

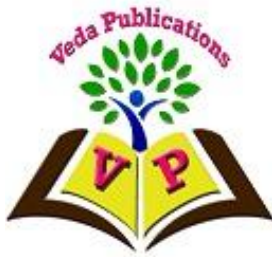
RETRACING IDENTITY: AN INTERPLAY OF ELITE POWER AND FAMILY ETHICS IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *GOOD AS GOLD*

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ABSTRACT



This paper will be exploring Joseph Heller's novel *Good as Gold* in the light of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills' landmark work *The Power Elite* (1956). Mills in his work gives a similar picture of post World War II America as portrayed by Heller's *Good as Gold*, where the big organizations like government and bureaucracy, directly or indirectly, holds every decision concerning an individual, taking away even the slightest chances of freedom. Whether it is the army and capitalist organizations run by the elites like where by creating meaningless rules as shown by Heller in his other work *Catch-22*, that take away an individual's right over his own life, or be it the glittering bureaucratic world which allures Bruce Gold, eventually getting him into its snare to such an extent that he is made to give up his very essence and identity. In every situation, an individual is actually made to be just a part of the "faceless multitude" as he is left with no choice and no sense of self. The only way left for him is to conform to the authoritarian and exploitative system under which he lives, which is run by a few in power. The paper's main argument will be to analyse the extent to which this elite bureaucratic setup has eroded an individual's identity, and whether an individual is nothing but really docile and devoid of any sense of self or has Heller kept a possibility of some sort of resistance which will allow an individual to achieve freedom by renewing his connection to his cultural and familial roots.

Keywords: *Bureaucratic, Individual's Identity, Jewish, Family.*

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C.W. Mills while pointing at the fragmentation that has set in at the familial level in his work *Power Elite* observes, "family institutions are not autonomous centres of national power; on the contrary, these decentralized areas are increasingly shaped by the big three, in which developments of decisive and immediate consequence now occur." This decentralization is something that is being seen repeatedly in Joseph Heller's work *Good as Gold* where the protagonist Bruce Gold's relationship to his family and to his Jewish roots is something which he detests for his desire to join the bureaucracy and be one amongst the power elite. As an academician and a partner in a marriage of long standing, Gold feels at loss on both fronts as he sees his marriage as well as his career approaching a dead end. He feels trapped in a marriage that is decaying day by day and hence he has entered into a series of affairs. His family, particularly his father, brother, and sisters constantly tease him at family dinners. His children too are just a means of disappointment for him. But his long held job even though is not of much satisfaction to him is still a means of respite from his family: "...entering so prestigious a university and vastly relieved at escaping a large family of five sisters and one brother in which all his life he had felt both suffocated and unappreciated". Since Gold's presence does not count in his family, he expects more freedom outside. And later the chance of holding an office in Washington appears to be an easy escape: "He had no doubt he would be disowned by his father, brother, and sisters and rejected by his children. The future looked bright."

Mills argued in his book that the social force of the power elite wasn't just confined to their decisions and actions within their roles as politicians, and corporate and military leaders, but that their power extended throughout and shaped all institutions in society. What Mills meant is that by creating the conditions of our lives, the power elite dictate what happens in society, and other institutions, like family, church, and education, have no choice but to arrange themselves around these conditions, in both material and ideological ways. He wrote, "Families and churches and schools adapt to modern life; governments and armies and corporations shape it; and, as they do so, they turn

these lesser institutions into means for their ends." The act of Gold's abandoning his family and cultural roots, so much so that he finds it disgraceful to be associated with his Jewish heritage just to make his way up in the power hierarchy of the White House, is an affirmation of Mill's stance of how the Power Elite shape and control the lives of an individual, directly or indirectly, making him deny his basic essence.

Gold feels himself to be an outsider with regard to his family. He seems to get no respect and acceptance from his family members who are always criticizing him. Sid, Gold's elder brother constantly irritates him. By his absurd arguments such as all the rivers flow from North to South and that vultures are blind, makes Gold lose his temper. His father, taking Sid's side adds to Gold's misery. Gold feels embarrassed in the family parties where Sid is present. Even his sisters also embarrass him by their remarks about him. When he says something to the members of his family, he is considered to be a pedantic. His knowledge and scholarship are of no use to them for the simple reason that they do not understand them. Their feelings are epitomised in the words of his sister Ida: "Bruce wasn't spoiled.'... 'He was given advantages because he showed he would make the most of them. Like I was. There's no need to be ashamed of him just because he writes things nobody understands'". He responds to the situation in different ways. Sometimes he gets furious, at other times he keeps quite with utmost restraint. But nothing helps.

