

Situating Existence: A Study of Existentialism in *Mr. Bean*

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Abstract

Existentialism, one of the most debated and critical philosophies, keeps on engaging the research platform with its unavoidable presence. Entertaining a number of newer perspectives, it clearly announces its relevance even today. The present study aims to uncover existential elements in *Mr. Bean*, a well celebrated English comic series. It seeks to analyze how the comic hero merges with an existential one in subtle ways. Moreover, it defines Bean, the central character, as an existential hero because he does not let himself fall prey to existential agonies but triumphs over it. The study justifies how painful humour can be.

Keywords: Absurd; Bean; Existentialism; Freedom; Sartre.

The world is rapidly progressing with overlapping currents of possibilities and, in the process, change is inevitable. Modernity has amply made human beings capable enough to cope with the changing needs and it is not uncommon that they strive hard to make their existence better. The amount of pressure and the overloading of information in the brains have prompted humanity to rethink their existence. In addition, the pangs and agonies resulting from the World Wars led philosophers to consider the world as an indifferent space inhabited by perplexed beings. The waves of existentialism gathered its momentum at this point although a recollection of the origins of existentialism would probably take one to Socrates who identified the need to know oneself. "Existentialism is the philosophy of existence, of the nature of human existence, its value, and its meaning" (Panza and Gale 1). Rooted in France, it is a philosophical take on the individuality of a subject and the way in which the subject comprehends the world around him. The term was coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the 1940s and later evolved into a cultural movement in Europe in the 1940s and 50s. As a philosophical proposition,

existentialism accommodates diverse opinions and schools of thoughts which makes it irreducible to a single definition. The inability to properly define it accounts for the limitless and diverse courses it takes. However, the commonly held perceptions on existentialism point at a constant yearning for meaning in one's existence. From the perpetual debates on the existence of God to the hesitation of defining oneself as an existentialist, the theory is self-critical and dynamic. "Existentialism in its wider implications is always understood as a philosophy of a concrete man in a concrete situation" (Khan 19). Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, Friedrich William Nietzsche, Karl Theodor Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Honore Marcel, Lev Shestov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre are some of the major philosophers who transformed existentialism to its present form.

A number of writers and artists have sought to present existentialism in their works, and the research to explore the concept is still going on. One cannot ignore the obvious examples of existentialism in literature like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* although the list extends to include many other works. These works seek to question the sense of meaninglessness which makes living a mere existence. Some of them take up a melancholic approach leaving the receivers in utter pessimism whereas the rest wrap the whole events in farcical episodes pushing the readers to laugh at themselves. Existentialism, mixed with a pinch of sarcasm, brings out the potential of humour to carry existentialism to an unimaginable dimension. Apart from the works that are evidently existentialist, there are works which covertly play the part as well. One of the celebrated and globally acknowledged comic series, *Mr. Bean*, is a prime exemplification of the statement. *Mr. Bean* is a British sitcom, aired in the United Kingdom from 1990 to 1995, created by Rowan Atkinson and Richard Curtis where the former himself plays the lead role. With just 15 episodes the series could invite mass attention and was successfully remade into an animation series as well.

It is quite amusing that despite being a comic relief *Mr. Bean* carries undertones of existentialism. Mr. Bean, the title character, is a loner who enjoys his privacy and is content with his everyday existence. He lives in an apartment and is accompanied only by a teddy bear who is his sole best friend. Bean maintains unhealthy relations with his neighbours and has no friends, which evidently exhibit his aversion for socialization. He also makes sure that no other person intrudes into his personal space and destroys his seemingly peaceful existence. Perhaps, Bean attributes meaning

to his solitude. Such attempts at converting the existential meaninglessness to meaningful individuality can never be discarded because it is what makes his non- existence an existence. However, the resultant paradox remains unresolved.

Although Bean hates people, he has a ladylove. He hates society, yet he goes to church, shops and the beach provided he is unaccompanied by humans. Although he seems stupid and ridiculous there is a smartness to whatever he does. When the rest of the world resorts to time consuming solutions, Bean discovers his own ways of solving problems. All these, indirectly, suggest his struggles to fit in. Unless one consciously juxtaposes the comic hero with existentialism, none of these traits would seem problematic. There are studies which define Bean as alien, insane, autistic and psychopath. But none of these explain this paradoxical nature of the series.

