CHAPTER IV
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CONCRETE EXISTENCE

Existentialist thinkers focus on the question of concrete human existence and the conditions of this existence rather than hypothesizing a human essence. However, even though the concrete individual existence must have priority in existentialism, certain conditions are commonly held to be "endemic" to human existence.

What these conditions are is better understood in light of the meaning of the word "existence," which comes from the Latin "existere," meaning "to stand out." Man exists in a state of distance from the world that he nonetheless remains in the midst of. This distance is what enables man to project meaning into the disinterested world. This projected meaning remains fragile, constantly facing breakdown for any reason from a tragedy to a particularly insightful moment. In such a breakdown, we are put face to face with the naked meaninglessness of the world, and the results can be devastating.

It is in relation to the concept of the devastating awareness of meaningless that Albert Camus claimed that "there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" in his The Myth of
Although "prescriptions" against the possibly deleterious consequences of these kinds of encounters vary, from Kierkegaard’s religious “stage” to Camus’ insistence on persevering in spite of absurdity, the concern with helping people avoid living their lives in ways that put them in the perpetual danger of having everything meaningful break down is common to most existentialist philosophers.

As Sartre puts it in his *Existentialism is a Humanism*:

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. Of course, the more positive, therapeutic aspect of this is also implied: You can choose to act in a different way, and to be a good person instead of a cruel person. Here it is also clear that since man can choose to be either cruel or good, he is, in fact, neither of these things *essentially*.¹

The necessity and seriousness of these ethical decisions facing man was for Parag the source of his dread and despair. Elkunchwar’s analysis of the human situation provides the central theme of contemporary existentialism.
Sartre was the only self-declared existentialist among the major thinkers. For him, the central idea of all existential thought is, *existence precedes essence*. For Sartre there is no God and therefore no fixed human nature that forces one to act. Man is totally free and entirely responsible for what he makes of himself. It is this freedom and responsibility that, as for Kierkegaard, is the source of man's dread. Sartre's thought, as expressed in his novels and plays as well as in his more formal philosophical writings, strongly influenced a current in French literature, best represented by Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. In France the most prominent exponent of a Christian existentialism was Gabriel Marcel, who developed his philosophy within the framework of the Roman Catholic Church. Aside from Heidegger, the leading German existentialist was Karl Jaspers, who developed the central Kierkegaardian insight along less theological lines. Various other theologians and religious thinkers such as Karl Barth, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr are often included within the orbit of existentialism.

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote *No Exit* in 1944, an existentialist play originally published in French as *Huis Clos* (meaning *In Camera* or...
Behind closed Doors) which is the source of the popular quote, *Hell is other people*. The play begins with a Valet leading a man into a room that the audience soon realizes that he is in hell. Eventually he is joined by two women. After their entry, the Valet leaves and the door is shut and locked. All three expect to be tortured, but no torturer arrives. Instead, they realize they are there to torture each other, which they do effectively, by probing each other's sins, desires, and unpleasant memories.

Existentialist themes are displayed in the Theatre of the Absurd, notably in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which two men divert themselves while they wait expectantly for someone (or something) named Godot who never arrives. They claim Godot to be an acquaintance but in fact hardly know him, admitting they would not recognize him if they saw him. Samuel Beckett, once asked who or what Godot is, replied,

> If I knew, I would have said so in the play. To occupy themselves they eat, sleep, talk, argue, sing, play games, exercise, swap hats, and contemplate suicide anything to hold the terrible silence at bay.²
Considering Samuel Beckett as the last modernist, Cornin says about the play, “The play exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos.”

The play also illustrates an attitude toward man's experience on earth: the poignancy, oppression, camaraderie, hope, corruption, and bewilderment of human experience that can only be reconciled in mind and art of the absurdist. The play examines questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of God in human existence.

