

AN EXPERIENCE OF STRUGGLE AND SELF-CONFIDENT IN HEMINGWAY'S THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the old man's heroic stature in fishing in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The sea with its unfathomable depths represents life with all its mysteries. The fish is a symbol of all the adverse forces that man has to fight against it. The novel is a consciousness of the overwhelming powerfulness of the universe affecting man through nature, fate and chance. The universe withholds favours for a long time with the old man going without for more than eighty days. What is finally conveyed to the reader is only a bare skeleton of what was originally conveyed by the writer; just as Santiago is able to bring home only the bones of the marlin. Actually, the writer is exposed to the mockery of critics just as Santiago is to that of fellow fishermen. Though a failure, the great writer is admired and emulated by the younger generation of writers in the same way that Santiago is admired and followed by the boy Manolin.

KEYWORDS: Fishing, Hunger, Suffering, Struggle, Voyage, etc.,

Ernest Hemingway is one of the leading realists of modern times. In his writings, one finds the plight of man in a world faced with constant war, moral and spiritual vacuum, pessimism and nothingness. In such a world survival is the constant obsession of the heroes of Hemingway. In order to survive the hero has to adopt the Hemingway code or the Hemingway attitude holding tight against violence pain and death and to the achievement of grace under pressure. He who wishes to survive must be tough with himself as with the world. It is this quality that Hemingway sticks to in his works. Like his creator, the Hemingway hero is a pragmatist a man of action, he needs practical experience to face a hostile and unsympathetic world. In order to get rid of his horrible memories, he must preoccupy himself physically. His cast of mind is towards the integration of what is workable. His basic preoccupation is how to live because he knows that life can be intensely lonely.

The Old Man and the Sea can be interpreted as an allegory with far more profound implications and significances that meet the eyes of the casual reader. John Bunyan pictures spiritual progress as a journey from a perishing city to an imperishable one. Hemingway adopts a similar allegorical mode. He views life spent in pursuit of a great ideal as a voyage started with the intention of catching big fish.

This novel narrates the incidents spread over five days. Having returned home empty-handed for eighty-four days in succession, old Santiago is very dejected. It is the boy Manolin's warmth that makes him undertake the voyage again. He kills a mammoth marlin after an arduous struggle. But, on his way back home, sharks gouge out all the flesh of the marlin, leaving behind only its skeleton. The dispirited Santiago is again encouraged by Manolin to re-launch the fishing expedition.

The novel is a consciousness of the overwhelming powerfulness of the universe affecting man through nature, fate and chance. The universe withholds favours for a long time with the old man going without for more than eighty days. After sometime favours are offered. Santiago hooks several fish, cuts the wire to get rid of them and to fight the one he has hooked already. Next, the wanton mood of the universal forces returns and the prize given is snatched away. But man is not daunted.

The writer expresses greater faith in struggle. Robert Jordan acts under the belief that his sacrifice will be efficacious for the fleeing band and the Republic, while Santiago acts under the belief that nothing is to come out of his struggle against the sharks at least. He struggles to prove his strength and skill and challenges fate by crossing the forbidden boundary for timid people. It is a philosophy of struggle and daring against all odds of the universe. A balanced view of fate and human effort is expressed by Santiago when he thinks that he should be precise in his actions and ready for receiving the favour offered by luck: "But, he thought, I keep them with precision. Only I have no luck any more. But who knows? May be today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact.

Then when luck comes you are ready" (121). Santiago believes that success will surely come to him at one time or the other.

Santiago ignores luck and believes in work; this might as well become a model for all humanity. The significance of his heroic efforts can be understood by his determination that never failed. If the power to struggle is a chance matter and is not based on human will, it neither shows the strength of the doer nor can it be a model for others. Santiago's effort is based on his volition and stands for the general strength of mankind in the face of fate. It is impossible for man to be able to transcend the forces of the universe; he has a tremendous sense of self-confidence due to his ability to act according to his resolution. Santiago's character comparison with Tennyson's *Ulysses*, the old, weather-beaten Ithacan king, going in search of the Happy Isles and also compare him with Wordsworth's leech-gatherer, made to work hard even in his tottering old age. There is a point of resemblance between Santiago and Lear, too. Both live in a hostile world. The boy Manolin who is exceptionally kind to Santiago is like Cordelia who never fails Lear. Myth critics have drawn a parallel between Santiago and Sisyphus of Greek mythology. Sisyphus does not despair even though the rock that he rolls up to the top of a mountain keeps sliding down again and again. Sisyphus finds meaning in an otherwise absurd universe through his persistent effort Santiago is a Sisyphus in that he never gives up fishing despite repeated failure.

Another comparison built into the novel is that between Santiago and Christ. The picture of Christ in Santiago's shack makes this comparison explicit. The sharks that frustrate Santiago's effort stand for the evil forces that ultimately get the better of Christ. Santiago's wounded palms are like those of the crucified Christ just as his carrying his mast, stumbling all the way, reminds one of Christ carrying his own cross. Santiago's shaking off his depression and re-launching his fishing expedition is unmistakably similar to Christ's Resurrection. Christ's exuding love and sympathy towards the very men who killed him is reflected in Santiago regarding the marlin as his brother and sorrowing because the fish has had nothing to eat. He kills the mako but admires its strength and fearlessness. TS Eliot and Jayakantan compare writing to constructing a mammoth building:

Hemingway associates the problems in writing to those in fishing. The marlin which Santiago hooks comes from the depths of the ocean. The theme or idea that the writer selects comes from the depths of his mind. (2)

Hemingway's novels are both realistic and symbolic. His descriptions of the sea in this novel bull-fighting in *Death in the Afternoon* are quite realistic. At the same time, he uses symbols also. The fish is a symbol of all the adverse forces that man has to fight against. In this novel, Santiago enduring pain is equated to Christ.

