

ABSURDITY, NIHILISM AND THE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: A STUDY OF MISTRY'S NOVELS THROUGH THE LENS OF EXISTENTIALISM

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Abstract

Existentialism as a philosophy became popular after World war I when the entire Europe was in the moral crisis of to be or not to be. Europe paid the price of being too ambitious. The European countries till World War I was flourishing leaps and bounds but it's greed for owning more territory led to power tussle and the ambitions of a few cunning leaders thrust a big chunk of population of the world under the threat of death. Millions perished and the other millions related to them looked and cried for a messiah, a second coming that can save them from the human predicament that they were witnessing. But no second coming happened. This gave rise to nihilism, absurdity and existential crisis and the same was reflected in the post modern writers. The non-European writers also experienced the same crisis because the post modern novelists also raised these timeless questions and through their characters they try to resolve but without any success. The absurdity and helplessness of human beings as an entity of this whole cosmos is projected in post modern literature. The paper brings out the existential crisis is conspicuous in Rohinton Mistry's novels. The characters raise their heads against their destiny but in the end they surrender before the cosmic forces. Mistry's novels cover a wide array of issues ranging from diasporic crisis, hybridity and post-colonial crisis. The existential crisis is dominant in his novels. The predicament faced by the marginalized characters is explored in this study.

Keywords: Post-modernism, nihilism, mineness, chaos, absurdity.

INTRODUCTION

It's quite astonishing how modern man tries to explore the mysteries of life. The old age values of a single truth is already broken by the post-truth philosophers. Now many truths are being accepted as truths. The foundation of finding meaning even in meaninglessness was laid down by existentialists. From journey from single meaning to meaningless to many meanings is quite long and interesting. It is also intriguing and complex. Individual conflict and universal conflict often comes face to face with each other. It is often observed that the urge of an individual to stay alive when confronted with other individual's urge to stay alive, results in universal conflict. Moreover the more modern man questions the meaning of existence; the more s/he seems to be confused. All the philosophies of the world, all the wisdom gathered by men; all the scriptures; holy books; religious discourses; scientific pursuits, discoveries, space exploration, nothing has been able to resolve the age old issue of 'to be or not to be' and to be more exact, if 'to be' then, 'how to be.....? Here the philosophy of existentialism comes to our rescue which posits individual human beings create the meaning and essence of their lives postulates that the absence of a transcendent force i.e. God means that individual is entirely free and hence ultimately responsible for his action The personal articulation of 'Being' is the only way to rise above humanity absurd conditions.

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN HYBRID LIVING

The existential philosophy delved into the exploration of meaning of human existence. Whether we first exist or whether we exist only when we are conscious of our existence is quite debated among existentialists. "I think therefore I am." Descartes claimed and generated a debate. Similarly, Arnold Schopenhauer observed that the world is just a representation of complex external appearances. He simply states, "The world is my representation." Goethe supported his color theory also because perception of colors also add to our perception. He also compared human beings perception of the world with that of a blind man. Existentialism as a philosophy reached its peak after World War II. By then people had thought that soon World war III shall be a reality and the human societies will perish thus questioning the entire gamut of created by God or No God like in *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Before Beckett each philosopher contributed distinguished threads of existential

thoughts in the main stream. The main ideas that made a round in the intellectual circles were life, meaning, purpose, angst, chaos, disorientation, dread, being, absurdity and so on. Rationalism which was in trend before was thrown out of the windows because things had gone out of control. World War brought death and deaths, death of individual and death of nations. Jean Paul Sartre, Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Carl Jaspers, Nietzsche, Marcel added new dimensions to existentialism. This philosophy became such a rage that it influenced creative and non-creative world alike.

Rohinton Mistry's diasporic experience and hybrid living caused chaos and mental conflict which is reflected in his novels. His immigration to Canada and his struggles in the new context is reflected through his stories. His fiction is an attempt to explore the meaning of existence. The characters of his novels, as the part of this world, live a there is nothing else beyond life. The characters of his novels experience the absurdity of life; there is a sense of alienation, fear of boredom, loss and decay. Their destinies lead them to nothingness. They feel lost in this world that is more confusing than ever'(286). So his novels are highly charged with the idea of nothingness and a sense of hollowness looms round his characters.

