

CHAPTER -II

Empire of the Sun-
Fantasy and Realism

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The story, is based on J.G. Ballard's actual experiences, is about a young British teenager who lives with his parents in Shanghai at the eve of Pearl Harbor and is then interned by the Japanese from 1942-1945 in the Lunghua prison camp near Shanghai. It is truly mesmerizing, in the negative sense unfortunately, because of the countless moments of inherent evil that arose as a result of war. The places- airfield runways made of bones of dead Chinese, a make- shift cemetery full of corpses with extremities sticking out, canals full of dead bodies, floating flower coffins with Chinese babies the people- an opportunistic American soldiers who profits from death, Japanese soldiers bent on brutality, an American doctor who does everything to save the sick and dying the indifference of a British women to a sick boy and events- the killing of a Chinese coolie, the never ending deaths of sick prisoners, the death march to Nantao – exemplify that evil and are described with such incredible detail and clarity as to be almost permanently engraved in the mind of the reader.

The story opens in Shanghai's International Settlement the day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Eleven- year – old Jim is everything one could want in a hero – affectionate, tireless, brave and more curious about life than a research biologist. Jim is the only child of a British textile industrialist who has kept his family on in Shanghai long after many British dependents have fled the threat of the Japanese domination of China. Yet even with the Japan- China war going on all around, Jim continues to enjoy the luxuries of the European community- chauffeurs, swimming pools, lawn parties, private schools. He is not unaware of the staggering desperation of the China that presses legless beggars against the front gate and daily exhibits public strangling; but he has learned to accept cruelty as the real world. Meanwhile, Jim has a secret life in which he roams Shanghai on his bicycle and a life of day-dreams in which he soars in a fighter plane. He aches to fly, and can identify both with the Spitfire pilots in the propaganda films about the

Battle of Britain he sees after church and with the Japanese pilots he has seen swooping over Shanghai in zeros emblazoned with the rising sun.

The war crashes upon Jim and the Europeans in China. Jim awakes Monday morning to study for an examination only to witness, accidentally, the Japanese sneak attack on British and American warships on the Shanghai waterfront that is time to coincide with the raid on Pearl Harbor. Instantly the panic that follows makes Jim the fair equal of all adults, and in a short time he is alone, separated from his parents. For four months, Jim struggles in a netherworld, grubbing for food in abandoned homes, fleeing slavery and death on his bicycle. Slowly he realizes that the Japanese are his only protectors in China. And with the hope of an innocent, Jim submits to the detention camps. His opinion of the Japanese is an ambivalent. He admires their courage and fears their brutality; he also knows that the Japanese are capable of mercy toward children. In fact, Jim has understood very early on that 'in a real war no one knew which side he was on, and there were no flags or commentators or winners. In a real there were no enemies'.

In the second and third parts of the novel Ballard reaches beyond the survivors manuals. On one level Jim grows for three years into a resourceful prisoner who can thrive in a world turned upside down, learning how to hoard food, hustle for favors and ingratiate him with the moral and immoral authorities of the camp. But on a deeper level in the closing months of the war, Jim is precocious enough to recognize the emergence of a new specter of mass extinction. Ballard evokes the panorama of the apocalypse and then to plunge Jim and the reader into a genuine nightmare. Here is the stench of the dead, stacked like wood, the brackish test of river water polluted by corpses floating nearby, the strange singsong of peasants crying in frustration because they know they are about to be beaten to death. And there are scenes that are not believable except that they feel entirely real. Jim sees teen-age Kamikaze Pilots crawl into their shabby planes without any more ceremony than the bored farewell of three other teen-age soldiers. He watches shallow graves deteriorate exposing corpses that tempt the starving remnant as meat. And in August 1945, after a death march to the Olympic Stadium outside Shanghai with the guards and the prisoners alike envying the sleep of the dead, Jim watches what he recognizes as the birth of a new

empire of the sun that usurps Japan's setting star. In the sky to the northeast of Shanghai, he sees a flash that momentarily overwhelms the dawn and floods the stadium with an odd light. Five hundred miles across the China Sea, Nagasaki has just been annihilated by the atomic bomb.

