

Interplay Between the Philosophies of Nihilism and Stoicism in the Canon of English Literature

Amoghha Prakash Gupta

Independent Researcher, Rewa, India

Abstract:

Works of Literature since its history have been harbingers of certain thoughts and notions even before they got their formal expression among the scholars of philosophy, and such a revelation shouldn't come as a bolt from the blue given the primary intention with which the Literary works have been getting disseminated has throughout been an accurate depiction of the human nature and philosophy entails nothing more than an inculcation of the wisdom that surrounds not just the physical existence in particular but even the inner arenas of our minds, hence despite both of them being distinct fields of study, a linkage between both the disciplines wouldn't be entirely nebulous so to speak. While philosophical feuds and repeated debates are aimed at being overly scrupulous about the distinction among certain philosophies, the exploration of which is beyond the scope of our current discourse, Human mind with all its complexities is capable of forming convictions resulting of both homogeneous and heterogeneous philosophies simultaneously. The notions and incitations underpinning the thought patterns of Nihilism and Stoicism, with both philosophies being poles apart in the timeline considering their formal propositions, are usually found to be in reciprocity despite their seemingly contradictory premises as is evident in the works of authors who inadvertently had depicted an interplay of both, being oblivious to the odds of a scholarly feud among their conformers.

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1. Introduction

Of many other philosophies that could be interpreted through a critical analysis of the literary works, the probe into the works betraying the stirrings of Nihilism and to some extent of Stoicism sets itself apart from any other form of philosophical enquiry by the virtue of it being contingent upon an exploration of the deeper bounds of the mind itself that are not only indicative of a new historicists' approach in drawing out the panorama of the author's physical world but also of a psychoanalyst's in revealing the inner world contained within the author's mind. The philosophy of Stoicism predating the Nihilist's view by almost two millennia didn't as much convey of a distinction as it revealed an essential link with the latter considering the world and its resultant ideas of apprehensions about the existence started off initially as an ontological enquiry later regressed to a refusal of continuing this enquiry further, which in turn was the immediate consequence of the failure of being able to arrive at anything conclusive with regards to the existence and this failure alone marked the genesis of the conception of Nihilism. The depictions of Stoicism in contemporary literature aren't as prolific now as they had once been with the works of Medieval Literature. "His carriage was full comely and upright, His countenance demure and temperate, But yet so sterne and terrible in sight, That cheard his friends, and did his foes amate". (Spenser

2.1) The portrayal of the virtue of Temperance in Spenser's *Sir Guyon* which is closely resonant with the idea of Stoicism, speaks of its estimable reception in the Medieval Literature. "In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior" (Bacon and Vickers). Stoic views are often interpreted to be conspicuous of an almost innocuous world view as the mind that is in perfect harmony with the natural order of the stoics seldom gets disarrayed with the affairs stoic philosophers would have deemed no higher than a cliché. Despite no formal proclamation of the idea of Nihilism there was no dearth of it in the works of Literature prior to it either, "Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,

Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart, Ne divelish thoughts dismay thy constant spright". (Spenser 1.10) The character Despair that portrays the sense of a Nihilistic rejection as would later be witnessed in the periods succeeding the thought, is luring the Red cross Knight into succumbing to the temptation of being erased. Nihilism could never quite find a respite from the constant slanders subjected to it for encouraging a world view that's to end in nothingness. The seemingly contradictory nature of both the philosophies make it seem almost impossible to harmonize the associations between the two, But after a more careful and wary observance into the outcome of embracing both the philosophies, the two are found to be mutually interdependent for the fruition of the idea that necessitates the practice of equanimity in existence as we shall see later that how a dismissal of the one also destabilizes the premises of the other.

