Chapter Two

The Behavioural Pattern of the Existential protagonist

Existentialism and its tenets as applied to both the literary works of the past and the present have been with us for a good while now, and yet one never seems to know exactly what it is. Despite all sincere efforts, it is impossible to boil it down to a simple definition. More than a philosophy, it is primarily and essentially concerned with the very existence of man himself. Gabriel Marcel one of the leading exponents of existentialism has said:

. . . not a day passes without someone (generally a woman of culture, but perhaps a janitor or a streetcar conductor) asking me what existentialism is. No one will be surprised that I evade the question. I reply that it is too difficult or too long to explain: all one can do is try to elucidate a key-notion of it, not to formulate a definition. (Reinhardt The Theological Novels 22)

The difficulty of finding for existentialism a single definition or a simple explanation arises mainly because, as Lawrence Shaffer puts it: “It is mainly anchored in individual human dilemma . . .” (87). Again, existentialism is not a new fad; it is as ancient as the history of human civilization itself. But it captivated the attention of the philosophers only during the nineteenth and the early twentieth-century and now we are associating it with the thoughts of men as diverse as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Paul Tillich, Francis Kafka etc. It became widely influential only in the 1940s, especially
after the horrors of World War II, through the novels, the Plays and the philosophical writings of Sartre and his wife Simone de Beauvoir.

As a matter of fact, existentialism is timeless and it is as old as Adam and Eve themselves. They were the first people to experience the existential predicament. As existentialism is mainly a protest against the forces that tend to reduce human beings and the inner realities of their mind and soul to insignificant sources, its origin can be traced back to the Bible and to the early Greek Plays of Euripides (Medea, Hippolytus, Helen etc) which depict violent scenes of revenge, murder, and death. The characters of Euripides are tormented men and women who experience the important existential motifs of choice, anxiety, dread and anguish. Existential insights can be found both in Buddhism and the Upanishads. S. Radhakrishnan writes:

Existentialism is a new name for an ancient method. The Upanishads and Buddhism insist on knowledge of self: atmanam vidh. They tell us that man is a victim of ignorance, avidya, which breeds selfishness. So long as we live our unregenerate lives in the world of time governed by karman or necessity, we are at the mercy of time. The feeling of distress is universal. A sense of blankness overtakes the seeking spirit, which makes the world a waste and a vain show. Man is not the final resting-place. He has to be transcended. Man can free himself from sorrow and suffering by becoming aware of the eternal. This awareness, this enlightenment is what is called jnana or bodhi. (Indian Philosophy 23)
Some of the basic tenets of existentialism are present in Indian philosophical discourses. Man’s quest for self-knowledge, meaning and purpose of life as well his involvement with others for an identity in a world in which he considers himself to be an alien or a temporary sajourner have been the preoccupations of Indian philosophical system from time immemorial.

All these show that existentialism which has its roots in ancient cultural, religious and literary traditions of both the West and the East cannot be simply reduced to a few terms to know and understand its basic principles by referring only to what some philosophers have said. On the other hand, one may do well to know it by probing into certain ancient myths which as Northrop Frye says have “the central informing power” (The Archetypes of Literature 429). Davis Dunbar McElroy refers to a very pretty myth which makes an admirable beginning for our inquiries. One day, the story goes, when Care was crossing a river, she noticed some clay on the bank. She took up a piece and began to fashion it. While she was still reflecting on what she had fashioned, Jupiter arrived on the scene. Care asked him to give this form of clay a soul which Jupiter promptly did. But then a dispute arose between Care and Jupiter: each wanted to give his own name to the new creature. And while they were arguing, Earth came along and insisted that her name be given to the creature, since it was she who had provided it with a body. The three, thereupon, called on Saturn to judge their dispute. Saturn said:

since you have given this thing a soul, you shall receive this creature after its death; you, Earth, shall in the end receive its body; but since Care first shaped this creature, She shall posses it as long as it lives.
And as for the creature’s name, let it be called man [homo] since it has
been fashioned out of earth [humo]. (qtd. in McElroy *Existentialism*
*And Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* 1)

As seen in the context of this myth, man is a composite of care and clay. While
fashioning man, Care had compounded something in man’s very nature which makes
him extremely anxious about himself by giving him endless worries, unreasonable
doubts, causeless and endless fears. This myth quoted by McElroy is at the very heart
of all the problem of man’s painful existence in this world. Otto Rank calls this the
“primal anxiety” of man which he experiences from his very birth onwards. According
to Rank, before man is born in this world, he lives in a state of extreme bliss and
innocence. The fact that he is born in a world which brings with it his physical
separation from his mother, physiological hazards and psychological changes induce
in him “the first and most fundamental feeling of anxiety which the individual ever
experiences” (McElroy 2). For Rank, this “Primal anxiety” is the source of all the
subsidiary anxieties of death, doubt and guilt, which perplex and threaten man
throughout his painful existence in this world.

