

Existentialism: A Philosophical Approach in Literature

Dr Aarti Mahajan,

Assistant professor,

Department of English,

Guru Nanak Dev University college, Pathankot ,Punjab.

Email-draartimahajan1985@gmail.com

Abstract : Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and an individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life. Existential philosophers often focused more on what is subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret, as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science. In this paper focuses on the philosophical approach of existentialism in literature.

Key word : Alienation, existentialism, cognitive meaninglessness, emotive response, absurdity of human condition.

Introduction :

Existentialism believes that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for themselves (although with this responsibility comes angst, a profound anguish or dread), and emphasizes action, freedom and decision as fundamental in rising above the essentially absurd condition of humanity (which is characterized by suffering and inevitable death). For more details, see the section on the doctrine of Existentialism

Existentialists refuse to belong to any school of thought, repudiating of the adequacy of any body of beliefs or systems, claiming them to be superficial, academic and remote from life. It is a reaction against traditional schools of philosophy, such as Rationalism, British Empiricism and Positivism, that seek to discover an ultimate order and universal meaning in metaphysical principles or in the structure of the observed world.

Existentialism in its currently recognizable form was developed by the 19th Century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, although neither actually used the term in their work. The Phenomenology of Martin Heidegger was another important influence on the later development of the movement. It can be argued that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer were also important influences on the development of Existentialism, if only due to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's opposition to Hegelianism and Existentialists refuse to belong to any school of thought, repudiating of the adequacy of any body of beliefs or systems, claiming them to be superficial, academic and remote from life. It is a reaction against traditional schools of philosophy, such as Rationalism, British Empiricism and Positivism, that seek to discover an ultimate order and universal meaning in metaphysical principles or in the structure of the observed world.

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Both philosophers considered the role of making free choices on fundamental values and beliefs to be essential in the attempt to change the nature and identity of the chooser. In Kierkegaard's case, this results in the "knight of faith", who puts complete faith in himself and in God, as described in his 1843 work "Fear and Trembling". In Nietzsche's case, the much maligned "Übermensch" (or "Superman") attains superiority and transcendence without resorting to the "other-worldliness" of Christianity, in his books "Thus Spake Zarathustra" (1885) and "Beyond Good and Evil" (1887).

The Phenomenologist Martin Heidegger was an important philosopher in the movement, especially his influential 1927 work "Being and Time", although he vehemently denied being an Existentialist in the Sartrean sense. Other major influences include Max Stirner (1806 - 1856), Karl Jaspers (1883 - 1969) and Edmund Husserl, and writers like the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821 - 1881) and the Czech Franz Kafka (1883 - 1924).

Existentialism came of age in the mid-20th Century, largely through the scholarly and fictional works of the French existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus (1913 - 1960) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986), all of whose works popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961) is another influential and often overlooked French Existentialist of the period.

Sartre is perhaps the most well-known, as well as one of the few to have actually accepted being called an "existentialist". "Being and Nothingness" (1943) is his most important work, and his novels and plays, including "Nausea" (1938) and "No Exit" (1944), helped to popularize the movement.

In "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), Albert Camus uses the analogy of the Greek myth of Sisyphus (who is condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a hill, only to have it roll to the bottom again each time) to exemplify the pointlessness of existence, but shows that Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning and purpose in his task, simply by continually applying himself to it.

Simone de Beauvoir, an important existentialist who spent much of her life alongside Sartre, wrote about feminist and existential ethics in her works, including "The Second Sex" (1949) and "The Ethics of Ambiguity" (1947).

Existentialist Movement in Literature :

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It began in the mid-to-late 19th Century, but reached its peak in mid-20th Century France. It is based on the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent force, the only way to counter this nothingness (and hence to find meaning in life) is by embracing existence.

