

Extential Themes in Modern Literature

Bhupinder Kaur

W.no 10, H.no 327, Gurdiyal Singh colony, Indri Karnal-132041 (Haryana)

Email- jagnoor9253471593.JS@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the themes of angst and absurdity in literature through the lens of existentialism. Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emphasizes individual freedom and the absence of inherent meaning in the universe, has had a profound influence on literature, particularly in the 20th century. Through an analysis of selected works, including novels, plays, and essays, this paper examines how authors have portrayed existential themes, such as angst, the feeling of anxiety and dread in the face of freedom, and absurdity, the conflict between human desire for meaning and the indifferent universe. By studying the works of key existentialist thinkers and analyzing how their ideas are reflected in literature, this paper seeks to deepen our understanding of existentialist themes in literature and their impact on the human condition.

[Bhupinder Kaur. **Extential Themes in Modern Literature.** *J Am Sci* 2024;20(9):23-26]. ISSN 1545-1003 (print); ISSN 2375-7264 (online). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 03 doi:[10.7537/marsjas200924.03](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsjas200924.03)

Keywords: Existentialism, literature, angst, absurdity, individual freedom, meaninglessness, human condition, existential themes, 20th century literature

Introduction

The unique perspective of the individual and his or her existence within a concrete, objectified society has been a central issue in the thought of existentialist philosophers in recent years. Although the ideas of existentialism are now more present in our literature, they seem to be derived from cultural influence rather than from exploring what it means to be human. When dealing with modern literature, we must be both careful and objective, for we find that modern literature makes us intellectually aware that the theme of the "isolated and lost individual" is largely dominant, but it still does not provide more than a mere theorization of the idea. The motif of the isolation of the individual is itself clearly seen as a consequence of the very character of the literary work, which we find to be neither causal nor volitional. With some frequency, this motif becomes manifest in the several forms of stupidity which will undoubtedly be recognized in the present and future generations. Existentialism is a philosophical movement of the 19th and 20th centuries which lays great emphasis on the individual as a human free agent, as opposed to a system with universal principles. It is of interest to note that the term became predominantly an insult at first, as it was used by the Vatican to condemn the philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger in 1930. Its acceptance as a generally recognized philosophical term in English was produced by the publication of *L'Homme et Les Choses*, delivered as a public lecture at the Club Maintenant in Paris in 1945. The first general use of the term, as we know it today, was certainly due to Karl Jaspers in the work "Existenzphilosophie." The concept has been defined

as an attempt to find some doctrine, some "ring" by means of which a system of philosophy may be founded. It is a reaction against the formalism of synthetic character, against the ultra-rationalism of classical philosophical systems. It is the struggle against a doctrinal attitude and a specific system, with which one's ego is labeled as the reason of the world.

1.1. Origins and Key Philosophers

Existentialism is a 20th-century philosophy and one with the simplest premise, and at the same time, with the grandest aim, says Princeton University. We are born human, with constitutive biological characteristics—no more, no less. Then, life gets in the way; we make choices, which radically alter who we are and how the world is for us. This project focuses on how the theme of existentialism is applied or referred to in modern literature; specifically, the aims of the paper are to (i) understand the writers and works that are intrinsically existentialist, or which present arguments that intend to present the "existentialist condition"; (ii) identify how existentialism is presented in these works; (iii) analyze and criticize the portrayals of existentialism presented. It is first paramount before starting the aforementioned analysis to first address the philosophical and literary concepts stemming from existentialism. Existentialism is the name of the set of philosophical commitments held true during the 19th and 20th century, and the intellectual orientation of the 20th century literature. The concept is existentialist because the word was first used by French existential thinkers. Also, by the philosophical literature which it inspired, it could have been called a humanistic literature. The word

existentialism is mainly drawn from the multiple works of Jean-Paul Sartre, but it is associated with some other notable authors. Sartre developed many of the concepts which became associated with existentialist ontology and metaphysics, though the philosophy was set in humanist foundations, being part of a humanism to the fullest, as he recognized. The concept of existential psychoanalysis, the result of the psychoanalytical experience by Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, with and influenced by Martin Heidegger—another figure important to the categorization of existentialism—could have been used.

2. Existentialist Themes in Modern Literature

Not only after, but also before the explosion of the concept in the mid-twentieth century, literary works were plenty of illustrations of existential themes. The examples include the interrogation about "the nothingness" of the human being in Dostoevsky, the exploration of free will in the short story "The Minister's Black Veil" by Nathaniel Hawthorne; the modernist prose of the flux and flow nature in "Mrs. Dalloway" by Virginia Woolf or by James Joyce with the exploration in his stream of consciousness; the theatre of the absurd with Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, and above all the Sartre's concept of existentialism where the absurd is turned into logical consequences but king of which it is Camus in "The Stranger", Kafka with the story of his main character Gregor Samsa in "The Metamorphosis", as well as other writers that developed the concept of solitude, connection, freedom, and responsibility in the knowledge that every man has itself of his loneliness and its unique impotence in a society that seeks to impose itself above humanity. Before plunging into a more literal analysis of its themes in the context of 20th-century philosophy, it is not surprising that modern existentialism has enormous connections through its several approaches to philosophy, and in particular through literature. It has a relation perhaps not immediate but that its literary characters of Hurricane and the words where it transfigured the anguish of being in positions of subjects to the test of our own spontaneity, the authenticity of our innermost dimension as witnesses of the naked truth of our consciousness placed in the world. So it is that literary works are the fruit of human experience lived in its depth and in its complexity, giving life to the report of the being amid the world and the history that surrounds it. And because of that, we have in front of us to explore some themes of existentialism in modern literature.

