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**Withstanding the Wrongs through the Supernatural:
Anatomisation of Social Concerns in *The Magician Nephew***

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Abstract:

Fantasy literature has magical and supernatural elements. Set in an imaginary world, it serves as an indirect vehicle for the writer to discuss the issues of the real world without creating any kind of contention. The reader is able to relate the real-life concerns with the extraordinary without getting personal. The Magician's Nephew is such a fantasy by C. S. Lewis. One can locate the perpetual social concerns, through the supernatural setting and magical creatures and talking animals, that belong to both the real and the extramundane societies. Social concerns are the problems that impede social development. The study in concern considers the issues that are absorbed in the plot of the novel. These issues are exploitation of the weak, injustice, immorality, selfishness among autophiles. To master these issues, social beings need to be just in their actions, preserve morality and altruism, welcome change and work together for the development of society.

Keywords: Fantasy literature, social concerns, justice, moral values, altruism.

I. Introduction

Fantasy literature enables the reader to look at the world differently. Implicitly, it helps one to expand viewpoints and to connect fiction with reality. It acts as an instrument to propound social concerns. C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) is a fantasy that enumerates such issues through supernatural events; including the creation of the magical land of Narnia, talking animals, powerful witches, and magicians. The novel, despite its supernatural elements, outlines some of the most significant social concerns that help inculcate human values in the readers. These concerns have been textualized in such a provocative way that one is coerced to scrutinize the contrast between what should be and what should not be for the betterment of society.

II. Material and methods

The study uses the text of *The Magician's Nephew* by C.S. Lewis; research articles, website sources and books related to social concerns as material. The method is a critical analysis of the novel considering social concerns.

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III. Fantasy fiction and social concerns

Now the question arises of how fantasy fiction can showcase the social issues of society. It is described as escapist fiction, far away from reality. But, by escaping into the imaginary world of magical creatures, the writer finds it easier to relate the problems of the real world and to discuss them in a less confrontational way. As Lisa Hoover opines, “It allows the reader to think critically about equality and justice in a less personally challenging way....to think about the tough issues while still engaging in some escapism...”. By employing metaphors, the writer intends to subvert the negative social institutions that demand to be transformed for the betterment of society. Hence, Flanagan remarks,

...it comments on social reality through indirections (metaphor, allegory, parable) and can therefore deal with complex moral questions in a more playful and exaggerated manner. Fantasy also prompts young readers to play at seeing the world in different ways and accordingly teaches them to construct meaning by making connections between seemingly unrelated concepts or things...

To analyse the text at length, it is important to first understand what social concerns mean. Social issues are problems that affect a larger part of society. These are encountered by people as an intellectual conflict between what is morally good or bad in their personal or social lives. It has been described by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing as “a condition or behaviour that has negative consequences for large numbers of people and that is generally recognized as a condition or behaviour that needs to be addressed.” Such negative attributions can be inequality, racial injustice, poverty, social health etc.

A. Exploitation of the Weaker section of Society:

The novel in question canvasses social concerns like exploitation of the weaker section of society, lack of moral values, selfishness, need for change and comradeship. It is conferred at length how these issues may prove to be the nemesis. Alongside the problems, the novelist also proposes remedies such as being just, morally sound, selfless, empathetic, and open to change. He has, furthermore, used the imaginary magic world as a foil to the real

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world. Where good and evil forces work parallelly through the prominent characters of the novel. The antagonist characters of Jadis and Uncle Andrew are corrupted. They put their selfish needs on the upper hand. They represent the unrighteous leaders for whom self-gain is more important than the amelioration of the weaker sections. What they want is not in favour of society. Thus, their actions usually lead to disruptive results for the people around them. Whereas, Aslan and Digory uphold goodness. They cherish values and believe that one is born to serve others. They, furthermore, broach a vivid polarity with Jadis and Andrew. Hence, through these characters, Lewis echoes the idea that society will progress only if all the members work together selflessly for it and stick up for the good cause.

