



AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE: HUMAN DILEMMAS, THEMES AND ISSUES

Kuntal Beniwal¹, Dr. Sharanpal Singh²

^{1,2}Department of Humanities and Social Sciences Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed To Be University) Mullana,
Ambala, Haryana

Email: kbsbeniwal@gmail.com

Article History: Received: 18.04.2023

Revised: 07.05.2023

Accepted: 16.06.2023

Abstract: *Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century, particularly in Europe and focuses on the individual's existence and experience in the world. It deals with the fundamental questions about human existence, freedom, meaning, and responsibility. At its core, existentialism emphasizes the subjective experience of the individual as they grapple with the inherent meaninglessness and absurdity of life. Existentialists argue that human beings are responsible for creating their own values and giving meaning to their lives in the face of an indifferent and chaotic universe. Key themes in existentialism include alienation, despair, absurdity, and negativity. Prominent existentialist thinkers include Jean-Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Each of these philosophers offered their own unique perspectives on existentialism, exploring different aspects of human existence and the search for meaning. It's important to note that existentialism encompasses a wide range of ideas and interpretations, and there are different variations within the philosophical movement. It is the essence that is created by the existence of our life, not the other way around. We live our lives, and these are the things that constitute our identity. In fact, it's impossible to put us into any type of category. In existentialism, a person's existence begins everything. This paper aims to explore Human problems, dilemmas, and issues related to the Existential Approach.*

Keywords: *Existentialism, philosophy, human being, dilemmas*

DOI: 10.48047/ECB/2023.12.SI8.575

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is most frequently associated with the themes of alienation, despair, absurdity, and negativity. Even though most people don't believe that they belong to the existentialist category, this trend is highly eccentric. Another way to think about this is that while most existentialists are in agreement about certain ideas and principles, there are others about which they are sharply divided. Man is the starting point for existentialism, rather than the natural world. In this perspective, man is treated as a being in existence, rather than as a conscious subject in other philosophies. We're saying that man exists, and then encounters himself, and then rises in the world, and then defines himself. As existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre says, "first exists he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself" (Sartre 10). The existentialist theory holds that no individual can be fully defined until he or she has begun his or her existence. Until he becomes what he wants to be, he's just a concept for the time being. The conditions and nature of the current human person are of concern to existential philosophers. They don't deal with issues that are meaningless, isolated or marginalised by meaningful human experience. Existentialism labels these issues with abstract thought as illusions. Existentialist dilemmas are universal issues that stem from actual human circumstances and are inherent to the human condition. These are real-world issues that must be resolved through real-world use rather than abstract reasoning. William Barret in the study *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, asserts:

All existentialists maintain that the truth of human existence lies in its concreteness and subjectivity which disappear into abstraction and exteriorization. They seek to bring the whole man- the concrete individual in the whole context of his everyday life and in his total mystery and questionableness into philosophy (Barret 244).

It fervently promotes and upholds the Enlightenment concept of a liberated humanity and a dominance-free world, a particular viewpoint in which liberty, equality, and justice would govern societal norms and institutions. Above all, existentialism and the Golden Age share an unwavering relation for the individual and an insatiable thirst for freedom of choice. The era of enlightenment and existentialism go hand in hand because of this, the belief that genuine social change is conceivable, and an underlying acceptance to engage in part, even if only via discourse, in social movements of a progressive nature.

Both capitalism and socialism attempted to offer the concepts envisioned by the Enlightenment in modern times. But capitalism merely served to increase the liberties and pleasantries benefited from by the bourgeoisie. Socialism endeavoured to expand the concept of justice and economic equality and gave greater weight to social needs, social responsibility, etc.; yet, in the end, the individual was subordinated to the dominance of the social structure. In both of these systems, the individual is ultimately simply seen as a calculable quantity, and neither freedom nor social justice are actually provided to them. Thus, the necessity for a society that allows for individual authenticity and allows that its authenticity to nourish itself. This is the gap that existentialist philosophy has sought to bridge.