2.1. Alienation and Isolation

Existentialism is regarded as a term of vague significance due to the broadness of protest catchwords that have been attached to it. There is, however, reason to believe that existentialism has been a protest catchword which reflects the malaise and the desperateness of our time. In the following articles, sex novels like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy and Forster, and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *All That Fall* (1957) are discussed in their existential contexts. Each of which depicts a man and a woman as being thrown into existence which entails the idea of existing on their own, making important decisions concerning their lives and finding meaning of apathy and distress in life itself. In various novels, these concepts are developed through crucial themes in modern literature, such as alienation, the difficulty of communication, the absurdity of human life, the inauthenticity of inauthentic existence, death, and despair. Alienation and isolation, including sexual alienation, isolation, and despair, are present both in the man and the woman and are aggravated by their society. Each isolates the man and the woman from the society and from the "other," allowing them to make meaningful choices in order to become truly themselves. Societal values and obligations contribute to society's punishment of the man and the woman for their decisions and desires, leading to a government myopic vision of existence and feeling of separation, apathy, and hopelessness as an existence which questioned the validity of existence itself and having ultimate meaning. In direct opposition, each work suggests that societal values are inauthentic and undesirable to the existentialist, who should live a life of self-imposed morality; values in ethics should come from within.

3. The Search for Meaning and Authenticity

A universal characteristic of existentialist "philosophies," existentialist literature, existentialist psychology, and existentialist theology is that no matter what else is being said, these existentialist points of view regard human life as lived "from the inside" as absurd, meaningless, nonsensical - as leading nowhere but to death. That a human being is condemned to death without hope - in a sense, each of us is "sentenced to life." Indeed, it is worse than it seems at a glance because while we fear, wish for, hope for, and dream of non-being, the part of us that fears nothing and cares only about the non-being of everything else is what we identify as "I." What is absurd about any person in this situation is that it makes no difference how he or she lives his or her life:

it has no significance, it amounts to nothing. The meaning of "is absurd" is that human conduct during a human life with death at the end of it is absurd unless this conduct achieves goals that non-being of self recognizes as special, valuable, in some way extraordinary so that a non-being that "owns" behaviors of self replaces the real, worthless self, when the real self is gone. Problems start when the real self, recognized by others at the same time it is recognized by self, is gone. Possible attitudes are threefold: real experiences and understanding from them are available with nothing added; nothing was ever there; and, if there was anything there, nothing is available now. Any photograph, any letter, any work of accomplishment, any reminder of kinship, any building, any bridge - anything - may preserve the memory of an individual's lifetime, but all that is gone when the lifetime is gone.

3.1. Characters' Quest for Identity

Humanity's search for self-identity is a common theme found in many existential novels. This search for self-identity can be illustrated in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which was published in 1915. By describing how a young city salesman's transformation into a large insect that he discovered one morning in his ordinary bedroom, Kafka developed a metaphor for how modern humans feel alienated when trapped in an oppressive society. The major symbols in the book concern how the salesman feels bad about supporting his family and the rage that he feels for how his family's loving capabilities do not penetrate the hard exterior shell which he has developed. The salesman's dilemma is portrayed to represent the aloneness, frustration, hopelessness, and isolation that the modern human feels. Because everyone within society must also face their own identity problems, persons also respond to how the salesman has been forced into metamorphosis. Other books which also address humans' intrinsic motivation to explore identity include James Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Joyce's book contains a semi-autobiographical account of how a young artist is transformed into a mature and self-exiled artist. Plath's book contains a semi-autobiographical account of how a young woman breaks down after not being able to integrate her public and private identities. Wiesel's novel is a semi-autobiographical account of how a Jewish boy comes to terms with their god, the world, and themselves while enduring the Holocaust. Vonnegut's novels are, simultaneously, a science fiction commentary about the current human condition and the author's hardships while living through the

firebombing of Dresden during World War II. Each novel, of course, is presented with unique and fascinating details. It is also essential to recognize how the higher-order metaphor, used by each author, describes how individuals must create the necessary support within their own system. After all, the storytelling acts as a prescriptive and descriptive device for how existential psychology can be appreciated.