Everything regarding Bean appears mysterious and unusual which is why it needs to be ensured that a tint of existentialism pervades throughout the series. The identity of the character appears vague and obscure. His name in itself is strange and, unlike the usual custom, is not followed by a surname. He addresses himself as 'Bean.' It is said that the character was originally named Mr. White and a weird name Mr. Cauliflower was also under consideration before they decided on the name Mr. Bean. The series does not feature Bean's family or friends. Some studies attempted to resolve the paradoxes by pointing out the probability of the character being an alien defenestrated from the other world. At the opening of each episode, Bean is seen falling from the sky in a beam of light in the middle of London.

His bewildered gestures, weird mannerisms and the oddity in actions point towards the same direction. The lack of verbal communication and active interaction with fellow beings does not overthrow the validity of the thought. Atkinson himself has, in an interview *The Fine Arts of Being Mr Bean*, pronounced that Bean "has a slightly alien aspect to him." Studies also suggest the possibility of Bean being, once a human, abducted by the aliens and thrown to the earth which explains how he owns material possessions. If proven right, these explain the reason behind Bean's existential crisis because he struggles to fit in but fails miserably. As the creators of the character have not yet confirmed these findings, the alien aspect of Bean, as Atkinson remarked, cannot be relied upon further.

Withdrawal from the external world of affairs is a commonly referred to

aspect of existentialism. Characters who choose to withdraw themselves from the external world often spin a cocoon in which they comfortably lean back and contemplate. The freedom of choice exhibited in this withdrawal is what interests the existentialists. Here, Bean is confronted with two choices: either he can present himself as a typical social being engaged in meaningful dialogues with the world or rather choose to remain a stranger in his solitude. The fact that he chooses to be different and, hence, strange vindicates Jean Paul Sartre's statement that existentialism "confronts man with a possibility of choice" (Sartre 2). Bean looks happy and victorious, perhaps, because the solitude that surrounds him does not seem to have emerged from a rejection of his being, rather Bean himself seems to have chosen to reject the unpleasant world around him. Nowhere in the series does Bean overtly regret his choices. Yet, the sense of anguish resulting from his free choices lingers. The anguish followed by his self-doubt results in inconsistency and dilemma. As Sartre points out, "the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (4). Bean feels responsible for his choices. Although he is happy, the uncertainty and self-doubt regarding his choices persist.

Bean has a lady love who occasionally visits him but the comic hero seems indifferent to her. Pure ignorance combined with wicked efforts at fleeing from her are what the lady has to bear with. Yet, he refuses to break up with her because he finds her a substitute to cover up his loneliness. She is the only one who bridges the void between Bean and the society. Moreover, it is a way of assuring his anguished self of the inevitability of the choices he makes. The affection and attention he lends to his teddy bear suggest a betrayal of his choice to remain a loner. Bean brings gifts for his teddy and chooses not to wake it up from sleep. Besides, he ensures that he travels with it, watches movies with it and talks to it. The conscious personification of the inanimate object at the hands of the hero projects his inward sense of solitude. Although the brown-coloured, button-eyed toy is more valued and cherished, Bean often deforms it to suit his personal needs and pretends as if it obeys all of his commands. The moment Bean snaps his fingers the teddy falls asleep and it nods its head as per the will of the hero. What one gets to encounter here is a controlling hero rather than a compassionate one.

Bean puts up resistance to his anguish by breaking social codes and subverting stereotypes. He contemptuously smirks at people who are typical so that he can satisfy his self-induced superiority. His contempt can also

be a way of redeeming his self- confidence in a world where he is stared at as an object of ridicule. What typical people follow as rules are unworthy of conformity to Bean. Rather, he follows his own set of inconsistent routines. Besides, he also tries to outsmart people who act smarter than him. This inclination of the hero to control his chaotic existence seems inherent when he repeatedly competes with beings who pose a threat to him. The very first episode of the series opens with the scene where Mr. Bean intentionally pushes and topples a blue car in order to clear his way. The same car with an unknown driver features in many of the episodes all in which Bean ruthlessly outperforms the former.