Gold is not only embarrassed by his cultural roots, which he thinks are the biggest impediment to his making big in the White House bureaucracy, he is also disappointed with his economic position that his current job brings, as money as the other big thing on his mind. He serves as a Professor of English in a college in New York. He detests his job as it does not bring him much money. For the members of his family, money is the standard of measuring a man's success. This is the reason why Gold's father considers Sid his favourite for he has been successful in making money. When Gold tries to substitute his reputation for monetary success, he ends up becoming a butt of laughter for everybody.

The social acclaim that Gold receives for his academic achievements is meaningless to the



members of his family. So he considers himself a failure in so far as monetary matters are concerned. He agrees to write a book for Pomoroy, a publisher, about the "Jewish experience in America." Though he is not well versed on the "Jewish experience;" he accepts the assignment, for it would help him in making money. However another opportunity comes to him when he reviews the President's book *My Year in the White House*, and attracts the attention of some high officials of the White House including the classmate Ralph. Ralph promises him a high position in the White House which would enable Gold to make money.

Gold's desire for social freedom motivates him to prefer a government job to the one he has. When Ralph invites him over the phone to occupy a high position in the White House, Gold asks whether he can have freedom to act independently in the government. He also inquires about the nature of his job. In reply, Ralph says: "Anything you want, as long as it's everything we tell you to say and do in support of our policies, whether you agree with them or not. You'll have complete freedom." Gold initially protests by saying that he cannot be brought. Ralph replies: "We wouldn't want you if you could be, Bruce,"... "This President doesn't want yes-men. What we want are independent men of integrity who will agree with all our decisions after we make them. You'll be entirely on your own." In spite of the ambiguous nature of the job he is offered, Gold decides to get into the government. When he takes the decision, he thinks that he will fit into the government and that he can enjoy social freedom by commanding the respect of his friends, and the members of his family. But even after giving up his ethnic identity he just ends up being nothing more than a puppet in the hands of actual elites who run the government.

Gold during his first visit to Ralph's office was so fascinated that he sees the official Washington as no less than an Eden. Gold is allured to see the glitz of the Washington elite circle and in no time makes up his mind to give up his academic job for a job in government, where, as Ralph tells him that his only work would be to write empty phrases for the President. But his new place in Washington takes away his freedom to work independently and reduces him to one of the "administration's men of

integrity who will agree to anything the administration wants to do."

Wayne C. Miller compare the elite ruling class of *Good as Gold* to villains as they tempt Gold to seek a place in the hierarchy of power that they control. Gold is lured by the elite circle and craves their acceptance in exchange of which he has to deny his essence. Soon after joining the government Gold also discovers that his appointment is subject to the condition of his marrying a woman far above him in social status. As Ralph says to Gold: "Belle [Gold's wife] would be ok for Labour or Agriculture. But not for Secretary of State or Defence." So Gold thinks of proposing to Andrea, the daughter of Pugh Biddle Conover, a dying career diplomat. He wants to marry her because he thinks of rising higher in the White House through Conover's influence. But the chances of marrying Andrea are bleak. To quote Andrea's words: "I've always wanted to be married to someone with a high position in government" Since Andrea will marry him after he gets a job in the government, Gold is crazy after a government job. Politically, Gold is in an awkward position when he is appointed a member of a Presidential Commission. His situation is described by Ralph:

"Now there commission meetings tomorrow morning can be of great importance to you, Bruce, because they're of no importance to anyone. Do whatever you want as long as you do whatever we want." As Gold enters a hall in the White House, he feels lost in the company of other officials who seem to be superior to him. He feels he can't have freedom as he develops an inferiority complex: "He was distressed from the outset by how little attention his presence excited, and his powers of speech were vitiated by his dread of being considered inferior. He began to wonder if he were the only Jew."

Gold, by witnessing the sexual promiscuity, in which many of his colleagues from the elite circle are engaged, his natural greed for sex is also increased and later it even becomes a political necessity for him to have another wife. His sexual passions are aroused by his knowledge of Ralph's several marriages and divorces:



"Gold's pulse raced with excitement. He had visions. He knew he was ten times more intelligent than Ralph and could go one thousand times farther in government if ever he got a foot in. and if Ralph could get married to Ellie after his divorce from Kelly after that trouble over the annulment from Norah or Nellie, there was no reason in the world he must stay married to Belle."

