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Existentialist Theory and its Depiction in the Character of Rani in Girish Karnad's Play Nagamandala

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Abstract:

This paper deals with existivist theory and its application in a female character named Rani who performs the role of a protagonist in Girish Karnad's play Nagamandala. Existentialism came into prominent in 20th century when 1st and 2nd World War happened and it is remarkable by the writing of Girish Karnad in his so many characters and specially in the character Rani in Nagamandala.

The core of existentialism comes into focus from the word existence, which in its turn comes from Latin existent- 'coming into being.' Existentialism is "a philosophical theory emphasizing the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development." Existentialism is a philosophy depicting the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experiences in a hostile and indifferent universe regarding human existence as unexplainable and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's act. It stresses on human being's own wanting, own freedom of choice, decision and commitment. Existentialism itself contests our attempts to classify and categorise life in fixed terms. Therefore, to say:

'I am an existentialist' is to say I am one of that classification of people known as existentialists whereas the existentialist wants to say, 'I am myself- and I don't like your effort to fit into your classification.'

So many critics have exhibited so many views on existentialist criticism. Jean Paul Sartre, in his "Being and Nothingness-An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology" says that the central proposition of existentialism is that 'existence precedes essence' which means that the most important consideration for the individual is the fact that he or she is an individual- an independently conscious being-rather than what levels or other preconceived categories the universe fits for him. Now the question is that what is being? Heidegger says that the question of Being is an entity's mode of Being; 'This entity which each of us is himself' and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being, we shall denote by the term Dasein." However Dasein is not the being itself. Dasein literally means 'being-there' and is something which understands Being, which interprets Being with time as its standpoint. An entity must always exist in the world and can be understood only in its relation with other objects of the world. He also suggests that "Being as a whole is the world." There are existentialists like Nietzsche and Sartre, known as atheistic existentialists due to their non-acceptance of any transcendental power that awards meaning to human existence on earth. They confer the burden of existentialist choices and responsibilities on human beings. The atheistic existentialists believe that there is no pre-given essence or purpose laid out for man by God or nature. It ultimately remains up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our own actions. Apart from existentialists like Sartre, there are people like Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich who affirm belief in the presence of God. They try to resolve the existentialist dilemma through faith in the Power of Being. According to Camus, "The mutual recognition of a common destiny and the communication of men between themselves are always valid." Instead of understanding human existence in terms of some platonic idea of a perfect existence or model or essence that we should aspire to achieve, the concreteness of day-to-day existence that encounters real problems which forms the core of existentialist thought. According to Maurice Friedman:

"Here is an existentialism, which does not invent values, as Sartre, nor create them through will to power, as Nietzsche, yet discovers them in the concrete situation of life rather than in the celestial thought."

Making choices is vital to Existential philosophy. By making choices man proves that he has free will. By choosing one option over another, a man projects his personality through his action. If he later makes the opposite choice in similar circumstances, he shows his personality has changed. Every time a man can make a choice through his free will and this freedom can be taken away only by death. Critics agree that "Existentialism is a response to alienation produced by mind-body dualism and sciences' Objective world." Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have also expressed their ideas about existentialism as encouraged by Marcel. Most of the philosopher rejected the term existentialist as being applicable to their own philosophy. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that a certain group of philosophers can be termed Existentialist. Man has potential and existence actualizes that potential. Hence, in the human individual "existence and the unfolding of the specific powers of organism are one and same." Man alone acts in the existential sense of the world because man makes his own choices. He has the freedom to choose his favourable course of action and the actions he commits will take the shape of his character influencing further actions.

A man can only become something by his actions. According to German critic Frederick Nietzsche, "Your very self be in your actions ... let that be your formula of virtue."

However, this belief that man is necessarily free and completely responsible for society can also lead to determinism. Later in his life, Sartre moves towards Marxism. In *the Critique de la raison Dialectique* ("Critique of Dialectic Reason"), Sartre attempts a synthesis between Existentialism and Marxism by modifying the notion of "L' Etre et le neant" (Being and Nothingness) with the notion of dialectic as understood by Marx.

Its Background

Existentialist movement came into its background after 1st and 2nd world war. Duration of 1st World War was 1914-1919. The brutality, atrocity, chaos and havoc destruction of the war was so terrible that it was impossible to return to the old traditional order and this chaotic order denied the rationality of human being. After 1st World War, the emergence of Fascism, Nazism, Communism and dictatorships ultimately caused Second World War. Many countries get affected by the destruction of Second World War. Spain was merged with quarrel by its Civil War. In Russia, Bolsheviks acquired power with a promise of establishing golden age but they hankered after only with the power and became unsuccessful in their mission. Mussolini established dictatorship in Italy and so naturally democratic values of the common people were totally violated. Reaching on the power, Hitler created a reign of terror and gave punishment to those people whom he considered to be the enemies of State. Even the country like America was merged in despair and frustration and ultimately came Second World War. After the ending of 1st World War, many critics said- "the war to end all wars"- but this saying proved failed. Second World War was more havoc and more chaotic with more destructive weapons than 1st World War. Not only the soldiers, but also the citizens did not get escape from the horror of this war. The axis power conquered country after country when the Nazis spread their brand of terror. At the end two innocent towns- Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by an Atom bomb in 1945. All think that the universe had lost its meaning and the world will be fulfilled with violence and uncertainty and all human beings think that there is no existence of God and this time German philosopher Nietzsche says - "God is dead". T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* gives a picture of frustration and disillusionment of the city London. Franz Kafka's fiction depicts a human being as irrational forces. After the ending of 1st World War, many critics said "the war to end all wars," but this saying proved to fail. Second World War was more havoc with more destructive weapons than 1st World War. Not only the soldiers, but also the citizens did not get escape from the cruelty of the war. The Axis powers conquered country after country when the Nazis spread their army of terror. At the end two innocent towns- Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed by an Atom bomb in 1945 which even today is giving the birth of so many handicapped children. All think that the universe had lost its meaning and the world will be fulfilled with violence and uncertainty and all human beings cannot find the answer of many questions. Their life seems to be meaningless as many writers' writings have proven this. E. g., In *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist awakes and sees that the explanation is given why he is changed. In the novel *The Trial*, Kafka depicts that Joseph K is arrested but the reason of arresting is not given. Similarly in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two characters Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot from the beginning of the novel to the end of the novel. But ultimately no one comes.

