

# Nothingness: Anguish, Refutation, Rebellion and Submission

Muhammad Adnan Akbar

Punjab Higher Education Department, Govt. Post Graduate College, Bhakkar, Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

Existentialism, Nihilism, Dadaism and Mysticism have their different perspective regarding their own subjective outlook towards life. All these schools of thought take nothingness as their basic element and their explanation of phenomenon is also quite different from each other. Yet every interpretation of nothingness has some common tendencies. From in-depth analysis of these thought patterns, simplified parallel interpretations have been deduced which are anguish, refutation, rebellion and mysticism in philosophies of existentialism, nihilism, Dadaism and mysticism respectively. This study will help to draw a theoretical framework of nothingness that can be applied on different literary works.

**KEYWORDS:** Dasein, Dread, Thrown, Being-with-one-another, Being-in-the-world, Becoming, Nihilism, Nirvana, Moksha

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nothingness always appears in relation to being. It is opened to varied interpretations. It comes under discussion in different philosophies. Existentialism, Nihilism, Dadaism, and Mysticism all have nothingness as a determiner in their philosophy, yet they treat it differently and do not share common conceptions.

Parmenides (520CE-450BCE) was the first philosopher who initiated a discourse on this issue yet he did not have much to say about it. He refuted the idea of nothingness and forcefully denied concepts like coming-into-being and not-being. John the Sot, an English theosophist in Ninth century, categorized evil as non-being but he also did not try to establish any particular philosophical discourse.

In pantheism and mysticism, there is a long history of nothingness. Mystics always consider this world and 'being here' as unreal, shadow or nothing. They consider Divine as Being and everything else as non-being or shadow of that Being. Hegel (1770-1837) starts the discussion of nothingness in philosophy as he also belongs to pantheist school of thought. Hegel confronts nothingness in the start of his discourse of dialectics in his book, *Science and Logic* (1812). According to him, whole is truth and everything can be judged in relation to whole. Whole is called as Absolute by Hegel. He proposes that absolute is pure being and at the same time nothing as well, so he labels absolute as becoming. Becoming is very similar to Heidegger's conception of being which at the same time manifests being and nothingness.

Nothingness comes under discussion in nihilism as a form of refutation and nullification. Yet it prevails thoroughly in Dadaistic school of thought. Nothing becomes prime and basis of Dadaist theory. Dadaists suggest nothingness in emotions, feelings, and actions; in short nothingness reveals itself in every state and entity.

Mystics also bring nothingness under consideration but in a little diverse way from existentialists, nihilists and Dadaists. Mystics consider God as being and themselves as nothing. They refute everything in order to embrace the larger reality. They are not ready to accept this world as real and they, much like Plato, (428/427BC – 348/347BC) assume it as unreal. For that reason they want to identify and be one with the Supreme Being.

Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Beckett (1906-1989), Eliot (1860-1835), Woolf (1862-1941), Dorris Lessing (1919-), and Mansfield (1888-1923) use nothingness as a determiner in their character's life but Kafka is one step ahead of all these. Kafka's characters seem to wrestle with existential problems of life and nothingness becomes a crucial criterion for their life's quality.

## 2. PROBLEM SPECIFICATION

Nothingness is a prominent element and theme of ontology as nothingness always appears in relation to being and it cannot be considered as a separate entity so this study will examine position of nothingness in different modes of being which will provide a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. This study aims at formulation of a proper framework of nothingness after careful study of existentialism, nihilism, dadaism and mysticism.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

- 1- To develop an understanding of Nothingness by considering ontological studies.
- 2- To point out different similarities and differences in the dealing of phenomenon of nothingness by various philosophical schools of thought.
- 3- To compare and contrast different viewpoints in relation to being and nothingness.

### 4. DISCUSSION

#### 4.1- Nothingness in Existentialism:

Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is regarded as the father of existentialism. He did not consider himself professional philosopher and he never wished to initiate any movement. He was very concerned with religion and tried to look deeper into it. He divides life into three 'existence-spheres': the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. All these spheres emerge in hierarchical relationship.

