Use of Symbols, Images etc and Theme of Lostness in Hemingway's Novel: A Farewell to Arms – An Existential Enquiry

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Abstract

Theme of lostness pervades in Hemingway's earlier novels and short stories. Almost all characters in his earlier novels and short stories were lost and sought escape from striving against the existential destiny adopting self-destroying style of life. In these novels and short stories the author uses symbols and images to establish the dominant mood of lostness and nothingness. All images, references or symbols have been associated with the dominant mood of failure, emptiness, despair and defeat. Rain has been presented as a symbol of disaster. The images of plains make Frederic Henry more aware of war and death. Frequent references to dancing parties, sex or drink mark their 'bad faith' or fleeing away from their freedom or reality. Like Henry, other characters are also lost and cannot face their reality.

Keywords :- **'Bad Faith', ' Nothingness', 'Lostness' 'Despair' 'Defeat' 'Unauthentic Existence'.**

Objective :- This paper aims to make an existential enquiry to make it clear that all images, references, symbols, ironies etc. have been used by Hemingway in his novel A Farewell to Arms to create a dominant mood of lostness from the very beginning till the end of the novel when Catherine dies and Henry finds nothing to sustain his life.

Introduction :- A Farewell to Arms is Hemingway's second major novel. The beginning of the novel establishes autumnal mood and is sustained throughout the novel: 'In the bed of the river, there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun... troops went by the houses and down the road, the dust, they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year"[1]. The novel opens like the mood we find in Eliot's The Waste Land (1922). Purity has been defiled. The life force has been thwarted and defeated. The leaves are 'powdered'. The tree trunks are too dusty. All this acts as a perfect objective correlative of the inner

desolation of lostness. This sense of barrenness and lostness has seen sustained throughout the novel. For example, in chapter seven, Book I, when Henry returns to the front, the sense of sweat, dust and heat is again emphasized. The soldiers were 'sweaty, dusty and tired' (p. 84). Book III opens like this: 'Now in the fall, the trees were all bare and the roads were muddy… the fields were brown' (p.143).

Analysis :- Hemingway employs images and symbols as a part of his plan to establish the dominant mood of lostness or nothingness; the sense of death, defeat, failure and emptiness. Daniel J. Schnieder states that such images are repeated so frequently that they begin to toll like bells in the mind. Virtually every sentence says death, despair, failure, emptiness because; virtually every sentence contains an image or symbol associate d with the dominant state of mind[2].

In the novel: A Farewell to Arms, rain has been presented as a symbol of disaster. The rain is not life-giving rain helping the leaves to grow. It is the autumnal and winter rain which brings leaves to fall. Rain is associated with darkness, destruction and death. The description goes like this:

> At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the 'cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven thousand died of it in the army'(p.9).

Hemingway has used the symbols of rain to heighten the sense of desolation and lostness, death and despair. He had seen killing and violence during the rains when he was on the war-front. And so rain is associated with death and destruction in his mind. The rain, which began just before Henry's return to Gorizia after his recovery from his wounds, continues throughout the disastrous retreat. In chapter twenty two, Book II, Henry narrates:

> 'that night and the next day it was raining. Coming from home from the Ospedate It turned cold Maggiore, it rained very hard and I was wet when I came in up in my room. The rain was coming down heavily outside on the balcony, and the wind blew it against the glass doors (p.127).

One feels that it is not rain but destruction which is after him. Though near the end of the book, for several months it does not rain at all. But then there is a sudden reference to the rain: 'In March came the first break in winter. In the night it started raining (p.263) And with this, one is made aware that some disaster is soon going to take place and it comes in the form of Catherine's death. When Catherine dies ' I went out', says Henry, ' and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in rain'(p.287).

Similarly, the images of mountains and plains have been employed by

Hemingway to make readers more aware of the filth and fatigue, nothingness and death. Mountains,in his works, are usually associated with concept of peace and love. Whereas Henry has always been shown going to the war-front in the plains which makes him aware of war and death. In his book: Hemingway: The Writer as Artist, Baker writes :

> 'By a process of accrual and coagulations, the images lead to build round the opposed concept…. The home concept, for example, is associated with the mountains; with dry cold weather; with peace and quiet, with love, dignity, health, happiness and the good life and with worship or for at least the consciousness of God. The Not-Home concept is associated with low lying plains, with obscenity, indignity, diseases, suffering, nervousness, war and death and with irreligion"[3]

So in Henry's mind also plains are associated with disease, suffering, alienation, death, nervousness etc. Hemingway has stated emphatically the ironic situation of Frederic Henry and of his contemporary men in the novel by using this image:

> 'Once in a camp I put a log on top of the fire and it was full of ants. As it commenced to burn, the ants swarmed out and went first towards the centre where the fire was; turned back and ran towards the end. When there was enough on the end they fell off into the fire. Some got out, their bodies burnt and flattered, and went off not knowing where they were going. But most of them went towards the fire and then back towards the end and swarmed on to the cool end \and finally off into the fire ' (p.282).

