



Marwadi
education foundation

ISSN 2454-8537



**DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

**International Journal of
Humanities In Technical Education**
(A Bi-annual Refereed Journal)

Vol: 4 | Issue: 1 | May, 2020

A Study of Existentialism in John Barth's *The End of the Road*

R. Murugesan

Ph.D Research Scholar

Department of English, Annamalai University, Tamilnadu

Abstract

John Barth is one of the postmodern writers in American literature. Barth's complicated, greatly self-conscious, and comic texts as well as applauded essays have clearly established the author's status as a dynamic defender of North American literary Postmodernism. John Barth is one of the major novelists of American postmodernism. Barth's contribution to the practice and theory of postmodernism is in this sense undisputable. However, much of the criticism dealing with his work in relationship to postmodernism is prompted by Barth's own theories of "exhaustion" and "replenishment," leaving his writing relatively untouched by theories of postmodernism in general. This study aims to change that. What is of particular interest here is the relationship between Barth's aesthetic and the ideology critical work of the historical avant-gardes, which were the first to mobilize art against itself and its institutional practices and demands.

Barth's second novel, *The End of the Road*, gives similar characteristics with its precursor. Like Todd, Jake (Jacob Homer) is a nihilistic protagonist who cannot get meaning in the world and who exists in isolation and separation from the rest of society. He also takes on a similar superior position with regards to the rest of humanity as does Todd and virtually all of Barth's characters. Indeed, Barth's protagonists distinguish themselves from society through their emotional coldness and self-conscious "philosophical" - or, rather "existential" power. All consider themselves as "open minded" beings who are entitled to evaluate others and to treat them as objects because of their knowledge of the ultimate meaninglessness of anything and, thus, of the absurdity of human life. As a consequence, in *The Floating Opera* Todd has no second thoughts about attempting to demolish the whole ship with hundreds of people in it. In *The End of the Road*, Jake treats Miss Rankin and Rennie with utter contempt, even shamelessly denying his duty in the death of the latter at the end of the novel. Hence, the major purpose of this article is to expose that neither extreme interpretation of the author's texts and creative intentions are fully analysed and Barth pursues a comparable goal with his writing to move from the absurdity of life by engaging in comical text and conferring artistic validity to his existence. moreover, Austria's literary and academic tradition and Barth's similarly strong connects to and

conditioning by the literary principle taught at North American universities explain that even though Postmodernism's assertion toward national history, universality and history still play a major part in the definition of contemporary fiction .

Keywords: **Existentialism, nihilism, black humour, metafiction and travesty**

A Study of Existentialism in John Barth's *The End of the Road*

Barth as Literary Creator

The term 'existentialism' was broadly defined to identify a major movement of the Twentieth-century thought during the mid-1940s, instantly after the end of the World War II. Although the term 'Existentialism' gives much attention after the World War II, it has been employed by the philosophers like Nicola Abbagnano, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. Gabriel Marcel, a devoted Christian thinker, employed the language of existentialism in the 1920s. The Italian philosopher Nicola Abbagnano extended an adaptation of it in his *La struttura dell'esistenza* in 1939. Both Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers used the word 'Existentialism' in the style of the most appropriate English translation of *Existenzphilosophie*. Subsequently the term was investigated by both the theist, Soren Kierkegaard, and the surveyor of the implications of the 'death of God,' Friedrich Nietzsche, as 19th century existentialist antecedents.

Existentialism is a philosophical development that regards human existence, having a series of main themes and characteristics, such as freedom, dread, anxiety, consciousness of death, and awareness of existence. Existentialism has its originated in Denmark, France, Germany, and Italy in the early period of movement. The result against Hegelian 'Rationalism', the Industrial Revolution in Europe, physical and economic annihilation caused by the World War II, consequence after the two World Wars and the nuclear age and the beginning of the Cold War are the main reasons of the spread and development of this philosophical movement. After the World War II, existentialism has emerged at the towering position as the latest style in literature and philosophy.

