RE-EXAMINATION OF THE THEORY OF EXISTENTIALISM IN A MAN CALLED OVE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract: Any human being born on the surface of earth is unaware of what life holds for him/her when they are born. As they grow, things, thoughts, actions, situations, and people around them shape, to a great extent, the way their life takes its course. This gradual shaping of one’s life may seem to be an important aspect that completes a person’s life; one that may seem to bring a sense of fulfillment. But achieving this sense of fulfillment and contentment in life is not as easy and simplistic as we may think it to be. Attaining this sense of fulfillment is an intricate, multi-layered, protracted process. It has to come from the process of realization of purpose and meaning in one’s life.

The novel A Man called Ove, penned by Fredrik Backman, captures and presents a vivid and moving picture of the life of a man named Ove, who too must have been born with no clue of what life holds for him.

This paper explores how some of the happenings in the life of a man called Ove are self-explanatory and substantiate some of the key ideas of existentialism as put forth by Sartre.

Keywords: existentialism, meaning, purpose, essence, authenticity.

I. Introduction

The way a person lives his life and spends his time on earth is different and unique and cannot match the life and emotions of any other person on earth. Though we all exist in a common space in a common time, we all have different thought processes, emotions and intentions. While people often live their life a certain way without being conscious about making their life different from other’s lives, some people do make conscious decisions. They make plans about the paths they want their life to take. “People form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realizing them. Most human pursuits involve other participating agents, so there is no absolute agency... Collective endeavours require commitment to a shared intention and coordination of interdependent plans of action to realize it.” (Bratman, 1999).

And, this process of realization comes only from the individual who, in the light of events and things that set him on the quest for meaning, explores his/her inner self, its connection to the outside world and the things that would bring them a sense of satisfaction from the outside world. “...(people) are also self-examiners of their own functioning. Through functional self-awareness, they reflect on their personal efficacy, the soundness of their thoughts and actions, and the meaning of their pursuits...The metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one’s thoughts and actions is the most distinctly human core property of agency.” (Bandura, 1986).
When Ove grew up, his life, his thought process and his feelings, in general, were shaped, to some extent, by the tragic as well as joyous situations and things that came across his way. And just like any other individual on earth, Ove also felt the need to look for a sense of purpose that would add meaning and value to his life, by giving him a direction, and he felt this need at each of the important phases of his life. And, this process of looking for meaning and purpose is important, because without this human life becomes meaningless. “Without deliberative and reflective conscious activity, humans are simply mindless automatons. Cognitive capabilities provide us with the means to function as mindful agents. Consciousness encompasses multiple functions that reflect the difference between being conscious of an activity and consciously engaging in purposeful activity” (Korsgaard, 1989).

II. The First Freedom

Ove was a single child to his parents, and they lived a minimalist life. His parents were working to make ends meet, but had a contented life. Ove’s thoughts and desires had the great influence of his parents. Ove was not an analytical person when he was young. He was a normal, happy child. After his mother’s death, an unfortunate event that happened when Ove was still young, Ove grew up under the sole care of his father, who was not rich but was loving and caring. The world Ove was exposed to was not a broad one. Ove’s father, who worked for the railways, did not and could not expose Ove to fanciful things, variety and luxuries in the world, and Ove, from his side, just followed what has been said and taught by his father. They usually had sausages and potatoes in the evening. “They never had much, but they always had enough.” (pg: 35)

The environment a child grows up in has an impact on the child’s development. The developmental perspective tells us the effect of the environment on a child’s development. Here Ove’s character tells us that he was a very obedient child and not much of an analyst. His father always told him “You are what you are, you do what you do and that is Good enough”, which got deeply embedded in Ove’s mind and made him follow that. Hence, what he saw and what he was taught to see by his father was, indeed, a very small, monotonous, and systematic way of life that he learned to live even as a small boy. They both were happy and content with the minimal things available to them. Ove’s father was only focused on doing his best in his job, and he taught the same to Ove. He taught his son his lessons and believed that time would bring them good. “…if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours...in proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty nor weakness,” Henry David Thoreau (1854).

