Features of Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

The word "Existence" is derived from the Latin "existere" meaning "to stand out". "Existere" is translated as to "come into being". It means that human beings exist in a state of distance from the world and they do not remain in the midst of it. Thus, the term "Existentialism" is used both for philosophical concepts and literary works. Existentialism is being used to reassert the importance of human individuality and freedom after the World War II.

Existentialism is taken up as a historical term like "rationalism" and "empiricism". Existentialism is also a philosophical movement. It has emerged as a reaction to the age of Reason. Philosophers like Spinoza, Leibniz, Hobbes, Hume,Lock, Voltaire, Bacon and Rousseau have asserted that reason is man's highest faculty. They think that reason can solve man's all problems and provide him with complete knowledge in the end. Thus, reason has been considered to be absolute which made them dignified, eminent, reasonable and rational.

Human beings cannot be considered natural substances with fixed properties which interact with other objects. Therefore, a serious analysis of human existence requires new categories. It is not found in conceptual repertoire of ancient or modern thought.

KEYWORD: Existentialism, Existere, Empiricism, Rationalism, Substance

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Existentialism", therefore, may be defined as the philosophical theory which proposes a further set of categories, governed by the norm of 'authenticity', is necessary to grasp human existence. In this vein, Existentialism arises as a problem of philosophy. Sartre defines it: "existentialism in our sense of the word is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity." Dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, choice, angst, commitment, nothingness, nihilism, death, despair and subjectivity are the major themes associated with existentialism.

Sartre repeatedly advocates, 'Existence precedesessence.'It means that the actual life of the individual is constituted by his or her 'essence. It is not shaped by his predetermined purpose or meaning. It is the basic understanding of the Existentialist thought system. Sartre says, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself is built upon this understanding. Such is the first principle of Existentialism."(Existentialism and Humanism, 28).Sartre further clarifies, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world andafterwards" (Existentialism and Humanism, 1948:28).Thus, it is clear that existence is a necessity to have essence. In this vein, human beings decide values and determine meaning in their life through their consciousness: "He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Existentialism and Humanism. 1948:28).This concept of Sartre is in contrast to Aristotelian assumption that 'essence precedes existence'. Sartre states, "Life has no meaning a priori .Before you come alive, life is nothing" (Existentialism and Human Emotions. 1957:49).

This study tends towards non-being. It is nothingnessor non-thing-ness. Sartre views 'Being- for itself' as a kind of nothingness. It is an internal negation of 'Being-in-itself'.

II. DISCUSSION

The philosophy of Existentialism suggests that nothingness is necessary to constitute being. "That is, Nothing has no meaning without Being" (Being and Nothingnees-26). Human consciousness is a sort of no-thing –ness as 'a consciousness of something' (Being and Nothingness-14). 'Being for- itself' is free to choose its way of being. "Nor is there any meaning for its being, other than what it makes for itself" (Being and Nothingness). "Existential" angst is a term common to many existentialist thinkers. It implies dread, anxiety or even anguish. Anguish is generally considered a negative feeling. It arises from the experience of human freedom and

responsibility. Anguish is the outcome of dread of the nothingness of human existence and the meaninglessness of it. Ellis states, "Anguish as the manifestation of freedom" (The Tragic Pursuit of Being.1988:15). Man thinks that he is free to choose what he will make of himself. This is because he has no ready- made essence. Sartre says, Existentialism is 'the doctrine confronts man with a possibility of choice' (Existentialism and Humanism-251).

Thus, anguish emerges from the notion of choosing for oneself while one chooses for the whole humanity. It arouses profound feeling of responsibility which throws man in the state of anguish. Anguish appears when man has to choose and act without knowing the consequence of his choice whether it is right or wrong for a particular course of action.

Fear has an element of threat. It reveals some region of the world as threatening and vulnerable. In anxiety, man finds himself in the same vulnerable and threatened state as in fear, but anxiety has no direct object as fear does have. In fact, there is nothing in the world that is threatening. As Heidegger delineates, anxiety testifies to a kind of "Existential solipsism". The experience of anxiety reveals the existential theme of the absurd a sort of 'alienation' from the world. The groundlessness of the world of meaning is "nothingness". Heidegger introduces this term to indicate self and world understandingthat emerges in anxiety. This is because, man's practical identity is defined by the practices in which he is engaged. When these collapse, he is not anything. Thus, he is brought face to face with his own finitude, his 'death'. Thisexperience of his death or his nothingness in anxiety can act as a spur to authenticity. Existentialists believe that death makes a man aware of his life. He tries to ignore his mortality by keeping himself busy with daily routine: "Death is a pure fact as is birth; it comes to us from outside and it transforms us into the outside" (Sartre, 1656:545). Heidegger and Sartre have emphasized 'freedom' in their own ways. Heidegger advocates that freedom is always thrown into a historical situation from which it draws its possibilities while Sartre points out that such "possibilities" do not underdetermine choice.

Moreover, Sartre depicts that freedom is the dislocation of consciousness from its object, the fundamental "nihilation" or negation by means of which consciousness can grasp its object without losing itself in it: "to be conscious of something to be conscious of not being it, a "not" that arises in the very structure of consciousness as being –for itself. This is, because "nothingness" is just what consciousness is, there can be no object in consciousness, but only objects for consciousness" (Being and Nothingness 1992:72). Sartre views anguish 'as the consciousness of freedom'. Human beings seek stability,identity and adopt the language of freedom according to their own choices. Sartre says "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the world on his shoulders: he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (Being and Nothingness 1957:52). The existentialists depict that we spend much of our life in planning to deny or evade the anguish of freedom.