Being is not a rigid and fixed entity for Kierkegaard but always in the process of becoming. It is always developing and in progress. Individuals are in constant striving for the change. This change is an eternal change. They desire to transform their relationship. This transformation takes between self and with God. Individuals are defined in relation to societal terms in Kierkegaard's philosophy such as husband, father, citizen, and etc. They have meaning with relation to society and alone they have no worth.

Individuals are not only rational beings but they possess emotions and feelings. For that reason, Kierkegaard's much work is related to the individual's mental state. Two of his works are named as, Fear and Trembling (1843), and Sickness unto Death (1849) which represent certain kind of emotions. Nothingness and being are formed, interpreted and developed in the play of these emotions. Despair or complete hopelessness causes ultimate stage of negation when all possibilities seem to be snatched away and no choice is left over. As the ethical stage ends and confrontation of religious sphere is bestowed to individual. End of ethical stage means the end of all possibilities. Despair emerges from this situation yet 'leap of faith' transcends despair.

Dread (anxiety/anguish)<sup>1</sup> reveals nothingness and they both are correlative. Robert G. Olson explores this dread or anguish in this way,

The anguish of nothingness is properly the anguish which one experiences at the thought that nothing and nobody might ever have come into existence or that everything everybody might go out of existence in an instant (246).

Another form of nothingness or nihilism comes through leveling. Leveling is stillness, rigidity and sameness. It is an abstract process which negates the individuality of every entity and leaves everything meaningless.

Kierkegaard does not differentiate existence (being) and nothingness. Nothingness is revealed in existence and it is not separate entity from it. Richard Gill and Ernest Sherman quoted him as:

I loathe my existence ... One sticks one's finger into the soil to tell by the smell what land one is in: I stick my finger into existence--- it smells of nothing (27).

Heidegger (1889-1976) considers himself as a philosopher of being rather than existence. He initiates an inquiry about being. A question, which has been neglected for so many years, came under consideration again. Heidegger studied ancient Greeks, Medieval Scholastics, and Modern Philosophy. By taking concepts from Plato, Aristotle and Moderns, he presented his own conception of being. He refuted empiricist and positivist approach to solve the query: "What is 'is'?"

Steven Earnshaw, while explaining Heidegger's concept of being, says:

In the sentence 'The sky is blue', for example, it is the word 'is' that should command our attention, it is the 'isness' which is everything and which needs to be thought about. The problem is, or has been, that we do not notice the 'is' in the sentence at all, and yet the 'is' is the precondition for everything, for all 'entities', it is Being itself (59).

For Heidegger, being cannot be a substance or an attribute as Aristotle conceptualized, and he is also unable to identify his concept with Plato's ideal existence. He also discards scholastics philosophy due to their excessive preoccupation with theology yet he accepts Husserl's concept of pure consciousness and related his concept of being with it.

Being is a very trick concept of Heidegger as one can say being is the 'isness' of every entity. Being incorporates everything and nothing at the same time. He assigns a particular mode to being named as *dasein*. Every human has the character of *dasein* in Heidegger's term and it literary means being there. *Dasein* constitutes the being as being-in-the-world. *Dasein* also accompanies *being-with-others* and *being-with-one-another*. *Dasein* is not a realization but *thrownness*. This *thrownness* has no historical or causal reason. Being is revealed in the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Danish word *Angst* has been translated as dread, anguish and anxiety.

of *dasein* with other. *Dasein* projects itself beyond itself in search of possibilities as our being is confined in certain conception of time. We are no longer past and yet have not attained future. We are perplexed in this maze of time. We are in the process of Nietzsche's becoming. Richard Kearney says:

Man is temporality precisely, because what is, here and now, always presupposes what has been and what he will be. Heidegger describes *Dasein*, in consequence, as a mode of being which is always projecting itself beyond itself towards its possibilities (32).

