

THE MALAISE AND SOLUTIONS: A RECURRENT THEME IN WALKER PERCY'S NOVELS

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Abstract---Walker Percy the novelist of the American South has written not only novels but treatises on language and morality also. His *The Message in the Bottle* is a book which deals with religious and philosophical aspects of human life. He is always concerned with the general, universal framework of moral standard which governs man's everyday life. The individual spokes of human life lose their significance so far as they remain isolated from each other. Social order is possible only when the individuals are ready to patch up with the other, practicing what the Thunder said as quoted by T.S .Eliot in the wasteland, namely 'Dalta' 'Daya-thuvam' and 'Damyutha' , meaning 'Give,' 'sympathize' and 'control' . This will take us back to the roots and weld the 'sundered soul together'. All the ills, maladies, malaise torturing human life will be remedied if 'togetherness' and sharing of thoughts and feelings are practiced. Percy's main idea is that a novelist has to warn the society of the impending calamity lurking at every bend in the path of life. Walker Percy compares a novelist to a canary bird which gives warning cries to the miners who go down to the coal mines. His main concern is that it is his divine duty to diagnose the malaise afflicting the society and also to offer possible remedies to circumvent the impending calamities. It is further expounded in the present study.

Keywords---Recurrent Theme, Togetherness, Death Before Dishonor, Homelessness, 'Dalta' 'Daya-Thuvam'

I. Introduction

Walker Percy was born on 28th May 1916 in Birmingham as the son of Leroy Pratt, a lawyer and planter having along a line of literary heritage. The southern aristocrats were guided by the Roman code of honour and valour, suicide was an accepted form of valour to safeguard the honour and heritage of the aristocratic planters. Percy's characters exhibit this suicidal tendency and self-destruction is a malaise to cope with. Percy's father himself yielded to the pressure of the time-tested code "death before dishonour" like Brutus and Antony. Percy and his two brothers practically became 'directionless' after the suicide of their father and the death of their mother Maratha Phinize in a road accident. Though their uncle William Alexander Percy took care of them. They became homeless when the affection of their mother and the protection of the father vanished from their life. So this homelessness made Walker Percy think about the human condition on the earth as strangers far away from their 'home' heaven. Therefore the

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archetypical image of the sojourner has become the 'leitmotif' in his novels. Though Walker Percy was a doctor of medicine, he could not diagnose the spiritual problems of the man using the canons of science. In order to get a satisfactory tool to gauge the spiritual symptoms of uneasiness, strain, stress and broken family life, Walker Percy found 'novel' as a fit medium and he became a novelist.

II. Review of Literature

'Shakespeare is not for his age, but for all ages', observed Dr. Johnson. Since a writer, whether it be a dramatist or a novelist is faced with the whole spectrum of human existence. Therefore a larger canvas should be at the disposal of a novelist in order to correlate the general human existential predicament. For Percy, the novel has become quite handy it has no set rules of magnitude and diversity of characters and incidents. So Walker Percy makes use of the existential framework of Soren Kierkegaard to analyze the three modes of existence namely 'aesthetic', 'ethical' and 'religious'. The characters he portrays are sojourners and wayfarers trying to discover themselves, travelling in a strange land with strange signposts. Everything is cryptic and indirect so the discovery of the real identity is not that easy as the pilgrims suppose. Man is divided in himself and there is no co-ordination among his faculties. So a society made up of such members runs the risk of degradation and extinction. So to the possibility of keeping the world intact, each individual has been responsible for his or her attitudes, mores of living. Philosophy and the possibility of communication with others. Art communicates language communicates, expression communicates and the possibility of fragmentary existence can be averted. Walker Percy explores this existential concept and makes his novels scholarly treatises on man's return to the original bliss of paradise.

Walker Percy is deeply concerned with the style of living entertained by the spiritually bankrupt modern man. Critics like W.J. Stuckey have strong reasons to include the physician-turned novelist as one among the great English and American writers like William Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald and T.S. Eliot who used all their might to remedy the spiritual malaise of the modern man. But Percy offers solutions through the change of heart of his protagonists who slowly start to communicate and love others as they love themselves'. Love is the only balm to soothe the fevered brain of the moderns. So the protagonists like Binx Bolling of the novel *The Moviegoer*, Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* and Lancelot of the novel *Lancelot* started loving at the end.

