

Exploring the Protean Identity in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*

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Abstract:

Considering mainly the work "The Protean Self" by Robert Jay Lifton, this paper will be analysing Heller's novel Something Happened while arguing that how a decentered subjectivity can encompass many different, perhaps even contradictory, identities. The paper will further will explore the anonymity that a character faces as he is caught up in a tension between the external world and his own inner psyche. It will further be looking at the resulting aspects of the protean self like loss of family values and disregard for the social institutions like marriage and the theme of paranoia and self-doubt.

Key words: Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, identity, protean self

The Protean Self as R.J. Lifton has named it in his eponymous work, is a self which is ever changing and multi-faceted. It is a self which transpires in a fragmented world and possesses a fluid personality. It is a self which "embodies tangibility and multiplicity of identities like Proteus." In Greek mythology Proteus was the son of Poseidon, the sea god. He knew about the past and present and could even prophesise the future. When captured by the Trojan War hero Menelaus for prophesying the future, Proteus changed himself to various shapes like that of a lion, a boar, a panther, a snake and even to running water. Although he could acquire multiple forms, the

most difficult task for him remained to be in his original shape. Erik Erikson in his *Dimensions of a New Identity* gives a wide-ranging description of the protean aspect of one's personality. He states that "It can and does denote a many-sided man of universal stature, a man of many gifts, competent in each; a man of many appearances, yet centered in a true identity. But it can also mean a man of many disguises; a man of chameleon like adaptation to passing scenes; a man of essential elusiveness" Lifton too gives us his opinion about the protean man. According to him a protean personality is "characterised by an interminable series of experiments and explorations- some shallow, some profound- each of which may be readily abandoned in favour of still new psychological quests." This many sidedness of one's identity is a kind of sub-conscious effort to gel in with today's world which is in a state of constant flux. As Lifton points out:

"Protean self emerges from confusion, from the wide spread feeling that we are losing our psychological mooring. We feel ourselves buffeted about by unmanageable historical forces and social uncertainties. Leaders appear suddenly, recede equally rapidly, and are difficult for us to believe in when they are around. We change ideas and partners frequently, and do the same with jobs and places of residents."

A state of contradiction has pervaded in today's time, where from one end an individual is trying to hold to the values of "consistency and stability," values which have been emphasized on for all one's life right from the childhood, and on the other hand the inconsistency and a state of extreme unpredictability that the external situations constantly throws upon the individual. This instils in an individual a feeling of being "unsteady, neurotic or worse." The extreme unpredictability and loss of core values, like those of religion, family, ideas of morality and so on poses a serious threat to one's identity. But in such a scenario Lifton states that rather than being collapsed and losing one's self of sense, there happens a series of identity

shifts where this very self becomes malleable and keeps evolving to various possibilities.

Looking at America's history, we see the country witness colonization, the great American revolution, followed by the movement towards the frontiers, civil war, large scale immigration, rapid technological development, the mass media revolution-all of which brought a major social change in the country, and most importantly had a great effect on the contemporary self. Being in a constant traditional flux, Lifton sees American's as the people of metamorphosis. Writers like Melville, Saul bellow, Ralph Ellison, Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, having their works made this self-inventive and shape shifting shape of an individual very prominent. This multiplicity of the self is evident in Melville's *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857) whose shape shifting protagonist plays a role of a speculator, healer, merchant and a philosopher. Emerson too has dealt with multi-dimensional aspect of one's identity stating that "metamorphosis is the law of the universe," or he even goes on to say that "there are no fixities in nature" and that "the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze."

