Chapter V

The satire in A Handful of Dust throws light on the decadence of the sick society

A Handful of Dust (1934) is one of the most penetrating of Waugh’s novels. He himself observed that it dealt entirely with human behaviour. After his estrangement and divorce with Evelyn Gardner, Waugh passed through a phase of extreme emotional turmoil. At that particular time, he got an impression of the infidelity of the married women. To some extent, the notion found expression in A Handful of Dust. Despite proving disloyal to Tony, Brenda Last did not find satisfaction with John Beaver and ultimately she had to get married to Jock Grant-Menzies. In the end, she got only a handful of dust. In the same way, Tony Last also could not get the things he cherished. He also remained a tortured soul throughout his life. That is why Evelyn Waugh has taken the title A Handful of Dust from T.S.Eliot’s Waste Land

“I will show you fear in a handful of dust.”

The novel deals with the futility, aimlessness, and boredom of the so-called modern life. Brenda Last got fed up with the hum-drum life as a wife of Tony Last and wanted to escape from this monotonous life. She wished for a place in the social circles, with this purpose she got inclined towards John Beaver. She got so involved headlong into this love cum obsession that she gave more importance to him than to her own son John. This is quite perceptible in the following conversation that took place between her and Jock.

‘What is it, Jock? Tell me quickly, I’m scared. It’s nothing awful, is it?’

‘I’m afraid it is. There’s been a very serious accident.’

‘John?’
‘Yes.’
‘Dead?’
He nodded.

She sat down on a hard little Empire chair against the wall, perfectly still with her hands folded in her lap, like a small well-brought – up child introduced into a room full of grown-ups. She said, ‘Tell me what happened. Why do you know about it first?’

‘I’ve been down at Hetton since the week-end.’

‘Hetton?’
‘Don’t you remember? John was going hunting to-day.’
She frowned, not at once taking in what he was saying.

‘John … John Andrew … I … oh, thank God …’ Then she burst into tears.’

Tony on the other hand was a simpleton. His main motto of life was to provide glory by renovating his outdated ancestral house Hetton. This is symbolic of the retreat to passed glories and traditionalism. However, by describing the house as devoid of any interest in the country Guide Book, the narrator establishes the futility of his pursuits, which he failed to identify.

“Between the villages of Hetton and Compton Last lies the extensive park of Hetton Abbey. This, formerly one of the notable houses of the country, was entirely rebuilt in 1864 in the Gothic style and is now devoid of interest. ….

The passage from the country Guide Book did not cause Tony Last any serious annoyance.”

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130 Ibid., p. 14.
Therefore, quite involved in his own daily chores of life he remained oblivious of the activities of his wife about which everybody knows, and later, he provided all fabricated proofs for showing his relations with different women so that his wife might get success in her divorce proceedings. John Beaver like John Haygate (in the life of Evelyn Waugh) is a social parasite. He wanted to use any kind of ladder for attaining social prestige and glory. He got a medium in the form of Brenda Last to acquire the charms of the glittering world. Waugh exposes the very fabric of the social relations. Brenda’s friends became instrumental in breaking up her relations with Tony rather than giving strength to their tenuous relationship.

The novel successfully brings out the complex relationship between love and life. Tony Last is a reincarnation of Anthony, the protagonist of Waugh’s another story ‘Antony, Who Sought Things That Were Lost’. Like Antony, Tony was also searching for the past that was gone. Tony was happily in love with Brenda like Antony who was deeply in love with Elizabeth and was living happily with her but like Brenda later rejected Tony’s love for a much lower John Beaver. In the same manner, Elizabeth also later on rejected Antony’s love for a lowborn turnkey when they were in prison. Antony was forced to watch these happenings impotently and thus he searches for his love that was lost and the past that was gone and later in a rage he strangles Lady Elizabeth.

