

Thirst For Identity in James Welch's *Winter in The Blood*: A Study of Rejection, Isolation and Segregation

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Abstract

Society gifts a person with myriad of identities, in different places a person has to put up different attire. He has to juggle with the multiplicity of pretentiousness where he loses his uniqueness. Everything changes when the attire is ripped, damaged, torn, ragged and finally converted to rags. A man then starts feeling miserable to see the original him. At certain spaces he feels rejected and tries to get alienated, which results in his isolation; that makes him believe that he is standing without identity. In the novel, *Winter in the blood*, we meet a thirty- two year old narrator who is nameless and is disheartened facing the societal challenges. He is rejected, isolated and segregated and has no corner to breathe a colorful life with shimmering sound. He thus, chooses a deep dark nook to breathe nihilism. The narrator is so much normal to the entire non normal situations that now he feels nothing for any situation or person. We can see his losses, his pain, and his struggle for survival when we catch all twenty- two situations where he adjures neither his love nor his fear. A sense of helplessness and the fear of being stalked by the shadow of white-men

traumatize him and drag him towards alienation and isolation. The present paper aims at analyzing the crisis of self identity in the novel, *Winter in the Blood*.

Keywords: Thirst for Identity, Rejection, Isolation, Traumatic Experiences, Existential Nihilism, Nihilism

Introduction:

In 1974, the founding author of Native American Renaissance, James Welch created a stir among the postmodern American novelists through his debut novel *Winter in the Blood* (Welch). Present novel by James Welch looks like a puzzled path but having linear dimension. While reading the novel *the merciless 'winter' trades with the flesh and bones of the readers, where the stream of 'blood' starts flowing, giving the evil scars, and the traumatic experiences are found in the form of clotted blood* (Sinha). The psychosocial conflicts in the chain of events bind the readers with the narrator and this binding gives the feeling of suffocation which the narrator finds no odd. Besides, the readers want to continue their journey with the narrator.

When the readers read the life history of James Welch, they find that Welch bears the blood of both Blackfeet Indian and Gros Ventre identity. His father, “*a welder, hospital administrator, and later rancher and farmer was a Blackfeet Indian. His mother, who trained as stenographer, was a member of Gros Ventre tribe*” (Anonymous). The question of identity is associated with Welch since he was born and his past hurt him like thorns in the path which has been inevitably traced in his first novel. It is also important that his previous anthology of poems *Riding the Earthboy 40* too was set in the same backdrop from where the writer got the inspiration for writing his fiction *Winter in the Blood*. As the novel opens, the readers meet an unnamed narrator who was a member of Blackfeet tribe, which

adds an autobiographical element to the novel. Welch sketches a gloomy picture of a hot summer noon when the narrator was returning back to the place where he lives, from the town after three days. This homecoming was paradoxically narrated as 'a torture'. He felt no pain, intoxicated by alcohol and stoned by heart. On his way he discovered the sight of:

the tall weeds of the borrow pit... sorrel mare, her colt beside her, walk through burnt grass to the shady side of log – and – mud cabin.... The roof that had fallen in and the mud between the logs fallen out in chunks, leaving a bare grey skeleton... (Welch)

On a whole, if the readers start examining the novel, he will find this same heart-wrenching situation faced by both the major and minor characters of the novel. By keeping the protagonist unnamed, Welch tries to set the theme of identity crisis which plays a dominant cause for traumatic experiences in his journey to realize the need of identity through existential nihilism.

Winter in the Blood is an intricate work of art. Without a stance emotion or sentiment, we can see Welch's achievement in writing a book about the native experience which he has experienced first handedly. Myth and oral history of native tragedies can be seen bleeding through every page of the book. The narrator which we readers meet is a visitor, who can be labeled as a loser, can neither adjure his love nor his fear. Whenever he roamed around the town, he developed a sense of helplessness of being stalked by the shadow of White men just like his father. The only difference we find between father and son was, the narrator wants to fight back, though failure paved his way many a times but he never stopped. Through the

stories which the narrator reads again and again in the movie magazines reveals his insights. The story of three men in Africa, out of the one the narrator was obsessed with. By reading this he used to identify himself with the situation where the attacking man-eating lion was killed by Enright who wasn't in the picture with the group of grinning black men. This shows that one does the work and other gets acclaim in the society. But this was not the thing which engulfed the narrator. In this whole picture he was penetrating that the Blackfeet were originally brave, they, if got together can wash out these White people just like they killed the lion. But still why not all of them were coming together? His search advanced the growth of his ability in each chapter of the novel. His disturbing nightmares went on and stories melted into incomprehensible vision of chaos. Everything merged into bizarre and terrifying reality but still he didn't stop and kept on chasing the answers for his questions. Throughout his journey, the narrator was in a quest to put to rest his grievous sense of 'distance'; a distance from himself, from his Blackfeet tribe and its culture and also from his homeland. Readers meet the narrator when he is thirty-two, the age where he tries to bridge the gap and comes home; personally, culturally, and geographically. Among American-Indians, the decolonization of society and communities besides that of individuals often intricate a process of repossession, a conscious act of claiming back the knowledge of tribes. When one evaluates him, it is evident that one's experiences, interactions, and ancestry factor remains into the identity of every person. Throughout the course of *Winter in the Blood*, the narrator comes in terms with his identity in each of these ways and at the end becomes a better version of himself .

