

Malraux and pre-existentialism



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As an art-adventurer of a time which was slowly getting optimistic after the devastation of World War I, Andre Malraux was a cult figure among the early existentialists. Along with Andre Gide whose literary career spanned far more than any of the contemporary writers, Malraux through his works unleashed an attack against the outdated sense of moralism and ethical values. The socio-economic condition of France experienced a brief period of respite from the grinding pressures of rebuilding.

As a matter of fact, the French society shunned the pretentious and snobbish facades of naturalism and espoused open values. Resultantly, the society was more inclined to attesting to the epicurean ways of living. It was quite predictable that literature and other artistic genres captured the free spirit of this era known as belle epoque in a perfect manner. However, it would be very narrow to regard the chief works of Malraux as being just a documentation of social opulence and grandeur. There are elements of political awareness in his novels, especially in *Les conquerants* and *L'espoir*.

Given the adventurous nature of the author, his earlier works reflect a marked disrespect to oppressive social tools such as Fascism and Nazism. At the same time, historical chronologies are blended beautifully with literary strokes of existentialism in the treatment of violence of wars, natural calamities, personality clashes and death (Barnes, 116). This essay is going to examine the existentialist qualities found in Malraux's *Les conquerants* and *L'espoir*, and compare these two seminal works with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

The question which is often raised by scholars and readers is whether Malraux was an existentialist in the same bracket with Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The theme of freedom and choice as addressed by Karl Marx is frequently used in the works of the aforesaid authors. In a sense, this particular group of authors tended to delve into metaphysics to denounce the aesthetics of life. Now, the metaphysical school of thought does not promote politicization of art in any way (redbubble 2009).

Rather than embracing the philosophies of commitment to a social setup and sharing its woes and misfortunes, it would be more comfortable with the depiction of individual whims and fancies that do not conform to any logical pattern. In simpler words, the treatment of nihilism and the absurd is far more radical in existential literature than what it is in the works of its precursors such as Malraux. In both *Les conquérants* and *L'espoir*, Malraux “evaluates his characters against their conduct in the radical movements to which they attach themselves.” (Barnes, 117)

Hence a free artist must not get possessed by the object of his creation, for he has more responsibilities to the creative context and its diverse expression. Malraux’s preoccupation with Marxism and his outright rejection of Fascism and Nazism did not augur well for *Les conquérants* as it was banned in Russia and Italy for a long time. Set in the middle of the 1920s in Canton and Hong Kong, this novel presents a vivid account of the horrific aftermaths of war and violence, and also gives an impassive detailing of the Chinese revolution.

In the process, he also explores the human immobilities to act when needed, a theme which stands in stark contrast to optimism and moralism (KB 2009). He draws his Swiss protagonist Pierre Garine with a unique blend of sensibility and sensitivity akin to the pre-existential norms of thinking. His dedication to serve the less-privileged Russians despite being a pessimistic individual in general can be interpreted as a deviation from the normal course of existential literature. Instead of adopting a totally negative and bleak stance in portraying his protagonist, Malraux infuses messages of hope and personal redemption.

Since Garine is not at all drawn to political beliefs, there is no reason for him to get motivated by the oppressive Chinese regime. It is the not-so-well-defined sense of humanity and sympathy for others that compels him to fight for the subjugated Chinese. The same characteristic traits can be found in Ivan Kaliayev, protagonist of Albert Camus' *Les Justes*. Despite being an ardent lover of peace and orderliness, Kaliayev vows to kill the tyrant to save millions of lives in Russia. However, what makes Kaliayev different from Garine is that the former is less motivated about his own life than the later.

Garine's disposition is definitely pre-existential whereas Kaliayev is a victim to existential dilemmas and uncertainties. Moreover, the philosophical background of Camus and Malraux, although different in many ways, shares a close resemblance in terms of highlighting man's inherent fear of death and disappearance (eScholarship 2007). The association of war with individual crisis was a common theme in the pre-existential forms of literature. In *L'Espoir*, Malraux purposefully simplifies social realism in his depiction of the concept of revolution.

The nature of collective conflicts in warfare is discussed at length in the context of the Spanish Civil War. In terms of the exploration of the perpetual strife between loyalty to humanism at large and self-commitment, *L'Espoir* is akin to Sartre's *Les Mouches*. Both in scope as well as in magnitude, this play is one of the seminal literary works of Jean-Paul Sartre. Core existentialist elements such as the confused concept of freedom and penitence are intelligently blended with the somewhat pre-existential notion of political authority and collectivity, thus connecting history with literature.

What emerges out of the readings and subsequent study of Malraux and his stand in the reference frame of later writers such as Camus and Sartre is that the very concept of existentialism lacks any rigid definition. For Camus, the basic philosophy that the existentialist should strive to establish is the position of human beings in the Cosmos and the absurdities thereof. Any kind of dogmatic stance by claiming to know beyond what can actually be known in reality is not the nature of existentialism.

Similarly, mankind should be treated as individuals being part of a social order only by chance and not by preset patterns. Thus, the transformation of Dora in the end of *Les Justes* can be attributed to her individualistic yearnings for establishing an alternative society. The idea Camus promotes through this episode is that there is no such thing as destiny in a world where god is either absent or insignificant. Hence, Dora takes her life on her own hands – an action which defies the Malrauxian school of pre-existential thought.

Garine's vagueness of purpose and dilemma is not only a hindrance for his own progression, but also puts others around him in a confused state. Sartre, on the other hand, is more concerned with individual loyalty in *Les Mouches*. His philosophical doctrine has a directness about it – a praiseworthy trait in the baffling and problematic context of our discussion. A thorough reading of *Les Mouches* makes it clear Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' and improbability of the existence of a 'loyal traitor'.