Introduction

The growth of human civilization has always been accompanied by unexpected turns and twists caused by individuals and communities exhibiting inexplicable behavior. For every effort of greatness, there has been an equal amount of meanness and debauchery making the humankind more and more inscrutable. Human beings have defied all definitions about themselves and still go about with a perplexing image of both noble and brutal. They create a social order to ensure a cohesive existence but end up breaking it, unable to face the moral crisis caused by the extreme turn of events. This study attempts to see the staging of human recovery from such situations through the fictional narratives of three writers belonging to three cultures and the crises faced by those societies, through a study of *The Plague* (1947) by the French writer, Albert Camus (1913 –1960), *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by the English writer, William Golding (1911 – 1993) and *Samskara* (1965) by the Indian writer, U. R. Ananthamurthy (1932 - 2014).

No society or culture has escaped the throes of crisis – be it moral, social, political or otherwise. The crisis that may be surmountable in one culture may shake the foundation of another. Of all the crises prevalent in society, one of the major causes for concern in the eyes of the participants of the New Dialogue is ‘moral crisis’. Studies undertaken across the globe have thrown up the alarming fact that this is a crisis which could jolt the social order with its amoral way of thinking. America’s moral integrity has been eroded by an ‘anything goes’ culture abetted by the moral permissiveness of contemporary ‘liberalism.’ The concern that the waning of tradition is giving
way to moral confusion and anarchy is shared the world over including China and India despite their strong traditions. The reasons could be aplenty - ranging from the outbreak of wars, outbreak of epidemics and even crumbling of societies under the burden of orthodoxy of religion and caste. This study is an attempt to look at the moral crisis in the different cultures, specifically French, English and Indian through three works to perceive how the social order has been affected and how the respective cultures have tried to cope with it.

Emerging from three different cultures, the three novels, The Plague, Lord of the Flies and Samskara speak of the issues of certain periods challenging the world of cozy compromises. They explore the central tenets of human existence: good, evil, dignity, honour, suffering and respect for the natural world. The writings of all three writers have universal elements in them with desolation and helplessness forming the core themes.

Despite changes in the political and social situations, the postcolonial era still has its share of tensions and dilemmas. Studies undertaken on Camus’s writings have covered his autobiography, his engagement with philosophy and the cult of the Absurd, his work in the world of theatre, his life as a journalist and his contributions to ethical and political debate. Taking Camus out of the French situation, including the colonial French situation, and placing him among the writers for whom, ‘beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined’ is the major concern of this study.

The experiences of his involvement in the II World War brought about in Golding a sort of religious revulsion which gets transmuted into the moral brutality which according to him is implicit in all of us. Taking a pessimistic view, Golding bemoans that war is the dreadful gift that parents gift children. Pointing out the ‘fragility of civilization’, Golding redefines violence and
the inability of humanity to address it. This ‘fragility’ is a metaphysical concept which can be applied to other modes of human behavior.

Colonialism introduced prose writing in India and the growth of the novel reflected the deep rooted Indian beliefs and efforts of the impoverished to uphold those beliefs. Novels in all Indian languages echoed the ultimate aim of literature - self-realization - and experimentations continued with or without the influence of the west. Demystifying tradition with all its sacredness, the Kannada writer, U R Ananthamurthy chose the novel to express his ambivalent attitude towards the ‘moral dilemma of the post colonial condition’.

The writers and the works

The 1950s and 60s were highly turbulent times in France despite a dynamic economy. The theatrical experiments in the early half of the century as well as the horrors of the II World War, which brought to light the problems of the human condition, contributed to spread, on one hand the ‘theatre of the absurd’ with writers like Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Becket, Jean Genet etc and on the other hand committed writers like Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir etc who questioned the very existence of life. French literature of the 20th century was thus a reflection of the society of the times and the experimentations gave rise to new philosophies and new literary schools of thought like surrealism, unanimism, existentialism, the philosophy of the absurd and the new novel. Although associated with existentialism, the philosophy of the absurd remained the personal doctrine of Albert Camus. According to Camus, the absurd is born out of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world and this revolt in turn gives meaning to an act.

*The Plague* evokes the terror of suffering and death, confinement, exile and the separation of loved ones. The victims of the plague can give up, acknowledge defeat, and see the hand of a
god punishing one for some transgression or ‘rediscover their dignity and freedom through revolt and solidarity.’ The plague which is a symbol of degeneration turns out to also be an agent of regeneration.

In *The Plague*, Camus imagines that an outbreak of plague befalls the town of Oran. Through the diary of a witness, Dr. Rieux, he makes us stand testimony to the dramatic evolution of the plague right from the day the rats appear carrying the disease, to the moment when in the isolated town whose inhabitants perished in thousands, the evil relaxes its hold and the survivors rejoice.

