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QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND DEPICTION OF MASCULINITY IN
THE CATCHER IN THE RYE BY J. D. SALINGER

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“The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.” (Salinger 203)

This is one of the many ideas put forth by J. D. Salinger, pertaining not just to the spirit of life but to masculinity and the notion of the ‘Ideal man’ that was prevalent in the society of his period in his chef d’oeuvre, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger began his expedition as a writer, venturing into the depths of dissatisfaction and angst—in the age that has become synonymous with disillusionment and destruction—during his service in the military from 1942- 1944. Despite the fame that came along with the publication of the novel, Salinger led a reclusive life and chose to break away from the frenzy of popularity. Salinger, though has written very few works which include—*Franny and Zooey*(1961), *For Esme, With love and Squalor* (1950) and *The Laughing Man* (1949)—he remained the most influential writer of Post War period in America for his honest and unbiased portrayal of his immediate atmosphere through his characters.

With *The Catcher in the Rye*, what seems to be a typical, off-the-rack, Bildungsroman, is immediately and consciously opposed by Salinger’s legendary anti-hero, Holden Caulfield. His cynical, hyper-aware approach to the society depicts the struggle that every adolescent faces in the process of development—from childhood to adulthood. Holden continually attempts to defy this natural process by constantly reminiscing his earlier days of innocence and merriment with his siblings, Phoebe and Allie, of whom the latter died of leukaemia three years before the narrative takes shape. The novel traces Holden’s journey after being expelled from his third school, Pencey Prep to his brief stay in New York which represents adulthood which entails certain amount of freedom and isolation that Holden had not been prepared for.

As paraphrased by Nisbet, “A spectre is haunting the modern mind, the spectre of insecurity” (Nisbet 258). The spectre haunts adolescent minds, much more than any other, that are predisposed with confusion with their roles in the society. A part of Gender Order Theory by R. W. Connell explores the concept of hegemonic masculinity which is an institution in which the man acquires dominance over women and defended the subservience of women. In the course of the novel, the readers encounter a cross-section of various hegemonic masculinities pertinent to the day as faced by the novelist himself, such as: imperial masculinity, soldier masculinity and complicit masculinity; none of which the protagonist identifies with. The journey from childhood to adulthood that Holden indulges in is riddled with these masculinities that are sketched through certain confrontations that seem redundant but are, in fact, key in moulding him as a person. The former is noted in the egocentric and borderline narcissistic attitude exhibited by Stradlater, his roommate which is evident when he says, “Wanna do me a big favour?” and Holden proceeds to interpret his character—

“You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he’s a real hot-shot, and they’re always asking you to do them a big favour. Just because they’re crazy about themselves, they think you’re crazy about them too, and that you’re just dying to do them a favour.” (Salinger 28)

“When men learn what it means to be a “real” man, that knowledge coincides with what they know about “real” femininity” (Jeranko10). It runs parallel with the statement by Monro, Surya-“On a social level, biological determinism, or the belief that we act in certain ways because of our physical make-up, is rife” (Monro10). Holden, as a result of this belief, though respects women cannot surrender the facets of his learning that men are meant to protect women which, in turn, advocates inequality. Holden struggles with the paradoxical fear of being seen as weak, while he perceives the women whom Stradlater is associated with as weak.

Soldier masculinity, on the other hand, is the practice in which collective identity lives on — such as represented by the Basketball team of Pencey Prep— as it did on the battlefield where the soldiers were left to fend for one another. Similarly, the latter, though in a far more complicated form, is represented by Mr. Antolini who tries to straighten his approach to gender, masculinity and to life as such. To elaborate, this is evident in the speech about real education:

“Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You’ll learn from them- if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It’s a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn’t education. It’s history. It’s poetry.”

(Salinger204)

“Something else an academic education will do for you. If you go along with it any considerable distance, it’ll begin to give you an idea of what size mind you have. What it’ll fit and, maybe, what it won’t. After a while, you’ll have an idea what kind of thoughts your particular size mind should be wearing.”

(Salinger205)

This confrontation attempts to shake off the conceited perception of masculinity presented to him by the system of hegemonic masculinity that he was surrounded by all along. The association of manliness with poetry or history was, in itself, atypical to Holden who proceeds to deliberate on this piece of advice as he drifts off to sleep. The incident that follows cannot immediately be compartmentalized as sexual abuse considering Holden’s previous conceited opinions on hetero normatively which is only emphasized by the distance in his relationship with his father. Since Holden has never shared physical intimacy of any sort with the same gender, he cannot be held entirely responsible to effectively classify the sensitive situation either as abuse or as a platonic symbol of affection. This ultimately resulted, unfortunately, in Holden’s return to his provincial, intolerant interpretation of masculinity augmented by the dysfunctional practice of hegemonic masculinity that encompassed his surroundings.

The acute lack of non-hegemonic male representation in Holden’s sphere is, thus, the root cause for all his predicaments with the ‘phony’ world that he refuses to associate himself with. Since identity, or dearth thereof, originates from evaluating the role of an individual in his/her social context, Social Identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) fittingly insists on the intrinsic association that an individual feels towards his/her society. To emphasise, the theory speculates on the stages of connection between the prototype and the community by dividing it to three distinctions namely, social categorisation, social identification and social comparison. Holden is seen to be especially good at categorizing the different social groups and analyzing their shortcomings and limitations which is evident when Holden talks about a roommate of his who owned a cheaper suitcase than his and wanted the others to assume that the more expensive one (Holden’s) was his. The protagonist is able to view the situation from his roommate’s perspective and even empathizes with him. This verifies that Holden is indeed aware of his position in the society as privileged and from a family of affluence, but this sense does not extend to a level of forming a connection to his social group/ in-group. In fact, he deems his world to be excessively “phony” in their behavioural patterns, practices and frivolous exchanges. His struggle to be “real” amidst phoniness heightens the aversion felt for his in-group which is discernible in his conversation with Sally Hayes where he impulsively asks her to run away with him and when she refuses, he vents out all his frustration by illustrating the life that they would lead if they were to remain there.

“No, there wouldn’t be marvellous places to go to after I went to college and all. Open your ears. It’d be entirely different. We’d have to go downstairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We’d have to phone up everybody and tell ’em good-by and send ’em postcards from hotels and all. And I’d be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers. There’s a dumb horse race, and some dame breaking a bottle over a hip, and some chimpanzee riding a bicycle with pants on. It wouldn’t be the same at all.”(Salinger143-144)

Holden’s quest for identity comes to a standstill with the first stage i.e., social categorization. The statement “The disenchanting lonely figure searching for ethical significance in the smallest of things, struggling for identification of race or class or group, incessantly striving to answer the question ‘Who am I, What am I,’ has become almost the central literary type of the age.” (Nisbet258) holds true for the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* but for the fact that answering the question has never been harder owing not only to the constraints and hindrances effected by Holden’s society but also to Holden’s own interpretation of the ‘ideal man’. Since Holden has been accustomed to the only predominant type of masculinity – hegemonic masculinity – he develops a sense of apathy towards his gender group as it failed to provide him with a semblance to his own personality. He is strained between two entirely disparate ideas of ‘manliness’- one being imposed on him by the society and the other that he often pondered briefly over but quickly dismissed as being “phony”.

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