroic being leading life by productive achievement and reason in order to attain happiness.



Another aspect worthy of paying attention to as far as feminist issues are concerned is that Rand doesn't consider domestic work to be a periphery restricted to only women; neither does she consider domestic work as menial and worthless. This has been aptly portrayed by her in the utopian world created in *Atlas Shrugged* – The Galt's Gulch depicts male characters willfully having their share in the domestic chores and Rand's hits a master stroke by portraying Dagny being paid for her contribution towards domestic chores. The work done by men (labour, business or profession) is worthy and deserves respect socially because it is paid for and hence by paying Dagny for her share towards domestic chores, Rand gives a cutting edge answer to the typical mentality of the male-dominated society that has prevailed since centuries – considering domestic work to be solely a realm of women, mindless and worthless.

Her protagonists are not knights on white steeds rescuing damsels in distress, or swordsmen who can fight off a dozen enemies single-handed, but men and women in the mid-20th century industrial America of steel mills, skyscrapers, and glimmering highways: women who run transcontinental railroads and men who revolutionize architecture or build a motor powered by static electricity to produce limitless, clean energy. Her novels show the importance of striving to be the best we can be:

Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the approximate, the not-quite, the not-yet, the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but never have been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible.... (Atlas Shrugged, 1957 [1992]: 983).



Conclusion:

Her novels inspire readers because they present heroes of unbreached integrity, heroes who lead colorful and remarkable lives and succeed not in spite of, but because of, their uncompromising virtue. It also purports to show how the wrong metaphysics can lead to the wrong ethics and thus to disastrous personal choices and a disastrous political and economic system, and how the right philosophy is needed for the rebirth of the soul and the rebuilding of the world.



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