The primordial source of Man’s anxiety and all its adherent characteristic
features can be traced to the Biblical myth of the creation and fall of the first man in
the garden of Eden. The Bible says that Adam, the first man, and his wife Eve were
having an idyllic existence. There was perfect harmony between them; they had
probably no work to do and they experienced no anxiety, doubts and fears. They were
as much a part of Nature as small children and animals are. They did not experience
what we call “isolation” or “separation” or “alienation” from God who came to see
them “walking in the garden in the cool of the day . . .” (“Genesis” 3). Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge and brought upon themselves and humanity the curse of consciousness that they would know evil and good and the evils of “separation” from God, their creator, and the curse of death. They were expelled from the garden, and, thus, they came to lose their freedom, happiness, divinity, innocence and even an immortal life which only God alone could have. Their sin against God’s authority and power, was the first act of human freedom. But that freedom was cursed by God who said that they had to go out of the garden and find new commitments and involvements and thereby earn their livelihood. God said:

Cursed is the ground for thy sake: in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shalt it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Gen. 3:17-19)

E.G. White delineates the painful existence of Adam and Eve after their separation from God and shows how it was marked with sin, guilt, anxiety, dread and other consequential discomforts.

After his transgression, Adam at first imagined himself entering upon a higher state of existence (emphasis added). But soon the thought of his sin filled him with terror. The air . . . seemed to chill the guilty pair.
The love and peace which had been theirs was gone, and in its place
they felt a sense of sin, a dread of the future, a nakedness of soul. (27)

The Biblical myth shows the powerlessness of man, his limitations, the
difficulties of his existence and his basal anxiety. His anxiety increases when he
visualizes his own end: death. He is taken from dust and he has to return to it whatever
be his glories and achievements on earth. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his
existence: he cannot rid himself of his mind, even if he should want to; he cannot rid
himself of his body as long as he is alive. The fear of death while increasing his
anxiety restricts his freedom. Being accidental in its occurrence, it instead of giving
life its meaning, leaves it in doubt and suspense.

In the New Testament, man’s separation from God and his surroundings is
brought to light by St. Paul. He unambiguously refers to the Fall and to the “Original
Sin” and says that it has afflicted the whole of humanity. It is surprising to note that
St. Paul uses the term “alienation” which occurs often in all discussions of
existentialism either as a philosophical concept or as a way of life. He writes:

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by
wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled.

In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and
unblameable and unreprouveable in his sight. (Col. 1:22-22)

The myth of the first man’s Fall continues to say that human beings who are
afflicted by the “Original Sin” of Adam and Eve can have their Redemption through
Christ’s sacrificial death which is ever calling them for the act of reconciliation. In
fact, in the Old Testament, we read that the Jews made a long journey for four hundred years from Egypt to Canaan, the land of milk and honey, which was promised to them by God. It is a symbolic journey which evidences that God has been calling man, time and again to repentance and to a life of reconciliation with Him. According to the Bible, human history is a history of man’s sinfulness and God’s eternal call to him to lead a life of commitment and involvement. In the New Testament, St. Paul points out how Adam’s Fall affected the entire humanity and how through the grace of God reconciliation is possible for the anxious and alienated man.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin: and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned . . .

Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.

. . . For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God . . . and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5: 12-17)

St. Augustine, the renowned Bishop and theologian of the Catholic Church in his magnum opus Confessions observes that Christ through his crucifixion has “abolished the ‘enmity’ which man’s sins have created between him and God” (35-36). Referring to St. Augustine’s Confessions, Ernest Tuverton makes the following comments: “Augustine’s Confessions, which eloquently expresses the sufferings of man as a result of alienation together with his yearning to be liberated from it, also
dwell on the resultant joy and sense of repose and contentment when his 
estrangement from his Father ended” (36).

Calvin sees man as a being alienated from God through eternity by his Original 
Sin. “The Christian doctrine of salvation may be seen as a theological equivalent of 
man’s longing for de-alienation. The circular image of paradise in the past, lost in the 
present, to be regained in the future exemplifies the use made by religion of the 
concept of alienation and de-alienation” (219). The Church has, thus, developed a 
theology of sin which is man’s alienation from God and its consequent anxiety and 
man’s useless journey and a quest for a hold or a meaning and the final redemption of 
man through God’s inordinate mercy and grace. The theology, in other words, affirms 
man’s alienation from his original source and includes his reconciliation with God and 
others around him. This shows that the pattern – man’s alienation, his quest for 
meaning, his active involvement and commitment in life and his final reconciliation 
with God and life – is an integral part of Christian theology and central to the 
understanding of man’s predicament in relation to God’s plan.

Early English literary works are religious in character being vastly influenced 
by the Bible. One can trace in them the pattern of man’s behaviour in this world of 
evil and sorrow. Beowulf, for instance, as commented by Margarat E. Goldsmith is 
“about a Holy War against evil and shows that man’s final failure rises up 
from his pride, his love of treasure and his rejection of God’s help” (18). Kevin 
Crossley-Holland believes that the poet “took the old story to illustrate a moral lesson 
– that only suffering, anguish and death can attend the search for earthly riches” (18).
Anthropological studies reveal that “the religions of the world seem to be fundamentally alike in underlying philosophies, ritual acts, and the roles which religion plays in human life” (Norbeck 5).