Since, it is not easy to have a divorce in his family, Gold always tries to find fault with his wife, so that he can divorce her. All his efforts to find a pretext for divorcing his wife fail because of the inherent goodness of his wife which makes him feel helpless. His situation is described thus: "All he needs to do was to take it by himself. Obedience and acceptance were the cruel weapons with which she persecuted him, total surrender was her strategy of attack, and he was hard put to withstand her." Gold remains indecisive on the issue of the divorce, but is at the same time tempted with the idea of marrying Andrea to enjoy his sex freedom just like he sees his friends in the elite circle do, and more importantly to make his way up and be a genuine part of that circle. The indecisiveness in which he is caught due to his family ethics which discourage divorce, but at the same time his temptation to remarry, goes on to show that how he is worked up and his life controlled by the elite culture for which he works: "The life-fate of the modern individual depends not only upon the family into which he was born or which he enters by marriage, but increasingly upon the corporation in which he spends the most alert hours of his best years..."

Eventually, Gold is engaged to Andrea for both making his way to a job in the government, and also to sexual freedom in his life, which he is made to believe is mundane and monotonous. But Andrea wants more freedom in sex than what Gold wants. She considers sex as nothing more than a biological phenomenon. Her liberal attitude towards sex is reflected in the following conversation:

"Let him have it if he wants it," she urged.

It's only bones, and flesh, and organs and places."

"Your body," said Gold, "is one of the things I look forward to having."

"But you will, darling, whenever you want. You can have it too, even right now if you make it fast."

She glanced at her watch.

"Unshared," Gold emphasized loudly, with a look of uncompromising disapproval. "I want it to belong to just me."

When Gold discovers Andrea's attitude towards sex he realises: "Not for this...was he leaving his wife, provoking the enmity of his children, offending his family, and forsaking for the time all other erotic relationships, but for money, beauty, social position, political preference, and a stupendous magnification of sexual prestige." Gold does not approve Andrea's sexual freedom, but he can't rise politically and socially without winning Andrea's favour. Gold is so disgusted with his family and marriage as he thinks them to be nothing more than impediments to his success and making big in politics, that he leaves no chance to defy his family and its ethics. In order to reclaim his freedom from his family relations, he not only gets engaged to Andrea, but also develops relations with Linda Book who is married and has four children. He concedes to Linda's demand for paying the dentist's bill.

Gold in all his attempts to be associated with the power elite running the Washington politics, constantly escapes his Jewishness. Gold seeks acceptance among the privileged elite group but is continuously reminded of his heritage wherever he goes. Once he is asked by the former Governor of Texas whether all Jews are submissive. Gold defends his race-

"Make war, said Nixon, and he made war. Pray to God, said Nixon, and he prayed to God. Seems to me his God was Nixon. Gold, do Jews always—?"

'No, Sir. They do not.'

Thus, Gold accepts his being Jewish by defending his race against Governor's assumption that Jews in general lack originality. Hereafter it becomes an existential necessity for him to free himself from the anti-Semitic atmosphere of Washington, where Jews are considered much inferior by the gentiles. The husband of a virtuous but suffering wife, a man having two mistresses, Gold was willing to trade his identity and even go



unnamed to achieve power. A job in the White House for him was no less than a satanic temptation for which he goes on to deny his ethical and familial heritage. But now the biggest question for Gold remains is that the power and status which his White House job is going to get him, is it really worth his identity- personal and ethnic, or in words of Heller "How much lower would he have to crawl to rise to the top?" Even though Gold despises his ethical identity and considers his family a shame for him, he still possesses a constant fear of being commodified, a danger made clear in Gold's dream in which he sees himself being changed into a glimmering Van Cleef and Arpels jewellery store, places where only country's elite shop. Being faced with a constant identity crisis, it eventually remains for Gold to decide which preferences and values are actually golden.

Gold analyses himself against the elite society he wants to be a part of: "Gold chose the Volkswagen over the camel and headed towards Washington in a dazed state of moral collapse. How much lower would he crawl to rise to the top? He asked himself with wretched self-reproach. Much, much lower, he answered in improving spirit, and felt purged of hypocrisy by the time he was ready for dinner." Now he realized that he can reclaim his identity by recognizing himself as what he is and not in what he wants to be in seeking social and political status. He changes his mind: "Gold found himself with an immense unwillingness to admit that the closer he drew to marrying Andrea and serving as secretary of state, the deeper he fell into doubt that he wanted to do either." Gold is confused in his motives. He makes an assessment of his future: "Gold lay awake for an hour bemoaning his plight. His blessings were one with his tribulations; he was about to effectuate a painful divorce from Belle; he was about to enter a painful marriage with Andrea, a woman at once submissive and weirdly independent, who both frightened and bored him; and he was about to embark on a vulnerable new career in government and politics whose fate, atleast initially would be largely dependent on the patronage and goodwill of an inhumanely selfish and malicious father-in-law who disliked him intensely and sadistically."