Justice for One and All:

C.S. Lewis throughout his works propagated justice for one and all. The major social concern of this novel is the exploitation of the unprivileged at the hands of the affluent. It is observed that society progresses if equality and social justice are valued. As for justice, it means being socially equitable when it comes to fundamental rights; access to food, shelter, healthcare and education; Participation and expression by each citizen; and equity for all the members of society (Soken-Huberty). In simple words, social justice is a state where all have equal rights and opportunities to communicate and progress, where individual and social interests are harmonised. It brings about fairness among various dimensions of society. Moreover, “social oppression” would exist if social justice is not incorporated into the system. In addition, social injustice or oppression is exploitation and infringement of “a group’s rights, marginalize their opportunities or treat them unfairly...”(Online MSW Programs) that hinders any possibility for social development.

Creating a Cordial and Safe world:

The novel revolves around the idea of creating a cordial and safe world by Aslan where all can live in peace and rejoice. While Jadis uses ‘the deplorable word’ to destroy the world of Charn, only to rule in solus (Lewis 77). She exploits and kills each who comes in her way of conquering the world and becomes the sole sovereign of the ruins of Charn...

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“...remember what you have seen. This is what happens to things, and to people, who stand in my way”- Jadis (Lewis 74). She believes it to be her right to use her subjects as she pleases... “I was the Queen. They were all *my* people. What else were they there for but to do my will?” (Lewis 78). Uncle Andrew echoes Jadis in the unmagical world of London when he uses little children Polly and Digory as his test subjects in his experiment of finding a new magical world with golden rings dabbled with magic. He does not care for the safety of these children or the animals he has used to examine his theories. Instead, he, like Jadis, narrates their plight with immense joy and pride. But he is afraid when confronted by Digory to go ‘there’ on his own... “A man at my time of life, and in my state of health, to risk the shock and the dangers of being flung suddenly into a different universe?” (Lewis 33). Thus, both of the characters see the people as a means to some end; they even do not pay any attention to the one who is not of any use to them (Lewis 91).

On the other hand, Aslan and Digory condemn these manipulations of the innocent folk and fight for their rights. Aslan while creating the new world of Narnia, gives the ‘power of speech’ to his selected pairs of animals among all the animals and commands them to use this for justice and merriment:

The dumb beasts whom I have not chosen are yours also. Treat them gently and cherish them, but do not go back to their ways lest you cease to be talking beasts. For out of them you were taken and into them, you can return... For jokes as well as justice come in with speech...” (Lewis 141).

Digory, at times, vocalises his empathy for the ones that have lost their lives at the hands of these exploiters. Lewis has plied Digory with a conscience that compares the uprightness and turpitude of the characters around him. Through these incidents, Lewis sets forth his ideas for the melioration of society.

B. Lack of Moral values:

The second social concern, Lewis talks about is the lack of moral values. He is of the view that the development of society depends on the values that its members adhere to. Moral

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values are the ethical teachings that lead a human being on the right path and help differentiate between right and wrong. For instance, honesty, truth, respect, love, selflessness, kindness, and forgiveness are crucial for building social relations. According to Bentham and Hazlitt, they help maximize happiness and joy in people's lives. It acts as a guiding principle to their behaviour and intellect while dealing in society. Because these values teach patience and composure which helps in resolving conflicts without any resentment and grudges. Hence, a peaceful society enjoys a boost in productivity and standard of life, resulting in the well-being of its citizens.

Struggle between Good and Evil:

With reference to the novel, the constant struggle between good and evil brings out the moral values that are crucial for a harmonious world. Aslan epitomizes a benevolent leader who works selflessly for the good of his people. In his orations, he often encourages his subjects to make peace with each other. He praises Polly for forgiving Digory to handle her rudely in the ruins of Charn. Aslan coronates the new King and Queen of Narnia and demands of them to "... rule these creatures kindly and fairly, remembering that they are not slaves like the dumb beasts of the world you were born in, but talking beasts and free subjects" (Lewis 166).