Similarly in *The Country Doctor*, the doctor travels to visit a sick child, but when the doctor arrives the boy has nearly gone consumed by maggot. All such writings show the picture of a lost generation who is a victim of alienation and isolation. The feelings were too much intensified after World War II. Everyone felt the need for new values and it gave the result of Existential philosophy.

The existentialist theory is dominating in most of Girish Karnad's plays- *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Yayati* and *Nagamandala*. This theory is applicable in the character of Rani in Karnad's play *Nagamandala*. *Nagamandala* is based on two great tales from Karnataka which Karnad first time heard from Professor A.K. Ramanujan. Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* is based on folk-lore. In the South Indian Villages, there is a practice among women to pour milk on ant hill occupied by cobras ritualistically on a certain day in a year.

'Nagulachaviti' or 'Naga-panchami' is the fourth or fifth day of the waxing period of the moon. It was a way of propitiating the phallic symbol. Cobra is the phallic symbol worshipped by unmarried girls and the supposed barren women, the former for getting good husbands and the latter to become mothers. Naga Pratistha, the setting of Cobra icons is another fertility rite. The 'vasikarana mulika', the herb of lure, an

aphrodisiac, is another folk-belief. An uninitiated girl on attaining on puberty looks at blood with repugnance as well as relief.

In the story, Rani, the young girl is the only daughter of her parents with long hair ties up in a knot as if a black king Cobra lays curled on the nape of her neck, coiled upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a black torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both

dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon Rani's husband came and took her with him. But when Rani goes with her husband, she first faces her destiny. Her life becomes miserable. Her husband gives her no attention and always locks her in their house from outside. He always comes at time of lunch and further goes without giving any attention. One day in the morning, the stag with golden antlers come to the door. He calls out to Rani. She refuses to go saying that she is not a stag but a prince. One day Kappanna with Kurudavva comes near Appanna's house. It was Kappanna's view that Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile and by some mistake, he got a human birth. Appanna is the son of Kurudavva's best friend. Appanna's mother and Kurudavva were just like sisters and she knows that in Appanna's house a new bride has come. Kurudavva feels sorry when she sees that the new bride is locked outside on the door just like a caged bird and she cannot talk to anyone. Kurudavva talks to Rani and asks her about her condition. Rani prays help and requests to free her. Then Kurudavva tells

her son to go into the cattle shed-the left corner and behind the pillar on the shelf, there was an old tin trunk full of odds and ends and untie the bundle of clothe because there is a wooden box inside it. In the wooden box, there is a coconut shell wrapped in a piece of paper and inside the paper there are two pieces of root and Kurudavva gives these two pieces of root to Rani and asks her to feed these pieces to Appanna and give her assurance that after eating this pieces Appanna will fall in love with Rani and will accept Rani as his wife. Rani at first mixes the paste of small root in Appanna's milk. Appanna becomes fainted and gets up and leaves Rani. Then Kurudavva gives him larger piece of root and tells her to feed this to Appanna to make him her slave. But

she goes into the kitchen and prayed silently to the gods and pours the paste into the curry. There is an explosion- the curry turned red-blood red. Steam, pink and furious. Rani being an innocent woman cannot serve this as this piece will make him ill. She thinks that serving this food means committing a crime, a heinous act. So she runs to the tall ant hill and starts pouring the liquid into it. The moment she turns her back into the ant hill, a King cobra lifts its hood, hissing, out of ant hill. It sees Rani and follows her at a distance. By the time she has reached the front door of her house, it is behind a nearby tree watching her. At night Cobra enters Rani's house through the drain in the bathroom and it takes the shape of Appanna and moves nearer her and then gently caresses her. She wakes up with a start. Naga talks to her very gently and carefully. He loves her, cares her, but When Appanna comes, his attitude is completely different from Naga. He used to beat Rani and he is very cruel towards Rani. So Rani suffers from existential dilemma. She cannot understand how a person can be so different at night and at day. She feels doubt about her own existence. Thus existentialism enters into the dramatic mode of situation. Before the end of the drama when Appanna told Rani to give an exam of her chastity before the elders of the villagers, Rani takes the oath of King Cobra to prove her virginity and the Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. Then Rani understands that Appanna with whom Rani used to spend night was not real Appanna but the King Cobra. Then Rani further regains her existence. Rani realizes that being neglected by but devoted to her husband she accepted a snake as her lover in the shape of her husband.

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