JEAN-PAUL SARTRE’S “THE WALL”: A STUDY OF “BEING” AND “DEATH”

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Abstract—The objective of this paper titled “Jean-Paul Sartre’s “The Wall”: A Study of “being” and “death” is to understand Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the “being” through a study of the relationship between the ideas of “being” and “death” in his short story “The Wall”. Sartre, an existentialist philosopher and writer has extensively discoursed on the subject of “being” in his philosophical and literary works such as “Being and Nothingness”, “Existentialism Is a Humanism”, “The Wall”, “No Exit”, “The Flies” and such others. This paper is primarily concerned with the study of the ideas of being and death in Pablo, the protagonist of “The Wall”. Some of Sartre’s major existential concepts such as, “existence precedes essence”, “being-for-itself” and “bad faith” are portrayed through the character of Pablo. Contemplation on Sartre’s “being” is also a meditation on his concept of death. Death is not physical death per se, but death of fixed ideas and concepts. Thus, an exploration into the concept of death paves the way for a study of the idea of the “being”. In this paper, terms such as “being”, “self”, “person” and “personhood” are used interchangeably as they refer to ideas akin to the concept of “personhood”.

Index Terms—Being, Existence, Self, Death, Nothingness, Being-for-itself, Essence, Bad Faith.

I. INTRODUCTION

“I took everything as seriously as if I were immortal.” Pablo in Sartre's “The Wall” is a portrayal of a person who is grappling hard to come into terms with the agony and the anguish of the reality of existence. 20th century western philosophy is a story of the struggles of understanding the idea of existence and its crudest reality – death. It was during this period that the concept of death was studied and approached from various directions to understand existence and the “self”. Sartre in his work “Existentialism Is a Humanism” formulated the key existential ideology, that is, “existence precedes essence” and meditated on the idea of existence, the self and death through his various philosophical and literary works. “The Wall”, set in the background of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) portrays the predicament of three war prisoners staring back at life while awaiting their death.

Death is perhaps the most striking event in one’s life; although it is true that one may never comprehend physical death in its full force, but the thought of death always intrigued human beings. “Death” presents itself as an idea that underlines the end of every possible presence or existence. The concept of death has been dealt by philosophers since time immemorial. The subject of death was initially approached from the perspective of mind-body dualism until the late 19th century when the discourse on death begun to be undertaken from the vantage point of existence, belief, faith, values and hope. Death was no more the mere death of the body and the release of the soul but death was philosophized as the end of one's faith, hope, belief and values. Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism meditated on the subject of death by engaging in the meaning of existence. Later, in the form of Nietzsche’s “God is dead”, Heidegger's “being-towards-death”, Marcel’s “death of man” and Sartre's “being in itself” and “being for itself”, one can see a development of a kind of discourse into the subject of death which is keenly related to the discourse of the “self” or “personhood”. The objective of this paper is to look into a relation between the concept of death and personhood through Jean Paul Sartre's short story “The Wall”. As mentioned above, the discourse of death can be approached from various perspectives; but it was essentially the existential school of thought which approached the idea of death from the perspective of existence and the nature of the self. The self therefore, is that “being” or that “person” which is in a “continuous flux”. In its lifetime it creates ideas and concepts, confronts those, destroys some, pursues some and perhaps re-invents some; amidst this ceaseless process of creation, persuasion, destruction and reinvention, the self creates a concept of itself which it calls as the “being”. This concept of the being is internalized through the various other ideas that constitute to formulate the being, and death is one such concept that constitutes the inherent idea of the being. Death is not physical death per se but death (in this context) is the end or loss of any aspect or idea that creates the self or the being and the self is in a process of continuous flux because of the aspects that leads to the creation and death of concepts, values and ideas that builds up the entity of the being. As mentioned before, this paper aims to look into the concept of the being and death from the perspective of the relationship shared between them. It has been pointed out that Sartre’s existential orientation is influenced by Nietzsche’s thoughts on the self, death and existence. Sartre too, like Nietzsche (and unlike Kierkegaard) did not believe in grounding meaning objectively in the universe. For him, meaning was
found in human freedom and death was certainly not an obstacle to one's realization of freedom. This thought for certain found reflection in Sartre's fictional character Pablo (in this context), for Pablo although staring at death was never shown bogged down by it; rather Pablo was contemplative of his very "being" and the ideas that defined his existence and created his "being".

II. SARTRE'S "BEING-FOR-ITSELF"

In "Being and Nothingness" Sartre has described two categories of beings - "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself"; the former is concrete, unconscious of itself and is unable to change whereas the latter is conscious of itself but incomplete. This second denomination of being, that is, the "being-for-itself" which is undefined and incomplete in nature is what a person is. A person as a "being-for-itself" creates itself from nothingness. Thus, a person who is the "being-for-itself" certainly does not possess a predetermined essence like a rock or a table. Sartre's "being-for-itself" derives meaning by acting upon the perennial unknown future and thus, creates itself as a being which is not something as one might describe at a certain point of time. Therefore, this being is at a "continuous flux".

