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Essence of Existence: A Study of Savie Karnel's "The Nameless God"

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Abstract

Human beings create values and means to their life through their conscious living. The Greek scholars like Plato and Aristotle are of the opinion that every human should have a purpose to exist in life. Literature of their time talks about the utility oriented subjects which in turn would ensure discipline among mankind. Keeping in mind this concept of essence of existence and the devising of values suitable to the respective period of time, the novel The Nameless God is analysed where some of the characters try to bring resistance to the old pattern of thoughts and adopt new values to effect transition in the present scenario. More than looking for the essence of existence, the study highlights the need to propagate the ideology behind the statement Existentialism is a humanism in practice. The conflict of the novel revolves around the demolition of Babri Masjid and the resultant communal riot that engulfs the peace of the province. While the elders are in the clutches of their ego and the politicians look for the personal profit, the young minds comprehend the demands of the situation and act accordingly. The pandemonium caused by the riot among communities instead of leading to hopelessness drawing them to know the meaning of life which is essential for the sustenance of the next generation.

Keywords: Existentialism, humanism, sustenance, essence of life, conflict.

Introduction

Human beings create values and meaning to their lives through their own consciousness. This means to say that the actual life of an individual is what constitutes the essence of his/her life. Aristotle is of the opinion that a human has a purpose to exist in life and his purpose is to exercise virtues as commanded by the reason. The personal responsibility in terms of the world being the essence of life exercised for the successful co-existence. According to Sartre, existence decides the essence of life. For example, a person's actions have to be taken in to consideration in order to judge whether he is good or bad. All the actions of the individual are his/her personal choice. It is not possible to take in to consideration all the acts of an individual to empathize him. Yet, it is to be agreed that man is responsible for all his acts. As agreed by all the existentialists, a man's action is a commitment on behalf of the whole mankind. His actions will certainly impact the society in which he lives. That is the reason the existence of 'Unknown citizen' is considered significant for his existence itself was the essence left for the generations to follow.

As per Aristotle's views on existentialism the purpose of our existence may be taken as the essence and the purpose is either variously defined by other theorists or the very existence of purpose is denied by some. In the history of mankind each human being has devised values suitable to the given period of time. If values are uncertain, if they are still abstract to determine the particular requirement, then it is absolutely imperative to follow one's instincts. This way human beings create values through their own consciousness and thus determine meaning to their lives.

When we say that our actions influence or impact the mankind, it is required to shape our actions to suit the requirements of the material world. That is the reason why Sartre says that 'Existentialism is a Humanism'. At the very heart of one's existentialism lies the absolute humanity that identifies the relativity of the cultural pattern and acts with commitment. Thus, a purposeful life is lived by one where he is free to have his choices through his senses and such seeking is beyond his self and must be directed towards the accentuation of human values.

At this age where post-truth is an idea adopted by politicians and rhetoricians in order to appeal to the emotions of people rather than appeal to their reasoning, it is mandatory to develop one's critical thinking. Post truth theory is one where the politicians use emotions to unleash the audience's emotions and thereby govern their thoughts and hide facts from them. The application of the post truth theory means persuasion of power discourse in which case it is imperative to feel the facts through one's senses and make one's life purposeful.

In this vein the essence of existence of some of the characters in the novel *The Nameless God* is studied and through this analysis it is found that the characters try to bring resistance to some of the factors or the old patterns of thoughts which are otherwise termed 'sedimentation' or the amalgamation of past choices, by choosing different ideologies and values to effect transition in the present scenario. Noor and Amit Bachchu, the central characters and both aged ten are studying in the same school. In the beginning of the novel Bachchu prays to God, "Dear God, please let someone..... a big man..... die today. I don't really care who, but any one whose death will give us a holiday will do"(TNG 1). Even at school, most of the time he is in his dream world – 'taming a seven hooded snake or flying on a magic carpet'. Both Noor and Bachchu and the other children of the town used to go to Ganesh ji's temple and Dargah. They believe that Ganeshji would help in giving easy question paper and Baba would grant them good results.

Children are all the more creative until their imagination is curbed by the past convictions that are introduced to them. Here the friends feel that their favourite God and Baba ji listen to their favourite devotees first as there is too much work load on Ganesh Ji and Fakir baba. They decide to have a separate God to favour them intoto and this way they feel that it would be a pragmatic solution to their problem. "Imagine if we had a god who listened only to us. What if there is a god who doesn't know any other children but us? Then he will have no other option but to grant all our wishes" (TNG 20)

They look for a secret place, an old fort and take along with them all the pooja items-agarbatti, camphor, a garland of plastic flowers, candles, turmeric and vermilion powder, bananas, coconut, and a small green cloth with golden border. According to Aristotle, children imitate what they see being practiced by the elders without knowing why they are engaged with such activities. Beyond the rituals their innovation is the idea of new god exclusively for them. In other words, the demand for existence gives rise to their creativity. On their first day of installation of the new god which is a stone resembling 'a small dinosaur's egg' they do not want to disturb their God. "No, it's his first day. Let the new god relax" (TNG 26)

The novelist, Savie Karnel in her interview for Deccon Chronicle explains the reason for not naming the New God. She says, "I felt that I should leave it just like that. Here was a God created by the innocent beliefs of children. They felt no need to give him a name. So, without a second thought I called the book, *The Nameless God*". Naming of the God is not important as the book talks about the values like friendship, faith and humanism."

