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Exploitation and Isolation in W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*: An Existentialist Perspective

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophical belief that explores the issues of existence and questions on the identities. European ideological concern on existentialism was strongly brought into debate from 1930s to the late 90s. It discusses the views of two distinct groups of the philosophers: the theists, who believe in the existence of God first, and the atheists, who reject this view and propose the existence of humans first. The objective of this paper is to study about individual feelings, fears, and ideas related to socio-economic downfall and the structural loss of social prestige and position. It also deals with exploitation, isolation, domination, deprivation and it raises the questions on identity issues. Poverty, sexual exploitation, injustice and insecurity are the weapons of identity politics to seek the values of 'I' in existentialism. This study, applies Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers' ideas explored in existentialist philosophy as methodological tools to analyze the experiences of Malin, Quant, Emble, and Rosetta in Auden's 'The Age of Anxiety.'

Keywords: Atheism, dread and despair, existential angst, theism

Introduction

Existentialism as a modern system of belief became fashionable among the philosophers. There are two distinct modes of existential philosophies and there is a great debate between theistic and atheistic ideological values. Theistic and atheistic, are values concerned with the issues of exploitation, isolation, dread and despair condition of the insulted and injured people. The term existentialism is defined into two different ways: theistic existentialism and atheistic existentialism. So existential philosophers have a great debate on existential values. Existentialists, whether theist or atheist, have had their own value judgements on the worldly creatures, human-beings and an existence of God. Atheists think about existence of human beings and they insist that the human being is one and the only one who has an identity with an existence. They reject the social beliefs of theists' who believe in the existence of God. Atheists hope only for the existence and essence of men/women. They disbelieve in the God and its existence. Existential debate creates a dichotomy between the common people's beliefs and their sufferings from despair, dread and angst which create the forlorn situation. Atheists deny the existence of God/gods and reject the theistic philosophy on its creation of the world. They believe on the single value ideology of one and only existence of the human beings. Therefore, this paper discusses the issues of exploitation and isolation either of the men/women or of the God and its power in the theistic-atheistic debates of existentialism. It discusses and analyzes Malin, Quant, Emble and Rosetta's attitudes and activities as presented in Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*.

Exploitation and Isolation of Malin, Quant, Emble and Rosetta in *The Age of Anxiety*

This article tries to explore the issues of Malin, Quant, Emble and Rosetta's exploitation and isolation as shown in *The Age of Anxiety*. They collect myriads of experiences and re-store their memories of discriminatory working condition, poverty, isolation, sexual exploitation, social, political and family insecurity that creates an isolated condition. They suffer of innumerable injustices and seek to establish their identity connecting through existentialism as dignified individuals. It excavates on the issues of existential angst, forlorn situation and identity politics of the characters narrated in *The Age of Anxiety*.

Malin, a young, active and hard-working character in the poem serves as a military officer in *The Age of Anxiety*. He is a source of guidance and an encouragement to the friends who create the hope for living. He advocates from the side of the insulted and injured friends and encourages them to fight and attack the enemies whose discriminatory activities victimize them. As the order is to fight for rights, Malin has to take the responsibility of leadership but his forlorn situation cannot show the clear-cut way-out. Each individual; Quant, Emble, Malin and Rosetta have collected traumatic experiences. They try to control the situation but they feel the discriminatory situation and turn towards the forlorn condition. They realize that if they do not feel anguish, they are is rather discriminating himself/herself.

Malin, Quant, Emble and Rosetta in *The Age of Anxiety* are not only unhappy, they are forlorn, as isolated and exploited. Sartre writes, "... despair discourages us to invent new things and to go ahead for search" (*Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 86). The forlorn nature of Malin,

Quant, Rosetta and Emble resonates the real picture of then society as reflected in the poem. Nelson examines to Emble's situation and writes, "Emble is feeling isolated from his fellows and his failure is the cause of despair" (Nelson 82). Malin suggests Emble and Rosetta to not to frighten but he is himself discouraged in his duty and very often, he wants to stay at home rather than in his work. In *The Age of Anxiety*, Malin, says that ". . . children are despaired by the cause of cruel consign and life for these children is grim, dark, hot, heavy, black, cruel, vacant and untidy" (86). In despair, they refuse to go ahead for their works as they experience exploitation and isolation and they are guided by pessimism, and they experience nihilism.

