

Existential And Nihilistic Perspectives In N.M Rashid's Poetry

ن-م راشد کی شاعری میں وجودی اور نفی پسند تناظرات

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Abstract:

N.M Rashid is a famous Pakistani modern Urdu poet. He depicts many Modern themes and perspectives. He depicts numerous Existential and nihilistic themes and approaches in his poems. He is a man of question and doubt. Due to his skeptical nature, he tries to reanalyze the objective conditions, the set of principles and the sources of morality and knowledge. He assumes that these are all absurd and meaningless. on the note of absurdity, Rashid shares deep pessimistic notions. At this point, sometimes he acts as an existentialist who believes in giving meaning to this absurd life by using his power of freedom of choice, while sometimes he conducts as a nihilist who solely and furiously negates all the meanings of life and believes that it cannot ever be given any meaning.

Keywords:

N.M Rashid, Pakistani Urdu Poetry, Modern, Existentialism, Nihilism, Existential crises, Absurdity, Alienation, Freedom of choice, dreams, Wishes, Skeptical, Ethical and moral Nihilism, Epistemological Nihilistic perspectives

Introduction:

Nazar Muhammad Rashid (1910-1975) commonly known as N.M Rashid is an iconic Pakistani poet of modern Urdu poetry. He has four published poetry books on his credit. His first poetry collection was published under the title of "Mavra" (beyond) in 1941. After that his three poetic anthologies were publicized under the titles "Iran Mein Ajnabi" (Foreigner in Iran), "Laa=Insan" (X=Man), and "Gumaan ka Mumkin" (The Possibility of Doubt) in 1955, 1969 and 1976 respectively. Rashid is a distinguished modern poet not only in his thoughts and themes but also in Poetic styles, rhymes and rhythms. Rashid as a modern poet shares many modern themes like colonialism and post-colonialism, skepticism, subjectivism, existentialism and nihilistic perspectives. In the respect of existentialism and nihilism, it is surely be said that Rashid shows an inclination toward existential and nihilistic thoughts and themes. His poetry shows the profuseness of subjective narratives and existential and nihilistic perspectives.

Existential and Nihilistic perspectives:

In an existential context, Rashid characterizes many subjective themes and existential topics and crises. Existentialism is a philosophical trend that believes in subjectivity, human supremacy and free will. Existentialists assume 'existence proceeds essence'. It means man can give meaning to his life by using his ability of free will and freedom of choice from his possibilities. It also focuses on subjective experiences and existential crises like meaningless, nothingness, fear, dread, nausea, absurdity, alienation and depression. Rashid's poetry possesses numerous themes regarding these crises. "City of dreams" magnifies a deep sense of alienation, in which Rashid unfolds and narrates the subjective feelings, alienation and singleness. He metaphorically talks about that land "the other shore", where nobody can get access except himself. This land is his subjective self where a person feels isolated from the outer world and others. On the whole, this poem has a pessimistic expression about death. Death is a mysterious place and the other shore beyond this existence. It is like a City of dreams which has no logical and reasonable explanation. The similitude between the city of dreams and death is that these both are subjective experiences. Every being feels a sense of anguish and fear regarding the phenomenon of death. According to existentialism, the phenomenon of death has both optimistic and pessimistic approaches and narrations. In an optimistic view, this pushes and encourages individuals able to achieve their goals and makes the process of choosing from their possibilities effective and speedy. On the other hand, the pessimistic perspective illustrates it as a containing force and coercion which engulfs all possibilities of being. Heidegger finds a correlation between care and death. Man throughout his life feels a sense of worry and care due to this fact. Heidegger says, "Dasein (German word which means "being there" or "presence") dies as long as it exists." (Heidegger, 1962) He coins the term "being for death" to further elaborate it. It means that man is born with the possibility of death. This reality of death initiates a sense of absurdity dwelling in individuals. Rashid elaborates on this condition in his sonnet "city of dreams":

"Lover, there's the other shore! Let me go

I'll never return to this desolate

Place. You cannot come, let me greet my fate

Alone I will go and like an arrow

For God's sake, be selfless and let me go..." (Rashid, 1991)

The concept of death is a mystery which everyone wants to solve. Humans get aware of the possibility of death in very early stages. They got conscious of death from their observations of their surroundings. This awareness stimulates the feeling of fear in individuals. In Rashid's poetry, death is a mysterious reality and a continuous sharp pang of sorrow. In his poem "pledge" he depicts the fear of death and connotes it as the certainty of limitations:

"...As insect climbs the wall

Fearful of dangers, quivering,

Knowing only the limit of shadow,

-As the limit of this world.