This reflects the ironic situation of Frederic Henry and his contemporary men.

In the novel, there are so many references to dancing parties. Most of the characters are interested in drink and sex. They indulge in amorous relations. Freely indulging in sex, dancing parties, the characters are trying to escape from the malevolent feeling of life's futility or drudgery of their own senselessness. Thrown into the situation of war these characters think that life is futile and its purpose is mainly sexual happiness. According to Sartre, amorous relation is a system of infinite reflection, a deceiving mirror game which carries within itself its own frustration. Love is a kind of 'dupery'[4]

In this novel, there are frequent references to whore houses. At the beginning of the novel, we find Henry sitting with his friends in a bawdy house. Drink and sex is always there observing the interest of the officers with whom he is associated. In the second chapter, when the priest is telling Henry that he should go to Abruzzi, the captain says, 'Come on, we will go to the whore house before it shuts' (p.14). In chapter three, when Henry returns to the front after his leave, he finds that lieutenant Rinaldi talks only of girls:

> 'That is nothing here now we have beautiful girls. New girls never been to the front before. We will go now this afternoon and see.
> And in the town, we have beautiful English girls' (p.16).

Henry himself explains why he had not gone to Abruzzi during the leave:

> 'I had gone to no such place but to the smoke of cafes and nights
> when the room whirled and you needed to look at the wall to make
> it stop, nightsin bed, drunk when you know that… that was all there
> was and the strange excitement of waking and not knowing who it
> was with you….'(p.17).

In the beginning, Henry's love for Catherine was nothing more than a mere flirtation. His attitude towards her was similar to what he thought of the other girls on the front. He himself says:

> 'It was all right if she was, I did not care what I was getting into.
> This was better than going evening to the house with officers
>
> where the girls climbed all over you…' (p.84).

All that Henry thought to do with Catherine was as with the other girls to make 'the world unreal in the dark' (p.17).

Not only Henry, but Rinaldi too finds some or the other way to escape into life of sex, delinking himself from any unpleasant feeling of life's futility. It provides him momentary relief from cares and frustration. It makes him forget everything even death. Rinaldi, a surgeon, is a cynical sensualist. He harbors no illusion about women. He says to Henry:

> *'There* is only one difference between taking a girl who has
> always been good and a woman. with a girl it was painful
> (p.176).

For Rinaldi, love is but a contrived euphemism for the philosophy of sex. A confirmed materialist, he believes frankly in living for the pleasure of the moment. Apart from his professional work as surgeon, there are two things that he likes;

drink and sex.Like Henry, Rinaldi is leading a life in an unauthentic mode. The war has made him mechanical , a cynical man.

Catherine, like other characters too, is a lost character in one way or the other. Her image of 'carrying a thin rotten stick like a toy riding crop bound in leather' (p.22) with her manifests her whole outlook towards life now. With the death of her fiancé in the war, her outlook towards life has completely changed .That was the end of faith, the end of her dream of happiness. Her flirtation with other characters is merely her unauthentic mode of existence.

Conclusion :-All these images/symbols or references of mountains, plains, rains, amorous relations, dancing parties, drinks etc have been used by Hemingway to establish a dominant note of unauthentic mode of existence of these characters. For these characters, physical love is one of the many activities to overcome the nausea, the feeling of the contingent and gratuitousness of their existence. It is one of the avenues of flight. Sex, drink, dance etc help them in escaping their war reality. Nathaniew Brander has pointed out that in sex more than in any other activity, an individual experiences "the fact of being an end in itself and of feeling that the purpose of life is happiness'[5]. These images of amorous relations,drinks and dancing parties are as a part of Hemingway to let the characters feel lostness or nothingness. These characters are uprooted and are evading the reality of war by adopting one or the other avenue of bad faith. These images, symbols ironies or references reflect the mood of lostness or nothingness of not only of the major characters but also of the whole generation of Hemingway's own time. These images and symbols make the characters feel the intensity of disaster, destruction, alienation and which leads them to evade the reality of their existence and to follow different avenues of 'escapism' or 'bad faith'.

References:

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