Nihilism and despair differ from anguish; however, they are close to the exploitation and isolation. They create the forlorn situation and turn human beings to the mental disbalance. Feeling of loneliness and absurdity are other features of existential angst in *The Age of Anxiety*. Emble stands in front of his father, but he is feeling as if he is alone in the darkness while facing his inevitable death. In the Part Two, "The Seven Ages" of *The Age of Anxiety*, he says:

Row with father, I ran with burning
 Cheeks to the pasture and chopped wood, my
 Stomach like a stone. I strode that night
 Through wicked dreams: waking, I skipped to
 The shower and sang, ashamed to recall
 With whom or how; the hiss of the water
 Composed the tune, I supplied the words
 For a fine dirge which fifty years hence
 Massed choirs would sing as my coffin passed,

Grieved for and great on a gun-carriage. (Pp. 278-79, lines139-48)

Emble is in existential angst and he has the numbers of painful memories of exploitation and isolation. He experiences fear and trembling in his life. Like Emble, Quant also is feeling alone, in front of the mirror, in the first two parts of the poem and he is in the dark feeling, forlorn situation and thirst in Part Three, as he says:

Lights are moving
 On doomed hills
 Where little monks
 Get up in the dark
 Though wild volcanoes
 Growl in their sleep
 At a great world
 Inside their cloisters
 They sit translating
 A vision into
 The vulgar lingo
 Of armed cities,

Where brides arrive
 Through great doors
 And robbers' bones
 Dangle from gallows. (P. 299, lines 57-72)

Quant and Malin in *The Age of Anxiety* undergo continuously in isolation. They experience exploitation and turn to the dreadful situation. They express their pain and suffering through existential angst. The poet, W.H. Auden, has rightly shown the subjectivism of existential angst, in this long dramatic poem, among all the characters.

In the poem, characters are struggling time and again. "Struggles about identities are struggles within the individual and between individual and group. Characters struggle against social norms and expectation" (Culler 113). In Culler's views, Malin struggles in the modern sense of an old-fashioned world but he wants to show his identity differently. Everyone likes to be superior to others. Malin's addressing to Rosetta in the Part Five, entitled "The Masque" of the poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, is relevant to quote here:

O clear Princess,
 Learn from your hero his love of play,
 Cherish his childishness, choose in him
 Your task and toy, your betrayer also
 Who gives gladly but forgets as soon
 What and why, for the world he is true to
 In his own creation: to act like father. (P. 338, lines 122-28)

Here, Malin wants to teach about male identity to the female with "I-you" relationship and says that serious self is no sole thought. The poem deals with man's problem in time and the constant tension he experiences between what is illusory and what is real, which is the problem, created by the issue relating angst of identity among the characters. Malin suggests Rosetta to learn a lesson from him but he is confused himself between whether to do or not to do. In *The Age of Anxiety*, characters suffer from the outside world and are frightened in the present day. Dread, despair and death fear turn them to the forlorn situation. And the same condition is seen among the characters in Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* with insulted and injured people for what critics interlink the situation in relation to the present condition of the forlorn people. The time when Auden wrote this poem was around Second World War, and characters suffer of the dread and despair, and they are insulted, injured, exploited, isolated, and finally anguished.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The Age of Anxiety is a quest poem that searches the issues of insulted, exploited and isolated people. Its characters search for self-knowledge, yet their searches are doomed from the very beginning. Quant, Malin and Emble have dominant, male identities because they feel as if they are in hell. They believe there to be only in purgatory, which is the cause of existential angst created by exploitation and isolation. Rosetta, only the female character, is in search of female identity but she is not able to find it. The problem of identity among the characters