Hinduism which is close to Christianity in many respect also shows the same behavioural pattern exhibited by human beings facing the challenges of life. Hinduism is mainly concerned with problems such as the nature of man, the character of the world, the way a man may take to rise above his real life conditions and the state of enlightenment or release from subjection to time. As William Barrett has rightly remarked:

Even today, the motive for an oriental’s taking up the study of philosophy is altogether different from that of a western student: for the oriental, the only reason for bothering with philosophy is to find release or peace from the torments and perplexities of life . . . Philosophy is the soul’s search for salvation . . . deliverance from suffering and evils of the modern world. (Irrational Man 5)

The Upanishads also focus their attention on the pervasive suffering resulting from change, chance and death. The Svetasvatara Upanishad queries: “By what power do we live? Where do we live? Where do we find rest? Who rules our joys from the unreal to the real, lead me from darkness to light, lead me from death to immortality?” (13-28). Thus, the Hindu thought is not merely a theory of God, but a philosophical proposition probing deep into basic human problems which alienate man from God and his fellow beings.
In Hinduism the equivalence of God’s love of Adam and Eve and His desire to have a lasting relationship with man is found in the relation between Brahman [God] and Atman [individual self]. In the Upanishads human beings are presented as never isolated or alienated individuals, but as closely related to the Absolute and to their fellow beings. S. Radhakrishnan comments: “The humanbeing has its root in the invisible though in his life it belongs to the passing stream of the visible” (Eastern Religion & Western Thought 37). The individual souls are presented as different expressions of the one Universal Self called Brahman. Though, sometime, the Brahman and Atman are used interchangeably, the former denotes the substratum of the universe while the latter the substratum of individual ego. In Chandogya Upanishad, Prajapati tells Indira:

The body is not the self, though it exists for the self . . . The self is universal, immanent as well as transcendent. The whole universe lives and moves and breathes in it. It is immortal, self luminous, self proved and beyond doubts and denials, as the very principles which make all doubts, denials and thoughts possible. (Radhakrishnan The Principal Upanishads 491)

In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad the sage Yajnavalkya declares that the self is the ultimate knower and hence cannot be known as an object because it knows all objects (Radhakrishnan The Principal Upanishads, 254-55). The relation between Brahman and Atman is illustrated in Svetasvatara Upanishad as “Two Birds, companions, always united, cling to the same tree. Of these two, one eats the sweet fruit, and the other looks on without eating” (733). Here the former is presented as the empirical self and the latter as the transcendental self.
Sri Sankaracharya in his *Atma Bodha* makes the relation between *Brahman* and *Atman* more clear when he says:

Brahman is another expression for God. Atman and Brahman are one and the same. The transcendental Reality (God) that functions in the microcosm is the same that pervades the macrocosm. The Reality dwelling in man as the innermost core of his personality is referred to as the Atman while the total Reality is called Brahman. If Brahman can be compared to the total space, then the Atman in man may be considered as the ‘space in a pot’. In fact, the total space and the pot-space are one and the same space which is indivisible even by the material of the pot. Similarly, the Reality is one but It is called differently because of the conditionings with reference to which It is indicated. (xxvii)

The Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita point out that the evolution of the *Atman* is essential for a liberated man. “As the soul passes in this body through childhood, youth and age, even so is taking on of another body. The sage is not perplexed by this” (Radhakrishnan *The Bhagavad Gita* 104). While the liberated souls know the truth and live in it, the unliberated ones pass from birth to birth, tied by the bondages of works. The *Atman*’s [man’s] access to liberation to have oneness with *Brahman* [God] is through knowledge [*jnana*]. But it is ignorance [*avidya*] which is the Christian equivalent of sin that stands in the way of enlightenment. *Avidya* breeds pride [*ahankar*] in man and he believes himself to be a separate entity unrelated to *Brahman*. The material world, its desires and attractions, his intellect and his sense
organs pull him away from the “pure consciousness” [God] of which he has to be a part and he reaches the condition of Adam and Eve who alienated themselves from their creator. Sri Sankaracharya, therefore, implores: “seated in a solitary place, free from desires and with senses controlled, one should meditate on that one infinite without any other thought” (Atma Bodha 104).

In course of time the soul [the Atman] becomes ignorant of God, loses its true nature and identifies itself with the body, the senses, the mind and their aggregate. In such an alienated situation, as observed by Swami Satprakashanda, “man uses the terms ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and asserts himself as a distinct individual” (71).

The alienated ‘self’ in Christian theology, is an anguished self and it wanders along, moves with other “selves” and finally becomes agonizingly aware of the threat of annihilation which Paul Tillich considers as “the basic human predicament” (The Courage to Be 52). Throwing more light on the behaviour of the alienated self and its anxieties as conceived by the Hindu seers, Swami Satprakashanda comments:

Bound by the Law of Karma, ‘self’ moves up and down in the phenomenal existence from one kind of life to another, repeatedly experiencing birth and death, rise and fall, hope and fear, joy and sorrow with all others alike itself. There is no release from this chain of duality as long as he retains his egoistic self that separates him from God, his innermost real self. (72)