Albert Camus was a friend of Sartre, until their falling-out, and wrote several works with existential themes including The Rebel, The Stranger, The Myth of Sisyphus, and Summer in Algiers. Camus, like many others, rejected the existentialist label, and considered his works to be concerned with people facing the absurd. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus uses the analogy of the Greek myth to demonstrate the futility of existence. In the myth, Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a hill, but when he reaches the summit, the rock rolls to the bottom again. Camus believes that this existence is pointless but that Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning and purpose in his task, simply by continually applying himself to it.
The existentialists were devoted to the demolition of dualist oppositions, such as that between the mind and body. In their view, experience of the 'outer' world is mediated by the unique kind of body, the living body or flesh; this is not itself reducible to purely physical properties. Mindful behaviour is exhibited by the whole body's actions, i.e. speech and gestures which show sense-giving and sense-making activities. Also, the opposition between 'inside' and 'outside': it is one thing that has an inside and an outside, not one thing on this side and another thing on that side. Mind is not located the body, or thoughts in the mind, in the way that water fills in a bucket. The skin surface is a fleshy membrane through which my encounter with the world takes place. Things and persons and values become parts of a person through his comportment towards them; not real object-like parts, but vital moments of his own self-chosen life. Merleau-Ponty says, 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. Prior to the existentialists the subject was constituted by a unique point of view: one that is private, privileged, and incorrigible; objects are 'over-against' the subject. For the existentialists
subjective features permeate the objective world; subject-endowed meanings are found everywhere. In 'falling away' subjects turn themselves and others into objects and hence reinforce the philosophical notion of a basic opposition between mind and world.

To prove that Elkunchwar is undoubtedly an existential writer, and that his plays carry the implications of Sartre’s and Camus’ existentialism, a broad outline of the philosophy is given in the sixth chapter.

Existentialism is a philosophic doctrine of beliefs pertaining to absolute freedom of choice. It emphasizes that the universe is absurd based on the phenomena of anxiety and alienation.

The roots of existential thought can be traced throughout the history of philosophy and literature. In modern expression, it had its beginning in the writing of the nineteenth century Danish Theologian Soren Kierkegaard. The German Philosopher Martin Heidegger is important in its formulation and the French novelist -philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus have done the most to give its present form and popularity. Existentialism has found art and literature to be unusually effective methods of expression evidenced in the novels of Franz Kafka,
Dostoyefski and Camus. In the plays and novels of Sartre, it has found its most persuasive media.

The nucleus of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is that reality is individual and its characteristic feature is subjectivity of truth. Keirkegaard directs the humanity to liberate themselves from the illusion of objectivity, a tendency that compel a man to accept the general rules that determine his behaviour and life, and move inward by engaging his mental concentration on individuality. His idea of subjectivity is developed based upon Socrates’ dictum know thyself. Karl Jaspers’ philosophy emphasizes upon inner action of man: — “Existentialism is to catch sight of reality at its origin and to grasp it through the way in which I, in thought, deal with myself – in inner action.” 4

Heidegger states man enjoys limited freedom conditioned by fate. He is the maker of his own life. He is responsible for what he is and what he will be. There are unlimited choice and decisions for him to make his life authentic but he is full of uncertainties and that limits his action and thought. The responsibility of choosing, deciding and acting makes him sad and provide him with a capacity to negate all the limitations. Thereby he finds a threat to his existence.
Almost all the existentialists show a concern with the problem of man, his existence, freedom and choice and responsibility in every field. They identify that a man in the modern age has been dehumanized by being deprived of his freedom. They state existence precedes essence. Man first exists and then he looks at the world, contemplates and acts as an individual. He is a clean slate when he comes into the world and during the course of his life he defines himself. His whole being is involved in choosing the alternative to decide his future and it allows him to have a hold upon his own existence.

Existentialists give much importance to the facts of life like sin, anguish, anxiety, despair, dread, death, choice and freedom. The existentialists strongly believe that by bringing man back to his existence, by restoring his freedom and by giving him chance to choose and decide like a responsible individual the maladies of modern society can be cured.

Sartre encourages man to confront brute reality without recourse to illusion, provided by reason and thereby enter into authentic existence. Sartre, the most famous representative of existentialism, propounds in his philosophy that human being is the maker of his destiny and is condemned to make his own decision. He daringly asserts,
There is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after the thrust forward existence. 5

He holds pessimistic mind-set towards human existence. According to him the presence of human being is irrational and absurd. He distinguishes human beings from other animals based on human freedom. He asserts that thrown into this world, the human being is condemned to be free. He is solely responsible for what he is, his guilt and actions. Choice and freedom are the things that he must find and make. Sartre believes that mankind defines itself through the act of living. In other words, first a man or woman exists, then the individual endeavours to change his or her essence. He repeatedly says in his literature that life has no meaning and the search for meaning in existentialism is the search for self. It is the doctrine that states that existence takes precedence over essence and holds that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompasses mankind.
At the beginning of the third part of the trilogy-*Apocalypse* (Yugant), the wada is reduced to a pile of stones and empty walls with just Parag, his wife, and their child living in the wada and struggling to make the ends meet. Despite all hardships, Parag refuses to leave the wada and settle in Mumbai with Abhay. He says: “This is my choice. To stay here... I can’t tear myself away from this village, Abhay...” (222)

