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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove*: Role of Community in Piecing Ove Together

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13684429>

Article History: Submitted-02/07/2024, Revised-13/08/2024, Accepted-21/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

Abstract:

This research paper plunges into the celebrated Swedish novel *A Man Called Ove* (2012) by Fredrik Backman, translated into English by Henning Koch in 2014. The paper aims to highlight the role of community in healing and helping an individual to cope with losses and adversities in life. Ove, the protagonist, is heartbroken at the death of his wife. To make matters worse, his office forces him to retire early. Having nothing to live for, he tries various methods of suicide. However, his life begins to change with the arrival of his new neighbour, Parvaneh and her family. Parvaneh invites herself into Ove's life and he has no other option but to accept her unsolicited entry begrudgingly. She gradually knits their community together and builds a close network of people who can rely on each other.

Keywords: Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, role of community, human relationships.

Introduction to the Novel

Published in 2012, *A Man Called Ove* narrates the saga of a fifty-nine-year-old man who finds himself redundant in the world after his beloved wife Sonja dies of cancer and he gets sacked from his office. Unable to bear the pain, he tries to hang himself in his room, choke himself to death in his garage, throw himself before a running train, and shoot himself with a rifle. However, all these suicide attempts are frustrated by sheer serendipity, much to Ove's annoyance. The tear-

jerking novel beautifully brings home the point that one can find purpose and meaning in one's life even after suffering the gravest of losses. Losing family or friend can be devastating. Grieving is painful yet essential to heal oneself. But life need not come to an end after this phase. Love is valuable in every form. Backman foregrounds the role of building a connection with one's community.

What is Community and Why Community?

Having thus laid the background of the novel, let us now examine what community is in its true essence and why it is crucial to build one. David M. Chavis and Kien Lee, in their article "What Is Community Anyway?" assert that community is not a place, a building, or an organisation. They give an insightful definition of community:

Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs...Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other. Neighborhoods, companies, schools, and places of faith are context and environments for these communities, but they are not communities themselves.

A community has both formal and informal forms. School, government, religion, law enforcement are formal communities. Residential neighbourhoods, gardening and cooking clubs, interest groups (based on shared interests), friendship groups are informal communities. According to Wikipedia, "members of informal groups...share jokes and gripes, eat together, play and work together, and are friends-which contributes to personal esteem, satisfaction, and a feeling of worth." In the context of the novel, it is the latter type that we shall be focusing on. Formal communities are undoubtedly essential for fulfilling one's civil duties and roles. However, informal communities are equally vital in an individual's life. Thus their significance ought not to be neglected in a fast-paced world ruled by cut-throat competition.

Elizabeth Dixon, in her article "The Importance of Cultivating Community: Why we need each other", states

Our diet, how often we journal, or the number of daily positive affirmations we repeat isn't nearly as important as the community we surround ourselves in. The social connections we

have (or don't have) can literally shape the physical structure and development of our brains, leading to integrated or disintegrated mental states.

In her article “Community for the win — how collective solutions help individual problems”, Maggie Wool writes that “people who lack strong social connections are also more likely to suffer from high levels of stress and inflammation, and face higher risk for suicide and early death.” According to Wooll, building a community can alleviate stress: “Coming together physically or virtually, finding points of connection with others, and enjoying moments of celebration and camaraderie can leave us feeling engaged and refreshed. Those positive feelings may help lower stress and anxiety.” Thus community and camaraderie are vital components in making an individual's life fulfilling and wholesome. Now, to fully understand and appreciate the role of community in Ove's road to recovery, it is imperative to understand his character development, his relationship with Sonja and how her death drove him to the edge of despair.

Ove's Grumpy and Rigid Personality

If we are to judge Ove superficially, based on his behaviour and interaction with other characters, the word “grumpy” best describes him. He belongs to the Boomer Generation and sticks with his old values. He is not fond of the new changes taking place in his society. He comes off as a sulky person but underneath this churlish persona lies a warm and sensitive heart. We are told of his childhood in flashbacks. His father, who worked for the railways, was a man of principles. His mother, a chain-smoker, died of air hazard at the chemical plant where she worked. Ove grew up looking up to his father and imbibing all his principles. He too was taciturn and stolid like his father. After he was orphaned at the age of 16, the kind Railway master gave him work in his father's place. Impressed his integrity and work, the Railway master allows him to work there. Thus Ove decided to drop out of school. A scoundrel colleague who has a grudge against Ove blamed him for embezzling Railway money. Everybody in the department knew who the real thief was. However, Ove still upholding his father's principles, refused to tell on Tom. Thus the boss had no choice but to demote Ove to the job of a Railway sweeper.

