

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue IV April 2017

www.ijellh.com

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ISSN :2455-0108

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(INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ONLINE OF SCIENCE)

**POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND PERSONAL SPACE: PETER CAREY'S
*HIS ILLEGAL SELF***

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Abstract

The term politics has number of connotations and includes myriad of factors which pervade every domain of human activity. A strong and flummoxed political, social and ideological set up always function behind any leader, author, philosopher or individual's viewpoint. In fact, by and large power politics determines one's life and often other relations as well, directly or indirectly, are functioned by some kind of power mechanism. Peter Carey as post-colonial novelist raises the issues of power politics in terms of colonialism, imperialism, ideology, gender and even democracy where individuals seem as the puppet in the hands of political players.

His Illegal Self portrays the situation of 1960s USA, emerged after Vietnam war, which gave impetus to the rise of the 'New Left' as a an alternative political ideology for the intellectuals. Present paper attempts to analyze how mainstream power politics of the USA and emergence of the 'New Left' influenced the lives of the individuals. Analyzing the fact 'personal is political' the paper is focused on the capturing of individuals' mind leaving no space for personal.

Key Words: Personal, Political, New Left, Ideology, Radicalism and Change.

Notion of an ideology is a politically or philosophically motivated idea which has certain political or social objectives. "A political ideology explains our social reality,

interprets it in certain way, evolves a set of interrelated principles, contests the nature of the political, and prescribes appropriate action” (Acharya and Bhargva 237). Describing a political ideology and its impact on the personal life, the story of *His Illegal Self* moves around a seven years old American boy Che and a young woman of early twenties Anna Xenos also called Dial. There is no blood relation between Dial and Che but they suffer together due to the political ideology of the period. Che’s parents are radical communist and the active members of a revolutionary organization titled ‘Students for Democratic Society’ (SDS). Che’s mother Susan Selkirk, is a Harvard dropout and a leading member of the radical organization SDS. The novel opens in the year 1971, immediately after the growing agitations of the revolutionary students. His father (David-Rubbo, also a member of SDS), and his mother are underground and Che is kept under the protection his grandmother who calls him ‘Jay’ instead ‘Che’. Anna Xenos commonly known as Dial, as a young Harvard fellow student and a member of SDS takes the responsibility of looking after Che for some time. Anna Xenos is a scholarship student from South Boston and is on the verge of getting a teaching post at Vasar. Dial is about to join her post when she receives a call from her revolutionary comerede Susan who wants to see her son. So as to obey the order of her ideology Dial brings Che to meet Susan but before their meeting Susan dies while making a bomb. Dial is sent to Australia immediately with Che, by revolutionaries, where the rest of the novel has been set.

His Illegal Self reflects the left oriented politics of 1960s USA and its impact on the American society in different levels. Set partly in USA and partly in Australia, the novel encompasses the national political developments in the U.S.A. American society in 1960s was dominated by the tendency to interrogate the existing structures. Conservatism, capitalism, tradition and conformity came under questioning. Radicals rebelled against the capitalism struggling for broad structural change. Reason and compassion were propounded as the tools of change and the people developed the ability to think critically and with revolutionary ideas. Along with national issues, question of Vietnam was highly discussed by the leftists of 1960s. The decade of the 1960s faced “disruptions, strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, confusion, and violence” states Stephen Eric Bronner, “In response to issue ranging from Vietnam War to minor abuses, universities were shut down and the access of conservative students to classrooms was denied” (128).

The novel exposes the adverse results of Marxism in American society of the 1960s that propagates structural change through revolution but it requires certain time and circumstances. Unfortunately, in the 1960s the USA did not have such circumstances that could bring change in the social and political structure of the time. The story moves on the premises of 'New Leftist' ideology of 1960s. "New Left" was a political movement that emerged in 1960s in the United Kingdom and the U.S.A. The members of the 'New Left' were educators, agitators, reformers and other conscientious beings of society who rejected the previous propaganda of communist ideology, based on labor and class struggle. They broadened the area of the ideology by implementing broad range of reforms on the other burning issues like gender roles and gay rights. Peter Carey attempts to expose the 1960s radical politics of American students in colleges and universities and its long-lasting impact on the American society.