Talking about a protean individual's process of identity formation, it will be relevant to mention *Invisible Men and Women: The Disappearance of Character*, a significant work by Scott Sanders. Although the work targets exclusively the science fiction, it can also be considered to be a strong commentary of the whole process of identity formation as shown in the twentieth century American fiction. As Sanders observes a kind of dissolution of character in science fictions, one also finds a similar dissolution of a character's identity or his sense of being in the works being produced post World War II in America. An individual as portrayed in the twentieth century American fiction undergoes "fragmentation and anonymization of the self in modern society" and is reduced to being just an "elementary particle" in the hands of large

institutions like government and multi-national corporations which define an individual only in terms of defining humans in terms of “markets, services, life-expectancies.” An individual ultimately ends up losing his sense of identity as he gradually slips into being anonymous due to the “tension between the external pressurised social order and the precarious inner psychic structure.”

According to Lifton it is for the purpose of dealing with this anxiety and pressure and to defend ones sense of self that an individual gets into the protean shape-shifting shell. Joseph Heller being a World War II writer, knowing or unknowingly, made this protean character very visible in all his works. Writing mainly in 1960s and 1970s, when there was an outburst of experiments with the self due to the significant changes that were taking place in America on the political as well as cultural front. Kennedy's victory in the 1960 election brought a diverse change in the American outlook. When America saw a charismatic and a trusted leader in his, it was his assassination shortly afterwards that put an abrupt end to all the rekindled American hopes. The decade witnessed a chain of shocking assassinations like that of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., which created an immense upheaval in the country. Countless young American soldiers who were sent to Vietnam under the leadership of President Johnson lost their lives, which further deepened the mistrust of the Americans in their leaders. A rebellious Counter Culture moment by the American youth was one way of coping with this shock where they started to assert their identities buy bringing in some major change in music, art, hairstyles and even resorting to drugs. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) by Tom Wolfe examined this flourishing drug culture among the American youth.

Joseph Heller being one of the prominent writers of this era in which the previous social and institutional arrangements were rapidly changing and there was a “loss of a sense of fit

between what individuals *feel* themselves to be and what a society or culture, formally or informally, *expects* them to be." An individual as seen in Joseph Heller's works faced the historical and cultural dislocation which resulted in "dangerous forms of fragmentation of the self." An individual in Heller's works acquires a protean identity in order to cope with all kinds of external pressures, but this mercurial defence mechanism remains in a constant threat of being dysfunctional which lead to a series of many other complexities- a symbolic fatherlessness, loss of values for institutions like family and marriage, plurality of names or namelessness, self-doubt, isolation and paranoia.

Something Happened (1974), Heller's second novel, portrayed a corporation man Bob Slocum, who suffers from insomnia and almost smells the disaster mounting towards him. The novel is a study of unrelieved human misery, and Heller becomes virtually the first major American writer to deal with unrelieved misery at length. As a post-modernist American novel *Something Happened* reflects the disintegration and degeneration of an upper middle class American family, and Heller in his characteristic hard hitting and incisive style illustrates the dismantling of the American self through a host of inter-related aspects: man to man relationships on the domestic and professional planes, besides the self vs. self process. The novel according to Searles becomes "to an alarming degree an accurate social documentary that mercilessly captures some very real elements of the contemporary American situation.

Something Happened is set in corporate and suburban America, and its protagonist, Bob Slocum feels that his happiness is threatened by unknown forces: "when an ambulance comes, I'd rather not know for whom. And when children drown, chock, or are killed by automobiles or trains, I don't want to know which children they are, because I'm always afraid they might turn out to be mine." He is a middle echelon

executive of a large corporation, the automobile causality insurance company, a suburbanite living on a quarter-acre in Connecticut, a husband and a father of three children. Though the reigning feature of his character is a sort of passivity, he is highly ambitious, and always thinks of raising higher in the professional ladder, in spite of his aversion for developing relationships which could help Slocum in acquiring promotions and perks. As far as private life is concerned, his only ambition is to enjoy supremacy in sex and fails to maintain functional relationships even with his wife and children. Domestic and family relationships are sought to be improved within imposed happiness, a happiness purchased with earning as much money as possible. Yet contentment is nowhere. Nobody in Slocum's family is happy. His wife is "unhappy" because Slocum is a philanderer; his daughter is "unhappy" because he does not love her. Derek, Slocum's mentally retarded son constantly embarrasses his father, because living itself for him is a torture.

