

# REPRESENTATIONAL EXPLORATION OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF BADAL SIRCAR, GIRISH KARNAD AND VIJAY TENDULKAR

SHYAMAL KUMAR SAHA

ASSISTANT TEACHER, GHORAPIR LAKE GARDEN, ENGLISH  
BAZAR, MALDA 732101 WEST BENGAL.

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## ABSTRACT

*After independence, the nature of English drama in India underwent a drastic change wherein it was not only a representation of the European lifestyle but a lot more. It became a typical art form in epitomizing the socio-political and economic status of the Independent nation. With the advent of the eminent theatre personalities like Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, K N Pannikar and many others, the rich chronicle of Indian drama, witnessed a marked change. This was the time when World War II had adversely traumatised Europe and eventually the existential philosophy became a pristine refuge and emerged both as an artistic discourse and a wholesome philosophy. Even in India, the writers started deriving and extracting the themes of existentialism from the native classical traditional folklore and writings. In this thesis paper, the sole emphasis has been given on the searching out of how the "Existential Crisis" has been characterized in the plays of Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar with the special focus on Sircar's "Ebong Indrajit" and "Baki Itihas", Karnad's "Tughlaque" and "Hayavadhana", and Tendulkar's "The Cyclist" and "Kanyadan".*

**Keywords:** Indian drama, traumatized Europe, Discourse, folklore, Existentialism.

## EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS DEVELOPMENT:

Existentialism is an important aspect of modernism in art and literature and as conceived today, it is basically a philosophy of existence which was pioneered by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and later disseminated by Sartre, Camus, Brecht etc.. In the 20th Century, existentialism became popular after World War II. Basically it came on the stage in the protest of 18<sup>th</sup> century objectification of human identity. It implies 'quest' of an individual for the assertion of 'self', despite his failures and limitations. Amidst grim facts of life, existentialism presents a philosophy of hope, ecstasy and exaltation. It stresses on choice of responsibility and freedom for consequences of one's acts. It is a presentation of rejection of all abstract thinking and insists that philosophy should be connected with an individual's own life and experience. In the present study an attempt has been made to explore existential crisis in the plays of **Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar**.

## AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO THE PLAYS OF BADAL SIRCAR, GIRISH KARNAD AND VIJAY TENDULKAR :

Indian drama in English has made fruitful experiments and bold innovations in terms of both technical virtuositities and thematic concerns during the Post World War period. There has been an increasing turn towards myth, folklore, history, legend which has reaped splendid results. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada respectively but also on the pan-Indian level. In many of their plays they find **Man at the centre of the universe and consider his choice of freedom as a turning point in his life** just like other major existential thinkers **Sartre, Brecht and Camus** do. The characters in the plays of these post modern Indian English dramatists are generally victims of existential sufferings and appear like lonely figures with split personalities and divided self.

In their plays, Man is represented as the creator of himself and his inwardness and individuality leads him to a state of outsiderism, absurdity, purposelessness, rootlessness, alienation, agony, loneliness and strangeness of situations. He is always in search for identity and quest for completeness and his individual alienation keeps him away from his 'Self' and 'Loss' of his world. Man is chained in his own hell which is created by the choice of freedom and he endlessly suffers with a hope to find his ground under his feet. This generates meaninglessness, purposelessness and helplessness of man and hence this condition is extremely crucial, painful, experiential as well as existential.

**EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN BADAL SIRCAR :** In golden period of Bengali theatre Badal Sircar appeared to the scenario. A number of his creatively significant and original plays like *Evam Indrajit, Baki Itihas*, brought to Bengali dramatic literature the concept of existential crisis.

