

AN ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS EXISTENTIAL CONCEPTS IN JOSEPH HELLER'S 'SOMETHING HAPPENED'

Mahalakshmi.S

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, India.

Abstract

I rebel; therefore I exist. – Albert Camus

Existentialism is a belief that through a combination of awareness, free will and personal responsibility, one can construct their own meaning within a world that intrinsically has none of its own. In a broader sense, it is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in this world. The Notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends their life in changing their essence or nature.

This paper explores the various existential concepts like absurdity, human condition, nothingness, anxiety and existential crisis in Joseph Heller's novel "Something Happened". Heller presents a comic vision of modern society with serious moral implications. This novel is about ambition, greed, love, lust, hate, fear, marriage and adultery. It is about the struggle among men, the war between the sexes, the conflict of parents and children. It is about the life we all lead today. The protagonist Bob Slocum's psyche directs the novel. Through his middle age crisis, Heller confronts us with the truth that as humans age, they lose innocence and confidence in their ability to shape their destinies. Thus the novel represents a half-century's struggle to articulate a way for the individual to live a dignified and genuine existence in the face of the absurd.

Keywords: Existentialism – individual-existential concepts – human -struggle- absurd

AN ANALYSIS OF VARIOUS EXISTENTIAL CONCEPTS IN JOSEPH HELLER'S 'SOMETHING HAPPENED'

- Mahalakshmi.S

Existentialism is a belief that through a combination of awareness, free will and personal responsibility, one can construct their own meaning within a world that intrinsically has none of its own. In a broader sense, it is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in this world. The Notion is that humans exist first and then each individual spends their life in changing their essence or nature. The prime cause for the emergence of existentialism was that people had lost their belief in the existence of divine being- God, owing to the wars and losses in the war.

This paper explores the various existential concepts like absurdity, human condition, nothingness, anxiety and existential crisis in Joseph Heller's novel "Something Happened". Heller presents a comic vision of modern society with serious moral implications. This novel is about ambition, greed, love, lust, hate, fear, marriage and adultery. It is about the struggle among men, the war between the sexes, the conflict of parents and children. It is about the life we all lead today. The protagonist Bob Slocum's psyche directs the novel. Through his middle age crisis, Heller confronts us with the truth that as humans age, they lose innocence and confidence in their ability to shape their destinies. Thus the novel represents a half-century's struggle to articulate a way for the individual to live a dignified and genuine existence in the face of the absurd.

The era of 1950's was the era of new beginning of the American writing. Certainly, American literature attained a new maturity and a rich diversity in this period. Significant works by several major writers were published and established new dimensions in the American literature. The radical changes in the field of science and technology, and the changing climate of the political scenario have affected the writers' mind. The works composed during this milieu reflect the political and psychological turmoil of the time. Under the shadow of nuclear war the human life became highly fragile and hopeless, vulnerable minds were come to be looked upon it

as a constant cause of anxiety. American writers turned increasingly to black humour and absurdist fantasy. The enormity of death, besides the sinister implications of the various techniques of wartime upheavals, left an indelible scar on the minds of the people.

Outcome of this indifference milieu has been reflected in the works of Joseph Heller - a popular and respected writer, who writes irreverent, witty novels in which he makes extensive use of humour and satire. His tragic-comic vision of modern life focuses on the erosion of traditional values and morals and life's increasing absurdities. Heller's penchant for anachronism, evident in all of his novels, reflects the disordered nature of contemporary existence. Heller's second novel "Something Happened, centres on a middle-aged businessman who have achieved material success but who feels emotionally empty.

Heller told in The Paris Review that catch -22 is concerned with physical survival against exterior forces but something happened is concerned with the interior, psychological survival. Slocum personifies everything that has gone wrong. He embodies every negative ever attacked in Heller's fiction. Completely self-centred, he is obsequious, fawning creature of society. Knowing that such things as love and responsibility exist, he perverts them when he finds them. Slocum misunderstands every fact and relationship in every level on which he operates: society, family and self. Operating on such misinformation, he reaches faulty conclusions and ultimately does actual harm.

Slocum begins his narrative with "the willies," a state of non-specific anxiety which existentialists consider an authentic mode of being:

'I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is happening behind it...I wonder why'(1)

But Slocum response to anxiety is decidedly inauthentic; he continues, "Something must have happened to me sometime". This statement, the first invocation of the novel's title, implies a deterministic belief that human responses are conditioned by indefinable environmental and psychological factors. Human will is irrelevant because we have no freedom of choice; we are moulded by forces we cannot control. Moreover, we cannot be held responsible for our actions since they do not result from our volition.