The apparently causeless enmity Bean has towards the blue car forces one to conceive the probability of the existential hero's desire to stand out. It can be derived that Bean constantly challenges his own self fighting the existential dilemma he suffers from. Bean wrestles between the constant self- doubt he encounters deep inside and the lone, self- sufficient individual he projects outwardly which, for him, hopefully triumphs over the former. Finding a balance and positioning himself are what make his existence difficult. The satisfaction he feels on the surface might be a result of his triumph over his own frustrated inner self. Thus, an unending tug of war between an inner self yearning for meaning and an outer self-rebuffing meaning is visible. Paradoxically, Bean finds existence by subverting existence itself.

The unconditional freedom and independence enjoyed by the character reveal an individuality peculiar to him which, at the first sight, seems difficult to be attributed. Bean is least affected by judgments and chooses to ignore the social norms. He appears self- obsessed and egoistic when he does not bother to lend a hand to people in distress. Things get complicated with Bean who frequently resorts to personalized solutions which the so- called normalcy of individuals hesitate to accept. Surprisingly, he manages to get things done and never waits for approval from others. This is where the question of subjectivity performs its part. The line of boundary drawn between normal and abnormal, sane and insane gets blurred thus.

When applying Sartre's existentialist remark to Bean, it is found that the hero's existence precedes his essence. Mr. Bean denies being essentialized. As per Sartrean vision, he is trying to project himself as a non- essential being who can set an example by being different. "In fashioning myself I fashion man" (Sartre 4). The abandonment Sartre discusses is a self- imposed one here. "We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself,

surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. . . . He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (Sartre 3). Thus, the lack of an essential yet unique individuality and existence makes Bean an existentialist hero.

Repetition, another key feature of existentialism, is obvious in *Mr.Bean*. The central character is rarely seen in a change of clothes. He wears a tweed jacket, a red tie, a digital calculator watch and travels by the same car. The series is not even crowded with too many characters, instead features the same set of characters repeatedly. Each of the episodes begins and ends with the same choral scores. Perhaps, the character finds change absurd or is afraid of the effects which ensue from them. The obvious absurdity in *Mr.Bean* when coupled with humour tends to mask the existential resistance carried out by the central hero.

Absurdism stems from disbelief and denial of previously existed modes of existence. The new interest for atypical, deviant and outlandish perspectives gains strength. The same applies to *Mr.Bean* as well. Bean refuses to be normal. His contempt towards a world limited and inhabited by typical, rational grown-ups becomes evident in and out in the series. Every absurd act of his is an attempt to resist being cornered. As Albert Camus said, “The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion” (qtd. in French). The frustrated rebellion of an anguished self is muffled behind a chain of comic stupidity. The immediate laughter it incites in the viewers is nothing more than a misinterpretation. The absurdity in his mumbled words and the absurd ways in which he manages his personal affairs reveal the existential aura that surrounds his whole being.

As per Thomas Flynn, authenticity is what aligns Bean with existentialism. In his *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, he suggests:

Authenticity is a feature of the existentialist individual. In fact, existential individuality and authenticity seem to imply one another. One is no more born an individual (in existential sense) than is one born authentic. To be truly authentic is to have realized one’s individuality and vice versa. Both existential ‘individuality’ and ‘authenticity’ are achievement words. The person who avoids choice, who becomes a mere face in the crowd or cog in the bureaucratic machine, has failed to become authentic. (74-75)

The conspicuous traits conferred upon Bean visibly announce the presence of existentialism in the series and place the hero in an existentialist

light. Moreover, it would not be wrong if one is to define Bean as a 'Sartrean' hero who constantly juggles with his multiple existential positions. The more one attempts to define Bean the more difficult it becomes to situate his existence. This difficulty to explain existence itself is the essence of existentialism. Repeated attempts to find meaning out of the apparent meaninglessness is the aim of existentialism because at the core it is "the philosophy that makes life possible" (Panza and Gale 9).

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