The conflict of the novel revolves around the demolition of Babri Masjid and the move for building Ram temple. The novel highlights the secular attitude of people before the eruption of the conflict. Bachchu, the 10-year-old boy listens to his mom's views on the omniscient nature of God and the secular practices of the Indians. "We've been living together

in harmony for many years. Don't you remember how, when we did not have a baby for years, you went to Mathura and Vrindavan to pray to Krishna, but also went to Fatepur Sikri to Salim Chisti Baba" (TNG 35)

She also defines the meaning of community. "Our community is the people we live with, our Neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, people in our locality. Those are the ones who have stood by us in times of need, attended and lent a hand in our marriages and funerals" (TNG 35). This is the essence of living understood by a woman for a fruitful existence. Such deliberations listened to by children in their formative years enable them to widen their horizon. It is to be remembered that the social media, or the smart devices, games and other means of propaganda spread fake news and the present-day children, digital natives, are constantly exposed to communalism, violence and every other dividing agent. So, it is the duty of every parent to speak about love, friendship, secularism and other values in order to create a society filled with humanity and harmony.

When the riot breaks out triggered by the death of a roadside beggar and schools are closed down, both the friends admire the power of the new God for granting them a long vacation instead of a one-day holiday. The two different versions of videos related to the demolition of Masjid break the secular pattern of existence of elders but the children are of the opinion that the video is a bore. Noor's chacha bribes him with a Walkman for not mingling with Bachchu. But the essence of the issue is better explained by Noor's mom which in turn shapes the thoughts of the child. "Your brother and I have taught Noor to respect all religions and to put our country first, above all else. If you ever try to put any funny ideas in his young mind, I will take Noor and go back to live with his Abba. We will cut off all ties with you" (TNG 48).

Noor's senses govern him rather than the sedimentary thoughts of his uncle. He meets Bachchu as usual and they go to the market place and witness the vandalism caused by the rioters. They too flee their life. Noor saves Bachchu by making him lie down next to Fakir Baba and he is covered by the *chadar* spread over his grave. After some time when they decide to go home, they are caught by a group of rioters and Noor is kidnapped by them. Bachchu is helpless but prays to his new god "Oh new God, please help me! Protect me from monster. You are a god so you can be present at two places at the same time. Protect Noor, but please don't forget me" (TNG 67). He happens to join one of his classmates, Seema who is also in search of her mother, a vegetable vendor.

As they move around Seema is shocked to see the hatred message in the pamphlets that have been circulated by the vendors inadvertently as they are not literates to understand the content. The rioters have distributed pamphlets and the same have been used by the vendors to pack the respective items. The two different types of pamphlets containing hate messages circulated among two different religions through the vegetable market and the meat market would no wonder cause animosity among the two communities. Seema understands that the common people are used as pawns to spread lies and hatred among people. The pamphlets have been supplied by the politicians and thus common people are pulled into the field of violence. Seema and Bachchu realize their responsibilities and their first task is to find out the truck that has kidnapped Noor. Noor on the other hand expresses his thoughts.

"God You have understood your job very well and miraculously created holidays for us. You may not have paid heed to the other factors. I understand you were in a hurry to

prove yourself, but please take it slow. Plan strategically and carefully. I am sure you didn't think that I would end up like this. Please new God, please give some help to Bachchu and lead him here to rescue me" (TNG 80)

Noor's thoughts reflect his responsibility and his sense of values for the sustenance of human kind amidst chaos. "I guess the best way to avenge the misdeeds would be to live harmoniously and let Aurangzeb disappear from our memories" (TNG 82). He is logical in questioning the irrational attitude of public calling Pakistan as India's enemy while China continues to do more harm to India. "And still, when it comes to an enemy country, we only mention Pakistan. We think of China as some exotic foreign land that is great for a vacation" (TNG 82). He also understands that when brothers turn into enemies, we speak a lot about brothers. That is the reason Pakistan is always targeted as Pakistan was part of India and the people share the same culture and tradition. When Bachchu and Seema are able to release Noor from the truck, Noor says "We have succeeded! We have created a God that listens to us!" (TNG 97). Their ability to use their knowledge and intelligence at the given situation is what is termed existentialism. Their creation of New God is a survival technique that is born out of their past experience and the same has been tuned for the present requirement.