In *A Fine Balance*, Dina Dalal wants to remain independent but her freedom is short lived and her struggle for the same meets with frustration and ultimately she takes shelter in her brother's house and in the end she is turned into a maid. Her quest for authentic personal being meets with resistance and ultimately frustration. The philosophy of existentialism unlike other philosophies starts from man rather than from nature. Soren Kierkegaard is considered as the father of Modern Existentialism. In the 1940's French existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus popularized existential themes such as dread, boredom, alienation and the absurd. Albert Camus in his canonical classic essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* said, "

In *Family Matters*, Nariman also tries to find logic and order but he fails miserably. Peter Moray also observes: Issues of mobility versus immobility decay and mortality are explored through Nariman's fate. From a life lived fully through the body he comes to exist solely in the life of mind (59-75). Mistry himself admitted in an interview with Robert Mclay when he was asked about the great sense of loss predominant in his novels: Well each of them (his characters) undergoes a separation and perhaps digressing slightly, think loss is part of the human condition. We all undergo separation and of course the first separation is from our mother's womb and that commencement of the journey (198-206). Existentialism is not only about loss but it is also about individual autonomy and self-determination, For Nietzsche, man is responsible for attributing significance to the world, he gives man a positive valuation of the world. He exhorts in *Joyful Wisdom*, "Shall we not ourselves have to become God merely to seem worthy of it?" (25).

The characters of Mistry also try to become Gods on their own account. In such a long journey Gustad Noble tries to comprehend the meaning of life and create his own values by creating a "Wall-of-All Religions" with the help of a painter, he also goes all the way from Mumbai to Delhi to know the truth behind the imprisonment of his friend Major Billimoria. In 'A Fine Balance', the poor man turned tailors try to create a niche for themselves against all odds. Dina Dalal never accuses any Superpower' for being too harsh to her. In the same manner Prof. Nariman Vakeel of *Family Matters* goes out for a walk despite suffering from Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis. Mistry's characters do not believe in any truth which is beyond appearance or beyond the skies. The greatest contribution of existentialism is perhaps the concept of Mineness. Mistry's novels call for resistance at a greater level. The perpetrators of class based society doesn't want to allow others to flourish. Ian Almond observes that the novel *A Fine Balance*, "offers an interpretation of the novel's central themes of resistance and resignation in the light of an earlier Indian classic, Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 work *Untouchable*, and in particular concentrates on the Yeatsian influence present in the novel, beginning with its title. In contrast to Anand's work, where the British and the caste-system are revealed to be the key perpetrators of the protagonists' sufferings, there is no single source of evil responsible for the myriad difficulties Mistry's characters suffer. " He also analyzes that, " The influence of Yeats and in particular his concept of the calm, stoic East, re-orientalizes Mistry's text in quite an unexpected way. A Westerner's understanding of the East as the antithesis of tragedy seeps into the novel, offering an almost mystical alternative to the bleak political landscape the book surveys."

As John Macquarie states: "The unique characteristic of existence is that my existence is unique and distinct from the existence of everyone else. I am not just a specimen of a class. I am (17)". So every individual is unique and different from other individuals and he is irreplaceable and in the journey of life one has to conquer oneself rather than the world; one has to work without hope. This concept aptly complements the sayings of the Holy scripture of Hinduism, the *Bhagwat Gita*, in which lord Krishna directs Arjuna to act without the desire of getting reward. Desires and attachment to pain, suffering and nothingness. Thus human beings often find themselves in an absurd Every human being spends his life struggling to comprehend the meaning of life and during this course of journey he confronts anguish, abandonment and despair. The fictional world created by Mistry is full of nothingness and his characters, Dina Dalal, Maneck, Avinash or the tailors; they all like life but their lives become a big bad joke. In such a Long Journey Gustad, Dinshwaji and Major stumble at every step because of uncertainty and unpredictability of life. Prof. Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* also encounters the same situation. He wants to exercise his freedom by going out for a walk but unfortunately he breaks his legs after falling in a pi becomes bed-ridden for a year and eventually dies.

Through the vehicle of literature immigrant writers try to recapture, reinvent and reconstruct their lived - experiences. The struggle to exist in the process of multiple displacements imparts to their writings a new voice, vitality and wisdom. The sense of alienation, loneliness, hostility, and obstacles in an alien environment provides maturity to their writing ventures. Mistry's lived experiences have won world-wide recognition, all his novels are Booker prize finalists. The hyphenated identity of migrant writers renders dual experiences to their writings. The effect of immigration on the consciousness of the writer is intermittently reflected through his characters. The feeling of belonging to nowhere, the sense of abandonment in a new culture, the anxiety of keeping one's individuality intact in a hostile environment is equally conspicuous in his characters. In *Such a Long Journey* (SALJ), the storms of existence leave Gustad Noble friendless, meaningless and helpless. Being 'a man existing alone in this world, he accepts his finitude as being only a man' rather than a superman who can do anything according to his will. The death of his three close friends Major Jimmy, Dinshawji and Tehmul Lungraa completely disillusion him with life and the sense of loss leaves him hopeless. Gustad wonders why life is uncertain, unstable and full of unrest. Like Camus, Gustad also declares, 'I don't understand this world anymore' [SALJ 142]. However, the painter of "Wall-of-All-Religions" tries to console him by saying 'life is difficult enough. Why to simply make it tougher' [SALJ 289]. The blackout papers on his window panes symbolize the fear, anxiety and insecurity of a common man about his existence in the present world which is always threatened by the wars between countries and misuse of scientific inventions. The French existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir admit that in the modern era the existence of a common individual is threatened by the totalitarian attitude of those in power, the invalidity of ancient philosophies after the two world wars and the misuse of scientific inventions like hydrogen bombs and weapons of mass destruction. China in 1962 and the other between India and Pakistan in 1971, compel Gustad to cover his window panes with black paper. The darkness soothes his soul because he feels insecure. His feelings are a true reflection of helpless common man in the midst of war. He finally accepts his own pilgrim status in the world when his third friend Tehmul dies in front of his own eyes, he starts his journey afresh but this time without hope because with the death of Tehmul which he sums as, 'the dance was over (SALJ, 333), he accepts his own absurd fate. He understands even if life is meaningless, he has to carry on. The urge to exist despite the conflicts that impinges the life of an ordinary man is the chief concern of modern novelists. The increasing sense of alienation, grief, sorrows in the cosmos is widely explored by the present day novelists. They emphasize more on the inner world rather than the outer world.

