

Original Article

The Ethos of American Existentialism in John Barth's *The End of the Road*

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ABSTRACT: *French existentialism, which has spread its wings in America, has affected the culture and the attitude of the American people. This American Existentialism is explicit in the work of John Barth. In his work titled The End of the Road, the protagonist, Jacob Horner, and his colleague, Joe Morgan, lead an existential way of life. Jacob Horner, who is "weatherless", an extreme introvert, uselessly self-conscious and indecisive in nature, gets entangled in a triangle love affair with Rennie Morgan, which finally results in Rennie's death and Horner's permanent admission to Doctor D's Remobilization Farm, thus questioning the purpose of his existence. This paper envisages a critical study of the dissemination of the ethos of American Existentialism in John Barth's The End of the Road.*

KEYWORDS: *Absurdism, American Existentialism, Freedom and Responsibility, Identity and Selfhood, Moral Relativism*

ABBREVIATION: The End of the Road (TEOTR)

America, a land of opportunities, has undergone a lot of cultural and social changes in its history. All these changes occur in an effort to fulfill the dream of America. As Luther had a dream, America too has a dream, a dream of prosperity. In order to achieve this dream, it adapts itself to these changes in time. Literature, which is the mirror of life, tends to reflect these social and cultural changes that are dominant in its era. However, there are many philosophies that have affected the Americans and their lifestyle; the philosophy of existentialism has considerably affected the American culture, society, and lifestyle.

Though existentialism has its origin in Europe, it has spread like wildfire into the realms of American culture. The World Wars have caused heavy economic and physical destruction in Europe, and with the emergence of the Cold War and the Nuclear Age, French existentialism became a worldwide fashion. French Existentialism is an appropriate philosophy for the postwar world, which was immersed in agony, despair, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and an unpromising future. After Sartre and Camus's visit to the United States, this philosophy gained popularity among Americans. Existentialism's emphasis on the sanctity of the individual, his or her rejection of absolutes, and comprehension of the alienating nature of modern existence captured the minds of the American intellectuals.

John Barth, an existential writer, has brought out this concept of existentialism in his novel *The End of the Road*. The protagonist Jacob Horner is portrayed as an extreme introvert, who is weatherless, uselessly self-conscious, and indecisive in nature. On the advice of the Doctor, he entered into the teaching profession and applied to the president of the Wicomico State Teachers College to teach Prescriptive Grammar. Horner vacates Baltimore and gets settled at Wicomico. There, at the interview, he meets Joseph Morgan, a Scout Master and also a member of the interview committee, who invites Horner for dinner at his home. Rennie Morgan, the wife of Joseph Morgan, also gets acquainted with Horner when she officially invites Horner for dinner over the phone. Now this is where the triangle love affair between Horner, Rennie, and Joseph begins. Joseph Morgan is so interested in Horner that he often invites him for dinner, which not only gives Joseph a chance to know Horner but also gives an ample number of opportunities for Horner and Rennie to come close to each other. At their first dinner, Joseph proposes that since he is occupied entirely with his research work, Horner could give company to Rennie, and Rennie could teach horse riding to Horner. It was during their horse riding sessions that Rennie and Horner shared and talked a lot. Rennie told Horner about her meeting with Joseph and how they fell in love and how they got married, and also about her domestic problems to Horner. However, at first, all this was on the basis of healthy sharing, but later this became the cause for their intimacy. Once, when they returned from their horse riding, they found Joseph alone in his room and masturbating, and they were perplexed and shocked. This incident, rather an accident, created an opinion in their mind that Joseph was not perfect and morally correct, and that gave them the confidence to accidentally commit adultery, when Joseph had left for Washington to pursue his research. On his return, his wife disclosed her adultery to him, and later they discovered that she was pregnant. Rennie did not want an issue and instead wanted an abortion. Horner made all the necessary arrangements for an

abortion, and in that attempt, she vomited from the ether, and she strangled herself to death. The triangle affair comes to an end with the death of Rennie, Joseph Morgan being fired from his job, and Jacob Horner goes back into his paralysis and is rejoined with the Doctor.

