

Marginality Shatters Existence: An Existential Reading on Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Pleasure Marriage*

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The marginalisation of people based on caste, creed, gender, and race has been rooted in the past and continues in various forms. The realisation of the self and the true purpose of human existence compel individuals to transcend man-made divisions and assert their identity. The article analyses how questions of existence push racially discriminated black people to forge their path by revealing their inhibited existential freedom within the framework of existentialism. The article draws on characters from the novel *The Pleasure Marriage* by the famous Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun to reveal how the mind and consciousness function as tools through which humans search for the reason for their existence.

Key Words: Marginalisation, Racial discrimination, Existentialism, Migration, Racism

Human mind is a treasure land where one can find means for a luxurious, satisfying and comfortable lifestyle. A true introspection into the human mind gives answers to the questions that human beings constantly ponder and strive for. Mind and consciousness are part of the tool that helps to light an individual's yearning for their true existence. Human beings for most of their life earn for their survival and livelihood, to make sure their existence in society. The underpinnings of human existence are given a theoretical foundation by various schol-

ars and its acute representation is evident in existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical study that aids men to find the logic behind human existence. The Western philosophical movement is defined as the approach “which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will” (Oxford Dictionary). Existentialists believe that self is the determiner of man’s culture which is strictly against the views of some behaviourists that people’s behaviour is governed by law. Dugald Arbuckle (1965) in his “Existentialism in Counselling: The Humanist View” states that “The free man lives within the laws of his culture, but he is not bound by them. They do not control him, rather his self transcends them” (p.560). The pioneers of the philosophical movement are Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. The tenets of existentialism are widely accepted in the academic world, especially in literature and emerge as a multidisciplinary field of study known as existential literature. The field of study encompasses various disciplines such as Atheistic existentialism, Black existentialism, Christian existentialism, Cosmism, Existential humanism, Existential nihilism, Existential migration, Feminist existentialism, Jewish existentialism, postmodern theology and Theatre of the Absurd. Existentialism is one of the important elements in post-colonial writings. Most of the people in the colonial nations long for lost traditions and tugs for their existence. The worst victims of the existential crisis are racially discriminated people. Discrimination based on man-made notions makes the life of marginalised folk pathetic. To make a living in a compartmentalised society is a herculean task. The worst of the discriminated people were the racially discriminated ones where both black men and women try hard to eke out a living.

As time passes world has changed and society progressed considerably though age-old conventions, superstitious beliefs and notions persist in slacken forms. When society embraces the changes it is reflected in every living being within. The servitude behaviour, assigned to the black community by the white race has become a fairy tale in the modern era despite their vain efforts to make the blacks conform to it. Racism and racial discrimination are still a nightmare in the so-called advanced modern era. Persecutions against poor innocent blacks by white people are some of the recent incidents in the

contemporary world especially in America and white-majority nations that evoke conventional racist thoughts. The divisions like white-black, capitalist-poor, and powerful-powerless that has its roots soiled in the colonial era shows its poisonous fangs in various forms in the present scenario too. The marginalisation of poor people, denying educational and economic opportunities based on caste, creed and gender, and deliberate exclusion of discriminated sections from society by the powerful are the forms of oppression that disrupt the very existence of human beings in their homeland.

The marginalised people are deliberately alienated in society and the discriminative attitude of society grabs their every possibility of existence. The concept of alienation which finds expression in sociological, theological, philosophical and psychological writings is one of the major tenants of existentialism. Though the concept was given various explanations from Marxist and sociological perspectives, existential writers try to discover the cause from man's consciousness. Erich Fromm (1960) in his *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* describes while experiencing alienation from society and oneself, man painfully wares the fact that, "life runs out of one's hand like sand, and that one will die without having lived; that one lives in the midst of plenty and joyless" (p. 86). The modern man never stops to pursue his existence though he is alienated and oppressed in society.

The questions and dilemmas over one's existence despite one's endeavours to fit into society urge one to defy the rules and conventions that inhibit one's freedom. This is true in the case of most of the side-lined communities; black people are not an exception. In such situations, people realize that they are not comfortable in their environment because they live in a heated setting or that they are too sensitive to discover the contradictions in their lives and also in their fellow beings. "The process that leads to this kind of reaction has always existed in the West" (Agbada, p.1). Richard Taylor (1977) in his "The Twentieth Century: Contemporary Trends" rightly states, "The individual has found himself no longer in control of his fate, he has become a puppet whose actions and reactions are determined by external forces" (p.193). Men exist in a world where he is perpetually in chains, either nature-made or man-induced. They desire to know through rationalistic preoccupations, the reasons for the incongruities

