

## Condemned to be Free: Orestes in Sartre's *The Flies*

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### Abstract:

*Jean Paul Sartre's Orestes' is one of the strong characters as far as literary sketch of any existential character is concerned. Embodiment of Sartrean philosophy, Orestes, in the play The Flies (1943) is a representation of the philosophy of freedom in which Sartre has put his literary thesis with the philosophic. In doing so with the character of Orestes, he comes back again to his lifelong pursuit of freedom and tries to explore it in the most possible and natural sense making freedom as an absolute and a strong value. The idea of freedom has been smoothly sketched in the play and its strident treatment matches the doctrines of freedom by the playwright. In this play, Sartre expresses the idea of condemned freedom and an attempt has been made in this paper to show this particular Sartrean brand of freedom expressed in Orestes.*

**Key words:** Existentialism, Existence, Freedom, Condemned, Absolute, No. Enlightenment

Jean Paul Sartre, an avowed existentialist and a militant atheist, being at the centre of the modern philosophy is a very important figure in French existentialism. Truly a philosopher in the traditional sense like Heidegger and also a political figure protesting in the student's revolution of 1968 in which he was almost close to becoming a rebel, he is a fine amalgamation of 20<sup>th</sup> century thought in which letters and actions go together

simultaneously. His persona can be easily traced in his autobiography *The Words* (1963) and also in his manifesto for literature titled, *What is Literature* (1947). Sartre in the latter work clearly pens down his thoughts on literature and its role. Committing literature to the political purpose for the sake of action and betterment, he banishes poetry like Plato and gives special privilege to prose. And so to his credit we have a huge corpus of prose detailing every bit of existence and its analysis in philosophy and literature together. Not only this, he was a constant producer of writings and thus owns a very big canvas on the literary scene. As of Annie Cohen Solal who lucidly puts her remark for Sartre and his writing sounds like this “more than forty works in less than four years. The genres included lectures, essays, plays, articles, introductions, radio broadcasts, biographies, philosophical speculations, screenplays, songs, novels, reports. The themes ranged from aesthetics, literature, ethics, politics and philosophy to travel, art and music.” (*Truth and Existence X*)

It's not Sartre alone who has fused philosophy with literature to map the territory of human predicament but he is the foster child of the movement from which he comes. In this practice we see him resembling with some of the great existentialists and their style of doing philosophy alike which attempted this same kind of style in talking about the philosophy of existence wrapped in literature. And so in this league, there are examples like “Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*, Buber's *I and Thou*, ... are pieces of literary or dramatic philosophy intended to convey some important aspect of an existentialist truth.” (Stuart Brown M, Jr. 159)

Coming to the play, *The Flies*, the character of Orestes in the play is a direct dialogue of Sartrean freedom in the wake of existing morals and divinity and also amidst the political struggle of the state, citizens and rights. Due to the tension and complexity in the play, it deserves special attention for its multiple purpose of commitment to the different issues. Despite being socio-political in nature, it maintains its existential

character by sticking to the singular primordial theme of existence which has been taken throughout in the play in great details.

Sartre, a phenomenologist before turning to be an existentialist, is the genius who travels widely in his literary landscape making characters larger than life and giving them independence which is unstoppable at any rate. Orestes being one of them is the character which is central to Sartrean kind of thinking. He clearly reveals the subtle and hard lines of being existent and a responsible individual. In the face of being existent like the anti-hero Roquentin in *Nausea*, who discovers that he is existent and thus we hear him saying that existence is seeping out from everywhere and he being engulfed in the vast sea of existence. Similarly, it's Orestes too who finds himself burdened with the idea of freedom and from which he can never escape. It means that no human can alienate oneself from the idea of freedom, for in Sartrean world the very existence is freedom. Orestes in the play thus says, "Neither slave nor master. I am my freedom." (*The Flies* 309) They are almost synonymous with each other hence; they cannot be separated from each other. Written in 1943 which has also been the year for his massive philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* which carried the "...same engaged, wartime, project of consciousness-raising, subtle in approach yet nonetheless powerful and daring, ..." (Gary Cox 129). This play is the parallel reading of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) on the frontiers of Sartrean commitment and can be seen as an embodiment of resistance and an absolute claim over the much struggled idea, 'freedom'. Presented through the idea of myth, it talks of freedom in the most extreme sense making it one of the most supreme, of any value. In this play, freedom remains wild and free, like the freedom proposed in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*. Purely being the existential and phenomenological freedom, Orestes and the other elements sum up the meaning for the purpose of writing literature, giving way to commitment and at the same time, building the much sought