After acquiring the knowledge of his own situation, Gold struggles for freedom by giving up his passion to be one among the Washington elites and by returning to his ethnic roots. As Gold gains more and more experience in Washington, he feels more and more disillusioned and accordingly he abandons his hope for a high office in the White House. He gets an opportunity to meet the President at the Embassy Ball, but just at the same moment he receives a telephone call informing him of his brother Sid's death. Now he has two alternatives: the promise of a high office in the White House, a chance that will set his way up in the elite circle, and his filial responsibility of attending his brother's funeral ceremony. He decides to return to his home by preferring his family to an elite government job. Gold at the end of the novel, finds the confidence to confront and accept his ethnic identity. Later, he even sees the inscription in Hebrew on his mother's headstone and follows his Yiddish custom by leaving a pebble on her grave, and finally returns to his wife Belle. While initially Gold denounces his ethnic roots and loses his identity to "the very garish political public life of the celebrities in Washington politics." In order to gain acceptance of the elite political group, he departs from his family values proving Mills' point that how families are controlled and shaped by the government and corporations and "as they do so, they turn these lesser institutions into means for their ends." But Gold is finally able to redeem his sense of self from the effects of bureaucracy.

Mills in his *Power Elite* gives a similar picture of post World War II America as portrayed by Heller's *Good as Gold*, where the big organizations like bureaucracy, directly or indirectly, holds every decision concerning an individual, taking away even the slightest chances of freedom. Whether it is the army or the capitalist organizations run by the elites, which by means of creating meaningless rules as shown by Heller in his other work *Catch-22*, take away an individual's right over his own life, or be it the glittering bureaucratic world which allures an individual till he gets into its snare to such an extent that he is made to give up his very essence and identity. In every situation, an individual is actually made to be just a part of the "faceless multitude" as



he is left with no choice and no sense of self. The only way left for him is to conform to the authoritarian and exploitative system under which he lives, which is run by a few in power.

Mills, pointing to such a tyrannical system which takes one's freedom and identity, states: "the men of the circles composing this elite, severally and collectively, now make such key decisions as are made; and that, given the enlargement and the centralization of the means of power now available, the decisions that they make and fail to make carry more consequences for more people than has ever been the case in the world history of mankind" and pointing at the individuals left at the receiving end of such a system he says "...that on the bottom level there has come into being a mass-like society which has little resemblance to the image of a society in which voluntary associations and classic publics hold the keys to power."

Heller also in most of his works goes on to show that how at the social level, contemporary man suffers a loss of identity. The big bureaucratic establishments and totalitarian structures constantly thin out human personality. The so called sophisticated communes have disfigured the very image of man. They have stifled the voice of the self. Commenting on the dwindling stature of the individual, which resounds Mills' take on the position of a faceless individual, Tony Tanner writes:

The pattern of his life one of constraint and eviction, he is alternately cramped and disappointed. This is true of his experience in the college, the factory, the hospital, the party. What he discovers is that every institution is bent on processing or programming the individual in a certain way.

In a somewhat similar vein Mills considers an individual to be an insignificant part of the bottom which is "much more fragmented, and in truth, impotent" as the massive expansion of bureaucracy has compelled man to conform to the group morality. He is caught up in the grip of institutional thinking. He, like Gold, begins to question the very values and validity of his existence. Though Heller presents life as enormous waste, where a person is trapped in a meaningless survival and conformity being his only option, Heller's victims still never wholly succumb to

despair and destruction. Heller in these works portrays an individual neither as a passive scapegoat nor a helpless creature. He rises to affirm the human sense of life despite the nihilistic void.

Heller in both his works shows an individual in standing quarrel with the big anarchical system and is never ethically defeated. In *Good as Gold* Heller deals with "the notion of ethnicity, particular as an alternative to the values of the corporate order of the modern nation-state" which becomes the moral vision of the novel and at the end an individual like Gold whose mind is tempered by the glimmer of Washington politics, is ultimately able to find "salvation of sorts in the personal commitment to family, to friends, and, finally, to the composite of values that grow out of the American Jewish experience as he accepts his past."

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