of their immediate environment which gradually paved the way for the acknowledgement of their existence. The hierarchical categorisation and marginalisation based on black and white skin prevail in societies where they live together. Morocco, a North African country also faces this issue though many progressive men consider all human beings as equal. The sufferings and struggles for the existence of black people are one of the recurrent themes in Moroccan literature.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, the greatest living writer of Morocco, gives voice to the silenced sufferings and human psyche of black people through his works. The innate desire to assert their individuality and inclusion towards society to mark their existence motivates them to break the boundaries and taboos. The paper chooses Tahar ben Jelloun's novel *The Pleasure Marriage* to understand how existentialism helps black people in Morocco affirm their existence and existential freedom in a place that denied them this. The novel revolves around the life of Amir and his second wife, a black woman named Nabua, and their children and grandchildren. Amir is a tradesman from a family of wealthy merchants and he stays in Africa for a long period to sort out his business there and take needed raw materials and resources for the shop in his homeland. This tempts him to take a contract wife, other than his legal wife, which is allowed in his community by the name "nikah mut'ah" (Jelloun, 2021, p.11) also known as temporary marriage or pleasure marriage. Thus he indulges in the practice of pleasure marriage and chooses an African beauty named Nabua to contract with him. Things turned upside down when he finds true love and abiding loyalty in Nabua which encourages him to take her as his lifelong partner. The dream-like life of Nabua in Senegal becomes topsy-turvy when she was taken with Amir to his homeland, Fez, a Moroccan soil rooted in racism.

Racism is a great threat to society because it separates people, deprives them of their humanity, and turns them into beasts. "The very serious function of racism is a distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being" (Morrison). Racism is in the blood of most Moroccans, so it is not surprising that they discriminate against Nabua because of her dark skin colour, even though she is good-looking, has friendly manners, and has a peaceful mentality. The novel begins with Amir, but in

the second half of the novel, Salim, Amir's grandson, turns the pages. Nabua, who has entered into a legal, permanent marriage with Amir, gives birth to twin boys, one black and one white; Salim is the son of her black child. The problems related to his marriage to Nabua force him to leave his hometown of Fez. So he emigrates to Tangier and opens a new business there. Nabua is the first victim of racial discrimination in the novel. She was able to thaw the taboos and racial prejudice when she hears the voices of her mind and conscience and finally acknowledges her existential freedom. She didn't give her ears to the murmurs and whispers of society that she must be treated as a slave and confined within the four walls, deprived of any human rights. Her son Hassan and his son Salem are portrayed as depressed, angry and always blaming their pathetic situations due to their skin tone. But everything changes when they probe societal attitudes that inhibit their rights over their existence and follow the path of their mind and conscience to revive the freedom and liberty in making choices which they believe are innate in human beings. Existentialism states that human beings are free to act upon and take a stand in situations irrespective of social milieu and structures. The concern for human existence compels them not to subordinate their self-awareness to abstract concepts and dehumanizing social structures.

One of the most important contributions of existentialism is the recognition that reason is not a fundamental or necessary aspect in the conceptualisation of 'man'. The existentialists created a discursive opening with their views and ideas for those who are on the margins and whose experiences fall outside the normative space of reason. They interpreted themselves as 'invisible', 'absent', or 'unreal' because of social attitudes. Frantz Fanon in his *The Fact of Blackness* states about the pathetic conditions of black people and the derogatory attitude of society towards them. He writes:

I was hated, despised, detested, not by the neighbor across the street or my cousin on my mother's side, but by an entire race. I was up against something unreasoned. ... I would personally say that for a man whose only weapon is reason there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason. ... When I was present, it [reason] was not; when it [reason] was there, I was no longer.

(Fanon, 1996, p. 118–120)

Fanon's words give us awareness of the "situated, affective and embodied ways of being and the forms of oppression unique to each situation" (Aho, 2014, p.143). The novel not only gives light on the oppressions that black people face but also their efforts to regain their existence. Though society endeavours to put black people in chains, Nabua managed to forge her path with her incomparable skills in designing, stitching and tailoring. The racial difference between her twin boys led the life of her black child, Hassan pathetic. The happy life and privileged status of his white brother, Hussein often depressed him and distracts him from his work. "Hassan was obsessed by his origins, by the color of his skin" (Jelloun, 2021, p.84). He wishes to follow in the footsteps of his mother's family which she deliberately discourages him. She urges him to live with his family and make use of opportunities at the right time to achieve prosperity in life rather than losing himself in the past. He has a son named Salim who was a real fighter, unlike his father. "He fought back at the slightest racist remark. He was a rebel, which his father secretly admired" (Jelloun, 2021, p.88). The more he fight more he thought of his origin and his existence in this white-dominated place which motivates him to find others who feel the same and go back to Africa, the land generally considered as the home of all blacks.