Nothingness emerges for shorter period of time in Heidegger's master work, *Being and Time* (1927) yet becomes a key factor which causes the realization of being. Heidegger also suggests the feeling of dread (anxiety/anguish) which reveals nothingness like Kierkegaard. Nothingness is concealing and revealing of being. It is not separate or detached from the totality of the whole yet it always accompanies being. Pure consciousness is a state of nothingness which can be achieved by the nullification of real world. Here being and nothingness merges with one another and freedom is also achieved. Free play of pure possibilities is opened for the *Dasein* as in the light of possibilities *Dasein* can re-evaluate, reinterpret, and rethink.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is a novelist, dramatist, short-story writer and philosopher but he will be remembered always as 'personification of existentialism'. He is post-war writer who is living in a world devoid of God, poverty-stricken and war-beaten. He has a lot to say about nothingness yet he does not separate it from being like Heidegger. In his philosophical book, *Being and Nothingness* (a bible of existentialism 1943), he continues the discussion of Heidegger and gives more elaborative discourse of nothingness while employing the terms, such as *dasein*, *thrown*, *mineness*, *ownmost* and *being-in-the-world* borrowed from Heidegger.

Sartre's famous lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), provides a doctrine for an authentic existence which deals with the issues of freedom and responsibility. Freedom emerges from *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) as man has been thrown to existence and he is essentially nothing. He is not pre-defined in the world devoid of any supreme authority. He has to do something in order to create meaning for its existence as he is completely free to do anything yet he has to bear the responsibility of his acts because his choice not a choice of his own personal self. In choosing, he chooses for all humanity. Sartre says:

And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men (521).

Sartre explores the different dimensions of consciousness as it is, according to him, spontaneous, impenetrable and uncontrollable. Being and nothingness yoke together in consciousness and everybody is unique and distinct due to it. Emotional consciousness is the foundation of the world and it establishes a link between consciousness and world. Being asserts itself in this relation.

Ontological consciousness creates the consciousness of existence. Roquentin, main character of the novel, *Nausea* (1938), is worried to think about existence. He says:

Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance. I leaned back and closed with eyes existence: existence is a fullness which man can never abandon (491).

In-itself is the pre-ontological consciousness which represents the existence of I yet for-itself is another kind of consciousness which thinks about in-itself. Sartre defines existence as a relationship of in-itself and for-itself. The herd<sup>2</sup> has been thrown<sup>3</sup> to existence and is not pre-defined for that reason there is a gap between in-itself and for-itself yet God is in-itself-for-itself as he is self-created entity so there is no gap. As the herd is not pre-defined so it possesses the freedom of defining itself. He is nothing in in-itself yet he will be whatever he wants to be but that is not decided yet. He has the liberty of decision. There nothingness and freedom becomes interchangeable as Steven Earnshaw says:

I am nothing, because my existence precedes essence, and I am nothing because what I am to be is yet to be decided and so I am free to choose my self. Thus freedom and nothingness are interchangeable (87, 88).

Nothingness emerges in imaging consciousness as image is *irreal* and not present in the world and it has its only existence in the mind in opposition to the world. Imaging consciousness is an escape and refutation of the world as it liberates oneself from the jaws of reality (world) as the object of imaging consciousness are based on nothing. Every image is produced out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and we are responsible for their production. As Abrams refers:

Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus view each man as an isolated being who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning – and to represent men's life, as it moves from the nothingness where it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd (1).

<sup>2</sup> This is Nietzsche's term which he uses for beings who are not participating in the process of becoming or they have not yet decided to participate.

<sup>3</sup> "I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help..." (Sartre)

#### 4.2- Nothingness in Nihilism

Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) popularized this word in his novel, Father and Sons (1862), for first the time yet afterward it emerged as a philosophy propagated by Nietzsche (1844- 1900). Nihilism denies ethics (moral nihilism), purposefulness of life (existential nihilism), and all sort of knowledge (epistemological nihilism). Metaphysical nihilism asserts non-existence of existence and it also suggests re-evaluation of moral standards and denial of existent morality. It is also not ready to accept previous cultures as well.