Accustomed to routine, Ove's journey took an unexpected turn when he saw a beautiful woman on the Railway platform. He was done for the day and supposed to take his train back home, but her effervescent presence made him make a spontaneous decision for the first time. He boarded the wrong train just so he could sit next to Sonja. When she warmed up to him, he

continued to board the wrong train for the next three months. This meant making an hour long journey in the wrong direction. She was studying to be a teacher. When asked about his job, he lied that he was training in the military. When he confessed his lie at the dinner, Sonja was impressed and touched by his self-sacrificing disposition. She encouraged him to enrol in an engineering course so that he could utilise his technical acumen. He secured a decent job at the housing office. Ove and Sonja soon married. Ove “worked hard, paid tax and did his duty”.

Contrasting Personalities of Ove and Sonja

Ove and Sonja were opposite poles of magnets. He adored her vivacity; she loved his sincerity. “She only loved abstract things like music and books and strange words. Ove was a man entirely filled with tangible things. He liked screwdrivers and oil filters. He went through life with his hands firmly shoved into his pockets. She danced” (Fredrik Backman, *A Man Called Ove*, 96). So, it is easy to see why they got drawn to each other. They are not the first example of such a couple where the woman is the cheerful life force for the male protagonist, giving meaning and colour to his life. “Sunshine-girl-and-brooding-guy” has been a popular trope in literature and films for many decades, but Backman’s novelty lies elsewhere. Backman has used this trope very tastefully, but without the romantic love overriding the main script. The readers see their love story but only in flashbacks, which by no means downplays their romance. The focus of the story is Ove’s present life after Sonja’s death. Backman situates a medley of vibrant, amiable and funny characters in Ove’s neighbourhood whom the readers go on befriending — along with Ove.

Role of Parvaneh — the Social Butterfly that Vivifies and Unifies the Garden

Parvaneh is a thirty-year-old Iranian woman married to Patrick, a Swede. The couple has two daughters and is expecting a third child. Parvaneh acts like a thread which weaves all the beads together in harmony. She is gregarious, warm, and bubbling with joy. So, she quite reminds one of Ove’s late wife. She manages to convince Ove to do what she wants, regardless of his initial protests. She sees through his stern and unfriendly demeanour and sees him for the man he is inside — kind but broken by his wife’s death. He tries to keep her at an arm’s length. However, it does not discourage her from approaching him. She has “an untidy, mischievous laugh that refuses to go along with rules and prescriptions” (53). There is a subtle cordiality between Parvaneh and Ove from the start.

Ove was never a people person, so his grief was silent and suppressed as well. However, he had been coping with his loss in an unhealthy way, that is, by cutting everyone off and attempting to cut short his own life. He refused to discard Sonja's belongings and bring his house and lifestyle back to normal. Parvaneh shows him that he is still a lovable and valuable community member. She assigns him to look after her toddlers. She cheers him up saying, "You're the funniest thing she knows. That's why she always draws you in colour" (186). By and by, we see how Parvaneh brings all the neighbours together. We meet Jimmy the jovial orphan, Mirsad who is a gay rejected by his father, the stray cat, the old couple Anita and Rune abandoned by their son. These people had been struggling and fighting their battles all alone. Parvaneh transforms her community into an extended family.

Ove's Recovery Through Service of Community

Parvaneh engages Ove in helping others. She asks him to teach her to drive. She persuades him to assist Anita, Ove's old friend and immediate neighbour, by fixing her radiator. He lends a hand to Adrian, a youth trying to repair the bicycle of the girl he likes. It is because of Parvaneh's influence that Ove gives shelter to Mirsad, who is disowned by his father for being gay. He also convinces Mirsad's father to accept his son as he is. Furthermore, when Ove is stabbed by the intruders, it is Parvaneh who calls the ambulance and cries the most. After his recovery, their whole close-knit neighbourhood comes together to confront the deceitful white collars. This instance highlights the power of interpersonal bonds.