Waugh’s own wife Evelyn Gardner betrayed him when after returning from a Mediterranean cruise, he went to country in solitude to complete his work of writing leaving his wife behind, during that period, his wife fell in love with Waugh’s friend John Heygate. Waugh was deeply hurt and it came as a shock to him. The novel A Handful of Dust is an attempt to bring out the evil effects of a marriage break off due to infidelity of women. However, the concept was not new to him and it was in his mind subconsciously since his college days but
facing it himself was a nightmare for him. David Wykes aptly says, “That novel could never had existed without Waugh’s divorce, but it seems irrefutable that the analysis of love’s possibilities that it presents, and specifically the idea that a woman could cease to love a completely lovable husband, and turn to, and sincerely love an ‘ugly and low born’ non entity, existed in Waugh’s mind when he was an undergraduate, long before he knew he would really need it, so to speak. Part of the intense pain he felt when his wife abandoned him came from the realization that a nightmare he had earlier imagined had now come true.”  

While telling a simple story of a failed marriage resulting in divorce due to infidelity of woman, Waugh ended up in raising pertinent questions regarding the ultimate aim of life. While admiring Waugh’s art Stephan Jay Greenblatt aptly says, “In A Handful of Dust Waugh returns to England to tell a seemingly simple story of the failure of a marriage…. What might have been a rather dull “bedroom farce”, however, is transformed by Waugh into a terrifying and bitter examination of humanism and modern society, which is the culmination of his art.”

Tony and Brenda Last were living at Hetton Abbey happily married for past eight years and were blessed with a son John Andrews. However, in their very nature Tony and Brenda were two separate poles standing wide apart. Tony was a hardcore believer of traditional values and rituals and he accepted them without questioning them and started finding pleasures in them but in reality he was living in a world which was not there, he was living in past which was nowhere and while living in that world he neglected the present. His desire to provide Hetton its lost glory was an attempt to remain in the past; his vague belief that by defending outdated Hetton he can regain the glorious past brings out his distance

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131 Wykes, David, _Evelyn Waugh A Literary Life_, op.cit., p. 35.
from the present, as he never wanted to come out of it. Therefore, he never changed his weekly routine and gets annoyed when he has to suspend his routine due to the presence of guests who in reality reminds him of the present he was ignoring. He was so engrossed in the past that he did not see the need to upgrade himself to modern world’s requirement. Moreover, his incapability to adapt himself to the changing world makes him a butt of Waugh’s satire. The novel during its course brings out his rigidness and the ways in which he was ignoring the present in all its ramifications. His search for another place during his expedition was in fact the search for the same Hetton he left behind.

“He had a clear picture of it in his mind. It was Gothic in character, all vanes and pinnacles, gargoyles, battlements, groining and tracery, pavilions and terraces, a transfigured Hetton…”

He failed to identify himself without Hetton and kept searching that past through out his life but this futile search ended when a mad recluse Todd stranded him and he found himself imprisoned in the books of Dickens. The books of Dickens had the same value for Todd as Hetton for Tony. And so the traits of his personality matches with Reggie and Mr. Todd who were also incapable of living in present and so prefers living in past. Reggie lives in his own dream world and often goes on excavations to find one. Jane Nardin aptly says, “Reggie’s absorption in a supposedly significant past distracts him from truly significant present responsibilities… It’s no accident that Reggie is going to search for meaning in a desert. His rejection of the present in favo• of the past makes him a worse man, just as the well-meaning Tony’s sterile preoccupation with the

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restoration of Hetton blinds him to such important present problems as his wife’s unhappiness.”

Similarly, Mr. Todd finds pleasure in the work of Dickens and lives in that world, which brings out his incapability to deal with the present. Jane Nardin while noticing this escapist nature of Tony, Reggie and Mr. Todd aptly says, “Tony and Reggie are not the only characters in A Handful of Dust who satisfy their longings for order and significance by retreating into dream worlds located in the past, while remaining selfish and insensitive to others’ sufferings in their handling of everyday life. The syndrome takes its most extreme form in the case of Mr. Todd … Tony and Todd’s emotional lives take place in a past world which never really existed as they imagine it – both neglect the present.”

All this makes Tony incompatible with Brenda because she was a young woman desperate to be a part of modern society and finds her satisfaction in London’s glamorous though shallow social life. She detests the house and its conventionality and finds satisfaction in a small one room flat in London. Deep in her heart, she always felt that Tony’s conventional ways are keeping her away from the modern world. Her affair with John Beaver was an effort to enter the world she always cherished. Beaver substituted Tony by accompanying her to the social parties in London and thus succeeded in finding a place in her heart.