The “diminished self” realizing its mistakes goes in search of the ‘home’ it has lost. The search soon leads to what is called “self-realization” which is the supreme state in which the alienated ‘self’ merges itself with the Brahman. “Self-realization” comes
through devotion or work or commitment to a supreme cause or wisdom or meditation. In *Vedanta*, these are called “*Yogas*”, the different paths of reaching God, *The Sat-Chit-Ananda*, the “Unity of Being” which expresses itself in infinite Love. Thus, to the Hindu, the world is not an opaque universe, but a *Dharmakshetra* [a charity house] where it is never too late to strive to attain one’s full stature. Wendy O’Flaherty says: “... the state of chaos in the Hindu myths is no longer a threat to life but the only premise on which life can take place ... The disintegration into primal elements which appears to signify death is, in fact, the first step of life transformation” (13). Having been graced with the vision of the Ultimate Order, the *Yogi* [one who has control over his body and mind] leads the life of a *Karmayogi* [A man of action who has his commitments] and *Jeevan mukta* [one whose “self” attains God – realization]. The *Yogi* is one “who dwells in his inner self, and is the same in pleasure and pain . . . , and what is pleasing or displeasing leave him in peace, who is beyond both praise and blame and whose mind is steady and quiet” (*The Bhagavad Gita* 14-24). The Gita asserts that the *Yogi* who achieves the supreme state of identification with the “Unity of Being” becomes a lover of humanity as he finds *Brahma* on the face of everybody around him. “The yogi who is united in identity with the all-pervading, infinite consciousness, and looks on all with an equal eye, sees the Self present in all beings, and all beings as imaginary objectives in the Self” (*Gita* VI 29). This is how the question of man’s commitment to some cause, his willingness to serve and save others and a sense that he is responsible for the suffering of others come in to the picture. This pattern of the alienated self’s search and final reconciliation which is at the base of both Christianity and Hinduism occurs repeatedly in a number of myths, legends, Puranas and Upanishdic stories.
The Existential dilemma experienced by Naciketa in the Katha Upanishad further exemplifies this pattern. Vajasravasa, Naciketa’s father is a poor but a pious Brahmin. While performing a sacrifice, he gives as present to the priests a few old and feeble cows. Naciketa resents this and he proposes that he himself may be offered as *dakshina* [offering] to a priest. When he persists in his request, his father in a rage says: “To Death I offer You” (*Katha Upanishad* 7). The rift between the miserly father and the generous son alienates the latter from his family and the pious and holy environment in which he has been brought up by his parents and his relatives.

Naciketa goes to the abode of *yama* [the messenger who carries away the soul after death] and finding him absent awaits for three days and nights continuously without food. He becomes anxiously aware of the threat of annihilation to his precious individuality. “He ponders over, what his father would gain, what religious duty he would be fulfilling by giving him away to Yama, the God of Death” (8). Yet, without losing heart, he “plays the role of the earnest seeker” [known as *purva-paksa* – the inciting questioner in the *Vedantic* Parlance] (10). He has all the “prerequisite qualities of a true wisdom seeker indicated in the Upanishads in a scattered fashion . . .” (10). *Yama*, on his return, is moved by Naciketa’s determination and fortitude and offers him three boons. For the first, Naciketa requests that he be returned alive to his father and for the second he says: “please teach me the fire sacrifice owing to which the dwellers of heaven gain immortality” (14). For the third he asks for a chance to go in quest of the “ultimate knowledge”, – “the problem of death and the state after death” (20). When *Yama* becomes reluctant to grant the third boon because it is “invaluable”, and begins to tempt Naciketa with other worldly temptations, the latter waives them away saying “Transient are these and they wear out O Yama”. “Naciketa is the perfect
model of the speculative tradition within Hinduism . . . in rejecting worldly pleasures for the joys of True Knowledge which will come through his involvement with others” (Radhakrishnan The Principal Upanishads 593). Naciketa’s agitated “self” becomes “tranquil and composed” (Katha Upanishad 60), after learning that “Birth and death together makes the nourishing food of life tastier, keeping it ever new” (61).

A study of the existential dilemma faced by Arjuna in the Mahabharata also reveals the same behavioural pattern of an alienated self which is in a quest to find an ultimate solution for its problems. In the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Arjuna, the Pandava, surveys the two sides and his eyes meet his own kith and kin on every side – grand sires, uncles, brothers, teachers, nephews and friends all ready for the battle. He is faced with an “unforeseen solid fact of life” (Siddhinathananda Our Heritage 77). Troubled by the feelings of separation from his near and dear ones, he doubts the wisdom of war and the utility of a success. He suffers from the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness: which is to say, the threat of nonbeing to all beliefs and ideas. He says: “I do not wish to kill them, even if they kill me. I would not want to kill them even for the kingdom of heaven, let alone for this small piece of earth” (Irawati Karve Yuganta, 196). “His heart sank, hand shook, head reeled, face faded, bow fell, and he sat down on the floor of the car perspiring and bewildered” (Siddhinathananda 78). “Arjuna let fall his celestial bow and sat down on the bench of his Chariot with a heart full of grief” (Donald A. Kackennzie Indian Myth 288). It is at this point, Krishna who is the Lord but who acts at the Charioteer of Arjuna comes out with his counsel which in course of time came to be called the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna who desires to know what is really good, takes shelter under Krishna who teaches him
that *Karma* [action and commitment] is better than inaction and renunciation. Krishna says that it is only through disinterested performance of one’s duties and commitments that one is enabled and entitled to grasp spiritual truths which alone are capable of removing one’s grief for ever and bestowing upon one everlasting peace. “He explains that *Karma* is only a handmaid to *Bhakti* [devotion to God] and the man who performs the duties and commitments assigned to him by God pleases Him and thereby recaptures his real being through blissful *jnana* [knowledge]” (Siddhinathananda, 80). Convinced by the message of the Gita, Arjuna proceeds to perform his assigned duty and carry out his commitment as a warrior. The Gita is a universal document which embodies and answers man’s perpetual doubts, withdrawals, quests, involvement and final affirmation of faith. In the words of S. Radhakrishnan: “The Bhagavad Gita recognizes the nature of man, the needs of man, and tries to fulfil all of them” (*Our Heritage* 44).