Ove is able to move on from Sonya's death and assimilate himself again into his society. He comes to appreciate life and relationships in all shades and colours. It would be no surprise then that when Ove dies, he bequeaths his house, car and bank account in Parvaneh's trust. He dies a natural and peaceful death cosy in bed. A reader of the novel sums up Ove's character development beautifully:

Ove had become an isolated person who was just existing but not living. Ove tried to end his life multiple times but was constantly interrupted by someone. These people were his neighbours who'd ask for help, check up on him, spend time with him and even bring him delicious savoury dishes. Slowly, Ove accepted them as "his people". He gave up on the idea of ending his life as he saw outside of his grief and found meaning in serving others.

In the end he died a peaceful death, knowing how much his community, his friends, his people loved him.

Struggles of Old Widowers

Dr Alejandra Vasquez, a certified grief counsellor, writes in her article “The 7 Stages of Widower’s Grief + Tips” :

Rarely do we hear about the grief and pain a widower may feel when losing their spouse...Men are stereotyped and expected to remain stoic, pillars of superhuman strength...The stages of grief for a widower might be longer and more complicated to resolve because of that same inability to process their grief openly and honestly among his friends, family, and peers.

In her article “7 Steps for Widows and Widowers to Manage Their First Year Alone”, Anna Bryne states: “The first year of being a widow or widower is about living in memory of a loved one, but the next chapter is about remembering to live your own life”. However, as an ageing man recently widowed and also having been stripped of his job, Ove feels like he has no purpose in life anymore. He also does not have any children to find comfort in, as Sonja had suffered a miscarriage. So, his life is haunted by loneliness and meaninglessness.

Thus, it becomes all the more critical for the community to reach out to silent and suffering widowers because they find it hard to express and share their sorrows. Amanda Lambert in her article “9 Ways to Help Seniors with Loneliness During COVID-19” suggests that the problem of loneliness among seniors must be dealt with tactfully. “Sometimes it’ll take more than just a phone call, so prepare to be persistent”. As we can see in the novel, this is precisely what Parvaneh does. She is relentless in her efforts to involve Ove with the community. She reaches out to him and makes him help others, even if he is rude. Lambert suggests various methods to help an elderly member of a community, such as scheduling frequent visits, hiring a caregiver as this provides them with not just a helper but also a companion, signing them up on social media if they are comfortable with it, sending or delivering gifts like fresh flowers or food. Parvaneh introduces herself and her family to Ove when she moves into her new neighborhood. She even gives him a homecooked meal as a gesture of affection from a new neighbour. He is confused and apprehensive at first, but eventually appreciates her efforts. Lambert also suggests:

Consider pets: If your loved one can take care of one, a small pet can make a huge difference. Cats can be easier to take care of since they don't require daily walking. Most assisted living communities allow small animals. Having the responsibility and companionship of a pet often fills the need to take care of something other than yourself.

Parvaneh gets Ove to adopt a stray cat that has almost frozen to death. He is not fond of cats, nor does he want any commitments. However, in the due course of time, we see how Ove begins to befriend the cat and cares for it.

Cultivating a Community in an Age of Anxiety, Insecurity and Alienation

Dixon suggests ways to cultivate a community, a need which is just as vital for introverts like Ove. "Stepping out and starting new conversations, joining a new group, going out to lunch with co-workers, or re-connecting with old acquaintances." According to her, phone calls help us feel connected with one's dear ones better than emails or texts. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable is also crucial in building an authentic connection with our community. "We have to be willing to share our struggles, hopes and needs with those we come to know and trust. The vulnerability arises when we let our most authentic selves be truly seen and known by others..."

People who struggle to assimilate in their social environment and build relationships need not despair. Socialising does not demand a person to always host programs or gatherings. Wooll writes, "The beauty of communities is that you can contribute just by participating. Just showing up can enrich your life, the lives of others, and build more resilient organizations and societies."

Conclusion

It becomes clear that cultivating a community is very essential in today's era, where isolation and depression continue to take a toll on human beings. One can socialise in several ways such as, reaching out to people in one's neighbourhood or participating in groups sharing similar interests. A sense of community and belongingness becomes all the more critical for an individual with no family to rely on for basic needs and emotional support. Ove slowly heals with the warmth and cooperation of his small community. He eventually opens up to society and becomes a grandpa-like figure for all.

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