It would be comforting to say that Jim's story closes happily when he once again embraces his parents by their drained swimming pool. He has survived in the war by luck, and he has survived the end of the Japanese because canisters of spam and powdered milk were dropped by the bomb. However, Jim is not persuaded that the war is really over. He is equally uncertain what kind of world awaits him as he sails from China to England.

Fantasy in *Empire of the Sun*

Fantasy is usually employed to designate a "conscious breaking free from experienced reality" (Holman 1960: 198) as Pellizzi defines it. The term is applied to a work which takes place in a non-existent and unreal world, such as fairyland, or concerns incredible and unreal characters or employs physical and scientific principles not yet discovered or contrary to present experiences as in science fiction and utopian fiction. Fantasy may be employed merely for the whimsical delight of author or reader, or it may be the means used by the author for serious comments on reality. The most sustained example of fantasy of author's serious comments on World War II and its effects on child like Jim are reflected in the novel, *Empire of the Sun* by J.G. Ballard. In this sense John Calvin Batchelor comments on the story of *Empire of the Sun*

"Yet this novel is much more than the gritty story of a child's miraculous survival in the grimly familiar setting of World War II's concentration camps. There is no nostalgia for a good war here, no sentimentality for the human spirit at extremes. Mr. Ballard is more ambitious than romance usually allows. He aims to render a vision of the apocalypse, and succeeds so well that it can hurt to dwell upon his images. For Mr. Ballard seems to be against all armies and the ideologies that mobilize troops; he seems also to believe that the horror of his youth

ended only when World War III began with a nuclear sunburst over Nagasaki". (Batchelor 1984:2)

I agree with this comment because World War II has affected greatly on the life of Jim. With the threat of war, the most of the European women and children have been evacuated to Hong Kong and Singapore. One more example I can quote from the novel. *Empire of the Sun* for this purpose. Fantasy is used as the means by author for serious comments on reality. When Jim threw himself into his imagination of the Japanese pilots and the wreckages of their fighter planes. When he revisited the 1937 battlefield of the Chinese armies and recalled the bodies of the dead and floating in the canals.

"They lined the verges of the roads and floated in the canals, jammed together around the pillars of the bridges. In the trenches between the burial mounds hundred of dead soldiers sat side by side with their heads against the torn earth, as if they had fallen asleep together in a deep dream of war". (Ballard 1984: 20)

The above passage traces or shows the stark real picture of Shanghai during Second World War. The same point is traced by William Boyd in his easy *A Unique Vision-*

"However, the narrator is pressed into delivering a truckload of corpses to a Shanghai cemetery- a ghoulisj journey which soon takes on the aspects of a nightmare, proceeds through the wasted landscape with a curious intense relationship steadily developing between him and his decomposing cargo". (Boyd 1984: 12)

So Ballard has used fantasy as the means for serious comments on reality. The whole novel is based on real experiences of author during the Second World War at Shanghai.

The word fantasy is both a literary and a psychological term. As a literary term a fantasy means any narrative that deals with impossible. As a psychological term fantasy has three meanings. The first

meaning is an imaginative construction which in some way or other pleases the patient and is mistaken by him for reality. This kind of fantasy we find in *Empire of the Sun*. On the way to the camp Jim was happy with his excitement and freedom. He made sure the truck kept moving north, watching the sun's angle as he learned to do at the detention center. Once again Jim was viewing the world from the vantage point of this prisoner truck, as he passed villages, old ceramics works and burned out tenement blocks. At that moment he was enjoying the war and only wished the prisoners could feel the same. But other prisoners were in terrible condition and not able to see Jim's perspective. Because Jim was living in dreamy world and he wanted to escape from stark reality of the war. In other words we can say that Jim was pleasing himself in imaginary world and was mistaken by him for reality.