Tangier is a well-known port city and borders some European countries, giving Moroccans easy access to all kinds of illegal migration. Natives who failed to find existence in their land are tempted to migrate to other lands where they hope to find a more liberal social situation. Morocco is a country with strict immigration rules and regulations. Ordinary people opt for illegal immigration for cost reasons, as legal immigration is time-consuming and expensive for them. Salim desires to leave his native place because he finds it difficult to live among the narrow-minded prejudiced people. It is argued that the relationships within the family, especially between the parents, and the general dynamics within the home environment catalyse the process of migration to some extent. Salim is the victim of racism which attack him fiercely and makes him a migrant. "...the process of 'existential migration' encompasses something indeterminately 'given' and myste-

rious, interwoven with complicated biographical circumstances and facilitated by the potential for travel” (Madison, 2006, p.116)

Salim decides to rescue the poor black people from the clutches of cruel racists. He saved every penny to buy a camera so that he could show the world the miserable lives of migrant Africans in Morocco. “From time to time, in these neighbourhoods, deprived Moroccan squatters declared war on the Africans. Tangier then showed its ugliest and most disturbing face” (Jelloun, 2021, p.92). The poor blacks in the country were considered cursed and alienated in the land where they are born. The harsh attitude towards black people encourages them to think about their origins, as they have always been seen as different. Salim has heard that Saddam's neighbouring city, Tangier, was full of migrants and that they suffered a lot under the racist government. The government considers black migrants “as black as sin, as black as the night of crime, as black as the great gate to hell” (Jelloun, 2021, p.94). His trip to Saddam was so disappointing that the police mistook him for an illegal Guinean suspected of burglary, even though he tried to inform them of his Moroccan identity, along with five other African suspects. So he was sent to his grandmother's home country, Senegal. He settled in Dakar and got a job there as a teacher at the imam's school. He was now busy with his job, had saved some money, eaten his fill, and found pleasure in discovering the city. He could have stayed there happily, but he wants to realise his true destiny. “He could have found himself among the African crowd and lived from day to day like most people, but something prevented him from being content with that. He wanted to know what his destiny reserved for him” (Jelloun, 2021, p.101). He feels that his true purpose in life is to live a life he wishes, not the one society chooses for him. He joins the group of Africans who set out to cross the Strait of Gibraltar on foot which has the same motif.

Africans feel alienated wherever they go, and their dilemmas and confusions about existence depress them and make their lives hell. Africans believe they will have a better life in Europe “Europe, the city where everything was possible, life, the crossing, death, too” (Jelloun, 2021, p.104). The questions about one's real existence make one thoughtful and inspire one to fight the oddities to achieve true

purpose and make life meaningful. “Existentialism, therefore, leads man to rebel against established ideas and institutions that not only inhibit personal freedom, but also fosters situations that give rise to a shattered world for fellow human beings” (Agbada p.2). Salim is restless and not satisfied with the jobs he took because a deep analysis of his self taught him that the true purpose of life and the meaning of existence is to fight for the justice and equality of oppressed people like him. Probing deep into man’s inner existence and his being- in the world discloses his desolation and despair, struggle and suffering. As F.H.Heinemann puts it, “Because the very existence of man on this earth is menaced, because the annihilation of man, his dehumanisation and the destruction of his humanity and all moral values is the real danger, therefore the meaning of human existence becomes our problem.” Existentialists believe that individuals must make choices and decisions in life using their will. Salem while seeking answers to his real existence, becomes powerful enough to come out from the position of so-called ‘black slave’ and crave a new path where he can use his talents and potential. Existentialists are preoccupied with man's inner life, and they analyse the human situation or condition.

Racism and its impacts on human existence are given an acute representation in the novel. Racism is an intellectual and powerful domination of a section of people on others based on their skin colour only to attain their selfish needs. The position of black people as slaves, servants and labours and their exclusion from society is to make sure that the needs of whites are done without adieu and by dominating them, they feel powerful. This tendency of domination for self-interest is still waving its hand in the modern world. The powerful people are dominating the weak sections to retain their position and privileged status. Thus racism is still a contemporary relevant phenomenon as domination for selfish needs is seen everywhere in the world.

Tahar ben Jelloun voices the inner turmoil and sufferings of black people and their yearnings for mere existence in the land they were born in through his representative characters. The novel brilliantly portrays how the thoughts on attaining existence led individuals to break taboos and create their own spaces. The novel also throws light on how age-old racist thoughts are still present in the contemporary world in different forms and the mentality of oppressed sections

towards alienation.

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