

Existential Nihilism in Bob Dylan's Selected Lyrics

Dr. Shweta K. Trivedi

Assistant Professor of English, Navyug College, Virpar (Morbi), Gujarat, India.

Abstract: Literature is the record of human existence on the earth. It connects with every phenomenon of life. Every work of art is meant to define the significance of human existence in the world. This research paper is an attempt to study existential nihilism in Bob Dylan's selected lyrics such as "Blowin' in the Wind", "Like a Rolling Stone", "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "Time Passes Slowly". Existential nihilism is the philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom and search for true meaning in a meaningless world. There are some key aspects of existential nihilism such as emphasis on individual existence, the role of anxiety and dreadfulness of life, skepticism, identity crisis, etc. The word "Nihilism" originates from the Latin word "nihil" which means "nothing". It denotes the absurdity of life and meaninglessness of life. Bob Dylan has denoted this aspect in his various works. It connects with the contemporary scenario of the society.

Key Words: Bob Dylan, Existential Nihilism, Absurdity, Human existence.

Introduction:

Bob Dylan is the most famous American songwriter, musician and folk singer who has created an incredible mark in the mind of contemporary readers. His lyrics are very popular in America and across the country. He has depicted the post modern and contemporary issues of the world. His lyrics are the product of his various experiences in America. His notable works are *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan (1963)*, *Bringing It All Back Home (1965)*, *Bringing It All Back Home (1965)*, *Highway 61 Revisited (1965)* *Bob Dylan at Budokan (1978)*, *Time out of Mind (1997)*, etc. His songs and music inspired various generations of musicians. He was awarded with a Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. He was acknowledged for his creativity with "new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition". (web)

His songs are the reflection of American tradition of folk music. He has written a memoir titled "Chronicles". He was influenced by the many scholars such as Woody Guthrie, Robert Johnson, Elvis Presley, Hank Williams, Homer, Ezra Pound, Beat Generation writers and Modernist poets. There are major themes of his songs like inequality, social injustice, anxiety, identity crisis, philosophical themes, societal issues, existentialism, alienation, nihilism, mortality of human life and song of protest. Bob Dylan has accepted himself as a poet first rather than a song writer, he said that "I consider myself a poet first and a musician second. I live like a poet and I'll die like a poet." (Zandt)

Theme of Existential Nihilism in Bob Dylan's Selected Lyrics:

There are some main themes of existential nihilism such as anxiety, identity crisis, ambiguity for the meaning of life, anguish, loneliness, absurdity and authenticity. There are some pioneers of nihilism like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Jean Paul Sartre. It is one kind of self- introspection to find out the meaning of being. Its roots lie in Socrates' thought called "know thyself". Existential nihilism is the matter of dilemma between being and becoming. This philosophy emphasizes the real identity of a person and some rhetorical questions like "Who am I?" It instincts us to see life with our own binoculars rather than to follow someone's thought blindly. It is the search for meaningful life and like that Bob Dylan has asked various questions to himself about the reality of the world in his many lyrics. Existential nihilism is focused on the theme of absurdity in various works of art. It is the self - centric perception of the individual. This philosophy

is totally subjective and insists on human existence. As Jadunath Sinha says, "Existentialism emphasizes the importance of man as an individual and his freedom and responsibility." (291)

Existential nihilism connects with the skepticism of life. This ism emerges from existential philosophy. This modern form of philosophy emerged in the 19th and 20th century in reaction to industrialism and the decline of morality in society. It explores the philosophy of absurdism which connects with the meaninglessness of life and focuses on the reality of life. It is one kind of revolutionary step towards the identity crisis. It emerged in the form of the awakening for the self and the real meaning of life. It connects with many kinds of rhetorical questions and philosophical pessimism. This notion leads to the rejection of the traditional values and beliefs of the society. Pascal states about the position of humans in between called nothing and something: "We burn with the desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the Infinite. But our whole groundwork cracks, and the earth opens to abysses" (qtd. in Abbagnano)

"Blowin in the Wind" is one of the remarkable lyrics written by Bob Dylan. He has asked many rhetorical questions to himself about the existence of the world. He has depicted many natural elements and their concern with the human world. He asked various questions to the animate and the inanimate things like roads, seas, dove, sand, cannonballs, mountains, sky, wind and man of the existence of the human on the earth. He answered them like a blow in the wind which defines the nothingness of human existence on the earth. He asks in his lyrics,

"How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, and how many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind" (Blowin' in the Wind)

In the above-mentioned stanza, he is introspective about the existence of humans, and he got answers like nothing. It defines the existential nihilism in his lyric. Its highly philosophical lyric which inspires the readers to quest for the reality of the human life. It denotes the absurdity of life also. In the further stanza he said that for how many years a man takes a birth on the earth before allowing to be free from the cycle of birth and death. It echoes the existential philosophy. He asked how many times a man can pretend for himself that everything is right. It's one kind of satire on the human situation in the present era. It emphasis on the identity crisis also. He says,

"Yes, and how many years must a mountain exist
Before it is washed to the sea?
Yes, and how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind" (Blowin' in the Wind)

Bob Dylan has asked many rhetorical and deep philosophical questions with the metaphors of natural elements, but everything is unanswered and finally he himself answers that the answer is blow in the wind, this depicts the nothingness of life. Jean Wahl describes in a very simple way the uncertainty of human life,