Even though the selected authors—J. D. Salinger, Walker Percy, John Barth, Chuck Palahniuk, Bhalchandra Nemade, John Gardner, Bhau Padhye, Kamlesh Walawalkar, Vilas Sarang and Kamal Desai—belong to different countries, different literary customs, cultures and languages, they have some uniqueness. All the writers are important in their literary traditions, and their select novels are the delegate existentialistic novels. Man's real existence in the world is less important than some pre existing effect is the general theme in all the select novels. Thus, for the present study analyses the novels of John Barth.

Existentialism is a famous literary movement in Europe and America in the Twentieth Century. The socio-cultural movement of the contemporary world has widely appeal of the movement. It reacts the spiritual predicament of the world. Alienation, the loss of sustaining religious customs, the feeling of anxiety, the absurd, and guilt are the views of the movement. All these senses and approaches are given powerful and open voice in existentialist context. In this context the first objective of the present study is to explain the concept

of Existentialism. Tough, the major objective of the study is to make a comprehensive statement create the existentialism portrayed in the select novels of Marathi and American Novelists, to claim at a broad way.

Biographical sketch

John Simmons Barth is the one of the famous American writers in literature. He is best known for his postmodernist and metafictional fiction. Barth began his career with *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, two short realist fictions that deal humorous with controversial topics, suicide and abortion in that order. They are directly realistic stories; as Barth presently remarked, they "didn't know they were novels". *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) was basically intended as the entire novel of a trilogy comprising his first two "realist" novels, but, as a result of Barth's developed as a writer, it established into a different project. The novel is important as it showed Barth's discovery of Postmodernism. John Barth's second book, *The End of the Road* was praised as a term novel of ideas. A special form of as *The End of the Road* called as an ideological travesty. In this novel discussed a conflict between two college teachers, a nihilist who teaches English and an existentialist who teaches history; they deviate on the true meaning of human nature.

Joe Morgan, the existentialist, was an incidentally worthless space in the end; the one meaningful reality is man's conscious. The individual human existence can be denoted by an orderly. But Morgan rejected worthless for cultural task that con man into feelings the meaning of identity and existence. David Kerner remarked that Joe walked on the meadow let the ways be walked not other way. He felt that he has taken off all unintentional values from himself. Since he has been arriving the rock of his important self so far Morgan's view is plainly typical contemporary philosophy. As one who takes over of the Enlightenment, We thought in original denies not original sin. We are executed to the idea of a society that will allow each man to become himself. We think in an ultimate culture, these are our heaven and our spirit. But Morgan alienated him from others, though they were no human being but only fully different natures. David Kerner explored that there are only significant values, Morgan's point of view a man ever did right from his view, When Morgan' wife asked to neighbours for their lack of furniture. He defended and hit her on the mouth about their lack of home needs. So his wife's requesting for apologize is absurd. His most essential value is his God –is his idea of consciousness.

If *The Floating Opera* is a paper on ethical nihilism, the companion novel [that is what *The End of the Road* is] is a detailed discourse on the existentialism assumed by Sartre and Camus. Both novels are essentially cynical. Jacob Horner in *The End of the Road*, as does Todd in *The Floating Opera*, shows a typical existentialist bound. He stirs from what Martin Heidegger calls "Fear" to "Angst." The first, Heidegger investigates, takes on the physical action of escape from somewhere to take retreat in something; in other

terms, it is a choice one creates in the place of discouragement. For the existentialist, "Anxiety" has no definite source nor is it focussed toward person or circumstance; it is simply the sense of nothingness experienced by all humans and thus creates us feelings of with life. Barth's heroes, then, must identify some way out of their problem.