This book is basically a metaphor of narrator's journey. A good portion of the novel was devoted by the narrator while fulfilling the quench for the thirst of his own identity. He was lost in the chaos and was not finding a way out of it towards the motive of his life or self

realization. This lack of self-knowledge made him remain unnamed throughout. The narrator who is also the protagonist of this novel was indeed greatly influenced by his relinquished experiences, and his perception towards impure tribal self. This results in his sense of paralyzed distance from his abode, his kinfolk, and his living. He goes as far as to declare that:

Coming home was not easy anymore. It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture. My throat ached, my bad knee ached and my head ached in the even heat...Everything had gone out of me, and I felt the kind of peace that comes over one when he is alone... (Welch)

In this place the narrator directly spoke the feelings; maybe he must be describing his own doom. He was in rigorous search of something which he himself failed to understand i.e. the search for his 'own self'. At the same time he had also a feeling of 'nothingness' which hammered him when he was in conscious state of mind. He was actually in a state where he continued both to net the fish and to believe that the river was barren. He was clueless about the numbness he felt, but it was indeed there, building bridges between him and those around him. *It was not just the end; the distance became more crippling... the narrator who was scratching his psychological scars... inability to interact unhesitatingly with his environment, as in Camus' book The Stranger, Meursault... during the counter attack... the lawyers who accused him for the murder of an Arab as well as for the death of his mother* (Sinha). The narrator however knew that all this came, not from his own land or his people; but from within himself. He makes the analogy: *"I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon"* (Welch). He explained why he had no feelings neither love nor hatred towards his mother, his grandmother or his Cree girlfriend. He even felt no sense of emotion when his girlfriend left with his electric razor and his father's gun. He

states: *“The gun, had once been important to me. Like my father before me, I had killed plenty of deer with it, but I hadn’t used it since... four years ago”* (Welch). In the epilogue too, it was evident that he still wasn’t connecting fully, though he was trying. When Lame Bull gave eulogy to Teresa, she got overwhelmed and tears started rolling down her cheeks. Narrator was neither paying much attention to the blossoming love affair of Teresa and Lame Bull nor he was thinking about his beloved but subconsciously he was craving about the lost possession i.e. his razor and his father’s gun. This situation was like a paradox perfectly combining the sense of perseverance and of doom that characterize him. Parting by dominating mood of detachment, rejection and isolation the narrator was just benefited for one moment; when he felt more united with himself, his own emotions and his own world and it all happened when Yellow Calf narrated his own story, which obliquely gave the narrator a hint that Yellow Calf must be his real grandfather.

It is known that the whole community of Natives had thirst for identity. In the history of America, there was nothing to compare with the violence and torture inflicted on the Native Americans. Not only mentally they were harassed, but also physically they were harmed. Being Indians, they suffered from racism, being female, the women proved to be the victims of sexual atrocities at the hands not only by White masters but also by their fellow men. The Whites got troubled that, if the Indians gained political power then they would rebel, so they tried to keep them marginalized using racial discrimination as a defense guard. By doing so, the Whites tried to manipulate their lives and minds. The White settlers treated the orientals as the cattle or worse even than that. They tried to create horror amongst those who started to oppose or restrict their norms and demands. Natives were beaten to death, or burnt alive, they were hung by being nailed to the wall or their ears were cut

off and fed to them. They kept the American-Indian unsettled because they would start thinking for their independence. They drove them towards life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insult, injustice, humiliation and atrocities as well as of dissatisfaction. The only possible thing accessible to them affluently was their wretchedness which was blended with each drop of their blood that they fail to recall their own existence and could barely dream of emancipation; like we see in Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood*, where Marlene proves to be a best example, who was doubly marginalized, on one hand by the Occident and other by the males of her own Native tribe. She was slapped by the narrator just after their coupling because here the narrator wanted to satisfy his male ego. This can be noticed in the following lines said by the narrator:

I was staring at the snubbing woman with the same lack of emotion, the same curiosity, as though I were watching a bug floating motionless down an irrigation ditch, not yet dead but having decided upon death... (Welch)

In the journey of Existential Nihilism the writer portrays that the narrator of the story used to travel without any direction but as soon as he gets conscious he finds himself in the chaos of his lost identity, jumbled up with everything he does. The search of something which all of the characters did not understand was just aggravating their minds, for the search of that, which was there but they are not realizing that, it is within them. The only people who did not suffer here were the pure White men. As we analyze the novel through the glasses of a critic, it becomes obvious that the narrator strives hard with those things that agents his subconscious niveau to mould his own identity; which further allows him to peep in his own self and see the hollowness which he himself has created. The winner of a Pulitzer

Prize for criticism, Margo Jefferson in Newsweek comments on the first reading of this novel that:

...as we read through *Winter in the Blood* for the first time, we are tempted to read the narrator's problems as rooted in actual experiences too painful to retell. In this light Welch's novel becomes, then, a book about a man trying to survive the particular deaths of his father and brother. As it foregrounds these deaths as the thing readers need to be made to feel... (Jefferson)

From this we can comprehend that the novel *Winter in the Blood* is a summation of painful experiences of a hurtful heart and mind through the lenses of narrator, who is looking for an identity which failed to place him in society that never sensed to discriminate any scalp of wretched land of the earth.

Conclusion:

The existentialists are of the opinion that man is tossed in an indifferent cosmos where he is compelled to discover the meaning of his existence. There is no pre-defined model whereof human life can be alienated in order to make his life experiences perfect. Existentialists believed that every individual has the liberty to choose as well as to act according to his self sufficiency. A man himself is in charge for his actions and the choice he sets later regulates his life. The novel *Winter in the Blood* highlights all the aspects of the Existential Nihilism through the portrayal of unnamed narrator, his crisis in search for identity, rejection from society and self, isolation and segregation which leads to the traumatic experiences. In the novel, the unnamed narrator is an embodiment of a man, who has been holding back but exploring and is in a constant quest to make sense out of his life. In

the process to encompass the reason of his 'being', he keeps debating with loneliness, desolation and unproductiveness.

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