ABSTRACT

The paper explores the existential crisis of Jonathan Livingston Seagull who triumphs over the limitations of an ordinary gull in flight and achieves highest knowledge. At a moment in life he realizes knowledge is limitless and continues for this quest for the knowledge and meaning of existence. The seagull conquers and realizes its identity not only as a seagull with achievements but also the limitlessness of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Bach’s existential novella Jonathan Livingston Seagull a story is a rhapsody of joy and triumph; the triumph of the seagull metaphor for all humans against the prejudice of his species and socially imposed traditions. Written in the parable form in a very simple and clear language, it tells story of a seagull named Jonathan Livingston who crosses all barriers of society to achieve his dream of flying against the Council Flock of Seagulls which is designed to marginalize him. Jonathan Livingston Seagull a story is almost a fictional account of a seagull, which travelled against all odds of the flock to freedom.

Though the fiction is considered to be the life history a seagull at one level, it is at once a metaphor or an allegory stating its deeper meanings. If we substitute or equate “Jonathan” to any man and the “Flock” as the patriarchal or conventional society and if we consider or read the story now it tells the tale of a man who fights against all odds of the society to find his self identity – the identity of an extraordinary seagull who conquered great heights in his goal of become the master of flying techniques amidst all limitations.

“Jonathan Livingston Seagull” is essentially a search for selfhood and by extension a symbolic search by any human to find and dream the contours of flying (goal) which is his dream. For this the individual self has to
go through a continual process of reaching beyond itself, of expanding itself through varied experience, through multiple identities and relationships. The forms of life and the world seem paradoxical, mysterious and horrifying. To respond the world through pleasure, desire, despair, protest, hate, acceptance and to absorb the contradictions both within the self and the world outside, is to achieve the wholeness of life and being. Richard Bach tries to elevate Jonathan Livingston Seagull into a world much beyond the ordinary seagull life. For this emancipation, “the old law” has to be set aside.

Jonathan the protagonist being a seagull is expected to behave like a seagull and to conform to the social convention and traditions practiced in the seagull flock. The daily routine to get food is the main aim or motive of the gull’s life.

“See here, Jonathan” said his father, not unkindly. “Winter isn’t far away. Boats will be few, and the surface fish will be swimming deep. If you must study, then study food, and how to get it. This flying business is all very well, but you can’t eat a glide, you know. Don’t you forget that the reason you fly is to eat.”(4-5)

Right from the start of the story however, as a hard working and perseverant gull, Jonathan is after the art of lying unlike others just for the passion of flight and not food. He is described as left “bone and feathers” and no “ordinary bird.” He had a far sighted vision, one that made him strange and different from the society of the gulls. He did not find meaning in being an ordinary gull and tried to exploit his limits of flying.

He didn’t know why, for instance, but when he flew at altitudes less than half his wingspan above the water, he could stay in the air longer; with less effort. His glides ended not with the usual feet down splash into the sea, but with along flat water as he touched the surface with his feet tightly streamlined against his body. When he began sliding into feet up landings on the beach, then pacing the length of his slide in the sand, his parents were very much dismayed indeed.(4)

On the advice of his parents he gives up flying and tries to be an ordinary gull. “For the next few days he tried to behave like other gulls; he really tried screeching and fighting with the flock around the piers and fishing boats, dining on scraps of fish and bread.”(5)

But his inner conscience kept thwarting him.” It wanted a freedom away from all the customary traditional routine. But to go and learn to fly. He always felt “there’s so much to learn!” Getting the urge and the call he again sets off to learn and spend time by himself “far out at sea, hungry, happy, learning.” The sense of happiness is only achieved when the heart’s desires are fulfilled and feels that it is worth the doing. Bach seems to point out that as Marlow (1968) has emphasized the central importance of fulfillment (self actualization) for understanding the self. His general scheme was derived from the work of Heidegger (1927) according to whom “the present self has a number of potentialities for future being; some of these become fulfilled whereas others do not. The guiding concept of potential fulfillment gives meaning and purpose to the present self.” The guiding concept of potential fulfillment gives meaning and purpose to the present self. Some empirical confirmation of the importance of these relationships, at least for male
adults was provided by Levisohn, Darrow, Klein, Levinson and McKee (1978).” “Three types of problems are associated with potential and fulfillment. One is how to form a specific concept of one’s potential toward which one may strive. The second is how to fulfill that potential. The third is how to tolerate the frustration and disappointment associated with non-fulfillment, which is inevitable to some degree. (Ct. May, Angel and Ellin Berger 1958, again on the basis of Heidegger).

The problematic nature of the individual’s relationship to society stemmed from being inextricably bound up in interpersonal society but needing to define one’s own meaning and purpose in life actively, because society no longer provides the individual with these. Then the extent to which the self is inextricably linked with it and how it is perceived by others becomes the problems.

