

Review

The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand: A Critical Analysis

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This paper seeks to examine Ayn Rand's 'Fountainhead' through a multi-focal dimension. It delineates the cartography of the themes of Rand's Russian-American ethnicity and the socio-economic conditions of the post-World War II, linking it to the post-Depression world, which engendered the philosophy of Objectivism. Furthermore, the paper explores the societal beliefs and themes of Objectivism, Conformism, and Individualism by analyzing them in two different paradigms: when the novel was published and the status quo. The paper finally goes on to underline how these antagonistic views of society have been exemplified by Rand through the characters in the novel and how 'The Fountainhead' serves as a commentary on the schism in society over the topic of 'individuality and conformism'.

Key words: Objectivism, Conformism, Individualism, Great Depression, United States of America, Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

'The Fountainhead', which was published in 1943, stands no less-relevant among various sections of society today as it did then because of its underlying themes that have proved themselves to be eternal and vital to the existence of mankind. Since the post- World War and post- Depression epoch, the seeds of Individualism, Conformity and Objectivism have been deep rooted in societal foundations of the world, challenging and endeavouring to narrow the schism in society between the 'individual' and the 'non-conformist'. However, the cardinal purpose that these themes served during the mid-1940's differs substantially to the purpose these philosophies serve today. Much of this chasm has been prodded by the contradistinctive socio-economic conditions prevalent in society today and in the post-World War milieu. In addition, Rand's Russian-American

ethnicity, her first-hand experience of the 1917 Communist Revolution, World War II, and the Great Depression have also been instrumental in the development of Rand's opinions on the primary themes of the novel and suggestive of her choice to exemplify polar personalities (that persisted in society) through each of the characters.

Rand's idiosyncratic comprehension of Communism was engendered at the mere age of twelve in the wake of the Communist Revolution in 1917. The event of her father's (Zinovy Zinovy Zakharovich Rosenbaum) pharmacy being nationalized by armed soldiers delineates the genesis of Rand's condemnation of Communist tenets that proselytize social/collective solidarity over individualistic interests. In one of her interviews Rand asserts, "I felt the way he looked. His was one of helplessness, murderous frustration and

indignation—but he could do absolutely nothing¹.” Zinovy, himself, held a radical stance against the Soviet government and vehemently protested against working for them— an act which left the family in starvation many-a-times. Thus, the obliteration of her father’s wealth and unique identity by Communist ideals, serves as a catalyst for the precipitation of Rand’s rejection of altruism and adoption of laissez faire capitalism, which literally translates into ‘leave us alone’, that is, it allows for individuals to carry out economic affairs without the interference of the government. As mentioned by Samuel Bostaph in his ‘Ayn Rand’s Economic Thought’ (2011), “during her address at Lewis and Clark College on “The Goal of My Writing”, she identified that goal as “the projection of an ideal man”” and inarguably, *The Fountainhead* is the first of her novels that outline her vision of that “ideal man”. Rand added that in order to do that she had to place him “in the kind of social system that makes it possible for ideal men to exist and to function - a free, productive, rational system, which demands and rewards the best in every man, and which is, obviously, laissez-faire capitalism” (Rand, 1963). In *The Fountainhead*, the concept of laissez fair capitalism has been elucidated extensively in Roark’s infamous courtroom speech through the allusion of ‘the creator’, where he states that “the basic need of a creator is independence” and that, “there is no such thing as a collective brain.” These lines also underscore Rand’s support for non-conformism and championing of the individual.

Rand’s arrival to the United States and her exposure to the socio-economic implications of the first World War that were now getting re-modelled with the onset of the Great Depression not only validated her denunciation of altruism- “the doctrine which demands that man live for others and place others above the self”- but also bolstered her espousal of ‘ethical egoism’ or ‘Objectivist ethics’. In her book, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964) Rand elucidates on the principles of Objectivism by summarizing:

“The Objectivist ethics holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own rational self-interest, [and that] . . . his right to do so is derived from his nature as man and from the function of moral values in human life - and, therefore, is applicable only in the context of a rational, objectively demonstrated and validated code of moral principles which define and determine his actual self-interest. She further adds that “a man’s ethical purpose is to sustain and further his own life”; therefore, “. . . that which is proper

to the life of a rational being is the good; that which negates, opposes or destroys it is the evil”.

