

## Extrication of “Dasein” from “They”: An Existentialist Reading of Hanif Kureishi’s “Straight”

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### Abstract

The study on Hanif Kureishi’s short story “Straight” analyses the protagonist’s existential transformation from they-self to dasein-self. This liberation is actualised when Brett, the existentialist hero confronts death in the guise of an accident by the river. This confrontation of the dreadful incident enables Brett to get a parallax view of the finitude of human life. This transformation of an individual is encapsulated in the existential tenet of dasein’s authentic perspective. The story is analysed within the framework of Martin Heidegger’s theory of Being-in-the-world developed in his monumental work *Being and Time*. The story is read as an existentialist exhortation of living an authentic life abiding by one’s norms and one’s freedom as a human being. The individual itself determines the conduct of one’s life and Kureishi’s short story, “Straight” provides a clear illustration of the same.

**KEYWORDS:** dasein-self/non-conformist self, they-self/ conformist self, authenticity, Being-in-the-world, Existentialism.

Jean Paul Sartre says in “Existentialism is a Humanism”:

When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. (291-2)

“Straight” portrays a man who has chosen the better perspective of life and great value is affirmed for that which is chosen; the chosen is the dasein that is extricated from They. The story is a remarkable account of the role/confrontation of death in achieving authenticity. This compelling narrative endorses the theory of authenticity as postulated by the Existentialists. The short story, “Straight” is the exemplar manifestation of how an individual transforms at the face of death. It illustrates the profound transformation of Brett after he has nearly drowned. This transformation at the anticipation of one’s death is one of the pivotal themes of Existentialism. Martin Heidegger developed this theme of metamorphosis in *Being and Time*. Harch in “Heidegger’s authentic self (Dasein) and they self (Das Man): A discussion of boredom and its influence on being-in-the-world” maintains that

Heidegger. . .distinguishes between the inauthentic ‘I’, they-self or Das Man, and the authentic, ‘I’, Dasein. When the telling refusal of all beings expresses indifference not to the former but to the latter, that is to say, Dasein. As a result, the real or authentic self is brought face-to-face with the inauthentic one. (3-4)

Wartenberg points out in *Existentialism* about this concept of transformation as “The crucial claim of his account is that anticipating one’s death can transform one from living an alienated life structured in conformity to the standards of others to achieving an authentic life in which one’s own values are paramount.” (163)

An individual self is often instigated by living a conformist life, the life that is steered by the accepted norms and not by the individual selves. Existentialists assert that the self that individual has initial access and affinity is the conformist self. Our normal course of action is greatly deviant from the action propelled by the inner voice. This division between the normal, accepted actions and the inner voice actions is of paramount importance to Existentialists. As endorsed by Existentialists, one of the ways towards the attainment of the self other than the self-conforming alienated self is the confrontation of death. As Wartenberg asserts, “A more definitive path is that provided by death, for the Existentialists – Martin Heidegger in particular- think that facing one’s own death provides the force needed to extricate oneself. . .” (*Existentialism*, 166)

The short story “Straight” underscores this tenet of Existentialism. When Brett is almost dead by drowning, the new life unfolds before him the grave realization of the disintegrated, futile ennui life he has hitherto lived. Brett abandons his old routine of conformist life in pursuit of a more authentic life. He embraces the Existentialist authentic life and discards the conformity life. Brett is determined to live a more meaningful, complete and fulfilling life. Wartenberg says, “As Tolstoy describes it- and Heidegger endorses and follows him in this respect- the authentic self is there in the deepest recesses of our being, awaiting our discovery and acknowledgement”. (*Existentialism*, 170)

The confrontation of death exhorts Brett to live his authentic life. His accidental drowning changes him profoundly and he is dejected by the vacuity of his past life. This self –revelation distances Brett from his friends and he loses interest in things he had revelled in.

Wartenberg explains, “For Heidegger, death- or more fully, an authentic being-towards-death- individualizes Dasein, frees a person from their immersion in the They.” (*Existentialism*, 171)

For Heidegger, it is the “dictatorship of the They” (*Being and Time*, 126). Surpassing the They for the individual is the victory for Existentialists. Wartenberg says, “Beginning with Kierkegaard’s objection to what he took to be Hegel’s valorization of the universal over and above the particular, the Existentialist tradition asserted the importance of achieving individuality.” (*Existentialism*, 173)

The ironical circumstance is that the absurdity of life becomes apparent by the absurdity of death, induced while engaging in a trivial act of mundanity. Brett was drowned when he went to pee near the river and got drowned by sheer carelessness. At the cost of this triviality, Brett would have lost his life. This symbolizes the triviality for Brett. The disjunction between the two, the careless act and the cost it would have entailed, reveals the absurdity of life, and paves way for his transformation. Wartenberg insists, “That an ordinary, everyday occurrence can have deep and abiding consequences for the life of a human being is one mark of the absurd.” (*Existentialism*, 173). This revelation has deep significances as it prompts Brett to re-evaluate his whole life. Brett’s life testifies the process of self-transformation that forms the crux of the school of thought, Existentialism.