after issue of authenticity while pursuing freedom in the whole of the story in the play.

Unsupported and abandoned by the Vichy regime that was responsible for the fall of France, the cause of freedom became the central issue for the French masses for the reason that this freedom was taken and crushed by the German occupation. So in order to trace this freedom and relight it, this play holds equally a very important position in reawakening the masses and saying No to the Nazi dictators. And thus, this whole drama by Sartre is enacted by covering it with myth. So to speak by Christina Howells, it is about the nature and its censorship. "The call to revolt against Nazi occupation in *Les Mouches* escaped censorship because of its mythical disguise" (*Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* 72). In this wake, the possibility of saying No to the authority was almost a mythical word but it's this 'No' which holds importance and significance in this play and also in the life of Sartre, who despite being a man from a higher society fought for causes of the marginalised and un-free individuals.

Talking about the case of Sartrean absolute freedom, the play based on the myth of Orestes and Electra, details this crisis of state and human existence. The freedom of saying No and simultaneously his great and controversial thesis that "man is condemned to be free" runs parallel in the making of the Greek prince Orestes. So to speak, "Conversely the freedom embodied in Sartre's drama may be envisaged as *I'envers de la fatalite*: it is an inescapable destiny. In other words, the Greek playwrights transform men's free decisions into myths; Sartre will show myths as the result of free decisions." (*Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* 80) And so in this setting of the play, it traces the inevitability of freedom in the Sartrean world of theatre. Thus the comments on freedom reflect the tradition of freedom to the present.

The play is set in a mythical town of Argos, a Greek town with a king and a queen but only with the difference of history which is ghostly and deadly. In this meek and faceless

town the arrival of Orestes is seen as a boon for the society and in the universe of Sartre it's an assertion of existence to its prime. Ruled by a despotic and tyrannical man, the king Aegistheus is the brother of the late king Agamemnon who is also the father of the Orestes. On this occasion, the arrival of Orestes in the village town of Argos suggests the plot of the play and brings a lot of possibility for the action. Zeus the god of flies too holds a special place as his presence is the resemblance to Nietzsche's existential doctrine which states the killing of god and so here the presence of Zeus suggests the same notion. Purely on Dostoveskian and Nietzschean lines, Zeus is placed to meet the "No" of Sartre from the mouth Of Orestes who in the end comes with the vision of the condemned freedom. It's also Electra; the sister of Orestes who gives a cohesive structure to the play and only because of her, the brother Orestes meets the need of his existence and society. She lives with her mother Clytemnestra, the queen and the wife of Aegistheus. This is the important background of the play against which the whole scene is to take place.

In this setting Orestes arrives in the town accompanied by his slave Tutor and the play begins at a "*public square*". This place is "... dominated by a statue of Zeus, god of flies and death. The Image has white eyes and blood- smeared cheeks" (*The Flies* 235). With a very muddy and dismal description of the town, which is very important for the action to come, the place deserves again a keen look. In the words of Cheema, it is thus described as, "In a locale where plague reigns supreme, flies scourge guilt ridden humans, sordid imagery haunts the milieu, saviours need somewhere to belong to and sadistic gods seek hideouts to eavesdrop, Sartre's version of the Electra Myth comes to life" (Cheema 113).