Yes, my wishes are no more than that..." (Rashid, 1995)

Existentialism is a subjective philosophy which deals with an individual's subjective conditions and feelings. It rejects the objective parameters which make someone behave and act like a puppet. The disproportion and difference between the objective conditions and the subjective world cultivate a sense of confusion and misery in individuals. It is a condition where the world appears to be contrary to a person's needs and what he wants to value. This condition creates a sense of aggression towards objectivity (social, religious and political principles and norms) and he starts negating these all. This behavior is called nihilistic behavior. According to "A Dictionary of literary terms (Gray, 1992)," Nihilism means "The rejection of all established codes of value and morality." So according to this definition, a nihilist is a person who rejects all the religious, moral and political principles and asserts that nothing really exists. Fredrick Nietzsche beautifully elaborates on this condition of tension by saying that "A nihilist is a man who judges the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world, as it ought to be that it does not exist." (Nietzsche, 1967) A nihilist reanalyzes the objective principles and these forms of coercion and comes to know the absurdity of life and the systems. This skeptic behavior leads him to a repudiating state. He wishes for a world which seems to operate like his subjective needs and desires. Rashid in his poem "The hidden Valley" yearns for a world which can make his heart full of joy:

"Would someone tell me?
The way of that hidden valley
I still search for a new arena of life.
How vexed I am
With the monotonous voices of life
-And life's joyless company.
Would that I shall set eyes upon
The land of beauty
From which emerges
The radiant abundance of laughter;
The land from which the
Caravans of the heavens take light..." (Rashid, 2000)

Existentialism and Nihilism both believe that life and the world are absurd. There is no meaning to anything. Life and the world are meaningless and purposeless. Here on the note of absurdity, existentialism and nihilism show different propensities. According to the nihilistic perspective, life is absurd and meaningless; it cannot ever be given meaning. While on the other hand, in existentialism this state of being aware of the absurdity of life embodies both optimistic and pessimistic approaches. In an optimistic view, this feeling is necessary to obtain authentic existence. The Awareness of nothingness, meaninglessness and absurdity urges individuals to struggle for attaining the meaning of life and to make choices from their possibilities for comparative betterment. On the other hand in a pessimistic view, this awareness leads to nurturing the feeling of nausea in individuals. This nauseating feeling can be seen in Franz Kafka's novella "The metamorphosis" (Kafka, 2010). This story unveils the absurdity of life in an allegorical way. The character of the story "Gregor Samsa" a salesman one day wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a giant insect. His nauseating condition and the burden of duties, same machine-like daily routine and responsibilities towards his family

he remembers during this phase illustrate the absurdity of life. According to existentialists the absurd canvas of life and the world portrays no meaning. Simone De Beauvoir on this account says that "The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed..." (Beauvoir, 1948) The awareness of absurdity amplifies pessimistic feelings in individuals. Suicidal thoughts are one of them. Rashid in the context of absurdity delineates these Suicidal thoughts in his poem "suicide" in these words:

"I've taken the final vow today
Before dusk, I licked the wall down
With the tip of my tongue,
By dawn, it grew up high again.
When I moved homeward at nights
I saw darkness ashamed and pensive,
Sadly caressing the pathway,
And I reached home so tired of people.
But I've made the final vow today.
I'll jump down the seventh floor,
I've caught this life all naked..." (Rashid, 1957)