Digory is an embodiment of moral values. Digory always keeps his promises even if the situations are against him. He confronts Uncle Andrew for not keeping his word to bury the secret box unopened. Later on, when Jadis asks her to steal the Apple of Youth for himself to be immortal like her or for his sickening mother, he is a little hesitant thinking about the possibility of curing his mother with the magical fruit. But he is determined to do good by his mother... "Don't you think I see? But I - I promised... Mother herself wouldn't like it - awfully strict about keeping promises - and not stealing... She'd tell me not to do it..." (Lewis 194). He has promised to be beside Polly and he supports her throughout his adventure. Thus, when Jadis tells him to leave Polly behind and lie about stealing the apple, he lashes out. He comes through and brings the apple from the 'Garden of Youth' in the 'Western Wild' for the Narnians. Even in the end, with his honesty, he wins Aslan's heart and

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returns for his dying mother curing her with the 'Apple of Youth'. He even forgives Uncle Andrew for his misdeeds when he sees a changed man in him. He, overall, is a virtuous character who triumphs over evils like theft, murdering someone to gain power and breaking promises etc. and holds the beacon of moral values for the society.

Whereas Jadis evinces a selfish and cruel yet powerful queen and Uncle Andrew, a mercenary. Both of them have their way and never think of anyone else in the process. They don't even have a second thought before killing someone for the cause. For instance, Uncle Andrew wants to find a new world so that he can get famous. Later on, when he witnessed the sprouting of the iron lamppost from the place where Jadis has struck the iron rod she had accidentally brought from London, he thinks of ways to make money out of it.

Bring a few old bits of scrap iron here, bury 'em, and up they come as brand-new railway engines, battleships... they'll cost nothing... I shall be a millionaire. And then the climate!... I can run it as a health resort, a good sanatorium here might be worth twenty thousand a year... The first thing is to get that brute shot... (Lewis 133).

To have everything for himself, he denies abruptly when Digory asks if he could help cure Digory's mother with these rejuvenating properties of Narnia.

However, they employ all sorts of treacheries to get things done. Uncle Andrew tricks Polly into touching the magical golden ring and transporting her into the limbo, the secluded place between the worlds. Jadis is not behind, she tries her best to lure Digory into eating the magical apple. At times, to serve her purpose, she even feigns weakness. They presume that they are not only far away from any liability or morality, but are also free from it:

Rules of that sort, however excellent they may for little boys – and servants – and women – and even people in general, can't possibly be expected to apply to profound students and great thinkers and sage... Men like me, who possess hidden wisdom, are freed from common rules... Ours is a high and lonely destiny- Uncle Andrew (Lewis 28).

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What would be wrong for you or for any of the common people is not wrong in a great queen such as I. The weight of the world is on our shoulders. We must be freed from all rules. Ours is a high and lonely destiny. -Jadis (Lewis 78).

Thus, these characters highlight the traits that confirm the downfall of oneself and decay for society, just as the fall of the world of Charn. Vocalising Aslan, Lewis expresses his fear for the real world. Aslan gives a warning to Polly and Digory to be upright lest "... it is not certain that some wicked one of your race will not find out a secret evil as the deplorable word and use it to destiny all living things..." (Lewis 211).

C. Selflessness is Indispensable to the Growth of a Society:

Thirdly, Lewis emphasizes that selflessness is indispensable to the growth of a society. The selfish deeds by the members of society, especially the leaders to whom people look up for direction, confirms the imminent labefaction. Kara Lydon (2021) remarks that selflessness can lead to happiness. Happiness leads to prosperity, a sense of having more than what is needed. As for happiness, it is a state of joy, relief and contentment, when one feels safe from any kind of harm, be it physical or mental. It is part of ethics that implies as Aristotle puts it... it is desired for its sake and not for anything else's; it contents all the wishes but has no evil whim at its root; and lastly, it is stable. Hence happiness is a positive attribute. According to Dalai Lama, one can achieve happiness by making peace with others and one's inner self. This is only possible if one pegs away in the service of others. Thus, for Dalai Lama, happiness creates a positive environment that is contagious and leads to the creation of a harmonious world. As for, being altruistic signifies acting without thinking about one's profit. A selfless person cares more about the well-being of others and works for them out of emotions and love. The basis for helping others out is not to satisfy one's ego and get popular by doing such social works. It helps one to have a sense of bonding with others, a feeling that each of the members is important "...to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan et al.). This improves human relationships and ultimately prompt others to

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reciprocate in the same loving and caring gesture. Hence, in the end, the world will be a happy place.

