

The Optimism of Existentialism

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Abstract: “I don’t want to be remembered as the girl who was shot. I want to be remembered as the girl who stood up.” – Malala Yousafzai. These words of a seventeen year old girl from Pakistan who survived a targeted Taliban attack that nearly took her life, advocate for girls’ education. In 2012, a Taliban gunman shot her in the head. But she had survived and had stood again for the same cause. Her courage is unparalleled. In 2014 she won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Malala Yousafzai speaks in the true spirit of existentialism. She lives her life in its full measure and enjoys each ounce of it because she takes her own decision and her own action. She lives in it no matter what the consequences are, for she is made of courage and enthusiasm. This paper attempts to bring out the optimistic bend of existentialism that pronounces the supremacy of man over his own life. The paper speaks about the effect of war (the major disaster made by man) and its everlasting impact on the psyche of man. And it also shows the superb flexibility of man that enables him to adapt according to challenging circumstances and his fine capacity to fix those challenges.

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1. Introduction

1) War – The Disaster Made By Man

Throughout human history humans vied for power, wealth, luxury and fame. They fought with each other to gain each one of them and the victory for one party meant the certain defeat for the other party. No two men can win at the same time when they fight with each other and the same rule applies for a wider group of people, wider territories and at last nations. Many a war has broken out out of the devilish greed of men and an inevitable apocalypse that eventually followed it determined the fate of those men after the war. When man begins a war he certainly does not know the future of it. He will win or lose. There is no guarantee, and the man fights depending on his chances. It is his fighting that makes the result. And the result shapes the remaining life of the man. Men make war; the war, in return, makes those men.

Men have waged war for their own benefit. But whether they got the benefit they aspired for is doubtful and the doubt watered the growth of existentialism.

2. What Is Existentialism?

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that originated and developed in the European continent during early 20th century, looks at the nature of human condition and asserts the individual existence of a human being who is free to choose his

actions through acts of his will yet at the same time possess responsibility for them. The concept of man is of utmost importance for the existentialist creed. Man is capable of free action; his free action produces a certain result. According to existential philosophy, his action and its result constitute the man. Man is of no existence if he is devoid of his will and his action because they are the part of his existence – they are inherent in it. Existentialism has its theoretical foundation in the tenets of ontology which deals with the nature of being in this universe (by being i.e., existence, ontology means human existence). How a human being lives in this world and what kind of existence he holds are the fundamental problems that existentialism deals with. And it grants us solutions in precision that are lucid in detail.

Existentialism is the theoretical proof for the existence of the pure existence of the existent. The existence of man is his pure existence in this world; he is the existent (existent is the one who exists). Thus the existence of the existent is the pure existence of the existent, and it leads to the equalization of existence and pure existence – existence is pure existence. There are different ways to exist and each different way is an existence in itself. As every way of existence is existence there is no difference between them. They are one and the same.

3. Its Founders and their Views

The progeny of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism found its upbringing and advancement in Jean-Paul Sartre. As stated earlier, it claims that an individual has an existence of a free and responsible being who has the capacity to develop through acts of free will. Therefore it also claims that a human being should make his own decisions on how to live. And therefore it claims absolute responsibility to his decisions and actions.

Where freedom of action is present, there responsibility is present. This creates anxiety in the individual, for he can never choose between good decisions and bad decisions – there is no good and bad at all. Sartre refutes the notion of good: “Nowhere is it written that the Good exists . . .” (Marino 349). Man is just incapable in distinguishing between good and bad because there is no such distinction. It is morality that produced such a distinction. Morality is the product of ideology. An ideology is the logical understanding of a certain idea that has a history of its own, and it is the product of a fundamental conflict between good and bad (or ideal and non-ideal). Existentialism does not

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approve of an 'ideal' – hence the fundamental conflict or ideology or morality shall never find a place in existential realm.

Why does existentialism reject 'ideal'? It rejects because 'ideal' is purely the product of human consciousness. Human consciousness produced a notion of 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' according to its own convenience. But there is no proof that a certain something is ideal; there is no scale against which it can be measured and known. So there arises no question of rectification because it applies only in the case of something bad and incorrect.

All that a human being is capable of is action only. It is just a form of his existence. He should do his action without knowing whether it is right. He cannot help being in ever oblivion for there exist no righteousness and it fills him with despair.

Action constitutes the demeanour of man. Man's demeanour is his existence – his individual existence. According to Sartrean mode of existentialism the pure existence of man could never be separated from his individual existence in this world, for the type of existence that he undergoes in this world is invariably the very part of his pure existence. This means the individuality that a man maintains through his own free will and action is his existence.