The early literary works whether written in the West or the East are primarily religious and mythical in character. Regarding the early Greek tragedies Richmond Lattimore says:

The gods of Homer are mainly immortal men and women, incomparably more powerful than mortals, but like mortals susceptible to all human emotions and appetites, therefore capable of being teased, flattered, enraged, seduced, chastised. As immortal people, they may also represent projections of feelings or activities in the observed world. (54)
C.M. Bowra observes: “. . . while the conflict in Shakespeare is between men and men, in Sophocles it arises in the last analysis between men and gods” (13). In Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex the Chorus in its songs expresses a consistent reverence for the gods and unfaltering faith in the oracles. It deplores and condemns the general decline in religion and prays to the gods to restore people’s faith in religious sanctity and divine justice. The irony is that Oedipus, the protagonist of the play, because of his deep and unwavering faith in the oracles gets himself entangled in a number of problems. His tragedy starts with his alienation from his own father, Laius, and mother Jocasta; his alienation from his foster parents Polybus and Merope and finally from his wife [his own mother] and children. His anxiety and mental agony, caused by the knowledge that he has married his own mother, know no bounds. Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus blinds his eyes. His pain is unbearable and he wants to quit the city in order to rid his house of the curse which he himself has uttered. His anguished mind recalls the incestuous relationship into which he has unknowingly entered with his own mother begetting children on a woman who has begotten him. He has become husband, father, brother and son at the same time, all mixed up in a monstrous relationship. “. . . the play shows how human life is at the mercy of the gods” (Bowra 167).

Oedipus is ever in quest to find the truth of his life. The Oracles tell him that he would kill his father and marry his own mother. So he flees from Corinth, determined never again to set eyes on his supposed father and mother as long as they live. His wanderings take him to Thebes, his native place where unknowingly he kills his father, King Laius, and then circumstances lead him to marry his own mother,
Jocasta. His quest to find out the murderer of his father is undertaken in all sincerity. He feels it as a duty and he will go the whole hog in trying to find out the facts and discover the criminal. “The quest of the truth entralls him, and nothing can hold him back. He probes the past with unflinching curiosity and courage” (197). Like an existential hero in a modern fiction “he wishes to know who he is” (198). “What matters for him is the sense of freedom, of responsibility . . .” (198).

Self-realization and reconciliation with life comes at the end. It can be seen in his adjustment to his blindness which is well depicted. The adjustment is so successful that we find him arguing stubbornly with Creon. He makes a remarkable and swift recovery in the last scene from the position of a nonentity to which he has been reduced by his discovery of his past sins. This recovery is autonomous and it is the expression of a great personality. The play ends as it began with the greatness of the hero. But it is a different kind of greatness. This greatness is based on knowledge and not on ignorance as previously. As Bowra observes: “Through resignation and suffering the rightful harmony of things is restored” (210).

Almost the same existential behavioural pattern can be traced in the Hindu religious epic the Ramayana which includes several mythical stories. Lord Rama, the protagonist of the epic is the ideal man and the upholder of cultural and traditional values much dear to the people of the past. The period of his reign, after fourteen years of alienation from his parents and others, is more painful than the period of alienation itself. During the fourteen years Rama was able to gather together heterogeneous elements to form a formidable army and successfully avenge his honour and liberate
his wife Sita from the evil King Ravana. He experiences several moments of anxiety and his long quest to find out his wife forms the real test of his mettle.

In all the versions of the *Ramayana*, the human lamentation of Rama after the abduction of Sita has been vividly brought out. Tulasidas goes to the extent of saying that Rama requested even the birds, deer etc; about the whereabouts of his fawn-eyed Sita. We see Rama in his human element enduring all pangs of suffering and feeling of mental agony. (Naidu 124)

The same hero, after assuming the powers of a king in the place of his dead father, finds himself helpless against the lowest rung of his own people when a washerman casts aspersions on his integrity and morality for having accepted a wife who has lived in an alien King’s household as his captive. This adds to Rama’s anxiety and as per the customs of the day he orders his wife to prove her chastity. Sita immediately enters into a fire ordeal and emerges as the purest symbol of chastity and womanhood. She is accepted both by Rama and the society. But soon Mother Earth who takes pity on her, separates her from all the agonies of the world by taking her and her two sons into her womb leaving Rama behind to bewail the loss of such a chaste wife. Rama, however, does not altogether lose his poise; he regains all his former powers as the king of the land getting himself reconciled to the unpleasant situation; does all that is within his reach for the benefits of his subjects and establishes what is called *Ramarajya* which means “a kingdom of universal brotherhood” (Manavalan 157).