2. Philosophical dichotomy between Nihilism and Stoicism

Nihilism can be crudely defined as the belief in nothing, and the trivial argument about nothing being a thing in itself is irrelevant considering the 'nothing' here to be merely a symbol of emptiness just like the darkness not being a thing in itself is a symbolic representation of the absence of light, Although the term formally being first introduced by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, didn't find its proper expression until a critique of German Idealism was brought forth in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer. The belief in nothing was not an immediate metamorphosis of the rebellious thought that had existed in the ages prior to German Idealism, rather it was a consequence of the rational mind having been led to such a conclusion after its exertions towards seeking a meaning in life. The ordinary being at this point remains disappointed with the existence as the earlier meanings that it had been indoctrinated with got lost with the embrace of a rational outlook and now it craves even for a slightest glimpse of light amidst the darkness that surrounds him but all of the efforts are met with despair and futility at this point. "I think we are just insects, we live a bit and then die and that's the lot. There's no mercy in things. There's not even a Great Beyond. There's nothing" (Fowles). Stoicism coming from that point seems so less odious and intimidating than Nihilism, as its roots lied in a civilization that was much ahead of its time, proposed by Zeno of Citium in the Athenian state of ancient Greece whose prime concern was the alleviation of human suffering that arose from a want of material possessions. "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment." (Aurelius and Meric Casaubon). Stoics considered the people's tendency of imposing the authority of their peace and happiness on elements that were beyond their control the prime cause of their most vexations, For them the only thing a person should conform to is the natural state of being which is unburdened and unbound and It's one's conscious choice of corrupting this natural harmony through conforming to the objects of the external existence that further inflicts miseries upon them but can also be overturned through the same conscious choice that had first corrupted it. The major point of discordance between both philosophies is concerned with the idea of a natural order, while Stoicism not only asserts the existence of

it but also its imperativeness, Nihilism rejects the presence of any natural order and deems the existence devoid of any value altogether. But the point of overlap and a significant one indeed is concerned with the application of both thoughts in the phenomenological experience, Stoicism in its assertion of rejecting the outward appearances in part professes about the futility of outwardly possessions that the mind longs for, because a refusal of the pursuit towards things of external existence can't proceed without acceding to the denunciation of it and Nihilism without any circuitous premises directly asserts the meaninglessness of existence and thus obviating the need to address the renunciation of materialistic pursuits any further. The dissonance between the natural order of Stoicism and a want of it in Nihilism is not of much concern considering the outcome of both being the same A rejection of the materialistic ways of life and subsequent inculcation of indifference towards happenings of the world that now remain no more than a triviality. Other than leading to similar philosophical conclusions, the necessary condition for an understanding of either, remains the employment of a rational mind towards the introspection of existence, unlike the populace whose most actions are driven of the bestial will bereft of any degree of rational thought, The psyches of both Stoics and Nihilists are preoccupied with matters that demand of their eschewing as far as possible from being acted upon by their instincts.

3. Shakespeare's Indifference and Desertion

Shakespeare's characters have often been known for their complex emotions and expressions as it turns out they are no more convoluted than the emotions embodied by any other ordinary person, His works could appositely capture the essence of multifaceted human emotions and it's not surprising that one could observe the dogmatic distinctions between Nihilism and Stoicism getting dissolved in his works even without any deliberation. "O God, God, How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Shakespeare 1.2) With Hamlet we begin to notice a presentiment of existential thoughts that would beset him with a rather gloomy outlook on life going ahead, as since this point alone, does the willingness to enquire into the nature of truths while making use of the rational faculty spring. For Hamlet, the delirium and complacency that had dominated him before his witnessing the unfavorable circumstances in his life, were nowhere to be found anymore as they had simultaneously been prevailed over by the distress and torment of a newfound inquisitive spirit. As Hamlet was being brought to the edge of a mental breakdown which in itself is contradictory to the idea of Nihilism, His thoughts were getting more disarrayed and there was an internal strife between being forced to be dismissive of the reality due to it not being commensurate to his expectations and an equal longing for the amelioration of his situation. In such a state, the Nihilistic thought though at the surface appears to be in full force but within the mind that seeks nevertheless an alternative meaning to live by with avenues of a materialistic redemption still being intact, It remains embattled with the former conditionings of the mind.