Though in himself, John Beaver was a worthless young socialite, more famous as the only spare man of London, who used to spend most of his time sitting next to his telephone expecting a last minute call inviting him for lunch or dinner. But due to his affair with Brenda he suddenly became an attraction for everyone. The attitude of the whole society got changed towards him, which brought out the

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135 Ibid., p. 125.
superficial and hypocritical nature of the aristocratic people, whose loyalties keep changing according to the power and position one holds.

“And Beaver, for the first time in his life, found himself a person of interest and, almost, of consequence. Women studied him with a new scrutiny, wondering what they had missed in him; men treated him as an equal, even as a successful fellow competitor. ‘How on earth has he got away with it?’ they may have asked themselves….”

The true epitome of that hollow culture was Polly Cockpurse who played a vital role in Brenda and Beaver’s affair and in Brenda and Tony’s separation. She was everything that could be expected from a London socialite, living a shallow and superficial life, interfering and gossiping about everyone, selling her second-hand clothes to maintain her popularity and enjoying the pelf and power of her husband. Waugh’s disgust for this character is clear in the words he used, to describe her-

“Although Polly’s fortune was derived from men, her popularity was chiefly among women, who admired her clothes and bought them from her second-hand at bargain prices; her first steps to eminence had been in circles so obscure that they had made her no enemies in the world to which she aspired; some time ago she had married a good- natured earl, whom nobody else happened to want at the time; since then she had scaled all but the highest peaks of every social mountain.”

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137 Ibid., p. 41.
She went to the extent of suggesting Brenda to make Tony interested in other girls so that Brenda can live her life on her own terms and at the same time can keep a check on Tony so that he may not create problem for Brenda. Therefore, even on failing to get Tony attracted towards Jenny Abdul Akbar, Brenda was satisfied that she had compensated for her infidelity, and thus never felt guilty because Polly told her that she has done more than other wives would ever do to make their husband happy.

‘Anyway, this lets you out. You’ve done far more than most wives would do to cheer the old boy up.’

‘Yes that’s certainly true,’ said Brenda.138

Brenda’s desperate attempts to live life on her own terms succeed in getting momentary sympathy from the scholar as she was not happy at Hetton but the sympathy dies, in the way she reacts to the news of death of her only son John Andrews, by thanking God that only her son has died and that her lover is very much alive.

Waugh satirizes Brenda for her lust of modern life that makes her forget her husband and her child. Her friends are also a butt of Waugh’s satire who encouraged Brenda instead of telling her to take care of her family and improve her tenuous married life by showing faith in the age-old institution of marriage.

Another important character who represents this superficial London society was Mrs. Beaver, who encouraged his son John Beaver to have an affair with Brenda Last so that he can enjoy the position and attention that Brenda gets in the social circles. Moreover, this also gave an opportunity to Mrs. Beaver to promote her business as she was a shrewd business woman who never forgets her commission in anything she does, and whether the things were right or wrong was not her

138 Ibid., p. 93.
moral concern. She arranged a flat for Brenda in London while making a smart property deal and on coming to Hetton, she did not forget to offer chromium plating on walls as it would give her more profit. The fraud fortune-teller woman introduced by her in Polly Cockpurse party just to earn her commission shows her moral emptiness.

“… for every five guineas that she earned at her introduction Mrs Beaver took a commission of two pounds twelve and sixpence.”

Waugh brings out her hypocritical nature when she refuses to help Brenda by not giving her job in her hour of need.

“Well… It’s hard to say. At any other time she is exactly the kind of saleswoman I am always looking for … but I don’t know. As things are, I’m not sure it would be wise.”

And finding that John and Brenda’s relation is not going as per her expectations, she failed to hide her disappointment.

‘I’m not happy about you, John. I’m not sure that things are working out as well as I hoped about Christmas-time.’

Though during her divorce proceedings, Brenda also realized the superficiality of her extra marital affair, but after losing Tony, she had no other choice then to stick with Beaver and for this; she continued to provide Beaver the privilege of high life despite running short of money. She disclosed her problem in front of Jock Grant Menzies.