Existentialism starts with mankind, but it begins with him as an existence rather than as a subject of thought. It is also implied that one cannot assert a “nature” or “essence” of man and then proceed to draw conclusions about him. In Sartre's words, a person's existence comes before his or her essence. H.H. Titus in the study *Living Issues in Philosophy* explains:

Existentialism represents an attitude or outlook that emphasizes human existence - that is, the distinctive qualities of individual person -rather than man in the abstract or nature and the world in general (Titus 299).

One of the aspects of our existence that predates the existence of humans is suffering. It is a fact that cannot be understood objectively. It is a wholly subjective idea since it is not an abstract concept. The issue has frequently been approached “objectively” by philosophers who have thought about it, rather than as something that stems from one’s own subjective existence. This trend appears to have existed in western thought at all points throughout its history, including the Greek, Christian, and modern periods. They typically adopt a rationalized account of the universe instead, paying insufficient attention to how uncomfortable man feels when confronted with the universe directly. The basic idea of western philosophy has been to steer man away from direct evidence and urge them to live within a system. It involves the premise that a person first just exists in the cosmos, and then, in order to understand the nature of life and humanity, attempts to define existence. Existentialism is a school of thought that emphasizes being over existence. Existentialism holds that every individual is entirely responsible for determining the meaning of life. This might result in pain and anguish, which eventually lead an individual to realize the true meaning of life. J.L. Styan in the study *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* explicates:

Existentialism proposed that man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action. By such a choice, a person would acquire an identity, a purpose and dignity as a human being. For preference, existential man should adopt some social or political cause in order to acquire this dignity and purpose . . . (Styan 118).

Existentialism desire to explore the human condition that emerges directly from contemporary circumstances. Some of these factors include the psychological state of an individual's cultural diversity, which is followed by alienation from beings who have lost their sense of purpose in life as a result of conflicts inside the human essence. These circumstances lead to what is usually referred to as the “existential experience”. Many authors, artists, and philosophers have described it as an experience of the collapse of our phenomenal world, starting with all rational concepts, moving on to objects, time, and

history, and finally, all coherence, to the point where one is left with nothing but meaninglessness and despair. A similar experience can be found in Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus*, avows:

Getting up, train, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, in the same routine, and then suddenly the setting collapses and we find ourselves in a state of hopeless lucidity (Camus 16).

Existentialists argue that human beings are responsible for creating their own values and giving meaning to their lives in the face of an indifferent and chaotic universe. Existentialism highlights the importance of individual freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. This emphasis on personal autonomy has influenced social and political movements, promoting ideas of human rights, equality, and the pursuit of individual happiness. It's important to note that the impact of existentialism can vary greatly from person to person and from society to society. While some individuals find empowerment and personal growth through existentialist ideas, others may find them challenging or unsettling. John Macquarrie in the text *Existentialism* avows:

Existentialist philosophy has brought to explicit awareness an attitude of mind and away of thinking that are as old as human existence itself and that have manifested themselves in varying degrees throughout the history of human thought (Macquarrie 34).

Nonetheless, existentialism has undeniably played a role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves, their choices, and the world around them. Camus had a unique perspective on existentialism and offered critiques and alternative viewpoints within the philosophical movement. Camus believed in the concept of the "absurd," which refers to the inherent conflict between the human desire for meaning and purpose and the irrational, indifferent nature of the universe. He argued that life is essentially absurd, as humans strive for meaning in a world that offers no inherent meaning or ultimate answers. Camus rejected the search for metaphysical certainties or transcendent explanations. He criticized existentialists who sought refuge in philosophical systems or religious beliefs to escape the absurdity of life. Instead, he advocated embracing the absurd condition and confronting it with lucidity and courage. Camus presented the idea of the "absurd hero" who faces the existential dilemma with courage and integrity. He celebrated those who, in spite of the absurdity and futility of life, engage in acts of rebellion, and solidarity, and create their own personal meaning. Camus philosophy explores the tension between the human search for meaning and the absurdity of existence, offering a nuanced critique of existentialism while still sharing certain existentialist themes. His works, such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the novel *The Stranger* continue to influence existentialist and absurdist thought.

