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An Existential Appraisal of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, first published in 1929, is a seminal work of the 20th century literature that blends romance, war and existential introspection. Set during World War I, the novel follows the story of Fredric Henry, an American ambulance driver in the Italian army, and his passionate but ultimately tragic relationship with Catherine Barkley, a British nurse. Drawing on Hemingway's own experiences as a Red Cross volunteer during the war, the novel captures the brutal realities of combat and the emotional desolation it brings. The novel explores the theme of love and loss, the futility of war and the search for meaning in a chaotic and indifferent world. The novel is often regarded as one of Hemingway's finest works and a powerful reflection of the disillusionment that defined the lost generation. An existential analysis of *A Farewell to Arms* is another possible way to explore this remarkable text.

Keywords: Existence, Essence, Authentic Decision, Real Situations.

Ernest Hemingway was an American novelist, short story writer and journalist, widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. His major works include *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *The Old Man and The Sea* (1952), the last of which earned him the Pulitzer Prize and in the year 1954, he was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature. Published in 1929, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms* has attracted the attention of various critics. Sheridan Baker explicates it as "the long rumble of disintegrating Christian and social faith



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that reached a crescendo in the World War I" (Baker, 73). Ramesh Srivastva remarks, "*A Farewell to Arms* is a more accomplished novel ...it has a fuller expression of his vision of the world, a more sophisticated assimilation of ideas ..." (Srivastava 14) D.S. Savage observes, "*A Farewell To Arms* impresses one with its surprisingly genuine and unforced quality. It is naïve rather than cynical, bewildered rather than 'tough' and there is a minimum of deliberate sensational violence" (Savage 99). Earl Rovit manifestly affirms, "*A Farewell To Arms* is beautifully ambiguous in two realms: The farewell to war in the separate peace, the farewell to the beloved in death" (Rovit 40).

Now the question arises regarding the validity of this research article and there are significant reasons behind this attempt. One is that not much work has been done on it from the perspective of Existentialism. Secondly, it also aims at interpreting the ideological voices. Though *A Farewell To Arms* is not an existential treatise but its main structural tenets like freedom, choice, responsibility, despair, existential guilt, alienation and finitude exude an existentialistic flavour. For a better understanding of *A Farewell To Arms* in an existentialism content, it is worthwhile to draw the broad parameters of existentialism. Sonal K. Amin remarks, "Existentialism is a philosophy of man as a living individual, the individual that breathes and thinks that has the awful freedom of moral choice that longs for salvation and faces despair, the individual that lives in anxiety and dies" (Amin 40). It is the philosophy of concrete human existence. Existentialism means will, passion and completeness. It is nonetheless unified by a central concern with the ultimate challenge of human existence. Woven around the quest for authentic values and the negation of social conformism, the existentialists generally stress the evolution of the existential insights of a person. Broadly speaking, there are three schools of thought among them. There is atheistic strand, theistic strand and the interpersonal strand among them. The existentialists like Nietzsche and Sartre are atheists and confer the burden of existentialistic choices and responsibilities on human beings. Whereas Nietzsche is obsessed with the advent of superman, Sartre is basically concerned with the question of authentic freedom and choices. Sartre endows the burden of freedom and responsibility on man. Human beings are condemned to be free as they live in a concrete world and therefore, they have to take authentic decisions in authentic situations. There is no place for imagination and to exist means to live in this real world. Human beings are responsible for themselves and for others. Actually man does not want to face the real existential situations but at the same time, man is not concerned with something abstract. He is concerned with the realities and actualities of life. Man must accept his human conditions of moral existence. He must choose and through his choices he has to discover himself and



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take full responsibility of his life. Human beings are thrown into this world and they have to take authentic decision and act according to real situations. Sartre opines that man keeps on changing because he is not static and he is always in a state of evolution or regression. Basically, existentialism is the philosophy of action, it is the philosophy of life and it is the philosophy of attitude towards life. Whereas Atheistic Existentialists proclaim the death of God, the theological existentialists like Kierkegaard, and Tilich seek a resolution of existential dilemmas in the affirmation of God. According to existentialism, what will happen tomorrow is not the question. Human beings are concerned only with the present and they have to accept this world as a real world.

Now the question arises, to which form of existentialism does Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms* belong? Can we categorize it in a theistic mode or in an atheistic mode? Or can we note its overwhelming orientation to existential dialogue? To place it in any of these modes would be a reductive effort. This rich novel cannot be categorized in a single category. The detailed analysis of the novel shows that it is suffused with the existential temper.