Abhay who has been struggling to find roots all the while, agrees with Parag: “This terrifying drought, these collapsing walls...how happy your home is in the midst of all this...You... have an impregnable house of your own...” (225)

Readers can relate to the attachment that Parag has for the wada and his village. This reflects upon the typical Indian psyche of looking back to one’s own roots in spite of all the riches one might have accumulated elsewhere. Thus, *The Wada Trilogy* explores issues that are talked about in a particular community but these issues also become the issues that are experienced by most communities in India. In focusing upon the Marathi community in particular, Elkunchwar focuses upon the Indian condition generally. He transforms the local into extra-local, and
creates a broad Indian perspective on the socio-cultural issues concerning the people of various backgrounds at large.

Old Stone Mansion deals with the characters, their interactions, and their emotional lives. In The Pond, the characters, their interactions, and at the same time, the changing social scene, the changing values, are the main concern of the playwright. Yuganth is totally about the change in values and society. And that is why it is stylistically so different from Old Stone Mansion.

Yugant is a very personal statement. Parag’s response to a given situation, Abhay’s response to a given situation, and Chandu’s quest- they are all part of the playwright’s personal, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual at the same.

The Pond closes with the hand cuffs fastening on Parag – and light lingering on the three women who have lost their sons. Then the light travels to Nandini and bathes her. She is standing there like a statue, both her hands resting on her womb.

With both Parag and Abhay out of the way, time has taken its toll of both the wada and Dharagaon. More than history, it has been nature in action, with the specks of dust in Wada cheribandi assuming the
enormity of an apocalyptic dust-room. That is the setting at the opening of *Yugant* (*Apocalypse*), when repeating the set pattern of the two earlier plays, this time the wada is gone. Though the wada is a pile of stones still it survives. But there is no family ceremony as an occasion for the visits. Timelessness is a dramatic element in this play. “Time: Today, tomorrow or anytime in the future. High-noon.” (15)

The playwright plays with two time schemes simultaneously for the civilizational time as it is indicated in the first stage direction is set against chronological time, as Nadini tells Abhay, “you left eight years ago, taking the rains with you,” (209) And Abhay recalls, “That’s also when Chandu-kaka left.” (209)

At the cross roads of civilizational time and chronological time, the wada has worn away to become part of the desert, its outer wall full of gaping holes, its front gate wide open. People can walk in so easily through these man-made gaps in the wall. Even the wind breaks into the house like a dacoit and blows boldly all the way to the Tulsi-Vrindavan in the backyard. Nandini says, “People break away bricks. Earlier they used to do it in the dark of the night. Now they do it openly, right before our eyes. We say nothing.” (211)
The family gold with all its traditional symbolic power is gone. She says, “we sold that off first. There is nothing more useless than ornaments. And they’d have chaffed in that heat.” (212)

Abhay’s quick tour of the house brings the destitution of the house into sharper focus. With the wada stripped bare and exposed to the desert, mortem of the village or whatever remains of it comes into view, once again through references.

The first scene of the play opens in the same mansion. The burning of the heat is almost palpable. Nandini, almost thirty, sits now on the varanda, leaning against a column. She is dressed in a plain saree, without any ornaments, tired and weak, but with a contented glow on her face. A flute is heard playing a desert tune, like a deep sigh of the desert being engraved on the silence. The tune is heard only at the end of the play again.

Abhay enters a few moments after the music stops. He is covered in the dust exhausted by the heat, panting, licking his parched lips, wiping his perspiring neck and fore head. He stands before Nandini for a long time looking at her. She is oblivious of his presence. He softly opens his conversation with her. But she is unable to recognize him. Finally she
smiles at him, and feels very difficult to talk to Abhay. She is totally confused and they merely stare at each other. Abhay’s eyes are inspecting the house very keenly. He asks Nadini about her son Bal. she says that he is sleeping. She also says that the boy hasn’t seen the rain since he is born in this world. When he makes an enquiry about his brother, she says very pathetically that he went to immerse the ashes of his mother. Because there is no a river or lake for miles with even a drop of water. So he went to Kasi to immerse with a hope toward off a dry end to the departed.