Joseph Campbell has developed another existential behavioural pattern which is not very much different from the pattern discussed in this chapter. According to
him, an existential hero’s career develops through three phases: “separation – initiation – return.” (The Hero With a Thousand Faces 30). Commenting on Campbell’s pattern, Sheldon Norman Grebstein observes:

Following the theory of Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and Lord Raglan, many critics subscribe to the original myth as that of a hero or god, a myth that incorporates the rites of passage – separation, initiation, return – and which repeats the life cycle and/or the cycle of the seasons. Northrop Frye endorses this cyclical view but argues that the monomyth is ‘the story of loss and regaining of identity’. Others find the journey or quest of primary significance. (Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism 316)

In order to determine the archetypal pattern which the mythical hero follows, Campbell analyses a great many legends. His hero sets forth from his hut or castle or land (separation or alienation) to the threshold of adventure (search). Then he undergoes ordeals or series of ordeals and involves himself with the people in his society (commitment), overcomes the evils and finally returns home as a victorious hero (reconciliation). According to Campbell “... the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of the nuclear unit ... a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (The Hero With a Thousand Faces 35). He adds: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellowmen” (30).
Campbell denotes that the hero is not without his commitments and responsibilities as he is a part of the society in which he lives. Campbell exemplifies his pattern by referring to the stories of mythical and religious personalities.

Prometheus ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods, and descended to help the people and thereby proved that he had his own commitments. Aeneas went down into the underworld and returned to found the Roman Empire. The Buddha left his home and wife and child, got enlightenment, and returned with the boon of Good Law for humanity to serve and save the people who were in bondage.

Theodore H. White while tracing the pattern of “Withdrawal and Return” (Caesar on the Rubicon 29) in the life of Caesar, maintains that separation (alienation) and return, as historians have maintained, is a pattern common in the lives of great men – as if temporary absence from and then return to the scene of action gives men a clear perspective, a larger, simpler view of action when they come back. Caesar had fascinated as many great writers as possible. His alienation and return has been presented in a number of ways. Shakespeare, drawing from Plutarch, made him a moody tyrant and a creature of fate. Bernard Shaw made him a witty but detached adventurer toying with life and empire as a game. Thornton Wilder has, in the present time, made him the urbane and cynical phrase-maker, world-weary, helplessly awaiting his end, yet amused as death approaches him. Theodore H. White goes a step further adding a divine touch to the character of Caesar. He says that the world famous dictators had considered themselves as divine expressions of God’s will or gods themselves. He adds that some such transformation of personality under pressure might have happened to Caesar in the
few weeks he passed at Ravenna by the Rubicon en route home from victory. Caesar, he says, finally came to reject both reality and law.

Both Joseph Campbell and Theodore H. White have not divested their heroes of the religious elements which coalesce inevitably with the existential heroes who fall within an archetypal pattern.

This archetypal behavioural pattern of the existential hero can be traced in most of the modern literary works which have religious and mythical background. The progress in T.S. Eliot’s The Family Reunion has been characterized by A.D. Moody as a movement from “sin and alienation to reconciliation and expiation” (Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet 175). He observes that the play is based on the Christian theme of “Original Sin” as in the Oresteia. Visweswara Rao has observed that the play “... can be best understood only in the light of the Greek myth and modern psychology” (93).

Harry, the protagonist of Eliot’s play is an emotionally isolated character. His mother, Amy, by imposing her dominating will upon him, condemns him to his own condition of living without love. His frustration and alienation also result from his sense of guilt which constantly haunts him as a result of which he suffers from a deep spiritual anguish. Eight years ago, after a brief and disastrous marriage, while travelling on an ocean liner he either pushed his wife over-board or at least watched her slip down. He is not quite clear which, but he had certainly wanted to kill her, just as his father in the past had wanted to kill his mother. Since that death, he has never been of his usual self. Like Hamlet, he is distracted; he suffers from a deep spiritual anguish and does not know how to set matters aright. He is not able to communicate his feelings to others. He must suffer and through suffering he must redeem his family
from the curse which has fallen upon it. His coming back to Wishwood where his mother lives is really a quest to find out as to what has happened actually. His mother’s hope that he will marry Mary also ends in smoke. He also refuses to stay at Wishwood for a long time. Amy’s other two sons, John and Arthur, are waited for, but they never arrive being involved in accidents. There is no love lost between Harry and his brothers.

It is only Agatha, Harry’s aunt, who understands him and enables him to realize the true nature of his sin. If there is any “union” at all, it is between Agatha and Harry, and it is only through her Harry makes his quest complete and successful. Under her spiritual guidance, he realizes that he must expiate and atone not only for his sin but also for the sin of his father who had tried to kill his mother. He feels it as a commitment and a responsibility. His self-realization and reconciliation comes when he learns that his family is under a curse and he must redeem himself and others through his sufferings and atonement. So he goes away bidding farewell to his mother as he knows that he is not born to enjoy the material comforts of life. Thus, the play *The Family Reunion*, as observed by D.E. Jones is “. . . a profound exploration of a complex spiritual state, and an attempt to communicate with the audience on the level of spiritual experience” (The Plays of T.S. Eliot 122). Harry’s goal is to achieve self-realization in a world that does much to prevent it. Richard Palmer who studies the play from the existentialist point of view remarks that “the underlying mood of the play is Angst, that is, “existentialist anxiety,” and that Harry “is the very model of the existentialist hero, an authentic questing self in a world of inauthenticity” (“Existentialism in T.S. Eloit’s The Family Reunion” 174).
Ramaswamy, the protagonist of the novel *The Serpent and the Rope* written by Raja Rao, one of the great Indian English novelists, also exhibits the same existential behavioural pattern. The novel is primarily mythical and religious in character.