Slocum represents the contemporary human reality in America where the individual has to face a lot of cultural shocks, social conditioning and institutional regimentation. There is a growing sense of fear, anxiety and concern for an uncertain future and consequently the middle class American parents are a loss to chart out a meaningful for their children. They get constantly threatened by insecurity and inauthenticity. Says Slocum: "I've got an unhappy wife to support, and two unhappy children to take care of. (I've got that other child with irremediable brain damage who is neither happy nor unhappy, and I do not know what will happen to them after we're dead). I've got eight unhappy people working for me who have problems and unhappy dependence of their own..."

Slocum receives signals from only three sources: his office, his memory and his home. He is well provided with all comforts and privileges, yet he is sure of nothing and afraid of

everything, even though he is not capable of defining the object of his fear. "I have a feeling that someone nearby is soon going to find out something about me that will mean the end, although I can't imagine what that something is." This vague fear which haunts Slocum becomes a chronic affliction, and in absence of any productive and meaningful relationships with human beings (in family as well as outside it), this problem aggravates Slocum's neuroticism. The more Slocum fails to establish meaningful relationships with others, the more his neurotic dependence on the self increases. A sense of fear and insufficiency haunts him constantly. "I get willies....something must have happened to me sometime."

Slocum is embarking on a deep psychological exploration and is worried about the ultimate cause of things, the propelling force behind the process of life. However, he cannot imagine what that something is, that happened sometime in his life, while excepting human inability and helplessness. Slocum's mental state is shaped by chronic feelings of loss, divorced from an understanding of what precisely has been lost: "I would be stunned; I would feel abandoned and isolated again, and I would sink back for safety again inside my dense, dark wave of opaque melancholy; I would feel lonely and I would be brought face to face again with the face that I have nobody in this world to confide in or reach towards for help..."

Heller creates a peculiar world where commerce dominates the entire life process, a world devoid of human love and warmth. Slocum himself comments: "the salesmen are proud of their position and the status and importance they enjoy within the company, for the function of my department, and of most other departments is to help the salesmen sell. The company exists to sell. That's the reason we were hired and we are paid." In this contest Slocum appears selfish and very much after positions and promotions, all the time afraid of losing his job. Heller makes a profound study of modern corporations and colleges, as these entrap human personality. Contemporary

man is getting crushed under their dead weight. The modern corporate ruthlessly levels down human talents, reflects a split personality and indulges in double talk. There is no real human essence.

Woven through what is essentially a static story about upper-middle class family life, are scenes of the vaguely defined company where Slocum works. The office where he works is surrealistically rendered, and characterized by fear, frustration and boredom. This world of office is as disillusioning and frustrating, for the protagonist, as is the world of his family. At the office, Slocum shirks from a genuine effort to establish healthy and productive relations with other individuals. In the company, Slocum thinks only in terms of boss-subordinate equations to be the superior and exercise authority over the lower rung person.

Slocum, is not sure anymore, "who really runs the company (not even the people who are credited with running it), but the company does run. Sometimes these twelve men at the top work for the government for a little while. They don't seem interested in doing much more. Two of them know what I do and recognize me, because I have helped them in the past, and they have been kind enough to remember me, although not I'm sure, by name." These words of Slocum again testify the truth about the human relationships in the world of big business and corporate life.

A helpless state of alienation envelops Slocum in the office as well as at his home. Two passages will illustrate the parallels between Slocum's family life and corporation life, the way his need to control is based on fear engendered by hierarchism: "in my department, there are six people who are afraid of me, and one small secretary who is afraid of all of us. I have other person working for me who is not afraid of anyone, not even me, and I would fire him quickly, but I'm afraid of him" and "In the family in which I live there are four people of whom I am afraid. Three of these four people are afraid of me,

and each of these is all afraid of the other two. Only one member of the family is not afraid of any of others, that one is an idiot." These words convey, beyond any doubt, the quality and nature of relations existing in Slocum's household. The family scent is thus disgusting, the office scenario being no better. Relationships are not only difficult but disgusting as well.

