

Unopened Windows: European Existentialism and Indian Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of literary concepts born out of major catastrophes like world wars that humankind had witnessed in the last century. Existentialism is one such concept which added a new dimension to European writing. A term that is part of intellectual history, the word *existentialism* emerged out of the angst caused by the upheaval in the aftermath of the second world war which left Europe devastated. Strongly used by Jean-Paul Sartre, more as a self-description, it gained ground through the literary and philosophical output of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus, going on to becoming a cultural movement which flourished in Europe in the 40s and 50s. As much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one, the theme caught on with many writers and artists across the world. Rather than being concerned with existence in general, existentialism is concerned with human existence and in trying to understand what a human being is, much more than what other sciences can explain.

While existentialism as a philosophy was acclaimed in the latter part of the 20th century in Europe, it was a different kind of human predicament created by sharp caste divisions that

was experienced in 12th century Karnataka which was expressed in the language and rhythms of Kannada mystical songs called *vachanakaras* and the religious tensions that prevailed during the Bhakti movements which took man to the basic question of human existence. This socio-cultural revolution led by Basavanna produced hundreds of *vachanagaras* including Akkamahadevi and Allama Prabhu. *Vachanas* are the experiences in the process of God realization through oneness with the pure consciousness in the *prana*. It was the same with the *siddhas* of Tamil Nadu who professed and practiced an unorthodox type of *sadhana*, or spiritual practice to attain liberation. Similar to the mystics of western civilization, *siddhars* are believed to control and transcend the barriers of time and space by meditation. Through their practices they could tune into the powers hidden in various material substances and practices, to heal suffering. Philosophy, religion and music were the chief components of Indian cultural tradition and this combination helped to neutralize social conflicts. Kashmiri Sufism is one such example. Oral traditions across the globe have a rich reservoir of expressions mostly from the alienated and non-mainstream sections. Strands of existentialist thought are evident in these expressions.

As the world is bridged today, it is necessary that literary concepts like existentialism which emerged out of intense human emotions at the individual and collective level, be shared with young learners across the world.

Key words: existentialism, human predicament, non-mainstream sections

Introduction

A literary phenomenon as well as a philosophical one, existentialism had its roots in the late 19th century and gained a foothold in the 20th century. Two of the main exponents of this movement were Kierkegaard (1813 -1855) and Nietzsche (1844–1900). The later schools of thought like post-modernism, deconstructionism, historicism and multi culturalism are said to have their roots in this philosophy. Due to its subjective nature, the existential philosophy is considered more a trend or attitude than a movement, proved by the fact that existentialist thinkers vary significantly in their thoughts and concerns. The emphasis above all is on the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in an indifferent and hostile world without attaching specific importance to the essence of human beings.

A term that is part of intellectual history, the word *existentialism* emerged out of the angst caused by the upheaval in the aftermath of the second world war which left Europe devastated. Strongly used by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 –1980), more as a self-description, it

gained ground through the literary and philosophical output of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Albert Camus, going on to becoming a cultural movement which flourished in Europe in the 40s and 50s. Some of the other names associated with this movement were the Germans - Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber, José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno from Spain, and Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov from Russia. In the later years the theme of existentialism was exploited not only in art and literature but films as well. Although it has been debated whether the term should be related to Sartre's philosophy alone, it cannot be ignored that it is a current that flows into the philosophical inquiry of the twenty-first century having an impact on subjects like theology and psychology. More than being concerned with "existence", this current of thought tries to understand human existence. While not denying the validity of the sciences, existentialism claims that human beings cannot be fully understood only through them. At the same time neither the moral theory governed by the norms of the good, nor the scientific theory governed by the norms of truth is enough to understand existentialism. "Existentialism" therefore may be understood as a philosophical theory which seeks to understand the human existence through the norms of authenticity. Some of the themes that existentialism seeks to explore are boredom, alienation, freedom, commitment and the absurd.

Jean Paul Sartre drew his inspiration from Martin Heidegger (1889 -1976) who sought to understand the nature of "being" or in other words the question of being / ontology - *seinfrage* in German. His philosophy revolved around the theory that human existence involved an active participation or "being there" termed *dasein* in German. This laid the foundation for later existential thinking. Heidegger himself was influenced by the phenomenological theory of Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) which focused on the study of consciousness and how a conscious person could be conscious of his /her own consciousness. While not all existential philosophers were influenced by phenomenology, most of them accepted it as it refuted the Cartesian view which related consciousness only to its representations, ideas and sensations. Heidegger who came to be hailed as the father of existentialism drew his inspiration from two nineteenth century writers, Sören Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche whose works treat the roots of the problem of existence.

While Kierkegaard's approach stemmed from his radical approach to the Christian faith, Nietzsche's began with his belief that God was dead. This difference in thinking was reflected in the later existentialists. While writers like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were atheists, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel and Buber looked at the concept of "authentic existence" for religious consciousness. Though neither Nietzsche's nor Kierkegaard's thought can be

treated on the same platform, they converge on the point of dealing with “the single individual”, as Kierkegaard termed it. To Kierkegaard, the singularity of existence comes to light when ethics conflicts with religious faith. One’s life becomes meaningful when one brings one’s desires under the moral law resulting in one’s actions becoming meaningful as they are governed by a norm. To Nietzsche, it is found in the phrase “God is dead,” in the challenge of nihilism, in understanding the being not as one driven by desires or universal law of behavior nor as *what* one is but by one’s *way* of being it.

