Man’s Joyful Humanity in the Midst of Inhuman Trails: A Reading on Dominique Lapierre’s *The City of Joy*

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Abstract

True art is concerned with the presentation of neither the absolute truth nor the exposure of facts and figures, it is entirely a different thing more internal than external, more aesthetic than physical. A novel is the work of art in so far as it is introduced into a living world. The novelist seeks his inspiration both from his observation of life as well as from his personal experiences. French literature has been for French people an object of national pride for centuries as it is one of the most brilliant and most influential components of the Western literature. French novelist Dominique Lapierre’s novel *The City of Joy* is an epic about the soul of humanity in the midst of inhuman trials; a song of love, a hymn to life, a lesson in tenderness and hope for all people for all times. The story of this book was acclaimed as a vibrant message of courage and hope.
True art presents the truth, not through dry and monotonous way but through rich symbolism and imagery, structure and design. It should also be from the class and creed, the odds and the peculiarities and above all, the impurities of the mind which hamper the progress of art. In other words, creating true art is not an easy task but an arduous and tenuous process where the body have to be surrendered for the rise of the soul or where the waves of the mind has to be controlled by purging the doss of desire through regular practice. Art, thus, churned out from this process becomes a true art, a universal art which is beyond time and place.

*The City of Joy* is Lapierre’s well-received account of the trials and tribulations of the Indian poor and the sub continent’s humanitarian issues. The story is based on the real life experiences of a rickshaw puller Hasari Pal and a Polish priest Stephen Kovalsky, who fulfilled his spiritual calling to serve the poor and the experiences of a young, American doctor, Marlowe in a slum in Calcutta. Lapierre stresses the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized and the dispossessed. This story concerns men, women, and children who have been uprooted from their homes by implacable nature and hostile circumstances, and thrown into a city whose capacity for hospitality has been pushed beyond imagining. This is a story about how people learn, despite incredibly difficult odds, to survive, to share and to love. Lapierre and his wife financed a regular aid for the slum children of Calcutta through local NGOs.
This book unfolds the experiences of the author during his frequent stays in Calcutta:

In these slums people actually put love and mutual support into practice. They knew how to be tolerant of all creeds and castes, how to give respect to a stranger, how to show charity towards beggars, cripples, lepers and even the insane. Here the weak were helped, not trampled upon. Orphans were instantly adopted by their neighbours and old people were cared for and revered by their children. (44)

Father Stephan joins a religious order whose vows put them in the most hellish places on earth. He chooses not only to serve the poorest of the poor in Calcutta but also to live with them, and if God will it, die with them. “He wasn’t just a Passing Visitor but one of them, they gave him the most affectionate nickname in their vocabulary, that of ‘Daddah Stepha’, Big Brother Stephan” (96). He begins his life in Anand Nagar or the City of Joy, one of the many slums that have much roomed across the megacity. In the beginning Stephan finds life hard in that seeming hell of one of the poorest and most crowded quarters of Calcutta, but as he gets to know the slum dwellers he find more heroism, more love and ultimately more happiness than in many a city of the West.

Above all, he discovers that the slum had the magical ability to fashion Saints. He lives in the slum, sharing the same life as the others living there, in a shack without proper ventilation and no electricity or light, infested with rats, cockroaches, spiders and surrounded by filth. He helped them all and people of Anand Nagar adored him and
cherished him calling him a Saint, a precious gift sent to them by the Almighty. “Some
offered a bucket, others a mat, an oil lamp. The poorer they were, the more eager they
were to give” (64). He in turn found some exceptional human beings who made a great
impact on his life and shared with him everything that they possibly could, inspite of their
utter poverty, people who made the slum an unusual place with their spirits and outlook
towards life.

It also narrates how a peasant farmer Hasari Pal arrives in Calcutta with his family
after a drought wipes out the farming village where his family has lived for generations.
“Gone was the sound of children’s laughter their small stomachs swelled up like balloons
and several of them died, the victims of worms, diarrhea and fever – yet in reality victims
of hunger” (19). Calcutta is described as an inhuman city and dying city. The City of Joy
was a place where the most extreme economic poverty ran rife. Hasari Pal says of
rickshaw pullers as “there are even human horses in Calcutta” (25). The third main
character is a rich American doctor who has just finished medical school and wants to do
something with purpose before opening up his practice catering to the wealthy.

The book chronicles not only the separation of the wealthy from the poor but the
separation of the different levels of poverty, caste divisions and the differences of the
many religions living side by side in the slums. It touches on Mother Teresa and her
sisters of Mercy as well. Lapierre talks about suffering, poverty, corruption and child
labour of India in this novel. Even Aravind Adiga in his debut novel The White Tiger
reveals two kinds of India – India of Light and India of Darkness. He talks about corruption and poverty in India in that novel.

Despite facing hunger, deplorable living conditions, illness, bone breaking work and death, the people still hold on to the belief that life is precious and worth living, so much so that named their slum Anand Nagar which is translated into English as The City of Joy. Anand Nagar is full of life. There are celebrations, festivities of all religions. People sell blood, nearly kill themselves or do just about anything to earn a few rupees to pool in for these community celebrations and at the same time they also come together in times of need and suffering.

The representations in literary texts can also be seen as the reflectors of reality. Dominique Lapierre’s work provides fragmentary views instead of one ultimate interpretation, which is an illusionary exploitation of the unitary work. The nature of representation is the most important issue in the understanding of humanity. Lapierre stresses the embeddedness of literature in historical circumstances. *The City of Joy* is a story about how people learn despite incredibly difficult odds to survive, to share and to love. It is about suffering yet it has wonderfully leaven loyalty, kindness, tolerance, generosity, patience, faith and even holiness. It is a lesson of hope and faith for the world.
Work Cited

