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MODERN MAN'S EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN KAFKA'S *THE CASTLE* AND GIRISH
KARNAD'S *HAYAVADANA*

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism is deeply embodied in man. Modern man finds himself being an unstable, lonely and finite being in his estranged world. He has freedom to transcend his role and his free choices eventually shape him in a way that he becomes an 'object' till his further possibilities are extinguished by death. As a conscious free being man also has to abide by the commands of the external forces of nature just like animals, and hence, biologically there is no difference between man and animal. Man also cannot evade society and social norms altogether and finally he encounters the inevitable death or defeat as final judgement. He can choose to venture, identifying himself with the group-consciousness of the society, thereby evading the responsibility of freedom. Man is always in quest of meaning of his life, his existence and solution to his problems which define his values in the society and goals of human life. But finally man attains failure as a rule and becomes a stranger, outsider and a loner in this world. There is a sense of loss of his world and his self. This suffering and existential loneliness has been very well depicted in many literary works. The present study attempts to explore existential crisis in Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle* and Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana*.

Key words: Existentialism, freedom, quest of meaning, suffering, loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

"The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." – Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942.

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence. It holds that the only way to counter this nothingness is by embracing existence. While the predominant value of existentialist thought is commonly acknowledged to be 'freedom', its primary virtue is authenticity. In the view of the existentialists, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called 'the existentialist attitude' or 'a sense of disorientation, confusion or dread' in the face of apparently meaningless or absurd world. Many existentialists have also regarded

traditional systematic or academic philosophies too abstract and remote from concrete human experience. Søren Kierkegaard is generally considered to be the first existentialist philosopher. He proposed that each individual, not society or religion, is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely. Existentialism became popular in the years following the World War II and it strongly influenced many disciplines including theology, drama, art, literature and psychology.

The philosophy of existence or existentialism is a salient feature of modernism in literature and art which was pioneered by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and later disseminated by Sartre, Kafka and Camus etc. Several contemporary forces – cultural, intellectual, political and social led to its development. In the twentieth century existentialism became identified with a European cultural movement emerged as a powerful trend after the World War I and II. It implies the 'quest' of an individual for the assertion of 'self', despite his failures and limitations. The predicament of man, who feels the sense of anxiety, despair, alienation, rootlessness, loneliness, hopelessness, anger and protest, is displayed almost by all the modern existentialists. In the modern age, man undergoes a loss of 'self' and is depicted as a stranger in the world by Kafka in *The Castle* and Albert Camus in *The Stranger*, who feels the sense of powerlessness and rootlessness. This point of view has been depicted very well in the novels and plays of Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka and Sartre. Many notable Indian writers also portrayed in their writings the struggle and predicament of man thereby exhibiting their existential concerns. Amidst grim facets of life, existentialism also presents a philosophy of hope, ecstasy and exultation. It stresses on the choice of responsibility and freedom for consequences of one's actions. It is a representation of rejection of all abstract thinking and insists that philosophy should be connected with an individual's own life and experience.

SENSE OF ESTRANGEMENT AND ALIENATION IN KAFKA'S *THE CASTLE*

The Castle is an embodiment of a key existentialist concept, i.e. estrangement. This sense of estrangement is tantamount to living in a world lacking any signs or markings. This image of an estranged world, an encounter with the nothingness of the world, has long haunted contemporary existentialist literature. In Heidegger's *Sein Und Zeit*, 'man is depicted as thrown into the world'. According to Heidegger, Man's guilt is the reason behind his sense of estrangement and alienation. This sense of alienation is not confined to man's feeling of estrangement in the world; rather it also includes man's own self-estrangement. Kafka's own sense of alienation in the world is reflected in the portrayal of his struggling characters. This alienation is not merely a personal problem for Kafka, but perennially the alienation of the modern man facing the modern universal context with all its ambiguity and meaninglessness. The protagonist's individual feeling of estrangement is also a concretization of the Jewish Diaspora. This farfetched home only exists in the mind of the estranged and forms the major part of his life's quest. In the novel, Kafka dramatizes man's existential, political and social estrangement in a world devoid of meaning. The novel is an embodiment of Kafka's theological orientation that stands midway between existentialism and nihilism. He delineates in his narrative the modern man's dilemma and his philosophical fluctuation through characters stuck in a state of bewilderment and confusion. The novel touches upon various existentialist questions concerning the problematic nature of man's relation with authorities, whether in form of social, political or spiritual. This multilayered relationship between the characters and the bureaucratic authorities delves deep into the disputable issue of man's freedom.