The entire story of the novel moves around the impact of Student Democratic Society (SDS), a 'New Leftist' organization, upon young people of universities and colleges. In 1960s, SDS emerged as a powerful student organization based on 'New Left' ideology and it was "chiefly represented by the Progressive Labour Party" states Peterson, which wants to expose "...the hypocrisy in American society – the gap between the liberal democratic dream and the grim human reality of American life – and a commitment to work for radical social change" (297). In fact, in 1960s many young students of America were not satisfied with American system of governance. "The major issues of the 1960s" state Richard and Margret, were "civil rights, Vietnam and university reform – provided the opportunity and rationale for a new generation of radical activists to organize massive student demonstration of radical activists to organize massive student demonstrations and capture public attention" (237). It can be asserted that "...students on the new left share the belief that American society is so grossly defective" states Peterson "that nothing short of a fundamental reconstruction of basic institutions will provide an adequate remedy, and they are willing to act on behalf of this belief" (295). In 1965 large number of young student joined SDS raising the issue of Vietnam War. "In April, 1965, twenty thousand people came to Washington for SDS organized march to protest the war" (297).

The novel opens in 1971 and describes the impact of radical politics on seven years old Che Selkirk, an innocent victim of 1960s SDS radicalism. His personal is awfully affected by the 'New Left' ideology and his father, David Rubbo is described as a person

who “has been persona not grata since Christmas 1964, six months before the boy was born” (3). David Rubbo is an active member of SDS and not acceptable in the USA. Since the time of his birth Che has been deprived of the love of his father and moreover “he has not seen his mother since the age of two” (3) and lives with his grandmother since he was two. When he was only two his politically radical mother was charged with bank robbery and has been fleeing the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) ever since. The secret of his outlaw parents is revealed to him and his grandmother keeps him in her isolated home at Kenoza Lake in Upstate New York.

Rearing and upbringing of a child under certain political and sociological system is one of the issues raised in the novel. Carey strongly delineates the worse condition of seven years Che who suffers due to the radical ideology of his parents. Being the active members SDS Che’s parents do not care for their personal life and the child is deprived of the parental affection he deserves. In fact the child is the product of the secret teenage affair between two radical members of SDS, David Rubbo and Sussan Selkirk. The child from an unmarried girl was a matter of shame in the American society of the sixties. “This was a teenage pregnancy with fifties shame and shadows, linocut illustrations in a women’s magazine” (129). Later she gives “birth to a boy whose name she registers as Che David Selkirk” (132). His name is inspired from Che Guevara who was an Argentine Marxist revolutionary and a major figure of the ‘Cuban Revolution’. Che’s father is a radical leader of SDS and his identity is never revealed to Susan’s mother. But Che’s parents are most wanted for American government as well as police, whose pictures are frequently displayed on the T.V. screen. Hence, the child’s right to even watch T.V. is snatched from him prejudicing his mind with the assumption that “Television was the devil” (18). Till the age of seven, “except for one single photograph, the boy had never seen his dad not even on T.V. There had no television permitted in Grandma’s house on Kenoza Lake” (16).

Theme of loneliness and constant search for parental love has been woven dexterously and the readers find catharsis in motherly talk between Dial and Che where the boy asks her “Can I call you Mom” (9) and feels first time “being with his mother” (10). Loneliness creates quarries in Che’s mind and in order to be satisfied himself, he develops friendship with Cameron Fox, a neighboring boy and baby sitter of Che, who tells him the revolutionary background of his parents. “After his mother and the Dobbs Street Cell had robbed the bank in Bronxville, a judge had given Che to the permanent care of his grandma. That’s what Cameron said. You got a right to know, man” (17). Che is informed of his hidden father by

Cameron “He looks like you, said Cameron Fox. You should get this framed, he said. Your father is a great American” (17).