Wartenberg elucidates it as, “. . . a process that Heidegger describes as Dasein freeing itself from the domination of the They and achieving an authentic potentiality-for-being.” (*Existentialism*, 175) Finally, as mentioned by Wartenberg, Brett has “discovered what Heidegger terms the voice of conscience that discloses the possibility of authentic existence”. (*Existentialism*, 175)

The very beginning of the story is the testimony of the transformation that Brett undergoes. “For days he had been fearful of this night but wanted to believe he was ready” (209). The reference here is to the party that Brett has been dreading for days as his non-conformist self has started disliking it. However, the transformation is not complete, it seems to be a slow and gradual process as far as Brett is concerned.

. . . he started to feel afraid that people would notice, that they would be able to tell right away what had happened to him, and how he had changed. He wondered whether his friends would think badly of him. He considered who would be hostile, who envious and who sympathetic.”(209).

This reveals that a tinge of the conformist self is still to be erased from Brett. He is conscious of conforming to They. And the transformed Brett is someone whom his friends cannot accept. The conversation between Francine and Brett signals that Brett is behaving oddly and we see Francine exhorting him to regain his old normal self.

“Is there really something wrong with me, Francine? Tell me if you think there is.”

“What’s right with you? You haven’t laughed at anything I’ve said.”

... “You banged your head when you fell in the river. That’s what did you in. Isn’t that right?” (212)

After the transformation, Brett is able to hear his inner voice and shows the courage to live up to his wish. He no longer wants to revel in the mundanity or urban ennui that he has pursued so far. What is remarkable about this transformation is that he no longer could be condescended. Francine says,

“Forget all that, Brett, the thing is, I think we both need to go away. It’s that time of the year. How about Rio?”

“Now”?

“Tomorrow Morning.”

“It’s too far.”

“Paris? It’s only up the road now.”

“What would we do?”

“Eat, drink, go out.”

“I don’t want to do that anymore.” (215)

At the Gala, he is forced into the celebration and the routine revelry makes him ponder over his past. He is now able to understand the futility and vacuity of his past. Brett contemplates, “How much money he had spent on it over the years, not to

mention energy! In the bathroom, he threw the drink away and filled his glass with water. What a beautiful drink water was.”(216)

The transformed non- conformist Brett could relate himself with the taxi driver who rescued him. This is exemplified when the narrator says, “Like the taxi driver, Brett seemed to be in a world where everyone resembles him but spoke in foreign language.”(217)

The emergence of a new self that is steered entirely by one’s own intuition and inner voice creates an urge in Brett to re-evaluate and rewind his life to start anew. Instead of going by the norms and rules set by the society, Brett takes the untrodden path led by his whims alone. “It would be a way of starting again, or returning to a state of teenage curiosity, when you might take any path that presented itself, seeing where it led.”(217) Even Brett conceives of the North African taxi driver as a man who was disgusted by the ways in which his strange customers thrived. He was “... despised or invisible amongst abhorrent fools who had so much of everything...” (218)

Wartenberg elucidates this important characteristic feature of Existentialism where human beings are urged to consider individuality as the fundamental value of human life in *Existentialism*:

What the Existentialists sought to counter was the tendency of human beings to live their lives guided by standards valid for all; what they advocated instead was the attempt by each of us to structure a life in a way that embodies what is distinctive about us as an individual. Rather than submit to the norms of what has been called ‘the mass’, ‘the herd’, and ‘the crowd’, the Existentialists encourage people to develop their uniqueness, their own special qualities. This means that the answers people develop to the fundamental questions about how to live their lives are ones that they have to work out as individuals. Hence, the Existentialists’ distrust of the general and their admiration for the particular. (22).

Brett’s existential transformation endorses this concept of emphasis of the dasein-self or individual human being whose norms are not prescribed by They but themselves.

HanifKureishi’s works predominantly deal with the themes of social identity and sexual and cultural politics but the short story “Straight” is about an urban dweller’s existential dilemmas. The existential introspection of the character is portrayed by dwelling deep into thoughts and anxieties of the protagonist, Brett. The short story “Straight” undercuts the conformist tendencies that hinder people’s ability to live their lives fully and freely. As Heidegger asserts in *Being and Time*, “Being-toward-death is not an orientation that brings Dasein closer to its end, in terms of clinical death, but is rather a way of being.”(247). The process is exemplified as something that helps an individual gain an authentic perspective. This process of evolution could be initiated by either death or dread. This perspective of authenticity is what drives the dasein-self of Brett out of the they-self. The accident by the river side instigates Brett to re-evaluate his life from the point of finitude. As propounded by Heidegger, the dasein-self is drawn out by hearing the Gewissensruf (call of conscience), the voice that is generated from dasein’s own self when it wants to be its self. The realization that dawn upon Brett after confronting the dread metamorphoses him so much so that Francine opines about getting admission in a rehab. The story unravels the awakening of the authentic self by listening to the inner consciousness.

However, the new authentic dasein self lives in integration with the they and not in seclusion from the rest. As Heidegger asserts in *Being and Time*, “It is rather an existential modification of the they (168)

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