



Into the Wild as an Existential Piece of Literature

AISHWARYA PATEL

Ph.D. Scholar,
Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad,
Gujarat (India)

DR. SHALINI SHARMA

Research Guide,
Associate Professor, English Dept.
Sabarmati University, A'bad, Gujarat (India)

Abstract:

Existential crisis is a common complaint amongst the people from early times. Philosophers in East and West have long pondered over the reasons and the ways to effectively deal with it. Despite this, the modern man continues to struggle. Into the Wild is a brilliantly written novel which brings to light an adventure taken by Christopher McCandless who took a lot of interest in the real purpose of life. Tired of conforming to the superficial standards laid down by the society, he rebels against the ways of the world in order to live an authentic life. Philosophical point of views of five key existentialists; Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche and Heidegger, will be used to support arguments in the current paper. They tried to reach a common understanding about existential crisis. The paper is going to focus on the protagonist of the novel, Into the Wild, and bring out its many existential aspects. The aim is to mark Christopher's journey from a fine life in America to a challenging life into the woods. It is attempted to understand the choices that he made in order to live an authentic life.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Into the Wild, Christopher McCandless, Authenticity, Rebellion*

1. Introduction to Existentialism

Since time immemorial, humans have wondered about what gives life a meaning. The purpose of life is a very commonly pondered over area. People tend to associate meaning with God, love, money, work and so on. Everyone has their personal sense of purpose and meaning in life. Some people believe that we have a God given purpose that we are supposed to identify and then fulfil it. However, Sartre strongly believed that we do not have any God-given purpose and that we must first live and then then what our life meant gets clear. That is to say, "Existence precedes essence". A sense of meaning is essential for human beings in order to survive. People find meaning by various means, like, religion, teaching, serving, art, so on and so forth.

Philosophy is all about dialectics, wherein someone puts forth an interesting thought to which other individual responds. Plato and Aristotle firmly believed that everything that we see on the face of this earth has some kind of essence attached to it. The essence refers to core properties that makes something what it is. In absence of those core properties, the thing would not be what it is. It hardly matters if the handle of the sword is made up of iron or gold. The blade is what gives the sword its defining function. So, the handle could be iron or gold, it would not matter but if the sword had no blade, it would not be a sword anymore. In similar fashion, Plato and Aristotle also thought that human beings have a function too. They go so far to believe that our essence is already defined even before we come into this world. Hence, it became crucial to know one's essence. This school of thought was later known as, 'Essentialism'. However, this idea was later attacked by many philosophers. For instance, Nietzsche, came up with the philosophy, 'Nihilism'. According to Nihilism, life was meaningless.

Sartre then came up with the idea of what if we exist first and then define the purpose of life. His understanding was that it was up to the individual to create his own meaning. This became the foundation of the existential philosophy. It is completely in the hands of individuals to define their own fate and determine their purpose in life. Hence, there is no pre-determined map that an individual has to follow per say. However, existentialism is not same as atheism. There are undoubtedly, existentialists who are atheistic, however, there are also, some like Kierkegaard, who are theists. These existentialists firmly believe that God did not create this universe or individuals with a preordained purpose. So, they do not in anyway counter the idea of God, but they just believe that God did not create the world with a pre-defined purpose. Therefore, each individual is born in this world without a purpose and it is up to us to give our lives meaning. This an essential element of existentialism.

The existentialists call the search for answers in an answerless world as absurdity. We as human beings always need some meaning to be able to go about in the universe, however, according to existentialists, we are born in a meaningless world and must find our own meanings. This is what absurdity is all about. The rant for meaning in a meaningless universe makes the lives of individuals challenging and absurd. It is this reason, that absurdity can meet a man at any junction in life and strike him like thunderbolt. The world was not manifested for achieving some goal. This means that there is no set of rules at all. This brings in a big question of morality, justice, order and fairness.

