

The Existential Self: A Journey through the Fictional World of Peter Handke's *The Afternoon of a Writer*

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Abstract: The paper *The Existential Self: A Journey through the Fictional World of Peter Handke's The Afternoon of a Writer* attempts to identify the existential precariousness of a writer and his search of self identity. The feeling of bereftness and barrenness in existence makes man alienated from himself, fellow men, nature, cosmos and God. Though human beings are free to choose and take decisions in their day-to-day lives, they are chained not only by the society but also by the abrupt situations of freedom, fear, dread, despair, anxiety, indecisiveness and alienation. The paper attempts to reveal the disconnection of the protagonist from the external world through many fleeting moments that reflect his existential struggle.

Key Words: Bereftness, Barrenness, Ennui, Indecisiveness, Alienation

Life itself is a state of continuous struggle between ourselves and everything outside. Every moment we are fighting actually with external nature and if we are defeated, our life has to go. Life is not a simple smoothly flowing thing, but it is a compound effect. This complex struggle between something inside and the external world is what we call life.

Swami Vivekananda

Existentialism is a philosophical investigation of the challenging nature of human existence. It is a cultural movement that arose in the nineteenth century Europe and rose to fame in 1945 after the Second World War. It is primarily concerned with the human condition which aims to reassert the importance of individuality and freedom. The comprehension of people's place in the world and the clarification of what it means to be alone are important themes of existentialism. From a detached perspective, it embraces personal freedom and the choice in one's life. This European trend began in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It explains the issue of human existence by focusing on an individual who, in a seemingly meaningless world, is unaware of the fundamental meaning of existence. Humans are incapable of making decisions in life when they experience existential precariousness. The existence of an individual is determined by the world, full of sufferings and struggles. The prime aim of existentialists is to mould one's life along with the hectic responsibilities embedded in man. Simone de Beauvoir, an existentialist philosopher describes existentialism:

Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive.(159)

Existence comes first, from the subjective perspective, and it is necessary for one to exist. It must be designed in such a way that subjectiveness alludes to freedom. It is a form of humanism that cherishes people's ability to be free, to make decisions, and extent their own views in the external world. The main focus is to make the best decision one can take. It emphasizes the unique position of the individual as a self determining agent for making meaningful and authentic choices in life. It has an impact on significant aspects of existence. Nothing is predetermined, but man can shape his destiny by the exercise of the will. To exist is to have a place and time in the real world. Existence is not just an idea or an essence that can be intellectually manipulated. Thomas Flynn by focusing on the works of Sartre speaks about man's need to find his own identity and choice of individual freedom:

We have seen that the quest for identity is on a collision course with our consciousness as non-self-identical. Yet most of us act as if we could attain the solidity and identity of things...and our pursuit of it expresses an inauthentic flight from the anguish expresses an inauthentic flight from the anguish of our own freedom. Ours is the freedom of non-self-identity. (76)

Existential crisis is a condition in which an individual ensembles the feelings and questions along with the meaning and purpose of life. It emphasizes the existence of an individual who finds it difficult to find solutions to questions of survival and is unaware of how to react. Existential crises are frequently thought to have a negative effect on a person's life. This excess condition leads to mental disorders. The need for therapy arises here. The overload of uncontrolled thoughts can be rectified only by an existential therapist. People troubled by existential crises are haunted mostly by the memories of the past. They feel alienated by the idea that there is no way to leave the unnatural atmosphere. These unfavourable feelings are a result of worries. The emotions an individual experience and the accompanying physical reactions are influenced by overthinking. People experience anxiety and sadness as a result of these recurring thoughts. As a result of this, existential crises can unfortunately harm one's mental health if it is allowed to spiral out of control. The question of 'why', is the foundation of an individual's drive. Lack of motivation may occur, if a person struggles with 'why' and believes in the search for an answer. Variables including emotions, sleep, and diet can all have an impact on a person's energy levels. According to Elon Musk:

I always had an existential crisis, trying to figure out 'what does it all mean?' I came to the conclusion that if we can advance the knowledge of the world, if we can expand the scope and scale of consciousness, then, we're better able to ask the right questions and become more enlightened. That's the only way to move forward. (n.p)

Peter Handke's works always pose a challenge to the readers by presenting many literary narratives of the neglected human condition. The interpretation of his novels need deep penetration. The themes of existential perceptions, reality and the estrangement of the individuals are focused in all the novels of Handke. The narratives of Handke are mostly based on his personal experiences and reveal the true nature of the traditional forms of inner perceptions. Handke says "I couldn't say who I am, I haven't the remotest notion of myself; I am someone without antecedents, without a history, without a country, and on that I insist." (7).