“The strange dislocations appealed to Jim. For the first time he felt able to enjoy the war. He gazed happily at the burnt out trams and tenement blocks, at the thousands of doors open to the clouds, a deserted city invaded by the sky. It only disappointed him that his fellow prisoners failed to share his excitement. They sat glumly on the benches, staring at their feet” (Ballard 1984: 96)

The above passage shows that the other prisoners are living in real world and Jim is living in imaginary world that is he has mistaken the reality.

The second type of fantasy is a pleasing imaginative construction entertained incessantly, and to his injury, by the patient, but without the delusion that it is a reality. A waking dream- known to be such by the dreamer- of military or erotic triumphs, of power or grandeur, even of mere popularity, is either monotonously reiterated or elaborated year by year. In my opinion this activity is morbid castle-building. This kind of day-dreaming we find in *Empire of the Sun*. With the threat of war, the most of the European women and children have been evacuated to Hong- Kong and Singapore. But Jim's family remains in Shanghai. While riding his bicycle through the streets of Shanghai, he day-dreams of is being a fighter pilot like the Japanese pilots that fly over the city. The same kind of fantasy also find in another incident in the life of Jim. When Jim was sent to hospital and had been waiting for three days to be

released. The hospital was guarded by the Japanese. The sky above Shanghai was filled with aircrafts and Jim listened to the guard trying to name them. Jim thought about his parents and hoped they would come to visit him. At that night Jim was not able to sleep because of the memory of his parents and more about his mother.

“Jim sat on the bed, facing the star like image of him that radiated from the centre of the full-length glass, and pieces of him seemed to fly across the room, scattered through the empty house”. (Ballard 1984: 44)

In my opinion, the memories of Jim’s parents were dominant in the mind of Jim. And that is why he was not able to forget them. Because of the strong memories, Jim day-dreamed about his mother’s presence in the room. J.G. Ballard loved his parents very much. His love for his parents is described in his book *Miracles of Life* as-

“For the First time in my life I was extremely close to my parents. At home we had our own bedrooms and bathrooms. I had never seen my parents naked or in bed together. Now I slept, ate, read, dressed and undressed within a few feet of them in the same small room. I reveled in this closeness. Lying in bed at night I could, if I wanted to reach out and take my mother’s hand though I never did”. (Ballard 2008:4)

But normal castle-building itself can be of two kinds and the difference between them is all-important. They may be called the Egoistic and the Disinterested. In the Egoistic kind the day-dreamer himself is always the hero and everything is seen through his eyes. In *Empire of the Sun* a young boy called Jim is at the centre of the story. He is representative of the author and everything is seen through his eyes. In 1941 Jim is eleven years old, and living with his parents in Shanghai, a city occupied by Japanese troops engaged in fighting the Chinese. Then comes Pearl Harbor and the foreign nationals in the city in the outlying districts of the Yangtze delta. Jim is separated from his parents and for some weeks patrols the city alone on his bicycle, staying in the abandoned house of these foreign residents. For a while he becomes

uneasy ward of two renegade American merchant seaman called Basie and Frank, who make a living selling the gold teeth they knock from the mouths of the endless stream of corpses carried out to sea on the Yangtze's tide. The next section of novel deals with Jim's life in Lunghua internment camp. Jim becomes curious, alien figure in the civilian camp. Parentless, often spurned by the other inmates, he has to rely on the kindness of the camp doctor and the curious patronage of Basie. Before he is reunited with his parents, Jim experiences a death march, incarceration in an empty stadium (where Jim sees the flash from Nagasaki) and finds himself trying to survive in a savage landscape of escaped prisoners, demoralized Japanese troops and bloodthirsty Kuomintang guerillas, all fed and fuelled by the boundless generosity of the American supply plans flying above them. All these experiences Jim has experienced and has seen through his own eyes.