Catch -22 the author's first successful work satirized bureaucracy blithely ignorant of the horrors it is involved in: the business in *Something Happened* creates an atmosphere of fear and hatred which would be more appropriate in war. The anxiety is power structures create relationships characterized by closeness bordering on intimacy while at the same time ensuring that those relationships are spiked with hostility. The pyramid of fear which Heller describes in the second chapter of *Something Happened* is implicit in *Catch-22*. It generalizes fear, but also mechanizes it. The latter point is important because the generalizing of fear might make it metaphysical and tragic like angst, and that has the tendency to ennoble the human by evoking existential courage in the face of the void. By contrast, the mechanizing of fear is anti-humanist and blackly comic:

'In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these five people is afraid of four people (excluding overlaps), for a total of twenty, and each of these twenty people is afraid of six people...' (13)

This stresses how the office as an institution builds fear into its structure and ensures that fear is an automatic response. So the employees of *Something Happened* - as much, shockingly, as the soldiers of *Catch-22* - are the puppets of an institutional structure. He chooses himself as part of the fear-bound mass, incapable of individual action- of the individual existence that allows it, of the personal responsibility it entails. In this novel Heller's criticism is directed towards the moral standard in the corporate world in America. He describes the executive burnout in the upper ranks, the incompetence, and the fear of being fired. This leads to the moral degeneration of the employees as they work in high pressured atmosphere with office party flirtation and sexual company conventions. The pressure in the company climate drives them to lose their identity and moral values. A nervous breakdown or in the worst scenario suicide is not uncommon. Because Heller's characters are forced to live a life that leads to disillusionment and hopelessness about the meaningfulness of life, they cultivate an attitude of selfishness, insensitivity, and indifference to the suffering and plight of other people.

Despite the negative connotation that selfishness, insensitivity, and indifference have, these attitudes are in fact Heller's Character's coping mechanism in order to immunize them from the hurt and suffering that other people experience. Heller's characters are created in order

to mirror and entice readers to contemplate the path in which American society is going and in spite of material wealth and prosperity, people experience emotional and psychological poverty.

Something Happened depicts Bob Slocum at great length. Slocum is more complex than most of his critics acknowledge, but this complexity is far from obvious. Indeed, Slocum can be seen as a fictional cliché, the organization man of sociology and popular myth. Vonnegut has already suggested that Heller's strategy is to take a "written -to- death situation" and revitalize by offering "the most memorable, and therefore the most permanent variation on a familiar theme" Leclair's formulation is even more precise: "Coming late to the corporate man in the exurbs, as he came late to the war in *Catch-22*, Heller uses excessive familiarity to defamiliarize a social experience often treated by other novelists; he uses redundancy to renew". Something happened reflects the fashionable alienation that is endemic to much contemporary fiction.

Something happened is an example of how Americans have become disillusioned with the reality of American life. In this novel, Heller uses the character of the American male who lives in modern society, who remains unhappy, dissatisfied, and is continually sceptical despite the comfortable life that he leads, living the "American dream".

Heller's objective behind the depiction of his protagonists is to reflect the real society situation Heller finds himself in as American society embarks towards yet another century of materialistic development and moral degenerations. There are no right or wrong principles, only relative rights and wrongs, which are dependent on us. Thus, Heller's Bob has become a part of the prevailing immoral society of the modern times.

I would like to conclude my paper by saying that 'Something Happened' has the existential concepts in each thread of the story line and it is visible through the characters description. They fight with the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life. The uncertainty and unreliability with which Bob Slocum surrounds him reveal the existential outlook of the novel.

Works Cited :

Primary source

Heller, Joseph. *Something Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004. English

Secondary Source

Blackham, H. J. *Six Existentialist Thinkers*. London: Routledge & Keagen Paul Ltd, 1952.

English

Book Review

Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. Rev. of *Something Happened*, by Joseph Heller, *The New York Times* book Review. October 6, 1974. Web. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/15/home/heller-something.html>

An Unpublished Dissertation

Engstrom, Turmod. "Black Humour, Irrationality and Immorality in Joseph Heller novels *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*" Bachelors Thesis. Lulea University of Technology, 2006. Print