In the late nineteenth century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche laid down the foundations for existentialism. Although, it became a popular concept during and after the occurrence of the horrendous events of World War II. The holocaust shook the faith of people. They had no reason to believe in the supreme justice. God had failed to intervene as humans turned against their own kind. It was difficult to believe that there was any order in the world. People found it more and more difficult to regain their lost faith and administer meaning in their lives. Sartre came up with another intriguing idea that contributed to the existential philosophy. He proposed that, the problem was not about the lack of meaning but about the abundance of freedom that individuals are born with. He wrote, "Man is condemned to be free, because once thrown into this world, he is responsible for everything that he does". If each man is so completely free, then each man must lay down their own set of rules and watch their own conduct. If there is no God to watch over the world, then there is no judgement day that man should fear. He is then left with his own conscience. Sartre believed that individuals who are constantly listening to the authorities like their parents or Governments, shall realize that they too live in a meaningless world and are constantly striving to create their own meaning. Hence, according to Sartre, the wisest thing for an individual to do would be to live as authentically as possible! This means that individuals must take complete responsibility for the abundant freedom that they enjoy while they live in an absurd world. So, all the meaning that an individual's life carries is endowed upon them by their own selves. Sartre goes on to say that any individual who blindly follows a path set by the authorities, then he has, 'Bad Faith', which means, that the individual refuses to accept the absurd.

It is vital that individuals live authentically. If there is something that they would like to pursue, then they must, in order to live an authentic life. If there are certain values and ethics that they respect then they must live by them in order to ensure that they are doing the right thing for their own selves. Most of the time, the right that we do, is to ensure that we do not offend the law and policies laid down by the Government. It is crucial that humans live ethically in order to bring these principles in the world. Everything that we see in the world was introduced as an idea by somebody that must have been accepted by a large number of people.

2. Christopher McCandless' Rebellion for an Authentic Life

Albert Camus very rightly quoted, "I rebel, therefore I exist". Christopher McCandless, a graduate of Emory university, led a life that might seem completely normal to the society. However, he was sensitive to the wrath that was hidden behind the sugar-coated words that his parents exchanged. He

cared for real things in the superficial society. He can be considered as the metaphor of the modern man who is anxious and desperate to break the chains that prevent them from following their dreams and pursuing a deeper meaning in life. He was an avid reader and had read a lot of Existential writings. After his graduation, he stopped communicating with his family members and gave away his college fund to a charitable organization and finally also lost his car in a flash flood.

He takes up a vagabond life, and calls himself by the name of, Alexander Supertramp. As he tours, he runs into different people, many of whom deeply appreciate his intelligence and respect his autonomy. He kept on moving from one place to another without getting too attached to anyone. He decided to live authentically despite the fact that he had to rebel and challenge against the prevalent mindset of the society. The modern man-built houses from cement and concrete and live a safe and secured life. However, in McCandless' view an authentic life is about, "make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously have never thought of doing, or been to hesitant to attempt. So many people live in unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservation, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality, nothing is more dangerous to the adventurous spirit in man than a secured future". He strongly believed that humans should answer their calling and take drastic steps. The existentialists like Albert Camus, strongly believed that, individuals must resort to rebellion in order to live through the absurdity of life.

He believed that in order to live a fulfilling life, an individual must come out of the safety bubble that he creates around himself and encounter new experiences each day, so that he may find meaning and beauty. The world around us is so beautiful and mesmerizing that none of it should be missed. Individuals should thus, learn to take risks and be ready to leave the sight of the shore. In order to measure oneself, individuals must put themselves in challenging situation at least once in life. Human beings are undoubtedly, social animals and yet every once in a while, they need an escape to meet with their own selves and regain their lost sanity. After this they have the courage to be in the chaotic society once again and to go about their business. These were the views by which Christopher McCandless lived. He believed that humans must embrace unconventional living. It is for this very reason that he walked away into the wild and measured himself day-after-day.

The Americans lived by material excess. The markets create unnecessary need for unnecessary goods. People try and fulfil their emptiness by becoming victims to procuring items in order to live a fuller life. However, no amount of goods can fill the gap in man's heart. It can be filled by living an authentic life and doing what is necessary and meaningful. Every person is different and the values and belief system that they stand by vary too. People must be ready put in the struggle it takes to live a meaningful life. Albert Camus, very rightly says, "There is scarcely any passion without struggle".