Nietzsche gives two-world picture by making distinctions between the worlds of *being* and *becoming*. World of being is permanent, static and unchanging. Becoming<sup>4</sup> is a destructive one which discards everything prior and creates fresh, new, and novel. Nietzsche advocates creative transformation which requires the destruction of the present being in order to launch the process of becoming where highest moral standards and values are possible. Nietzsche in The Will to Power says, “Strictly speaking nothing of the nature of Being much be allowed to remain, because in that case Becoming losses its value and gets to be sheer and superfluous non-sense” (289).

Becoming, in fact, is a process of nullification and refutation in which no prior values, knowledge and ethics can possibly reside. One cannot achieve highest possible good while clinging to prior being which limits and restricts oneself, it is necessary to break ties with prior debased being. Being is just an appearance yet *becoming* is reality. It does not become static and also does not approach to any final state. It is always in continuum.

In becoming, God also does not have any place as ethics and knowledge do not have because God is again an attribute of being which should be negated in order to clear the way for superman. He is an embodiment of highest kind of ethics which is devoid of God, being, and debased morality. Superman annihilates being while reducing it to nothingness and achieving the state of pure consciousness from where becoming takes its roots. Becoming begins from presuppositionless state of mind in which no prior knowledge can be present.

Death of God is a vital event in the Nietzsche’s philosophy. By refuting the existence of ultimate being, he takes a start towards his nihilistic approach. In The Joyful Wisdom, he announces the death of God in this way,

Where is God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him,-you and I! We are all murderers! But how have we done it? ... Do we not stray, as though infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? ... God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? (256)

Superman has attained the stature of god after His death. He is not confined in the sphere of good and evil, he will create his own moral and ethical codes as he is beyond good and evil. ‘The herd’ (man) is imprisoned in world of being which leads towards God’s commandments that are evidently denial of life. He has to say ‘no’ to this world of being. The nullification will promote him into a new world of freedom. In Thus Spake Zarathustra (1885), he says, “I teach you the Superman. Man is something that should be overcome” (262).

Nothingness creates identification with the process of becoming, in which being has been reduced. All prior knowledge and ethics have been negated. God’s presence is refuted and pure consciousness has been achieved. All mighty presence of being has discarded. It has been replaced by becoming where nothingness have equal adherence with being. This refutation of being is unconditional and honest one as Richard Schacht says about his atheism, “That Nietzsche goes well beyond a cautious agnosticism, and shares Schopenhauer’s ‘unconditioned and honest atheism’, is something he makes quite plain time and again”(121).

Morality is usually associated with concept of God because He is the one who judges and then gives reward or punishment but morality presented to us according to him is debase so we also don’t need God as well. He says this thing in Beyond Good and Evil (1886), in this fashion, “Why Atheism nowadays? “The father” in God is thoroughly refuted; equally so ‘the judge,’ “the rewarder”. Also his “free will”: he does not hear-and even if he did, he would not know how to help” (279).

#### 4.3- Nothingness in Dadaism

Dadaism was short-lived literary movement (better to say anti-literature movement). It started in 1915 and ended nearly in 1924. Movement started during the period of chaos and depression of World War I. It reached at its peak during the year of 1920. Tristan Tzara was the founding father of the movement and he presented its manifesto. Donna M. Kristiansen quotes few lines from his manifesto:

I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things and in principle I am against manifesto, as I am against principles. I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain

<sup>4</sup> In The Will to Power, he says

- 1) Becoming has no final state; it does not tend towards stability.
- 2) Becoming is not a state of appearance; the world of Being is probably only appearance.
- 3) Becoming is of precisely the same value every instant; the sum of its value always remain equal; expressed otherwise, it has no value, for that according to which the word value might have some sense, is entirely lacking. The collective value of the world defies valuation; for this reason philosophical pessimism belongs to the order of farces. (69)

because I hate common sense ... To explain: the amusement of red-bellies in the mills of empty skulls (460).