Revolutions, radicalism or other change oriented thoughts and philosophies have multidimensional objectives and implications which cannot be gazed through single spectacle. Perspectives of people on such immense transpositions vary as per their position and status in the society or concerned system, hence, implications, good or bad, of desired changes cannot be finalized with the viewpoints of certain characters in the story. However, literature doesn't demand any authenticity of facts and keeps broadness to fill lacuna left by history providing space for the untold and unrecorded voices of society by and large. *His Illegal Self* records the viewpoints of the characters, victims of 1960s radicalism, the innocents and the experienced, Che, Cameron and Dial. Che, though a child victim of the 'New Left' has his own viewpoint on the radical politics which has been developed in his psyche by listening to the stories of revolution, robbery, bombing and protest. At the age of seven he knows everything about the revolutionary organizations like 'Weathermen', Maoism and SDS. Dial surprisingly gets answered “Do you know what SDS stands for? Student Democratic Society, he said.” (28) He further adds that “PL is Progressive Labor. They are the Maoist fraction...You are sort of Weathermen.” (28). Camron Fox on the other hand also has concrete updates of radical politics and keeps Che informing the different narratives of “New Left” and role of Che's parents in SDS describing 'Weathermen', 'Maoism' and SDS etc.

The novel is a comprehensive critique of the rise of the 'New Left' in 1960s implicating the emergence of radical forces as the failure of the existing government. The story is not the straight condemnation of the radical politics, whereas, the various reasons of the emergence of 'New Left', as an alternate for existing system, and indulgence of youth dominate the plot. “In 1969” states Geoff Bailey, “more than one million students considered themselves revolutionaries and socialist of some kind” (web). Civil Right Movement, American sponsored Vietnam War, racism and poverty were the causative factors to bring the intellectuals and students under a single umbrella against the existing channels of politics. Geoff Bailey again reasons:

The basic problem was that student radicals had come to the conclusion that a revolution was needed – that was, racism and poverty were not simply bad policies, but were the outgrowth of a system based on the exploitation of the

vast majority for the benefit of a small minority, and that system could not be changed through the existing channels of the Democratic Party. (Web)

In *His Illegal Self* Carey's major characters are the active members of SDS and belong to intellectual class without ensuring indulgence in any sort of inhuman activities. They are sensible human beings and equally vulnerable for existing social disparities. Susan Selkirk, daughter of privileged parents, is an intellectual girl who is "fluent in three languages" (129), joins SDS not blindly but to bring change in American society. Along with struggle she studies "philosophy, economics, books that would never once have interests her" (132).

Robert Strange McNamara was an American business executive and eighth 'Secretary of Defense', served from 1961 to 1968 under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. As 'American Secretary of Defense' he enlarged the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. Vietnam War was fought between North Vietnam supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies – and the government of South Vietnam, supported by the United States and other anti-communist allies. In the course of war, the U.S. conducted a large scale strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam that was highly criticized across the world and even in the USA itself. *His Illegal Self* describes the impact of 'Vietnam War' on American people. The novel also brings into discussion the then 'American Defense Secretary' Robert McNamara's visit to Harvard. "When Robert McNamara came to Harvard in September of 1966, it was SDS who led the protest" (134). Susan Selkirk also leads the protest against McNamara with her small baby, Che, in her back. Her impetuous action in order to oppose the USA defense secretary is described as:

The mother was in front, Che is in her arms, her wild hair streaming the famous "fabulous" Tibetan shawl flying backward. The crowd bucked. The mother tripped. She plunged forward as the black Lincoln spend around the corner. There was so much criticism to come, but everyone who saw her said she fell like an athlete, rolling, landing on her back with the child safe against her stomach as she slid... (134)

She is badly injured in the protest. Her character is presented as a true revolutionary whose heart is ached with the tragic deaths in Vietnam caused by American bombings.