is major existential angst exposed in this poem. Sartre, an atheist explains in detail about “anguish”, “unhappiness”, “despair” and “loneliness,” which he calls “grandiloquent words” (Existentialism 18-29). Talking about anguish, Sartre declares that “man is anguish” (23). Malin, Quant and Emble in *The Age of Anxiety* are unhappy and forlorn as they are exploited and isolated. The Individual are free to choose and contact with another being, but they fail to practice it. After choosing the existential world, they can face the godless universe. In *The Age of Anxiety*, characters are struggling on existential angst repeatedly. Like other existentialist, Sartre writes, “Indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge. I can have myself” (“Common Condition” 868). The question of identity concerns on the issue of ‘I’ whereas, “I” appears as the matter for identity issue in front of the others.

Existence of that being is rather to the “Inter – subjectivity”. Sartre divides living as authentic and inauthentic. He chooses authentic living and for it he says, one must choose and make a commitment of an intellectual, if not, it becomes like a paper knife. The knowledge of God and its creation for atheists is a conception of man in the mind of God, which is comparable to paper knife in the mind of an artist. According to atheistic existentialists “. . . there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence that being is man” (“Common . . .” 828). Man, first exists and encounters himself, rises up for the struggle in the world and defines himself afterward. Unlike theists, he believes in the existence of man in the world at first as defined in the existence and essence. The authenticity of life demands it to make a free choice values in the poem. Auden does not isolate the freedom of human being but he says that one should not choose or lose his freedom. Here, he raises the contradictory points towards ideologies of individual, groups and their shift towards existential roots.

Recent theoretical debates undergo on the issues of identity crisis and existential angst of the subject of “self”. What is this ‘I’ that I am- person, agent or actor, self or what makes it, what is it? Two basic questions underline modern thinking in this topic. “First is the self-something given or made and second should it be conceived in individual or in social terms” (Culler 110). Two oppositions are the way to identify ourselves in terms of the work we do. When we meet someone for the first time we say, “who are you? or What do you do?” (112). It means, we define others and ourselves through profession or work we do and cultural values of our society we believe on. The concept of existential universality is clearly applicable to Auden’s *The Age of Anxiety* in the issues of existence and creation of an identity.

Identity is a term related with personality, which is used to define who a person is, or the “qualities of a person or group, which is different from others” (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English* 70). On the one hand, people can identify themselves on the basis of their gender, color and ethnicity and on the other they advocate for the cultural identities. Individual and group identities are like two parts of a coin while they are related with national, cultural or ethical identity. For example, a man with *daura*, *suruwal*, and Nepali *dhaka topi* in foreign land shows the national identity of Nepal. Hindus are divided into four castes and thirty-six sub-castes with an identity of Hinduism. We all have different kind of skills, occupations and dress codes to show different identities. One can feel insulted, isolated and injured if his/her identity is not valued by the society or the community. Same kind of feeling is shown among the activities and attitudes of the insulted, exploited and isolated characters. Their activities and conditions are, thus, researchable in *The Age of Anxiety*.

Results and Discussions

The term 'existentialism' is described as a latest movement of European thought. There has been a great progress on it after the mid-twentieth century. Its beginning can be traced back to Kierkegaard, whose first important work, *Either/Or*, was published in 1843. Kierkegaard focuses on the values of God and says that the God has created this world and the worldly things. He gives a great value to the historical developments of the God and the worldly creatures. He writes, ". . . many people trace the roots of existentialism to ancient philosophy" (*The History of Philosophy*, 423). Ancient philosophy of theistic existentialism is related with the parts of myth making and the myth highlights to the existence of the God first and takes the other creatures as the creation of God. Existential philosophers and their behaviors are reflective on the existence of this world and the socio-cultural construction. Critics find debatable expression in existentialism that may be described as the revolt of life against thought of passion and feeling against the reflective contemplation. Philosophically, ". . . it now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world and his relationship or lack of one with God" (Cuddon 316). Cuddon focuses on the human identity and their connection to the God.

