

Being and not becoming: A study of John Barth's The Floating Opera

Dr. P.T.Selvi Kohila¹

¹Asst.Prof.Of English, V.O.Chidambaram College, Tuticorin.

Abstract- Existentialism and Nihilism as philosophies are historically and culturally of European origin but it has spread widely to have become a modern international phenomenon. The two World Wars and their aftermath had fostered the growth and proliferation of existentialism and nihilistic attitude on the continent. In the United States of America certain aspects of modern experience make American intellectuals susceptible to the existentialistic and nihilistic style of philosophizing. John Barth, a postmodern writer dramatizes the madness of the contemporary society in his novels. His works have certain modern relevance and it takes its nourishment from the two mentioned philosophies. The paper titled "Being and Not Becoming: A study of John Barth's The Floating Opera" proposes to analyze Barth's 'The Floating Opera' as dramatizing various nihilistic attitudes and existentialistic fervor.

Existential philosophy is rooted in the basic literal meaning of the word 'existence' which is ex-sistere which means to emerge or stand out. Existence emphasizes the dynamic side of man coming into "being" that is in a state of becoming. If man has a strong sense of his identity, of the permanency of things and of an integral selfhood he will be secure. But when he experiences non-being he is at once beset by the state of non-being. He cannot assert his identity when he is likely to experience in his existential position called ontological 'insecurity'. According to Laing:

The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his 'identity' and 'autonomy' are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own continuity. He may not possess an overriding sense of his own personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good and valuable. (43)

Laing's painting is a portrait of modern man in distress and existentialists describe modern man in their philosophy. The existentialist artists portray the condition of man in twentieth century. His condition is exceedingly complex, varied and jumbled and distraught existence. Paul Tillich in his work The Courage to Be points out that in existentialist art causality has lost its validity.

Soren Kierkegaard's Existential works abound in studies of crisis, despair, anxiety, and dread of death, meaninglessness. Man makes a choice which seals his fate. This is the tone of existential analysis. Every form of contemporary art shows us the disintegration of identity. Kierkegaard was clear about the protest against pressures that were changing the human condition. The very sensitivity which made him rebel made him able to apprehend the basic

problems of human existence of the present day. And protest continues to be an essential element in existentialist philosophy and it is the protest of existing man, man in estrangement, man with an awareness of his guilt and meaninglessness. It is also the protest of modern men against their depersonalized, technological society where people are so much in danger of merely becoming things perhaps even 'no things'. Existential philosophy is distinguished by its concerns for the subjective experience of the individual and with the realization that man can feel himself as 'nothing'. Here existentialism turns to the concept of Angst which means so much more than anxiety. Angst embodies fear, total and indefinite that encompasses alienation, insulation, despair and death. To Heidegger, death and anxiety are related concepts. Thus Herman Feifel says existentialism has "... accented death as a constitutive part rather than the mere end of life and high pointed the idea that only by integrating the concept into the self does an authentic and genuine existence become possible" (65).

Barth's aim has always been to dramatize the madness of the contemporary society. His works have a certain modern relevance and it takes for its nourishment the European Philosophy of Existentialism and Nihilism. Both World War I and World War II radically changed the shape of European and American culture. The effect was modern men and women were disposed off their belief in a universe laden with absolute values, God, tradition, reason and individual institute. John Barth's works are a deliberately creative response to the chaos of negative forces in a wealthy and sophisticated culture that has lost its myths and values. His novels are all philosophical. After the world war, human activity appears to have neither purpose nor direction. The basic question is whether human life itself has value. The need to produce or create derives from this deficiency but every activity called creativity seems ultimately useless. This nihilistic attitude of negating the values is at the core of

Barth's novels and his novels are fictive construct of his time. At the same time the theme he chose was one which has been fascinating him since 1953. He was so fascinated that he planned to write a series of books dramatizing various nihilistic attitudes and existential fervor. Barth also investigates the tension between what human beings want to be and what they are, between subconscious sexual drives and conscious rational processes, between human violence and elaborate systems of justice and between events and attribution of causes.

In *The Floating Opera* the preoccupation with suicide, nihilism and existentialism is rendered in an ironic way. *The Floating Opera*, published in 1956, is narrated by Todd Andrews, a bachelor lawyer in Cambridge, Maryland. He served in the First World War and experienced its chaos and brutality and later slipped off the remnants of his personal security by the suicide of his father. Todd is an intensely rational twentieth century American, a detached observer who is almost always conscious of observing. Only five times in his life he laughs, that too, it is a reaction to the absurdity he believes is everywhere around him. Todd writes in order to gain a private personal perspective on his own problem as an aspect of his father's suicide. He searches through self-inquiry to find personal meaning within a perplexing and alienating universe. It concerns principally the climactic events of June 23 or 24 1937, which occurred seventeen years before Todd rewrote them for publication as a novel in 1954. During the intervening years Todd has managed to provide himself with a philosophical rationale for his actions. But Todd's mental predisposition is so problematical despite its seeming insistence on existential logic. Todd writes his book with two predominant subliminal purposes that to explain himself as mentally recapitulating his father's supposed reasons for taking his own life and at the same time to detail the tortured existential logic that propelled both father and son to ultimate questions and their common putative answers in the form of suicide.