As Orestes is here now and has arrived to the place destined by the narrator, the folk and the protagonist meet the justice of existence in which Orestes realises himself and his power of existence whereas on the other, the folk in the Argos are delivered a fair justice. As, the Sartrean thesis states "man

is condemned to be free” and so Orestes too pronounces this same meaning for freedom in conversation with the god Zeus. Before coming to know about this conversation and the meaning embedded in it, it's necessary to know the reason behind this duel. The genesis of this condemnation lies in his massive philosophical work *Being and Nothingness* and is more clearly explained by Cox, “Back in Paris he wasted no time. He founded the resistance movement 'Socialism and Freedom' and wrote his major philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, a work in which he argues that freedom, choice and personal responsibility for one's actions are fundamental and inalienable features of the human condition” (Gary Cox 129). So in *Being and Nothingness*, it's the being and nihilism which have been traced and thus the inevitability of freedom lies at the core of all the arguments. With the positioning of freedom in every context whether it is ‘place’, ‘environment’, ‘death’, the absolutism of freedom reigns human destiny. This particular idea being the inspiration of Sartre, the thesis of freedom and specially the ‘condemned freedom’ is put forward. The reinforcement of this idea is so great and to press it hard, Sartre devotes it to literature and we get the character Orestes who is the guilt stealer in the play and thus resorts to everything to save his freedom. And so he says to his sister Electra, “I am free, Electra. Freedom has crashed down on me like a thunderbolt” (*The Flies* 296).

Denying everyone and every power of sate and divinity, Orestes says to Zeus, which happens in the last part of the play. This conversation is in the alignment with the atheistic tradition of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. It also resonates, the death of god. Thus the conversation starts in which Zeus being the god of men and flies asks the prince to look in the matter of his creation and the universe. He says that he is the creator of all.

ZEUS: Orestes, I created you, and I created all things. Now see... It was I who ordained their courses, according to the law of justice...But you, Orestes, you have done evil, the very rocks

and stones cry out against you...No Orestes return to your saner self; the universe refutes you, you are a mite in the scheme of things. Return to nature, Nature's thankless son. (*The Flies* 308-309)

ORESETES: Let it crumble! Let the rocks revile me, and flowers wilt at my coming... You are the king of gods, king of stones and stars, king of the waves at sea. But you are not the king of man. (*The Flies* 308)

Orestes is very clear with the No which he is putting forward and really doesn't care for Zeus who is the god of gods. He thus shows a complete indifference to the matter, for his actions are committed to the sake of freedom. With this reaction of Orestes, Zeus really gets infuriated and says.

ZEUS: Impudent spawn! So I am not your king? Who, then, made you?

ORESTES: You. But you blundered: you should not have made me free. (*The Flies* 309)

We come here to know that the faculty of freedom which Orestes owns and is symbolic to the freedom of the humanity is actually free like Orestes and is also free from the control of God. Though Orestes admits that he is the creation of Zeus but he says that his being free is not in the control of Zeus. Sartre gives the power to man by the virtue of freedom in which s/he is its own master and doesn't care for anything except its own position interpreted by the very being who owns and possess this freedom. And thus this position is very akin to his position in his lecture *Existentialism is a humanism* (1946) in which he says, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." With this doctrine Orestes moves to the front claiming his right for his own making, despite all the forces which stop, making him as an authentic individual. As the conversation further moves Orestes claims the supremacy of freedom in which his existence too is entwined. Orestes says, "Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me, and swept me off my feet. Nature sprang back, my youth went with the wind, and I knew myself

alone, utterly alone in the midst of this well-meaning little universe of yours. I was like a man who's lost his shadow. And there was nothing left in heaven, no Right or Wrong, nor anyone to give me orders" (*The Flies* 310). And this proclamation brings him to the further understanding of man in which it's the commitment of the individual which makes him the person who he wants to be. Thus in his lecture *Existentialism is a humanism*, which he gave in the club Maintenat in Paris, explaining about this faculty of being brave and coward which is alike to the very situation of Orestes and so in doing this act, he is exercising his freedom at utmost.

