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The Fate of Man in Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*

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Abstract

The fate of man in the modern society has become a significant study that emerged in the field of literature and its analysis. Modern man is caught in a web of his emotions where the search for the truth of life and ultimate self-realization are the important ideals of human existence. The Outsider is an analysis and the study of man and his existence where the search for truth and self-realization becomes the highest ideals that he can ever achieve. The meaning of life and the search for truth can be depicted in Colin Wilson's analysis of his theory *The Outsider*. Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* is a philosophical study of the meaning of human existence and the search for truth and identity. This paper attempts to study Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* in light of the fate of man in the modern world where the search for truth and identity has become a vague idea. Also, an attempt will be made to reveal the fate of man as Colin Wilson denotes in his philosophical work.

Keywords - Fate of man, Modern society, Outsider, Truth, Self-realization

The notion of "The Outsider" forms the philosophical basis of thought and analysis in the study of literature. *The Outsider* focuses on the meaning of existence, life and death, the essence of reality, and the pain and agony that all human beings undergo in life. It is a revolutionary sub text where "literature is about trying to capture the one or two moments in your life when your heart opened up" (Albert Camus). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus affirms that the philosophical question that all human beings should understand is the thought of suicide. *The Outsider* will therefore have to search for the meaning of life and seek to understand the questions of existence.

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The English writer, Colin Wilson (1831-1922), first published his book *The Outsider* (1956) which became successful in his career as a writer. In *The Outsider*, Wilson explores the world of the outsider where the meaning of life becomes a living hell and truth becomes the shield for discovering his inner self. Having wrote the book in the reading room of the British Museum and living in a sleeping bag at Hampstead Heath, the book was strikingly successful because a new kind of consciousness emerged at a time when alienated people lost their self consciousness. Marilyn Ferguson in *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) declares that as the book appeared in the mid 50's, there is a wave of self developmental and spiritual connectivity that was visible during the 1960's and ever since it has been a major part of western culture. It belongs to the same cultural shift as that of the Beat poets, the hippie movement, Zen, Timothy Leary and Carlos Castaneda. Steve Taylor points out that "In fact, to some degree, the Outsider actually helped to create this movement, with its advocacy of mysticism and spiritual development, and the attention it gave to previously obscure figures like Hesse and Gurdjieff" (Stanley 81).

One of the reasons why Colin Wilson's philosophical book works so well is because it produces a high literary quality where even now the book remains amazingly fresh. Wilson surpasses all his contemporaries like Angus Wilson's novels, even *Room at the Top* or *Lucky Jim*. However, only a few writers have this fresh quality, for example, Schopenhauer, Henry Miller or F. Scott Fitzgerald. For Steve Taylor, the Outsider "seems strangely modern for a book written more than half a century ago" (Stanley 85) and that "its message seems even more relevant, now that the wave of self development and consciousness expansion has intensified so much, despite the currents of post-modernist superficiality and scepticism which oppose it" (85). No doubt the book itself is a turning point in the life of the writer who brought immense contribution in the field of literature and philosophy. Critics agreed that the great lesson the book teaches is the fate of man in the modern world and man's strive for achieving a desired goal, as Nathan A. Scott, Jr points out:

when a sensitive and intelligent young person like himself seeks today to ask questions of a truly fundamental sort about the fate of man in the modern world, it is natural for his sensibility and his imagination to find their deepest anchorage in those traditions of philosophic and religious radicalism...because they have called into question the basic

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idolatries of the age, an age which has been committed to the positivistic religion of scientific rationalism. (136)

Colin Wilson examines the outsider problem in his book *The Outsider* where the book structures in a well defined manner. The structure of the book has a literary quality with strong narratives and there is a compulsive forward flow which proceeds in a logical and linear fashion. Wilson, first of all, examines the first category of outsiders, they are the most neurotic and least developed group of people - the narrator of Henry Barbusse's *L'Enfer* and Sartre's *Roquentin*; then he examines the Romantic Outsiders whose isolation can be moved by an awakening of spiritual experiences, here Wilson cite examples from Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* and Nietzsche's the 'ultimate man' and 'superman'; then he comes to the Artistic Outsiders whose art expresses the transcendent world of the self, thereby examining the works of Van Gogh and Nijinski; finally he concludes by discussing the next type of Outsider and that is the Visionary Outsiders, who have permanently reached a state of integral awakening and thereby solving the problems of the outsider. The above discussion can be proved by a statement made by Taylor in his article called *The Outsider: From Existentialism to Enlightenment*, he writes:

This narrative arc is the developmental journey of the Outsider, from self-division and alienation, through temporary transcendence to permanent spiritual awakening, or enlightenment. Or in philosophical terms, this is the journey from existentialism, through to romanticism towards mysticism. Unfortunately though, as Wilson shows, many Outsiders don't make the whole journey, but become stuck at the earlier stages, due to a lack of self-understanding or self-belief. (Stanley 82)

Like all other existentialist philosophers, Wilson is an existentialist who analyzes the fate of man and also the meaninglessness of human life in an empty and indifferent world. Like Sarte and Camus, Wilson describes the strangeness of unreality that life offers in the lives of people who are self divided and estranged from their deepest inner self. He calls them the existential Outsiders whose self division is a "sense of strangeness of unreality" (Wilson25). He further states that "The Outsider's sense of unreality cuts of his freedom at the root. It is as impossible to exercise freedom in an unreal world as it is to jump while you are falling" (49). Therefore, the outsider is someone who "needs something more, but his

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drive is blind; he doesn't have enough insight or self-knowledge to understand it" (Stanley 83) and at the end he will continue to solve the existential crisis of 'this world-without-values' (Wilson 47). Many reviewers have proclaimed that at the age of twenty four Wilson was incredibly possessing a supremacy over his theory of the existence of man in a subdued world. According to Hazel E. Barnes:

... the Outsider must be someone who felt himself to be out of step with society, who believed that the solution lay neither in better adjustment to the social nor in reform of society but rather in spiritual improvement, a process which isolated him even further but compensated with inner peace and mystic ecstasy. (382)

For Wilson, the Outsider stands for truth. In the first chapter 'The Country of the Blind' Wilson describes the characteristics of the outsider. He says:

What can be said to characterize the outsider is a sense of strangeness of unreality... This is the sense of unreality that can strike out of a perfectly clear sky. Good health and strong nerves can make it unlikely; but that may be only because the man in good health is thinking of other things and doesn't look in the direction where the uncertainty lies. And once a man has seen it, the world can never afterwards be quite the same straightforward place. (15)

The problems of unreality are what the outsider face as he tries to understand the meaning of life. Colin Wilson proclaims that each man must discover his potential because as an outsider "it is human nature that is sick, and the outsider is the man who faces that unpleasant facts" (20). With reference to this, Henri Barbusse highlights the problems that the outsider has to go through. He says that "he is a man who cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois, accepting what he sees and touches as reality. He sees too deep and too much" (15). Therefore, as an isolated being, the world forces him to wander from his ordinary everyday life and ultimately he passes through the "irrevocable threshold" then reaches the "Great Lie of Bourgeois Civilization" and finally the vast reality of 'pain, chaos and death" (Castillo91). In literature, a great quantity of descriptions can be depicted on this phenomenon of the Outsider, for example, in Sartre's *Nausea*, Roquentin the protagonist asserts:

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Why was I talking to these people? Why was I dressed so oddly?... There, I am quietly slipping into the water's depths, towards fear. (Wilson 22)

The protagonist also asserts gloomily that:

I live alone, entirely alone; I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing ... (Wilson 22)

Such a creature no longer feels deeply for anything, life becomes unattractive and the world appears chaotic. Like Mersault, he may commit a crime and can never free himself from the clutches of guilt and pain. He understands that he is not free yet he desires for freedom and liberation. Therefore, the Outsider must understand that the world is chaotic and "truth must be told, chaos must be faced" (Wilson 15). Nevertheless, the term the 'Outsider' is a valid identification of a phenomenon where a detailed examination of a new human type emerged bringing about a new kind of consciousness. The final truth that he must accept in order to live life to the fullest is that "...when a man tries to realize himself through the gifts with which nature has endowed him, he does the best and only meaning thing he can do" (Hesse 278).

To conclude, the Outsider stands supreme in the world of his existence. He may be a common man who exists in this modern world with the gripping truth that showers down from him. From time to time, this new type of man can only discover the potentials that lay hidden within his consciousness which will further guide him to self-realization.

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