Hence, McCandless, in 1992, hitchhiked to the stampede trail in Alaska. There he walked deep into the wild with minimum supplies of food and water and lived for one hundred and thirteen days before he died as a result of accidentally consuming fruit of a wild plant.

3. Self-Discovery; An Inward Voyage

Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* very rightly said, "When I discover who I am, I'll be free". Christopher McCandless travelled far away from the civilization and the civility. His quest for truth was so great that he took the road less travelled by to look for answers. Being disgusted with the superficiality of the modern society he wanted to make the most of one life that he had. A lot of people spend their lives meeting their ends meet. The rest resort to sensual pleasures. There are very few individuals who have in them the inevitable longing to know the supreme truth. These people are often viewed as rebels because they live on their own terms and do not confirm to the societal norms. They are far away from the societal standards of normality.

One must begin by knowing oneself before he/she can make sense of the absurd world around them. The modern man can easily slip into nothingness and view the world around him as meaningless. Hence, the individual should take the first step by understanding self before navigating into the world outside. The existentialists have found that individuals are struck by anxiety and to overcome that they must live as authentically as possible. Humans have a thirst to explore the unknown and that they must. Exploration and discovery are at the very core of human existence and we shall not shy away from that. One must always remain a seeker and keep looking for answers. Most of the times, the answer is nowhere but within the heart of the man.

“I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one’s neighbor - such is my idea of happiness. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps - what more can the heart of a man desire?” This is what McCandless aspired for. However, the modern-man is a victim to the rat race that never ends. He is constantly made to believe that he needs this and that. Humans need few things in order to be happy. They need not even pursue it. Happiness is a by-product of meaningful actions. However, the modern-man has digressed and has begun to believe that materials can bring joy and enable them to live a complete life. The funny part is that, although, we are the most comfortable generations, we cannot claim that we are the happiest of all. We are still unhappy in so many insignificant ways. The reason behind all this is the endless desires for what we do not have.

āpūryamāṇamacalapratiṣṭhaṃ samudramāpaḥ praviśanti yadvati
tadvatkāmā yaṃ praviśanti sarve sa śāntimāpnoti na kāmakāmī॥ 2-70

In Bhagvada Gita, lord Krishna explains Arjuna, that the ocean does not get disturbed by the rivers that continuously merge into it. Similarly, the sage who remains unshaken by the desirable things shall ultimately attain peace and not the man who continuously acts to satisfy his thirst for desires. McCandless was far from living a life of unfulfilled desires for material pleasures. He rather chose to walk away into the wild with minimum necessities and take a journey inward. It was not just a journey but an odyssey. He had some enlightening experiences.

4. Conclusion

The existentialists laid importance on experiential truth. No matter how much an individual lends his ear to wise men, women and saint, humans must realize the importance of experience. It is the only truth. The only true source of knowledge is nothing else but personal experiences. McCandless and other individuals who lived an authentic life by breaking away from the prevalent ideologies of their times were able to bring about revolutions and a new perspective of viewing the world. Sometimes, it might seem easier to conform to the existing ways of life. However, individuals must muster up the courage to live a life on their own terms in order to live a significant life.

References

- 1.“Existentialism.” The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 247–67. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspephil.26.2.0247>. Accessed 2 Jul. 2022.
- 2.Dufrenne, Mikel. “Existentialism and Existentialisms.” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, vol. 26, no. 1, 1965, pp. 51–62. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105468>. Accessed 16 Jul. 2022.
- 3.Krakauer, Jon. Into the Wild. New York: Anchor Books, 1997. Print.
- 4.Moyn, Samuel. “Anxiety and Secularization: SOren Kierkegaard and the Twentieth-Century Invention of Existentialism.” Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context, edited by Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 279–304. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/juda14774.13>. Accessed 9 Jul. 2022.