**EBAM INDRAJIT:** Tension, stress, boredom, monotony, and repetitiveness of daily life create a crisis in the life of middle class people. Delineating this pale, insipid, picture of common man in the canvas of his writing Sircar upholds the absurdity in existence of human being in this world. The 'nothingness' of man's existence is engraved in the works of great western playwrights like Albert Camus, Alfred Jarry, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov or Edward Albee, but in the domain of Indian drama Sircar portrays this for the first time. This '**nothingness**' is found in his epoch making play *Evam Indrajit* (1963)

**Indrajit:** There is just a large wheel going round and round. And we go round and round with it.

**Writer:** "Amal, Vimal, Kamal. And Indrajit. And Manasi. From home to school. From school to college. From college to the world. They are growing up. They are going round. Round and round and round. ." (Sircar, 54)

The very title "*Evam Indrajit*" exemplifies modern man's state of identity crisis. He prefers to be addressed as Nirmal, like Amal, Kamal, or Vimal because he knows the meaninglessness of his name in the modern situation. Therefore, the bitter irony of his name sometimes mortifies him:

**"Manasi:** Indrajit...

**Indrajit:** No, Manasi, don't call me Indrajit, please don't. I am Nirmal. Amal, Vimal, Kamal, and Nirmal.

**Writer:** Indrajit...

**Indrajit:** You must be mistaken. I am Nirmal Kumar Roy.

**Writer:** But you are not looking for promotion—or building a house—or developing a business scheme. How can you be Nirmal?

**Indrajit:** But...but I'm just an ordinary man." (Sircar, 121)

In *Baki Itihas*, a classic text in the canon of post-independence literary drama, Sircar ruthlessly interrogates the generation of sixties about the dreary middle class obsessions with owning a home, making a career and getting promotions in life. Sharad, one of the central characters of the play, like Amal, Vimal, Kamal in *Evam Indrajit* is imprisoned in the world of mechanical gestures like passing the exam, job, marriage, family and children. For Seetanath living in this absurd world is an act of passivity too. The play echoes Cleanth Brooks' concept of "Death in life" made in order to point out the meaningless existence and repetitiveness of modern people in wasteland as delineated by T.S. Eliot in his classic poem *The Waste Land*.

Therefore, Seetanath thinks that it is better to die than lead a meaningless life when death is the ultimate reality of this lurid world. To justify his thought he carries with him a register containing images of human atrocity from the time of the *Mohabharata* to the present. He parallels this bizarre history of death with the history of man's life: Seetanath erases the distinction between private and public, individual and universal experience by describing his suicide as the only rational response to the accumulation of misery that is recorded human history.

**EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN GIRISH KARNAD:** Girish Karnad is a master dramatist of existential philosophy, which concentrates on Man who is at the centre of the universe. His inwardness and indivisuality, leads him to a state of outsiderism, absurdity, purposelessness, rootlessness, alienation, agony, loneliness and estrangement. Karnad's characters appear like lonely figures having a split personality and a divided self because of being victims of existential sufferings and predicaments. In the present study an attempt has been made to explore existential elements in Girish Karnad's two important plays which reveal direct impact of the theory of existentialism: *Tughlaq* (1972), *Hayavadana* (1975).

In *Tughlaq*, the protagonist is always in a divided state of realism and idealism and hence an indecisive behavior. For being a man of indecision and inaction, he becomes a living figure of the king of Denmark, Hamlet. His „to be or not to be" hence becomes a remarkable feature of existential predicament and suffering. He is not a creator/ maker of himself but becomes as circumstances or situations make of him. He cultivates a living hell for his countrymen by transferring the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and vice versa, just for the sake of his dedicated idealism of safety of his people from the foreign invasion. In the name of equality, justice and Hindu-Muslim unity, he brutally massacres his relatives. Ultimately he becomes a divided self/split personality as a result of his earnest endeavor to build a heavenly kingdom of communal harmony and equality for his people. Instead of being a rescuer, he becomes a victim and people

(his victims) become his prosecutors. Eventually he becomes a very restless, helpless and a meaningless character. As a helpless creature, Tughlaq is full of dread and despair and has no authority to change. Man's real problem being that of action not of a sterile abstraction or contemplation and in the predicament of despair, he represents alienated humanity. In an existential problem, man should act as a participant in his life situations and hence should act, decide and make his own choices as this is what can help him to solve the riddle of existence . Other estranged and alienated characters in the story are Aazam and Aziz