Abhay wonders how they are living in the village in such abject conditions. He dragged himself to the village through the blistering heat. He can’t find even a single tree. He can’t find a single bird in this scorching heat. For a while he thinks that he is between the earth and the sky. Nandini says, “There are no animals, no birds except a few dogs.”(210) Because “People have hunted them and eaten them all, one by one.” (210) Many villagers have vacated the village and reached the place where they could find water. She also says that no outsider has come for the last five years into the village. They have forgotten that there is a world outside. There is nothing left of their orchard. All the wells have dried up long ago and the wind fills them with the dust. Many
things have been collapsed outside the wada. The outer wall is full of
gaping holes, even a man also can pass through. People started taking
away the bricks one by one earlier in the dark of the night but now they
are doing it openly in the presence of the Deshpandes.

In these circumstances they sold off their family’s gold first. There
is nothing more useless than the ornaments. When Abahy walks into the
middle room, he stops and gets shocked. There is no furniture, but just
bare walls. He stands rooted to the spot in the disbelief. He goes into the
living room and finds it bare. He goes into Parag’s room and finds only a
mat there. This happens in the opening scene of the Act IV of The Cherry
Orchard. At the opening of the scene the furniture is piled in a corner.
Gayef and Madam Ravensky saying good bye to the peasants.

A little later the wind blows again, then Parag enters with Chandu.
He looks tired. Chandu is a mere a skeleton. When Nandini offers him
water he holds her hand and says that she looks like Aai who died at
sunrise.

I know it. My eyes had been filling with tears from the
evening before. I didn’t know why. Tears kept flowing even
as I slept. In the morning, I felt somebody’s hand touching
me. I woke up to find a bird sitting on my shoulder. Then it flew off and sat before me. It followed me around all day. And in the evening, it flew across the Ganga and vanished into the darkness. I know that Aai had gone. She was free at last. (214)

Chandu also comes to the house after a long time. He is found at the temple sitting in a row of beggars. At first Parag couldn’t identify him because his hair is matted, beard is grown wild. Parag happened to drop a coin into his palm. By the time he recognizes him, he starts running. He is about to jump into the river, but Parag manages to pull him back. Parag’s responsibility changes him.

Abhay says that they are all insignificant people filled with greed, violence, malice and treachery. Death is the only truth, when we realize this we wonder that we are making a major mistake interfering with the order of things. He also says that they consider being the creators of the universe and superior to the nature. He blames that they are playing a blind, egoistic game under the guise of pursuing of knowledge.

Abhay also expresses his attachment to the village. He had drags himself all the way to the village for finding the satisfaction of finding a
home before he dies. He is also distressed with his parents as they gave him no home, a place where there is not a moment to rest. He feels that this is the permanent place for him to go and come whenever he likes.

Scene II continues the same day but past midnight. Everyone is sitting in the veranda but Chandu is fast asleep. In The Pond, Parag feels very unhappy with the Sudhir’s attitude and his family towards them when they are in financial crisis. But this time he doesn’t react anything, moreover he feels that it is his destiny. His helping nature is indicated when he spends for the tailor’s funeral. His behavior is totally changed. In this long second scene Parag and Abhay debate over choice and the end of choice follows a perfect dramatic vignette that brings the opening scene to a close.

There is a philosophy which gives priority to human existence, that is to say, subjective experience of the world, rather than abstract structures or essences. It views human existence as radically different in nature from the existence of the physical world, in so far as men and women are free to make of themselves the kind of people they want to be and, to some extent, to make for themselves the kind of world they want to live in. This freedom entails concomitant responsibilities; it is not
freedom in a void, for each person's freedom comes into contact and possible conflict with that of everyone else. In fact, existentialists usually espouse a situational ethics, in which the consequences of particular act in particular social and historical circumstances take priority over the absolute ethical.

There is a whole drama in that little sequence in which 'a loud wail is heard from outside, as if someone died, and Parag goes, leaving Nandini to explain cryptically, “Nobody comes forward these days”(218)- wada is charged with pity and care- and morality. Abhay, still an outsider unable to penetrate the agonizing import of the words, asks for the meaning. Nandini says, “Sometimes there aren’t enough people to carry the bier.”(218)

It is the impersonal incorporativeness of Nandini’s words that conveys the shock of it to Abhay, who bursts into hysterical laughter and goes out, while Nadini looks on.