Search for Identity

Walker Percy highlights his pet idea that man is an estranged being, fighting the battle of life in solitariness and alienation. As per the Judeo-Christian concept, man is in a strange land since he left his spiritual abode and roams on the earth searching for a home and identity. So he accepts this perennial truth that he has to come out of this loneliness by existing 'out' of the prison-house of his body and soul. For which he has to take the initiative and open the door of possibilities for establishing his true identity. Percy stated in an interview that "in the Judeo-Christian traditions man is seen in the first place as a pilgrim, in transit, in a predicament, in a fix, fallen" (7). The other type of estrangement is man's drifting away from the traditional and cultural roots, going for easy and readymade solutions for this malaise. So a search for true identity is a solution to escape from the devitalized and mechanical existence contributed by everydayness. Percy speaks about Binx Bolling's need for a search in the following words,

"the search is what everyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his life.... and not to be on to something is to be in despair" (18). The next malaise experienced by the reads in man is what Percy termed as "inauthenticity." It is, "the antithesis of meaningful life involving the surrender of personal sovereignty through such habits as conformity"(23) .

The next malaise to be dealt with is what Percy calls 'abstraction'. It is "the absorption of concrete personality into its theoretical shadow through the objectification of the self." The habit of converting 'personality,' 'heart' and soul into mere objects and commodities devoid of any value beyond their 'commercial significance', is the trend of the time which estranges man from the very root of human values. There is no malaise without remedy. Percy offers a few solutions to escape from the disorder and devitalized existence. He calls them as 'ordeal', 'repetition', 'rotation' and 'intersubjectivity'. Each is further explained by Percy on different occasions. He says that everybody has to undergo an ordeal or shock in order to break the thin film of familiarity which should lead to the solution through rotation"(27). In *The moviegoer* he states that "rotation is experiencing the new, beyond the expectation of experiencing the new" (*The moviegoer* 177). Finding out something new and significant in what is old opens the internal or the spiritual eye. In the treatise 'The Man on the Train' an essay included in *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy defines it further. He writes that " rotation is the quest for the new as the new reposing of all hope in what may lie around the bend, a mode of experience which is much the same in the reading, as in the experiencing" (*The Message in the Bottle* 86). One can proceed to the 'ethical' and 'religious' modes of existence from the aesthetic mode. As a pathologist, Percy could not find solutions to the spiritual maladies, but as a novelist he offered solutions.

Percy suggests that 'repetition' is a way for progression and solution. He states that repetition of reliving of past experience, sandwiching the intervening years (Della 8). The aim of 'repetition' is to forget the past and empower the future. Though it seems to be a backward movement, one gains strength from the past experiences that propel him to the future S. T. Coleridge's famous in the observation that he made while defending poetry is an example of repetition in *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge points out that "like the motion of a serpent which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power or like the path of sound through the air at every stage he pauses and half recedes and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward" (*Biographia Literaria* 195). Considering a human being as a human being is enhancing brotherhood and relationships. By this, the feeling of solitude and alienation can be nullified. By this a communion and affirmation with the other-self are possible.

Walker Percy is a moralist and but he does not feel that the much-repeated clichés like 'salvation', 'baptism' and 'religion' can be effective in the postmodern setup. All direct preaching has failed and he wants to try 'indirect communication'. In an interview with Pindal, Percy gave the changed role of a novelist. He says that a novelist has " to make God real in His absences and God must be invoked without being named" (65). Therefore, it is the duty of the novelist to offer solutions for the diseases that affect the mind and the soul. In an essay of Percy titled "Novelist and Novels" he says that a deep- rooted religious commitment should be nurtured in the mind of a novelist and he should not look at the society where he lives as hostile nor is he an alien. A novelist is like a wounded man lying

down with a better vision of the battle of life than others who still fight. He should be, like Wordsworth's statement ' a man speaking to men' fully involved and committed. A novelist should warn the society of the dangers that are lurking at each bend of the path of life and try to avert the impending disaster. The society has to pay heed to the novelist because " the physical forces presently released in the Post -Modern consciousness open unlimited possibilities for both destruction and liberation, for absolute loneliness or a rediscovery of community and reconciliation (Message in the Bottle 112). The novelist has to "call on every ounce of cunning craft and guide he can muster from the darken region of his soul. The frictional use of violence, shock, comedy insult them to bizarre are the everyday tools of his trade" (Message in the Bottle 118).

