

Existentialism- The Struggle Remains in Mulk Raj Anand's Major Novels

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The perception is that, humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Existentialism is a quest for authentic existence. Jean-Paul Sartre says, 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.' Man's sufferings and humiliations comes under the aspect of existentialism, which is found in the novels of Anand. Anand is a humanist and his humanism manifests itself in a realistic representation of

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the inhumanity of the situation of the oppressed masses, suffering, various types of disability, discrimination and alienation. Existentialism is an aspect of humanism and Anand has portrayed it through human beings pathetic sufferings and miseries. Anand's humanism dwells into the survival of human love through existentialism. The humanism of Anand showcases the concerns of existentialism, exposing the reality of life and its tragic condition of suffering and misery. The pathetic condition of suffering and misery is existential since it has the elements of chance, absurdity and nothingness in them. Their alienated conditions are shaped by fear and loneliness. Though Anand denies of being an existentialist, his most of the works reveal existential ideologies of Sartre and Heidegger.

Keywords: Existentialism, Essence, Oppression, Humanism, Absurdity, Alienation.

Introduction:

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is 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 is by embracing existence.

Existentialism believes that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for themselves. It therefore emphasizes action, freedom and decision as fundamental, and holds that the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of humanity is by exercising our personal freedom and choice.

Existentialism originated with the 19th Century philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the 1940s and 1950s, French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre,

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Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir wrote scholarly and fictional works that popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment and nothingness.

Existentialism in the broader sense is a 20th century philosophy that is centered upon the analysis of existence and of the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The notion is that, humans exist first and then each individual spends a lifetime changing their essence or nature. In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Existentialism is a quest for authentic existence. Man must decide who he would be. Each Individual must decide the question for himself. Each one's existence is his own. There is no universal pattern that can be imposed on all. Each must invent his values and he exists authentically in so far as he strives to realize values that really are his own.

Man is exercising freedom, will, decision, creativity, setting goals and striving for the attainment of selfhood. He appears as being possessed. Man is described as 'a being with others' capable of love and community. Many of the great existentialist thinkers have stressed the individualist's need to extricate himself from the crowd in order to be fully himself.

Sartre claims that a central proposition of Existentialism is, that existence precedes essence, which means that the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals, who act independently and are responsible conscious beings ("existence")—rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories the

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individuals fit ("essence"). The actual life of the individuals is what constitutes what could be called their "true essence" instead of there being an arbitrarily attributed essence others use to define them. Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning to their life. Although it was Sartre who explicitly coined the phrase, similar notions can be found in the thought of existentialist philosophers such as Heidegger, and Kierkegaard. Sartre's definition of existentialism was based on Heidegger's magnum opus "Being and Time". In a set of letters, Heidegger implies that Sartre misunderstood him for his own purposes of subjectivism, and that he did not mean that actions take precedence over being so long as those actions were not reflected upon. This way of living, Heidegger called "average everydayness".

Existentialism deals with choices, decisions and personal commitments. The existentialists have a great concern for human existence, especially the plightful situation of the present human as being or an individual in the society, since an individual is pushed against all odds. Jean-Paul Sartre says, 'Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.'

Anand is a humanist and his humanism manifests itself in a realistic representation of the inhumanity of the situation of the oppressed masses, suffering, various types of disability, discrimination and alienation. Man's sufferings and humiliations comes under the aspect of existentialism, which is found in the novels of Anand. Existentialism is an aspect of humanism and Anand has portrayed it through human beings pathetic sufferings and miseries. Anand's humanism dwells into the survival of human love through existentialism. The humanism of Anand showcases the concerns of existentialism, exposing the reality of life and its tragic condition of suffering and misery. The pathetic condition of suffering and misery is existential since it has the elements of chance, absurdity and nothingness in them.

