

## **Quest for Self-realisation in the Novels of Ernest Hemingway**

**Nivedita Sinha**

The purpose of this paper is to display Hemingway's vision of man and his action related to exploration of the 'self'. With his strong faith in the potential and dignity of man, the novelist contends that an individual's ultimate goal should be to know the latent energy and power of the self. The quest for self-realisation has been a perpetual process of human beings since the primitive periods. Prophets, sages and seers – all have toiled a lot to attain this truth. In the process, they discovered the maxim of "know thyself" which proves to be a key to the understanding of human life shrouded in mystery. Hemingway finds man caught in the web of wordly dazzle, dreams and illusions and gets alienated from his self. His protagonists therefore, struggle hard encountering the challenges in life and nature to probe the mystery of life and death. In the process, they emerge victorious. With their unyielding disposition and unflinching determination, they prove that man is an unparallel piece of work who can be destroyed but not defeated. With this conviction, they achieve a tragic grandeur while discovering their self.

The universal self of man takes a general account of life of human beings throughout the spectrum of human history. But the latter has suffered fluctuations from time to time in proportion to the urge and intuition of man to know his place in the universe, the extent of his latent potentialities, value and purpose of his life. It is this urge to know and assert the personal self that is witnessed in the different phases of human history. Eve, the first mother of the human race, was inspired by the desire to know her 'self'. As soon as Eve is created by God, her first inner urge is to get the knowledge of the surrounding which she is inhabiting. She suffers from an intense obsession to know her place in the world. Therefore, it is but natural that she should embolden herself to go near the tree of knowledge and cast greedy eyes on its fruits even before and she is tempted by Satan. When Satan shows her the gifts of knowledge that she will receive by transgressing the will of God and by eating the fruits of knowledge, she promptly saturates her will. It is by asserting her own will over that of God that Eve asserts her 'self'. Even in *The Book of Job*, the protagonist suffers from an internal obsession to know his self.

As such there is nothing new about Hemingway's constant theme of 'exploration of self'. All the protagonists of the ancient Greek tragedies are seen engaged in exploring their real self. Oedipus unknowingly murders his father and marries his mother. It is a secret. But the sudden breaking of plague in his kingdom and the prophecy at Delfi of God Apollo that the plague will not stop until the guilty of the murder of Laius is punished, kindle an intense urge in Oedipus to know his 'self'. All the Marlowean heroes meet their tragic end in course of their assertion of self. The advent of Renaissance opens a new vista of hope, adventure and inquiry before the people of England. They start now trusting their potentialities. They explore their self by exploiting the human energy to the fullest extent.

Most of the novels of Hemingway deal with the themes of sexual degeneration, individual isolation, fear complex and existential anxiety. The hydra-headed monster of problems had reared up its ugly head and torn all the values of life with unconcealed fangs, inspite of the sustained efforts of the sane thinkers to hold this demon of barbarity in check. The world that has been envisioned as a stony universe in "The Waste Land" of T.S. Eliot, chaotic in "The Decline of the West" of Spengler and decadent in "The Second Coming" of W.B. Yeats, cannot be set in opposition to a genius who, equipped with boundless stamina and bubbling enthusiasm, is ready to face it. Such a genius is Ernest Hemingway who, though not equipped with the fine frenzy of Yeats, can attempt to diagnose the pedantic American disease and can do his best to resolve the crisis of 'self'.

The rapid progress in material luxury and scientific knowledge had severe repercussions on the 'self' of Americans. Though material comfort and intellectual growth gave superficial satisfaction to them, yet their 'self' remained dissatisfied. This made people revolt against the growing mechanisation of life. Naturally, a drive against materialism came into existence and this was called the "Happy movement or Best Generation movement". The Hippies came to realise that the very 'self' of Americans in particular and Westerners in general was getting annihilated by the growing material force. They attempted to liberate 'self' by resorting to free and natural life.

Man, today, is at the crossroads of utter confusion, in fact, at a loss to decide as to what course of action should be taken in the face of harsher realities of life. The erosion of ethical and social values and the occurrence of the devastating world wars shocked man into the loss of his 'self', "I

was/I no more exist". (*The Golden Treasury* 319) Human beings lost faith in executing worthy actions to realise their 'self'. Naturally, life has been reduced to what T.S. Eliot calls "... a hundred visions and revisions, before taking of a toast and tea". (*Selected Poems* 12) It is this loss of vitality in life to realise the "self" that has bred existential anxiety. The French existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard, Satre, Camus and others, too try to explore existential agony of 'self'.