Dadaism was a sort of nihilism in which reality was presented but in a deformed way. In the same way, words, sentences and grammatical rules were also discarded. Language was incomprehensible. It was a severe critique of the debased moral society. It provides with a true picture of meaninglessness and rootlessness of human being in the world deprived of any ethical and moral values. Dadaists refuted logic and reason in literature as the world itself had lost rationality and had become an evident portrayal of nothing.

Nothing is the basic word in the dictionary of Dadaism. They want to present nothing and they want people to understand nothing. They believe that there is nothing to understand and to express except the pure state of mind. Pure state of mind reveals the very being of beings and in the world full of chaos the very being of beings is 'nothing'. Andre Maximov in his essay gives the postulates of Dadaist movement, last two postulates are,

Dada, he wants nothing, nothing, he does something for the public to say: "we understand nothing, nothing, nothing."

Dadaists are nothing, nothing, nothing, most certainly they will come to nothing, nothing, nothing (270).

Dadaists' writings are negation of set patterns of society and these are a kind of protest against societal trends. They are not ready to accept the standards of art presented to them. For them all literature is and should be worthwhile for writers only. They refute all literary criticism as well. Mallarme suggests that symbolism demands half work from their readers in order to understand yet Dadaism only demands from his readers as it does only provide them with nothing. Andre Maximov describes Max Jacob, who is a Dadaist writer, in his essay as, "Max Jacob wrote novels, essays, and poems in which sentence followed sentence with no connection whatever, and achieved nothing but the bewilderment of his readers" (273).

In Dadaism everything loses its worth and value. Nothing remains beautiful or ugly. No categorization of good or bad can sustain. No attribute or substance upholds. Everything is irrelevant and unimportant. There remains one thing; nothing, nothing, and nothing. With help of writings, they convey the absurdity of life. They present absurdity in their poetical and prosaic structure as well. They disturb the whole structure of syntax and semantics. Poem of Pierre Chapka Bonniere is quoted by Andre Maximov which is a best presentation of Dadaistic state:

PAROXISME  
-; - ; - o - O  
!!! tsi-i-i-l  
-et sam -et sam-sam- saM  
-et sam \_ keink \_ tdiH  
? ehs - keink - tdiH  
! rrrroor- 0  
-Atakak - oh- oh tzzi g.

This whole poem sounds like a joke and it conveys nothing but merely depicts a state of mind which is also nothing. An absurd state was overpowering the conscious of war generation. Absurdism, Futurism, Cubism and Surrealism, all of them share consciousness of age. They all negate life and present it as nothing and absurd. In this regard, they employ theory and techniques of Dadaism to some extent. Dadaism soon faded away after a short span of ten years. Yet they have affected the minds and thoughts of people to larger extent. Donna M. Kristiansen quoted Tristan Tzara Tzara who suggested two solutions for true Dadaist,

No more looks!  
No more words!  
Stop looking.  
Stop talking (459).

#### **4.4- Nothingness in Mysticism**

The hearing, sight, my tongue and hand: all He.

Then I am not, for all that is, is He.

I think I am, and thought is but a dream.

When I awake, all that remains is He (Kashani32).

Mystic life is a continuous struggle for the achievement of union with Supreme Being. Mystic does not consider this world as real but a shadow of original. For them, their own existence is futile without the blessings of Divine Being. Mystic refutes thinking process as thinking becomes a hurdle in their way of spiritual journey. They depend on meditation rather than thinking and socialization. Karma yoga is also a way towards spiritual insight by being in society, yet mystics, in some cases, abandon life activities for the sake of spiritual depth, but this is not a case for all mystics.