Existentialists perceive that man does not have a fixed nature or essencelike other animals and plants. Each man has his own choice which defines him. Thus, choice is central to human existence but his consciousness approaches infinite possibilities. It is inescapable. Most of the existentialists assert that man is thrown into the world as a free being. He has got absolute freedom to choose. His actions cannot be justified by referring to anything outside him. If man refuses to choose, it is also accepted to be a choice. Freedom of choice entails commitment and responsibility, Thus, absolute freedom brings absolute responsibility with it. In this vein, Existentialism proposes that one must be committed and dedicated to be free. One must be painstaking to be free. "There is no choice without decision, no decision without desire, or desire without need, no need without existence" (Winn 160:15). There is no difference between the being of man and his being free. Thus, "man is free, man is freedom" (Sartre, 1948:34).

Facticity is another major theme of Existentialism which deserves special mention. It is the fact that human beings have no control over their existence. The concept of facticity is very close to that of "freedom". It is defined as 'in-itself' by Sartre in "Being and Nothingness". Facticity includes all those properties that third person investigation can establish about man. They are natural properties as weight, height and skin colour. They are also social and historical facts about man like his race, class nationality, past action, family background, etc. They also denote mind set up of man in terms of his way of thought, belief, desire, character traits, etc. Man's birth is a physical circumstance of his being- in the world. To be in the world is facticity. It can be seen as unbearable or joyful. Therefore, existentialists believe that "man-----is thrown into the universe into desolate isolation" (Kern, Edith. Existential Thought and Fictional Technique 169).

The absurd is the most glaring theme of Existentialism. Existentialists believe that the world is meaningless. There is no meaning to be found in the world save the meaning what we give to the world. This meaninglessness indicates amorality or "unfairness" of the world. It contradicts with "karmic" ways of thinking in which "bad things do not happen to good people" in the world. There is no such thing as good person or a bad thing. Anything can happen to anyone at any point in time in this absurd world. Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus describe the people who have encountered the absurdity of the world. Albert Camus

studied the issue "of the absurd" in his essay The Myth of Sisyphus. Despair is also associated with Existentialism. Commonly, it is defined as a loss of hope. In Existentialism, despair is especially related to the reaction to breakdown in one or more of the defining qualities of one's self or identity. If an athlete who loses his legs in an accident, he may be in despair. He finds himself unable to be that which defines his being. But, the existentialist notion of despair differs from that of the dictionary definition of the term. The existentialist despair is a state in which one is not overtly in despair. Man's identity depends on qualities that can crumble. He is found to be in perpetual despair.Sartre says that despair is a universal human condition. Kierkegaard defines it as: "Any life view with a condition outside it is despair" (Either/Or). In other words, it is possible to be in despair without despairing.

Sartre and Heidegger are atheistic existentialists. They believe in the philosophy of non- existence of God and religion. They advocate that there is no absolute meaning in the life of human beings and they are expected to create meaning and values for their ownselves. Man is all alone in attributing meaning and values to his life since God does not exist: "We are left alone, without excuse" (Sartre, 1948:34).

The anti-Cartesian view of the "alienated" self gives the theme of existential alienation. It makes the self estrange from the world and from itself. The world takes on meaning through the projects of man. It retains its otherness and can be considered completely alien. This experience is basic to existential thought. It contrasts with the ancient view of a cosmos which reveals that human beings have a well ordered place in it. This very thought of existential alienation is close to the modern experience of a meaningless universe. Secondly, the world includes other people. As a result, man is not merely the revealer of the world but something revealed in the projects of those others. It is substantiated by Sartre's concept of "being-for-others".

Subjectivity over objectivity is an important theme of Existentialism. It clarifies that man makes himself what he is through his free choice not by being what he is. Sartre says, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity" (1957:15). Everything starts from the inside, from the side of the man or subject. Thus, there is nothing objective about what a human being is. Further, Sartre asserts that subjectivity does not degrade human beings. It gives man dignity in two ways. First, subjectivity is owned by humans in unique ways. Secondly, human beings also choose what is good for all in making choices. As a result, subjectivity is the part of human nature. It provides each human being with the ability to understand other's individual experience as if he himself possessed the same.

The Existentialists state that there are two types of being Authentic being and Inauthentic being. Authentic existence implies that one has to "find oneself "and live with this self.Sartre and Heidegger agree to the view.They assert that one can achieve authentic existence if one realizes one's possibilities and constitutes one's own values and meaning in life. Authenticity is not an essence of consciousness or of human reality.The authentic act is one that is in accordance with one's freedom. In contrast to this, Inauthenticity is the denial to live in accordance with one's freedom.

In Existentialphilosophy, 'bad faith' refers to 'self-deception'. It shows that one has failed to follow his or her own essence. In Being and Nothing, Sartre clarifies that the concept of 'badfaith' consists of the individual consciousness possessing a false notion of self. That is 'self deception. Self deception is not a state of consciousness, but a willing state of acceptance of what one knows is objectively misleading. Sartre says, "Aperson can live in self deception, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakening to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life" (Kaufman 303)

Lastly, the mood of forlornness has been emphasized by the existentialists. Heidegger says that human beings find themselves forlorn due to God's non existence. "When we speak of forlornness, ------we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this" (Sartre, 1957:21).

III. CONCLUSION

Existentialism is studied in various perspectives to search out and even establish man's identity in this absurd world. These streams of thought have been strongly and forcefully reflected in the plays of Samuel Beckett and other absurdist's in the west and the east.

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