Existentialist perspectives are also found in literature to varying degrees. Jean-Paul Sartre's 1938 novel Nausea was "steeped in Existential ideas", and is considered an accessible way of grasping his

philosophical stance. Since 1970, much cultural activity in art, cinema, and literature contains postmodernist and existentialist elements. Books such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick and *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk all distort the line between reality and appearance while simultaneously espousing strong existentialist themes. Ideas from such thinkers as Dostoevsky, Foucault, Kafka, Nietzsche, Herbert Marcuse, Gilles Deleuze, and Eduard von Hartmann permeate the works of artists such as Chuck Palahniuk, David Lynch, Crispin Glover, and Charles Bukowski, and their works are marked by a delicate balance between distastefulness and beauty.

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *No Exit* in 1944, an existentialist play originally published in French as *Huis Clos* (meaning “In Camera” or “behind closed doors”) which is the source of the popular quote, “Hell is other people.” The play begins with a Valet leading a man into a room that the audience soon realizes is in hell. Eventually he is joined by two women. After their entry, the Valet leaves and the door is shut and locked. All three expect to be tortured, but no torturer arrives. Instead, they realize they are there to torture each other, which they do effectively, by probing each other’s sins, desires, and unpleasant memories.

Existentialist themes are displayed in the Theatre of the Absurd, notably in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in which two men divert themselves while they wait expectantly for someone (or something) named Godot who never arrives. They claim Godot to be an acquaintance but in fact hardly know him, admitting they would not recognize him if they saw him. To occupy themselves they eat, sleep, talk, argue, sing, play games, exercise swap hats, and contemplate suicide—anything “to hold the terrible silence at bay.” The play “exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos.” The play also illustrates an attitude toward man’s experience on earth: the poignancy, oppression, camaraderie, hope, corruption, and bewilderment of human experience that can only be reconciled in mind and art of the absurdist. The play examines questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of God in human existence.

Franz Kafka’s works, in which themes of alienation and persecution are repeatedly emphasized, permeate the apparent hopelessness and absurdity that are considered emblematic of existentialism. *The Metamorphosis* resonates the alienation and revulsion of Gregor Samsa, who gets transformed into a monstrous insect and is hopelessly abandoned and hated by his family. *The Trial*, in which Josef K. is unexpectedly arrested by two unidentified agents for an unspecified crime. The agents do not name the authority for which they are acting. He is not taken away, however, but left at home to await instructions from the Committee of Affairs. On the last day of K.’s thirtieth year, two men arrive to execute him. He offers little resistance, suggesting that he has realized this as being inevitable for some time. They lead him to a quarry where he is expected to kill himself, but he cannot. The two men then execute him. His last words describe his own death: “Like a doggy” *The Castle* — in which the protagonist, K., struggles to gain access to the mysterious authorities of a castle who govern the village for unknown reasons. The novel is about alienation bureaucracy, the seemingly endless frustrations of man’s attempts to stand against the system, and the futile and hopeless pursuit of an unobtainable goal.

Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* (which introduces his theory of the absurd) presents Sisyphus’s ceaseless and pointless toil as a metaphor for modern lives spent working at futile jobs in factories and offices. Sisyphus represents an absurd hero who lives life to the fullest, hates death and is condemned to a meaningless task. Camus saw absurdity as the result of our desire for clarity and

meaning within a world and condition that offers neither, which he expressed in works like *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which often pointedly resonate as stark allegory of phenomenal consciousness and the human condition. Camus emphasizes the ideas that we ultimately have no control, irrationality of life is inevitable, and he further illustrates the human reaction towards the “absurd.” He questions the meaning of the moral concepts justifying humanity and human suffering. The plague, which befalls Oran, ultimately, enables people to understand that their individual suffering is meaningless. As the epidemic “evolves” within the seasons, so do the citizens of Oran, who instead of willfully giving up to a disease they have no control over, decide to fight against their impending death, thus unwillingly creating optimism in the midst of hopelessness.

Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an absurdist tragicomedy and palimpsest, which expands upon the exploits of two minor characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Comparisons have also been drawn to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*, for the presence of two central characters who almost appear to be two halves of a single character. Many plot features are similar as well: the characters pass time by playing questions, impersonating other characters, and interrupting each other or remaining silent for long periods of time. The two characters are portrayed as two clowns or fools in a world that is beyond their understanding. They stumble through philosophical arguments while not realizing the implications, and muse on the irrationality and randomness of the world.

Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* also presents arguments founded on existentialist ideas. It is a tragedy inspired by Greek mythology and the play of the same name (*Antigone*, by Sophocles) from the 5th century BC. Produced under Nazi censorship, the play is purposefully ambiguous with regards to the rejection of authority (represented by Antigone) and the acceptance of it (represented by Creon), Antigone rejects life as desperately meaningless but without affirmatively choosing a noble death. The play discusses the nature of power, fate and choice, the “promise of a humdrum of happiness” and of a mediocre existence.

Critic Martin Esslin in the book *Theatre of the Absurd* pointed out how many contemporary playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov wove into their plays the existentialist belief that we are absurd beings lost in a universe empty of real meaning. Esslin noted that many of these playwrights demonstrated the philosophy better than did the plays by Sartre and Camus. Though most of such playwrights, subsequently labeled “Absurdist” (based on Esslin’s book), denied affiliations with existentialism and were often staunchly anti-philosophical (for example, Ionesco often claimed he identified more with “Pataphysics” or with Surrealism than with Existentialism), the playwrights are often linked to Existentialism based on Esslin’s observation.

Existentialism in the Modern and Post Modern Literature :

The existential philosophy is connected with the view of the absurdity of human condition. The aesthetic existentialism shows an individual in a strange world. Man has no reality if he unthinkingly follows social law or convention suffering anguish and despair in his loneliness, he may nevertheless become what he wishes by the exercise of free will. The existentialist though they define in doctrine attitude agree on certain points, they are also connected with man’s being. They too feel that reason is insufficient to understand the mysteries of the universe, they are cautious that anguish is a universal phenomenon and also believe that morality has

validity only when there is positive participation. Existentialism just is this bygone cultural movement rather than an identifiable philosophical position.

Existentialism is not a school of philosophy rather a revolt of traditional philosophy. The three notable existentialists- Heidegger, Sartre and Jaspers are not in agreement on essentials. Kierkegaard who is a precursor of existentialists was a dedicated Christian and stressed the idea that In God man may find freedom from tension. Pascal was another precursor of Catholic sorts, Nietzsche was anti Christian and Dostoevsky was anti- semitic and anti- Catholic. And when we consider Kafka and Camus as existentialists we are safe to consider that one essential feature shared by these men is their fervid individualism. The basis of existential thought is marked by dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy.

Existentialism is a timeless sensibility that can be discerned in the past, but only in recent times it has hardened into a sustained protest and pre-occupation. Sartre and Heidegger deny god's existence and provide the inner odyssey of the self as the primary concern. Sartre and Heidegger incorporate the idea that man is alone in this godless universe. According to Sartre, God is impossible. To be a God is to exist from his own nature alone: 'heaven is empty and yet we are left alone to create ourselves by own acts.' Mathieu in Sartre's *Age of Reason* is dominated by a sharp nostalgia and bitter feeling of loneliness in his search for freedom. Sartre speaks of "aesthetic existentialism" which is an attempt to reinterpret human class of nature in terms of human subjectivity itself. Sartre's *Being and Nothing* lays the foundation for particular moral or psychological analysis of special human problem. Both Sartre and Heidegger show the problems of the individuals in the community, i.e the problems of togetherness, a sense of belonging with nothing genuine to belong to, that constitutes the "one" in and by which on the unauthentic level, each of us lives. An existentialist seeks to examine an individual's problem in the community. For the existentialist, every man is born to set right a time out of joint and everyman's tragedy like Hamlet's line in the disproportion of the circumstances to be rectified and the action that he takes to rectify them. It is not a simple romantic disparity of thought and action, but a more delicate and desperate record. It is not just the disparity between his dreams and actuality. But it is his dreams enacted, his values self- created and self-realized hopelessly disproportionate to the circumstances he is trying to control. Kierkegaard in the "Philosophical Fragments" directs his thought on the problem of the individual and the personal of subjective appearance, existence as inwardness. However his notion of subjectivity is not fluctuated from the problem of Christian faith. Kierkegaard's thought is determined by his conception of Hegelian speculation and of Christianity. It is significant too that Kierkegaard has turned from abstract philosophic tradition to something closer to the inner feeling of our experience. In this context, his thinking has significant akin to Conrad's novels, particularly *Lord Jim* who examined his entire life on the refutation of a single past action. The tragic conflict that lies at the core of personal existence is something completely private something hidden from public affairs and revealed only in glimpses as the storyteller developed his tales. Sartre's *Huis-clos* is an existential novel too. The character Garcin himself has not just life but all eternity to puzzle out the question of his cowardice. The existential philosophy directs the attention to the meaninglessness. The existential philosophy is connected with the view of the absurdity of human condition. Though Camus is not called an existentialist, he has the affinity with the thought of existentialists in his insistence on man as an isolated being cast into an alien universe. In his *Myth of Sisyphus* he writes: "You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is as much through his passions as through his torture. His skillful scorn of the gods, his strong hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that

unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exalted toward accomplishing nothing.” “Existentialism”, therefore, may be defined as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence. Existentialism does not deny the validity of the basic categories of physics, biology, psychology, and the other sciences. Existentialism just is this bygone cultural movement rather than an identifiable philosophical position; or, alternatively, that the term should be restricted to Sartre's philosophy alone. Camus' existentialism represents man's life as an existence which is both absurd and anguished. In a universe that is suddenly deprived of light man feels a stranger. He is terrifically exile.” Camus “The Outsider” has no nothing special to illuminate. He has hardly any feeling at all: “Mother died today or may be yesterday, I can't be sure.” The hero is tormented by the sense of unreality the sense of “absurdity of existence.” Hamlet is a drama of existentialism. The check that repeatedly keeps him from swift and effective execution of his purpose is as much his doing as are the bold and impulsive deeds that he does do in the heat of a moment-killing the pirates, Polonius, fighting with Laertes. The elements of chance are dramatic instances of the absurdity irrationality that defines our freedom. Our highest purposes fall miserably little in terms of its fulfillment. Hamlet's freedom and humanity are crossed and checked by the milieu which is governed by diabolic mother, corrupt uncle, stupid Polonius and hypocritical friends. Hamlet's apparent madness is only and the tragic reality. He is a prototype of existential alienation. Pip in Dickens' Great Expectations is an alien in the seamy surroundings but rises above it and tries to become a gentleman. He takes seriously the values given him by his age. He is a horrible example of “Mauvaise foi.” In Kafka the sense of unreality is coined by deliberately using a dream technique. In The Metamorphosis the hero awakes one morning finding himself into a gigantic beetle. In The Trial the hero is arrested and finally executed without knowing why. In The Castle Kafka is a seeker who tries to find the grace of God so that he can fulfill his life but he finds himself beset with confusion of modern world. He tries to clear away the confusion that roams the castle, but unable to do so. The sense of loneliness in this universe is found in many poems, novels and the dramas of the modern period. The growing introspectiveness of the modern poets and their self- withdrawal and various techniques of exploration of the consciousness point to the influence of existential thinking. New Lines poets echo the existential thinking in their pre occupation with ironic self scrutiny and complacent acceptance of life as a mad, mad thing. These poets spin poetry out of the very inadequacy and pointlessness of modern existence. T. S. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is the expression of a sense of loneliness and boredom which constitutes the modern dilemma. The Waste Land depicts a picture of the desolation of man. Man's individuality is lost in the godless universe but Eliot is however searching for truth and freedom. In Ash Wednesday the soul:

Wavering between the profit
and the loss.

In this brief transit where
the dreams crossThe dreamt crossed twilight
between birth
and

dying.....