In private life, if at all there is one, Slocum is a petty tyrant, presiding over the dismantling of relationships. For a home there is first a New York apartment, then a Connecticut house; a plumpish buy svelte wife who drinks; a contentious fifteen year old daughter; a couple of younger sons, one brain damaged; and a constantly changing succession of maids. All the members of Slocum's family are unhappy in various ways and he knows it is largely his own fault. There is a constantly widening gulf between Slocum and his wife, which governs their relationship. He says that he always wanted a divorce, even before he met his wife and married her: "I dream of divorce. All my life I've wanted a divorce. Even before I was married I wanted a divorce. I don't think there has been a six-month period in all the years of my marriage- a six-week period- when I have not wanted to end it by divorce. I was never sure I wanted to get married. But I always knew t wanted a divorce." Yet the divorce never comes. Slocum is terrified by the possibility that his wife might be unfaithful to him.

Their relationship remains essentially unchanged during the course of the novel. If Bob Slocum is immediately obvious as a negative example, his wife, frustrated, insecure and semi-alcoholic, is the stereotyped suburban housewife. As a housewife, she is harassed by household scores. Distraught by inner complexities, she craves for peace; "what's bothering her? I ask my wife loudly, as we move together in the dining room. 'Nothing I don't know, I never know.... That shouldn't be too hard, should it.'" He does not want to take care of his wife in her old age: "I want to get free of her before her health fails. I see

an ailing wife in my future.” Obviously the very notion of an old ailing wife is abhorrent for Slocum and sours the relationship further.

As in the case of the son, so in the case of daughter, Slocum has miserably failed to evolve and maintain a healthy and fruitful relationship. Such a failure is visible in case of the wife as well. These failures further aggravate the disintegration and strife in Slocum’s domestic life. The family norm and the traditional concept of domesticity, crumbles under the weight of perverse values, demonic obsessions, and, above all, rotten relationships.

Lack of good and normal relations makes Slocum unhappy at his home, as unhappy is his office. Fear and power, the opposites of love and caring, characterized Slocum’s family relationships. To escape the problems of his family, Slocum wants to stay in the company office during vacations, and his thoughts show that he does not love the members of his family: “I am always hesitant about being rude (to anyone but the members of my family), even when it isn’t dangerous.” There is no hesitation in Slocum to oppress the members of his family: “along with Green and Horace White, I have played the part of tyrant myself at times with people in the country who are subordinate to me, and I play it often at home with my wife and with my daughter and my son, and even at times with my idiot child, who also doesn’t understand what is going on.” These words again illustrate the cardinal fact of Slocum’s life that is absence of meaningful relations with his wife and children, Heller’s protagonist resorts to browbeating and tyrannizing his family.

Slocum being an integral part of an unacceptable situation in which he finds himself- the ruthless, cutthroat, immoral realm of big business, exhibits an array of personalities. There are times when Slocum longs for a better identity and hence in doing so, takes the shape of a little boy. He sees his best self as a trapped, little boy, who somehow

receded inside as Slocum matured. He wonders, "What happened to the lovely little me that once was?" Directly afterwards, Slocum realizes: "I know at last what I want to be when I grow up. When I grow up I want to be a little boy." He wants to recapture the generosity, the innocence and purity of a little boy. Although being somewhat of a tyrant, an oppressor at the work fan family front, resorting to all kinds of foul plays to meet his end and satisfy himself, but near the end of the novel Slocum states quite directly what he does want from life. "I wish I were part of a large family circle and enjoyed it. I would like to fit in. I wish I believed in God." In these words Slocum confesses his longing for normal relationships within the family, a longing which remains unfulfilled due to his negative attitude. Slocum longs for traditional values, a world of love, trust and simple pleasures. Yet caught in a world too complex and too alienating for such simplicity and security, he became both disillusioned and compulsively needful and insatiable.

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