There are no significant incidents, no real plot, no climax, and not even a hero in the story in the normal conventional sense. The story is based on a struggle which depicted observations, dialogues and a string of episodes in which K.'s ambition is thwarted by hidden powers. It is the dramatization of man's self-discovery in the depth of dark, ambiguous and diabolic world. This world which has been pictured by Kafka is the world of the castle itself. *The Castle* is an allegory for Kafka's nightmare of the unconscious world. K. the protagonist of the novel finds himself in a vicious circle. Although he calls himself a land surveyor, at a symbolic level, he is more of a life surveyor. He starts his journey into the dark jungle of the unconscious. The more he tries to get closer to the village and the villagers, the more suspicious they get about him. The more he tries to communicate with the castle, the more he is denied the access to it, and which in turn makes it urgent for him to prove his identity to the villagers. K. has a wish to go into the castle as soon as possible, but

the circumstances do not allow him to do so. He met many different officials, villagers, women, but none of them prove helpful. They neither let him go, nor do they accept him as the land surveyor, nor do they reject him totally. To put an end to this wretched condition and to get everything settled, he holds talks with the officials of the castle, but the way to the castle seems inaccessible. The more he goes towards the castle, the more frustrated he becomes and the further the castle moves away from him. The castle is unreachable, just like the look of a mirage to a thirsty person who is lost in a barren and hot desert on a summer day.

The Castle is a presentation of a struggle of the self and a quest in the direction of infinity and transcendental world. The shadow of the 'other' is felt everywhere and it suppresses each individual's self. No one can claim for his identity. Even if he claims, he will only end up deceiving himself. For example, in the story K. is a land surveyor who has been summoned to the castle. He starts some few indirect contacts with the castle through a letter he receives and a telephone conversation he overhears. Finally two officials from the castle finalize his appointment. However, he himself is never fully convinced and never relaxes in his efforts to make quite sure of it. He feels he must penetrate to the very centre of authority and brings a kind of clinching evidence for his claim. At last he yields in paralyzed despair and receives a letter granting him permission to stay in the village. The endless road leading to the unreachable castle amounts to non-road. To have walked on an endless road towards an unreachable destination for a whole week is same as not having walked at all. Another quality which begets the sense of inaccessibility of the castle is the bureaucracy and the demonic hierarchy of the castle which never allows K. a direct encounter with Klamm, the supreme official of the castle who seems particularly attentive to K.'s affairs. It is also due to the inaccessibility of Klamm that K. cannot overcome his problem.

The Castle itself is a monstrous bureaucratic image, and nothing and no one in it can provide any final truth. Only a few scraps of truth could be picked up about its activities or decisions, and these came to nothing. Forget the simple villagers, the one like Barnabas is unable to get authorities to listen to his appeals for an opportunity for a secure position in the Castle. For him hope and failure are no less different than hoping and waiting for the slightest sign of amelioration. Everything is for naught, as one waits and waits and waits for nothing. Observing 'those very questionable officials' into whose room Barnabas was allowed, gave him an exalted idea of their authority. Yet even within the bureau deceptions are more frequent than changes. Hence the two letters Barnabas delivers to K. can never be appraised as to their genuine worth since they themselves change in value perpetually and in effect it betrays K.'s only hope. It is interesting to observe that the movement of action itself in *The Castle* shows the same stagnation that affects the expression of emotions in its inhabitants. There is no measurable movement in an active sense of taking a step forward or backward for it seems that a step taken in either direction results in indirection. Nothing appears to be accomplished as if there is an unceasing stalemate no matter what activity a character seeks to fulfill. Nor does it matter what happens since the element of powerlessness prevails in everything and in everyone. What matters does not matter, even as what is, is not, as K. discovers. The people K. comes into contact with exist as in a vacuum, or in a dream, and death in life are the inclusive state of being here. Even Kafka's occasional scenes of passion involving K. and Frieda are wooden and lifeless, so much so that 'eros' itself is vacuous or meaningless. At one point, an unhappy Frieda says to K.: "You always persecute me; oh, K., why do you always persecute me? Never, never will I go back to you, I shudder when I think of such a possibility."

