

Existential Musings in The Zahir

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Abstract

The philosophy of existentialism is a 20th century movement, which emphasizes the active participation of will, rather than reason, in confronting the problems of a non – moral or absurd universe. The term existentialism is applied to philosophical doctrines enunciated by Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre which is centred upon the analysis of human beings that regard human existence as not exhaustively describable or understandable in idealistic or scientific terms. Existentialism is marked by its emphasis on the concreteness, subjectivity and individuality of human existence. The existential enquiry is the one in which the thinker is himself seriously involved for the nature of his own existence the search for human freedom is central and basic to all systems of Existentialism and it gives practical orientation to the existential enquiry. Other Existential writers are Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, Bergson, Simone de Beauvoir and others. All Existentialists lay stress on the impotency of reason to solve man's problems; give importance to man who for them is the starting point; stress existence prior to essence; talk of individual freedom to choose; emphasize concrete experience and passion; underscore alienation, highlight negativities like dread, despair, anxiety, nothingness, and morality and suggest authentic existence as a way out.

Coelho's novel *The Zahir* is a tale of a man's love for his absconding wife, the tone of which is existentialist in character. The protagonist dreams of becoming a writer but procrastinates. Overcome by anxiety at the disappearance of his wife, awakens him from his illusions and false securities. It confronts him with his responsibility and the call to grasp his authentic being, realize his identity and freedom, thus, leading him to find the meaning and essence of his existence.

Esther's unhappiness creates in her a feeling of void and she also experiences despair and disappointments, mingled with feelings of guilt. She believes that no one is perfectly happy, everyone is sad deep within themselves. She tries to create meaning for herself by choosing to

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become a war- correspondent. Hence both the protagonist and his wife exercise their freedom and act in accordance with their true nature, thus lending essence to their existence.

Introduction:

The philosophy of existentialism is a 20th century movement, which emphasizes the active participation of will, rather than reason, in confronting the problems of a non – moral or absurd universe. “Existence precedes essence” is the well known dictum of existentialism. Man

has been defined by this mode of philosophizing as the sum total of his acts rather than his intentions or potentialities. After man’s illusions have been shattered, he exists in order to will himself to act and thereby create his own being in his own specific situation and environment.

The term existentialism is applied to philosophical doctrines – enunciated by, for example, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre – they are centred upon the analysis of human beings, and that regard human existence as not exhaustively describable or understandable in idealistic or scientific terms. These doctrines stress the freedom, responsibility, feeling and subjectivity of the individual and have a distrust of philosophical idealism and institutionalism which shifts the individual’s freedom.

Existentialism is marked by its emphasis on the concreteness, subjectivity and individuality of human existence. A single individual because of his concrete and subjective existence is worth more than all the universals. Man as a unique, individual existence is more real than the abstract concept of mankind; his concrete, subjective and individual existence cannot be categorised and universalized and hence defies all human effort to mirror it exactly in a concept. Hence existentialism may be broadly defined as a descriptive analysis of the structure of human existence and its ethical interests. It is an enquiry into the constitutive conditions of human existence, its potentialities and limitations. The existential enquiry is the one in which the thinker is himself seriously involved for the nature of his own existence. The existential enquiry emerges out of an introspective attitude of the enquirer and examines him as an object of enquiry without losing sight of his concreteness and subjectivity. Existentialism is the philosophy which develops in response to such fundamental questions as; who am I? What is the nature of my existence? What are its limitations and potentialities? What are my present relations with ‘others’ and the ‘things’ of the world? What does future hold for me? etc.

The description of Existentialism as the analysis of the nature of human existence and its ethical interests is specially applicable to the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Marcel. But Sartre and Heidegger enquire mainly into the ontological conditions of human existence, and

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seek to construct an objective and universal system of ontology out of a subjective, descriptive, analysis of human existence.

Existentialism has an ancient heritage. Some hold that it takes its roots from Socrates' Delphic "Know Thyself." But as an epitome of a mood of twentieth century it profited from the philosophies such as those of Nietzsche, Bergson and others and gained momentum with the advent of Soren Kierkegaard and publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). Other key figures that contributed to the rise of establishment of existentialism as a unique brand of philosophizing are Hegel, Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and others.

George W.F.Hegel (AD 1770-1831) provides existentialists with the philosophical framework to work in. the concept of alienation or estrangement is one of his direct contributions to contemporary existentialism. The triad – Being – Non – Being – Becoming – typical of the Hegelian dialectic corresponds to the existentialist concept of existence – awareness of nothingness – essence.