Another factor that might have supported Rand’s development of Objective Ethics was the affirmative individualistic stance and subsequent prosperity (corroborated by the nation’s victory in the first World War) which got reduced into an overall malaise. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that many Americans had begun to seek self-appraisal and self-worth through materialistic aspirations and as their financial dwellings dwindled, they were possessed by a spell of hopelessness. According to historian Harvey Green, psychiatrist’s offices were thronged by upperclassmen who sought help to cope with their wealth which fell into a state of inertia. Moreover, suicide rates increased in late 1929 and continued to increase until 1933—from 13.9 per 100,000 to an all-time high of 17.4 per 100,000. This provided a riveting incentive to Rand to formalize her view of a philosophy and system that enabled an individual to exercise rights “that preserve the individual’s freedom to engage in those actions that support his life.”

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Exploration of myriad evidence provided by the happenings in the lives of the American people during the Depression period seems to suggest that they provided inspiration for Rand to develop characters in *The Fountainhead*. For instance, it is fair to make a supposition that the example of James. J Riordan, President of the New York County Trust Company, who committed suicide over the shame he felt over losing others’ money along with his own funds, offered a compelling case-study for Rand to develop the character of Ellsworth Toohey. Riordan’s “sacrifice of the self for others”, a disposition exemplified by many people in society during that time, becomes a metonymy through Toohey’s character and is seen to have some bearing in Peter Keating as well, who portrays the ‘parasites’ persisting in society during that epoch. Therefore, when the very feats that Rand tried to escape by migrating from Russia surfaced in an equally conspicuous manner in the States, it acted as an impelling force for her to seek for a ‘Roark’ in society to rejuvenate man’s self-perception and individuality. Samuel Bostaph, in his essay “Ayn Rand’s Economic Thought” (2011), writes, “the novel itself strongly contrasts the characters of Roark, the innovator, Peter Keating, the intentional parasite, Gail Wynand, the unconscious parasite, and Ellsworth Toohey, the misogynistic manipulator”, which validates the argument that Rand’s philosophy and description of American society through her characters exemplify her own ideals.

However, a character that has not been mentioned in

the aforementioned lines by Bostaph and stands as one of the most intriguing personalities in the novel is Dominique Francon. It is evident throughout the novel that Dominique's unique persona and characteristics that are in direct contrast to that of other female protagonists like Catherine Halsey, Louisa Keating, Lois Cook etc. make her superior to the other females presented in the novel. Dominique is portrayed as a fiercely independent woman with a high degree of individualistic opinion, who has a proclivity for recognizing the greatest potential that a human is capable of. Her acute sense of morality would rather have her destroy Roark than to have him exist in a world which doesn't recognize nor respect the greatness of such an 'ideal man' - such is the standard of individualism and objectivist ideal that Rand bestows upon her. However, Dominique's formidable attributes have also been met with much scrutiny, especially by Feminist critiques who have condemned Rand for presenting Dominique as 'anti-feminist' in the scene where she gets raped by Roark. In the years following the publication of the novel, Rand has clarified that the act was that of consensual sex by writing that "They had been united in an understanding beyond the violence, beyond the deliberate obscenity of his action" (Penn State University Press, 1999). The critical point to note is that an act, which Rand, herself, has described as "vicious action and a violation of a woman's rights", mustn't be enough for us to abbreviate Rand's portrayal of Dominique into merely being 'anti-feminist'. It should be reiterated that throughout the novel, Rand has endeavoured to present her view of 'the ideal man' through the fixed lens of Objectivism and "if feminism is the view that women are, and ought to be recognized as, men's intellectual, moral, sexual, and political equals, then the Objectivist philosophy of human nature is inherently feminist, since it applies equally to all human beings, regardless of gender (or race) (N. Branden 1999)." Furthermore, the substitution of sentimentality-which is seen as a hallmark of femininity - with cold, individualistic and steadfast judgments (in Dominique) patently exemplify the ideals that "man must act for his own rational self-interest...and validated code of moral principles which define and determine his actual self-interest." The juxtaposition of Dominique's traits with that of Catherine Halsey and Louisa Keating, who both display an absence of a 'self' with their identity being defined only by their affection for Peter Keating and lack of direction to help them foster their own self-interest, further serves as compelling evidence to suggest that Rand's depiction of Dominique goes beyond simple binaries and, rather, establishes Dominique as an allegory for the 'Dominance' that Rand wished to see in every woman.