On the opposite, self-obsession harms society. Selfish people tend to alienate themselves and become paranoid. They think that keeping the needs of others over one's own will somehow cumber theirs' (Patel 2020). Harming others to satisfy their whims furthermore damages the hope for the communal uplift of society.

In the novel, characters like Aslan and Digory act selflessly for the happiness of others. They are empathetic even towards the darkest of the souls. Digory feels for Jadis when she looks sickly and pale in the wood between the worlds. To see her gasping for breath, Digory commiserates. His sense of bonding with all the living creatures, his friendship with Polly and his wish for the well-being of his kith and kin, highlight his caring nature. Both of the children lament for the lost lives in the destruction of Charn. They never fear to deplore, at several intervals, the wrong-doings of the vicious. Moreover, the inscription on the golden gate of the Garden of Youth, also, reverberates the need for a sense of community:

Come in by the gold gates or not at all,
Take of my fruit for others or forbear,
For those who steal or those who climb my wall
Shall find their heart's desire and find despair. (Lewis 187).

Besides, Aslan demystifies that one can achieve pleasure through wrong and immoral means, or by fleecing innocent people of their resources. But this delight is short-lived and it brings agony for the lifetime.

Selfish people put themselves before everything and vanquish everything that comes in their way. Thus, in the end, they are left alone. After eating the Apple of Youth, Jadis does get her heart's desire to be invincible and indestructible but she lost her innocence and beauty "...her face was deadly white, white as salt..." (Lewis 191). In the same way, Uncle Andrew

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obtains the hidden magic from within the box. But in the process, he loses his youth and turns into a grey-haired “pantomime demon” (Lewis 21). Even the world of Charn becomes a “dead, cold” ruin that was once a “wonder of the world”, where there is “...no ants or spiders or any other living things... no grass or moss,” except an “empty silence”; (Lewis 56-75). Jadis had wanted Charn for herself, so she kills even her sister to have the throne. Using the deplorable word, she annihilates all and becomes the only soul. Her desire to be all-powerful ended her up being lonely. Later on, even Digory turns her down when she asks him to eat the Apple of Youth and be with her as her King. It is worth a thought that even when she is supreme and absolute, she still needs someone to resurrect her from a lifeless statue that the sinister spell had turned her into. Being alone is not an option, one requires the other at some point in life.

Selfishness stops one from enjoying the pleasantries of life. Jadis and Uncle Andrew no longer hear the sweet song of Aslan but it seems appalling to them. What is music to the ears of all, is a growling beastly sound to them. Jadis cannot enjoy the sweet fragrance of the silver apple tree, as she had taken it by force and misdeed. Hence, for her “...length of the days with an evil heart is only length of misery...” (Lewis 208).

D. The theme of Immortality: Change vs. Stagnation

Fourthly, the theme of immortality is an appeal for change and newness. For Lewis change represents the growth of society, in terms of “human interactions, relationships, behaviour patterns, and cultural norms” (UoPeople). These changes construct the new rules and advanced social mechanisms that affect society in the distant future. For instance, formerly, women had no right to vote, but today they are being selected as the senate members and even Prime ministers and presidents i.e., Mrs Indra Gandhi (PM, India 1966-1977 and 1980-1984), Samia Suluhu Hassan (President, Tanzania April 2021) etc. With change comes cognizance. It spreads knowledge within society that leads to increased awareness among its citizens. Owing to this, they make decisions and learn in the process, what has been done right and what, wrong. Hence, through change only, a society progresses.

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In the novel, change is hampered through magical phenomena. Jadis acquires immortality by consuming the Apple of Youth. Since she has become unkillable, her strengths and pride accentuate. She will "...never get old or die..." (Lewis 193). Now she aspires to become the sole empress of the whole world for an eternity. Thus, immortality brings stagnation for her and she craves the same for all.