In his crusade against the institutions of state, society, church and speculative metaphysical systems Kierkegaard (AD 1813- 1855) resents the institutions that smother individual freedom and reduce man to an anonymous entity. He sees state and church and their respective supporting ideologies as denigrating enemies of man's dignity. According to Kierkegaard, the philosophies which depend on reason for presenting man as having pre- established relationships to the cosmos, highly threaten man in so far as they inhibit him from acquiring self- knowledge. He holds that man's awareness of personal existence comes as a result of a direct feeling rather than through the activity of the intellect. He makes man aware of his primal subjectivity, so far that he may live authentically by taking his decisions responsibly. Regarding man-God relationship he insists that this paradox can be resolved only by faith.

Existentialism has variously been defined as: "an irrationalistic and philosophical movement, mainly concerned with the true reality and form of human existence" (Couch, 529). A distinctive philosophical viewpoint that stresses the existence of the individual as against his essence, the particular character of a man opposed to what he shares with all other men"(Wiener, 189). It deals less with abstractions and more with individuals who alone and unprotected, face the world and in doing so create themselves" (Raymond, 18). It is one that "speaks of humans as unfinished, with the clear implication that humans must respond to the possibilities that this incompleteness provides and freely choose to actualize them for the good of themselves and others" (Corsini, 462).

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All these definitions make clear to a certain extent, that existentialists lay stress on the impotency of reason to solve man's problems; give importance to man who for them is the starting point; stress existence prior to essence; talk of individual freedom to choose; emphasize concrete experience and passion; underscore alienation, highlight negativities like dread, despair, anxiety, nothingness, and morality and suggest authentic existence as a way out.

Major existentialist writers deal with the existence of man which is temporal and finite. Ephemerality casts a shadow on human journey from womb to tomb. Man's existence has to be made meaningful in these few fleeting moments which invariably end in death. Dread of uncertainty stares him in his face yet the unaided and unprotected human being engages himself in a heroic existential struggle to be. Awareness of one's temporality fills one with fear. And this emotion of fear and anxiety is felt by the humans alone, not by angels and animals. Anxiety which is too subtle and elusive to be comprehended, "makes us feel 'uncanny' and not at home" (Macquarrie, 169).

Coelho's novel *The Zahir* is a gripping story of a man's love for his absconding wife, which can be perceived in the light of existentialism. The protagonist dreams of becoming a writer but procrastinates. He finds the meaning and essence of his existence when his wife, suddenly disappears one day. He admits that he is a man of bad faith when he says: "I have money, I have contacts but what I don't have is the courage to write a book" (18). His frustrated dream leaves him an embittered soul, however he is aware of one great reality called freedom which essentially goes with his being. Like Sartre who believes that freedom is present for everyone at every moment in the form of one's ability to make choices, the protagonist observes, "freedom is not the absence of commitments but the ability to choose and commit myself to what is best for me" (18).

The protagonist finds it difficult to digest the fact that Esther, his wife, should be making decisions for him, when she suggests him to undertake a journey on the road to Santiago. Nevertheless he chooses to realize his dream of becoming a writer by setting off for thirty-eight days on the road to Santiago. The journey to Santiago proves to be a turning point for the protagonist as it lends him transcendence, thus liberating him from bad faith. It eventually helps him evolve as a writer providing rich experiences which become the raw material for his books. Seen in the light of existentialism, the journey on the road to Santiago is in fact a journey from his inauthentic self to authentic self. It lends an essence to his existence, by making him a writer, a dream that is realised.

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I have the woman I love, the career I always dreamed of having, the kind of freedom that is the envy of all my friends, the travel, the honours, the praise. But there's something... I have the idea that, if I stopped life would become meaningless (39).

The protagonist belongs to the modern world where boredom and tedium is a part of existence. People live the self same life over and again leading a monotonous existence. Esther too has her moments of despair and disappointments, mingled with feelings of guilt or fear. Her belief is that no one is perfectly happy, everyone is sad deep within themselves. She confesses to her writer husband that:

I have everything but I'm not happy. And I'm not the only one either; over the years, I've met and interviewed all kinds of people: the rich, the poor, the powerful, and those who just make do. I've seen the same bitterness in everyone's eyes, a sadness which people weren't always prepared to acknowledge, but which regardless of what they were telling me, was nevertheless there (37-38).