The environment Ove grew up in affects his development as a person, and many instances from the text substantiate this argument. His father believed in being truthful and complying to the rules. All of his father’s actions show his faith in self-restraint and a peaceful co-existence. Horace’s words “Rule your mind or it will rule you” hold true with his father’s case. His father does not steal things, and Ove followed the same example. Even when Ove was given a choice by his father to choose between keeping the suitcase and handing it over to the authorities, Ove chose to hand it over to the authorities, a choice that would bring him appreciation and recognition from others. And, doing things according to rules and regulations, and not deviating from it is one thing that he definitely learnt from his father. When he was thrown out of the job at railways for a short span, because of being framed by Tom, Ove did not speak for himself. He bluntly accepted the blame with no word of protest. When the director of the railway company

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finds out that it was not Ove, but Tom who committed the crime, he asks Ove why he never told on Tom, Ove says, “Men are what they are because of what they do. Not what they say.” (pg: 69)
The definition of a meaningful life given to Ove by his father was a conservative one. “… how efficacy beliefs are developed and structured, the ways in which they are exercised, and the purposes to which they are put vary cross-culturally.” (Bandura, 2006).
When Ove’s father passed away, Ove had just turned sixteen. The impact of his father’s death was huge on the young Ove. “… stopped being happy. He wasn’t happy for several years after that.” (pg: 38) He told the vicar not to reserve a place for him during Sunday services in future, because “…God seemed to be a bit of a bloody swine.” (pg: 39)
His father’s death opened the first window to freedom. Ove was free, but it was a freedom with no limits and a freedom with pain. Sartre talks of how humans find themselves “painfully, shockingly free” sometimes. “This is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything that he does.” (Sartre, 1948). When we are painfully free, we have no direction. And because there is no direction, we are clueless as to what to do next, which in turn makes us question the purpose of our existence.
When his mother died, Ove was just seven years old and took time to get over it. With his father’s enormous support, he could come out of it slowly but steadily. During the phase of his mother’s death and recovery from the trauma, Ove experienced pain. But he did not feel that his life lacked purpose, because his father was there for him to give him hope, love and a direction to take in life, at least for a few years that followed. When Ove’s father died, he was left all alone to handle things on his own, and he did not know how to proceed with things in life. He was inactive and mourning for a period of time, and all his smile and joy were taken away. Plato’s words “Lack of activity destroys the good condition of every human being” reflected an aspect of his life at that point. As a single child, he was highly protected from the external forces, highly pampered with the minimal things that could possibly be provided by his family. From the time he was young, he showed keen interest in mathematics. But it was not just calculations that he was good at. He was interested in, attracted to and good at anything that required a systemic planning, pattern and format. He had a flair for building houses and SAAB cars. Ove had a lot of difficulties dealing with day-to-day activities. From the point of view of psychological intervention, it can be argued that if Ove was not overprotected, and if he had been given maximum exposure to the outside world during his childhood days, things would have been different. Probably his approach to life, his interests and his thought process also would have undergone some changes. He probably would not have been so ignorant and naïve, calculative and close-minded.
Ove was rigid and was not at all flexible in certain aspects. When he was left to face the harsh realities of life all alone by himself, including being fooled by an insurance agent, losing his home and not being able to focus on career due to financial constraints, we could see that he ardently keeps up the virtues and teachings given to him by his father. Problems and difficult situations shade his life in grey. And Ove had to go through the harsh realities, because, as philosopher Lao Tzu once said “Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them; that only creates sorrow...Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”, and Ove could not undo the things that had already happened. He experienced all those changes and felt that there is nothing good in the world until Sonja entered his life.
When Ove became “painfully, shockingly free” at a young age, due to the death of his father, he felt that everything had come to an end. As a young boy, he would have never expected or
predicted such a thing, and that is what life is. It brings unexpected things at unexpected times, and Ove had no other option than to deal with it. “Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans.” (Allen Saunders, 1957). He became sad and dull, thinking that it was time for him to depart from the railway station, where his father used to work, and go home. And the dullness in him grew by gradual degrees as time passed, until he could find, or rather given, a new purpose, his father’s job.

“The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1881). Ove had to change himself: his thoughts and actions. At a very early age, he prepared himself to enter the workforce. This new-found purpose, the job at the railway station is enough to keep him going well. When Ove gets the job, it was more than enough to put him back in his routine.

III. The Second Freedom

At that phase of life, when his father passed away, Ove was still young, and had plenty of time to let his mind wander. Therefore, it was easy for him to find a purpose and meaning to his life. But when he encountered the same sort of loss when his wife passed away, Ove was already old. For him, that was the most “painfully, shockingly free” moment of his life, when he did not know what to do. The young Ove only grew sad after his father’s death, whereas the older Ove grew desperate to take his own life, thereby trying to put an end to the absurd freedom life has provided him with. “Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.” (Khalil Gibran, 1923). And, Ove’s pain after his father’s death let him explore the world little by little.

