

Review

Existentialism in the plays of Girish Karnad

Bisma Khursheed

Research Scholar, Sri Venkateshwara University, Uttar Pradesh.

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Existentialism is an important aspect of modernism in art and literature and as conceived today, it is basically a philosophy of existence which was pioneered by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and later disseminated by Sartre etc. In the 20th Century, existentialism became identified with a European cultural movement. It implies 'quest' of an individual for the assertion of 'self', despite his failures and limitations. Amidst grim facts of life, existentialism presents a philosophy of hope, ecstasy and exultation. It stresses on choice of responsibility and freedom for consequences of one's acts. It is a representation of rejection of all abstract thinking and insists that philosophy should be connected with an individual's own life and experience. In the present study an attempt has been made to explore existential elements in Girish Karnad's three important plays namely *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*.

Key words: Alienation, despair, existentialism, isolation, responsibility, outsider, existence, self, absurd, angst.

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INTRODUCTION

Existentialism emerged as a powerful trend in Europe after World War I. It is a salient feature of modernism in literature and art. Several contemporary forces- cultural, intellectual, political and social led to its development. These forces had achieved prominence after the world wars had drastically shattered people's faith in the progress of human civilization. For the people of the West, the value of life had begun to appear absurd and meaningless.

One usually witnesses Kafkaesque 'angst', Kurtzian 'horror', Sisyphian 'despair' and Promethian 'defiance' in the modern age which is a 'true glorification of Scientism'. The predicament of man, who feels the sense of anxiety, despair, alienation, rootlessness, loneliness, hopelessness, anger and protest, is displayed almost by all modern existentialists. In the Modern age, Man undergoes a loss of 'self' and loss of this world altogether. Man is depicted as a stranger in the world by Kafka in *The Castle* and by Albert Camus in *The*

Stranger, who feels the sense of powerlessness and rootlessness like an outsider to his society and world. Just like the characters depicted in the theatre of the 'Absurd', his world is full of pessimism, despair and tragic alienation. This point of view has been depicted very well in the plays and novels of Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka and Sartre. Other writers who also have touched the existential themes are Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, Iris Murdoch, Thomas Hardy, Graham Greene, Leo Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, T S Eliot, Pleneric Ibsen, Jean Anouilh, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and many other contemporary writers. Many notable Indian writers too portrayed in their writings the struggle and predicament of man thereby exhibiting their existential concerns like Sri Aurobindo, R K Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore, Arundhati Roy, K N Daruwallah, Nisim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad and Asif Currimbhoy.

Girish Karnad is a director, a playwright, a scholar, a

scriptwriter and an actor, who won many laurels in the realm of theatre and playwriting. His achievements include the Sahitya academy award (1994), Karnataka Sahitya Academy award (1993), President's Award for Excellence in Direction, Padma Shri (1974), Sangeet Natak Academy award (1972), Kamladevi award (1971) and the State award for *Yayati* (1961). Most of his plays were penned down in Kannada and some he himself translated in English. The direct impact of Existential theory is vivid in three of his plays: *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1972) and *Hayavadana* (1975).

For Poonam Pandey:

“Girish Karnad is a master dramatist of existential philosophy, which concentrates on Man who is at the centre of the universe.” (2010:69)

Girish Karnad, like other philosophers, finds man at the centre of the universe. A turning point in his life is his choice of freedom with which he becomes the maker of himself. His inwardness and individuality, leads him to a state of outsiderism, absurdity, purposelessness, rootlessness, alienation, agony, loneliness and estrangement. He is always in quest for completeness and is always in search of his identity, being away from his world due to his individual alienation. Karnad's characters appear like lonely figures having a split personality and a divided self because of being victims of existential sufferings and predicaments. Man creates his own hell by his choice of freedom which chains him and hence he undergoes an endless suffering, thereby generating a state of meaninglessness, purposelessness and helplessness. And this condition entails a lot of pain in addition to being crucial, experimental and existential.

In the present study an attempt has been made to explore existential elements in Girish Karnad's three important plays which reveal direct impact of the theory of existentialism: *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1972), *Hayavadana* (1975).

In *Yayati*, the main protagonist, Yayati, is married to Devyani and during the course of action ties knot with Sharmishtha. Puru is Yayati's son who comes home after his marriage to Chitrlekha. The bed that was prepared for Puru and Chitrlekha was ironically used to solemnize Yayati and Sharmishtha's marriage. As the curse falls, Puru loses his youth to his father Yayati. Chitrlekha's earnest wish of bearing a child leads her to offer herself to Yayati, who plainly declines her proposal. As a result of frustration and disgust, Chitrlekha commits suicide. Her death opens Yayati's eyes, so much so that he takes back the curse from his son and being penitent abandons the kingdom. Puru exchanges his youth with his father's old age and this leaves his wife Chitrlekha deserted, frustrated and finally spoilt. And out of frustration, Yayati

is not able to enjoy his 'old-age transformed' youth. Hence, all three of them experience a fractured and divided personality. There is always a quest of completeness in them and their cravings are full of frustrations and existential situations.