Esther is sad no doubt, but she is also strong and does not give in. Instead she decides to find her own happiness in the guise of a war- correspondent. Her belief is that a soldier's life is meaningful because he is ready to offer it up for a cause. A soldier is capable of experiencing something important, he experiences the true essence of being a man. Esther feels that her life also acquires meaning when she is in a war zone, she loves and cherishes every second of her presence in a war zone. She does not feel any sadness or doubt because there is great love for life in the face of death. Kierkegaard's implication is that in the long run, what is really chosen is oneself. It is out of its decisions that the self emerges. A self is not given ready -made at the beginning. What is given is a field of possibility and the existent projects himself into this possibility rather than one, he begins to determine who he shall be. Existentialism in most of its forms is not just a cold analysis of the human condition but itself a passionate quest for authentic existence. In Kierkegaard's opinion: "the self is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. The self knows itself to be such a synthesis when it chooses itself in its authentic existence" (Srinivasan, 180). Esther's existence is authentic in the sense that she is decisive and chooses the course of her life. It is through her free obedience to her conscience and its call that attains her wholeness and authentic selfhood. Hence she chooses to be a war correspondent. Existentialism compares practical action to the contemplative intellect, which imposes logical forms that are arbitrary and abstract, the products of thinking (not acting). So Esther, in keeping with the existential perspective, is in a constant process of becoming and evolving. Freedom consists in Esther's transcendence and

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she directs herself to the active participation of lending herself to understand the suffering of the soldier's in the war zone and write an article about the imminent war, thereby being of service to them. Participation in the pains and pleasures of others endows her with a plenitude of being which is otherwise impossible for her to acquire. Mikhail, a native of Kazakhstan comes to her aid and becomes her interpreter during one of her interviews with a nomad, where Esther's seeks answers to life's innumerable questions. She learns that people are unhappy because they accumulate memories and forget their dreams which lead to sorrow. According to the tradition of the steppes, also known as the Tengri, in order to live fully, it is necessary to be in constant movement; only then can each day be different from the last. There is a need therefore to unburden oneself of one's past, which can be done by repeating one's story over and again. In this way it is possible to make room for the new experiences. For Kierkegaard repetition is an existential task in which the subject is engaged in his or her contingent striving. Thus Esther tries to seek happiness by emptying herself of her past and finds the meaning of her existence in the war zones. Her stay in Kazakhstan, where she is involved in making carpets is symbolic in the sense that she is continually striving and transcending, for she allows herself to love and be loved. Her pregnancy gives her a rich experience of womanhood and she looks forward to being a mother. Thus Esther's life comes to a full circle where she assumes complete control over herself and her life.

Esther's disappearance fills the protagonist with anxiety. Since the existentialist ideas on anxiety have their provenance in Kierkegaard who describes it as a 'dizziness of freedom' (Macquarrie, 167). Freedom is by its very nature pregnant with possibility; and it is this stirring of possibility in the womb of freedom that is experienced as the primordial anxiety. Anxiety awakens the protagonist from his illusions and false securities. It confronts him with his responsibility and the call to grasp his authentic being. The protagonist realises that it was Esther "who made me say 'yes' when I wanted to say 'no', who forced me to fight for what she, quite rightly, believed was my reason for living, who let me set off alone because her love for me was greater even than her love for herself, who made me go in search of my dream" (27). He also realises that Esther's absence could not be substituted. Her disappearance makes the protagonist obsessive of Esther. He feels lost and helpless and then he happens to meet Mikhail, his wife's friend. Mikhail who is also on the road to self- discovery comes as a ray of hope in the protagonist's life. Conversations with Mikhail help the protagonist realize that "If I was to see her again, my face needed to be as clean as hers. Before I could find her, I must find myself" (179). This resolution sets him to search for his own self or rather search for the

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meaning of his own existence, before searching for Esther. In the process, the protagonist also discovers that all men and women are connected by an energy which many people call love, but which is in fact, the raw material from which the universe was built. Love is the energy which leads us gently forwards. He realizes that it was love in the past, which made him undertake the journey to Santiago and become a writer. Love for Esther had made him anxious in the present and his consequent search for her was evident. The protagonist hopes to find Esther and be united with her, clearly depicting the power and energy of love. Introspection of his own self lends his character with a clarity of purpose and resoluteness of spirit.

It can then be inferred that in the existential perspective, both the protagonist and his wife Esther, are free to make their life meaningful and they both nihilate, negate or transcend the character of human consciousness. This dissociating and transcending character of consciousness is, according to Sartre, the synonym of absolute human freedom. Thus man is always free to transcend his present state, transform himself, to choose his being, since human freedom is nothing but man's own possibility and project. In other words, "man's liberation is not only 'from' something, but for something. And this 'for' is man's creativity" (Macquarrie, 181). Hence the protagonist chooses to become a writer because he has always dreamt of becoming a famous writer ever since he was a child and is passionate about it. Esther chooses to become a war correspondent because she feels happy and derives inspiration from the lives of, who are fearless in the face of death. Both the protagonist and Esther have chosen their lives in accordance with their passion. According to Kierkegaard, The ethical self is characterized by passion, for the ethical is an inwardness realized by the subject alone. Man's true nature or his innermost nature is his ethical self. Human existence for Kierkegaard therefore is the possibility of man's self-realization. The essence of their existence is thus created by the protagonist and his wife through their deeds which lends meaning to their existence through their freedom.

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