‘You’re going through with the divorce?’

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139 Ibid., p. 116.
140 Ibid., p. 178.
141 Ibid.
‘I don’t know Jock. It doesn’t really depend on me. It’s all a matter of holding down Mr Beaver. He’s getting very restive. I have to feed him a bit of high-life every week and so, and I suppose that’ll all stop if there’s a divorce…’

Therefore, in order to feed Beaver, Brenda demanded alimony of two thousand pounds per year. Though earlier she demanded only five hundred pounds per year for which Tony also agreed without any written agreement and himself gave false proof of his infidelity so that Brenda can get divorce easily as he was in habit of ‘loving and trusting Brenda’. However, this new development for Tony meant giving up Hetton. Therefore, Tony denied to sacrifice Hetton, his beloved home to buy Beaver for Brenda and went on an expedition to Brazil. However, for this again Brenda’s so-called friends blamed Tony only, for being selfish and rude

‘Who on earth would have expected the old boy to turn up like that?’ asked Polly Cockpurse.

‘Now I understand why they keep going on in the papers about divorce law reform,’ said Veronica. ‘It’s too monstrous that he should be allowed to get away with it.’

‘The mistake they made was in telling him first,’ said Souki.

‘It’s so like Brenda to trust everyone,’ said Jenny Abdul Akbar.

Whereas on the other hand, through Brenda, Beaver wanted to enjoy the high social life, name, fame and attention and so he was in love with Brenda till he was getting it and therefore later on Brenda’s inability to help him in getting the membership of the prestigious Brown’s club he took it against her.

\[142\] Ibid., p. 172.

\[143\] Ibid., p. 152.
'Oh dear,’ said Brenda as she rang off. ‘Now he’s taken against me. It isn’t my fault he can’t get into Brown’s…’

Moreover, later when Beaver realized that Brenda was not that ladder through which he can attain social success, he decided to leave her and went to America with his mother leaving Brenda helpless, which brought an end to their illegitimate relationship.

The novel thus, brings out the fact that how people run after those persons who can bring them name, fame, glory and money and how their attitude changes when they find they are not going to get it from the person they were earlier expecting from. As a result, due to this blind chase the true relations are left far behind. While describing about the cousins of Tony, the narrator efficiently conveys that they might have shown more grief on the death of John Andrews if they have realized that they can be the heir of Hetton, in case anything will happen to Tony in the near future. This brings out the yearning for wealth and the emotional emptiness even in the blood relations, who give utmost importance to material possession.

“The impoverished Lasts were stunned by the telegram. They lived on an extensive but unprofitable chicken farm near Princes Risborough. It did not enter the heads of any of them that now, if anything happened, they were the heirs to Hetton. Had it done so, their grief would have been just as keen.”

Waugh emphasizes that the modern world is a true ‘Wasteland’, there is nothing like a true relationship which can stand the test of time and people are just standing with each other till their needs are satisfied. As Jock and Tony found

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144 Ibid., p. 179.
145 Ibid., p. 120.
themselves lonely at Brown’s because people don’t like to accompany the unhappy lot.

“Lately they had found it a little gloomy at Brown’s, for people tended to avoid anyone they knew to be unhappy.”146

The social isolation faced by Tony and Brenda makes them realize that their so-called friends were there with them until they were happy and gay. The atmosphere of Bratt’s Club where people usually come in search of friends when their women folks abandoned them, describes the plight of the human race, which is heading to nowhere.