The novel *The Castle* tells the story of the novel's main character, simply called K. in pursuit of salvation. The novel's aesthetic and interpretative complexity underlines the multi-layered meaning of salvation itself. In a modern world salvation is not necessarily one of divine grace, of deliverance from sin and damnation. Kafka, as a non-Christian Jew, though intuitively aware of salvation in its metaphysical tensions, relegates those tensions to the modern settings and circumstances. In *The Castle*, K. is hardly a protagonist seeking entrance into God's divine kingdom since his aspirations are not essentially soteriological in nature, but are at once more modest and yet consuming in character, and appropriate to the stark, cruel realities of a modern world with its absolute power of illusions and deceptions. K's pursuit of salvation is subject to expediency, compromise, treachery, caprice, whim to those encompassing conditions and circumstances that defy absolute criteria of truth and fulfillment. There is much truth in the accusations leveled by Frieda when

she charges that K. is a selfish seeker after his own special endeavors, one who promotes his 'hidden intention' and will opportunely adapt himself to any situation that earns him greater advantage. In short, he is an operative who will, if he must and can, push aside, discard, or exploit people, events, and situations that hinder his goals.

The circumstances and conditions of K's world point to a future which has no future, or the impossibility of 'colliding with the future.'¹ In the novel the human situation is one in which any search for salvation meets with failure and despair. The search itself is circuitous as one finds oneself stranded in 'eternally empty streets', ending with the defeat of all struggle and the death of effort. Arrivals and departures in the novel are the same. In fact, an inherent tyranny is found in the circuitousness of the structure as it is demonstrated by Klamm's treatment of women. "Klamm's a kind of tyrant over women", Olga declares to K., "he orders first one and then another to come to him, puts up with none of them for long, and orders them to go just as he ordered them to come." Love and lovelessness are one and the same, as are the beginnings and endings in the novel. *The Castle* offers us a centreless world in which its inmates are like shadows in the land of death. Kafka reveals a world in which there is a blind alley in which there is 'no exit' of a systemic 'nausea' of unattainable relief. The faces of modernism have the same diabolism, the same Luciferian grimace. K's quest for salvation attains no savior, whether of an ethical, of a theological, or of a messianic nature. Salvation in the novel typifies the eternal paradox that for K. it is imagined as a pursuit without end. The Castle reveals an unending stagnation in a world in which men and women are 'sleep-walkers, not evildoers'. The modern world, Kafka confesses to us, is a repudiation of all finality of humane value since the very stuff of a value is intrinsically ambiguous and ambivalent, disjointed and disconnected.

In the novel, K. is doomed to remain in a state of indeterminacy, uncertainty and the vacillation between hope and disappointment. He is both an honoured and boastful land surveyor and a degraded, miserable janitor. He is neither a member of the castle nor a member of the village. He is rejected by both. He is not needed or wanted anymore. However, K. does not seem to be altogether cursed out. The occasional gleams of hope do not let him give up his efforts. The castle demonstrates a gradual process of the degradation of man, who has been mocked and teased. He is the loser of a game with the unconscious plays with the cards. He is oppressed by the unconscious through the authority of the father. He, as a wanderer, is subjected to what his father wants. Even Frieda, Klamm's former mistress, a motherly figure cannot help him. Love gives hope but not forever. In the world of unconscious, love, feeling is nothing but only suffering, waiting and even collapse. The authority wants to keep him in waiting and in false hope. K. also does not truly love Frieda. He uses her for reaching up to the castle; but at the end this trick comes to nothing. Frieda leaves him and runs off with one of his assistants. What remains before K is only a maze with no way out.

The novel's message at the end is one that cancels out vision itself and personifies lacerating doubt, as crystallized in one of Kafka's memorable 'parables' describing how one citizen, on a very early morning, is on the way to the station, the time being much later than he thought. Feeling uncertain of the way and unacquainted with the particular location, the citizen asks directions from a nearby policeman. "You asking me the way?" the officer says. "Give it up! Give it up!" said he and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter. The policeman's words disclose a great deal about the limits of Kafka's vision and also about his own view of its fragmentariness and abnegation.

Kafka's world is sometimes not seen for what it really is: a modern world, in which moral effort is endlessly diluted or betrayed, exposed to fluid interpretation and abstract explanation. K's quest itself is essentially one of manipulation and maneuvers, of stratagems that illustrate its lexical definition: 'an artifice or trick designed to outwit or surprise the enemy', 'a device or scheme for obtaining an advantage'. No quest better quintessentializes the stuff of modernism in a situation that epitomizes Edmund Burke's 'antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, and unavailing sorrow.' K. is emblematic of modern man 'in sight of chaos', an alienated and obsessed figure who grasps for solutions that are painted in the twilight colours of an existential dread and lack of direction, a never-ending lostness. In Kafka's *The Castle*, the protagonist does not ultimately

¹ This is a phrase used by Jose Ortega y Gasset in *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, translated by Milfred Adams

succeed in his plan of entering the Castle. Thus, it embodies the predicament of modern man in an absurd universe trying to make some sense but ultimately fails to have it.