In *The Floating Opera*, Todd first commits suicide and then disagree that idea, rejecting it with his continuous inquiry which befalls *The Floating Opera*. For Jacob Horner, entrapped like his autograph in the corner, the "to be or not to be" question never rises. In lieu, when taking decisions, he severs from paralysis, an illness to act one place or the other, and, seem Todd again, and his only key is in writing. It appears though Barth thinks that new creation can be a flee from life's insignificant and absurdity. Barth looks also comprised by the end of 1955 that two important principles of existentialism are fact: (1). Every human action and reaction is in the end absurd, and (2). no amount of fantasy, masks, or immobility can cover the basic absurdity of existence (of. Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, *Essay of absurdism*, and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and *Nausea*).

The early two realist novels, the spins that exist for Todd and Jacob are sealed models in that they end in boundary. The "calm down" responses of both characters start by questioning that if all values are virtual, how does man ultimately analyze anything? Discovering no reasons for living, Todd commits suicide but ultimately identifies that the lack of encouragements for living are exactly linked by the lack of motives for dying; however, like Bartleby, he does not perform. Jacob Horner ends in his execution (the last word in the novel), his place, by discovering that all choices are equal; therefore, alternative simply portrays an artistic set of ambiguous questions. The key to Jake's dilemmas survives in mythotherapy, and this is what grasps the two sets of novels together. The rather inability doctor in *The End of the Road* analyses Jake as suffering from "cosmopsis," the feeling of the absurdity of everything, or cosmic neutrality. As this paper has already mentioned, Eben Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor* undergoes from the same inability, and the reflections of Jacob and Eben, logically distinct as they are, take the reader two possible Medicare for this view of the world. Mythotherapy, Jake's medications, becomes the role play of developing self. The game is played by bearing new identities, guessing masks, and assuming simple reasons for making difficult situations; existence, then, becomes concluded by a man's awareness of motion, the series of action and reaction that explains and hones existence.

The doctor speaks Jake to

act impulsively; don't let yourself get stuck between alternatives, or you're lost.... If the alternatives are side by side, choose the one on the left; if they are consecutive in time, choose the earlier. If neither of these applies, choose the alternative whose name begins with, the earliest letter of the alphabet; these

are the principles of Sinistrality, Antecedence, and Alphabetical Priority— there are others, and they're arbitrary, but useful.(*ER* 30)

Barth's second novel, *The End of the Road*, gives similar characteristics with its precursor. Like Todd, Jake (Jacob Homer) is a nihilistic protagonist who cannot get meaning in the world and who exists in isolation and separation from the rest of society. He also takes on a similar superior position with regards to the rest of humanity as does Todd and virtually all of Barth's characters. Indeed, Barth's protagonists distinguish themselves from society through their emotional coldness and self-conscious "philosophical" - or, rather "existential" power. All consider themselves as "open minded" beings who are entitled to evaluate others and to treat them as objects because of their knowledge of the ultimate meaninglessness of anything and, thus, of the absurdity of human life. As a consequence, in *The Floating Opera* Todd has no second thoughts about attempting to demolish the whole ship with hundreds of people in it. In *The End of the Road*, Jake treats Miss Rankin and Rennie with utter contempt, even shamelessly denying his duty in the death of the latter at the end of the novel.

Hence, the major purpose of this article is to expose that neither extreme interpretation of the author's' texts and creative intentions are fully analysed and Barth pursues a comparable goal with his writing to move from the absurdity of life by engaging in comical text and conferring artistic validity to his existence. Moreover, Austria's literary and academic tradition and Barth's similarly strong connects to and conditioning by the literary principle taught at North American universities explain that even though Postmodernism's assertion toward national history, universality and history still play a major part in the definition of contemporary fiction .

Finally, his float becomes malady because all alternatives in the end become equally meaninglessness.