Finally, *Such a Long Journey* emerges out as an attempt to come to grips with the true meaning of human existence in this world here and now. The characters of SALJ, Miss Kutpitia, Dinshawji, Billimona and Gustad learn to accept the bitter truth of existence which forms an integral part of our life gracefully. The drama of human existence is filled with strange events. Life doesn't follow any scientific rules except the natural process of "Birth-Youth-Old age-Death" which is the ultimate reality. Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* (AFB) the most engrossing book brings out a strong existentialist character, Dina Dalal, she shows exemplary courage while dealing with the turmoils of existence. Her husband dies in a tragic accident and her life comes to a halt, she faces the tragic turn in her life with silent tears. Death is the culmination of life, it is the end of the existence. The existentialists believe that death is a great evil.

John Macquarie also points out: "Death is seen as the great surd of existence, the final proof of the absurdity of both men and the universe" (198). The uncertainty of death requires the individual's need to overcome the fear of death at every moment. For existentialists life is solitary, short and nasty. Each passing moment evaporates into void and with the passing of each moment we come near the time of extinction. Awareness of death instills fear of absurdity. The fear of absurdity haunts the life of all the major characters of the novel. They want to fight and struggle "even if life knocks them around" (AFB 82), but they experience defeat and despair while facing the brutal realities of life. The characters of AFB have close affinity with the mythological character Sisyphus, popularized by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). For Camus, "the biggest problem is suicide, " he also challenges the notion of God, " We turn to God only to obtain the impossible ; as for the possible men suffice."

As T. Singh observes: "All attempts by human mind to understand the world are futile. All philosophical systems and religious which claim that they can enable man to make sense of the world are delusive and useless" (554). Critics agree that Mistry's fiction is able to capture the vivid encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe which forms the basic feature of the philosophy of existentialism. The absurdity of life compels his characters to declare their helplessness. In *Family Matters*, Yezaad yearns to understand the world in which he exists, he ponders, "How he would love to acquire that kind of knowledge. Would it be of help in making sense of this world, his world?" (AFB 353) But all of them feel like trapped animals suffering from the tyrannical chains of existence. In fact Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters* is a fine example of how the ordinary heroes experience hollowness in the flux of the modern world. The complexities of family life are juxtaposed with the subtle presence of life as a 'jigsaw puzzle'.

The protagonist Prof. Nariman Vakeel regrets whenever he remembers his past: "When he looked back at it all, across the wasteland of their lives, despaired at how he could have been so feeble minded, so spineless, to have allowed it to happen." (FM 9), Nariman's hollow existence ends with the farewell song, "One day when we were young." played by the Violinist Daisy Ichchoria Yezaad's consciousness keeps on harboring pain and guilt of his employer's murder. The alien universe which all families confront ultimately accepts the absurd forces that

control their lives. Neither reason nor religion helps in making a rational conclusion of their lives. Their lives remain like a 'jigsaw-puzzle. They are unable to piece together their lives into a meaningful existence.

Rohinton Mistry has become a household name among the diasporic writers he has also received accolades for his novels internationally like other native Indian writers. The Atlantic praises him for his ability to handle the big questions regarding: "Death, family, the passing time, the inevitability of loss, God writers corresponding God-shaped hole, Mistry handles all of them in an *The Existentialist in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry* accomplished style entirely of his own" (2). Mistry is successful in bringing out the hollowness of existence, the feeling of loss and decay. His fictional work could be best judged in his own words written in his short stories, titled *Swimming Lessons* which is considered auto biographical. In *Swimming Lessons* a mother while judging the stories written by her son, says: "How beautifully he wrote about it all, even the sad things and though he changed some of it, and used his imaginations, there was truth in it" (113). The adherence to truth makes his fiction warm, compassionate and humane.

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