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John Osborne's Play Luther: A New Discourse in Existentialism

Abstract: This paper aims at exploring the presence of existentialist contents in the play Luther (1961) written by eminent litterateur John Osborne. The play focuses on Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century monk who publicly spoke out against age-old practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church thus become one of the foremost instigators of the Protestant Reformation. The drama has a historical setting and a timeless theme. The present paper explores the basic concepts of existentialism, its emergence and how it has dominated various literary works over the years. The paper then makes an in-depth analysis of Luther to understand the various literary techniques employed by the author to express his existentialist

theme in the work. It has been found that among the most essential techniques that the author has used include settings, thematic concern, various symbols and motifs and dialogues.

Keywords: Existentialism, John Osborne, Luther

Introduction

John Osborne (1929-1994) was a 20th Century litterateur who is known for his existentialist theory. The distinctiveness of his literary creations was that they rebelled against the established social and political stance of the society. Majority of his works projected the British middle class values. He is the first English writer who analyzed the stance of the British during the post imperial age. Some of the finest creations of Osborne include *Look Back in Anger*(1956), *Epitaph for George Dillon*(1958), *The Blood of the Bamberg's* (1962), *The Father*(1989), *A Better Class of People*(1981), *Luther* (1961)and *Very Like a Whale* (1980) to name some . Luther was the second of the historical plays that the litterateur wrote so far. The style and structure of this play is said to have taken its shape from the play *The Life of Galileo* (1938) by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The central theme of the play is that it explores the conflict between scientific truth and religious authority. Since it is a historic play, Osborne centered upon Martin Luther as the namesake of the literary creation. Set in the backdrop of Germany, the play unfolds several incidents in the life of Luther. Thus, the play gives a vivid narration of the transformation of Luther from a religious reformer of protestant reformation to the founding of the Lutheran faith under his guidance to his return to his hometown Eremite Cloister to reunite with his family forty five years after he joined Augustinian monastery in opposition to his father.

Discussion

About existentialism and its presence in works of literature over the years

Existentialism is the first French literary movement that had considerable influence on the-then literary creations and well as others of the coming years. It is a term that is connected to intellectual history and thus expresses historical convenience to some extent. (Crowell, "Existentialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017), It is basically a tradition of philosophical inquiry which is primarily connected with the 19th and 20th century European philosophers who despite differences in their philosophical doctrines had the same idea that philosophical thinking does not initiate with thinking subjects but human subjects like acting and feeling. The concept of existentialism was first introduced by the Danish philosopher and litterateur Soren Kierkegaard even though the philosophy was not exactly termed as existentialism by him. The concept gained popularity in the post World War II phase and was explicitly adopted as a means of self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre. By 1940s to 1950s, existentialism became a part of the cultural movement that flourished in Europe during that time. From this time onwards, the philosophers who were identified as existentialists were Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber in Germany, Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel in France, the Spaniards José Ortega Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, and the Russians Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov .

The root to existentialism could be traced to the time of Socrates around (469-399B.C) when he questioned human existence through his works. Even though the presence of exact contents of existentialism could not be found in the works of Socrates, the works of his disciple contained many existentialist elements. In the period initiated by Kierkegaard, existentialist elements were found in his works like *Fear and Trembling*(1843), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1846). Similarly, the works of the 19th Century German philosopher Nietzsche also presented existentialist elements through

writings like *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *The Gay Science* and *Übermensch*, a concept in his book thus spoke Zarathustra (1883). From the time of Jean-Paul Sartre onwards existentialist elements were found in varying degrees in the works of different litterateurs of the 20th Century. Among the celebrated works of Sartre that are rich in existentialist elements are *Nausea* (1938), *No Exit* (1944), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and so on. Similarly the theatrical works of Samuel Beckett during that time like *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1953), *That Time* (1975), *Waiting for Godot* (1952), and so on. Other noteworthy existentialists and their works of in differed periods of 20th Century include *Fight Club* (1996) by Palahniuk, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969), and *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1983) by Charles Bukowski, *The Stranger* (1942), *The Possessed* (1959), *The Misunderstandings* (1944) by Albert Camus, *Being and Time* (1927), *Dasein*, and *On the Essence of Truth* (1930) by Martin Heidegger, *Das Urteil* (1912), *Der Heizer* (1913) and *Die Aeroplane in Brescia* (1909) by Kafka, and *Walking* (1812), *Night and Moonlight* (1863), *Letters to Various Persons* (1865) and *Excursions* (1863) by Henry David Thoreau and *Look Back in Anger* (1956), *A Patriot For Me* (1966), *Inadmissible Evidence* (1965), and other works of John Osborne.