The mother's long tanned back was all messed up and bleeding, but no one else was even scratched, certainly not Che. So it did not matter, you would

think, his father thought, his mother thought especially when looked at in the light of all the deaths in Vietnam. (134)

'New Left' politics of the USA could not be successful in spite of its humanist approach and vision for society. The failure of the 'New Left' to provide a solid stand to the left politics in the USA is quite visible in the novel. In the story instead of making their movements successful SDS and 'Weathermen' got split. "These were extreme left fractions in SDS but it was still three years before the famous split that produced the 'Weathermen'" (134). The Weatherman Underground Organization (WUO), "commonly known as weathermen underground, was an American radical left-wing organization... and their goal was to create a clandestine revolutionary party for the overthrow of the U.S. government" (web).

Carey's view point about the corollary of radical politics and bondage of ideology oscillates between the two main characters, Che and Dial. The conversation between Che and Dial reveals the frustration, suffering, quest for identity, search for parents, loss of personal life and career and conflicts that emerged because of the left ideology. It is ideology that makes Dial lose her job and home. It is due to this doctrine that Che becomes orphan and is sent to a foreign country, Australia.

The radical politics of 1960s affected the lives of poor students who were studying in colleges and universities of the time. One of the most politically affected characters in the novel is Anna Xenos commonly known as Dial. Her surname Xenos is a Greek word that means 'strange' or 'alien'. So Xenos community was politically and socially marginalized in American society. In the novel Anna Xenos is a poor hard working girl, around whom the plot of the story moves, has been a member of left student wing Student Democratic Society (SDS) having some link with Susan Silkrik, the active leader of (SDS). This character seems acting as a puppet in the hands of the left politics who also works as a babysitter for Che. Her life immediately drags into trouble when Susan Selkirk calls her at night. Susan is underground after bank robbery in Bronxville. She has not seen her son, Che, for long since he was two years old. Anna Xenos a student with scholarship from South Boston is going to join a job of teacher at Vasar as she receives Susan's call that she wants to see her son. Susan Selkirk knows that Dial is innocent and inexperienced, can be used for political purposes. "I need your favour, Susan said at last. If not for me, then for the movement" (35). Conditioned to obey the order of the SDS top structure, Dial collects the boy from his grandmother and goes to New York. In the same episode Che's mother is killed while planting a bomb.

Immediately, after that, SDS sends Dial and Che to Australia arranging wealth and passport for them. In this critical situation Dial is seen as the kidnapper of the boy.

After Dial's departure to Australia, to a hidden place with Che, the entire novel has been set in Australia. Australia is a strange land to both, Dial and Che, where they endure physical, emotional and rational trails that change their lives profoundly. In Australia, Che and Dial live among hippies of Australia near Queensland. Hippie' is a subculture that originated in USA during the 1960s, which spread in many other countries. "Its origin may be traced to European social movements in the 19th and 20th century such as Bohemians, and the influence of Eastern religion and spirituality" (web). The novel describes hippies as honest and generous people, who give shelter to Dial and Che. Many hippie children are the victims of Australia politics of hate. They live in inhuman conditions in the forests of Queensland. Trevor, one of early acquaints of Dial and Che, is a poor man. Many other children live the life of beggars. They have no personal place leading a life of abject poverty. Adam is on other poor hippie boy who "had no shoes himself. He looked mad and homeless, with big long feet and toes like fingers" (95). In Australia Dial and Che's problems and sufferings go from bad to worse. Life in Queensland forest brings them trauma and frustrations: "She would be happier locked in Jail. Really. It could not be worse than to be hidden away here in the leaky rain. There was a grimy kitchen sink on the back wall and the counter was piled high..." (94). Depressed and dejected Dial abominates the environment she is provided. "It was awful. They could not live here, ever" (94).