PREDICAMENT OF HUMAN EXISTENCE IN A WORLD OF TANGLED RELATIONSHIPS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA

Contemporary Indian drama in English translation has made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuositities. It has been increasingly turning to history, legend, myth and folklore, tapping their springs of vitality and vocal cords of popularity with splendid results. Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sirkar and Vijay Tendulkar have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Kannada, Bengali, Marathi and Hindi respectively but also on the pan Indian level. Among the major Indian dramatists mentioned above, Girish Karnad has been regarded as the leading dramatist so far as the use of myth and history is concerned and his plays vividly represent this trend. In all his plays there are mythical, historical or legendary elements with modern approach.

In his play *Hayavadana*, Karnad reinforces the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. Originally, it was written in Kannada and later on translated into English. The dramatist skillfully uses the principles and theme of Indian mythology, folk tales and folk theatre conventions – use of masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story, use of image of Kali, Ganesha, Rudra etc. to create an allegorical significance and a bizarre world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world which appears to be indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. The symbolic core of *Hayavadana* comprises the philosophic crisis of estrangement between mind and body. Like its predecessor *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* too is thoroughly modern in outlook and spirit. Karnad here goes back in time to make a very relevant social commentary. Here the only inspiration is not history but mythology and folklore. Here he explores all the modern concerns through the lens of the eternal emotion of love. Through folktale and myth Karnad gives us an insight into the issues of modern life in entirely new ways. Hence, *Hayavadana* is traditional yet modern. Vanashree Tripathy feels that “Karnad’s confabulation of the classics with the folktales of the transposed heads and the story of a half-man, half-horse, playfully dilutes the prototypical themes (*Shakuntalam* and *Mrichhakatikam*), where the ideal balance between duty and passion is restored. *Hayavadana*, in exploring the realm of love: erotic man-woman, male bonding, parent-child, offers us insight into the desires, hopes, fulfillment and frustration it breeds”.

The plot of *Hayavadana* is derived from Somdeva’s *Brihadkatha Saritsagar*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. The central episode in the play, the story of Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila is based on a tale from *Vetala Panchavimshika*, but Karnad borrowed it through Thomas Mann’s novel *Transposed Heads*, a mock-heroic transcription of the original Sanskrit tales. However, the sub-plot – horse-man’s search for completeness, is Karnad’s creative invention. *Hayavadana* is a play of the ‘mad dance of incompleteness’ and search of identity in a world of tangled relationships. Devadatta, the intellectual, and Kapila, the man of physicality, are intimate friends who represents two extreme opposites – one *Appolonian* and another *Dionysian* tendency. In the play, Devadatta marries Padmini and Padmini and Kapila are attracted to each other. The two friends kill themselves. In a highly comic scene, Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devadatta Kapila’s body and vice-versa. It results in a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. When the situation gets complicated, they fight a duel and kill themselves again. Padmini performs *sati*. Through this plot Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell out modern man’s anguish and dilemmas.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad re-shapes an ancient Indian myth from *Vetal Panchavimsati* to point to man’s eternal quest for completeness, or self-realization. With its highly stylized action and mimicry, especially the scene at the temple of Kali and the sword fight between Devadatta and Kapila in the second act. Karnad invests the play with a significance, which brings out the emptiness of the incomplete human being. The play is a re-shaping of an ancient Indian myth from Thomas Mann’s translation of the Sanskrit *Vetal Panchavimsati* which forms part of Kshemendra’s *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara* to the point of a man’s eternal quest for self-realization. The theme also reveals the Upanishad’s principle that visualizes the

human body as a symbol of organic relationship of the parts to the whole. The issue of transposition of heads is the significant issue in this play. Karnad dramatically exposes the incompleteness of the human being by referring to some of the stylized actions.