I left the ticket window and took a seat on one of the benches in the middle of the concourse to make up my mind. And it was there that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas. There was no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. (*ER* 37)

Joe cannot perceive these anti-rationalist principles. When he tells Jake why he chose adultery with Rennie, Jake's reply is that he simply sensed it; and he doesn't know why he believed like it either. Joe cannot believe the fact that some people act without cause, that some actions have no intention, so he stresses that Rennie and Jake meet again until they can discuss their rationale. Since there is absurd, the ending is tragic. Rennie is pregnant with neither man knowing for sure who is responsible. She does not want pregnancy, and Jake, for

the first time, takes responsibility and goes to meet a doctor. During the abortive operation, Rennie dies, disgusting in her own vomit of sauerkraut and hot dogs. It is, possibly with the exception of the act of Rabbit Angstrom's wife hiding her child in John Updike's *Rabbit*. Run, the most strongly horrible set piece in modern American literature.

In *The End of the Road* here is one other character who justifies more mention. The doctor, Jake's mythotherapist and Rennie's abortionist, has no equal in *The Floating Opera*. He presents Jake existential advice, and, at one view, he even asks Jake to read Sartre and become an existentialist. He first requests Jake to make changes, the first existential action. He then initiates Jake to mythotherapy which he explains as follows:

Mythotherapy is based on two choices: that human life leads human essence, if either of the two terms really indicates anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own effect but to assume it at will. (*ER* 38)

These are experimental instructions, but the doctor is not an existentialist; indeed, Jake tells him a super-pragmatist. Truth does not concern him, only values and results. The pragmatic remedy to Jake's problems is to select the action which will result in the least amount of disastrous actions. He lacks to do this because his cosmopsis keeps him from expecting results, and his acceptance of responsibility comes too late to create any variations. The doctor, then, becomes yet another juxtapose between the two closed models, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, and the two open or "twisty" novels, *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*. He is the first in a set of metaphysical scam-men, Henry Burlingame in *Sot-Weed* and Harold Bray in *Giles*, who will both be discussed with at length later.

Barth understood for his first two novels to be companion pieces (of Gerhard Joseph and David Morrell). The end of *The Floating Opera* is the beginning, the other enquiry, of *The End of the Road*. The similarities are obvious. Both use first person narration by a hero who wants to write. Both main characters are cynical, bachelors who are strongly searching for existence and value. Both play roles in order to make life. All of the major characters in both novels are representations of a philosophical point. What is less true and more significant is the polyphonic nature of the books considered as a set. Jake can identify nothing in life of the most importance while Todd is forced to find some reason for every moment. Another contradiction involving Todd and Jake is that the masks that Todd costumes are unconsciously selected; Jake selects his intentionally as a part of his psychological therapy (the mask of the authoritative grammar teacher, for instance). The distinction between Harrison Mack and Joe Morgan, the equals for the two major figures, are important as well. Both remain thoroughly to developed principles, but Harrison is immature in thinking that his values are

fixed while Joe understands that his personal code is realistically vulnerable and subjective; therefore, insight in *The Floating Opera* becomes intellectual thoughts in *The End of the Road*.

Conclusion

The End of the Road is about the end of the road. Joe withdraws his job at the university, his greatest mistake having been that though he recognized Sartre and Camus's idea that there are no values, he made a value of reason and neglect to accept haphazard chance. Rennie is disappearing, and Jake's life is tragic. If we read the last word in the novel, terminal, literally, it is his final depot from choices, from existence itself. It is a very irritating and unpleasant novel to read, but if this closed technique is to alter there should be some witness of possibilities at the end, and there is. Finally, and most important moment in this book, Jake's end of the road arises when the intellectualization of his absurdism faces Rennie's human desire, love, and loss. Rennie had affectionate both Joe and Jake. That love abides after terminus, after both the end of the road and *The End of the Road*.

Works Cited:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Delhi: Macmillan India Limited, 1971.

Barth, John. *The Floating Opera & The End of the Road*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Bowen, Zack. *A Reader's Guide to John Barth*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994.

Bradbury, Richard. "Postmodernism and the Present State of American Fiction: *Critical Quarterly*". 32: 1 (1990): 60-72.

Bryant, Jerry H. *The Open Discussion: The Contemporary American Novel and its Background*. New York: The Free Press, 1970.