The condition of Che is analogous to Jimmy Fairley a boy protagonist of another post-colonial text *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf. Jimmy Fairley, a British boy remains among the Aboriginals of Australia for a long period of time who struggles for his lost culture and community. In *His Illegal Self* Che loses his parents and is sent to Australia where he starts living with the hippies of Australia. He is not informed about the real facts responsible for his sufferings and predicaments. In Australia he searches for his father everywhere and when he comes to know the fact that Dial is not his mother he finds his identity interrogated. He tells everything to his hippie friend Trevor: "I know she's not my mother, the boy said, tears welling up. I know ok!"

It is politics and ideology that develops the relationship between Che and Dial, but the base of this relation is not reality. Che's friendship with Trevor, a boy of his age, in Australia brings certain misunderstandings between Che and Dial when he asks her the reason of his

being stolen. He cannot comprehend the ideological structure of radical politics and persistently inquires the imperative cause of his condition declaring Dial to be the culprit:

So why did you steal me, he said and saw how he made her wince.

I did not steal you. I was taking you to see your mama.

He felt a huge angry power to hurt her, like he could do anything and not be stopped. You stole me, he said. You brought me where no one could find me.

(191)

Dial feels dejected, disappointed and pained when her generosity dedication and affection for Che is interrogated by him. She has been a sincere and dedicated member of Left ideology who had left her profession and compromised her personal life but here she herself is heartbroken. She realizes that her entire sacrifice has been futile having no correlation with the practical life. She heartedly loves Che but when he questions her self-respect and humanism, their relationship reaches at the point of collapse. She despondently attempts to tell him the reality but Che is not convinced. The worse condition of an individual under a political ideology is unraveled when Che without listening to her considers Student Democratic Society responsible for entire episode:

My mommy's dead, he said.

He watched her shrivel.

Your mommy wanted to see you, but that was against the law.

...

Your mother was underground. Do you know what that means?

SDS, he said. I know. You know I know. (191)

Dial, a poor and honest girl, is the member of SDS but her innocent personal life is disturbed by the ideology. She is not responsible for kidnapping and destroying Che's childhood, rather protects and loves him like a mother. The consequences of radical politics with its catastrophic impact on relationships, personal life, friendship and even on profession are exposed in the novel. Dial immediately reacts and rebukes Che when he blames her for making his life hell. On this point she immediately wants to break the emotionally built relation with Che. Her anger and frustration unravels how she has been dragged into the situation forcibly. She clearly warns Che that she is a teacher who does not need to stay in Australia, "Don't turn on me. My life is totally destroyed by this. I'm a teacher. I'm not meant to be here. (192)

When the conflicts between Dial and Che worsen, Dial struggles to find ways to contact with her communist comrades but does not succeed. She is not a kidnapper and wants to be free from such an accusation. With the help of Trevor she reaches Brisbane for international contacts. Somehow they manage to call Che's grandmother: "Jay is here. You want him? Or not? ... I lost a daughter, I can't lose a grandson... listen to me please we just want to come home." (262). The story ends happily exposing the web of political and ideological entrapment that always direct human beings for all impersonal motives.

The novel reveals the tragic experiences of human beings under certain kinds of political transitions, and events like revolution, radicalism and state oppression. All the political and ideological agencies claim to change the society and existing system but they leave a long lasting impact on the lives of people. The novel critically exposes the political radicalism of 1970s that emerged from the erroneous policies of American government, but Carey does not accept the novel as a political text. Jon Wiener asks him in an interview about the purpose of the book stressing on the point is it a "conservative disdain for 1970s radicalism?" (web). Carey replies "what I wanted to do was a really beautiful work of art" (web). Moreover, revolutions and radicalism are broad terms with multiple objectives inside and Carey records only a little part of it. Jon Wiener records Carey's perspective on 1970s radicalism, in the same interview: "1970s radicalism" is a big and complicated thing. I'm critical of one part of it – the weather underground" (Web).

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