Life is duration of continuous struggle and hardship, where the objective realities and environment are not feasible for human subjective conditions. It's a crown of thorns which an individual have to wear his whole life. The absurdity of life and worldly phenomenon makes an individual suffer a lot. Due to these sufferings and miseries, an individual wishes to end this span of distress. He wants to seek shelter in his death abode. Existential crises like meaninglessness, nothingness and nausea are the by-product of the awareness of the absurdity of life. An individual gets grind between two slides of grinding stone of absurdity. On the one hand, he has to bear the heavy burden of his free will and the outcomes of his actions and on the other hand, he has to face destitution and deprivation due to inhumane objective conditions. Rashid laments this condition of man in his sonnet "Humans" in these words:

"I spent many nights searching and meditating
I, often cry out at the degradation of Adam's progeny
I am mad with a sense of destitution;
Not ours are alas! Even the things that are "ours"! (Rashid, 2013)

Rashid believes in the process of dreaming, wishing and commitments. This process makes individuals able to find ways to fulfill these. Existentialists strongly believe that authentic beings always try to form their personalities on subjective grounds. According to them "Existence precedes essence". It means that the essence of human beings is not predefined like the "being in itself". The freedom of choice differentiates between being in itself (material things and unconscious beings like animals and birds) and "being for itself". Being for itself (human) has the freedom of choice to choose from their possibilities. Rashid defines desire as an expediting process which accelerates the process of choice. In his poem "Hassan the potter-1" he symbolizes the world as a potter's wheel and the individual as a heap of dust which needs an exhorting power of desire like moisture in the dust to change him into moist clay. Now, this

moist clay can become something. Commitment is a by-product of desire and need. Commitment is necessary for the process of freedom of choice. Rashid connotes:

"The age, Jahan-zad, is that potter's wheel on which

Like enamel, cup, pitcher

Lantern and flower-vase

Humans are created and destroyed

I am human, yet

These nine years have passed in the shape of grief

Hassan the potter is today a heap of dust

-Without a sign of moisture.

'Jahan-zad', this morning in the bazaar at

Yousuf the perfumer's shop, your eyes

Have spoken once again

Breathing moisture into dust

Perhaps dust will waken into clay."(Rashid, 1991)

Desire and dreams are repetitive themes in Rashid's poetry. He possesses "the heart close to the endless bonfire of desire."(Rashid, 2000) He believes "may the rising flames of our hopes remain lit." (p. 232) He claims his existential right by saying that "I also have my dreams." (Rashid, 2000) According, to him desire is the most precious and beloved thing and "the most cherished possession of man." Along with these optimistic statements, many pessimistic approaches can also be seen in his poetry which depicts the continuous painful struggling process of choice and dreaming. He concludes that desire is an endless journey by saying "who knows the expanse of desire."(Rashid, 1985)These pessimistic approaches are obvious for that person who bears the burden of his freedom of choice. To believe in this freedom means that a person admits his responsibility for his actions and the consequences led by these actions. Jean-Paul Sartre says, "Existentialism declares that man alone is responsible for his actions."(Sartre, 1957) people feel fear of bearing this burden of their actions so they start believing in bad faith. Sartre uses the term "bad faith"(Sartre, 1961) to describe the psychological phenomena of the inauthenticity of being when he surrenders his freedom of choice to objective pressures and starts believing in false values and norms. Rashid is a great critique of this inauthentic behavior and bad faith. He belongs to an Orthodox society, which shows conservative tendencies toward a social, religious and political set of principles, norms, values and creeds. In such societies, people try to follow the set of principles and live inauthentic life by submitting their freedom of choice to systems. Irrespective of their subjectivity, they stop desiring and dreaming and want to fit into the good roles and characters defined by society. Rashid dislikes these practices of authenticity. His ethical nihilistic perspectives can easily be seen in his writings. He writes in his poem "Desire is nun" while criticizing inauthentic practices:

"Desire is nun, forlorn and sad

But how should monks know why the nun is sad?