4. Existentialist Concepts in Literary Techniques

The task of the author is to reflect the underlying mood of a particular age or period of social and individual existence. If we posit the problem from this perspective, then dropped-out characters, distorted development through the loss of the judgment bar, closed structure, reflection, artistic decor, theatricality of characters, and false intonation used in literary plot may well uncover art as form, aesthetic content, and add content that rolls and is created by the deep layers of consciousness. In essence, these elements belong to the range of behavioral motivators that make them existential. This means that at the conceptual level, these compositions can provide high-quality material for the work of modern educators with spiritual aims. To do this, educators themselves should exploratively delve into the contents of these compositions, pointing out "similar" content to conscious members of school boxes and textbooks, thus facilitating the mental stamina of attention in unexplored areas while integrating the school's overall programs with elements of culture existing in the reality of humanity. On the other hand, so omnipresent and accessible today because it is worth knowing what the learners themselves are striving to explore. Do they pursue the hellish torment of restless existence in their free time? Or are they looking for extraordinary characters in these works who enjoy life and live life consciously? From this viewpoint, one interesting exploration is carried out at the conceptual level. With the help of an accessible abstract model created by literary techniques, it is possible to determine which composition can be regarded as existential because it actually contains existential components in its content, addressing those dark questions posed by modernity. Such a structured contemplation creates additional value for the modern educator, who seeks and selects fine works that educate the human soul and feeds the associative networks that learners consciously maintain in their own minds. Only by doing this can students be initiated into cultural knowledge while accepting their own existence, or at least actively involved in attempts to transform it.

4.1. Stream of Consciousness

Stream of consciousness is the flow of a person's thoughts and sensations kept running in the mind. It is a term used in literary criticism. Such writing as stream of consciousness tries to represent or reflect the random thoughts and sensory experiences of awareness as they occur, without any logical explanations, rhetorical deviations, or complete sentences. This form of literary style concentrates on the inner lives and private feelings of the characters and absolutely bounds the effects of a story or psychology of a character. Ideas and feelings move through a person's mind. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce are two main contributors in developing this writing technique of narration and describing the inner thoughts and 'expression' whereby the words on the page can represent the abstract concepts, functions to assess the content typically (consciously). These forms result in phrases that may or may not disclose traditional syntax. The stream of consciousness study endeavors its concerns with the experience, humankind, and the perception of understanding. William James' concept, the contrast of what is real is perceived versus sensory perceived and what is actually there or what we know or what our other beliefs dictate behind these words, states that most language has symbolic meaning behind every word defined by the feelings. Tok's definition dissociates the "inner" and the "outside" from the normal characters of the consciousness experiences. To put matters into perspective, while object consciousness deals with which things can be direct objects of our thoughts, state consciousness involves the quality of these experiences that consider the intentionality. When thoughts about how things might be interactive create intentionality, inside awareness permits these thoughts about the actual external entity inside the stream.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

At the close of the 19th and turn of the 20th centuries, writers such as Dostoyevsky, Hamsun, Melville, and Kafka provided readers for the first time with vivid, deliberately inartistic pictures of anxiety, alienation, and the grotesque. Kierkegaard, who they barely knew, would have called these creations the 'factor anxious.' Like T.S. Eliot after them, philosophical 'good Europeans' turned to Hellenistic civilization, especially to the Stoics' comprehension of

sin, character, and necessary self-restraint with an eye toward solving moral problems. However, when thinkers concerned with 'a certain irony at work in the world' contemplated life and considered the world and existence funny because 'it suffers from original sin', they believed themselves existentialists. A preponderance of philosophers who by ends and beginnings of this epoch shed light on what it entails to be human were interested not only in the enigma of death but voiced questions about our dreams, their scarcity of concrete content given that 'what is important in it, namely the mental qualities of some real person, can be adequately thought only if thought as possessing reality'. Only in our own epoch is it no longer a case of 'mental absolute essence' which may be parabolically lived but 'concrete life as existence'. Only now have philosophers become looked to with anything resembling confidence.

REFERENCES

1. Camus, A. (2012). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Vintage.
2. Kafka, F. (2013). *The Trial*. Vintage.
3. Beckett, S. (2014). *Waiting for Godot*. Faber & Faber.
4. Sartre, J.-P. (2016). *Being and Nothingness*. Routledge.
5. de Beauvoir, S. (2014). *The Second Sex*. Vintage.
6. Kierkegaard, S. (2013). *Fear and Trembling*. Penguin Classics.
7. Nietzsche, F. (2016). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Penguin Classics.
8. Heidegger, M. (2012). *Being and Time*. Harper Perennial Modern Thought.
9. Woolf, V. (2014). *Mrs. Dalloway*. Vintage.
10. Joyce, J. (2016). *Ulysses*. Vintage.
11. Dostoevsky, F. (2014). *Notes from Underground*. Vintage.
12. Heller, J. (2019). *Catch-22*. Simon & Schuster.
13. Blanchot, M. (2015). *The Space of Literature*. University of Nebraska Press.
14. Kundera, M. (2017). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
15. Hesse, H. (2018). *Steppenwolf*. Picador.
16. Mann, T. (2012). *The Magic Mountain*. Vintage.
17. Proust, M. (2013). *In Search of Lost Time*. Penguin Classics.