

Existential Quest and the Meaning of Life in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Anita Desai's Voices in the City

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Abstract - Existence, being the first principle of existentialism, means the 'here' and 'now' of being. Essence being the second, is the 'what' of this being. Hence the basic idea of existentialism is that man's existence is prior to his essence, that is his being 'here' and 'now' precedes his being 'something'. As Jean Paul Sartre puts it "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards". He is a free individual in the sense of not being determined but his freedom burdens him with a sense of responsibility. He is a 'being-for-itself' and tries to live beyond himself. Man begins the journey of his life with romantic dreams and ideals but ultimately ends up disillusioned – as an existentialist. But he is different from a romantic pessimist or a nihilist. He makes conscious efforts to discover the meaning of his existence amidst the meaninglessness of life. This is what is called by the existentialist thinkers as 'new existentialism' which is been discussed in this paper with reference to the protagonists in the novels Heart of Darkness and Voices in the City.

Index Terms - agony, disillusion, existentialism, outlaw, realisation.

INTRODUCTION

In Anita Desai's Voices in the city, the central voice is that of Nirode, varying, raising and falling according to his own moody reactions to his own situations in life. The thematic core of the novel is Nirode's pursuit of higher life and value than the common man would aspire for. The common man works for success and happiness but Nirode relinquishes both, as they would lead life to a blind alley. Like a true existentialist, he keeps experimenting with failures in quest of an abiding meaning in life, although he achieves nothing-except for a couple of realizations in the end. The existentialist dimension of Nirode's personality has been depicted effectively by Desai. He loses faith in life and develops an attitude of complete negation.

Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness concerns Marlow and his journey toward and through certain facets of potentialities of self. Marlow reiterates often enough that he is recounting a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. He sets out a journey with great ideals and expectations, but though disappointed to see the reality, realizes something in the end like Nirode. He feels that the mind of man is capable of anything, because everything is in it, all the past as well as the future. Desai has delineated the growth of the protagonist from self-alienation to self-identification. Nirode is a visionary, rootless nihilist and a psychic outlaw, who alienates from everyone with a view to preserve his individualities and indulges in self-deceiving fantasy.

The idea of 'nothingness' is central to existentialist writing. Two meanings of this word are applied to Nirode as well as Marlow. In the first sense, 'nothingness' was a kind of gap or separation which lay between a man and the world or rather believes in man's unconsciousness. The second sense of 'nothingness' is that almost of 'futility' of the vanishing and corporates of objects in the world.

Nirode is a type who doesn't expect anything from his mother or from anybody. He thinks that it is enough for him to earn just to live for the moment. Marlow has a slightly different idea about existence that too he learnt from Kurtz, what Marlow values in Kurtz is both moral and non-moral. Moral because whether a man exists has the capacity to act as a human being is the most important moral fact about him. Non-moral because existence is prior to morality.

In the beginning Nirode feels revulsion towards the dullness of the office going life. His body encases a sublime spirit which is averse to the docility of an office life and its servile bossism. The whistle of the local train and its struggling voice impress Nirode with

the thoughts to bid good bye to the city. He feels it is difficult to survive in the city same way Marlow leaves his work in order to live the life - the life of ultimate wisdom and completeness. He says "I don't like work-no man does - but I like what is in the work - the chance to find yourself; your own reality for yourself-not for others. What no other man can even know" (Page no #), which clearly establishes Marlow's existential state.

The concept of freedom is more or less the same in the two characters. Suffering, disaffection, disillusionment have made Nirode an 'outlawed hermit'- a hermit who loves freedom. Independence is too damn expensive. He strives independence from family tradition, title and heritage and so wants to be on his own. He feels fully at liberty when he is out of these bondages. In the same way Marlow feels that discovery of the self is the discovery of one's freedom. To Kurtz it means freedom to become his own diabolical God. This freedom seems to Marlow, both exalting and revolting. The quest, for Kurtz, is the discovery of the dreadful burden of human freedom.

Nirode feels that the entire world of eating, drinking, conservation in cafe, hotels, dances, singing, music and conference, meaningless rushes in buses from streets to streets of Calcutta and the suburbs leads nobody to anywhere. He feels that the multitudinous voices in the city reducing most of the men and women into the insignificant position of insects, ants and moth as in the paintings of Dharma. Same way in the climax, Marlow follows Kurtz ashore, confounds the beat of drum with the beating of his heart, returns to Europe a changed and more knowing man. He feels that ordinary people are now intruders whose knowledge of life was an irritating pretence because he felt so sure that their knowledge about life is simple, silly and selfish.

Existential philosophy lays emphases on many journey of the reverse. Heart of Darkness may aptly be described as the story of reverse. Being the emissary, Marlow aims at glory but ultimately discovers that he is hollow at the core. The more he advances, the more he is driven away from the civilization. After Kurtz's death the spiritual agony has passed on to Marlow. It becomes a crisis of an individual who does not subscribe to the accepted norms and codes of the society. He goes on to live the life that Kurtz's has dropped. His ultimate realization of wisdom is that life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.

Cast away involvement is another central trait of these existential heroes. Most of the characters in the Voices in the city are shown working for it and mostly failing. The attempts and failures make the character human and life like. Nirode gives up all for the higher purpose of life. He withdraws himself from communicating with others. He rejects all the demands and desires to achieve something meaningful in life.

Near the end, Marlow realizes that Kurtz is the one thing he has been seeking, 'the enchanted princess', whose approaches are fraught with danger. He does not find what he had expected all along, a good man amidst corruption. The causes for Marlow's disappointment are within – in his towering expedition and ambition and his rootless idealism. The word 'horror' uttered by Kurtz has made him proud of his knowledge of man's existential predicament in the world of illusion. With this superior knowledge he returns to Brussels, 'The Sepulchral City' where people can be seen always dreaming their silly and insignificant dreams. Same way Nirode feels that Calcutta is the city of 'death and decay' and he wanted to get out of it.

The philosophical message of Voices in the city is that Nirode seems to be delving deeper and deeper in life, below its apparent surface for higher meaning and comes to the conclusion that life should be a state of ideal detachment. But he discovers that he is yet involved and committed and realizes that the independence is disease and detachment is health. He wants to move away from failure to failure to rock bottom. He is not ready to sacrifice his ideals for anything. The habit of withdrawal from life makes him move from self-alienation to self-identification (which he hardly achieves). He is in a sense portrayed as a nihilist (A nihilist need not be a pessimist) in search of meaning of the inner self.

The existential theories of the problem of knowledge, that is the gap between abstract reasoning and actual life, the problem of reality - that is being and becoming, the problem of existence of man in the world, the problem of communication between the man and the fellow-man and the problem of transcendence between man and God are all brought out through the protagonists in the two novels.

In Nirode a drastic change comes about after Monisha's death. A searing realization dawns upon him. He comes to the conclusion that wisdom lies not in avoiding the expense but in making the journey

worth the expense. In the course of the journey, Marlow affirms some basic concepts of existentialism. He realizes that Man is isolated in an alien universe. Man is no doubt a part of the universe but he is alone in it. Search for security is basic to human idea confides man to understand the human situation through conscious decisions. He has to choose his values and commit himself.

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