

TRACES OF EXISTENTIALISM IN AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLAND BY JOSEPH CONRAD

Dr. Vinod Zalte

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, SPND Women's College, Ghatkopar (W), Mumbai

The philosophy which foregrounds individual existence, freedom and choice is known as Existentialism. This philosophy foregrounds that it is human who express their self-connotation in life, and try to make convincing choices in spite of living in an unreasonable world. It highlights why human are existing, and the life journey is without fixed goal or clarification at the core of existence. It also brings forth that no superpower or other unequalled force rescues human beings, in such situation the only means to face this nothingness is acknowledgement of existence.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

The focal point of existentialism is that humans are free and must take their own responsibility. So, it brings forth that activity, liberation and decisiveness are central and believes that the path to be away from the absurd predicament of humankind is by opting individual freedom and choice. Though Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus names are associated with this philosophical theory, it originated with the 19th Century philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche.

This philosophical theory which flourished after the Second World War. As discussed earlier, it propounds that human existence as a free and having control over their choices and actions. The WWII scenario was a disturbing one and in such state of the world, the two philosophers, namely Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus offered a novel way of life and thought. This philosophical vogue generated from the writings of Sartre deals with a vision and attitude to life. According to Kaufmann, it is a “timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past.” (Kaufman 1986, 12). The elementary clue of existentialism is that human being thinks himself to be unique, a self-sufficient mediator excelling his surrounding, and an individual creator who has committed to a personal understanding of reality. Man is imperfect, a dependent creature seeking the perfection of the eternal. This kind of self-knowing constitutes the basis of existentialism. The existentialism claims that the unifying function of reason is limited, productive of appearance rather than of reality and that reason applied to the world of immediate experience is an insidious mechanism of escape from reality.

Sartre's name is associated with this philosophy and there are very few existential philosophers who admire themselves to be called as an existentialist. His contribution to the literature help to boost this philosophy. His work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) is a phenomenal one, and his fictions and dramas which include, *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1944), proved to seminal for this movement. Albert Camus by using the Greek myth of Sisyphus explained the essence of this philosophy. Sisyphus pushes the stone up a hill and returns to the previous position. Through this example,

amus tries to explain the uselessness of existence, but Sisyphus gets to the crux of the task by adhering to the task and continuing it.

Joseph Conrad's novels deals with man's existence and his plights, his search for 'self'. According to Walter Allen, Conrad is the novelist of extreme situation and he dealt with theme of man who challenges himself, his environment. He further states that his characters have dual functions that is to separate the protagonist from the society, "and the larger world of men, so that he can be put in extremis, and to act as the agent of his self-confrontation." (Walter Allen 1954, 303)

Generally, the theme of isolation and alienation dominates in Conrad's novels. While comparing Sartre and Conrad Tarnawski depicted Conrad's view - The world has no ethical purpose. Perhaps it is a mere spectacle, without either meaning or order. The actors in this dreary spectacle live in almost unceasing anguish - the anguish of loneliness, guilt, and so on." (Tarnawski 1979, P,1). This picture is discernible in his almost all the novels including *An Outcast of an Island*. This paper is an attempt to trace the semicentennial elements in the novel under study. Though this novel was published before the existentialism as a philosophical theory was accepted in literary parlance, yet Conrad successfully covers this domain.

An Outcast of an Island unfolds Peter Willems' downfall, an infamous, corrupt person who withdraws himself from a corrupt deed done in Makassar and keeps himself hidden in a secluded village of the native dwellers. In the village he betrays his patrons and follows the daughter of a tribal head. In this novel, Conrad has presented a character named, Tom Lingard, who is present in *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *The Rescue* (1920).

An Outcast of the Island deals with Willems' otherworldliness, betrayal and moral deterioration. At the outset of the novel, the writer clears about Willems ambition, his "inward assertion of unflinching resolve," (AI 1923, 3) and "his existence in a perpetual assurance of unquestionably superiority" (AI 1923, 3). The character of Willems is portrayed as a "rising man sure to climb very high," (AI 1923, 4). He works as the confidential clerk of Hudig and Co. He is not appreciative of Portuguese invaders. The writer makes it clear - "shabby multitude; those degenerate descendants of Portuguese conquerors... They lived now by the grace of his will. This was power. Willems loved it." (AI 1923, 4). He is shown as a man who harbours "great benevolence" and "an exalted sense of his duty to himself and the world at large." (AI 1923, 5). It indicates subjective-awareness of existential humanism which is the focal point of Sartre's philosophy. This awareness generates self-knowledge in him and makes him fiercely self-important -

He believed in his genius and in his knowledge of the world, others should know of it also, for their own good and for his greater glory. (AI 1923, 6)

When he looks at his own shadow self-righteously, he calls it –

The shadow of a successful man"; he is slightly dizzy with the intoxication of his own power and exclaims; "How glorious! (AI 1923, 7).

This clearly shows his self-transcendence. It hints at Clemence's self-transcendence in *The Fall* (1956) by Camus.

Joseph Conrad paints the character of Willems as disrespecting the social rules and moral values. He gives importance to what he likes and follows. His way of life is totally corrupted with bribe, gambling and deceitfulness. Through the symbol of the 'house of cards', Conrad indicates the disappointment of Willems. His life is like that of the 'house of cards'. Conrad shows Willems' up and down in his life:

Travelling ... he achieves great length without any breadth, and is battered, besmirched, weary; he touches the goal at last; he grasps the reward of his perseverance, of his virtue of his healthy optimism: an untruthful tombstone over a

dark and soon forgotten-grave. (AI 1923, 196).