Depiction of existentialism in “Luther”

The presence of existentialist elements in Luther has been estimated by different scholars from different points of view. According to Gilliard, Luther is one of those literary creations of Osborne in which the litterateur takes the milieu of history in order to reinforce his thematic view. While the play solely focuses upon inner crisis of Luther, Osborne also presents his protagonist as an ordinary man of flesh and blood who is in spiritual crisis. Thus, the essence of this work of Osborne is that the focus of this drama is not upon Luther as a legendary public figure Luther, but as a private man named Luther with all his humanistic traits like hopes and fears, desires and guilt, and all the doubts that beset him and thrust him into history. The

scholar makes further analysis of the structure of *Luther* in order to explore its existentialist elements. In so doing, the scholar finds that Osborne has structured this drama in the form of an epic. Moreover, the setting that has been used presents clear influence of Brecht's theatrical setting and thus feature Durer-like backdrop, use of significant color like Tetele's Red Cross, implementation of music in order to undermine emotions in portions where readers could find mass chanting during Luther's epileptic seizure and shattering of the unities. In addition to this, the use of antithetical structure by Osborne in the drama is also quite evident, which has been done so in order to present the psychological reality of this central character. Again, the scholar further suggests that on apparent reading of the drama it will appear that the incidents in the life of Luther are fragmented and do not appear in a chronological manner. But it has been done deliberately by Osborne in order to create some kind of unity of these incidents in the deeper level so they are able to narrate the inner spiritual crisis of the protagonist, and live up to the expectations of existentialist principles in the process. Lee remarks that Osborne has incorporated existentialist elements in *Luther* by means of its thematic concern, which is, confrontation of personal and historical ironies of life. Thus, the theme of this drama retains the essence of existentialism by means of putting emphasize upon the incongruity between the personal self image and historical image of Luther. In so doing, Osborne presents the legendary figure Luther as a man who seeks transcendence during a time when the uncertain world does not attend to the individual or spiritual needs of the man. The scholar further suggests that in order to express the existentialist theme, Osborne has used the concept of dialectical material by presenting that the public face or the historical image of Luther tends to conceal the spiritual essence within him. Lee further asserts that Osborne has used many literary techniques in *Luther* in order to depict his existentialist theme. One such technique is noticeable in the nature of dialogues that Osborne has used throughout the play. For instance, in Act I where the

ordinary human being Luther is found to have realized his sins but the legendary Luther abstains him from confessing as the monks generally do. In such a sequence, Osborne writes...

they all prostrate themselves...MARTIN...prostates himself downstage behind the rest

(Osborne, pp.19; Cited by Lee)

Moreover, while all the monks confess jointly as a community because they are ordinary human beings who can relate to each other, Luther finds him all alone due to his status quo. Thus, when he laments for his sins, it expresses his loneliness as he says,

I am alone. I am alone and against myself (Osborne, pp.20; Cited by Lee)

However, Osborne also projects here that Luther is aware of power within his community that has awarded him the elevated status, which he feels that he will obviously lose when he goes outside it, thereby making him vulnerable to common human vices. Hence, Luther remarks,

...I am a worm and no man, a byword and a laughing stock ... I was fighting a bear in a garden without flowers, leading into a desert. His claws kept making my arms bleed as I tried to open a gate which would take me out. But the gate was no gate at all. It was simply an open frame, and I could have walked through it, but I was covered in my own blood, and I saw a naked woman riding on a goat, and the goat began to drink my blood, and I thought I should faint with the pain...if I were all bone, I could brandish myself with without terror, without any terror at all – I could be indestructible (Osborne;pp.19-21; Cited by Lee).

According to Gale, while Osborne used thematic technique in the play is order highlight his existentialist theme of loss of faith of the protagonist on Church due to some newfound found status and revival of faith again after self realization. However, the scholar additionally

suggests that Osborne has used dialogues as his primal machinery to establish this theme well. Thus, as the play opens readers could feel how Martin Luther gradually loses his faith for God and the church as the effect of strong influence of Protestant Reformation that swept Europe in 1500s. Thus, through the mouthpiece of Luther Osborne writes,

“I listed for God’s voice, but all I could hear was my own (Osborne; Gale)

The existentialist theme of self realization has been remarkable narrated by Osborne towards the end of the play when readers could find Luther regaining back his faith towards God and religion and surrendering to the almighty by remarking,

For there is no power but of God, the power that be are ordained of God. Whoever therefore resisteth that power, resisteth the ordinance of God (Osborne; Gale)

Criticism of the issue

The essay highlights that John Osborne was one of the pioneering existentialists of 20th Century and his works clearly depicted existentialist contents. The literary work of Osborne under discussion elucidates that he has attempted to present the spiritual realization of Martin Luther and presented the inner crises that the protagonist faced due to conflicting faiths, ideologies and realizations of sins of legendary public figure Luther and an ordinary man Luther. While thematic concern is the chief literary weapon that Osborne has used for presenting his existentialist theme in the play, the use of symbols and motifs for highlighting the principles of existentialism are equally evident. The mastery of the author also lies in the manner in which dialogues have been used throughout the play to focus on this inner conflict of Luther, loss of faith due to gaining of power status and revival of faith again after self realization of the futility of materialistic gains. Goldstone makes critical estimation of Osborne’s Luther and suggests that the most remarkable feature that the playwright used here for expressing his theme is

characterization where readers could find how the leader Luther makes attempts both privately and publicly to cope up with the self realization of his inner turmoil as an ordinary man. Worth further suggests that introduction of Luther as a hero of existentialist qualities who is seen engaged in inner conflicts with his intellectual inner world and materialistic outer world marks a new beginning in Osborne's dramatic art.

Conclusion of the study

This study attempted to explore how the play of John Osborne, named Luther sets a new discourse in existentialism. While the study establishes that the core existentialist theme of this play is the conflict between the spiritual inner world and materialistic outer world of a man, it can be said with conviction that the play sets a new discourse in the genre of existentialist works by choosing a historical character as the protagonist. Thus, it is found that it lives up to its expectations by presenting the various courses in the life of Martin Luther with primary focuses on the development of spiritual might of a legendary public figure.

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