

Existential Angst in The Serpent and the Rope and Asamardhuni Jeevayatra

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Abstract—According to existentialists, “man is thrown into the world by choice.” That makes it clear that man’s survival depends on the choices available at his grasp. Based on the circumstances, man chooses the option which appears to be right according to the then prevailing situations. The sole responsibility for the consequences as a result of individual’s choice, allows him be aware of it constantly. As long as his life goes happily, he assures himself that he reckons the right option and he won’t bother about anything else. But when he faces the difficulties in his way of living, he tends to question himself whether he is on the right track and has chosen the right option. This leads to an anxiety which pertains to introspection and disbelief in his caliber. It is called “existential angst”. Out of that state of existential angst, he starts drawing comparisons between his actions and others’ actions and the consequences. That sometimes results in conflicts; sometimes proactive actions; and other times, philosophical speculations. Thus, my paper focuses on such an existential dilemma experienced by two protagonist of two novels namely, *The Serpent and the Rope*, an English novel and *Asamardhuni Jeevayatra*, a Telugu novel.

Index Terms—Existentialism, Angst, Survival tendency, Dilemma

I. Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard (1814-55), who is regarded as the father of existentialism, popularized the concepts like dread, angst and faith through his works *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (1846). Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-81) focused on existentialism and human psychology through his works like *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) spread the concepts “will to power” and “God is dead” through the works *The Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (published in four parts during 1883-85). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who is generally regarded as father of Phenomenology, popularized the concept “being” through his works *Being and Time* (1927), *Contributions to Philosophy* (1999).

According to existentialists, “man is thrown into the world by choice.” That makes it clear that man’s survival depends on the choices available at his grasp. Based on the circumstances, man chooses the option which appears to be right according to the then prevailing situations. The sole responsibility for the consequences as a result of individual’s choice lets him be aware of it constantly. As long as his life goes happily, he assures himself that he reckons the right option and he won’t bother about anything else. But when he faces the

difficulties in his way of living, he tends to question himself whether he is on the right track and has chosen the right option. This leads to an anxiety which pertains to introspection and disbelief in his caliber. It is called “existential angst”.

II. Discussion

Raja Rao and Tripuraneni Gopichand, the distinguished novelists of philosophical consciousness, dealt with basic elements of human existence, such as earnestness and zeal to know the meaning of life, purpose of existence, quest for the truth have taken their frontline importance in their writings. And thus, all these concepts have become the undercurrent themes of the works of both Raja Rao and Tripuraneni Gopichand. Both of them see the world from the analytical point of view. They both possess the common characteristic feature of asking the question ‘why’.

Both the writers possessed contemplative nature over every issue of life. That contemplation takes the form of introspection which finds its fine expression in their works. Both are struggled with the unanswered questions like distinctions between the real and the unreal; the body and the soul; life and death etc. Through their works, one can find the mention of these topics with utmost exposition of truth and also perceive their intense desire for understanding the world and the ultimate truth.

Raja Rao possessed strong predilection for Indian philosophy which established him as a complex and much-debated philosophical writer. He has received high critical acclaim for extending the scope of prose fiction by using it as a medium to give shape to his philosophical speculations. C.D. Narasimhaiah in his “The Serpent and the Rope: A Study”, appreciates the range of knowledge that is exhibited in Rao’s fiction:

He is perhaps the first Indian who brings to the business of novel writing a wide intellectual culture - Vedas, Upanishads Buddha, Sankara and Coomaraswamy jostle with Cathars, the holy grail, Dante, Rilke, Paul Valery, Cezanne, Marx, Gide and Romain Rolland. (79)

The novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*, opens with Ramaswamy, the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope*, losing his mother at his tender age. This is both a boon and a bane to little Ramaswamy. He finds himself unfortunate to have lost his mother at such a young age. It is a boon because he is brought up amidst many family members including grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins, siblings and other relatives experiencing the motherly affection from more than one. Growing up amongst such a large family, he has got a wide exposure to the attitudes, emotions, and affections of his close kith and kin including his father. He is particularly influenced by his grandfather who initiated him in to *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Ithihasas* exemplifying the fine traits of sacred and holy characters.

Throughout the novel Ramaswamy boasts of his Brahman hood. This view is in line with the *Advaita* philosophy which emphasizes the ultimate supremacy of man without any parallel. Ramaswamy is indeed a

Brahmin in his ways and deeds. His Brahmanic leanings instill in him a gentle and kind behavior that attracted the attention of Madeleine. As he confesses Madeleine loved him not for his outward appearance but for the Indian present in him. He could have lived happily in the foreign land with his loving wife and sufficient income.

But it is not the case in reality. He finds some hollowness in his life. Thus he says, “something had just missed in me” (SR 26). He finds some displeasure in the remote corners of his heart and remarks, “that no love and learning could fulfil.” (26). He wants something which cannot be clearly expressed by him. It is when he meets Savithri, he realizes that he is looking for Hindu ways in his French wife. Savithri’s adoring him as her lord, satisfies his inner-self which is an orthodox Brahmin. When he encounters with Lakshmi, a friend of Savithri, he cannot identify his Indianness with her. It explains that he is looking for a caring and sympathetic person, so characteristic for a typical Indian woman, which are missing in Lakshmi. That might be the reason behind his not finding much Indian identity with Lakshmi as he related with Savithri.