When Ove encountered a similar tragedy as a young man, during the trip he and his wife Sonja took as a young married couple to Spain, where a train they got into met with an accident, resulting in Sonja’s abortion and permanent physical disability in her legs, he was still able to get himself together and move on with his life, without having to think much about what next to do. “Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.” (Viktor E. Frankl, 1946). Ove’s plans of starting a family with a baby were blown away. The circumstances took away from him whatever he had intended to do. But his thoughts remained stable. He still had the love of his life to take care of. Even after the accident, he still had to think of what to do next. He had a direction given to him by life, time and situation.

Most often we make calculations about our future, despite being aware of the fact that not all our predictions and plans come true. Ove too was not an exception. Though he had no idea as to how the future would turn out to be, he made plans with the hope that his plans would bear some fruit. “...through cognitive representation, visualized futures are brought into the present as current guides and motivators of behavior. In this form of anticipatory self-guidance, behavior is governed by visualized goals and anticipated outcomes... The ability to bring anticipated outcomes to bear on current activities promotes purposeful and foresightful behavior.” (Bandura, 2006). After the incident, he had a wife who is crippled. But this wife of his never felt frustrated, demotivated or lost after the accident. She lived a very active life even after that. She was, as she has always been, a cheerful, happy woman, interested in teaching kids. So, he made plans to help his wife and himself. They both sold the house in the city and moved to a more rustic, quiet and peaceful town. Ove altered the newly bought house in their new locality, including the shelves, cupboards and kitchen, in a way that would be easy for Sonja to access and work from her wheelchair. When Sonja wanted to work in the school, he took her in his ‘Saab’ every morning.
and evening to and from the school. When the school was not taking any steps to build an elevator for someone like Sonja, Ove took it upon his head to build it himself. All those things that he had to undergo and experience after the accident had a tinge of pain added to it. But Ove never complained about how things turned out to be. Because even during those painful and suffering times, he had someone whose existence gave his life meaning. “If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering.” (Viktor Frankl, 1946) During these times, Ove had a purpose. He had to be there for his wife, who had readily devoted her life for a man like Ove, who her friend found was a below average match for a beautiful, refined and educated girl like Sonja. “In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice.” (Viktor E. Frankl, 1946). Because he loved Sonja, Ove’s sacrifices for her did not feel burdensome. Ova was the opposite of everything Sonja was, yet the love they had for each other allowed them to accommodate the other person in their life. “He was a man of black and white. And she was colour. All the colour he had.” (pg: 33)

“One word Frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love.” (Sophocles, 2004). Together, even after the accident, they had a meaning to their life through their love. And it is this love, and a life full of love for each other that keeps them going. “For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.” (Viktor E. Frankl, 1946).

When Ove learned of his wife’s illness, cancer, he was absolutely devastated. He was informed of the consequences and the last days of his wife’s life, but that time was never enough for Ove to prepare himself. When she died, he felt abandoned in the world, not only because she died. The company Ove worked for told him, “It’ll be good for you to slow down a bit.” (Pg: 12) Obviously, Ove was getting old, and the company did not want to keep him anymore. The company’s decision came as a blow to him, as he felt completely free with no direction to take. The ‘existential angst’ came to haunt him again.

He was left with so much of freedom, an insanely abundant freedom that failed to show him any direction to take or choices to make. Though it is true that with freedom comes a personal space to explore and grow, it is ironical to note that this freedom only brings him the feeling of loneliness and void, which in turn makes him decide to commit suicide. When Ove visits his wife’s grave, with all of his thoughts about taking his own life, he tells her what he feels. He wonders how people are able to sit around, doing nothing. “How can anyone spend their whole life longing for the day when they become superfluous? Wandering about, a burden on society...Staying at home, waiting to die.” (Pg: 22) The interpersonal theory of suicide states that a thwarted belongingness and a feeling of burdensomeness to others drives people to commit suicide in many instances. A sense of belongingness, especially when there is a group to socialize with, reduces the thoughts of committing suicide in people to a great extent.