Theistic existentialism is taken as an old concept of Christian faith, which is made famous by theists. These existentialists believe in God and his existence. According to Solomon, Soren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), elaborates the belief that ". . . through God and in God man may find freedom from tension, peace of mind and spiritual serenity, an idea that has prevailed in much Christian thinking over many centuries. . ." (Existentialism . . . 316). According to Solomon, theists believe in the God and its power who creates us and also gifts the freedom, peace and even the tension to all. Everything is fixed by the great creator and that creator is the God. It also resonates at the beginning of the world history and historicizes up to the end of a century marked by horrifying mass movements. Its depiction of radical religious obedience stirs new fears as we enter the new historical time and the time-period when older political ideas were being replaced by renewed expressions of religious absolutism. Moreover, it deals with the works of individual that are marked by terrifying mass movements of the twentieth century.

Kierkegaard believes in Christian faith and he views that God exists first and then it creates the other things. According to him, the concept of God is related to the life of an individual who, if he/she believes in God, can discover truth. The individual can also find mental peace in freedom and loneliness, which he can not find in a crowd because the crowd to him is untruth. In a crowd man does not search for the real existence of a Being. Crowd is a part of cowardice in congregation. For Kierkegaard, crowd and cowardice is one and the same thing ("The Individual" 810). He talks about the two views of thinkers about life: one considers that "truth lies in congregation only and the other that lies only with the individual being" (809). Kierkegaard believes in the second type of view and declares that "crowd" is "untruth" (809). In "Spirit, Human Existence and Reason," Karl Jaspers views that each individual has a tight responsibility, which supports his/her whole intellectual existence.

In the existential world, we become purposeless objects of amusing survey because of our irresponsibility. That irresponsibility at last misguides an individual and he/she becomes

serious in his/her personal idea (44-45). Regarding the cycle of this existential world, Jaspers in *The Idea of University* puts forward his views in this way:

Human existence is firm commitment that supports our whole intellectual existence. Without such commitment all we experience becomes the random object of hedonistic contemplation, irresponsible theorizing and empty aestheticism. The meaning of what we do eludes all attempts at formulation. It becomes manifest only in our innermost beliefs. Only the seriousness of our personal resolve can allow ideas to become effective in our lives. (44-45)

Existentialism is a formulation of an intellectual effort including overall activities in an individual's life as shown in Auden's poem. So, his characters cannot escape from the real engagement of human existence and they suffer of insults and isolations. The philosophical movement that exemplifies an anxiety and uncertainty of intellectuals in an era of World Wars is existentialism. Writers and artists, existential philosophers are responding to European civilization that is found in unpleasant condition. However, there is a great debate between atheists and theists regarding the issues of an existence of man and God/gods. Theists present their views strongly about an existence of God/gods and his overall power. Among theists, Gabriel Marcel is the strong believer of God who claims that the God's power is seen in its existence, creation and protection of us.

Gabriel Marcel is aware of being and having. He wants to link ownership and burden with the help of concrete primary and secondary reflections. Marcel's concept is close to Perry's views. Perry makes a value judgement and writes, "It begins with wonder and astonishment of mystery" (Perry et al. 759). As the great World Wars of nuclear holocaust prove that human rationality does not work, people are very frightened of wars and they have no hope of secure life. New technology and scientific reasoning ruled nineteenth century that synthesized new ideas. However, this more recent concept avoided older concepts of unity, rationality and Christianity. "Anxiety and uncertainty ruled the fragmented world. The existentialist philosophers examined European Civilization that failed and was at the verge of destruction" (Perry et al. 755). Thus, Perry discusses the uncertainty and the dark side of Christianity that fragmented the world and ruled it violently. The blind faith pushed the humanity towards destruction.