So in the egoistic kind of fantasy the day-dreamer is hero and everything is seen through his eyes. The same point is focused by George Carte in his essay *Sourdough* as-

“The story is a great look through a child's eyes at the WWII experience in Eastern China for British citizen captured by the Japanese. It goes from pre-war opulence to devastating prison camp existence to liberation” (Carte 2008:1)

One more example of the egoistic kind of fantasy is reflected when Jim watched the American attack and bombers dropping canisters filled with ammunition for the Kuomintang troops, rooting out the last of the Communist troops. Hundreds of dead communists were stacked like firewood. Jim feared the Chinese refugees the most, armed with knives and hoes, as did Basie's bandit group. Jim was sure that World War II had ended but wondered if World War III had begun.

“When Basie and the men had gone, vanishing among the ruined warehouses on the quay, Jim studied the magazines on the seat beside him. He was sure now that the second World War had ended, but had World War – III begun?” (Ballard 1984: 262).

In my opinion the fears of war are deep rooted in the mind of Jim and that is why he is imagining of the coming of World War- III. So the above passage reflects the fantasy of war in the mind of Jim. But the reality is that the war has affected badly on the life of people and the psyche of children like Jim.

One more incidents affected on the mind of Jim when he looked at the body of the pilot. The face was younger than Jim remembered childlike Jim imagined the pilot as a child and imagined his mother placing a morsel of pork in his dead mouth. Jim was in despair; he had placed all his hope on this young pilot that they would fly away together. He needed the pilot to survive and show the way. The pilot was an imaginary twin of himself. He thought that if his twin was dead, he must be too. In the end war is over and Jim met his parents and he recalled the war by watching the newsreels at Shanghai Cathedral. He had spent many hours watching these cinemas during the two months before leaving for England with his mother. He was imagining that whether he would survive in World War-III. At the same time he was recalling war experiences, his friends in the camp and sympathetic people who showed sympathy in the camp.

Hero's journey in to the past illustrates what may be called the "Kairotic moment" and decisive point in time when psychic transformation occurs in almost every story of J.G. Ballard. Usually Kairotic moment is a disaster or the free choice of a hazardous alternative, or to "Live Dangerously" (Philmus and Mullen 1991: 57). In such a moment, the hero (or rarely heroine) becomes Nietzsche's Overman, the self-vanquisher, and is reborn. But the story of *Empire of the sun* is conventional one and based on J.G. Ballard's actual experiences, is about a young British teenager who lives with his parents in Shanghai at the eve of Pearl Harbor and is then interned by the Japanese from 1942-1945 in the Lunghua prison camp near Shanghai. Obviously, this is not a work of science fiction or utopian fiction. There is no clearly Kairotic moment. But the novel is not without a certain utopian savor. Jim Graham, the adolescent hero, is obsessed with the bright transforming violence of air war and fantasies of resurrection. Little by little, the prisoners of Lunghua camp form a post-disaster utopia of mutual aid and supported each other during 1943, Jim was very happy.

“During 1943, when the war was still moving in Japan’s favour, the prisoners had worked together. The entertainments committee, of which Mr. Maxted had been chairman, organized a nightly programme of lectures and concert parties. This was the happiest year of Jim’s life” (Ballard 1984:140)

Near the end of hostilities, after the Japanese guards have left the camp and Jim sees several formal prisoners trying to return, he waves to his old comrades.

“After three years of trying to leave the camp they were now back at its gates ready to take up their stations for World War-III. At long last they were beginning to realize the simple truth that Jim had always known that inside Lunghua they were free” (Ibid: 243)

He even fantasizes about returning voluntarily with his parents to its perilous freedom after the war, and realizes he would miss the Japanese guards.

In my opinion for Jim the freedom of the camp was the freedom to live dangerously, to be bombed, and to be starved, to live outside the norms and constraints of ordinary bourgeois existence and dare to face the Kairotic moment. *Empire of the Sun* is not so much a utopia as a kit of building materials for the construction of future utopia fictions.

Realism in *Empire of the Sun*:

The novel is set in Shanghai during the war years, and is concerned with the story of a young boy called Jim, whose idyllic early life is shattered by the war and the internment of all foreign nations by the Japanese. Jim is separated from his parents and left alone in Shanghai. Eventually interned, he establishes a more secure life in the camp until the final collapse of the Japanese sparks off a brutal lawlessness. He witnesses a death march, experiences incarceration and glimpses the flash of the atomic bomb over Nagasaki. The novel closes with an ambivalent Jim reunited with his parents.

