The New Against the Old: An Existential Crisis

Abstract

Change is the rule of life and nature. Everything is in a state of flux. The society changes and gives rise to different existential tensions. The old and the new counter each other. This automatically leads to social tensions and psychological trauma.It brings in an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty. The old with their inherited values try to stick to their tradition with a lot of superiority. The new generation, on the other hand, is very confident and impatient to bring in the changes. This paper makes an attempt to study these social and psychological problems which are a result of these forces ofchange.

Keywords: Heritage, Bequeath, Anxiety, Trauma, Troubled, Extremes, Cnfusion,Commitment, Accomodate, Impatient.

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Introduction

In the course of time a society passes through different phases. It keeps on changing from one state to another. A society changes because it is impossible for the younger generation to take over intact the social and cultural heritage bequeathed by an older generation. The traditional structure of a society has ceased to answer to the conditions, needs and demands of the present generation. When the change takes place the people of the out-going generation try to counter the forces of change as there is an irrepressible desire in the older generation to stick to its traditional customs and institutions and to exert its moral and cultural superiority over the younger generation. The younger generation, on the other hand, greatly influenced by the new forces, is reluctant to accept the imposed values of the former generation. Thus tension prevails till the older generation because of its rigidity loses its contact with reality and is forced to yield.

The crisis of a transitional period registers a conflict between an order that has exhausted its freshness and an order that is yet to gain acceptance. The resulting situation is a psychological no-man's land. The period is characterized by conflicting loyalties. People are thrown into a quagmire of doubts and uncertainties, fear and anxiety. People, with their inherited values and the new experiences, are constantly bewildered and perplexed. They live in a troubled world, a world torn between two extremes. This period is characterised by chaos and disorder. There is confusion and bewilderment. Commenting on this troubled social situation J.B. Priestley observed :

> It is a kind of short interlude between two long acts, just as the Regency is : a col between two plateaux...a bridge passage, brief but complicated in the great symphony of two centuries; a time when a lot of people are trying to cling to the past while many ethers are trying to hurry themselves and everybody else into a future of their own devising... It was an era of tensions between two extremes.(84)

The tensions of a transitional period presuppose a radical change in the social system. This change takes place when new ideas and thoughts enter into the minds of the younger generation. The old way of living is no longer valid. A new generation arrives with a new philosophy completely different from that of their predecessors. Holbrook Jackson has thus commented on this situation of the revolution of the new against the old:

> There were misgivings in more directions than one....Ideas were in the air. Things were not what they seemed, and there were visions about. ...People said it was a period of transition and they were convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another and from one

religion to a dozen
or   none.
...........Everybody,
think about, so much to discuss, so much
to see.... [31]

This change in the social system poses a great challenge to the people of the out-going generation. They feel that their culture is being threatened by some strange new order. Their ideas and ideals which have dominated the social system now seem powerless. They react exactly as Somerset Maugham likes to put it in his Selected Prefaces and Introductions:

We live in a troubled world....The future is uncertain, our freedom is menaced. We are in the grip of anxieties, fears and frustrations. Values that were long unquestioned now seem dubious.[20]

This transition stresses the fact that the sensitive, heroic individuals may undergo the trauma of helplessness in the face of insurmountable odds posed either by the dehumanized civilization or by the indifferent destiny. They feel insecure and shaky. This feeling is better illustrated by Priestly:

They (old) no longer felt secure. The old confidence had gone, the members of the upper middle class felt that property and position were being threatened....In the lower middle-class respectability itself, often newly-born, had to be guarded. There was a feeling that religion, the family, decency, social and political stability...were all in danger.[87]

The tension in the transitional period is due to a clash of values. Each society changes in keeping with man's relationship to the circumstances around him. The people of the older generation try to protect their own values in the face of new values which threaten their existence. Highly individualistic and sensitive by nature these people of the past try to counter the forces of the present. Even in the society of the present, they desperately try to keep their old way of life alive. This is mainly because of their commitment to a value structure of an old world. But the modern society has its own conditions for its members and certainly cannot accommodate anyone who refuses to stick to its conditions.

But, since the self of such an individual carries the image of that old world, which is totally different from the modern world, it comes directly into conflict with the latter. These people who are sensitive of their heritage live in a world of memory which is alien to the actuality available to them. They live a displaced existence. They are generally committed to a value structure of a bygone world. The world in which they live has nothing in common with their psychic inheritance of values. They are not in a position to accept the changing tenor of time. The immortality which they associate with certain glorious experiences in their life, in the ultimate analysis, isolates them from the available context of reality in which they are forced to operate.

As we know, the human spirit that is the individual essence in order to achieve universality must make itself conformable to the society in general, failing which the individual will be in complete disagreement with the social. The individual and the society in which he/she lives will repel each other. As a result the

mentally and emotionally, was running about in a hundred different directions. There was so much to

individual gets alienated and finally defeated before the mightier force of the society. The man who lives in the period of transition faces a single major problem. His problem is that of conformity, of adjustment. His inner needs would always remain the same, the need to actualize his possibilities, the need to assert his dignity as a man, his uniqueness as an individual. His inner need to maintain his individuality against all odds and the existential necessity to adjust with the prevalent social forces form the main tension of an individual who lives in a transitional period.

The integrated structure of the society is lost with the change of power from the landed aristocracy to the rich middle-class. The society gets distracted. Instead of being narrowed down to a few land-lords, it becomes amorphous in character. With the growth of democracy and individualism the power and prominence of the common man emerges as a threat to the closely-guarded traditional structures of the society. The conflict between the two classes deepens with the unyielding supremacy asserted by the rigid established class and the non-conforming attitudes of the new generation. It leads to a turmoil in the socio-cultural plane giving way to the ultimate tensions. The world thus is sharply torn between two distinct parts: one represented by the older generation with its non-compromising inflexibility and the other by the new generation with its tendency and urgency to bring in the new values. The decline of the out-going class however is clearly visible. The titled class is unable to offer any combative resistance to the growing socialistic forces and democratic ideas. With the birth of the *nouveau riche* the old aristocracy loses much of its charm. One notices the falling apart of the former structure of society and gradual ascendance of the commercial, bohemian class in the socio-political sphere.

Thus the society is confused between two opposite worlds. The younger generation is hugely motivated and governed by the ideas of freedom, individualism and self-fulfilment and the older generation is out to defend its traditional values. The younger generation is impatient and not at all prepared to abide by the ideas and values of existing society. Its protest is a clear declaration of its disenchantment with the old order. A confrontation becomes inevitable between people who cling to the old way of life and people who represent the present social norms. Instead of all their fighting efforts, these people of the past turn out to be loosers.

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