
Patrick Modiano: In Search Of Roots Or Complex/ Obsession With Rootlessness : *THE MISSING PEOPLE*

NEHA JAIN RESEARCH SCHOLAR
SHRI VENKATESHWAR UNIVERSITY
AMROHA, UP.

DR. SEEMA MATHUR RESEARCH SUPERVISOR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AUROBINDO COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF DELHI.

ABSTRACT

Patrick Modiano seems very pessimistic here towards life. He is Nobel Laureate but instead of being happy for his acknowledgment and fame as a writer and film script writer, he is obsessed with his past. He always showed pessimism towards life. He is what he made himself. He is a self made person but he is stuck in his past. He wrote his book 'Missing person' in which he talked about his own past only. He is so much obsessed with the past that all the time is searching for it in the novel. It's an autobiographical account of his. In this work, he is roaming in France, and other parts of Europe to search for his past. Though he is somewhat aware about the basic facts but is not ready to accept it and wants to search it in his own way. He has created a hypothetical past and which is gone and without any flaw but in reality it does not exist. He met different people and talked to them about the people he portrayed to remember about. He set a few facts which use to surprise him in the novel.

This kind of obsession has only created a negative impact on a person. One should face the past boldly and accept the facts related to it. It makes one stronger rather than weak or obsessed. He concludes 'Missing Person' with a metaphor of a little girl who is playing on the sand on a sea, but when her mother tells her to come and go home.

KEYWORDS : Pessimism, Holocaust, World war II, Psychology, Homelessness, Exile

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What kind of a person will start with his autobiographical novel with an opening sentence like " I AM NOTHING" and after several detour ends up with a question – "do not our lives dissolve into the evening as quickly as this grief of childhood?"

Jean Patrick Modiano, a famous French Novelist, who is generally known as Patrick Modiano. He received Nobel Prize for Literature in the Year 2014. Before receiving Nobel Prize, many of his work had not been translated into English, else it has been translated in more than 30 languages and all are famous in France and Europe.

His work centers on issues such as memory, oblivion, identity and guilt. In 2014 he became the 15th Frenchman to receive the Nobel for Literature. Upon announcing the prizewinner, the Swedish Academy cited —the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and

uncovered the lifeworld of the occupation. Because of his obsession with the past, Modiano was sometimes compared to Marcel Proust, though their styles and concerns were quite different.

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It shows that the effects of WWII were so great that it made many people helpless, homeless and put them in exile. This event separated children from their parents and snatched their childhood. Same is the case with the writer. He was asked to leave his home when he was very young. He was sent to some boarding school for good education and safety. He was forced to live alone because of the worst circumstances in France during Holocaust and WWII. He lived alone throughout his life afterwards. He was changing countries, cities and was playing with his identity to save his life, which put him a very bad psychological effect and that can be seen through his novels.

He survived alone in England and other countries in Europe for the rest of his life and ultimately found some job for him in Europe. After getting the job of writing for films, he started taking his journey in some indirect ways, has started finding for the facts of his own life, his past. Like a common man, he assumed a very normal and happy life for himself and tried to find that in the novel 'Missing Person'.

The after-effects on the mind of the writer were portrayed through the central character of the novel, that he is missing his family and wanted to search the impressions of his past. The past which he was unable to understand that time because he was very young to calculate every situation in correct dimensions. He just obeyed the orders of his parents and left for the boarding school to continue his education well. And today when he wanted to search for all the facts of his past, he didn't have courage to face it on the same edge. For that he has created a hypothetical world where all is good and he is supposed to forget it, and he is here to search for the facts he was imagining. He all the time was trying to run from his past by searching for it.

This kind of obsession has only created a negative impact on a person. One should face the past boldly and accept the facts related to it. It makes one stronger rather than weak or obsessed.

Existential Analysis

I wish to analyze Modiano's work within the framework of the theory of existentialism, particularly with the Sartrean perspective. The famous French philosopher analyzes that there is no learning rule. The only meaning of life is what we ourselves give to it. There is no pre-ordained purpose of life. The purpose is what we set to ourselves. We define our life by the projects, we undertake ourselves. Though

existentialism started from the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and German philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger, yet it was popularized by the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre.

According to Sartre, we come into existence first into this world and then we try to make meaning afterward. Thus, existence precedes essence.

So he turned famous philosophers, religious thinkers on their head down by suggesting that there is no essence before existence. For example, the famous philosopher Aristotle believed that there is a telos (purpose/ essence) for everything and every person. This is already given before his/ her birth, so there is a defined destiny. This destiny for a free person is different than for a slave. Similarly, it is different for men and women. A good society is one which helps a person in releasing his/ her telos.

According to existentialists, there is no such telos or purpose. In fact, there is no meaning or purpose of life, there is no essence either. Life is absurd and without meaning. It is “Being in Nothingness”. So there is no purpose, no meaning, no God and no Divine authority to guide us. We are condemned to be free. So if there is no purpose, no God or no divine guidance, then what will be the purpose of living?

This takes us to constructive side of existentialism, which is based on four concepts namely,

1. Freedom,
2. Responsibility,
3. Authenticity
4. Bad faith.

According to Sartre, we are totally free to give any meaning to life, but this freedom is not without responsibility, as it carries a big burden and a big weight. If we are free, we can't blame anybody else for our failures. An example, of our free choice, is in India, where there is a concept of ‘Arranged Marriages’. If the marriage does not succeed, the couple can blame the parents for a wrong choice, but suppose if it is a ‘love marriage’, and marriage partners are chosen by themselves, then they exercise their freedom and they can not hold anybody else responsible for their plight. They will have to take the responsibility for their choice. It is scary and frightening.