Karnad employs his mythological tale to show modern man's efforts towards achieving a sense of completeness, and a search of human identity in a world of tangled human relationship. The confusion of identities in the main plot of Devadatta-Padmini-Kapila story reveals ambiguous nature of human personality. After their heads are transposed Devadatta and Kapila do not retain their original selves. Thus, they lose themselves. Padmini, who after the exchange of heads, thinks that she has the best of both the worlds, slowly reaches disillusionment. The play seems to suggest that if perfection or completeness means fusion of two polarities, such completeness is not possible. The myth has been reinterpreted and has been used to present a very modern problem of tangled relationships in the contemporary society. It blends the modernist ideas of identity and completeness with folklore and myth effortlessly. *Hayavadana* presents a universal and very real emotional dynamics that lie close under the whimsical surface of the plot: friendship and jealousy, self-possession and self-doubt, and most importantly, love. *Hayavadana* is unique in the sense that it encompasses all the aspects of life and experience. All three spheres of existence – divine, human and animal encompassed and Karnad looks at the problems of each with a sympathetic and discerning eye.

In this play, the central figure is a woman, Padmini. Selfishness and sensuality find expression in her insatiable desire for both brain and body, which are symbolized by Devadatta and Kapila respectively. Married to Devadatta, Padmini craves for the 'muscle' and 'body' of Kapila. In the myth and in the play as well the craving is explicit; it runs an undercurrent in Padmini's subconscious mind. The happenings in the Kali temple where she transposes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila, reveal her subconscious desire. Padmini's predicament is the predicament of a modern emancipated woman in our society who is torn between two polarities – a woman who loves her husband but at the same time is also attracted towards someone else for a different aspect of his personality. Padmini's act, though unintentional, is indicative of the incomplete human being's silent quest for completeness.

One of the significant skills of Karnad while dealing with myth is the transformation of religious myths into the non-religious ones. He transforms the religious myths to question as well as critique those myths. He makes certain changes in the names of the characters for he wanted the names not to be the reflection of the ancient myth entirely; he wanted the names to be generic. The presence of the goddess Kali presents the religious sentiment of the Indian society. It also focuses on the cultural and psychological interpretations of the goddess Kali to be the representative of a deity as well as a destroyer and preserver. In this play divine intervention unfolds the central theme, the incompleteness of the human beings and the same man's quest to achieve completion. Karnad develops various folk conventions like music, chorus, and the amalgamation of human and non-human worlds in order to permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view. Interestingly, the main and the sub-plot of *Hayavadana* deal with the moral, psychological and philosophical aspect of the problem raising more important issues relating to the human existence.

Indian society is conservative and traditional and an individual is still governed by societal roles and norms that ensure a continuity and survival of its cultural norms. As Eric Fromm writes, "We are what we believe in and where we live in". Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source of plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and the past beliefs found in these myths. He provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world. Like humanism, existentialism affirms the dignity of man. Karnad's plays are by all means remarkable existential plays which deal with the theme of responsibility, responsibility, search for identity and the issue of human relationships. *Hayavadana* deals with human relationship and the theme of search for identity. In the play the characters are trapped in the intertwined mixture of situations and as a result they lead an undesirable life and appear as incomplete personalities. The absurd has been highlighted in the accepted norms of social behavior and the playwright has employed a very existential approach to human life. In order to solve the problems, the protagonists strive very hard but their noble efforts and struggles bear no fruits due to wrong perceptions regarding problems of man and conservative culture's antipathy towards

them. Karnad's characters appear like lonely figures having a split personality and a divided self because of being victims of existential sufferings and predicaments. They are imprisoned in a state of agony and suffering due to a peculiar complexity of relationships. At last they become pitiable figures and appear as strangers, loners and outsiders in their own world.

CONCLUSION

There is a marked difference in the outlook of the Indian writers like Girish Karnad and the Western existentialists as their characters live in an altogether different background and culture. In the western countries existential crisis is born out of despair, frustration, materialism, fear of war and industrialization. While in the oriental Indian setup, this crisis is emerged due to gender inequality, caste discrimination, traditional cultural and religious bindings, and social injustice which obfuscate the dream of freedom and aspirations. However, in spite of the differences in the predicaments and sufferings between oriental and western characters, there is affinity in their outlook of existentialism, i.e. in the ultimate crisis of man and his dilemma which makes him chained, tired, frustrated, isolated, estranged and lonely in his society and the world at large. Existentialism embodies the realization that life is absurd with no inherent meaning. This realization is often brought about by an existential crisis. Existentialists are of the opinion that while life has no inherent purpose and is the midst of dilemma, one can give meaning in life by finding joy in one's absurd struggle.

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