The story opened in Shanghai's International Settlement the day before the Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbor. Eleven-year-old Jim was everything one could want in a hero-affectionate, tireless, brave and more curious about life than a research biologist. Jim was the only child of a British textile industrialist who had kept his family on in Shanghai long after many British dependents had fled the threat of the Japanese domination of China. Yet even with the Japan-China war going on all around, Jim continued to enjoy the luxuries of the European Community- Chauffeurs, swimming pools, lawn parties, private school. He was not unaware of the staggering desperation of the China that pressed legless beggars against the front gate and daily exhibited public strangling; but he learned to accept cruelty as the real world.

“There were so many beggars in Shanghai. Along Amherst Avenue they sat outside the gates of the house, shaking their Craven tins like reformed smokers. Many displayed lurid wounds and deformities but no one noticed them that afternoon” (Ballard 1984: 11).

The above passage shows the realistic picture of beggars and common men. It also shows social realism because the war effected on the life of beggars and they are forced to starvation. Not only the beggars are starved but also the prostitutes are trying their level best to attract customers towards them. As Vera is doing outside the Pork Hotel.

“Hundreds of Eurasian bar-girls in ankle-length fur coats sat in the lines of rickshaws outside the Pork Hotel, whistling through their teeth at the residents who emerging from the revolving doors.....” (Ibid: 23)

The prostitutes are not getting enough customers. And they are forced to starvation. The thieves and gangsters are also suffered. Frank and Basie, American merchant seaman turned scavengers. And for earning money they used to sell gold teeth taking all from corpses. So all these examples show social realism. The war affects the life of people in Shanghai during the Second World War. Jim is also forced for starvation. In that sense Edward Fox has commented in his essay *Goodbye, Cruel World-*

“Jim loses his parents in the chaos of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai. He adapts instantly to his strange new life ... later almost thriving as a resourceful adolescent prisoner in the internment camp outside the city. After three years of fending off starvation, Jim wonders of life will continue after the war ends, or if a new war, World War III, has already begun The haze of malnutrition and disease blurs in his mind the distinctions between life and death, war and peace”. (Fox1985: 89).

Many Chinese people and refugees were dying of cholera and smallpox. Because of war many soldiers were killed and many dead bodies were spread everywhere.

“Real war was the thousands of Chinese refugees dying of cholera in the sealed stockades at Pootung, and the bloody heads of communist soldiers mounted on pikes along the Bund”. (Ballard 1984: 6)

So the above mentioned incidents- legless beggars, prostitutes waiting for customers, spread of cholera and smallpox etc. shows the social realism and the effect of war on soldiers, common people and children like Jim. The war theme also reflects the social realism. And the social realism is related to personal realism because in this novel Jim's (author's) personal experiences during World War II are described minutely.

The novel opens on the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, in Shanghai's International Settlement. The story deals with the effects of World War II on China. Most of the events deal with the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and the brutal events, which took place in the Lunghua camp. Early on in the story we are told how “everyone in Shanghai was showing war films”. Yet in spite this nobody realized the enormous horror and change in lifestyle which war would bring in its wake. Towards the conclusion of events in the novel, Jim reviews the whole situation of Shanghai as a result of war and before his return to England with his parents. He still sees crowds watching newsreels of war, and begins to realize that war was taking place all

round him yet these crowds have failed to grasp that reality. Jim soberly reflects that "One day there will be no more newsreels". The story concludes on the grim image of the devastation caused by war- Jim notices a child's coffin moving along the stream with flowers forming a garland as it moves towards that terrible city of Shanghai. In this sense William Boyd says in his essay, *A Unique Vision* that-

"It is possibly *Empire of the Sun's* greatest achievement to be a war novel that utterly eschews the consoling positive treatment of war and to reflect without retreating into comic absurd- this awesome context." (Boyd 1984: 13)

John Calvin Batchelor observes in his essay *A Boy Saved by the Bomb* that *Empire of the Sun* is based on real war experiences of Ballard. He comments that-

"J.G.Ballard, has reached into the events of his own childhood to create a searing and frightening tale of wartime China. Indeed, Mr. Ballard declares in a foreword that this novel is based on his experiences in the Lunghua Civilian Assembly Center near Shanghai from 1942 to 1945. He has performed a heroic feat of memory to recover feelings that must have been tormenting to live through and can have been no less painful to relieve in fiction". (Batchelor 1984:2).