The important question that lingers in the mind of the reader is why and how the contemplated suicide did not take place. Todd was with an existential question "To be or not to be" coupled with its logical extension "why be at all?" and its contemporary converse "why not?". The issue was particularly rife during the postwar existential movement with Sartre's and Camus's ultimate answers differing with each other and with themselves over a period of time. The early existential dilemma involved freedom of choice versus an inherent indifference to the obligation to make any choice at all. The dilemma whether or not to join the opposition to the forces of oppression, to absent oneself and leave the world to its own idiotic devices or to take arm against a sea of evils and by opposing and end them is reflected in the metaphoric structure of the novel. If life resembles a floating show complete with masks and characters who meaninglessly act out roles, what use is there in understanding what it is all about why even make an attempt. The question raises hopelessness in writing the *Inquiry*. It is a self inquiry composed when he decided to kill himself and later changed his mind. He tried to

kill himself because "it is my bad luck that I tend to attribute to abstract ideas a life- or-death significance" (TFO 241).

The problem with the emotional moments begins when the Army Doctor casually told Todd that he has an incurable, fatal circulatory illness. But there is no emotional outburst here. The information becomes the major factor influencing Todd's feelings of impermanence. He learns of his imminent death and he is not shocked. He assumes various poses to hide his heart from his mind and takes many precautionary measures anticipating death. He pays his rent daily, avoids any events to vary the diagnosis, preferring to live as if it were true. He became a saint, then a cynic and at last found the most of cynicism gone and finds despair in its place. To drive away despair he could turn to God but Todd did not believe in the existence of God: "The impulse to raise my arms and eyes to heaven was almost overpowering but there was no one for me to raise them to" (TFO 226). He went to sleep and woke up in the morning and decided to kill himself. Before that he spent gathering philosophical support for his decision:

Nothing has intrinsic values. Things assume value only in terms of certain ends. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately arbitrary. That is, the ends in terms of which things assume value are themselves ultimately irrational. There is, therefore, no ultimate reason for valuing anything. Living is action in some form. There is no reason for action in any form. There is, then, no "reason" for living. (TFO 238)

When he found no reason for living he contemplated suicide and found no reason in that also:

To realize that nothing has absolute value is, surely overwhelming but if one goes no further from that proposition than to become a saint, a cynic or a suicide on principle, one hasn't gone far enough. If nothing makes any final difference, that fact makes no final difference either and there is no more reason to commit suicide say, than not to, in the last analysis. (TFO 270)

Todd's decision to live provides the ultimate logical rationalization for his behavior. Then he goes to bed in enormous soothing solitude and fairly well despite the absurd thunderstorm that soon afterwards broke all around. The conclusion suggests that the irrational place in the cosmos whether or not they are part of Todd's plan. Todd too attempts to control the chaos of the cosmos in so far as it affects himself and his actions. Todd revises his bequest of philosophical truism for his dead father. Barth draws attention to the absurdity of Todd's revisions by inviting comparison with its counterpart in Harrison Mack Sr's oft revised seventeen drafts will. Todd's success as a lawyer is predicted on his knowledge of irrationality, on his detached understanding of the absurd. Todd's father, in heavy debt, leaves for his son just as inexplicable a legacy of problems regarding his reasons for suicide. Todd is not emotionally involved in the substance of the case. He assures us, "I insist upon my basic and ultimate irresponsibility" (TFO 83).

Thus Todd views how and why he does things may be taken as another absurd aspect of the novel. As told by Barth in *The*

Friday Book Todd “goes about his daily round as always but he is every moment leaping perfectly and surely into the infinite, the absurd and every moment falling smoothly and surely back into the finite” (25). The entire legal procedure is parodied in a law suit which involves seventeen wills left by Harrison Mack’s father, president of Mack Pickle co., and each will containing clauses conflict with clauses in all other wills. Todd observes “the case of the Mack Estate would be fantastic, even in ours; it received considerable publicity from the Mary Land Press. These parodies point up the absurdity of all man’s activities, even jurisprudence and justice. Todd says they have “no, more intrinsic value than say oyster – shucking” (TFO 81).