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In the words of Binod Mishra:

“The fictional world of Anand is not the narrow real world and he cannot control the reader’s response along the familiar lines. The pattern of despair and delight cannot acquire its full meaning if the relationship between the actual world and the fictional world is not fully acknowledged. A short analysis of Anand’s well-known essay ‘The Story of My Experiment with a white lie’ is not out of place because it is a sensitive record of his existential consciousness. The distressed novelist rejects the hangovers of the past and decides to write about man’s fate, which is no longer in the hands of God. The terms like ‘destination man’, ‘the compulsion of a morbid obsession’ and ‘the body-soul search’ can be meaningfully related in the pattern of despair and delight”. 1

D.Riemenschneider looks at the pattern of despair and delight very closely. He explores the problem of labour and fulfillment from various angles and highlights their effect on the emotional and spiritual make-up of the hero in each novel. Since most of the heroes of Anand slog like anything, it is viewed not only as a social activity but also as an instrument of self-realization. If man is alienated from the products of his labour, it is a moment of despair. The act of production brings for his hero suffering. D.Riemenschneider rightly remarks:

“If man is alienated from his own nature, he is also alienated from the human nature of his fellow beings, a fact most obvious in the existence of antagonistic classes within a society.”

2

In Anand’s *Untouchable*, Bakha is very much aware of the discord between the world he is condemned to inhabit and the new world of his undying aspirations. He tried hard in vain to be in harmony with himself but soon realizes that he is an alien, an outsider who

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cannot belong. He is extra ordinarily sensitive to the fact that he can never go where there is no place for him. Ananda exposes Bakha's existential crisis and alienation from the society, fellow men and from his family, which ultimately results in his identity crisis. According to Marx, alienation is the consequence of development of the capitalist mood of production that transforms man's labor into dehumanizing existence. Some describe alienation as consisting in an individual's lack of fulfillment or self-realization in capitalist society.

“Tragedy becomes inevitable when someone has to believe that he does not have any other identity than the one that is imposed on them by society. Due to the restrictive and sometimes oppressive role society often plays in relation to individuals, society works against individualism.”³

Anand presents his protagonist as a unique soul endowed with physical strength as well as moral and spiritual qualities which enable him to rise above the limitations imposed by adverse circumstances and uncongenial atmosphere. Among the inhabitants of the colony Bakha alone is repulsed by the polluted and foul air. Most of the characters of Anand are forced to sell their labour in order to survive. Their social and economic position is unalterable in a society that is disabled by caste and class system. According to Reimenschender, alienation is not only the result of capitalistic forces but also feudal forces which are non-economic. Hence, both these forces together bring about a basic change in the hero of every novel of Anand. It is visible that the pattern of despair and delight is the main scope of Anand's fiction.

Anand's *Coolie*, conveys various forms of alienation. The novel comprehends deeper levels of plight and degradation, with less amount of delight. Munoo, the hero, moves from the village to the town, from the town to the city and then to the mountains, broadening the canvas of the novel and ultimately swept to his doom. He is a frail boy in a hostile world. He is more a victim than a rebel. Life in pickle factory was suffocating because of the heavy and

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ceaseless toil that turned Munoo and his healthy colleagues into wrecks. Munoo, a boy of highly sensitive nature becomes a victim of nature.

“Munoo did not laugh and talk even as much as he used to at Babu’s house. He was possessed by moods of extreme melancholy in the mornings, dark of self-distrust and brooding sinking feeling which oppressed his heart and expressed itself in his nervous, agitated manner” 4

Anand’s description of the working place and the analysis of Ganpat’s attitude are the two important factors in the treatment of alienated labour as a motif in the novel .

The intimidating presence of Ganpath , who believes that the success of an entrepreneur lies in extracting the maximum out of the labourers, tyrannizes the poor workers to silence. But in his absence they sing together. As they chant the hill songs aloud, as if by a spell, their subdued

spirits get charged with vigour and a consciousness of their identity that has almost been forgotten gets revived. It was ‘as if he regained the wild freedom of his childhood’ and he would take out his mirror and comb his hair with’ the desire to be a man, to flourish the true dignity of manhood’ 5

Munoo’s experiences in Bombay and Daulatpur depicts his savage struggle for survival. In that struggle, life seemed to be a threat and death was a release. Life in Bombay was a dreadful pattern of garish opulence and rampant filth. The novel shows death through alienation.

