

A Study of Identity Crisis and Post-War Trauma in Ernest Hemingway's "*The Sun Also Rises*"

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Abstract: Through the representation of characters' experiences while searching for their sense of self and purpose in a world that has been totally clashed as the results of World War I, Ernest Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, explores the theme of identity in the context of European post war. The main characters, mainly Jake Barnes, Robert Cohn, and Lady Brett Ashley engage in the continuous search for self to identify themselves and find their places in the society in which they feel split and lost as related to the term lost generation. By experiencing the issues of masculine crisis, anti-Semitism, feminine crisis, and societal disillusionment in Spain and France, there is a pursuit of self-realization by the main characters trying to shape their identities to fit in. This work aims to examine how these characters undergo through and deal with the difficult problem of identity crisis in the era of post-world war I, and also investigates Hemingway's portrayal of the search for life meaning and identity through, *The Sun Also Rises*, in order to have a profound and deeper understanding of the novel's philosophical theme of identity and long-lasting traumatic effects of I World War on human being.

Keywords: Identity crisis, lost generation, Anti-Semitism, World War I, Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most successful and great writers of the American 20th century because of his simplicity and economic of language writing style which gained him a respected place in the world of literature. Being born in July, 21, 1899 and raised in Oak Park Illinois, he studied his high school after when he worked a cub reporter for six months, in Red Cross and during the World War I, as an ambulance driver where he got a serious wound in 1918. The experience he gained during the war was an inspiration to one of his novels titled *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). It was in 1921 when he got married to his first wife Hadley Richardson and then immigrated to Paris. In France, he was influenced by the lost generation, the movement of writers and artists of the emigrants who served in the First World War. In 1953, Hemingway won Pulitzer Prize due to his best seller work titled *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and later on won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954. He has written many novels, short stories, nonfictions etc for instance; *The Torrents of Spring* (1925), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), *A Moveable Feast* (1964), *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1932), *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972), and so many others.

For *The Sun Also Arises*, published in 1926, Hemingway tells a story of the disillusioned group of people known as the lost generation who were living the aimless life in Europe trying to figure out their sense of living after the World War I. In his work; *Imperial Brett in The Sun Also Rises* (2010), Hays argues that the novel is well known for its frank style and the disillusionment theme. The lost generation was a group of American Expatriate writers and artists living in Paris during the 1920's after the World War I. Characters in the novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, pursue a search for self in the post-war society trying to find their place in that absurd society. Each character was trying to figure out what they want, who they are and where they belong which shows the identity crisis in the after-war society.

2. EUROPE AFTER THE WORLD WAR I

After World War I there was political, economic and social instabilities. During that period of time, European society was sick as reflected by Georgette's comment "everyone is sick" when she was conversing with Jake in *The Sun Also Rises* (Hemingway, 1926: 23). A large number of people died especially men who served in the war. This led to women taking responsibilities and getting opportunities to engage in different fields of work with no exception based on patriarchal gender roles which reinforced the ideas of gender equality. Socially, everyone was facing the consequences of war. Many Americans who served in the war moved to European countries and they were known as the lost generation. Most of them were writers and Artists and they seem to be lost in life, spending their lives drinking living the aimless life as mentioned by Gertrude Stein in Hemingway's non-fictional work titled *A Moveable Feast* (1964). Stein described the lost generation as all of the men who served in the war who had no respect for anything but only drinking themselves to death. The lost generation people became disjoined and isolated from both the world already destroyed and the new world emerging afterwards (Rafi, 2012: 3). They exiled to Paris hoping to redefine their lives in a new environment. The feelings of alienation and emptiness were filled inside the people living in Europe as the consequences of the World War I. The world has been totally changed by the War which led them to trying to find the meaning and purpose in life as argued by Moore Charles. E in his work *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* that Life must be understood backwards [...] but must be lived forwards (Charles E, 2003: 263).

Throughout the history, the problem of anti-Semitism has been staying in the minds of western society which finally led to the holocaust during the World War II. In 1920s, the time in which Hemingway set his novel, the European society was also characterized by the prejudice and hatred towards Jewish people and character like Robert Cohn serves as the remind of Jewish identity in the novel which reflected the real life situation of the marginalization of Jewish race throughout the history.

3. CHARACTERS' SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

Jake Barnes is the protagonist of the novel. Hemingway represented Jake as a wounded character both physically and psychologically as the aftermath of the World War I. His physical wound led him to losing his masculinity by becoming an impotent. This wound made him question his worth as it affected his relationship with women. When Jake met Georgette in the bar, he confessed that he got the injury from the war. "You're not a bad type," she said. "It's a shame you're sick. We get on well. What's the matter with you, anyway?" Jake responded: "I got hurt in the war," (Hemingway, 1926: 22) Jake's love to Brett seems to be very genuine. But the fact that he was injured, impotent, couldn't give him the chance to enjoy his love and live with Brett:

"Oh, Jake, we could have had such a damned good time together." Jake responded "Yes, isn't it pretty to think so?" (Hemingway, 1926:222). All of these challenged his sense of self-worth and he couldn't stop searching for the meaning and purpose in life to find a place in the changed society.