The novels of the Stream of Consciousness technique aims at preoccupation with one's own consciousness. Joyce's Ulysses published in the year 1922 the year in which Eliot's The Waste Land was published explores the aimlessness and loneliness of a man of a single day to day life. Conrad's

Lord Jim, *The Heart of Darkness* seek to focus the minds of characters lost in the darkness of their confused purposes and thwarted ambitions. In the play *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne is a frightening study of alienation of Jimmy. His cynicism bitterness and anger are Hamletian and betray his pain and anguish for the purposelessness of his life. He symbolizes the existential rejection of life. The Theatre of the Absurd which became prominent after the Second World War in the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter reflects on the absurdity of the existential thinkers that man is out of harmony, man is an exile in a meaningless universe. In his *Waiting for Godot* Beckett shows that Godot is nobody, no goal, no meaning and of nothing itself. Sociologist Harry Dahms has pointed out *The Matrix* Trilogy of films in the context of the theories of alienation in modern society. He suggests that the central theme of *The Matrix* is the "all-pervasive and invisible prevalence of alienation in the world today, and difficulties that discourse the attempts to overcome it". In addition, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is introduced as a perfect example because so many senses of alienation are present.

Discussion:

Sartre's existentialism drew its immediate inspiration from the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time* introduced most of the motifs that would characterize later existentialist thinking: the tension between the individual and the "public". Heidegger pursued these issues with the somewhat unlikely resources of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method. Husserl's efforts in the first decades of the twentieth century had been directed toward establishing a descriptive science of consciousness. The existentialists welcomed Husserl's doctrine of intentionality as a refutation of the Cartesian view. According to Husserl consciousness is our direct openness to the world. A phenomenology of consciousness depicts neither the metaphysical composition nor the causal genesis of things, but the "constitution" of their meaning. Existential themes take on salience when one sees that the general question of the meaning of being involves first becoming clear about one's own being as an inquirer. According to Heidegger, the categories bequeathed by the philosophical tradition for understanding a being who can question his or her being are insufficient: traditional concepts of a substance decked out with reason, or of a subject blessed with self-consciousness, misconstrue our fundamental character as "being-in-the-world." In his phenomenological pursuit of the categories that govern being-in-the-world, Heidegger became the reluctant father of existentialism.

In Kierkegaard, the singularity of existence comes to light at the moment of conflict between ethics and religious faith. Kierkegaard, in his book *Fear and Trembling*, argues that for philosophy my life becomes meaningful when I "raise myself to the universal". He believes both that Abraham's life is supremely meaningful. Human existence cannot be thought through categories appropriate to things: substance, event, process. Existentialists tend to describe the perspective of engaged agency in terms of "choice," and they are sometimes criticized for this. Because existence is co-constituted by facility and transcendence, the self cannot be conceived as a Cartesian ego but is embodied being-in-the-world, a self-making in situation.

Conclusion :

Alienation is most often discussed in literature as a psychological barrenness of men belonging to this society. In a volume of Bloom's *Literary Themes*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is discussed as the 'supreme literary portrait' of alienation. In *The History of Literature*, German Romantics groups is to

be treated the first writers and poets whose works are associated with the notion of alienation regularly. At the beginning of the 19th century Hegel popularized the Christian and idealized philosophy of alienation. He used German terms to assimilate the idea that “self” was a historical and social creation. In human alienation human beings try to be estranged to become apart from others. In a broader philosophical context alienation incorporates the inadequacy of the human beings with the relation to the world. The human mind sees the world as an object of perception and is distanced from the world. And all relation is going to be fused with the demand of nothingness. The human frailty is the result of the alienation and alienation is akin to excessive demands gyrated by the human beings of the materialistic world. In the theory of psychoanalysis developed around the beginning of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud did not express the concept of alienation. Alienation is the sense of lack of power of human beings that is addressed by Seeman as the probability of an individual who has no sense or rather no control over his exaggerated mind. Kalekin-Fishman says that a man suffers from alienation in the form of powerlessness when a clash is held in between of his capacity to do a work and of what he would desire to do. Seeman also discussed the insights of the psychologist Julian Rotter who distinguishes the internal control and the external control kept within one’s ability. Powerlessness is the means of active perception that the individual does not have the power to achieve.

Both Heidegger and Sartre believe that phenomenological analysis of the kind of intentionality that belongs to moods does not merely register a passing modification of the psyche but reveals fundamental aspects of the self. The experience of anxiety also yields the existential theme of the absurd, a version of what was previously introduced as alienation from the world. Sartre said that anxiety provides a lucid experience of that freedom which, though often concealed, characterizes human existence as such. For him, freedom is the dislocation of consciousness from its object.

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