The ultimate victory represents a triumph of absurd logic. Todd involves in the Morton. V. Butler case. His involvement as Butler’s defense lawyer stems from Andrew’s tokenization of Morton whose famous tomatoes made him the richest man in town. At least one of the contributory factors to Todd’s father’s suicide was bad investments. His only bequest to Todd was \$5,000 which Todd gave to Colonel Henry W. Morton, who needs it least, thus rendering absurd Andrews Sr’s reason for death. Morton tries to compensate for the gift by befriending Todd but finally despises him for being with his wife.

Here Barth refers to the absurdity of the triangle among Jane, young Mack and Todd when Morton shares his wife at the party. The Mack’s premises for planned adultery are analogues to Todd’s desire for existential freedom. The Mack’s will liberates themselves by consciously giving Jane and thus both the freedom to choose among lovers is denied by the marital institution. The Macks’ rationalizations supply the domestic equivalent of Todd’s skewed profundities about the meaning of existence. Ultimately, all are victimized by guilt, jealousy and finally indifference. All the characters with whom Todd associates come to inform his rumination and actions. Osborne enjoys existence by railing against it and the eventual suicide whose conscious acceptance of life belies a subliminal abhorrence of its condition. Haecker, like Todd, suffers from being an intellectual. His wrong headed arguments for living contradict his real desire at the ravages of an aging and purposeless existence. Todd saves Haecker after a suicide attempt but Todd is not concerned with his desire to end his life. Todd takes effort to philosophize his way into indifference and he cannot escape his perhaps personal, irrational impulse to preserve life. This is evident when his father executes a chicken and he remembers his own execution of the German in response to his consuming fear for his own life. He devotes much of his own remaining life in searching for a reason for his father’s decision to commit suicide.

The characters mesh together in the grand finale, the Floating Opera’s evening program. Todd plans to blow up the showboat and when he realizes that the whole family may be blown up with him he does not particularly care: Calmly I thought of Harrison and Jane: of perfect breasts and thighs scorched; of certain soft, sun- smelling hair crisped to ash calmly too I heard somewhere the squeal of an over

excited child, too young to be up so late: not impossibly Jeannie. I considered a small body, formed perhaps from my own and flawless Jane’s, black, cracked smoking. (TFO 234)

Even his relationship with Jeannine Mack possibly his daughter cannot free him of negative opinion of human nature. The ending is satisfactory to modern existentialists for whom neither the measure of justice nor the satisfaction produced by an appearing moral conclusion is of great importance. In *The Floating Opera*, Barth explores the ideas that people hold their perceptions and statements about themselves and the unsettling experiences of the twentieth century. Set in a thoroughly modernist context, *The Floating Opera* gives a sense of existential angst and world weariness. Heide Ziegler aptly notes: “Barth like other fledgling contemporary writers was influenced by the existentialist discussion which dominated the American intellectual stage of the 1950s” (13). Barth made Todd’s meditations on death so pervasive and persuasive that *The Floating Opera* was acclaimed as the existentialist masterpiece. With the news of his bad heart, he becomes a rake, nearly murdered by the prostitute Betty June, he becomes a saint, having cut his father down from the rope, he becomes a cynic.

As a lawyer he “can philosophize like two Kants, like seven Philadelphia lawyers” (TFO 167) and he is aware of how rationality has opposed his instinctual life: “I know for certain that all the major mind changes in my life have been the result not of deliberate, creative thinking on my part but rather of pure accidents” (TFO 21). One of Todd’s primary goals is to find a guiding philosophy or principle because he has lost faith in absolutes due to traumatic experiences in World War I. Fear prevented him from functioning logically. He killed the German soldier to save himself and this caused him to realize his basic animality, to distinct himself and others and to be skeptical of governing principles and systems of reason. In killing, Todd found himself and his system of values inadequate and he faced his generation’s anxiety over a loss of belief in a protective God, a benevolent society and a system of analytic reason.

Barth’s depiction of his first protagonist Todd shows nothing but the existential abuses of supra-rational irony as a mode of consciousness. Author and narrator agree only on the aesthetic abuses of irony as a trope – which irony is trite, easy and heavy handed when it merely imitates “life’s elephantine ironies...” (TFO 107) as when Stephen Crane could not resist letting the cash register display its zeroes over the corpus of his Swede or when Haecker cannot resist dramatizing his suicide by dressing in black and underlining the passage in Hamlet as his final rebuttal to Todd. Barth knows that ironic laughter is as much a reaction-formation against the year of the flesh’s mortality as severe asceticism but Todd does not know this phenomenon. Heide Ziegler takes the book as a mistake arising out of Todd’s nihilistic despair – his over literalisation of the show boat metaphor that makes art a substitute for life. He also affirms that such over application is Barth’s way of “liberating contemporary literature from the existential predicament: the necessity that any protagonist finds his own essence as the recondition of his

life”(25).Therefore, Todd is a being in the world but not definable.

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