“It is not uncommon at Bratt’s Club, between nine and ten in the evening, to find men in white ties and tail coats sitting by themselves and eating, in evident low spirits, large and extravagant dinners. They are those who have been abandoned at the last minute by their women. For twenty minutes or so they have sat in the foyer of some restaurant, gazing expectantly towards the revolving doors and alternatively taking out their watches and ordering cocktails, until at length a telephone message has been brought them that their guests are unable to come. Then they go to Bratt’s, half hoping to find friends but, more often than not, taking a melancholy satisfaction in finding the club deserted or peopled by strangers. So they sit there, round the walls, morosely regarding the mahogany tables before them, and eating and drinking heavily.”147

146 Ibid., p. 130.
147 Ibid., p. 64.
Mr. Todd in the novel is a symbol of a true aristocrat who was using his powers selfishly. But like Tony he found satisfaction in past and ‘past’ for him meant the ‘books of Dickens’, Waugh called him a ‘perfect reader’ but his reading of the books never meant that he was gaining any moral lessons whatsoever. It was just an escape for him to an imaginary and more significant world, where he had never been and so through the books he tries to reside in those places that do not exist. However, Mr. Todd was a mad recluse but the nature of his escapism was quite like Tony because like Tony he also wanted to escape from the current world to an imaginary world that can provide him comfort and solitude. But when like all the aristocrats Todd used his powers to detain Tony in the forest it turned out to be disastrous for Tony and he got a life imprisonment in that forest.

Overall, the novel brings out a story of number of people who were out on a journey but their destination was unknown that makes their life aimless and purposeless. Like Tony, Reggie and Todd, Brenda was also devoid of a true purpose in her life and after Beaver left her, she married Jock Grant Menzies as going through a bad financial phase she needed someone so that she can sustain in that cocktail society of London that is the beginning and end for her. Beaver’s escape to America also depicts his aimlessness. However, it may appear that the novel does not provide any poetic justice. As everything got settled well for Brenda and other parasites of society like Polly Cockpurse and her other friends who continued to live their life in their usual manner but narrator efficiently conveys that the direction they were heading in will only culminate in disaster.

Bernard Bergonzi aptly says, “The title of *A Handful of Dust* comes, of course, from *The Waste Land*, and in both Eliot’s poem and Waugh’s novel the characters have a similar inability to feel deeply. At the end of the novel farce turns into horror, as we leave Tony Last imprisoned forever in the South American jungle reading Dickens to the recluse, Mr. Todd. *A Handful of Dust*
can be defined, like some of Wyndham Lewis’s novels, as a farce in Bergsonian terms: we laugh at people, or objects resembling people, colliding like things. But we are disconcerted by the sudden realization that these seemingly mechanical semblances of humanity are really persons, or very nearly so. Tony Last embodies the pathos of the wooden puppet that suddenly weeps real tears.”

Tony and Brenda’s attempts to search meaning in life shows Waugh’s optimism that there is a ray of hope and this prevents his novels from being a sad and grim satire. Waugh emphasizes that people should search for the meaning of life instead of running after the pity temptations, but along with this he also warns the modern decaying society that a search in a wrong direction will bring nothing but a handful of dust, and because the direction of Tony and Brenda’s search was wrong, at the end it resulted in a failure. Paul A. Doyle aptly says, “It is implicit in Waugh’s view that humanism is not enough. Man must seek the spiritual to balance his existence. Secular goodness unaided by spiritual belief dooms modern man to an essentially incomplete life.”

Thus, the scholar concludes that the novel A Handful of Dust brings out the hollowness of modern life in which pristine human values are sacrificed for getting momentary pleasure of mundane life. Waugh always tried to unfurl the flag of true husband wife relations based on love, dedication, commitment and sacrifice. In case any partner deviates from this path of righteousness, he or she not only brings about destruction for himself or herself but creates social chaos. Brenda Last becomes an example of a person who does not get satisfaction at any place, and she becomes the butt of laughter in those very social circles she...

149 Doyle, Paul A., Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective, op.cit., p. 128.
wanted to become a part of. With this novel, the novelist raises a very pertinent question ‘What is the aim of life after all – momentary and short lived pleasure of glamour or everlasting bliss in the age old accepted relations.’ The methodology adopted by the novelist was to present the negative side to come to the positive side. At certain levels, the writer questions the very basis of making friends and maintaining friendly relations. The description did not remain confined to a few individuals – it becomes general with the description of Bratt’s club. But the sad spectacle is that despite their desire to fly high they attain nothing in the long run and their hand only contains a handful of dust which justifies the title of the novel. It ends on the moral note that if people will not change their mind set by leaving the superficial modernity, the present situation will ultimately end in the same way as it ends in the sad predicament faced by Brenda Last.