These two comments show that Ballard has expressed his own experiences of World War- II.

The whole story traces the heroic struggle of a young boy, Jim who survived the horrors of war and the cruelty of the concentration camps in China. Jim comes from a wealthy British family who are expatriates living in China. His life before the war is of luxury. He is driven everywhere by a chauffeur and surrounded by affluence and wealth. War soon changes that as Jim is forced to flee alone and on the streets taking refuge anywhere he can. Jim witnesses some excruciating incidents of violence and suffering through his adventures and learns to grow morally through the various experiences and encounters along the

way. In addition other British people such as Dr. Ransome become a source of support and inspiration for Jim. The story demonstrates how war can truly bring out hidden depths of goodness, humanity and heroic courage in those people who survived its better cruelties. In this sense Recogitare comments in his review *Survival Amidst Death* that-

“Through all the death and destruction of which almost every chapter of the book is filled with lives a young British teenager (the author himself, but written in third person) who has an incredible will to survive. The question of his morality is ever present if we judge his thoughts and actions solely; yet in the face of starvation and omnipresent death, his story is one of a smart young boy who is trying his best to survive”. (Recogitare 2006:2).

The same view is expressed by Stevens Charles in his review *Humanity, Stripped to its Core* that –

“The novel overpowers the reader from start to finish by Ballard’s stark account of Jim’s survival against all odds, in conditions stacked heavily against him. Death, betrayal, illness, and hunger surround Jim and yet somehow he always managed to survive because he never despairs, never gives up, always keeps his wits about him, and as he himself explains, because he ‘takes nothing for granted’. The World of World War II Shanghai strips humanity to its bare, naked, ugly core” (Stevens 2007:3).

There is also clash of cultures. We are given an insight into different cultural systems- the Japanese culture, the American culture and that of the British culture in Shanghai. American culture is extrovert. The Americans manage to overcome the terrible conditions of Lunghua with a substantial degree of optimism and style. They feed Jim’s desperate need for hope and the promise of a better world. The American seamen attracted a steady stream of visitors, mostly female. They have a vast array of possessions, which Jim describes as treasures. The British are compared unflatteringly to the American in his evaluation of the three

cultural contexts that surround him. We are told that Jim felt that the Americans were the best company and far superior to the morose and complicated British. The British value system has many Christian elements; the more noteworthy can be seen in the figure of Dr. Ransome.

In the novel of Ballard personal realism, psychological realism and social realism is dominant. The personal realism we find in the novel from beginning to end because the story is based on J.G. Ballard's actual experiences, is about a young British teenager who lives with his parents in Shanghai at the eve of Pearl Harbor and is then interned by the Japanese from 1942-1945 in the Lunghua prison camp near Shanghai. The psychological realism is there. Because it focuses the psyche of 11 year old boy, Jim who was separated from his parents and starved many days. The social realism is also dominant that it shows how Chinese people affected because of war, The places- airfield runways made of bones of dead Chinese, a make- shift cemetery full of corpses with extremities sticking out, canals full of dead bodies, the indifference of a British women to sick boy – and events – the killing of Chinese coolie, the never ending deaths of sick prisoner are described with incredible detail.

It would be comforting to say in conclusion that Jim's story closes happily when he once again embraces his parents by their drained swimming pool. He has survived in the war by luck and he has survived in the end of the Japanese because canisters of spam and powdered milk were dropped by the bomb. However, Jim is not persuaded that the war is really over. He is equally uncertain what kind of world awaits him as he sails from China.

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