Ramaswamy, a Brahmin from South India and a descendant of the mythical sage Yagnyavalkya, goes to France to do research on the Indian origins of Albigensian Heresy. Before leaving for an alien land, he was fully involved with India, with his family and with his cultural milieu. He loved to hear grandfather Kittanna’s stories. He performed the last rites of his mother strictly according to the scriptures. He lived in a state of innocence. But his departure to Europe and his stay there initiates him to accept the culture of a new world. While in France, he vehemently rejects contemporary India and all its traditional values. He rejects the moral puritanism of India as something essentially weak. He declares: “I hated this moral India” (*The Serpent* 349). He also rejects the industrial and metropolitan India as irrelevant and alienates himself completely from it. His marriage with the French woman, Madeleine, who is a Catholic, is a failure. She is true neither to Ramasamy, nor to herself, nor to her pledge. She is true only to her passion. Obviously, such a marriage is bound to fail and bring in untold grief and mental anguish. He feels homeless and rootless and in frustration he concludes: “There is nobody to go to now: no home, no temple, no city, no climate, no age” (402). As an alienated exile, he is caught up in the endless flux of life. At the end, he cuts off all worldly ties. He takes a divorce from Madeleine; Savithri and Saroja have already settled in life with their chosen men. Now he realizes that he must go to his *Guru* [Master] in Travancore. He gets reconciled to life by following the “age-old spiritual tradition of India which gives the Guru the highest place in Man’s quest for Truth” (Naik *Raja Rao* 89).
The behavioural pattern discussed so far has undergone a change in most of the present day literary works in accordance with the spirit and character of the horrifying contemporary world. Today, man has lost his faith both in myth and religion. The imposed structure of all beliefs of the past seem to crack under the weight of modern bitter life-experiences. Man, today, finds it increasingly difficult to harmonize his experiences with his religious myths and the orthodoxy of his ancestors.

As a result, in most of the modern literary works which have an existential dimension, the protagonist’s “Withdrawl and Return” (Theodore H. White Caesar on the Rubicon 10) has no ethical and religious strain. Artists, who are expected to be true to nature and life, cannot willingly and deliberately bring into their works what is conspicuously absent in the life they see around them. Walter Allen who insists on the importance of making “topical reference” and portraying “contemporary atmosphere” in literary works points out the various changes that have affected modern Man’s behavioural pattern. “After the First World War, the age that had ended in July 1914 seems as remote as the far side of the moon . . . The war had speeded up social change as it had never been speeded up before . . . It emancipated women . . . It affected everything. Nothing was as it was before” (Tradition and Dream 1). The Great War unsettled society in many ways. The writers of this period began to feel that our civilization has become a “dog-toothed civilization” (The Lost Childhood 223) and it belongs to the “same diseased and erratic world of the dictators and the millionaires” (223). It is no exaggeration that modern life is marked by uncertainty, anxiety, a sense of fatalism and apathy which result from the helplessness of the individual who is destined to live in a highly-industrialized and mechanized world. The age in which we
live is known for disillusionment, cynicism, and agnosticism. Chatterjee’s observation
is worth quoting: “disillusionment of our age has resulted in a marked decline of
spiritual quality in contemporary fiction” (Problems 33). The average modern man
drifts through life without any sense of purpose. Most of the modern English literary
works, like Joyce’s Ulysses mainly concerned with this drift and aimlessness, the
qualities which characterize the modern existential hero.

The thirties constituted a period which forced the writer’s attention on the
social and the political issues. It was the period of “the Great Slump and the
unemployment it brought, the rise of the Nazis, the Spanish Civil War . . . and terrible
approach . . . of World War II” (Priestly Literature 266). The thirties were a decade of
fear, misery, and panic. It was a time when the spectacle of poverty and the ever-
increasing danger of war compelled even the common man in the street to consider the
nature of economic power, and think about political issues. There was a general
feeling that Western civilization was doomed and that “only the violent extremists,
Left or Right, who had rejected any idea of liberal democracy and gradual progress,
could save Western civilization. Or, if they could not, if it were inevitably doomed,
then why still attempt any restraint and balance, why not recklessly indulge every
passion and prejudice?” (246-47). This mood shaped and coloured the works of the
writers of the Thirties. It was, therefore, natural that in such an age, writers were led to
deal with the social and economic malaise of the time. The mood still continues and
the writers’ basic obsession now is to present in their works the predicament of Man
who has come to live in a world full of all kinds of evils. To write is now to be
humane. George Orwell beautifully sums up the situation while writing about the
helplessness of the present day writers. He says: “Get inside the whale – or rather, admit you are inside the whale (for you are, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process” (Selected Essays 48-49).