For one, this might seem like an ordinary story with a triangle love affair in it. But some of the characters in it strongly exhibit the existential outlook of life. John Barth has portrayed the leading male characters as strongly inherent in the qualities of existentialism. Jacob Horner, who is “weatherless” (TEOTR 287) and indecisive in nature, leads a solitary life. Horner doesn’t rationalize or find meaning in human relationships; that’s how he treats Peggy, with whom he shares a bed often, as an object of sexual fulfillment and has the least intention to marry her. On the other hand, we have Joe Morgan, who is almost like Horner, except that he bases his relationship on pure reason. Joe Morgan claims that, “I’ve no right to expect you or anybody to accept anything I do or say but I can always explain what I do or say” (TEOTR, 297). Since Joe is purely guided by reason alone and not values, he wishes Rennie and Horner to completely explain the reason for cheating him. Joe demands a reason from Horner, stating that, “ ‘Horner,’ he said painfully, ‘why in the name of Christ did you fuck Rennie?’... ‘Why’d you want to do it? What was your reason?’ ” (TEOTR 357). Sartre proclaims that ‘man is condemned to be free’ (Existentialism and Humanism 34). Moreover, since all criteria or standards for evaluating our actions are also freely chosen, in our actions, we are also deciding what sorts of reasons are going to guide our actions. With no higher judicial examination for evaluating reasons for acting, man is entirely responsible for what he does: he has ‘no excuses behind him or justifications before him’ (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

In the novel, John Barth, through the characters of Horner and Joe Morgan, deftly explores the folly of the philosophy of existentialism and its repercussions on American society. Existentialism is very hard to define but may be summarized as a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe and regards human existence as inexplicable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts. *The End of the Road* is a darkly funny story about how extreme existentialism and relativism, along with a desire to control, lead to destruction instead of freedom. The very seriousness of searching for existential truth is mocked over and over again, leading to personal and moral disaster. This makes readers laugh grimly even as they face the story's emptiness. Horner impresses faculty during a job interview by using empty cliches like "inspiring students" and getting the job with empty language that makes fun of the bureaucracy of education. In the classroom, there are pedantic grammar arguments with students, and philosophical paralysis creeps into syntax lessons, mixing Horner's stuck-up view of the world with intellectual pomposity. Horner constantly makes fun of ultra-rational Joe Morgan, whose last name makes him think of horses and who throws "horseshit" at nonsense. This shows that Joe's dogmatic "purity of heart" is just hypocritical talk, especially when he compares slaps to equality in his marriage to Rennie. Their horse-like head-whipping laughs and fake-deep debates make ethical voids seem unimportant, and the farce builds until the pregnancy crisis happens.

In particular, it denies the existence of natural law, an unchanging human nature, or any objective rule. According to the philosophy of existentialism, each individual is cursed with freedom and must make his or her own way in the world, although many people resort to devices to hide this from themselves. It also stresses that life is without ultimate meaning, but one is forced to make choices all the time. This literally means that one is radically free to act. But in most cases, one is afraid to face the responsibility given by this radical freedom. Sartrean existentialism, as distinct from the Christian existentialism derived from Kierkegaard, is an atheistic philosophy of human freedom conceived in terms of individual responsibility and authenticity. His belief is that ‘existence comes before essence’ (Existentialism and Humanism 26), which implies that as human beings, one has no given essence or nature but must forge one's own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or absurd world of existence. Thus, the chief characters Horner and Joseph, in the novel *The End of the Road*, fashion their own values that are meaningless and absurd, which ultimately lead them to their doom.

Though man has stepped into the new millennium, the practices of the past still linger as a dark shadow that threatens the hopes and visions for a better and meaningful life. Thus, John Barth in his novel *The End of the Road* vividly exhibits the ethos of American existentialism, which is a destructive force and hinders the peace and harmony in the new millennium.

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