Immortality has always been a supreme desire of human beings from time immemorial. People have yearned for physical immortality. They have always yearned to be like the immortal gods with a physical body. Hence, the quests of alchemists for "the philosopher's stone" (Paracelsus); the pursuits of the Caribbean people for "the fountain of youth" and the Chinese for "peaches of immortality" or "the elixirs of life" that grants eternal youth, throughout the mythical legends of the world. In Hinduism, it is known as "Amrita" which was churned out of the holy Ganges by the Devas, with the help of Vasuki. In Japanese mythology, it is termed as "ochimizu" or "waters of rejuvenation" that was in the possession of the moon god (Naumann 133). "Aab-i-Hayat" meaning "water of life" and "Chashma-i-Kausar" meaning "Fountain of Bounty" are found in the Muslim scriptures which grant immortality (I. K. Poonawala). Thus, looking back at history, human beings have consistently tried to gain immortality, a boon by God Himself.

But in the concerned novel, the writer has challenged the traditional concept of eternal life and has described it as obnoxious and lonely. For him, it equals doldrums. It is a hint at the introduction of modernity in the novel. One is reminded of Mahadevi Verma's beautiful lines on the worthlessness of immortality in her poem "Adhikaar" which means 'Such is your world...'. She writes that immortality hinders the emergence of something new. Moreover, true delight can be relished by the one who has experienced pain, negativity is always followed by positivity. One enjoys the warmth of spring because the cold winter has ended. Hence, change begets novelty and joy. Such is the character of Digory, who declines Jadis's offer to share immortality with her; "No thanks..." he says, "I don't know that I care much about living on and on after everyone I know is dead. I'd rather live an ordinary time and die and go to Heaven..." (Lewis 193).

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Uncle Andrew was a mean character, but he is embraced by society only because, he changes. His little adventure with the animals in Narnia, when they mistake him for a tree and try to plant him in the sand, has taught him a lesson "... in his old age he became a nicer and less selfish man than he had ever been..." (Lewis 220). In addition, if the thunderstorm had never destroyed the apple tree that had sprung from the silver apple core planted by Digory, there would have been no wardrobe for Lucy, Edmond, Jane and Peter to enter Narnia. Therefore, one thing ends and makes way for something new to start.

E. Progress of Society is a Joint effort:

Lastly, C. S. Lewis implies that the progress of society is a joint effort. It cannot be achieved at an individual level, but all the members of society would have to work together to achieve it. The development of society refers to the productivity, health, and well-being of its inhabitants. It is only possible if each member works with the other to help the weaker section rise. It is about eliminating differences whether they are of religion, culture, race, or status (GNB). For instance, if one wants the Corona pandemic to end, they all must work together, follow the safety instructions, and get vaccinated. Suppose one is cured of the disease and he/she starts roaming about the society without taking precautions, he/she is putting others and himself/herself again at the risk of infection.

Aslan, in the novel, propagates a sense of togetherness for the growth of society, occasionally, in his speeches. He adjures the Narnians to take care of the Tree of Protection and keep each other safe. As the evil of self-centeredness has been won over but it still exists. To fight it, benevolence and benignity are crucial. He asks Caby and his wife to deem all as their children and not to have "favourites either among your own children or among the other creatures or let any hold another under or use it hardly..." (Lewis 166).

IV. Results and Discussions

To surmise, fantasy literature helps sensitize people towards the social concerns prevailing in society. The Magician's Nephew is a fantasy novel that promulgates the idea that society is pivotal for an individual's growth. If one wants to flourish, then he/she would

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have to work for the prosperity of society. Because, when society thrives, every single citizen of it also progresses with it. By propounding the above-mentioned social concerns, in C.S. Lewis' text, the concerned study affirms that they are harmful to the development of society, hence should be surmounted with the given solutions. Working for the progress of society, its citizens should observe justice and equity for all the strata of society, moral values, selflessness, acceptance for change and a sense of togetherness are prioritized, then the advancement of society is outright.

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