The Dialogical and Monological concepts of existentialism find relevance in the life of Ove. If we delve deep into the concept of existentialism, in connection with Ove, we find him to have had a MONOLOGICAL philosophy towards life, viewing things in a strict and rigid way. Monological existentialism has a ‘strict’ approach, whereas dialogical existentialism is a broader one. For a monological existentialist, everything is dominated by rules in the society, a slight change in which will haphazard the normal functioning of the society. If Ove had been subjected to Dialogical concept of philosophy, he would have been more receptive and broader in viewing the world and handling his emotions, which would have helped in bringing down his grumpiness

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and would have helped him make smoother decisions rather than the depressive, impulsive and thoughtless decision of committing suicide. When we further analyse Ove’s actions, we understand that he was not easy to change and was not ready for change. He did not easily accept or welcome any changes in his monotonous life. ACT (Acceptance cognitive Therapy) intervention would be beneficial for a person like Ove as it helps one have easier acceptance for changes and aids in the smooth transition of his/her. Ove suffers for a considerable amount of time with the void caused by the death of his wife and the loss of his job. A job was very important in Ove’s life. When Ove’s father died, he was given his father’s job. He did the job with sincerity and conscience, and to his surprise, he found that “there was a certain liberation in doing a job.” (pg: 63) When he lost all of it after Sonja’s death, growing lonely and sad with the passing of each new day, the entry of a foreign woman, Parvaneh, who comes to reside next door, brings something that could get rid of the void in Ove’s life.

IV. The Purpose that gives Meaning

Parvaneh’s entry into his life was not received with a warm welcome by Ove, who at that time was devising all the orderly and peaceful methods of taking his life off. Ove was the same cold, grumpy old man towards her, helping her with some of her requests, but only in his own fashioned way of complaining of the incompetence of the younger generation and lamenting about all sorts of imperfections. Apart from being grumpy, Ove also does not engage in small talk, and he himself realized that “...this was a serious character flaw.” (pg: 32)

The readers could see the very first time Ove feels comfort, after a prolonged period of bereavement and sadness following Sonja’s death, when Parvaneh’s little girls bring him food and when the little one says, “Mum said you were ‘ungry!’” (pg: 19).

Ove was fortunate in many instances. Whenever life threw him into unfortunate circumstances, he was able to figure out some purpose for himself, despite a brief period of grievance. According to Sartre, finding a purpose is important, because without a purpose, we are nothing but creatures without essence. “In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing.” (Sartre, 1946). Sartre’s concept of “existence precedes essence” was new and definitely different from many philosophies that had been there before his time. But when some of the people who lived through the world wars in prison were set free at the end, they were left free with neither a direction nor a purpose. And, Sartre’s thoughts on how humans are nothing without them drawing their own portrait and committing to themselves or finding a purpose for themselves was felt by such people who were set free. For those people who had lost everything during the war, including their families, homes, friends, jobs and everything else that was theirs, it was a painful “nothingness” that they had to experience as soon as they were out of the prisons. “No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations.” (Sartre, 1948).

When Parvaneh entered Ove’s life, she helped him draw his ‘own portrait’ of an old man who could serve the community and the people in it with his time and goodwill. His availability itself was enough to help the people in the community fare well in many aspects. He was helpful and available, not only physically but also emotionally. Ove barely showing up in the doors of Rune’s home helps Rune’s wife emotionally. “Belief in one’s efficacy is a key personal resource in
personal development and change.” (Bandura, 1997). This realization, that he could still be of help to the people around him, helps him understand his ‘personal resource’.

Though it is understood that Ove felt a new purpose to his life when Parvaneh moved next to his house and started interacting with him, giving his help and taking his help, Ove was not able to free himself from the thoughts of committing suicide. The time it took for Ove to get rid of those thoughts was long, and the process was hard. For the first six months since the death of his wife, he experienced nothing other than loneliness and pain. He tried to commit suicide several times and failed several times. Even after he started getting busy after Parvaneh’s entry into his life, he made many systematic plans to take his own life, only to be interrupted by someone seeking him or his help. “Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations.” (Adler, 1937)

At a point, Ove realized that his presence on earth was still meaningful, for his life served the purpose of helping and easing of lives of others around him.

With this realization, he continues to live and continues to serve the society until one silent morning his soul peacefully ascends to heaven.

V. Conclusion

As demonstrated in the analysis of the life and times of a man named Ove, it is beyond doubt that human life is incomplete without a purpose. Hence Viktor Frankl’s theory on existence, and existential theories that uphold the idea that meaning for a human life is given by a purpose stay true, valid and applicable for any human at any point of time.

References