Pablo Ibbieta, the protagonist in "The Wall" is a being who is thrown at the face of an unknown future and entity called death. It is at this time that the readers meet Pablo who is incomplete, undefined, born out of nothingness and is going towards nothingness; but it is this nothingness which is also nourishing his "personhood" as he is trying to meditate upon the meaning of his existence. Death thus, is not a mere physical death that Sartre is describing through Pablo, but he is portraying the collapse of Pablo's ideas about the very nature and essence of existence, time, and relationship with the other and oneself at the face of physical death. In "The Wall", death is as much as physical as it is metaphorical. But it is the metaphorical concept of death that dominates Sartre's discursive involvement with the subject of existence.

III. THEMES IN "THE WALL"

"...he wasn't interested in what we thought; he came to watch our bodies, bodies dying in agony while yet alive.”

Agony is an essential theme in Sartre's "The Wall". The story begins with the scene of three people awaiting their death sentence and the agony that they go through before the sentence is carried out. However, the agony of an impending death makes Pablo confront the fact that how the sense of death changes one's attitude towards one's relations, memories and desires. Pablo says:

"At that moment I felt that I had my whole life in front of me and I thought, 'it's a damned lie.' It was worth nothing because it was finished. I wondered how I'd been able to walk, to laugh with the girls; I wouldn't have moved so much as my little finger if I had only imagined I would die like this...there were so many things I could have missed, the taste of manzanilla or the baths I took in summer in a little creek near Cadiz; but death had disenchanted everything:"

Pablo experiences sensations such as cold, warmth, hunger, bright light, somber faces, fear and agony even when he stands very close to facing death. Thus, the thought of death does not restrict his sensations, rather it enhances them. Existence and its nature are best realized by Pablo at a time when he is on the verge of his physical demise. Such sensations open up avenues for new insights contributing to the evolution of the being; his personhood is therefore, not crippled by death, rather the self is being nourished by it.

One of the central themes of Sartre's existentialism is "bad faith" where people fall into self-deception. This concept of "bad faith" is categorized by Sartre as (1) denying one's freedom, and (2) identifying oneself completely with one's freedom. Pablo too suffers from "bad faith" and realizes them when life stands at striking contrast to his impending death sentence. There are many times during the course of the narrative when Pablo has been confessing thoughts which displayed the existence of "bad faith" and its subsequent realization:

"I took everything as seriously as if I were immortal."

Pablo (perhaps unknowingly) tried to render a fixed and unchangeable essence to his existence where thoughts about the reality of mortality barely appeared. He conveniently adjusted himself into the roles of a man who possessed desires of love, lust, happiness, glory, freedom and justice. He identified himself with these emotional states and his socio-political role ignoring the fact that "...it's really true that everything ends.” But Pablo realizes that everything truly does end, and this realization does not instill a sense of fear in him rather it displays to him the stark reality of life which at its very inception is sentenced with impending death. Pablo sweats profusely, but perhaps not with fear of dying but because of the realization of the inevitable human reality which gets intensified and exhibits itself in its full glory at the time of the inevitable:

"All three of us watch him because he was alive. He had the motions… The rest of us hardly felt ours – not in the same way anyhow..."

Death separates the living from the dead. Those who are about to die are separated from the living by their
overwhelming emotions which they alone can experience. Pablo certainly felt separated from the Belgian doctor, the guards or the jailer; but he also had the awareness that death is inevitable and it would come to all, since living under the sentence of death is the ultimate truth of human existence. What flares up between this wait for the inevitable and death is intense existence of the being.

CONCLUSION

Sartre has maintained that although physical death is the crudest and inevitable reality of one's existence, it is hardly a barrier to one's freedom. A person never encounters her physical death, what she encounters is the death of ideas, thoughts, understanding and concepts. But such deaths instead of limiting one's being, opens up new avenues for the being to grow. The wall in the title of the story could either be viewed as a barrier or a space which is letting the being encounter events that can enlighten it. The wall certainly separates life from death, living from the condemned and the self from the other. But this separation allows the being to confront itself. “The Wall” is a meditation on existence, and the impending physical death is the event which can pave the way towards such realizations and meditations. The real significance of the concept of death is contained in its metaphorical nature where death refers to continuous process of degeneration of fixated notions about life and one's self so that the being can travel towards a path of “nothingness” and again reinvent itself from “nothingness”.

REFERENCES