It shows that Willems life voyage is an existential one. At the end, he leaps backward and all his fantasy wipes out. The characters of Willems and Lingard in this novel are shown as lost the purpose of their life. Questioning of the Lingard indicates that his belief in justice of heaven is crushed. Lingard questions - “was there, under heaven, such a thing as justice?” (AI 1923, 265). Willems answers, “There was no mercy under heaven,” (AI 1923, 265). The dialogues of Lingard and Willems foregrounds the disillusionment of an aesthetic existentialist who is aware that this life voyage has to be lives.

The protagonist in the present novel is not happy with his life. He feels his life to be utter disgust. His pursuit for love also proven futile and he starts hating to his beloved Aissa. He feels her look to be venomous and he begins to feel like ... a tall madman, a great disturbance about something invisible; a being absurd, repulsive, pathetic, and droll.” (AI 1923, 271)

on the other hand, Lingard also feels emptiness due to a fearful oppression of the presence of Willems and Aissa. His self-experience and feeling reveals that –

...space without any light, where his thoughts wandered forlornly, unable to escape, unable to rest, unable to die, to vanish (AI 1923, 272).

With the passage of time, Willems feels helpless, his current existence as meaningless and his past - vanished and worthless one.

Willems life on the island becomes stagnant one without any happening. He leaps to the past for self-relief, but the bygone memories are “crowded yet empty, like an old cemetery full of neglected graves, where lie dead hopes that never return.” (AI 1923, 282). He did not get any relief from his past and it is deteriorated when Tom Lingard leaves him. He becomes a man enveloped by:

... the cruel solitude of one abandoned by men; the reproachful silence which surrounds an outcast ejected by his kind hope; an immense and impenetrable silence that swallows up without echo the murmur of regret and the cry of revolt. (AI 1923, 327).

This loneliness brings more darkness within Willems. He continues in such stance “restless, sombre, tangled, chilling, horrible and venomous, like a nest full of snakes.” (AI 1923, 328). This understanding brings in him mental pain and inner void. He experiences with himself with his void and meaninglessness brings nothingness though his beloved Aissa is with him. He feels as if “robbed of everything; robbed of his passion, of his liberty, of forgetfulness, of consolation.” (AI 1923, 339).

This lonely state separates his own self from him and this brings a notion of falling in abyss where his decay is sure. His feeling brings forth his state:

... peering into a sombre hollow, into a deep black hole full of decay and of whitened bones; into an immense and inevitable grave full of corruption where sooner or later he must, unavoidably, fall. (AI 1923, 339).

This state of Willems makes him understand the reality of his self-existence. His own words starkly clears that he lost man. He realises that everything is out of his control. He has lost the game. This situation of Willems’ positive realisation coincides with Antoine Roquentin in *Nausea* by Sartre. Antoine Roquentin says - I lost the whole game. At the same time, I learnt that you always lose.” (N 1965, 223).

He feels an existential terror as Lingard leaves him forever. He thinks of himself as uprooted, not in reach of any civilized help, and deprived of any human resources to survive the ordeal – though Aissa lives with him and Lingard

provides him all the supply. At the end, his wife Joanna arrives with their son. This adds to his suppression and he feels doubly oppressed. This dismal thought leads him to think to end both women. In this ordeal, Aissa shoots him. To conclude, the novel reveals Conrad's analyses of human existence and the way human beings find themselves existing in the world. He also reveals that human being's absolute condition is to exist in the world. Through the character of Willem, the writer makes clear that we cannot understand the human predicament. It also makes clear that existential philosophy has added a new viewpoint of man and life. According to Otto Bohlman, "Conrad existentially reveals that man is in his own source of transcendence. Through man's resolute moral efforts to create his unique for-itself amid his utter freedom of choice for action that entails responsibility both to himself and others, he has the potential to overcome the Sartrean weight of the world that induces feelings of anxiety and alienation." (Bohlmann, 1991:196). Like other existentialists particularly Sartre, Joseph Conrad's literary contribution foregrounds particular existential concerns.

References:

1. Bohlmann, Otto (1991), *Conrad's Existentialism*, Macmillan, Hong Kong.
2. Conrad Joseph, *An Outcast of the Island*, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., London:1923.
3. Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky and Sartre*. Meridian Books, Meridian Books. The World Publishing Company, Cleveland and New York, 1986, PP.1968.
4. Sartre Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, tr. By Robert Baldick. Penguin Books: 1965. PP. 223.
5. Sartre, Jean Paul (1956), *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barness, Philosophical Library, New York
6. The Basics of philosophy
https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_existentialism.html
7. Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Penguin Books, 1954) PP.303
8. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
9. Tarnawski, Wit. "Conrad and Sartre." *The Journal of The Joseph Conrad Society (U.K.)*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1979, pp. 1–3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20870530>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.

Cite This Article:

Dr. Vinod Zalte, (2022). Traces of Existentialism in An Outcast of The Island By Joseph Conrad, Aarhat Multidisciplinary International Education Research Journal, XI (IV) July – August, 87-90.