Mystics believe that there is nothing existent but God. Famous mystic, Ibn Arabi also advocates the same doctrine. Ibn Arabi explores the divine aspect of human beings named as *al- lahut*. Realization of divine aspect is necessary to achieve the unity with Divine, as divinity of man is fused together with humanitarian self. It is customary to distinguish divinity from the other and from the point of realization journey starts. There is an evident realization of being and nothingness in his theory of divinity and humanity. Divinity can be seen as being yet other as nothingness. Man has been thrown in universe and he is essentially nothing yet he realizes his being after considering his own existence as nothing from that point journey towards being starts, as Sartre assumes. Ibn Arabi's doctrine that sheds some light on this matter:

“Nothing remains but the Fulfiller of Promise alone;  
The threat of God has no object to be seen.  
When they enter the Abode of Misery they experience  
Pleasure wherein lies a bliss so different  
Form that of the Gardens of Everlastingness.  
It is all the same: the difference is felt at the beatific vision”(419).

Buddhism portrays radical mysticism in which nearly everything is annihilated and a full attempt is made to achieve a state of nothingness that corresponds to the Highest Truth. Nothingness is the basis of everything as everything has come out of nothing so everything should be annihilated to achieve original and pure state of being. Buddhists mysticism preaches Nirvana that leads towards liberation of soul from all materialistic obligations. In nirvana, one has to overcome his feelings, emotions and thoughts. One has to suffer in order to learn the practices of fasting, waiting, and thinking (meditation); three basic characteristics as portrayed by Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) as well in his novel *Siddhartha* (1922). A passage from Kant's (1724-1804) *General History of Travels* provides a true picture of Buddhist mystic tradition which is presented in the essay of Dumoulin; Kant says:

They say that Emptiness or Nothingness is the beginning of all things, that out of this nothingness and combination of elements, all things are produced, and that all must go back (to nothingness), ... Holiness consists entirely in ceasing to be, i.e., being submerged in nothingness (461).

*Shunyata* (emptying out/ emptiness) and nothingness are important concepts in Buddhism. One has to, first, empty out his mind from all kind of lust and greed then he has to mollify all wishes, desires and feelings. By emptying out, one can move towards nothingness. Nothingness is achieved after liberation from the material self. A transcendence is completed when *atma* (soul) makes union with nothingness; the very base for all basis.

Schopenhauer suggests two kinds of nothingness; absolute and relative. Absolute nothingness is the prime goal of Nirvana. Relative nothingness is comprehensible and has no capacity for transforming an individual self to spiritual self. Absolute nothingness is the prime creator of everything except nothing. Dumoulin includes the definition of absolute nothingness of Schopenhauer in his essay; which is, “For if something is not anything of what we know, it ... does not therefore follow that it is absolutely nothing, that from every possible standpoint it must be nothing ...” (467)

Nirvana demands *absolute nothingness* in which consciousness and passions cannot accompany one self. Consciousness causes realization of being. Being gets involved in society due to enormity of environmental pressure. Passions also make one self a slave; a slave of desires which cannot leave the world. So it becomes compulsion to leave both to have unification with nothingness.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Nothingness is a potential meaning provider to life in these four philosophies. Existentialism derives realization of being from nothingness of existent being. Mystics in a similar way try to attain the state of nothingness in which they can create unification with the Divine Being. Dadaists find refuge in nothingness and take it as all prevailing meaning for everything. Nihilists reduce prior morality and culture to nothingness in order to revise and re-interpret life again.

Nothingness has always been an intriguing query for the philosophers of ontology and it remained a dilemma for ontology to fully comprehend this phenomenon as it is not fully described under any philosophical label. Nothingness assumes different shapes in different modes of discourse so it will be quite helpful in analyzing Kafkaesque world after brief survey of nothingness in different school of thoughts.

From the whole discourse of nothingness four parallels have been deduced which are anguish, refutation, rebellion and submission that represents nothingness in Existentialism, Nihilism, Dadaism and Mysticism respectively. These key terms are also helpful in analyzing any character in a literary piece by depicting different mental states of the character as anguish, refutation, rebellion and submission all are reactions of certain mental states.

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