The narration revolves around several plans: firstly as the chronicle of a disease traced by a doctor with all the symptoms as well as the narration of a psychologist and a moralist who analyses the reactions filled with egoism, suspicion, pain and finally solidarity. Realistic and mythical at the same time when the disease symbolizes the existence of physical and moral evil, *The Plague* is also an allegory of danger inherent in all civilizations. Another dimension of the plague is that which gnaws the body corresponding to the inner plague such as lies, pride, hatred and tyranny.

Camus gives a realistic portrayal of how human beings can negotiate the ills of the period given the fact that moral crisis is an ever occurring phenomenon and an indispensable part of life.

If Camus had felt the after effects of the war, William Golding, (1911 – 1993) had firsthand experiences of it, having fought for the Royal Navy during the war. Golding’s writing essentially develops Nietzsche’s proposition that there is ‘an internal conflict between the theoretic and the tragic world view’. Despite its complexity, Golding’s art is rooted in popular and primitive experience. He has revealed the dark places of the human heart, when isolated individuals or small groups are pushed into extreme situations. His works are characterized by exploration of ‘the darkness of man’s heart’ as well as delving into deep spiritual and ethical questions. *Lord of
*The Flies* (1954) shows little concern for social morals and the characters find themselves on the border of the social and non-social, or history and pre-history. The story describes a group of children, who are evacuated from Britain because of a nuclear war. Their airplane crashes on an uninhabited island, and all the adults are killed. The boys create their own society, which gradually degenerates from a democratic, rational and moral community to a tyrannical and cruel one. The older boys take control and a boy who is asthmatic becomes a target of teasing and torment. Leaders emerge and the annihilation of opponents, often whimsically identified, begins. Golding provides enough indication that evil is an indestructible part of the human psyche and each civilization must find means to deal with this hidden enemy.

Written in response to *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne, in which three British boys, Jack, Ralph and Peterkin, stranded on an island overcome all problems, Golding has instead resorted to an alternate reality, how the evil in human beings surfaces in extreme circumstances in the clash between democracy and dictatorship, between good and evil, in the fight for survival. *Lord of the Flies* is in the words of Golding "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." A moral allegory as well as an adventure tale, *Lord of the Flies*, which has been submitted to diverse interpretations - psychological, sociological and religious, continues to be regarded mostly for what it is – ‘a disturbing portrayal of the fragility of civilization.’ Golding focuses on the evil inherent in human beings which manifests itself when they find themselves pushed to extreme situations and are forced to make compromises many a time.

Unlike the west, Indian literature was not directly affected by the catastrophes of war but a spirit of nationalism prevailed which was expressed by novelists like Premchand and Bankim.

Belonging to the *Navya* school of thought, the writings of U R Ananthamurthy (1932 - ) pose a ‘metaphysical dilemma’ through the contradictions of society in transition. They probe the
question whether any ethical action is possible for the individual, independent of the community. Through *Samskara* (1965), *(A Rite for a Dead Man)*, Ananthamurthy tries to shatter notions of ‘purity, ‘sincerity’ and ‘selfhood’ by raising the question "What is actually culture - is it achieved by blindly following rules and traditions, is it lost when they are not kept?" The background for this eternal question is the samskara (funeral) of Naranappa, a brahmin who rejects his brahminhood, which brings with it a plague followed by deaths raising questions without answers or archaic answers which do not answer actual problems and the rebirth of the main character, Praneshacharya, a Brahmin. To solve the problem of the funeral rites (samskara) of the heretic Naranappa, Praneshacharya undertakes a samskara (a transformation) where the funeral rite becomes an initiation rite for the living. In life as in death, Naranappa poses problems to the Brahmins of the village and reveals the samskara (the refinement of the spirit) or the absence of this quality. Naranappa contests the archaic ideas of the other Brahmins by leading the life of a libertine in the midst of an orthodox inhabitation. Through the journey undertaken by Praneshacharya in search of the solutions to the problems raised by the death of Naranappa, the author makes us witness to the tests and the discovery of the self of the hero.

Ananthamurthy in *Samskara* questions religious traditions and conservative orthodoxy and opines that new tenets of civilization can only be brought about by individuals. These three fictional works, emerging from three different social and geographical milieus, question the meaning of the moral concepts justifying humanity and human suffering within a context which sees a changing attitude towards moral concepts. Whether it is the plague which kills ruthlessly in *The Plague*, the inherent evil in *Lord of the Flies* or the burden of conservatism in *Samskara*, it seems inevitable that every culture or society goes through the process of redefining or reinventing before attaining *samskara* or the refinement of the spirit.
The writers’ works arising from different cultures questioned the established social norms, challenged the core beliefs and initiated new codes for human behavior.

This study will identify the fine line that separates these two phenomena by comparing and contrasting them to prove that irrespective of age, society or culture, moral crisis prevails across all periods in varying forms reinventing the social order.

Keywords: moral crisis, social order, cultures, philosophy of the absurd, fragility of civilization, tradition versus modernity,