Peter Handke's *The Afternoon of a Writer* brings forth the existential attributes of the nameless protagonist who survives the odds and develops a sense of commitment and attachment in life. The paper tries to reveal the nameless writer's disconnection with the world. It is a fictional narrative of an afternoon walk, away from the writer's desk to a tavern in the city's edge and finally back to home. He collapses into disenchantment by withdrawing from society. The understanding of self-journey by the narrator is a clear fulfillment of the existential essence of life. The experience of namelessness may be a liberation from limitations imposed on him. According to Western thinkers, the situations or predicaments project man to the state of absurd. *The Afternoon of a Writer* witnesses how the narrator appears as a divided self, a split personality, a loner and a victim of circumstances. According to Swami Vivekananda, "Abnegation is just as every action that emanates from us comes back to us as reaction even so our actions may act on other

people and theirs on us. Perhaps all of you have observed it as a act that when persons do evil actions”(82). The present study is endeavored on the existential aspect of the abnegated self of the narrator and his survival of ordeals through self realization and commitment to life.

The Afternoon of a Writer exposes how an individual can unchain himself from the physical space and boundaries. Boundaries created by man can be overcome by one's mental strength that is strong enough to eradicate the feeling of nothingness. Handke interprets the human condition in its totality and pictures the nameless author's escape from his obsessiveness of clinging into the inner world. *The Afternoon of a Writer* authenticates that the traumatic stipulations can be swept away and hope can be filled the vacuum in life. The narrator who is in a quest to explore the outside world arouses curiosity in the readers. The writer while resting on the bench of a bus-shelter, glances at the traffic mirror at the road junction and discovers in a moment of epiphany an enchanted world. His fixed boundary loses the empirical dimensions. This shows the writer the dark figure of his own thoughts as an emotional curve. He feels:

Surprisingly, it was almost exclusively at times when he was writing that he was able to divest the city he lived in of its limits. The little became big; names lost their meaning; the light-coloured sand in the cracks between cobblestones became the foothills of a dune; a pallid blade of grass became part of a savanna. (24)

The narrator's fear at conjuring up the world and his disenchantment by withdrawing from society is the main theme of *The Afternoon of a Writer*. The writer's crisis of self-agonies, and quest are reflected in his odd behavior. His way of living, eating and dressing portray him as a misfit in a world which is not pleased with him. He compares himself to a legendary Chinese painter:

The claw arms of a trolley brush like an insect's feelers over a single tall fir tree in the distance. Strange that so many people, when thinking themselves alone and unobserved, reminding him, with their grumbling, throat clearing, and puffing, of those crackling trolley-buses, which really ought to be brought back into use, and that with him it was usually the contrary; it was only when nameless and along with things that he really started functioning. If someone had asked him now what his name was, his answer would have been: "I have no name," (52)

Existentialism deals with a philosophical movement of man's disillusionment and despair. The narrator in *The Afternoon of a Writer* is haunted by a sense of loss that could never be spelled out to anyone. He is a victim of existential crisis which makes him question his own inner conflicts. Every deed of the narrator ends in confusion and it is revealed through his life. The intensity of his mental crisis can be visualized through the disorder of things at his house. The house seems to be uninhabited. The window seats, dining tables, pianos, upsetting stereo loudspeakers, chess boards, flower vases, bookshelves are out of order and the books are piled up on the floor and window sills. He feels a sense of being at home only at the night. After months of writing in a sound proof room in a high-rise building, he moves to a street level room. The sound of the construction noises disturbs him always. Later on, he looks out at the workers and tries to establish a harmony between what he was doing and their busy schedule. He maintains an acquaintance with his eyes and nature outside. He can smell the sweat in the room for the first time. This shows his association with nature. The inner soul finally attains meaning in life.