Jean-Paul Sartre has remarked that the word "existentialist" no longer means anything at all. Sartre believes that only philosophical writers are existentialists. He finds them widely different from one another in their philosophical views. They all emphasize that the importance of an individual regarding the issues of identity is great. One should realize what he/she is doing for an individual as well as society. The existentialists believe in struggle and honor rather than the power of passion. Regarding the concerned issues, the Christian doctrine says, "Be charitable, love your neighbors, and take the more rugged path" (Perry et al. 757). Freedom is to rejoice or to get rid of tension in life from innumerable burdens of society as well as an individual.

Atheistic existentialists oppose the view of theistic existentialists. According to theists, atheists reject the reality and earnestness of rebirth after death. Sartre summarizes their charges thus:

From the Christian stand point, we are charged with denying the reality and seriousness of human undertakings, since if we reject God's commandments and the external varieties, there no longer remains anything but pure caprice, with everyone permitted to do as he pleases and incapable, from his own point of view, of condemning the points of view and acts of others. ("Existentialism" 10)

Faith in Christianity or the religious concepts of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Marcel and Martin can't be far away from the social norms and values of social relationships along with an individual struggle. For theist God existed first and it created the men but for atheists, man existed first, struggled in this world and came to the survival, but the God never existed and it does not exist. Sartre frequently talks of an "anguish" and "despair," what he calls "grandiloquent words" ("Existentialism" 8-30). The concept is formed in an inescapable form. In this sense, despair incites us not to deeds and commitments but to thinking only. In despair, people may take refuge in pessimism and even in nihilism.

Opposing the Kierkegaardian philosophical vision on existentialism an atheistic existentialist, Nietzsche strongly stands in the side of only existence of men. Nietzsche believes that the free thinker does not care about good and evil while exercising his "life will" to reach unbounded "power will" (816-22). Nietzsche asks us not to try to be Oedipus and solve the riddle of the Sphinx to arrive at truth and certainty because "truth is impossible" (818). The Kierkegaardian concept, according to Nietzsche, is blind faith in the binary opposition, or what Nietzsche called "antithetical nature of values," between good and evil, truth and untruth, rational and irrational, certainty and uncertainty, logical and illogical. Such values have been the causes of delusion. The phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, in support of Sartre and Nietzsche highlight the issues of existence and creating an identity.

Atheistic existentialists hold the arguments that only the man "exists". Thus, for them, trees and mountains just are, but they do not exist. Heidegger writes, "The being whose manner of being in existence is man. Man, alone exists. A rock is, but it does not exist. A tree is but it does not exist. A horse is but it does not exist. An angel is but he does not exist. God is but he does not exist" (Qtd. in Macquarrie 29). Thus, Heidegger believes in only existence of man and man's existence does not depend simply on "standing out". Human existence is then transcendental as well as non- transcendental to its own possibilities and existentialism is a theoretical tool in philosophical analysis that studies, elaborates, clarifies and theorizes different texts. The study recollects the textual ideas with the theoretical debates on exploitation and isolation of the insulted and injured characters. The study centers on theistic-atheistic debates of existentialism in Auden's *The Age Anxiety*. It concludes by analyzing the isolation, exploitation and identity issues of the characters.

Conclusion

The Age of Anxiety focuses on the character's exploitation, isolation, dread, despair, anguish and forlorn. The external support does not help the characters and that does not increase their confidence level. Malin, Quant, Emble and Rosetta are mentally dis-balanced. They do not have any trust and faith on the social practices as they see, feel and experience the biasness everywhere. Innocent people like them are exploited and isolated. Auden like many other poets experienced the tragic moment of World War, and it is reflected in his characters in this long dramatic poem. He understands the human psychologies and questions the uncertainties, dread, despair and delusion. He also talks about the reconciliation. He wants to keep a harmonious relationship between human and the nature. He observes trees and catches the leaves for the search of meaning but he seems them gloomy. Characters mental conflicts become the part of incarnation to those who collect the religious faith. They return to the object as well as magnificent shelter and go to die, escape, and change the fate rather than living is forlorn. The absurdity leads towards exploitation, isolation, frustration and the characters' attempt even to suicide because of an existential angst as shown in *The Age of Anxiety*.

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