

Chapter - IV

CLAY : A MEANING OF IT ALL

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I

Clay is the story of the second phase of Joyce's literary career. It deals with Maria. She is a very small statured, rather ugly looking old spinster.

"... she had a very long nose and a very long chin."¹

She works at a laundry. She does not like people quarreling. She tries to keep peace everywhere. She extends her co-operation to all workers. Everyone appreciates her. Maria has two brothers. She takes care of them. They are independent now. They are married and they are living separately. Maria is now living independently. She is free to do her work. Joe and Alphy are two brothers. Joe wants Maria to live with them. Joe's wife is nice with her. Maria does not like to live with them. She is now accustomed to this kind of life. Joe respects and regards her as : "proper mother".

Formerly Maria had bad opinions of protestants, but the changed circumstances have made her think of them as very nice people. She loves plants and takes care of them. She remembers her days as a young girl. She enjoys the company of women and they crack jokes. Even when Lizzie Fleming says that Maria is sure to get the ring at the Hallow Eve, she laughs at them at every moment. This makes her inwardly happy. Because ring signifies marriage, and she enjoys the feeling of happiness. She remembers the old days and enjoys the comments. Later she becomes meditative. It seems that at every incident she become introspective. She stands before the mirror and traces her waning beauty. It is on the fading slope but she is beautiful.

She learns that her brothers are quarrelled. And inorder to bring them together she goes to Joe's house. She reminds the childhood days of her brothers. They use to play together as friends. She takes a cake with her to give to Joe's children. When she enters, the shop to purchase cake, the stylish young lady behind the counter curiously asks her whether she wants to purchase the wedding cake. At this she blushed and smiled. Another kind of experience she gets in the tram. When she enters tram she notices that young men do not notice her, but an elderly

gentleman makes a room for her. He is :

"a stout gentleman and he wore a brown hard hat; he had a square red face and a greyish moustache."²

The gentleman begins to talk with her. He sees the bag of Maria and inquisitively asks her whether it is full of things for children. He tells her :

"the youngsters should enjoy themselves while they were young."³

And he compliments her. He is very polite in his behaviour. It makes her feel about him. It makes her shy.

When she reaches Joe's house, she notices children playing. She hands over the bag of cakes to the eldest boy Alphy. She has another plum cake for Joe. But she realizes that she has lost it somewhere in the journey. Joe tells her not to worry about the cake. Mrs. Donnelly plays the piano and they dance. When Joe and Maria talk about their past they enjoy it. But when she asks about Alphy, Joe becomes angry with her. He does not listen to

her and he does not agree with her. Maria is upset. She wants her brothers to be together.

Later the girls arrange some games and soon everything becomes full of happiness. Children begins to play the game of blindfold. They insist on her to play with them. There are several saucers containing in them some things like a prayer book, a ring. These signifying some religious and moral concepts. A ring suggests the ring that is offered in marriage. Further in order to bring liveliness in the game, the children add one mere saucer containing "soft wet substance", clay on the table. When she touches one of the saucers, she feels a soft wet substance in it. But before unfolding her eyes, she is asked to touch another saucer. At this second attempt she gets the prayer book. The whole atmosphere fills with happiness. At the end when children grew tired Joe asks Maria to sing a song. She sings a song. "I Dreamt that I Dwelt". The song is about a dream of a girl. She sings only the first part of it. And further without going to the second part, reiterates the first only. Though the listeners realise the mistake but no one informs her about this. Joe is moved by this song. His eyes filled with tears. He realizes how Maria is deprived of many joys

and happiness in her life. How she is leading lonely and dull life.

Maria is disappointed in her life. Like clay she is formless and flexible too ! She symbolises both life and death, existence and end. It seems that she also stands for Ireland. Ireland in those days was economically, politically, socially and culturally paralysed. Joyce focuses this condition of Ireland through the symbols of Maria in this story.

Maria sometimes signifies church in the story. She wants peace everywhere. Joyce further tries to compare her with Virgin Mary. She is a spinster. Her life is divided into reality and dream. She is a poor creature who endures only through out the life. Her tragedy is that with her maternal and domestic virtues, she remains a spinster.

II

Maria can be interpreted on many levels. She is both Halloween witch or the Virgin Mary. Maria's activities are described very minutely in the story. It is a naturalistic story. She is the symbol of family and also she stands for church, she is not a witch in reality. Joe finds in her a proper mother. She has motherly qualities in her, she brings cakes for small children. She signifies church.

Joyce portrays her as the symbol of Ireland. Joyce is influenced by the Irish movement. When Maria lost her cake in the tram, it denotes the nation of shopkeepers (Londoners) takes her cake (Ireland). Through the quarrel between Joe and Alphy, Joyce signifies the quarrel among the Irish people. Maria tries to bring peace among them. She works in a laundry and she is well-accustomed with condition of the working class in England. She is disappointed in her life but never shows it outwardly.

The incidents like her buying the cake in the shop, her encounter with the man in a tram, her part in the game of blindfold. Signifies the meaning of her all. She is a spinster and works for others. She is the peacemaker and

tries to be happy in the company of others. When she finds lonely and unnoticed.

Her eyes sparkle with disappointed shyness."⁴

She can not forget the man she met on a tram. She recalls :

"... how confused the gentleman with the greyish moustache had made her coloured with shame and vexation and disappointment."⁵

Maria is projected as a woman who endures everything calmly. The story ends on an anticlimactic note.

"Her epiphany comes when she is called upon to sing 'I Dreamt that I Dwelt' in Marble Halls. Despite her poverty and her humble position in the laundry, she sings of marble halls, vassals and serfs, riches and a high ancestral name."⁶

Maria is a woman who has sacrificed herself for others and some where in the core of her heart she feels for herself too. The story is :

"... very like a bottle for which someone has hidden the corkscrew"⁷

Clay is an experimental story. Joyce uses here free indirect style. He gives here the naturalistic picture of Dubliners lower class family life. Her suffering, endurance, and silence speaks much than her utterance. Her passive, silent behaviour gives meaning to all her actives more obviously than anything else in the story.

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1. Joyce, James. Dubliners, London : Jonathan Cape, 1970, p.97.
2. Ibid, p.100.
3. Ibid, p.100
4. Peake, C.H. James Joyce : The Citizen and the Artist, London : Edward Arnold, 1977, p.32.
5. Joyce, James. Dubliners, London : Jonathan Cape, 1970, p.101.
6. Peake, C.H. James Joyce : The Citizen and the Artist, London : Edward Arnold, 1977, p.32.
7. Patrick, Purrinder. James Joyce : Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p.53.