The problem with Jonathan Seagull too is the same. He is often pulled by the society’s nagging and the constant discouragement from his near and dear ones and the society. The society of the seagulls perceives him with shame as he spends more time in his flying lessons than in leading an ordinary seagull life. They outcast him from the gull flock.

Research on self presentation has demonstrated numerous ways in which behaviour is subtly motivated by an overriding concern with how one is perceived by others.(cf. Baumcister, 1982; Schlenker, 1980. Tedesci, 1981).

Jonathan’s return to the gull’s practice of fighting for tiny bits of food is one such a motivated concern. The trends on conformity and on socialization also deal essentially with the relation of the individual to society. With his limitations as a seagull he practiced flying fast and different strokes. He also learned to fold his wings and fly like the falcon. All I need is a tiny little wing, all I need is to fold most of my wings and fly on just the tips alone! Short wings! (14)

With determination and strength of mind Jonathan could control his flight and fly faster. A hundred forty miles per hour! And under control! (15)

His earlier vows forgotten, guiltless he said to himself “such promises are only for the gulls that accept the ordinary. One who has touched excellence in his learning has no need of that kind of promise.” (15)

Conquering fear and his new found power he was proud of knowing himself – his capacity. He even thought that his flock would be proud of his breakthrough. “they will be wild with joy”, he explored that gulls could be free and can lift themselves “out of ignorance and can find ourselves as creatures of excellence.” (7) But to his surprise the gull flock centered on the beach.

One day, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, you shall learn that irresponsibility does not pay. Life is the unknown and unknowable, except that we are put into this world to eat, to stay alive as long as we possibly can. (24)
The Council Flock banished him to a solitary life on the Far Cliffs. They were not ready to accept the fact that he had “followed a meaning, a higher purpose in life.”

The Flock alienated him and he is banished to the far away mountains. Holding onto his dreams of flying he persevered hard. He spent the rest of his days alone.

His one sorrow was not solitude, it was that the other gulls refused to believe the glory of flight that awaited them; they refused to open their eyes and see. (25)

On mastering his flying exercises he learned that a streamlined high speed dive could bring him to find the rare and tasty fish for survival. He evolved so much that he “learned to sleep in the air, settling a course at night cross the off shore wind, covering a hundred miles from sunset to sunrise.” He adapted to eat insects when flying high inlands too. He overcame “boredom, and fear and anger” and found his true identity and lived to heart’s contentment.

Chance meeting with two gulls, directs him to a “higher plane of existence,” where the world is found through perfection in knowledge. There he also meets gulls like him who have a common goal that is to fly. His friendly relationship with Chiang gives him the key to learn more, to instantly move to any point in the universe.

“To fly as fast as thought, to anywhere that is,” he said, “you must begin by knowing that you have already arrived.” (53)

Jonathan finally realizes that “You’ve got to understand that a seagull is an unlimited idea of freedom an image of the Great Gull” (70). He also understands to the true to oneself: “you have the freedom to be yourself, your true self, here and now, nothing can stand in your way.”

Reaching on another plane of knowledge was the next task set ahead to know the meaning of love and kindness. For this to become fruitful, worked hard for a month. Master and the wisest of the gulls with final words “Keep working on love” Jonathan, he vanished into thin air one day. Practising more on the nature of love, sprung the thoughts of the Earth, the fellow gulls who would wish to learn and accept knew knowledge and realized he was born to be an instructor. “He couldn’t help but think that there might be one or two gulls back on Earth who would be able to learn too.” (57)

The recurrent image of the old flock made him return and help them. Met Fletcher Lynd Seagull and helped him to learn flying with the promise one day his knowledge would be shared with the flock. “Let’s begin with level flight.” (59)

He liberated Fletcher and later a few of the other young gulls. They were made to find their identity and know their ability. “He spoke of very simple things – that it is right for a gull to fly, that freedom is the very
nature of his being, that whatever stands against that freedom must be set aside be it ritual or superstition or limitation in any form.”(77)

CONCLUSION

The quest for identity in the novella Jonathan Livingston Seagull operates at various levels – first at the level of the protagonist who finds his true identity as an instructor of flying, rejecting the norms of the society for a higher knowledge and existence and is liberated physically as a gull and also spatially and temporarily. He conquers the knowledge that all gulls are born free to achieve their goals. On the second level Jonathan becomes a medium for the other gulls who also finds their identity and freedom. They spend the day celebrating freedom. The study shows that the quest for self identity is always a complex interface of personal, social, psychological and moral. Jonathan at once becomes a quest and a celebration about the freedom of flying and the new knowledge of power of love and compassion that cures all wounds of the past. Goethe says “the whole art of life consists in giving up our existence in order to exist.” (Bishop, 171)

WORKS CITED