According to Kierkegaard, the dichotomy between existence and pure being is the otherness between the realistic and unreal, between conflict and detachment, and, ultimately, between despair and deliverance. While Sartre encounters man as being thrown meaninglessly into a purposeless world, seeking and even exercising an almost absolute freedom but eventually losing it. However, Kierkegaard considers mankind as being embedded in a meaningful and ethical predicament by its development, and even in his collapsed state having the freedom of embracing or renouncing God's given remediation. In the context of God's purpose, both human capability and the physiological condition of pessimism exist. Thus, according to Kierkegaard, the free man chooses a leap of faith as an interim approach to the sense of 'absurdity'. George E. Arbaugh in the study *Kierkegaard's Authorship*, explains:

Not only is freedom, for Kierkegaard, concrete and circumscribed by at least the limits of his nature, rather than the abstract leap of some aesthetic existentialists, it differs also for him in that the freedom of the creature fulfils itself only in a decision to be orient to the creator. This means that man is properly free only when he chooses the Good (Arbaugh 164).

The sense of absurdity arises from mankind's connection with the outside world. Martin Esslin in the study *Theatre of the Absurd*, asserts: "A world that functions mysteriously outside our conscious control must appear absurd. It has no longer has a religious or historical purpose; it has ceased to make sense" (Esslin 219-220). The perplexing dilemma for absurdist is how to describe what an object is like when it has lost its human significance. Devoid of all religious ideas, the absurd man must face the ultimate harsh

reality. So, the contemporary absurdist writer Samuel Beckett portrays the gloomy fate of man who is confronted with time and hence must wait. The absurdist's attitude of man and the universe may appear ugly, frivolous, and inconsequential. They attempted to persuade others of man's perilous, enigmatic place within the universe. There is no acknowledged set of ethical standards, no valued beliefs to elevate humanity out of its unfortunate state. Ours is a conceptual language. It is simplistic, generic, and impersonal. It is nothing more than old myths, hollow traditions, and slogans. Jon Stewart in the study *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth- and Twentieth Century European Philosophy*, says: Absurdity is, for Camus, the fundamental fact of human existence which poses the moral problem. There are several possible solutions to the problem of meaninglessness and absurdity. Like Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky one might opt for religious solutions. The second possible response to absurdity and nihilism is suicide. But for Camus, suicide cannot be regarded as a viable solution. Instead, he encouraged revolt against the universe and its meaninglessness. The notion of revolt refers to both a path of resolved action and a state of mind (Stewart 184).

Nietzsche's changed facets of beliefs reflects of his individual advancement. The first feature "God is dead", occurs in several of his works especially in *The Gay Science* (1882). Steven. Earnshaw in the study *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* writes, "For Nietzsche we are abandoned, in a godless world, to creating our own values, distinct for each individual" (Earnshaw 73). God is dead does not refer to the non-existence of God, who previously existed, but rather to the believe in God. It alludes to a loss of faith in God. The majority of critics consider Nietzsche to be an atheist. Nietzsche phrase "God is dead" is not a claim of atheism. He considered God's death to be his most pressing issue. The death of God could draw people transcend mere viewpoints to complete nihilism, a belief that nothing has inherent value and that life has no purpose. Nietzsche "will to nothingness" focuses life away from itself because there is nothing of useful in the world. Nihilism manifests itself as an apprehension of all values in the world. Some philosophers believe that non-human things are separate from humans. Since humans are conscious of their own existence, but objects are only there to be seen, this is called a case of non-contradiction. One must accept responsibility for one's actions and choices in the present in order to develop one's concept of existence. One's essence is shaped by the individual choices and actions that are taken. In an existential sense, freedom and responsibility are intrinsically linked. A man realizes and fully comprehends his freedom when he understands that he has complete and absolute control over his life. In the process of acquiring individuality, he achieves all of the significance, concreteness, and security it implies. Successful and authentic men have to understand both their personal freedom and the power they have over their own lives. Sartre in the study *Existentialism is a Humanism* states:

Man, first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future... and is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower; there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be. Not what he will want to be. By the word "will" we generally mean a conscious decision; what we have already made of ourselves is only a manifestation of an earlier, more spontaneous choice. If existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is (Sartre 3-5).