What draws more attention to Rand's portrayal of the polar personalities that existed in society decades ago, is the fact that they have continued in perpetuity to the

status quo. However, there is a vast gulf between the way the ideals of 'Individualism', 'Non-conformism', and 'Objectivism' manifest in society today vis-à-vis when Rand originally wrote about them. With the technological boom since the 1990's and the advent of social media which consequently led to greater global connection between people from different parts of the world, the aforementioned ideals no longer restrict themselves to the purview of Capitalism and occupational pursuits. In the 21st century, the persistence of oligopolies, greater trade, glorification of 'start-ups' and entrepreneurship, and increasing investments in brand recognition have made the importance to adopt the ideals of 'individualism', and 'non-conformism' paramount. The world today, thrives on being able to sell a certain type of idiosyncratic lifestyle, that is, everyone from social media influencers to business firms depend on being able to create mass appeal through certain peculiarities in their personality in order to be 'relevant' amongst their competitors and the common man. This conspicuous paradigm shift has resulted in individuals subconsciously or, more-so, consciously running on a treadmill to keep up with the changing dynamic of 'the ideal self' as affirmed by society. Paradoxically, in the effort to assert one's self-identity, individuals are actually falling prey to living like, what Rand describes as, 'the second-hander': "a parasite fed by the minds of others." Moreover, a growing trend of 'sacrificing the self' in order to conform to the standards of what society deems as 'acceptable' is being observed among today's generations. A vast majority of people even profess that the sacrifice of the self-according to society's demands is a crucial factor in determining an individual's success in the world.

A recent research conducted in New Delhi amongst people older than thirteen years of age, reveals that people believe that there is a direct correlation between the ideals of self-sacrifice as per society's expectations and personal gain. When asked whether the participants felt that society had expectations from them, an overwhelming 81.7% of them answered yes. Upon further questioning on whether they had ever done something only by virtue of the fact that society considered it to be 'cool' 54.9% of them agreed to doing so. This not only reveals the herd mentality of people today, but also the acute deficiency of what Rand terms as 'ethical egoism'. In addition, questions of whether the participants believed that compromising on one's own ideals is necessary to have society recognize one's success and whether they feel that there is a direct correlation between sacrifice of the self and long term gain, 59.2% and 85.9% of them answered yes to both questions respectively. The results of this survey clearly exemplify Rand's fear of the world having a disproportionate share of 'parasites' and 'creators' and how "men have been taught that it is a virtue to agree with others" and "swim with the current."

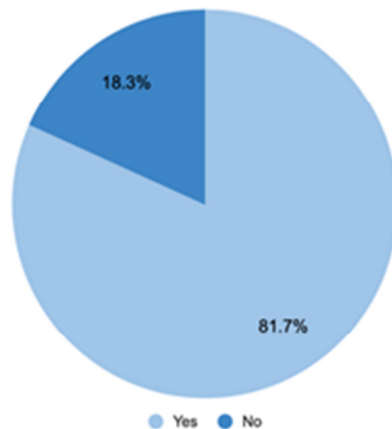


Figure 1. Percentage of people who felt that society has expectations from them

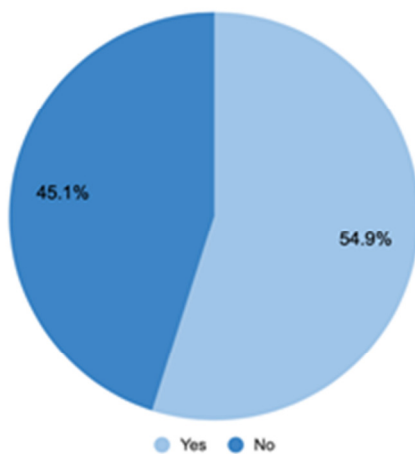


Figure 2. Percentage of people who have done something to look 'cool'