So in freedom, one has to take responsibility that you are responsible for whatever decision you take or whatever meaning you attach to life.

According to the existentialists, we have to live an authentic life; ‘Authentic’, in the sense that what is real for us and is not guided by opinions of others. Sartre says that the other side is hell.

To avoid authentic choices, according to Sartre, most people confirm to social opinion and run away from their authentic self. For example, a girl who is marrying a rich and established person to respect the wishes of her parents and not marrying the person to whom she is in love with. According to Sartre, this would be an authentic choice and he called it ‘bad faith’. So he exhorts us to live an authentic, responsible and self-determined life.

Thus, there are two aspects to existentialism; one aspect is the criticism of the traditional meanings attributed to life by previous philosophers like Aristotle. Aristotle took the view that there are certain telos of life which a man is supposed to fulfill as a seed of oak develops into an oak tree. Sartre rejects this view and comes to the conclusion that it is absurd to attribute a meaningful life; there is no

pre-given meaning or purpose. This is the first conclusion he draws. But he does not stop here. He develops a constructive theory of meaning also. He says that we have to take responsibility through creation of an authentic life. We are responsible for the quality of life we create. This is called creative or the constructive side of existentialism.

Application of the Existential Theory:

By contrast, The constructive side of existentialism is well exemplified by the work of Victor Frankl of the Nazi concentration camp. Frankl noticed that in the most trying situation of a concentration camp, different people were reacting very differently to the same situation, for example, some were very kind and generous even to offer their mere food to others while some were absolutely scared to face death. Frankl raises an important question that why different people were reacting differently under the same situation. The death of everybody was certain then why some people were still hopeful and some were totally hopeless.

Frankl in his famous book ‘meaning of life’ explains that those persons who possessed some positive meaning of life were not totally despaired. But those who saw no meaning or sense in dying were hopeless and scared. Frankl survived the tortures thinking that one day he will write a story about his experiences and will educate the other people about the atrocities of the Nazis if he survived. So his future vision and his meaning attributed to the events, helped him keep his hopes alive and it became a self-fulfilling prophesy. Not only did he survive by creating a meaningful project for himself but he inspired others also to create a meaning in their lives under the most preposterous situations.

But Modiano’s hero in ‘Missing Person’ does not go back far as to come out with a positive creation of meaning or identity. He goes in an obsessive search for his true identity from place to place and person to person. But his obsession with the rootlessness does not help him in finding either a positive meaning or a positive identity for himself. Thus we read Modiano’s *Missing Person*, and we find that the person as well as the meaning is missing unless we call Modiano’s negativity as the meaning of life.

When we apply this two-dimensional theory of existentialism to Modiano’s work, we find that Modiano goes to critical dimension/ existentialism. When he begins his novel ‘missing people, with the sentence, ‘I AM NOTHING’; he is embarrassing the critical aspect of existentialism. Even after his long journey in search of an identity, he does not create any meaningful identity for himself. He concludes ‘*Missing Person*’ with a metaphor of a little girl who is playing on the sand on a sea, but when her mother tells her to come and go home. She is aggrieved for a while but joins her mother. Modiano identifies himself in her temporarily grief and ends his novel, “she has already turned the corner of the street, and do not lives dissolve into the evening as quickly as this grief of childhood?”

We will notice that there is a grudgingly passive acceptance of the situation. No creative will of giving you new purposes or new goals or new identities is at work. But the second dimension of Sartrean existentialism is conspicuously absent in Modiano’s work. The creative energy in writes like Goethe is not there in Modiano’s work. Goethe has written,

“what if the house is scattered , the heart is broken.

Run the race of life again and gather the broken pieces of heart and create a new world ,

Closer to your heart.”

This kind of palpable energy and earnestness to create again is invisible in Modiano’s work. Modiano’s work highlights what is missing in people rather than what is exhilarating in people, places and events.

Modiano’s storytelling is different from writing history. It is an artist’s way of dealing with a certain time of history, so he admits that he is not writing history but he is adopting the technique of writing in a manner like a novel. A novelist has much more creative freedom in choosing and manufacturing the facts. Even historians do have the choices to choose from the multiple facts and language is not unproblematic in converting the felt experience into the truthful narration. The post-modernist deconstructionists believe that finding a truth is not a simple, straightforward and linear method. Truth itself is a construct.

Even after publication of Trauma Cohen’s famous work ‘_structure of scientific revolution’, the scientist has come to believe that doing science is not about the discovery of purely objective facts but it is more like storytelling. So, there is a lot of scope of choice making and interpretation in a scientific area. If so, writing about the past ‘_in a truthful way’, is not possible, but Modiano’s technique of narrating the past goes much beyond history writing. Instead of being a detective, he writes more like a ghost from the past, adding his own nuances coming from his troubled and unconnected and incoherent childhood. So his technique is to focusing on certain events, personalities and ambiance from the past, particularly in the context of the Paris occupation, the way he perceived it and the manner in which the events or story of it affected him. So ‘_Missing Person’ is nor a story of the past but a story about the story of the past.

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