It is mainly because of their abiding interest in according a religious sanctity to the suffering humanity, quite a good number of modern writers have rejected religious orthodoxy and fundamentalism and accepted humanism as their major concern and creed. What they present in their works is not philosophical humanism or Renaissance humanism, but humanism which is shorn of all philosophical trappings and which appeals to all because it is centered on human interests and human values which promote social living. Their humanism is concerned with commitment to the principles of love, happiness, harmony, freedom, peace, non-exploitation and kindness, all of which lead to Man’s happiness and give him a sense of fulfilment. It is the humanism propounded by Corliss Lamont: “. . . a credo for average men and women seeking to lead a happy and useful life” (The Philosophy 12). The Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that “there is no other universe than the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity” (69).

Humanism in simple terms means proper human relationship and oneness of humanity. This human aspect of it has come to occupy the place of myth and religion in contemporary literary works which deal with the problems of man’s existential crisis. In Greene too very often his humanist enthusiasm overrides his religious preoccupations. Even in his so called “religious” novels like Brighton Rock (1938), The Power and the Glory (1940), The Heart of the Matter (1948) and The End of the Affair (1951), his religious sense is subdued by his humanist interest. Like Greene
himself, the protagonists of all these novels, with the exception of Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, are unorthodox Christians. In these works, throwing his lot with the depraved humanity, Greene accords a divine sanction to human qualities, like, love, pity, compassion and understanding, all of which, he believes, are the saving graces of Man.

The change that has come into the behavioural pattern of the protagonists in existentialist novels is now clear. Unlike the heroes in the past works which have explicit mythical and religious dimensions, the heroes in modern works, during the last phase or stage of their life, return to surrender their personal interests to embrace the larger interests of the masses. In other words, they, finally, merge themselves with the larger humanity which they earlier despised. There may be some exception to this. But, in most cases the heroes’ movement is from alienation to accommodation, from non-involvement [alienation] to involvement with the lives of others. This movement can be seen in the works of a number of novelists. One may mention here the names of novelists like Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Bernard Malamud, John Steinbeck, Margaret Attwood, C.P. Snow, Irish Murdoch, J.B. Priestley, Angus Wilson, William Golding, Colin Wilson, Graham Greene and a host of others. These writers show man’s cruelty to man, his destructive nature and the roots of evils in the world and point out the need for man’s redemption through love, compassion and concern for others.

The existential protagonists who figure in the fictional works of the Indian English novelists like Raja Rao, Balachandra Rajan, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Timeri Murari, Saros Cowasjee, M.V. Rama Sarma, Manohar
Malgonkar, Romen Basu, Shiv K. Kumar, Bhabani Bhattacharya and a number of others, depart from their native soil, live in an alien culture and finally look back at India nostalgically and return home only to live amicably with others. Ramaswamy in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* makes the predicament of such protagonists very clear. He asks: “I could, in fact, stay in Europe if I cared. But why should I? What is there to do? . . . Could I give Little Mother such joy if I were back?” (402). Towards the end of his novel, Ramaswamy, resolves to come back to India and find out his *Guru* who will teach him what kind of life he can lead. The protagonists of the other writers also take a decision to come back to India to fulfil their wishes here. In Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye Blackbird* “Adit is coming back to spend the rest of his life in the service of his motherland” (38).

The behavioural pattern of the absurd protagonist is different from that of the existential Outsider who eventually becomes a normal insider. The difference lies in their response to the universe in which they find themselves. Whereas the existential Outsider who comes back to involve himself in the life of others and to fulfil his commitments to his society, the absurd protagonist is not able to make any meaningful protest. While the former returns to embrace socially committed action, the latter does not at all act. Jan Kott, commenting on Beckett’s *Act Without Words*, aptly points out the difference:

> Man must be defeated and cannot escape from the situation that has been imposed on him. All he can do is to give up; refuse to play blind man’s buff. Only by the possibility of refusal can he surmount the external forces. The existential Outsider is still a hero in the traditional
sense, but the absurd protagonist is an anti-hero, mocked at, perverse and incapable of action. (118)

Thus, in Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* life has no meaning for the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon. They are waiting, but they do not know for what they are waiting. Similarly Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* describes the life which man has created for himself as a “solitary free passage characterized by indifference towards others” (C.P. Singh *Edward Albee* 12). The protagonists in the works of Camus, Kafka, Strindberg, Maeterlinck, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Ademor, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter also live in an alien universe and conceive the universe “as possessing no inherent human truth, value or meaning . . .” (S.R. Jalote *The Plays of Harold Pinter* 3).

The behavioural pattern of the existential protagonist is, thus, real, natural and true to life. It has its beginning from the time when man came into existence in the world and its various stages – man’s alienation, his sufferings, his quest for meaning, his involvements and commitments, and his final reconciliation with life through love and compassion for others – have evolved over the ages. These stages had their origin in early religious and mythical works and they are more markedly seen and emphatically pronounced in most of the modern literary works.

After having arrived at a sound base for further argument, it is in the fitness of things, to see how far the existential protagonists of both Graham Greene and Arun Joshi fit into this archetypal behavioural pattern. Therefore, in the next Chapter, a sincere attempt is made to study how the protagonists of Greene and Joshi lose their
sense of belonging and identity and how they become alienated figures and develop an ambivalent attitude.