They are two faces of the same coin; hence people refrain from taking action and having responsibility because of their perennial fear of morality. But if they come to know that there is no morality as such, they can freely choose their action without guilt then.

4. Two Modes of the Philosophy – Christian Existentialism and Atheistic Existentialism

Existentialism "started out as being fundamentally Christian in nature, only later diverging into other forms" (Cline 1). The other form he refers is atheistic existentialism. The father of existentialism Søren Aabye Kierkegaard is a Christian Existentialist while Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre are atheistic existentialists. Christian existentialism does not discard the idea of God. Instead, they accept the existence of God and further tell that the God that exists is an individual concept that differs from man to man. It is his personalized view of God that leads him to salvation. How does man know that God exists? It is 'his' belief; it is 'his own' choice to hold on to that belief. It is 'his' conscious action to follow God without question. So if he attains salvation it will be purely the result of his action; man makes his salvation.

For Kierkegaard a human being is in a fundamental dilemma to choose between good and bad because there are multiple possible ways to exist. He is forced to take a decision in the absence of rectitude and certainty. This results in anguish and despair for the human being. But, then, if the man wants to take such a decision he has to halt his reason and take what Kierkegaard calls a 'leap of faith'. The individual must choose if he wants to have this 'leap of faith'. God is there, of course – but it is man's freedom to choose God. The leap of faith includes a basic awareness of our own freedom to choose our course of action. In order to truly exist, man must exercise his

choice of action. He can discard or embrace God – that is man's will. But either he must discard or must embrace.

Later came atheistic existentialism that denies the existence of God. It states that man is without a creator, and that he creates himself. Sartre writes: ". . . first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself . . . at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be" (Marino 345). Man becomes the creator of man; the man is the man who is made by the man. There is no God to turn to. Man himself is the God of man. He is the supreme authority over his life by deciding whom he should turn out to be and what he should become of. But he should take that decision solely by himself (as in the same way that of Christian existentialism) and no notion of right or wrong would be there to help him. All that man can do is to continue his course of action because his course of action is his existence.

There are, then, two fundamentally different ways for the man to exist: be a Christian existentialist or be an atheistic existentialist. There is no other way because man is fundamentally an existential entity – an existentialist. And in both ways (Christian and atheistic) it gives hope for man because he can choose his way and improve himself, at any time. Sartre tells with pride on existentialism: ". . . there is no doctrine more optimistic, since man's destiny is within himself; nor for an attempt to discourage man from acting, since it tells him that the only hope is in his acting and that action is the only thing that enables a man to live" (Marino 357). It gives hope that at any point of time man can rebuild a new life of his own.

5. The Catalysts of Existentialism

Two World Wars drastically changed the world. The First World War, or the Great War (as it was then known), lasted from 1914 to 1918 and took the lives of nearly 10 million soldiers. In the war, around 20 million more were wounded. The Second World War, referred to as the most deadliest war in human history, lasted from 1939 to 1945 and about 17 million soldiers lost their lives; millions more were injured, and had lost their property. When the First World War took more lives than any other war up until then, the Second World War claimed still more. The magnitude of destruction caused by the two great Wars created a profound impact in the psyche of humanity; it ever remains there as a wretched black spot.

Material and spiritual destruction were the immediate impact of the wars on social front. The whole of Europe was thrown into hopelessness, pain, frustration, sickness and death. New types of weapons used, especially in WW II, which destroyed many cities completely. Bombs wrecked nearly everything. According to Stokesbury, after WW II "millions of starving and homeless people wandered among the ruins of Europe and Asia" (21: 498). All these were a direct result of the greed of man for power, wealth and fame (as stated in the first section of this article). The people who held power at the time of the wars tried to usurp and use power as a means to have an upper hand over others. But the aftermath was the collapse of all. The world leaders tried to confine power to their own territory. They consolidated the military power of their nations and prepared

them to fight until victory was at hand. As a result tension between nations increased, and the noble qualities such as universal brotherhood and equality were waning. An apocalypse was imminent then.

According to Coffman, historians believe the WW I had deep causes such as extreme national pride among various Christians, enormous increase in European armed forces, a race for colonies and the formation of military alliances (21: 454). Different countries formed alliances with each other in order to fight. The war broke out but it resolved nothing. There was no gain for anybody. The danger had happened; a majority of land area was destroyed and millions of people lost their lives.