Anand in his *Two Leaves and a Bud*, has taken up the problem of the appropriation and alienation of labour as one of the prominent themes. In the *Economic Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx says, “for the worker who appropriates nature through his work, this appropriation appears as alienation, his own activity as activity for and of someone else, his vitality as sacrifice of his life, production of objects as their loss to an alien power” 6

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This novel delineates Gangu's despair and anxiety as an alienated peasant in MacPherson Tea Estate in Assam Hills. Life of Gangu is marked with fear, anxiety and frustration. He is ruthlessly exploited by the colonists who own the tea estate. Gangu is aware that the real cause of his tragedy is his poverty, but he puts up with his suffering and humiliation very abjectly. In the new environment, Gangu has to face the crisis of existence. The wages given to Gangu's whole family was very meagre. It was only a hand to mouth existence to them. In case of emergency, they had to borrow money from the money-lenders, who charged them with heavy interest and they were unable to return the money in their whole life. This way the coolies in the tea plantation had to toil their whole soul and heart for their whole life, for the colonists to lead a luxurious life.

Gangu is a victim of man, god and civilization. He faces the storm which ruins his harvest with a feeling of resignation. Anand describes his feelings thus:

“Gangu watched the violent play of God, the storm with an almost imperturbable calm, as if in the moment of his uttermost anguish, in the very moment of his despair, at the loss of his harvest, he had been purged of his fear of the inevitable.” 7

The pattern of despair and delight has many dimensions. Binod Mishra rightly remarks here: “The doctrinal despair and delight is only a fragment in the total pattern. Anand's stress on hope and harmony is as explicit as his stress on despair and disillusionment.” 8

According to Ralph Fox, for Anand, novel was the epic of struggle and the struggle for Anand was to be directed towards recreating the individual and his community. The optimistic view of human development stressed by Anand in his fiction is not without delight. Despair and delight had been a continuous theme of his fiction. These two terms can be explained with sun and slum, happiness and sorrow, energetic and dispirited etc. Life moves on the two wheels of despair and delight, which gives a slice to our existence. Anand's envy

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of the rich is an intensive crave for social justice and the inadequacies of his own life in India contributed something to this preoccupations. He writes with despair mixed with candour:

“But I do not apologize for this because it is not easy in the face of such wretchedness and misery as I had seen in India to believe that material happiness and wellbeing had no connection with real happiness and the desire for beauty.” 9

The theme of self-realization through labour is developed more meaningfully in Anand’s another slim novel, ‘The Road’. Reimenschender aptly remarks:

“It is in this short novel that Anand more than in any other work has found a more profound insight into a possible solution of overcoming alienation.” 10

In the novel, ‘The Road’, the government hires Bhikhu and the other untouchables to build a road so that milk can be easily transported from the village of Govardhan to the city. The road would mean prosperity for the village, but the construction is opposed by the caste Hindus who refuse even to touch the stones quarried by the untouchables. There are two opposing factions: one led by Lambardar Dhooli Singh who, though a caste Hindu himself has aligned himself with the untouchables; the other led by sarpanch Thakur Singh-the landlord, who owns most of the village and the land on which the untouchables live. As the feud continues, Thakur Singh’s son, Sajnu, along with Dhooli Singh’s son, Lachman, burn down the huts of Bhikhu and the other untouchables. They face the crisis of existence and the crisis of identity. Later we find some moments of delight when the village headman who possess a magnanimous heart, offers shelter to all these untouchables in his house.

The Road portrays not only the sufferings of the untouchables but also of the magnanimous caste Hindus who try to awaken the conscience of the members of their own community against the evils of untouchability. C.J. George rightly remarks:

“To be honest is a dangerous thing where the rule of hypocrisy dominates. That is what led to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Socrates

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had to drink hemlock, Christ to hang on the cross and Joan of Arc to burn at the stake for being honest to the society. Dhooli Singh, in *The Road* is a social reformer and a staunch disciple of the Mahatma. His following of his master's footsteps was a hard task. His single handed fight against untouchability in a society where casteism is interpreted in terms of religion is considered as a challenge to the religion itself. But he represents the true religion; he personifies the author's vision of an ideal hindu."11

Conclusion

Existential philosophy does not advocate a negative approach to life or reality, the philosophy in fact is all about understanding oneself and revolves around the boundless capabilities of an intellectual and ethically conscious individual to bring about positive change in his life and subsequently in the world. So positive change is crucial for the true existentialist; in order to lead a fulfilling life otherwise life becomes meaningless and purposeless and a complete void to them. Taking into consideration this view point existentialism is not at all about pessimism but about bringing a positive meaningful change in one's life.

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