What a piece of work is man? How noble in reason, How infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god? The beauty of the world; The paragon of animals, And yet; To me, what is this quintessence of dust? (Shakespeare 2.2). The mind trying to reject the notion of life altogether, Despite its inner bewailings of striving to seek meaning, This is a rather fragmented and chaotic inculcation of the idea of Nihilism as Hamlet's words indicate a struggle between two conflicting notions and because of an erroneous conception of the idea of Nihilism, the Stoicist perspective doesn't approve of the situation either, because there is no conforming to the natural order for restoring the recently wrested tranquility, the similar state is that of Macbeth's,

“Come what come may, time and the hour runs through the roughest day” (Shakespeare 1.3) as he tries to stabilize the notion of Stoicism by at least feigning to not care about external occurrences but his natural order stands ever demolished when his fears about facing the repercussions of his treacherous act are revealed “If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly: if the assassination Could trammel up the consequence, and catch With his surcease success”. (Shakespeare 1.7). The apotheosis of the chaotic events for both, turns out to be a rejection of life as despite having strived for mending their situation, they couldn't escape the ordained and had to capitulate before the dark and gloomy existence with apparent resorts to Nihilistic thoughts as their last respite in the moments of annihilation. “The rest is silence” (Shakespeare 5.2) betrays a sense of defeat in a world for the protagonist that he had tried to bring to his own terms, such an approach is not evocative of Nihilism as the Stoic ideal of being unflinching through their unpropitious fortunes was not found adequately.

“It is too late, he drags me down; I sink, I sink, — my soul is lost forever!” (Shakespeare 5.8)

With Macbeth too, the groans about his life being snatched from him, is neither resonant of Nihilism nor of Stoicism, as through the entire course of his predicaments, he didn't shrug off the possibility of evading the punishment of his sins and such an inclination proves with much evidence that there was nothing Nihilistic about him, other than an ingenious masquerade as the one that he had put up, intended for a ephemeral consolation of his fears of eventually getting executed.

4. The Nihilistic Charade of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov

Perhaps no other character in Literature embodies such conflicting emotions and notions simultaneously than Raskolnikov, If Dostoevsky's depiction of such a character was intended to be representative of the tumults of rudimentary thoughts of humans, then those tumults must have been extraordinarily arcane to the understanding of any person incapable of screening them. Raskolnikov is not so much of a Nihilist as he is a narcissist who without being brought to any sense of rational thinking and as if that wasn't worse, without even an inward enquiry unto his own opinions dabbled into the world he had barely even known striving for a radical change as if he were a chosen one.

I simply hinted that an ‘extraordinary’ man has the right ... that is not an official right, but an inner right to decide in his own conscience to overstep ... certain obstacles, and only in case it is essential for the practical fulfillment of his idea (sometimes, perhaps, of benefit to the whole of humanity). (Dostoevsky) The fact of him being possessed by the idea of the world calling for a change in itself speaks volumes about his inherent values and if he were a Nihilist, there wouldn't have been a set of values to conform to for him, Though he had thought rationally about matters pertaining to his existence and life, but perhaps those contemplations were not an objective one as is required for arriving at the decisive threshold of a Nihilistic thought and were implicit with his distorted views of society that he resolved to crusade against later. “Yes, that's what it was! I wanted to become Napoleon, that is why I killed her ... Do you understand now?” (Dostoevsky). His disposition was to some extent emblematic of Nietzsche's idea of *Übermensch* which Dostoevsky might have erroneously intended to caricature in his portrayal of Raskolnikov, and drawing such a parallel had been erroneous not because the Raskolnikov didn't aspire to be an overman but because the conception of *Übermensch* in its true essence was actually Anti Nihilistic contrary to what Dostoevsky might have thought. “I know and will tell ... you, only you. I have chosen you. I'm not coming to you to ask forgiveness, but simply to tell you.” (Dostoevsky). Raskolnikov's abrupt fondness for Sonia is also at odds with the idea of a Nihilistic worldview because his mind had constantly been ruminating about his separation from Sonia moments prior to getting apprehended for his crimes. The Stoic ideals of

equanimity are non-existent in his demeanor as due to his inability to renounce any subjective meaning in life, he couldn't possess the indifference at the situations that had beset him." "I want to attempt a thing like that and am frightened by these trifles," he thought, with an odd smile." (Dostoevsky). His constant fits of paranoia fueled by his fears of getting intercepted had him always on the edge of his composure. His resort to Nihilism was a contradiction in itself as he had merely been using it as an excuse to achieve the things he deemed to be superior, in this view, of a consideration of certain things being more suitable than others lied the ideological subterfuge. He was neither observant of the Natural order of the stoics nor of the destabilized world of Nihilists. In his heedless pursuits, he had lost all the ability of foresight or circumspection and was almost unhinged as is evident in the text itself. "I dare say. I can see I'm ridiculous myself," muttered Raskolnikov angrily." (Dostoevsky). He could never in fact stabilize the entirety of his conflicting thoughts because of his not being resolute in any of his convictions, a striking feature common in both Nihilistic and Stoic ideas.