Just two decades after the WW I was over the WW II broke out. It was the most devastating one in our entire history of wars and “killed more people, destroyed more property, disrupted more lives, and probably had more far reaching consequences . . .” (Stokesbury 21: 470). The places of battle included most of the nations in the world and bomb raids and massacres were happening everywhere. The exact number of deaths could not be calculated due to the magnitude of the war. Stokesbury further states that “historians trace the causes of World War II to problems left unsolved by World War I ... the treaties that ended it also created new political and economic problems. Forceful leaders in several countries took advantage of those problems to seize power. The desire of dictators in Germany, Italy, and Japan to conquer additional territory brought them into conflict with democratic nations” (21: 470).

The Second World War displaced millions from their homeland. Havoc caused by modern weaponry was a major reason. Pollution and contamination of water bodies and land areas posed great threat to the livelihood of the masses. Epidemics were another threat. People who took no part in politics had to leave their cities and towns to be relocated to another part of the country; some people left their countries too.

Stokesbury says: “World War II uprooted millions of people. By the war’s end, more than 12 million displaced persons remained in Europe. They included orphans, prisoners of war, survivors of Nazi concentration and slave labor camps, and people who had fled invading armies and war-torn areas. Other people were displaced by changes in national borders” (21: 498). After the war ended, the borders of different nation were reassessed and redrawn, and many people had to change their residence. In total, the human suffering at that time was beyond description. Man lost his hope in everything.

If man had hopelessness, he had hope too...

It is man who has made all these calamities. It is he who has brought disorder unto this world. It is he who has made himself a worst nightmare. But it is the same man who thrives after each disaster. To exemplify, Stokesbury details that the Allied forces of WW II established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) which began work in 1944 in different regions in the world which were freed by them from the Nazi regime, and that it “set up camps for displaced persons and provided them with food, clothing, and medical supplies” (21: 498). They were doing a tremendous job of charity and magnanimity by showing their unconditional love and support towards their ailing brethren.

After WW II the traditional powers of Europe such as Germany, France and Britain and the Eastern power Japan had lost their supremacy in world politics. The Soviet Union and the United States of America became the global powers. America helped the nations which were much affected by the war. In 1948 the United States brought forth the Marshall Plan to help those nations rebuild their economic condition; they got monetary aids and other necessary supplies as support. Soon came the nuclear era of atom bombs (it actually started with the development of those bombs in WW II) and other weapons of mass destruction, but everybody refrained from another world conflict because the bombs showed their terrifying avatars at Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 Aug 1945 and 9 Aug 1945 respectively.

The programmes to develop more atomic weapons were progressing on one side where the Soviet Union and the United States topped the list; on the other side a rallying cry from nations all over the world to prevent and stop war forever was equally progressing. The former resulted in the formation of a still more destructive weapon called hydrogen bomb and the latter resulted in the formation of the United Nations Organization (UNO). Due to the noble missions carried out by the organization no World War has happened since. After experiencing the horrible effects of WW II the allied forces jointly thought of establishing an international organization that would uphold the dignity of humanity. The United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and China met at Moscow in Russia in 1943 and agreed to work together to promote world solidarity and peace; they also agreed to establish an international organization that aims the same. Thus in April 1945 representatives from 50 countries around the globe joined at San Francisco in the United States and proclaimed the beginning of UNO. That June they signed the charter and the organization was officially born on Oct 24 that year.

6. Man Makes his Life

Man of the 20th century has shown the capacity of his own actions in two diametrically opposite ways – one through waging wars and the other through upholding peace. Those two paths show the capacity of man to build his own life. And they assert the power of man to steer his life towards the desired direction. Man has made war. Man has made disasters. But he can also make no wars, no disasters. The speciality of man over animals is his rational capability. He can stop and think and can then act according to what he thought. This ability of man gives fresh ray of hope that man can defeat any apocalypse and can strive towards a better future.

What existentialism says is exactly this. Man is fully capable of remoulding and renewing himself. He is not under the hold of a superpower so that he is eternally subject to a life that is not controlled by him; on the contrary he is the controller of him and he controls him in such a way that he can defeat any defeat that comes to defeat him. Even though disasters strike humans they can successfully manage them because human beings innately possess the power of management. The two World Wars and the incredible power and potential of people to overcome those Wars prove the point. Japan is a case in point.

The country is worth mentioning in this context. Like the mythological phoenix, it has arisen out of its own ashes after WW II and proved its mettle. The country and its people believe in action. They espouse existential philosophy, knowingly or unknowingly. Sartre comments on existentialism that the doctrine he presents proclaims “there is no reality except in action” and “man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life” (Marino 355).

Thus through action man can destruct or construct him. He is his maker and he himself is the power that controls his life. If disaster strikes him he will possess the power to annihilate it. He has to annihilate it; only then he becomes the man, in the

true sense of the word.

7. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of the optimism of existentialism.

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