



## THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA: THE AESTHETICS OF 'SURVIVAL'

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### ABSTRACT :

This paper tries to locate the place of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the novel by the American novelist Ernest Miller Hemingway, among the world fiction. The novel gets huge appreciation across the world for its realistic depiction. The paper cites the life philosophy sets forth by Santiago, the principal character and how the novel rises to the status of a moral fable. It details Hemingway's style in narrating Santiago's epic struggle with Marlin, his victory, the magnificent failure caused by the Sharks and Santiago's relentless faith. The paper traces the metaphysics of 'survival' embedded in the narrative structure of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

**KEYWORDS :** Realism, Survival, Aesthetic, Life, Struggle.

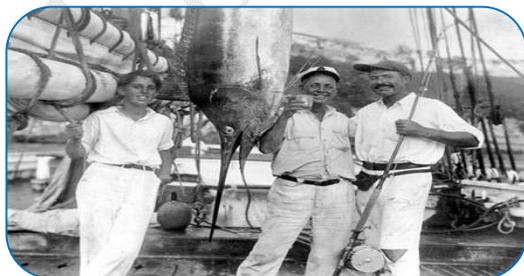
### INTRODUCTION:

Ernest Miller Hemingway is indubitably a 'leviathan' in the field of literature. Mark Schorer has described him as 'unquestionably the greatest craftsman in the American novel in this century' and has praised his art as 'absolutely incomparable.' (19) He is a feted journalist, short story writer, novelist and social activist. He enjoys immense freedom in writing, by deprecating traditional narrative strategies. He could create a writing technique of his own at the early phase of his literary career and almost in the track of Faulkner, John Dos Passos, e.e. cummings etc. Hemingway has witnessed the two World Wars and unsurprisingly his oeuvre details the horrid nature of war, the trepidation and alienation. He belongs to the leading group of that time-'Lost Generation' with Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound.

Hemingway is a voracious reader, traveller and he has keen interest in sports, deep sea fishing, hunting, boxing and bullfighting. He encodes his experiences in his works magnificently. Hemingway got immortal fame among bibliophiles with his magnum opus *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The classic text *The Old Man and the Sea* won Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and Nobel Prize in 1954. The Nobel Prize Committee observes:

Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his mastery of the art of narrative, most recently demonstrated in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and for the influence that has exerted on contemporary style. (NobelPrize.org)

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* receives much critical appraisal since its publication. While writing an introduction to Hemingway's works, famous writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair notices that 'it is really a wonderful text as well as a human epic.' M.T. adds to his comment that this Hemingway text poignantly delineates the prodigious battle-'Life.' Hemingway too expresses his opinion that "*The Old Man and the Sea* is fiction, based on actual occurrences." The polyphonic reading of the novel-naturalistic/ psychological/spiritual/ allegorical/ symbolical emphasises the text's rigorous philosophical stature. Hemingway invests the semantic layer of the novel



with much striking and inspiring notion- "A man can be destroyed, but not defeated." The novel is a parable of all humanity.

The application of Hemingway's 'Iceberg theory/ theory of omission' can trace in this novel too. Much of the story of the novel goes back to his earlier article *On the Blue Water*, published in *Esquire* (April 1936). The article recounts the excitement in deep sea fishing and also reports the event of an old fisherman Anselmo Hernandez, who caught a giant Marlin which weighed 800 pounds. Hemingway modelled Anselmo for portraying his principal character Santiago. Santiago, his boy-attendant Manolin and Marlin, the huge fish are the major characters in the novel. On literal level, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a tale of an old Cuban fisherman's (Santiago) single handed fight with a huge fish (Marlin) in the Gulf Stream. But Hemingway's story deviates the established narrative stratum and attained an inexorable place in the literary world.

The symbolic overtones in the title itself reveal that Hemingway presents his story as the parable of Man vs. Nature. The old Santiago becomes the prototype of 'Universal Man' who is the epitome of simple joys, sufferings, hamartia, moral qualities etc; 'sea' is the representative of 'Nature.' Hemingway illustrates the aesthetics of 'survival' through this baffling story marvellously. It is ironic that though Hemingway commits suicide, he is able to teach humanity to face the challenges of life with will power and dignity. Hemingway utilises dream, Santiago's life, Joe di Maggio, Christian symbolism, images of Manolin etc. to colour the aesthetic philosophy of survival in the novel.

With the third person narration Hemingway introduces his hero Santiago: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish (1)." Hemingway's heroes are often designated as code heroes, one who sustains grace under pressure. Such a figure is Santiago too. Santiago, the thin and gaunt old Cuban, who lived alone in his shack, is a giant Marlin fisherman. He is only accompanied by his boy attendant Manolin. But in the beginning of the novel, Manolin is forced to leave Santiago, who could not find a single fish for forty days, and join another luckier boat. After eighty four days' continuous defeat, he wishes the eighty-fifth day is his luckiest day and goes alone for fishing. He encounters a giant Marlin in the depth of the Gulf Stream and the strange fish is not an easily tameable one. Santiago can entangle the Marlin after three days relentless struggle and both are badly injured. He ties the fish to the skiff, which is actually larger than the skiff, and returns back to the shore. The spilled blood from the fish attracted the sharks and they feasted on Santiago's victory- 'the fish' and leave it as mere skeleton. Santiago reached the shack as a shattered man. But Manolin and Santiago decides to resume their fishing venture together. The novel ends with: "The old man was dreaming about the lions." (91)

Hemingway brilliantly handles the thematic narration to reveal theory of 'existence and endurance.' The novel picturises the lonely life of Santiago, his conversations with Manolin about fishing and baseball, his epic struggle with the giant Marlin, his tragedy and his rejuvenation in striking language. He uses many Spanish words, as Cubans speak Spanish, during the narration which brings Spanish flavour to the story. Hemingway exemplifies his life philosophy through his protagonist Santiago and it instigates the literature lovers to lead a sound and noble life.