A man must be willing to accept full responsibility for his actions in order to accept full responsibility for his actions. Once a person accepts the fact that he bears ultimate responsibility for his own actions, he is more likely to take personal responsibility for his actions and act accordingly. Only when mankind accept that we are responsible for our actions, our lives, and any mistakes we have made will we be willing to exercise our responsibility. No one else has the right to decide what we do or what happens to us. To say that a man must be self-sufficient implies that he has the final say in what happens to himself. There is no such thing as a free pass to dodge our responsibilities. In the end, we are the ones who have to make final decisions. And, in order to do so, we must rely on our own judgement. People who we trust, like friends and teachers, as well as parents and counsellors, can all offer advice to us when we are seeking it. We must determine whom to turn to from the start. After we have received the request information, our decision on whether or not to accept or reject the request is entirely in our hands. It's actually an

existential truth that we are solely responsible for our decisions, and this is something we must always keep in mind. To say that we bear complete responsibility for our actions means that we are held responsible for everything we do. We must accept the truth before we can succeed in life.

Men's freedom is limitless, and as a result, they will go to extraordinary lengths to conceal it from themselves. Erich Fromm in the text *Man for himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* he admits: "There is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers" (Fromm 52). When he makes this assertion, he is saying that he is choosing to run away from freedom. We are witnessing mankind's freedom from liberty through the application of modern technology. Most men have a difficult time identifying with the things they create. Using science and universal determinism, we have given ourselves an excuse to hand over our freedom, along with the anxiety of being a responsible citizen. Running away from our own freedom accomplishes nothing and only makes things worse. Freedom is hard. But being pushed out of freedom is unimaginably worse. Once we have grasped the concept and accepted our freedom, we will be able to deal with our fundamental problems. Recognizing and properly using our freedom gives us the opportunity to live fulfilling lives that are purposeful and profitable. By accepting all responsibility for our actions, we agree to bear all the consequences. Authentic human beings are defined by freedom of choice, according to existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre in the study *The Age of Reason*, affirms:

He was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept, free to refuse, free to equivocate; to marry, to give up the game, to drag this death weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good or Evil unless he thought them into being (Sartre 242-243).

The transcendence and facticity of the for-itself coincide. Heidegger's concept of "Dasein" is also intertwined with the concept of authenticity. Authenticity in choice is something that can only be accomplished when there is proper balance between transcendence and facticity. It can be difficult to make constant choices and deal with those choices all at once, and this can lead to anxiety. Martin Heidegger used the term *angst* to refer to the individual's struggle with the unbearable thought that their actions have no purpose or meaning in a meaningless world, as well as the tremendous struggle that people have when trying to find rational justification for decisions, they make that are senseless. After coming to terms with the realization that the universe is not orderly or rational, a person can feel nausea. In addition to the anguish, he felt over the fact that we humans have the freedom to choose what we can do, he also grieved over the realization that we have total freedom of choice. Anxiety, dread, *angst*, nausea, and anguish are all a result of realizing the truth that our world is not what we thought it was. Human existence in postmodern existentialism is defined by subjectivism, which means that I am my own reality, and my beliefs are an extension of that. The postmodern existential man is explained by Rosenau as follows: "A man who will lead a simple and unremarkable life," says Rosenau. He is both a person and the source of caring relationships and creative individuality. He will be completely removed from all forms of epistemological enquiry, which will result in him being a purely subjective individual. Sartre and Nietzsche share same thoughts in their depiction of existentialism. J W Phelan in the text *Philosophy: Themes and Thinkers* pens:

The Sartrean version of „God is dead“ philosophy is summed up in the term ‘abandonment’... It is a feeling of existential *angst* at being alone in the universe without any supernatural assistance to help us to decide what to do... The absence of God intensifies the freedom we experience as moral decision makers and reconstructs humanity in the image of God. We are empowered to choose our actions without any excuse, limitation and the confinement of dogma. In doing so, we are free to transcend our own humanity (Phelan 318).