The majority of fishermen do not venture far from the shore. They represent folks who chalk out petty programmes and achieve cent per cent success. Santiago belongs to the opposite extreme. Despite the infirmities of old age; he sails far away from shore without being dampened by earlier failures. He stands for the indomitable spirit of the man who strives after goals nobler than ordinary mortals can grasp.

Santiago has in him certain qualities which invest him with a heroic stature. He is one of Hemingway's code heroes. The code he follows is that a great man should endure hardships with close-lipped patience, love all without discrimination, fight and kill dispassionately and without rancour. As for his powers of endurance, he endures the ill-will and mockery of fellow fishermen who brand him unlucky and nearly ostracize him, taking away from him his pet admirer, the boy Manolin. At sea, he has nothing to eat. He is bored with eating and does not take any food with him. "I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures" (66). He has only a bottle of water. He drinks water, and that too sparingly, when he has to refresh himself. He eats the tuna and the shrimps raw, not out of liking but solely because he has to have strength to face the marlin and the sharks. He forgoes sleep for two days. He has a restless sleep on the second day of the trip, sitting and holding fishing lines in both hands. In the struggle with the marlin, his face and figures are badly out and his left hand is cramped, all causing him acute suffering. But he never complains or grows bitter.

Santiago's second notable quality is his universal love. It is love which binds together Santiago and Manolin. "Then he lay down on the bed... and slept face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up" (122). Though vastly experienced, Santiago is not arrogant or demanding towards Manolin. He is very humble. This very humility wins over the boy. Santiago is full of love for birds and fishes also. For Santiago, Animals are nobler and more able than man "They are not as intelligent as we who kill them, although they are more noble and more able" (61). He regards the flying fish as his close friends. He invites the bird which perches on his fishing lines to come into his house, as one would a passing friend. He pities the bird as its lot is as hard as man's searching for food day in and day out. Though loving all creatures, Santiago does not hesitate to kill when necessity arises. He regards killing as an unavoidable part of life. "It is silly not to hope. Besides I believe it is a sin" (103).

Santiago's uniqueness is that though he is determined to kill, he does not hate anything or anybody. Thus, even when planning to kill marlin, he regards it as his and pities it because it has not eaten anything for two days. He says that he is born to kill just as the fish is born to be killed. "You are killing me, fish. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater or more beautiful a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who" (92). He and the fish are part of a cosmic order; they are executing the roles assigned to them by nature or God and so the question of sin does not arise. Thus, Santiago is a code hero, displaying some of the finest qualities that Hemingway admires.

Santiago's fishing expedition is also comparable to Hemingway's or for that matter any writer's literary venture. The sea with its unfathomable depths represents life with all its mysteries. The marlin that is caught stands for the writer's vision. The pity is that, in the process of expressing the vision and driving it home to the reader the vision gets weakened. What is finally conveyed to the reader is only a bare skeleton of what was originally conveyed by the writer, just as Santiago is able bring home only the bones of the marlin. Naturally, the writer is exposed to the mockery of critics just as Santiago is to that of fellow fishermen.

Though a failure, the great writer is admired and emulated by the younger generation of writers in the same way that Santiago is admired and followed by the boy Manolin. Santiago is described as a modern primitivist perceives pain as a sign of authenticity, due to the hardship associated with primitive life. One who is living in such circumstances must fight to survive like an untamed wild beast. In all his novels Hemingway deals with killing and getting killed. As Edward Wagenknecht points out in his book *The Cavalcade of the American Novel*:

Hemingway hero makes an art out of killing. He is a highly sensitive, civilized man who feels himself under a terrible compulsion to kill. Santiago, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, regards the marlin as his brother and yet is determined is kill it. It looks as though he is motivated by a mysterious urge to kill the marlin just as the sharks are to bite off its flesh. (2)

The plot knits together the past, the present and the future. There are several references to the past. Manolin remembers how, when he was a five-year-old boy, he eye-witnessed Santiago's clubbing a big fish to death. Santiago recalls how his killing of a female marlin many years ago roused the wrath of its male partner. Manolin's and Santiago's planning to join together and go on another expedition soon takes the reader to a future of unrealized but not unrealizable potentialities. Adhikari states,

The frequent appearance of the lions in the old man's dreams illuminated that the old man had the will to live as the lions did and the lion could be thought of as a symbol of the old man's spirit. With the firm spirit and his hard working he got back the respect from his villagers. Santiago is the Superman. (119)

The character of Santiago lending itself to be interpreted in several different ways contributes to its richness and complexity. The old man of the sea, otherwise called Proteus in Greek mythology, is noted for his quick changes.

CONCLUSION

The existentialist finds himself in a hostile world. This is true Santiago. His fellow-fishermen shun him as an unlucky man. He returns home after a gap of three days in an utterly exhausted state. The tourists swarming in the village marvel of the huge size of the marlin's skeleton. They do not understand Santiago's agony and struggle with the cruel sharks. The only force that sustains Santiago is the boy Manolin's unreserved love and affection for him.

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