5. Consonance between the ideas in Kafka's Metamorphosis

The harmony between two thoughts whose philosophical accentuations though seemingly contrasting with each other at first can't be observed any better than in the works of Franz Kafka. The immanent chronotope in his works is relevant with the incredulous rejection of meaning with respect to Nihilism and the simultaneous reign of harmony amidst the chaotic disorder in line with Stoicism as well. The Kafka's characters start off already with a sense of a rejection of life and nothing seems worthy enough to them of being pursued with alacrity.

"A First Sign of the Beginning of Understanding is the Wish to Die." (Watroba). Even after being beset by situations that are no less than apparitions, its protagonists are able to establish a sense of calm within them due to the virtue of them having already rejected any subjective meaning in their lives. It's as if they don't expect anything from life and thus nothing that happens can confound them even to a slightest degree, perfectly representing the development of Stoicism accompanied by Nihilism. "Calm —indeed the calmest— reflection might be better than the most confused decisions". (Watroba).

Gregor Samsa didn't feel appalled at his situation, rather contrived for a way to get his ends met, his being disciplined in striving to return to his work as a salesman despite being turned into a vermin is expressive of the idea of the same discipline in accordance with one's natural order that's indomitable which Stoics avidly implored for.

All he wanted to do now was to get up quietly and undisturbed, get dressed, and, most important, eat breakfast, and only then consider what to do next, because, as he was well aware, in bed he could never think of anything through to a reasonable conclusion. (Watroba)

His works also embody a certain Derrida's 'Aporia' which is a poignant expression and assertion of the meaninglessness of the pursuit of seeking meaning, echoing yet again a Nihilistic worldview. "I never wish to be easily defined. I'd rather float over other people's minds as something strictly fluid and non-perceivable" (Watroba). It's worth noting that Gregor's behaviour was not in an accordance with the usual view of Nihilism leading to tendencies of Suicide as what most think of it. This aberration from the general opinion could have been possible only of the Stoic ideals that despite denouncing the external appearances, don't warrant of a conscious cessation of one's life. In his rejection and disdain of life, having renounced the entrenched values, he eventually got so indifferent to the notion of existence that to even consider of suicide would indicate of it having some credence.

Despite everything he felt relatively content. True, he had pains throughout his entire body, but it seemed to him that they were gradually becoming weaker and weaker and would finally go away completely. (Watroba). In the end it is evident that Gregor died not by suicide but succumbed to his sustained injuries. His dismissal of existence was so profound that he gave up on both living and dying and became absolutely apathetic to the external world or simply became a mere spectator of the appearances as Stoics would have said.

6. Conclusion

The philosophies of both Stoicism and Nihilism find enough expressions in the wide framework of human emotions through the works of Literature. Both rest on the same spirit of Skepticism and a Rational employment of the faculty of thought that have resulted in groundbreaking ideas in works of Philosophy and Literature alike. The attempts towards exploration of philosophies pertinent to Ontology were in part based on the cessation of human sufferings that are caused by none other than our own opinions. “It is not things that trouble us, but our judgements about things”. (Epictetus and Long). These opinions are considered to be the primary source of our vexations from a stoic perspective which in accordance with Nihilism also insinuates for a rejection of any external authority along with a strong emphasis on the realisation of the mortality of being. Their frequent interplay in the works of Literature is based on the indivisibility of the premises underpinning both, while there are graver distinctions between both that could be the subject of an altogether new enquiry but when considered from a teleological perspective, The ideas are often found to be supplementing each other particularly when the eradication of humans' ideological afflictions is concerned.

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