Ramaswamy, the protagonist of *The Serpent and the Rope*, is such a person who try to understand the life from the principles of existentialism. He makes it through inwardness but the exposure is outward. His quest begins with questioning the fundamental foundations to grasp underlying phenomenal fact. Things are analyzed thoroughly to arrive at one inference as Ramaswamy says about the *Vedantins*:

But when they died – for indeed they did ‘die’ – they too must have been burnt by tank or grove or meeting of two rivers, and they too must have known they did not die, who is it that tells me they did not die? Who but me. (SR 1)

Introspection to understand the roots with this self-questioning which has started its in-ward journey is evident in the above words of Ramaswamy. As Ramaswamy always acclaims that seeing *oneself* is what we always seek. This statement opens different vistas which may lead to self-awareness and finally lands Ramaswamy in self-introspection. The urge for self-realization must begin from true self and subsequently should progress towards the awareness of the Absolute and self-beingness.

Asamarthuni JeevaYatra (The Bungler: A Journey Through Life) is considered as first psychological novel in Telugu literature. Gopichand’s courage to expose self-deceptions and to condemn tyrannies of every sort is best displayed in the story. False prestige, great enemy to self-actualization, has found its fine expression in this novel.

Sitarama Rao, the chief character of the *The Bungler* hails from an affluent family. He always lives in dreams imagining himself as an exceptional human being and royal descendent. He lives with his own ideology like donating money generously without assessing the motives of the taker; not to tie up the women in the name

of marriage; marriage as a captivity for people; not to be responsible for the suffering of women in the name of pregnancy; not to have children; not to be attached with money; enjoy the life without any binding responsibility; gain comforts without any effort; to be praised all the time, are some to mention. All these ideals are so impressive that one can have them as fancy but practically they seem to be impossible. Simply he is living in a *Utopian* state.

But he declares them as his principles and wants to stick to them whatever may come. Worldly ways cannot let him to be as he liked. Against to his stated principles, he has to marry Indira and bring forth children. By the time he has his own family of four members, his ancestral property almost gets exhausted leaving him with pittance income. His inability to deal with financial management and collecting debts, plunders away all the property. An elderly person Ramayya warns him against his mismanaging his property and cautions him to be careful in dealing with the monetary affairs but he doesn't heed to his advises. He keeps himself intact with the loss and does not realize that money is an important component in running the family. His needs are well-attended by his wife and he presumes that everything is going well.

The reality is quite contradictory. The bitter fact is that he has to earn at least minimum income to fulfill his basic responsibilities as the head of the family since the laid-down tradition is that husband is the head of the family and he must be the bread earner in an Indian atmosphere. When Sitarama Rao starts the family of his own, obviously he deemed to be the head of the family. So the responsibility of earning the money is on his shoulders. But he doesn't have any clear idea about what to do, how to do the work and where to search for work. Instead of realizing his ignorance, he simply throws blame on others.

According to Freudian psychology, when confronted with an adversity, man tends to throw the responsibility on to others but owns the prosperity. If that's not possible, then he may behave as strange as Sitarama Rao did. Subconscious displeasure is coming out as apathy towards family members. On positive way, if situations are compared and their states are analyzed with that of others - through which some sort of realization takes place.

Through this novel, Gopichand introduced psychoanalysis and imparted knowledge over the presence of a second person in one's soul. Gopichand analyses that attempt of bringing in change among the masses through writing which provides following benefits according to him:

We cannot alter the natural laws. We cannot make the sun to rise in the west! We cannot bring heat to the moon light. But the writer can share a point of view with the readers suggesting the ways of how to accept, understand and analyze a particular incident. Through this effort we can add a meaning to our writing by imparting some knowledge to the readers. (Gopichand, Novels-1, Preface) (Translated by me)

III. Conclusion

Both the protagonists experience traumatic situations which confront them demanding a solace. Both of them approach the philosophy to find solace in their existential dilemmas. Close look at the lives of Sitarama Rao and Ramaswamy, reveals that existentialism has come as a branch of philosophy to facilitate better understanding of the basic meaning of life and the role of an individual in making himself/herself. This concept has been understood by Ramaswamy. Thus Ramaswamy understood, from his long association with Hindu philosophy, that he should seek advice from a wise person on how to overcome the present dilemma and what are the reasons for these consequences and what would be his course of action in future. So, he realized his inability in grasping the intricacy of life and decided to seek the help of a 'Guru'.

But Sitarama Rao, despite his vast knowledge, has not realized the importance of life. His oscillation between rationalistic ideology and irrational thoughts, cannot let him possess acceptable behavior. He could not assess how his actions would reflect on his family. He cannot come out of his self-created cocoon to see the reality. At the end of the novel he realized the gross mistakes he committed and fundamental truth that he hadn't understood. Thus it appears in such a way as he failed to lead life successfully that he ended his life like a coward. But close look at Sitarama Rao's behavior discloses his self-realization which confronts him like a haunting ghost which itself killed him as he could not bear the load of sins that he committed. This can be related to the Hindu mythological character, Shishupala whose wrong deeds bring him death. He has been beheaded by lord Krishna since his count of wrong deeds exceeds the limit. Thus Sitarama Rao's list of mistakes also exceeds his limit and brings him death.

To get relieved from his existential angst, Ramaswamy reckons on Hindu Dharma theory to find solace through *Jyana Yoga*. But Sitarama Rao with his existential nihilistic ideas, ends his life. As it is evident from the final fates of these two protagonists, their minds have played a vital role in determining their destiny:

bandhur atmatmanas tasya yenatmaivatmana jitah

Anatmanas tu satrutve vartetatmaiva satru-vat

For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy. (*Bhagvat-gita: As It Is* 6.6)

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