For existentialist philosophers, the inner experience of reality is an important factor. To arrive at this conclusion, the concept of the personal was utilized. Philosophy can be approached by first focusing on one's own personal experience and knowledge and incorporating that as evidence. The emphasis in existentialism is on the individual's personal experience. When it comes to conceptualizing Being, a

philosophy based on attestation and acceptance will be employed, as well as an outright rejection of the idea of trying to rationalize and think about Being. Existentialism emphasizes on the mankind, which is defined by existence, and it advocates a return to the real-world, individual in existence as contrasted with the essence and nature of things. It highlights the dominance of existence over essence. The essence of the human, according to the majority of existentialists, is one's existence. Existence is a dynamic concept that indicates a continuing attainment of the self in the individual's self-directed life. Existing as an individual entails becoming a person in terms of freedom and choice. The person, as an existing, produces oneself. Running away from one's responsibility to exist as an individual is the same as escaping into the crowd. It is unsettling to be alone in one's individuality; so, courage is required to exist, to establish oneself as an individual. In a world where anonymity is the saving virtue, numerical dominance is the deciding factor, and popular opinion is the criteria of truth, all existentialists urge the human beings to continue to develop into, as well as discover as a being adhering freedom of choice and courage. Despite the fact that humans are primarily free and self-creative, their search for existent inner being encounters with resistance and, at times, frustration. Humans' influence to act is inhibited by their ultimate alleged, life or death, meaning it confines their capacity for choose and over which they have no control. Death, as the ultimate possibility and fact, forms an inner structure around human existence, indicating humans' limit-situation. The existence of the nothingness in one's being is felt by the human, and prior to this existential awareness of one's finite freedom, one feels despair or anxiousness. Anxiety is felt in the face of the emptiness of human existence. The presence of emptiness in the human is the same as human finitude or ontological guilt, which allows for sinful behaviour. Macquarrie in the text *Existentialism* highlights:

Kierkegaard explains that anxiety precedes sin and transgression which leads to suffering in this world. It is the prior condition towards sin and the fall of man. He describes anxiety in three ways. First of all it is inherent in the state of innocence. There is something like an instability, an uneasiness, a presentiment that disturbs the tranquility of happiness. Secondly it is also linked to freedom. It is a kind of instability prior to action. Thirdly it is associated with man's peculiar constitution as body and soul, established in spirit. So, man is subjected to tension, and this tension is anxiety (Macquarrie 166-167).

CONCLUSION

It's important to note that the perception and reception of existentialism in the modern world can vary widely among individuals. Some may find its emphasis on personal freedom and meaning-making empowering, while others may critique its individualistic tendencies or its potential to overlook societal and structural factors. Nevertheless, existentialism continues to be a relevant and thought-provoking philosophical framework that engages individuals in contemplating the profound questions of human existence and the search for meaning and authenticity.

REFERENCES

1. Styan, J.L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*. vol. 2, Cambridge UP, 1988.
2. Fromm, Erich. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics*, Open Road Media 2013.
3. Stewart, Jon. *Idealism and Existentialism: Hegel and Nineteenth- and Twentieth Century European Philosophy*. Continuum, 2012.
4. Phelan, J.W. *Philosophy: Themes and Thinkers*. Cambridge UP, 2005.
5. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Methuen & Co, 1966.
6. Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment*. Penguin, 1972.
7. Earnshaw, Steven. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2007.
8. Barret, William. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: Anchor Books, 1958.
9. Titus, Harold H. *Living Issues in Philosophy*. New York: American Book Company, 1964.

10. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Penguin Books, 2000.
11. Arbaugh, George E., *Kierkegaard's Authorship: A Guide to the Writing of Kierkegaards*. Illinois: Rock Island, 1968.
12. Esslin, Martin. *Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Anchor Books.1968.