"What the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly, that the hero makes himself heroic. There's always a possibility for the coward not to be cowardly anymore and for the hero to stop being heroic. What counts is total involvement; some one particular action or set of circumstances is not total involvement" (Christine Daigle 50). This is the exact manifesto of Sartre in relation to the making of an individual as per the wishes and so strongly suggests with the radical stand that the making and the destiny of the existence lies in the fact who owns it. In the case of this play, Orestes is the one who has done this job and thus feels remorseless even after killing his mother and stepfather. Though there is also admittance by the hero that he is anguished for this is actually the Sartrean position, in which man, after realising his freedom fills with anguish. Orestes too is filled with anguish but still it's his own anguish like his own freedom. Orestes thus stands in the same league of Sartrean heroes like Roquentin of *Nausea* (1938) Hoederer of *Dirty Hands* (1948, Mathieu of *The Age of Reason*(1945) falling in accordance to the schema of the philosophy of freedom. The protagonist thus being highly an existential character, he thus replies to Zeus in lieu for his statement which reads as:

ZEUS: ... Your vaunted freedom isolates you from the fold; it means exile.

ORESTES: Yes, exile. (*The Flies* 310)



He thus accepts the state of exile and is no mood to compromise with the present state unlike his sister who is crying in front of Zeus for her absolution.

He further says, "...For I, Zeus, am a man, and every man must find out his way. Nature abhors man, and you too, god of gods, abhor mankind." (*The Flies* 311)

With this mood and setting the play has almost come to an end in which Orestes has shown a complete defiance to God Zeus. It's no more stopping by Orestes and brooding but going ahead with his sense of goal. With a very fine metaphor Sartre leaves an important message in which Zeus and Orestes are compared with their equality of being anguished. Hence Orestes says, "Take care; those words were a confession of your weakness. As for me, I do not hate you. What have I to do with you, or you with me? We shall glide past each other, like ships in a river, without touching. You are God, and I am free; each of us is alone and our anguish is akin." (*The Flies* 311)

It's very clear now that there lays a strong difference in the freedom of a man and the control of God. They cannot go side by side at least in the world of Sartre. The absolute freedom has gained its feat in denouncing the very God and killing it for it's not required at all in the radical world of Sartrean freedom which has its roots in the free consciousness as explained in *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre gives the god like voice in defining the authority and hence we see Orestes speaking, one of the very important statements by the playwright himself.

ORESTES: What they choose. They're free; and human life begins on the far side of despair. (*The Flies* 311)

This is the end of the conversation and almost of the play, only left with the last saying by Zeus which he anticipated long back for Orestes. It's an end which shows the fall of God and the rise of mankind. It can be traced more concretely in the words of Zeus.

ZEUS: Well, Orestes, all this was foreknown. In the fullness of time a man was to come, to announce my decline. And you are that man, it seems. But seeing you yesterday – you with your girlish face- who'd have believed it? (*The Flies* 312)

This marks the end of the story which started with the hegemony of God but ends in the decline and reinstalls the faith not in the Kierkegaardian realm but purely on the manifesto by Nietzsche. The decline and refusal to God bears the testimony of human passion and freedom. Orestes thus clears Argos from the deadly environment and the plague with which it was infected from the last fifteen years. He has given justice to the folk of Argos and has even justified himself in the process. A very high model and an ideal embodiment, he is thus an authentic individual who leaves bad faith even in the terrible times of despair sowing a light beyond reason and common sense. The character of Orestes equally sums up the political nature of the facts existing under the German occupation and also delivering a message for the political commitment for the French masses. Hence, with the help of myth, Sartre has brought the state of things to the proper justice delivering an equality of purpose in terms of politics and philosophy. And in the case of Orestes, he has finally been raised up by getting enlightened in the process of condemned freedom.

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