Abhay asks her not to encourage him to such extent otherwise the house would be cleaned for charity. But the fact is that she herself started it. One day she put her gold box before him.
Parag also talks about the horoscope of the family that Chandu’s horoscope says that his hands always will be filled with diamonds and rubies. Parag is the lamp that will lamp up the entire family. But ironically he did it breaking the stones in the jail. Parag also says about his experience in the prison which has changed his life. He began to feel free only in the prison. All the fear, shame and anger are burnt away. He says that he himself created the problems for his own life, from which he can’t escape. And he feels finally that death is the only punishment.

But Abhay doesn’t believe it. To him even life is a punishment. Yet he doesn’t want to die. Against Abhay’s despair Parag asserts the freedom of choice;

This is my choice. To stay here. Let death come when it will.
But till it does, we have to, and must make choices every minute. I can’t tear myself away from this village- not so much for this village as such, but for the ultimate crisis or death or nothingness it embodies. A faceless, wretched, impoverished village, like ten thousand others. I might even have gone away, but this draught struck and began to
devastate it before my eyes. Then my feet dug in more firmly. (222)

Parag’s choice is comparable to Mathieu’s towards the close of Startre’s *Iron in the Soul*. With the German motorized infantry approaching the village where five soldiers, the last defenders, hold their ground on a parapet, Mathieu resolves once he is left alone.

Parag has travelled through the false essence of a culture or tradition embodied in the wada, lived through its injustices, inhibitions and constraints, to break out of it into an existence—initially of defiance and violent violation—that again in the living through, shapes into his choice, an existential choice over and against all that had been laid down and followed. Parag’s route is one of that *Roads to Freedom* constitute the running theme of Startre’s trilogy of novels grouped under that head. It may not be over-reading after all to locate the subjectivity of Parag and Nandini, whose word for it is courage in an existentialist framework.

The draught and its aftermath, as described by Parag to Abhay, have its focus both on chronological time and civilisational time. For Parag’s view of things and his care of the new victims grow out of an ethic shaped by his early choice of a life outside the confines and honor
of the wada. With Tuka-mama the tailor, Soma-dhobi, Datta sonar, Yaswanth-kaka, Baji-maushi, Choka-kaka, Kasinath Rithe, Vacchhi, Baban Barai, Parag had formed and lived relationship outside and in defiance of the terms of the wada. The relationship involved love and affection and betrayal alike, and constituted part of Parag’s ethic as it involved in the throes of the draught with its incessant flow of dust storms.

Parag realizes that he is responsible for what is happening, so he should certainly not run away from it. He says everybody has to make a choice between facing a life and escaping from it.

Abhay gets a strange feeling that he is an outsider everywhere. He is made an outsider by the terrifying draught, the collapsing walls, the dust rubble etc. He is unable to understand them. He has been walking around the house since he came to the house in the abject hope of gaining an entry into it. He speaks very occasionally when they open for conversation.

During the course of their conversation, a commotion is heard outside from far. It comes nearer and nearer. It seems obviously an angry mob is chasing someone who is screaming with fear for his life. She is
none other than Maina, who once had an affair with Parag in the previous play. Many villagers believe that she has defiled the village. Her sins have brought the calamity on the people. So the village elders gave a judgment that she should leave the village. She refused to go, but they dragged her by the hair and kicked her all the way to the edge of the village and threw her out. When she tries to come back, they drove her out again with sticks and canes. Parag tried to convince the elders but in vain. They asked him to leave the village along with her. Here Nandini proposes that they should go but Parag didn’t dare to leave the village. He feels that his heart is bound up with that place and its people. He asks whether there is anyone who hadn’t gone to her. But those are the very men who headed the crowd and are driving her out.

In the last scene of Yugant, Maina, who once had a relationship only with Parag, but when ended it, she went down so fast that she soon set up shop, quite openly, and carried on smoothly till the draught came up and the villagers suddenly woke up, turns into a site that Parag proposes to approach, assuming responsibility and the obligation; but before even he can carry his resolution, Chandu makes his own choice to go to Maina. In the process he chooses his own death. Parag as usual,
plays the role of the caring witness. In his final decision when he resolves
to leave Chandu’s ashes in the pond. He predicts that, “one day the rains
will come, the pond will fill up and take him into itself.” (235)
REFERENCES


1 Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism is a Humanism, Trans. Philip Mariet. London: Eyre Methuen, 1948, 58.