Robert Cohn, having a Jewish Identity, was presented as a good example of the searching for meaning, purpose and acceptance in a discriminative society. Hemingway's portrayal of Cohn's identity serves as the main theme in the novel. The first sentence of the novel describes him. At the beginning of the novel, he was described as someone who struggled with "the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton" which made him train boxing painfully although he disliked it aiming to knock down any one who could look down upon him. This shows that in pursuing the search of his sense of self and the acceptance of his identity in the society, Robert Cohn went beyond to make it happen. The oppressed people try to find their sense of belonging which gives meaning and purpose to their life. Going back through the history, Jewish people were marginalized in Europe which led to the holocaust during the World War II. Robert Cohn was a victim of that discriminative society against Jewish and through the novel, that situation influenced his interaction with others and affected his entire life. Living in the society which marginalizes him gave him a feeling of being isolated and the influenced even his decision making where he "was married by the first girl who was nice to him." (Hemingway, 1926: 12)

Desperately while trying to find his place in the society, he got married to someone whom they latter separated. Throughout the novel he engaged in different relationships with his wives and Brett while trying to pursuit the sense of belonging. The way Hemingway portrayed Cohn represents the struggle of finding one's personal identity with meaning and purpose in a certain society in order to feel accepted and fit in according to the societal expectations despite one's achievements.

Lady Brett Ashley represents a liberated and free modern woman of her time. She does what she wants and defies the traditional and societal expectations and norms of gender. She can be seen as a role model for women in that she has the courage to define her own standards and abide by own authentic self, and furthermore, she is one of the novel's main character (Willingham, 2002: 34-45). Ernest Hemingway portrayed Lady Brett Ashley as a complex and puzzling figure, who changes her identity constantly in the unexpected way. Her shifting of identities can be seen through several relationships she had with multiple characters like Jake Barnes, the narrator and protagonist of the story, Robert Cohn, Mike Campbell, and Pedro Romero; the bullfighter young man. Each relationship left her an impact on her sense of self.

The fact that in the novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett engaged in relationship romantically with Jake, Robert, Mike and Pedro shows her perception and understanding of the concept of love which is totally different from the societal and traditional expectations. For her, it is only the matter of satisfying her desire of freedom, liberation and independence as a modern woman and also by challenging the societal expectations from a woman. It is obvious that through the portrayal of Brett, there is a pursuit of freedom and independence as she defied the gender expectations and traditional gender roles trying to pave out her own way in the society dominated by men as a female figure. Even though she has a strong desire and is determined to make her own choices to do what she wants, she also makes people around her suffer as the cost of her doings. This can be seen through the way she refused to be anyone's partner but prefers to move from one relationship to another searching for the meaning and purpose in her life. She told Jake that going with her in the country "wouldn't be any good ..." that she "couldn't live quietly in the country..." not with her own true love. (Hemingway, 1926: 57)

Although Brett seems to live her own life as a free and independent woman, she still struggles while taking that journey of pursuing and searching for the meaning and purpose by defying the societal norms and expectations. Living in a patriarchal society as woman, she continuously struggles with the pressure from desiring to live freely and at the same time the need for being accepted and feeling belonged to the society. She seemed to have an internal conflict when she told Jake, while reflecting on their relationship, that they "...could have had such a damned good time together." (Hemingway, 1926: 222) The tone that she used in her voice was so wishful and this clues the fact that she had made the sacrifices in the searching for her self-identity and happiness. Her defiance of the traditional gender norms does not provide her the happiness and identity she was longing for. Instead, brought her the feeling of emptiness and despair as the only man that she is deeply and genuinely connected to is Jake Barnes who cannot sexually consume relationship as the results of the World War I wound.

the representation of Brett's character serves as mirror through which the author examines the potentials one may have in the pursuit of independence and freedom as a woman at the same time she represents the "lost generation of women" in the after war world. Brett tends to be free from something but not to be free to become something. Men like Campbell, Cohn and Pedro Romero, a 19 years old who was head over heels for her, wanted to marry her but she didn't want to settle down and conform to the traditional rules. She was free from those gender norms but did not know what to become. This can be seen in her conversation with Jake when she tells him a about Pedro Romero's marriage proposal that she had denied. Romero wanted her to grow hair in order to look more womanly and also to marry her so that she "...could never go away from him." (218) Rejecting Romero's proposal pained him as she unexpectedly cried after for Jake to comfort her. Jake said: "She looked away. I thought she was looking for another cigarette. Then I saw she was crying. I could feel her crying. Shaking and crying. She wouldn't look up. I put my arms around her." (219) before initiating this conversation Brett did not want to talk about it as she said to "...never talk about it" multiple times; at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the conversation. But she ended up telling the whole story later to cry showing her internal struggle and conflict.

4. CONCLUSION

The Sun Also Rises vividly shows the impact of World War I to the European society which was totally changed and the characters in the novel represents the Europeans who suffers from the lack of the sense of belonging after war. Hemingway portrays the characters in the pursuit and the search for meaning and purpose through the exploration of love, freedom, masculinity, and femininity while trying to find their place in the world which is no longer the same. As the results of the World War I, everyone in the society is sick and tries to find the meaning of life in his or her own way. Most of the American writers and artists who, later moved to Europe including the author himself, served in the war and are now living the hopeless and aimless life by drinking to death with no respect to anyone, injured and seem to be traumatized as the reason why there is an expression known as the lost generation to refer to them. A character like Brett, seem not to abide by the rules and expectations of the society for a female instead, she lives her life freely changing the partners which is a representation of

women claiming their right in patriarchal society. This also fueled by the fact that a large number of men died during the World War I and women got the opportunity to engage in the different fields of work with no exception of gender roles. Hemingway also portrays the theme identity nearly connected with the factual history of the marginalization hatred towards the Jewish people through the character of Robert Cohn. His struggle to fit in the society because of his Jewish identity made him develop the spirit of searching for purpose and meaning of his life in the post-war sick society which is the representation of the Jewish people life experience in Europe in 1920s.

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