Hemingway's novel brims with the basic Christian religious notions and thus many critics view *The Old Man and the Sea* as a Christian allegory. The novelist presents his hero Santiago as a Christ like figure who possess the qualities such as love, endurance, humility and compassion. As the critics Carlos Baker and Philip Young notices that: "His wounded hands, his compassion, his role as a martyr among the fisherman and his exhausted and painful journey home after his ordeal-all these suggest his symbolic association with Christ." (16) At the end of the novel, Santiago climbs the hill to his hut with carrying the mast across his shoulder. The scene resembles the Christ's crucifixion scene. By casting Santiago as a Christ figure, Hemingway could tell the story of the ordeal of life in a realistic manner.

Santiago, being a baseball lover, adores Joe di Maggio and his virtues in life. He usually ploughed the newspaper for getting news about his US baseball hero Di Maggio. Di Maggio has become a champion despite the painful bone spur in his heel. Hemingway conveys the inspiring thought 'heroism is surpassing one's personal defects and handicaps, in one's efforts to reach the heights of power and glory' through the

image of Di Maggio. His life story instils immense courage in Santiago to face all the hardships of life. Whenever he feels depressed and alienated, Santiago thinks about Di Maggio and 'the dream' for regaining strength and confidence.

Santiago dreams of some lions on the African shores; they appeared to be an affectionate pack of harmless cat like creatures. He loves them as he loves Manolin. The lions symbolise greatness, grandeur, power and pride. The pictures of lion and Di Maggio give unimaginable potency to Santiago's life journey. Hard work, perseverance, noble endurance etc. are the basic ladders of a successful life. Santiago pursues these virtues throughout his life. Though he lost his prize/Marlin to the evil force-Sharks, his epic struggle is worth to mention. Only the skeleton of giant Marlin remains and a tourist lady from Terrace restaurant sees 'the long white spine with a huge tail that lifted and swung with the tide.' She enquires about it to a waiter and he replies that it is a shark. The lady and her male companion say that they didn't know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails. Manolin feels great pain at his mentor's pathetic condition and also that the Cuban people did not take a minute to think about Santiago; they just looking at the Skeleton and makes ironic comments. However, Manolin is able to console Santiago and they plan about their future ventures. Santiago firmly believes that a man is not born for defeat. He avows that 'a man can be destroyed but not defeated.' Hemingway presents an instigating tale of hope, suffering, epic struggle, firm resolution through Santiago's life.

Dr. D. K. Lal and V.K. Maheswari observe that:

The essence of Hemingway's aesthetic principle lies in his adherence to truth and realism, in his appropriate rendering of inward emotions and external observations, events, facts and in his preoccupation with the natural beauty of landscapes and men. The abstract and the intellectual principles find no place in his writings. This had led him to adopt a style which is simple, pure and properly oriented to create the appropriate effect. His worship of truth and beauty is interlinked. He has approved certain canons of fiction enunciated and explicated by Joseph Conrad, another admirer of truth. Hemingway's fiction with its deep suggestive power and symbolic significance and beauty of narration, appeals to the temperament of the reader. This is the reason why his art has become more enduring. (43)

Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* can be read as a fable which narrates the politics of 'survival' poignantly. His code hero Santiago is a worshipper of Nature and her subjects. He loves humans, birds and animals lots. He admires and sees sea as *la mar*, as feminine and he knows its mystical strands. He adores turtles, man-of-war bird, dolphin, lion, Marlin etc and treats them as his friend or brother. Santiago's thoughts on 'Nature', Sin, the hunter-prey relation etc. imply that the universe is not only for human but also for all other creatures. Santiago is always dedicated to his profession; he quits hand-wrestling as it hurts his right hand. Hemingway embodies the philosophy of *Karma* propounded by Lord Buddha through Santiago. Such narratives enhance the aesthetic principle of survival in the novel. The famous critic Robert.P. Weeks remarks that:

By selecting a common man like Santiago for his hero, Hemingway gives his story a classical universality. More than that, when he shows us the bravery and resolution this ordinary man can summon up in the face of defeat, we are struck with pity and awe. Here is Aristotle's dictum turned upside down: we are moved not by the fall of a great man but the elevation to heroism of what we had taken to be a little man. And the tourists, by their unawareness in the final scene, flat, unemphatic and understated as it is, underscore as nothing else could the solitary, dignified, self-sufficient valor of the old fisherman. Their unawareness of Santiago's ordeal helps to elevate it far above the sort of pathos that outsiders often are aware of, perhaps because they can mitigate it with their commiseration. Thus the final scene of *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrates how skilfully Hemingway combines self-imposed limitations to stir our emotions and bring into focus the central meaning of his novel. (5)

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