The duty of a novelist is very well establishe in the third novel of Walker Percy tilted *Love in the Ruins* (1971). An alternate title given to the novel is a clear indication of the Walker Percy's moral orientation "The adventures of bad catholic at a time near the End of the world" is the alternate title that tells volumes about the dangers that the world is to encounter due to the growth of 'scientific humanism'. All the needs of man cannot be satisfied with science, bat the trend of the post-modern culture is the deification of science. Dr. Tom More, the protagonist invented a scientific device called More's 'Qualitative and Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer' to gauge the spiritual lapses, percentage of sign and quality of life. It is an attempt to find out the ratio of purity and impurity like the lactometer which makes the measurement of water in the milk. He calls it the stethoscope of the spirit. His assistant, Art Immelmann wants to commercialize the production of the ellipsometer in order to become rich all a sudden as with it "any doctor can probe the very secrets of the soul [and] diagnose the maladies that poison the wellsprings of man's life" (*Love in the Ruins* 7). The inventor Dr.Tom More himself is an eccentric a "Psychotic Psychiatrist and a diagnostician and a participant in the disease" (*Love in the Ruins* 155). But the truth is that he himself fails to understand that life and its satisfaction cannot depend upon science totally. Sharing of consciousness or inter-subjective interactions alone can save the world. The 'I, 'thou' relationship should be established as a smooth transition to calm down the 'fevered' soul of modern man. 'Marriage' is the symbol of one surrendering to the other to become a healthy whole. The comic ending of the novel asserts the truth that man needs company and society to communicate and share rights and duties. Only this can save the world.

Percy's philosophical essay, "Random Thoughts On Southern Fiction" is a clear statement of the reason for the despair and distress found in modern man. He writes:

Something has gone badly wrong with Americans and American life, indeed modern life that people generally suffer a deep dissolution in their lives which has nothing to do with poverty and ignorance and discrimination. Indeed it is the very people who have escaped tobacco road and moved to the exurbs, who have fallen victim to this malaise. What increasing engages the southern novelist as much as his Connecticut Counterpart are no longer the Snopeses or Popeyes of O'corner's crackers or Wright's black underclasses but their successful grandchildren who are going to nuts in Atlanta condominiums . (509)

Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* "alone ailed, suffering not only from hay fever but having fallen also into a long fit of melancholy and vacancy amounting almost to amnesia" (*The Last Gentleman* 16). The present condition of disorder lies in the fact that the modern man allows the co-existence of good and bad in the same individual whereas in the past a man was either 'good' or bad. A man can be a 'gentleman' and a fornicator at present while women can be a 'lady' or 'whore' at the same time. The southern stoic, the father of Will Barrett committed suicide as a reaction against this inability to distinguish between a lady and a white. Sins are a part of life as though they are as natural as breathing. Ed Barrett before committing suicide makes a statement showing the fallen standard of morality. He says:

Once they [the lower class whites] were fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribe and we were not and that was why they hated us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay? They know they do not have to kill me, (*The Last Gentleman* 258)

The difference between the southern aristocrats and the blacks is that the blacks are honest as they openly admit their mistakes. While the aristocrats are hypocrites since they appear honest even after keeping skeleton in the cupboard: He asks his son, Will Barrett not to follow both groups because, "if you do one, there you're going to be like them, a fornicator and not caring, if you do other, you will be like them a fornicator and hypocrite" (*The Last Gentleman* 85). He tells his son, "go to whores if you have to, but always remember the difference, don't treat a lady like a whore or a whore like a lady" (*The Last Gentleman* 85). The modern man is a split personality like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and as though he wants Christ and Satan done at the same table. In the novel *Lancelot*, the protagonist says, "we [Lancelot and his boyhood friends Harry] went to whore houses. I understand young men don't have to go to whore houses anymore" (*Lancelot* 14). Because both, lady and whore are found together, in one individual. The experience of Lancelot makes him furious at his own wife Margot because he was made a cuckold under the roof of his own house! Percy grabs his experience using the 'fork imagery', the division of the fork into two while the handle in one and the same. The same individual forked into angelism and beastialism.

III. Conclusion

Walker Percy as a novelist emphasizes the universal truth that one has to find a remedy for the ills and malaise that torture him and return to the original innocence and purity, to the innocence of the lost childhood and the celestial light shrouded in the beautiful forms of nature. Going far away from the falconer is the malaise and the reunion of the falcon with the falconer is the solution. There are two types of return illustrated in the Bible. One is the massive Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to their own land of milk and honey and the other is the repentant, penitent prodigal son to his father in guilt and contrition. In this return is the real solution to the malaise as expounded by Walker Percy. Tagore in *Gitanjali* stresses the return to the source and the creator, "and let me return to myself be an immediate return to him." (XLVII, P.29).

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