Hemingway's first step towards his aim of encountering existential problems is to accept reality as it is. In other words, he does not want illusions or dreams to be a refuge for escaping from the hard realities of life. Eugene O'Neill in "The Ice Man Cometh" shows that men from different walks of life are so horrified by the existential cruelty that they take asylum in pipedreams. Tennessee Williams in his play *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Street Named Desire* shows how illusion are being nursed to escape from existential agony. But Hemingway asks people to follow the religion of reality and hard facts. "So live in it and never show it", writes Hemingway in his story, "A Clean Well Lighted Place", "was all a nothing and a man was nothing, too". (Barrett 41) Here, the artist is exhorting the people to gain awareness of reality which may ultimately lead him to the realisation of 'self'. This fact has found an artistic presentation in his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Here, he depicts the life - style of human beings who have lost the sense of real purpose of life on earth.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway has once again denounced illusions as Utopian ideals meant to escape from the existential anxiety of self. The protagonist of the novel, Henry who is in the army, nurses a false opinion about life in war and in love. He says:

Well I knew I would not be killed.  
Not in this war. It did not have  
anything to do with me. It seemed no  
more dangerous to me myself than  
war in the movies. (*A Farewell to  
Arms* 31)

Though Henry is unconsciously living in a makebelieve world of romance, yet Hemingway makes no concession in administering shocks to make him realise the existential realities of life – that all the human relationships are bound to shatter and dream world collapse.

In his another novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway's vision of existential problem is present in an epic magnitude. The protagonist, Jordan is in possession of the knowledge about temporal human relationships and inevitable extinction of life. Hemingway has very artistically brought into the most universal existential problems whether the true existence of self lies in the pursuit of one's own welfare and ambition or in the sacrifice of one's personal ambition and happiness for something universal.

The existential problem of self - recognition has most extensively been explored by Hemingway in his last novel, *The Old Man And The Sea*. This 'self' of an individual can exist only by making a Jordan - like commitment and translating it into reality. This has been presented in a concrete fashion in *The Old Man and The Sea*. The old man, Santiago, has not been able to catch even a single fish for the last eighty four days. Other fishermen jeer at his failure. This old man is a symbol of modern individual who is deemed to be bankrupt of all valour and stamina. Cast out by a success - driven society, he temporarily loses his self-poise, for a destabilisation of the individual's achieved status inevitably depletes his self - belief. So, revealing his self-alienation, the old man cries out, "I have no luck anymore".(*The Old Man and the Sea* 25) But his resilient mettle soon asserts itself and he proclaims, "I may not be as strong as I think ... But I have many tricks and I have resolution".(17) Since a fisherman can redeem his honour only by making the fishing voyage successful, the next day he rose out far into the sea with hope and determination in order to re-establish himself. The rising sun is painful to the eys of the old man but, "All my life the early sun has hurt my eyes, he thought yet they are still good."(29) He encounters all the obstacles of life with perfect ease and composure. All the time, the old man is pensively on the lookout for a big fish.

The old man's luckless voyage symbolises the struggle between man and nature with the ancient bonds between hunters and hunted. Respecting his prey, the hunter must nevertheless assert at any price the power of man. He attains supreme position in the hearts of many by killing the fish and killing it well. There is a gradual shift in his personality trying to adjust itself or rather appropriate the same in order to establish the existence of the self. In fact, when we put Santiago along with all other significant characters, he stands apart because in him perhaps we find Hemingway's enduring concern with the co-existence and intersection between the 'human world' and the 'natural world'. The author shows

that true commitment and hopeful attitude are necessary for realisation of true 'self'.

Obviously, Hemingway's novels have been an odyssey of 'self' and their tenor a positive, dynamic, active stance of life. He has not explored life with any intellectual realities. What he has in common with the general humanity is the acute experience of complete loss of faith in practically any of the traditional values, an awareness of violence and death. He sets out in a journey to assert and explore 'self' under the changed circumstances. His exploration of 'self' by actuating the dormant potentialities of man endears him to the majority of the readers of the post war period.

#### **Works Cited**

Barrett, William. *Irrational Man*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1962.  
Clare, John. "I am". *The Golden Treasury* (Ed) Palgrave. Calcutta : Oxford University Press, 1980.  
Eliot T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". *Selected Poems*. London : Faber and Faber, 1954.  
Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. St. Albans : Triad/Panther Books, 1977.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New Delhi : Surjeet Publications, 1977.