Existentialists believe in action. As Satre says feeling is not a guide to action but feeling is formed by the deeds. Here Noor also believes that doing good and bad are one's action and they are governed by the opinions of people. Noor Says, "I think we are good and bad because of our actions, not because of what people think of us." (TNG 100) Seema's mother is considered as bad by the society just because she has left her husband and doing business in the market amidst menfolk but she is looked at as 'Rani Lakshmi bai, fighting with her baby tied to her back' by the friends of Seema.

When all the friends walk through the churchyard, the fear of ghost make them chant the Christian prayer to deliver them from evil. "Our Father who are in heaven ... Deliver us from every evil" (TNG 104). Here, they apply their past knowledge to govern the present situation. They believe that God is their agent to fulfil all their demands. "But you need to be told everything. You need an instruction manual. Why didn't you protect Kangaaru?" (TNG 111). They chide god "Your head is full of stones. Oh wait! You are just a stone!" (TNG 111). They reveal their human emotions to the 'stone' by chiding sometime, by praising sometime, by sympathizing and by placing their immediate requirements. Seema who belongs to the lower class is not informed about gods and goddesses but stories of Ambedkar. Seema's essence of life is hardwork but not magic.

The course of action on the part of the people initiates the pronouncement of a significant ideology for the welfare of mankind by the main characters. As the friends talk to one another about their new god and the future prospects, they hear some hushed voices. A few men gather around along with two political personalities namely Akbar bai and Amarji and exchange a serious conversation that is overheard by the friends.

It is understood that Amar ji exploits people using the religious sentiments for his next election and Akbar bai exploits the present situation for the sake of retaining his position as a leader of his community. The riot is born out of their selfishness. They boys understand the full impact of the words uttered by a poor young woman when they meet on

that day of riot "Alas, the colonies of the poor are easy targets for the powerful to start communal violence. Home will never be home again" (TNG 91). Politics is a good business for the wealthy people. The burning of the huts means acquiring land from the poor to build a shopping complex. Amar and Akbar are going to get their due share of commission in the deal.

The friends also come to know that the origin of riot of the day was due to the death of a poor beggar who was a tribe and it was a natural death. His death has been given religious colour and used for personal profits by the politicians. This incident is a great eye opener for the two boys who think that they should act to restore peace. Their sense of existentialism is nothing short of humanism. It is to think beyond their selves and to choose a fully human life. Noor and Bachchu are successful in their personal search for values through their understanding of God. As opined by Jaya Bhattachaji Rose in her tweets, the novel discusses openly "religion, communalism, politics, secularism constitution etc. At the same time, the basic messages of friendship, respect, kindness, humanity and India's syncretic character come through strongly in the novel. It is obvious it is our citizen's DNA."

The fort where they have installed their stone God is removed by the newly established shrine by Benaam Bhagwan. People believe that the shrine is a symbol of brotherhood between the two religions. So, their god, the little stone god has been stamped and kicked to the side. Seema takes them to the place where she has restored the new god. On seeing their god, Bachchu cradles the god in his arms like a new born baby. Noor kisses the god and Seema looks at their reaction.

Bachchu acts dramatically by running towards the stream and gently immerses their God in the stream. Now their God becomes one of the pebbles and becomes indistinguishable. It is the result of their self-awareness. After going through the present reality, they have gained a higher level of awareness and thereby wish to alter the existing cultural pattern. Their realization is that God listens to them and helps them even if they are far removed from the temple. "Be he is within us. May be our God is everywhere, all the time. We can't trap him in a stone or a structure" (TNG 138). Everyone realizes that God is there "in the stones, waters, trees, mountains, clouds, mud... everything" (TNG 138). Their new understanding is that the Earth is God and it is everyone's responsibility to take care of the entire earth. All human beings are the same. That way 'Kangaaru', the pet dog is no wonder the younger brother of both the friends. Their ideals reflect the philosophy of Spinoza who said, "To be a superman is to be free not from the restraints of social justice and amenity, but from the individualism of the instincts." (Durant 238)

They have identified their essence of their existence by finding the meaning of life. "Men who are good by reason-i.e., men who, under the guidance of reason, seek what is useful to them-desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind" (Durant 238). The friends have proved that humanity is more powerful than religion. To govern oneself is to stand above partialities and futilities of unwanted desire. Their thoughts and behaviour will no doubt be the foundation for change. It is through choices rather than reactions, people can effect and affect their living environment based on the types of influences. The children attain self-fulfillment in terms of their contemporary experiences by being with the existential times and the essence of their existence is humanism.

Conclusion

The controversial nature of religion emerges from its intersection with deeply held beliefs, cultural diversity, social structures, historical legacies and ethical considerations. The novelist has approached the subject from children's understanding of the world. Through their existence and experience with life's situations they understand the meaning of their life. Their wisdom that God cannot be trapped in a stone or a structure is born out of their experience and not through scriptures or teachings by their family members. The friends have understood the unchanging nature of divine as opposed to the impermanent nature of ideals of the world. Their experience has taught them the necessity to practice humanism rather than religion. They are realistic rather than ritualistic in their approach to religion.

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