Standing as they do, like marbles slabs

In the soul-burning wilderness of

Endless! Submission

Where man's passion Is wilting rose... (Rashid, 1993)

Rashid in this ethical nihilistic perspective beautifully and precisely illuminates the inauthentic beliefs and the practice that confiscates the individual's freedom. When a person starts following the set of principles, systems of values and codes of morality, indeed he submits his free will and power of freedom of choice. According to Albert Camus, all ethical and moral parameters are idle practices and silly habits. He says, "The truth is that everyone is bored and devotes himself to cultivating habits." (Camus, 1991) Rashid in his poem "I also have dreams" continues the same notion and thought pattern of ethical and moral nihilistic perspective in such a way:

"Some dreams are buried
Beneath the sagas
Woven by our ancestors
Beneath the walls of undefiled superstition of fallen belief,
Beneath the thought of the slender cupped ascetic of Shiraz,
Beneath grief that comes from carrying on our shoulders
The back-bending burden of our civilization... (Rashid, 2000)

Rashid is a man of question and doubt. His skeptical nature can be seen in his thoughts and works. He believes that doubt is a stimulating force which compels and urges an individual to find the true meaning of his existence and his true self. He assumes that the only way which can lead someone toward his true self is the subjective way. In his poem "The possibility of doubt: which is you and I", he articulates his long journey to discover his true self; the subjective self. In this poem, he counts the difficulties and hurdles faced during this long quest. After describing his efforts, he comes to conclude this journey by negating all the objective parameters and the sources of knowledge and truth. He infers that the only truth that can be perceived or exists is the subjective truth. There is no absolute truth or "The Truth", although some objective sources of knowledge claim to have it. Rashid in this above-mentioned poem effectively expresses his thoughts in these words:

"In the hope of finding you (to find myself)...
In this pursuit
From how many streets,
From how crossroads roads,
From how many mute statues,
I have passed through.
In this pursuit
From how many gardens
From how blind drunken nights,
From how many dearest arms
From how many deluged oceans of love
I have been passed through
From how many lit candles of reason and action
From how many domes of faith
I have been passed through
In this pursuit, I have counted thousands of beginnings and endings
In this pursuit, there is no door

No ensuing age
Every remaining destination is only a passing tale
All ways, All learned questions, lost their values
All answers having assumed the guise of history
Just repeating themselves
'We are the answers, we are the answers!
we believe that we are the answers....
How certainly they are repeating their beliefs!
But they all have contradictions
Like the possibility of doubt
Which is you, and I"(Rashid)

Epistemological nihilism is a position and form of nihilism which skeptically challenges and rejects the validity of knowledge. According to this, knowledge does not exist, or if it does exist it is unachievable for man. Albert Camus in " The myth of Sisyphus: And other essays" remarks on this absurdity of unattainable transcendental meaning of the world by noting that " What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in humanly terms." (Camus, 1991)There are only perceptions and perspectives of reality and knowledge. Although, systems and sources of knowledge claim that they have answers and ultimate truths. But in reality, these are all their arbitrary beliefs and perceptions of reality. There are no concrete truths and binding realities. The deficiency of these answers claiming authorities and sources is that they all have contradictions with each other on a stance and often, with themselves. Rashid skeptically examines the sources of knowledge and phenomena and probabilities of life. He keenly observes the exponents of the sources of knowledge. He concludes that these are all meaningless and absurd. His poem " In the depths of the ocean" deliberately formulates the theme of the meaninglessness of words and their associated and self-perceived meanings:

"In the depths of the ocean
In the treacherous depths of the ocean Is a chest...
And in the chest is a small box and a box within it
-And in it yet another box...
(In which there) are the mornings of myriads of meanings
Mornings on which the doors of Revelation are closed" (Rashid, 2008)

As a poet and critic with a strong understanding of the philosophical and literary trends of the modern age, Rashid deliberately symbolizes many themes of existentialism and nihilism. His poems are a good source of thoughtful writings and philosophical themes and discussions. Specifically, In the context of existential and nihilistic perspectives, many poems of him can be referenced. Four parts of " Hassan the pot maker", " X= Man", " The word is God", " The martyrs", "Blind vendor", Feeble donkeys", " The New Man", "The dust upon us", " In the silence of boundless night", " Bid me farewell", " The spell of creation", "One more city", " Oh my desert wandering heart", " Afraid of life?", " The eyes of sorrow", "Sin", "At the window", " Distance", " Pledge", "Desolate wastes" and ``Nimrod's divinity" are some of the many poems which depict existential and nihilistic perspectives.

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