Chitrlekha's suicide makes Yayati alienated and isolated and consciously he realizes responsibility of his actions. Yayati says, “The fear of sacrifice led me to sexual pleasure but this unnatural youth could not obtain that, Puru take back your youth and be a good king. There could be no better lesson than Chitrlekha's death,” hence making responsibility the essence of his existence. Survival in this world is impossible without an “authentic existence”. The decision of choosing exchange of ages with his father leads not only Puru but also Chitrlekha to an endless suffering and agony, as a result of which they become a split-personality and a divided self. They are cut out from their society and the world at large due to a sort of self and social alienation.

In *Tughlaq*, the protagonist is always in a divided state of realism and idealism and hence an indecisive behaviour. For being a man of indecision and inaction, he becomes a living figure of the king of Denmark, Hamlet. His 'to be or not to be' hence becomes a remarkable feature of existential predicament and suffering. He is not a creator/ maker of himself but becomes as circumstances or situations make of him. He cultivates a living hell for his countrymen by transferring the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and vice versa, just for the sake of his dedicated idealism of safety of his people from the foreign invasion. In the name of equality, justice and Hindu-Muslim unity, he brutally massacres his relatives. Ultimately he becomes a divided self/split personality as a result of his earnest endeavour to build a heavenly kingdom of communal harmony and equality for his people. Instead of being a rescuer, he becomes a victim and people (his victims) become his prosecutors. Eventually he becomes a very restless, helpless and a meaningless character. P Ramamoorthy says, “Muhammad keeps changing roles.” (2010:160) although trying to stop the monstrous sufferings of his prosecutors, he tried to carve decisions so as to fight unfavourable circumstances but he finds himself isolated, stranger and an outsider from his own self. In his restlessness and helplessness, he turns to the supreme rescuer, God Almighty, to seek help and mercy, praying, “Good God in Heaven, please help me... I have no one but you, only you.” The burden of one's misdeeds is lightened when one accepts the power of God. Only thing left to man is his power of choice but not to exercise control of the very compelling and overpowering conditions. In favourable conditions, man feels that he is the creator of his destiny and otherwise he submits to God who is the ultimate rescuer and mentor. As a helpless creature, Tughlaq is full of dread and despair and has no authority to change. Man's real problem being that of action not of a sterile

abstraction or contemplation and in the predicament of despair, he represents alienated humanity. In an existential problem, man should act as a participant in his life situations and hence should act, decide and make his own choices as this is what can help him to solve the riddle of existence in creating a profound understanding between men and in carving out a perfect climate for any sort of moral upsurge. Other estranged and alienated characters in the story are Aazam and Aziz. Tughlaq's plans are misappropriated by the opportunist Aziz, to suit Aziz's own desires. He assumes numerous disguises, commits all sorts of crimes, kills people but still in the end is crowned with success. Despite the immoral nature, Aziz's choices are existential decisions, which bring him victory/ success. He is the man of the moment as he prefers to live in the present. He craves for authority and power. When Aazam decides to abandon his company, Aziz manages to kill him in cold blood. Aziz comes out successful in this complicated essential situation, while Tughlaq and Aazam fail miserably.

Hayavadana is a story of two friends and lovers of a single woman. It is a drama of 'tangled relationships'. On one hand there is Devadutta, a man of mind and intellect and the other is Kapila, a man of steel like body. They both love Padmini, the wife of Devadutta. Padmini in turn loves Devadutta's mind and Kapila's body and want both these qualities assembled in one- that is 'a fabulous mind in a fabulous body'. She even desires to have a son who would be an embodiment of a sound mind in a sound body. Here characters are trapped in a state of agony and suffering due to a peculiar complexity of relationships. At last they become pitiable figures and appear as strangers, loners and outsiders in their own world. Padmini seeks to obtain a perfect/ ideal man without self alienation. She ultimately gets entangled in an existential crisis resulting from a confusion of identities. The ambiguous nature of human personality is revealed through her remarks:

"What are you afraid of, Devadutta? What does it matter that you are going soft again, that you are losing your muscles? I am not going to be stupid again, Kapila's gone out of my life forever. I won't let him come back again. Kapila? What could he be doing now? Where could he be? Could his body be fair still and his face dark? Devadutta changes. Kapila changes. And me?" (Karnad 2009:49)