Karnad's **Hayavadana** is a story of two friends and lovers of a single woman. It is a drama of „tangled relationships“. On one hand there is Devadutta, a man of mind and intellect and the other is Kapila, a man of steel like body. They both love Padmini, the wife of Devadutta. Padmini in turn loves Devadutta's mind and Kapila's body and want both these qualities assembled in one- that is „a fabulous mind in a fabulous body“. She even desires to have a son who would be an embodiment of a sound mind in a sound body. Here characters are trapped in a state of agony and suffering due to a peculiar complexity of relationships. At last they become pitiable figures and appear as strangers, loners and outsiders in their own world. Padmini seeks to obtain a perfect/ ideal man without self alienation. She ultimately gets entangled in an existential crisis resulting from a confusion of identities.

Although Kapila tried his best to erase the faceless memories of the past from his mind but Padmini's appearance revives them and adds to his anguish, dread and desperation . Soon Devadutta arrives on the spot and both ruthlessly fight and kill each other and Padmini performs Sati. Hence none of them is able to attain completeness. Kirtinath Kurkoti writes: Neither death of the lovers nor the subsequent Sati of Padmini is presented as tragic; the deaths serve only to emphasize the logic behind the absurdity of the situation. In Hayavadana, the absurd has been highlighted in the accepted norms of social behaviour and Karnad has employed a very existential approach to human life in the play. In order to solve the problems, the protagonist in Hayavadana strives very hard but his noble efforts and struggle bear no fruits due to our wrong perceptions regarding problems of man and our morbid culture's mighty antagonism .

**EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN VIJAY TENDULKAR** : Vijay Tendulkar, a leading Indian playwright had been the most influential dramatist and personality in Marathi. Human existence, deep understanding of human psychology and expressing them through drama has been an obsession with him. He prefers restraint and simplicity to excessive freedom and gaudiness. The individual existence of man and his social existence, the harmony and disharmony between the two, form 'the essence of his thinking'.

*The Cyclist* was intended to be Tendulkar's last play. It was his ultimate comment on himself and the reality surrounding him. It deftly unveils the complex attitudes that permeate our middle-class society. It is skilfully crafted, uninterrupted piece about the adventure of life told through 'a cyclist journey'. That is why some critics call this play an allegory about the 'Journey of realities.. Life's complexity can perhaps be best understood when told in simple terms.**The Cyclist** is not about one but three journeys- the geographical journey in the protagonist, a historical journey of the bicycle and a psychic journey of the cyclist submerging into his sub-consciousness. The adventure gets darker and darker as the journey progresses, The Cyclist facing 'difficult elements both natural and human'. It unravels man's dehumanization through a series of encounters which though often extravagantly comic, tend to become illogical and bizarre as we move deeper into the play. On the surfaced level, the cyclist seems to be the fantasy of a youth who nurture the dream of encountering the world and each turn of journey as a mode of obstacle gives an insight into the horrible reality of the world. "Where I came from, where I am going" ? reflects in the mind of the cyclist. The human consciousness becomes the battle ground for the counter acting forces in the cyclist. A serious subject has seriously been handled by Tendulkar to draw serious conclusions about the triviality of human existence .

His **Kanyadan** is the fittest example of delineating existential crisis found in the characters . The drama portrays that Jyoti is found to attain her choice of freedom with which she becomes the maker of herself. She wants an idealistic life with her own truth and knowledge of the humanity but her inwardness and individuality leads her to a state of outsiderism ; a life of absurdity, agony , estrangement, and alienation. Jyoti and her parents Nath and Seva are always in quest for completeness but they are proved as split personality. Jyoti though brutally tortured by her husband Arun and isolated by her "basic anxiety" and utter helplessness is forced to accept her crisis. She invites unrest by breaking the norms. Nath feels totally defeated; civilization turns into savagery, ideality turns into reality, humanity turns into inhumanity . On the other hand , a man with tender and emotional mind, Arun is stricken with conflict and burst into agitation and revolt showing angst of post independent India .

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