The protagonist of the novel, Frederick Henry, supports the atheistic existentialists like Sartre and Camus who believe that there is no God. So man is entirely abandoned to fixing his own norms and determining his values what he will become. He believes in himself and finds himself responsible for all that happened in his life. In his conversation with the priest, he accepts "I am afraid of him in the night sometimes and I don't love much" (69). He denies to have faith and love on God. Throughout the novel he does not believe God but in the end when Catherine was dying with labour pains he got upset and prayed "Dear God, don't let her die, please, please, please don't let her die ... I'll do anything you say if you don't let her die" (285). Thus in the end we find a weak theistic strand in him.

Catherine Barkley, on the other hand, belongs to theistic group and has firm faith in God. When Henry was leaving for war, she gave him Saint Anthony with affirmed faith in His power and tells him, "... a saint Anthony is very useful" (43). The priest also belongs to the same group. He loves to live and serve God. He explains "I would be too happy if I could live there and love God and serve Him" (68). Henry and Catherine, throughout the novel enjoy "I - You" relation. Both of them value, respect and love each other. Earlier Henry was not serious towards her and Catherine was also doubtful for his love but later on Henry proved his love by taking care of Catherine in every way. Catherine also dedicates herself fully to him and exclaims with emotions.

Awareness and consciousness are the pre-requisites for a man to understand his existence. He has to be aware of himself and his infirmities too and also of his surroundings.



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Sheridan Baker comments, "Man as a bearer of this consciousness occupies a central place in reality" (Baker 73). Consciousness is purposive or intentional and Henry is aware of his weakness. Rinaldi motivates him to tell others the heroic tales of his injury so that he can get a silver medal but he denies "No, I was blown up while we were eating cheese. I didn't carry anybody, I couldn't move" (61). Catherine is also conscious of the love game played by Henry in the beginning and asserts "And you play it as well as you know now. But it's a rotten game" (33). Later when she tells Henry about her pregnancy, she predicts his inner feelings and asks him "And you don't feel trapped" (144), may be a little he answered.

All the existentialists, whether atheistic or theistic, agree with the viewpoint of Jean Paul Sartre, "Existence precedes Essence" (Sartre 29). Existence is not what a man has or possess. It is what he is. Whereas essence is definable in a thing. It can be individual or universal. So, man should fix some norms because it is the philosophy of concrete human existence. The fact which Sartre emphasizes is that first and foremost man simply is and that later on he makes himself what he wills. Sartre also opines that man is caught in the web of fantasies but he has to follow some norms, only then he can follow the path of progress otherwise man is bound to face the feeling of existential guilt. So man must be aware about his existence. Frederick Henry proves to be a man of action, an officer who can take decisions instantly, without any hesitation. The observation of Ray B. West is quite relevant in this context, "Henry has been thrust into a world of violent action in which choice is eventually to become necessary" (West 20). During the retreat, he decides that staying in line is both dangerous and futile so he decides to find some roads across the country by which he may reach his destination. He is equally decisive when two sergeants refuse to help him. When they start running off, he has no hesitation in shooting at them for behaving like deserters. Only a short time later he finds himself in a similar predicament in danger of being shot as a deserter. He takes an equally quick decision, pushing aside two soldiers and running away from there. After reaching safely, he decides to make his pace and to break his bonds with Italian army. Yet another episode displaying his innate courage as well as decisiveness occurs when he is living at Stressa with Catherine. The waiter of the hotel comes to inform him of the possibility of his being arrested by some Italian soldiers on the charge of desertion. He takes a decision immediately and escapes by boat to Switzerland under cover of darkness.

Even in the matter of love, Henry proves to be a decisive man. Although initially he was disinclined to become seriously involved with any woman, he devotes himself completely to Catherine once he really does fall in love with her. It is this love which impairs some semblance of meaning and purpose to his existence. Thus we find that Henry took all his



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decisions on his own whether authentic or inauthentic but he tries to give a meaning to his life and his character through his decisions. Similarly Catherine also behaved as a master of decision making. She also made quick decisions. In the beginning she was aware of the love game played by Henry but still decided to continue with him. Later on she maintained physical relations with him before marriage but It was again her own decision. Then she decided to postpone her marriage even after being aware of her pregnancy. She declines Henry's offer of marriage immediately after the revelation of her pregnancy because if she marries Henry, the British army rules will insist on her being sent back home, thus implying a separation she is not willing to bear. She again refuses to marry Henry in an advanced stage of pregnancy. Her friend Ferguson also insisted her "why don't you get married" (214). But still it was her firm decision and in this way she also shaped her essence through her decisions.