On seeing Kapila's changed, virile body, Padmini is bewildered and unable to solve the tangled web of existence:

"Yes, you won Kapila. Devadutta won too, but I- the 'Better' half of two bodies, neither win nor lose. No, don't say anything." (Karnad 2009:57)

Although Kapila tried his best to erase the faceless memories of the past from his mind but Padmini's appearance revives them and adds to his anguish, dread and desperation. His existential situation is revealed in following lines:

The river only feels the pull of the waterfall. She giggles and trickles the rushes on the banks, then turns a top of dry leaves in the navel of whirlpool, weaves a water-snake in the wet of silver strends in the green depths frightens the frog on the rug of moss, sticks and bamboo leaves, sings, tosses, leaps and sweeps on in rush-while the scarecrow on the bank has a face fading on its mudpod head and a body torn with memories (2009:59).

Soon Devadutta arrives on the spot and both ruthlessly fight and kill each other and Padmini performs Sati. Hence none of them is able to attain completeness. Kirtinath Kurkoti writes:

Neither death of the lovers nor the subsequent Sati of Padmini is presented as tragic; the deaths serve only to emphasize the logic behind the absurdity of the situation. (1982:5)

In *Hayavadana*, the absurd has been highlighted in the accepted norms of social behaviour and Karnad has employed a very existential approach to human life in the play. In order to solve the problems, the protagonist in *Hayavadana* strives very hard but his noble efforts and struggle bear no fruits due to our wrong perceptions regarding problems of man and our morbid culture's mighty antagonism.

Thus, man finds himself being an unstable, finite being who is menaced to die in this world. Existentialism is deeply incarnated in man. We are told that man has freedom to transcend his role and his free choices eventually shape him in a way that he becomes an 'object' till his further possibilities are extinguished by death. As a conscious free being he too has to abide by the commands of nature just like animals and hence biologically there is no difference between them. Also man cannot evade society altogether and finally encounters the inevitable 'death' as final judgement. He can choose to endeavour identifying himself with the group-consciousness of the society, thereby evading the responsibility of freedom. But his freedom and responsibility that set him apart in lonely isolation can also be acknowledged in 'dread'. Man is always in quest of meaning of his life, his existence and solution to his problems which define his values in the society and goals of human life. But finally man attains failure as a ruler and becomes a stranger, outsider and a loner in this world. There is a sense of loss of his world and his self. This

suffering and existential loneliness has been very well depicted by Karnad in his plays *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Tughlaq*.

Like humanism, existentialism affirms the *dignity* of man. Karnad's plays *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* are by all means remarkable existential plays which deal with the theme of responsibility, search for identity and the issue of relationship. *Yayati* is a self consciously existential drama on the theme of responsibility. In *Tughlaq*, there is an ardent search for identity wherein Sultan at first finds his identity in his imaginative plans and ideals, but once there is diversion in his plans by chance or choice or if there is non-execution of his plans, he feels outraged and utterly frustrated and takes recourse to bloodshed, tyranny and slaughter. *Hayavadana*, too, deals with human relationship and the theme of search for identity. Also in each of his plays, Karnad's characters are trapped in the intertwined mixture of situations; as a result they lead an undesirable life and appear as incomplete personalities.

In his plays, Karnad exhibits characters' feelings of alienation, their spiritual crisis, their inner chaos, tension and complexes, their sensibility, their problems and their creative impulses. For him the outer weather, the visible action or the physical geography is less compelling than the inner climate, the climate of sensibility, which clears the rumbles like thunder and lightning blazing forth. The agonies, incessant struggle to find meaning and psychological complexities in the behaviour of his characters symbolize man's concern with the external human situation. Man is always trapped in the circumstances and situations and he works according to his own choice or will. Karnad's characters capture reader's attention with their skill of struggle for existence thereby successfully emerging out of their predicament. Therefore, they are engulfed in both action and contemplation. And in order to achieve the quest of meaning in life, these characters reflect and reveal their perceptions and their vision of life.

In short, Karnad as a playwright has successfully constructed the master design of existentialism in his plays. There is a marked difference in Karnad and the Western existentialists as his characters live in an altogether different background and culture. In western countries, existentialism is born out of despair, frustration, materialism, fear of war and industrialization. While in the Indian setup, existentialism is harboured due to gender inequality, caste discrimination, traditional bindings and social injustice, which blurs the dream of freedom and vision. In spite of the differences in the predicaments, problems and sufferings between western and eastern characters, there is similarity in their outlook of existentialism- in the ultimate crisis of man and his

dilemma which makes this man chained, tired, frustrated, isolated, estranged and lonely in his society and the world at large.

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