His feeling of a sole survivor was revived and overwhelmed by the thought that the whole world outside has ceased to exist. As a result, he had to clear his throat to prepare his voice for the customary man-to-man tone and able to understand the faces of the passersby who were becoming more and more frequent. (18)

Existential characteristics like anguish, loneliness, and isolation are reflected in the protagonist. As the writer suffers from readers' block, he needs himself to be free. He starts observing the huge gap between his role as a writer and as an observer of nature. His journey recollects his lost contact with the language when he is unable to work. At this stage he senses the nothingness and meaningless state of his existence. *The Afternoon of a Writer* is a product of a restless and fertile mind. The narrator feels "The liberation from limits or the self comes from the experience of a nameless. He feels like a man wholly outside among things, and it feels like a kind of enthusiasm" (49).

Existence is related to one's own decisions, choices, and actions. As the writer recalls his lonely existence he feels that at a particular point he has even dissolved into the air and ceases to exist. He recollects that on particular day sights, conversations were of little. He only wishes to close his eyes and ears just to

inhale and exhale. Everything seems to be a hallucination for the writer. He recollects all the incidents one by one and pushes them into the depths of illuminated thoughts. The writer reveals to the world that the inner world is a reliable sequence of images, and a dependence on nature makes life worth living. As the realization dawns upon him, life appears to be a puzzle, a long-forgotten excitement. The character brings to the lime light how confused people are in the contemporary chaotic world.

At last, he would lie still and nothing else; yes, there was such a thing as rest. He thought of the next day and decided to tramp around the garden until his footprints were as dense as if a whole caravan had come through and until he had seen his first bird in flight. And he made another of his vows. If he didn't come to grief in his work, if he didn't lose his err of speech he would give the chapel of the old people's home at the foot of the hill a bell which, instead of tinkling, would resound... To himself, he was a puzzle, a long-forgotten wonderment. (86)

The intensity of suffering and the problem of alienation arise from the oscillation between dream and reality. Accepting the responsibility of one's actions along with self-realization can strengthen the character of an individual. The single character in the novel who the author addresses as nameless authenticates the existential traits of the humanity. The author succeeds in finding a meaning for his protagonist's existence. Thomas Flynn says "existential individuality is an achievement, and not a permanent one at that. We are born biological beings but we must become existential individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions" (n.p).

The Afternoon of a Writer exposes how an individual can unchain himself from the physical space and boundaries. The paper interprets the human condition in its totality and pictures the nameless author's escape from his obsessiveness of clinging into the inner world. The study emphasises that the traumatic stipulations can be swept away and hopes can fill the vacuum in life. *The Afternoon of a Writer* analyses the writer's reactions to the society and the responses of his observations. Existentialism does not necessarily aim for an authentic life with purpose, sense, and meaning. To substantiate this, one can observe the characters in Camus's play *Caligula* who says, "To live one's life is a little thing and I shall have the courage to do so if it is necessary, but to see the meaning of this dissipated, to see our reason for existing disappear, that is what is unbearable. (4).

Literature unfolds the multiple aspects of human life. It emphasizes that human life is meaningless and hopeless. Man's experience in the world is to enable him to get out of the whirlpool. According to Sankhya Philosophy: the characteristics of one man is inactivity, dullness and laziness; that of another, activity, power, manifestation of energy; and in still another we find the sweetness, calmness, and gentleness, which are due to the balancing of both action and inaction. (85)

Existentialism means self-truth which makes human life significant. Every man is somewhere caged in his life. He deliberately hides himself from the society. *The Afternoon of a Writer* moves much deep with the consciousness of the main character and depicts man as a stranger to the world as depicted in *The Stranger* and *The Castle*:

He feels the sense of rootlessness, powerlessness like an outsider to his society and world. His world is full of tragic alienation, despair and pessimism. He feels himself as absurd which is devoid of purpose, and becomes rootless and meaningless to his society. (2)

Human mind has the power to turn the face of the world. Man cannot avoid the reality of life. According to Sartre, "there are a lot of things which controls man's freedom. Man lives within the boundary of five facticities which create a great obstacle on the road of freedom" (94). Peter Handke has beautifully carved out the image of a nameless writer as a stranger to the world. He portrays how the protagonist revived himself from the chains of inner crisis to become a new human being.

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