But to Sartre, what mattered was the human experience of being; of what one may be able to create for oneself, being tossed into life with no apparent meaning or purpose. In other words, Sartre believed that “existence precedes essence”. The central theme of Sartre’s philosophy was always “being” and human beings: What does it mean to be and what does it mean to be a human being? From Husserl he took the idea that philosophy must start first with the human being; from Heidegger, the idea that we can best understand the nature of human existence through an analysis of human experience; and from Marx, the idea that philosophy must not aim to simply analyze existence but rather to change it.

Sartre argued that there were essentially two kinds of being. The first is being-in-itself (*l’en-soi*), which is characterized as fixed, complete, and having absolutely no reason for its being — it just is. This is basically the same as the world of external objects. The second is being-for-itself (*le pour-soi*), which is dependent upon the former for its existence. It has no absolute, fixed, eternal nature and corresponds to human consciousness. As human existence is characterized by “nothingness”, anything that is part of human life is purely of one’s own creation, achieved through rebellious means. The absolute freedom that one has leaves one in constant fear and anxiety due to the lack of absolute values and meaning but this is the freedom of choice that is given to human beings.

While existentialism as a philosophy was acclaimed in the latter part of the 20th century in Europe, it was a different kind of human predicament experienced in India. As early as the 12th century in Karnataka, the divisions created by caste was expressed in the language and rhythms of Kannada mystical songs called *vachanakaras* and the religious tensions that prevailed during the Bhakti movements which took man to the basic question of human existence. This socio-cultural revolution led by Basavanna produced hundreds of *vachanagaras* including Akkamahadevi and Allama Prabhu. *Vachanas* are the experiences in the process of God realization through oneness with the pure consciousness in the *prana*.

The *sharanas* (prophets) tried to eradicate the inequalities faced and exploitation of women caused by the ancient varna (caste) system and the patriarchal hierarchy of society and

introduce an equal status to both men and women. The values that govern marital life and the meaningful relationship between men and women were dealt with by the prophets. The fact that women were treated as equals, that they enjoyed total freedom of expression besides being self-confident is clear from the following *vachana* of Jedara Dasimayya :

“The presence of braids of hair and breasts mark a woman, while a man is known by the appearance of moustache and beard. But the soul that resides within them is neither man nor woman, O Ranganatha” (Kelaginamani, 2006, 85)

The *vachanakartis* proved their worth by scaling great spiritual heights through their single minded dedication and honest efforts though there was a difference in the way the upper caste and lower caste *vachanakartis* expressed these sensibilities. Akkamahadevi speaks of a framework, a unit of society, i.e the family which includes the husband, his family, its framework, its nature etc. and of the human body as a familial unit in the following *vachana*:

“*Satva, raja and tama* (nobility, passion and ignorance) (86).

Accepting the woman to be an object of pleasure for man, Akkamahadevi compares the bondage of both the family and worldly affairs with that of the independent and liberal spiritual setup.

While this was so with the higher caste, the lower caste *vachanakartis* considered their husbands their equals and hence there was no question of being dominated or pressurized by them. Rising above the belief of *Sharana sati* and *linga pati* , they spoke of that cosmic union of the partners that is achieved only through devotion to Lord Shiva as says the following *vachana* of Guggavve:

“The knowledge that transcends the gender divide is knowledge in the true sense of the term” (87)

In most of the Dalit novels and stories, the woman is portrayed as a central figure, donning the role of the head of the family. She is the one who cares for the family and protects its interest.

So it is not surprising that the existential theme in its varied forms has featured in Indian literature across the ages from as early as the twelfth century. It became more evident in the post-independence era when writers tried to bring out the complex dynamics of contemporary society. While the feelings of alienation, existentialist angst and disintegration found prominence in the creative writings of Europe, it was the predicament of man caught in the dialectics of modernization, a colonial legacy, which received priority in the thematic concerns of the third world countries. The portrayal of the clash between the native and alien

cultures was a major literary preoccupation of many well-known writers in the post-colonial India.

The literary works of U.R. Ananthamurthy, a prolific Kannada writer, treats the philosophical aspects of people in different situations, times and circumstances. His writings analyze aspects from challenges and changes faced by Brahmin families of Karnataka to bureaucrats. His novels delve into the duality of politics and morality in human society and the reaction of individuals in such situations where there is a clash of right, wrong and change, old traditions and new outlook, tradition and modernity, revolution and status quo. While Ananthamurthy's stand remains ambivalent, Arun Joshi's obsession with the plight of modern man in a hostile universe results in the creation of a fictional world that is inhabited by alienated men suffering from rootlessness and struggling to transcend the existentialities brought about by the warring forces of tradition and modernity. His fictional exploitations are devoted to the creation / discovery of a viable alternative to the modern materialistic world that has reduced man to an automaton.

In Tamil Nadu the *siddhas* professed and practiced an unorthodox type of *sadhana*, or spiritual practice to attain liberation. Similar to the mystics of western civilization, *siddhars* are believed to control and transcend the barriers of time and space by meditation. Through their practices they could tune into the powers hidden in various material substances and practices, to heal suffering. Philosophy, religion and music were the chief components of Indian cultural tradition and this combination helped to neutralize social conflicts. Kashmiri Sufism is one such example. Oral traditions across the globe have a rich reservoir of expressions mostly from the alienated and non-mainstream sections. Strands of existentialist thought are evident in these expressions.

As the world is bridged today, it is necessary that literary concepts like existentialism which emerged out of intense human emotions at the individual and collective level, be shared with young learners across the world. Ours being a country of vast diversity with a multitude of languages and cultures, a study of the ancient texts will reveal how people through the ages have been able to negotiate life with its conflicting situations.

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