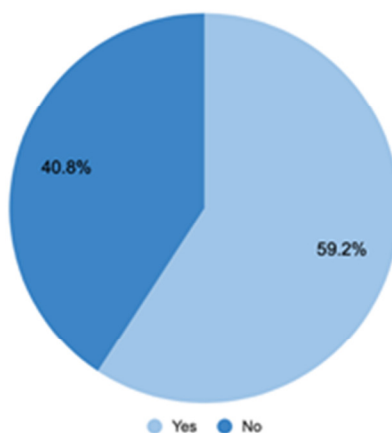


Figure 3. Percentage of people who believe that compromising on their ideals is necessary for society to acknowledge their success

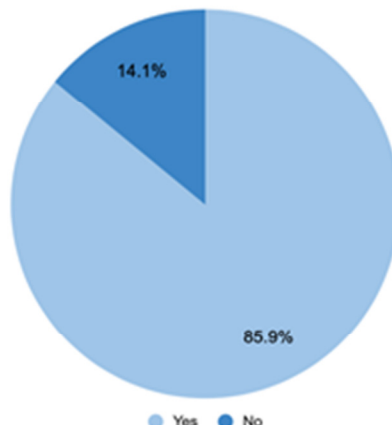


Figure 4. Percentage of people who feel that sacrifice of the 'self' is directly correlated with long-term gain

RESULTS

From its publication in 1943, 'The Fountainhead' has continued to enthrall and provoke readers with its profound discussion on themes such as Objectivism, Conformism and Individualism. It scrupulously challenges the norms in status quo in order to put forth a view of an 'ideal' society that enables man to do and be whatever it is that he/she wants to do and be and accentuates man's cardinal duty to be selfish to serve his own self-interest. Through the evidence provided by the survey included in the paper, one notices how society's expectation of an individual has played a crucial role in defining a person's 'self' and is a practice that has been passed down in perpetuity to successive generations since time immemorial. It underscores a crucial lesson pertinent to today's day and age that maintaining one's dignity and self-respect - even though it may come at the cost of social derision and lampooning - is a virtue that indefatigably provides one with utmost contentment from life and is the elixir ensuring a creator's freedom.

DISCUSSION

As expressed by Rand in 'The Fountainhead', "To sell your soul is the easiest thing in the world. That's what everybody does every hour of his life. If I asked you to keep your soul - would you understand why that's much harder?" This quote accurately captures the essence of the novel, which espouses the doctrine of 'ethical egoism' - that is, to sustain one's own life and repeal all of that which hinders that process. These very themes of Individualism and Objectivism are further elucidated upon in Ayn Rand's magnum opus, 'Atlas Shrugged', which was published just over a decade later after the release of 'The Fountainhead'. At a time when World War II and

the Cold War had led to the surge of collectivist and Marxist principles in America, Rand pledged her support for individual freedom by weaving a narrative around man (represented through John Galt) and the 'looters' (proponents of the collectivist ideal). She depicted a dystopian United States where government regulation and expropriation led society to feel stifled and descend into deprivation; the resolution of the American people to then safeguard their liberty exemplified Rand's conception of a society that allowed the cultivation of an 'ideal man' - a man who does not exist for others. In both, 'The Fountainhead' and 'Atlas Shrugged', Rand advocates taking decisions in favour of one's own rational self-interests and opposing those actions that prevent their manifestation. In addition, the lucid juxtaposition of the 'ideal men' - Howard Roark and John Galt - with protagonists like Peter Keating and the 'Moochers', in 'The Fountainhead' and 'Atlas Shrugged' respectively, serves to convey to the readers the pitiable and poignant state of those who chose to live their life in pursuit of satisfying the expectations of others. The fact that the pertinence of Rand's ideology can be seen in the status quo, where individuals are still bound by the shackles of societal norms and, therefore, "perishing from an orgy of self-sacrificing", shows the true success of 'The Fountainhead' in being able to promulgate a doctrine that strives to liberate man from all that prevents him from realizing and becoming his true-self.

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