"I am there such as I am; and I neither know why or how; the only thing I know, truly and inexorably, is that someday I am going to die. And that is what limits all my possibilities and my future. My future limited, finite and I knowing it what my situation in this world is. I know that my existence is precarious and short and that I can lose it at any moment; that is why there is the substratum of anxiety, fear and anguish." (42)

"Time Passes Slowly" is another deep philosophical lyric which denotes the reality of human life and uncertainty. It depicts time as the enemy of human existence and how humans remain helpless in power of the time. It emphasizes on the nothingness of life and how humans can't stop the process of the time moving. He says,

"Time passes slowly up here in the mountains
We sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains
Catch the wild fishes that float through the stream
Time passes slowly when you're lost in a dream" (Time Passes Slowly)

In the above-mentioned stanza, Bob Dylan said that life is flowing in the hand of the time. We can't pause the time for a moment to know the reality of life. It denotes the absurdity and nothingness of human existence. He said that time passes slowly when people are lost in a dream, it connects with the daydreaming situation of humans rather than to quest for the reality of existence. He further says,

"Ain't no reason to go in a wagon to town
Ain't no reason to go to the fair
Ain't no reason to go up, ain't no reason to go down
Ain't no reason to go anywhere" (Time Passes Slowly)

Bob Dylan has explicitly described existential nihilism with his poetic diction (words) like "no reason and ain't". It is the perfect example of the nothingness of human life in the world. He addressed many questions about human existence, and it defines anxiety, alienation and absurdity. Brandon Carson says, "Dylan erupts with words that evoke feelings of confusion, chaos, anxiety, and our/his never-ending desire for love and meaning and purpose" (qtd. in Mai: 18). In the last stanza of the lyric he says,

"Time passes slowly up here in the daylight
We stare straight ahead and try so hard to stay right
Like the red rose of summer that blooms in the day
Time passes slowly and fades away" (Time Passes Slowly)

Bob Dylan says that time passes slowly up here in the daylight but being a human, we just stare at it and it's so hard to stay right in the negative situations. This time factor in human's life plays a significant role and slowly it passes and fades away. It defines the nothingness of human life and chaos of life. Reginster remarks,

“The concept of nihilism is most naturally associated with the second interpretation of the idea of a meaningful life. In the first place, in Nietzsche’s analysis, the terms *meaningless (sinnlos)* and *valueless (Werthlos)* are used interchangeably. In other words, the idea of a meaningful life is simply the idea of a life worth living, and so nihilism is the recognition of its valuelessness.” (Reginster 23)

“Like a Rolling Stone” is one of the lyrics written by Bob Dylan which is the prime example of the existential nihilism and identity crisis. He addressed one lady named Miss Lonely, who did not have her own identity and her situation is like a rolling stone in the street. It emphasizes the nothingness of human life without the real identity in the society. The title of the lyric is very appropriate as per the subject matter of the lyric called a situation of a Miss Lonely like a rolling stone. It defines humans as the inanimate thing like a stone whose identity is mediocre. It denotes the theme of despair, absurdity, authenticity for the reality and social injustice. Bob Dylan says in his poem,

“People’d call, say, “Beware doll, you’re bound to fall”
You thought they were all kiddin’ you
You used to laugh about
Everybody that was hangin’ out
Now you don’t talk so loud
Now you don’t seem so proud
About having to be scrounging for your next meal
How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?”

You have gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely” (Like a Rolling Stone)

“Mr. Tambourine Man” is one of the most famous lyrics written by Bob Dylan. It’s full of multiple interpretations and focused on the various themes. In this lyric, Bob Dylan has described the existential nihilism of asking various questions to God. It describes the ambiguity of life and unrest of the soul. It denotes the theme of death and despair of life. He says,

Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me,
I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to.
Hey, Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me (Mr. Tambourine Man)

Mr. Tambourine is the symbolic metaphor for God. In this lyric, he has introspected himself about the existence of the human on the earth. He said to take him on a trip which describes the intuition to leave the world and search for the new world. The major subject matter of the lyrics is agony, pain, despair, ambiguity of life and absurdity. The narrator of the lyric is faded up with life and wants to be an escapist. It echoes the theme of existential nihilism which emphasizes on the “nothingness”. Bob Dylan says,

“Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin’ ship,
My senses have been stripped, my hands can’t feel to grip,
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels

To be wanderin'.
I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade
Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way,
I promise to go under it." (Mr. Tambourine Man)

He has expressed his despair of humanity with the words of the lyric. He asked Mr. Tambourine to go with him on a new journey. Dylan has shown readiness to go anywhere with Mr. Tambourine. He says, "I'm ready to go anywhere, I'm ready for to fade" (web) His lyrics are the epitome of the existential nihilism which defines the absurdity of life. Justin Weinberg remarks, "As I kept on listening to Dylan, I heard, beyond the electrifying attacks on social injustice, articulations of (...) and longing and other fine-grained emotional states, meditations on mortality, and through it all a steady engagement with the fundamental ethical question: how to live. Dylan articulates an ethical ideal of personal freedom that reminded me of a philosopher like Dylan only in the sometimes-cryptic nature of his writing: G.W.F. Hegel." (web)

Conclusion:

In a nutshell, the theme of existential nihilism is found in Bob Dylan's various lyrics. He has depicted the nothingness of life and existential crisis of the human. His lyrics are the epitome of the deep philosophical thoughts which connect with the ancient philosophers' ideas like Homer, Socrates, Jean Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, etc.

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