The remarks of John Macquarie are significant, "Freedom, decision and responsibility are prominent in all the existent philosophers. These matters constitute the case of personal being ... It is through free responsible decisions that man becomes authentically himself" (Macquarie 16). Freedom is not as alluring as it seems to be because it brings the problem of decision making and then responsibility. Karl Jaspers agrees "It is only because I am free to take decisions that I am responsible for my actions" (Jaspers 130). Responsibility is our word for a man's readiness to take the guilt upon himself. Fredrick Henry in *A Farewell To Arms* realizes his responsibility. He is aware of the fact that he himself is responsible for his decisions. He decided to desert the army under unfavourable conditions thus he never blamed anyone and he also fulfilled his responsibility towards Catherine when he came to know about her pregnancy. He proposed to marry her but she refused. Thus he performed his duties very well. Catherine is also aware of her responsibility towards him and she never blames him for anything. She finds herself responsible for all her decisions and never regrets. In fact at the time of labour pains, she behaved in a courageous manner and assures Henry "I'm not going to die now, darling. I'm past where I was going to die. Aren't you glad" (274)?

Another group of recurring existentialist themes include topics such as despair, existential guilt, alienation, death and finitude. Despair is our human lot, a dead end. Henry also faces the problem of existential guilt and despair. He decides to desert army, though forcibly, but he is depressed later and repents. Thus he starts avoiding the discussion on war with anyone "I did not want to read about the war. I was going to forget the war" (210). In this act of negation of war he feels "I had the feeling of a boy who thinks of what is happening at a certain hour at the school house from which he has played truant" (212). When Catherine was suffering from labour pains, Henry again got depressed and the major cause of his



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existential guilt was the death of Catherine because she was the only treasure he had and that was also snatched from him. Maxwell Geismar explains the root cause of his guilt as "Following his personal objectives he abandons his friends, his responsibilities as an officer, the entire complex of organized social life represented as an officer, the entire complex of organized social life represented by the army and the war" (Gesimar, 115) and then lost Catherine also.

Catherine also got depressed when she was broken with labour pains and found herself near death. She was excited for her child and assumed it an easy process but later on she exclaimed with despair "I'm not brave any more, darling, I'm all broken" (278). Rinaldi, Henry's best friend and a surgeon by profession also suffers from depression due to over work and he told Henry that he worked like a machine day and night and got tired. Later it was recognized that he was suffering from the problem of syphilis. Thus he was sunk into the depths of despair as a result of war.

Loneliness and alienation are the concrete truths which cannot be denied. Henry was left all alone in this world. Firstly he got away from his friends because of his desertion. He missed them and realized "well, I would never see him now. I would never see anyone of them now. That life is over" (204). Thus alienated from his friends he found support in the love of Catherine. He told her "My life used to be full of everything. Now if you are not with me, I haven't a thing in the world" (222). But destiny played a cruel trick against him and Catherine died due to labour pain and Henry was left with nothing in the end. Theme of finitude and death is also highlighted by the sudden and uncertain death of Catherine. It devoids Henry of everything he had. D. S. Savage observes, "When the sense of life itself vanishes, there is only one way in which it may be recaptured and that is by the violent, absolute contrast of life and death" (Savage 95).

Though all such tragic things happen in Henry's life still he decided to live and not to surrender himself. This proves him to be a strong existential hero. John Killinger focalizes, "Henry who walks off into the rainy night at the end of *A Farewell To Arms* is like the Orestes who exists with the furies in moorlands, he is alone tormented, but very much alive in an existential sense" (Killinger 104). He can also be compared to Sisyphus, a character in a myth by Camus. As he was punished by God to take the stone on the top and it fell down again and again but he kept on doing it. Albert Camus explains, "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious"(Camus 45). Thus Henry equals Sisyphus because after the death of Catherine, he realized the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, still decides to



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continue with this absurd life and hopes to give it a meaning again. Camus supports that one always finds one's burden again and in this sense Henry is an existential hero.

Conclusively, we can say with confidence that whether a person is living in London or Berlin, in America or Italy, one should realize his responsibility and should be ready to make decisions and then use his freedom in the most fruitful way. Human beings live in a real and concrete world where there is no place for imagination and fanciful ideas. It is the sole duty and responsibility of man that he should take authentic decisions in authentic situations. One should lead an authentic life and respond to concrete situations in a responsive manner. Basically, man does not want to face the real existential situations but the fact is, man is not concerned with something abstract. He is concerned with the realities and actualities of life and he must accept the human conditions of moral existence. Human beings are thrown into this world and they have to take authentic decision and act according to real situations. What makes the protagonist's insights all the more illuminating is their transmission to us in an authentic manner by Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell To Arms*.

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