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- **Answers**

15.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall

- Discuss the literary movement of existentialism
- Study its history in brief and impact on literature

On completing this unit you should be able to

- Discuss the impact of existentialism on literature
- Explain what existentialism is about

15.1 ORIGIN OF EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a philosophical tradition of thought that began in Europe and is associated with some of the nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers who shared the belief that philosophical thinking commences with human subject- the living and expressing human individual, though they had some profound dogmatic differences. In mid-1940s the French Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, coined the term “Existentialism”. The term was initially not accepted by Jean Paul Sartre, but later having rethought over it, he espoused the existential label in a lecture which was published as “Existentialism is a Humanism”. This short book popularized the existentialist thought to a great extent. The two world wars were the major reason for the arrival of existentialism and more specifically the Second World War. It came as a response to and voice of remonstrance against all the rationalistic and speculative philosophies. It started as a voice against the absurdity of pure thought, a logic which is just the immanent movements of Being. Existentialism reinforces the thinking of man as an existing individual who seeks to know the right way to live and to live the life he knows. It emphasizes human existence consequently addressing the qualities which are distinctive in man like love, passion, ecstasy, decision making, anguish, sickness, despair and death, that are neglected in Classical philosophies. It looks at the individual situation from a humanistic perspective; a philosophy that deals with human existence, being, authenticity and universal freedom.

The major aim of existentialism is to know how the individual can attain the richest and most rewarding life in the modern world. It can be “characterized as a reawakening of man’s interest in himself” (Kneller, 1958, p. 31). It is a “philosophical movement oriented towards two major themes, the analysis of human existence and the centrality of human choice” (Stevens, 2000, p.56). Existentialism, as a philosophical tradition, deals with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice and personal responsibility. In a world that is meaningless and absurd, existentialism makes human life possible.

15.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOVEMENT

15.2.1 Soren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855):

The Danish philosopher and Christian fundamentalist Soren Aabye Kierkegaard; famously known as the father of existentialism, founded it in the nineteenth century. He began with the question of “what it means to exist?” His disillusionment with exploratory philosophy and continuing despair made him revisit Christian faith with an aim to reform traditional Christianity so that it is acceptable to the existential beings. According to him organized Christianity and the Danish state church of his time did not permit individual’s confrontation with God and hence

made real experience of religion almost impossible, doing away with the subjective element of the individual which is the supreme of all religious experiences. He reinforced the individual's freedom to choose and the need to do the same along with understanding his character. He stated that an individual can become authentic only when he solely bears the responsibility of his deeds and does not rely or turn to any ritual or customs for support. He found that despair is the fundamental condition of a human being. His investigation and treatise of three different modes of despair is one of the most important milestones of human psychology. His major works include "Either\Or" (1843), "Fear and Trembling" (1843), "Philosophical Fragments" (1844), "Concluding Unscientific Postscript"(1846), "The Sickness unto Death" (1849) and "Edifying Discourses".

15.2.2 Friedrich William Nietzsche (1844-1900):

The German philosopher Friedrich William Nietzsche reacted differently to religion as he said "God is dead and we have killed him" with reason and rationalistic philosophies and consequently religion is dead. His major contributions to the philosophy of existentialism are i) the concept of death of God, which resulted in ii) the rise of "the Superman" who owns his own destiny (ethical relativism) and iii) the "Will to Power."

15.2.3 Martin Heidegger (1889-1976):

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is considered one of the most original and influential existentialist philosophers whose major concern was the problem of being. According to him to exist, to have authentic being, is to reflect on oneself, to be concerned about one self because the true nature of being is self being which involves not only consciousness, but responsibility and free decision as well. Death is important in Heidegger's system as there is no reality for an individual before birth or after death and the one who accepts this is freed from the fear of it and lives a life of dignity. Hence, his major contributions to the existentialist thought are i) the concept of being-there and ii) study of time as fundamental aspect of human existence and of way of human existence. His major works include "Being and Time" (1927), "Kant and the problem of Metaphysics" (1929) "On the Essence of Truth" (1931), "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), "Introduction to Metaphysics" (1935), "Letter on "Humanism" (1947), "What is Called Thinking?" (1954), "The Question of Technology" (1954), "Identity and Difference" (1957), "On the way to Language" (1959) and "On time and Being" (1961).

15.2.4 Karl Theodor Jaspers (1883-1969):

Jaspers began his work in existentialism with "Philosophie". He was deeply influenced by ~~Nietzehe~~[Nietzsche](#) and Kierkegaard. His philosophical concern was about concrete individual and birth of it from individual existence. He introduced two states of being: existence in its

most minimal sense (Dasein) and the real and valuable (existenz). A freedom recognized by choice, awareness and selfhood is central to the existence of man. The predominant theme in his works is individual freedom. According to him, the spiritual transcendence of a human being is possible with the help of participation in the worldly life. He introduced major concepts of transcendence and encompassing. Major works by Jaspers include “Psychology of World Views” (1919), “Man in the Modern Age” (1931), “Philosophie” (1932) “Reason and Existenz” (1935), “Philosophy of Existence” (1938) and “The Question of German Guilt” (1946).

15.2.5 Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre (1905 – 1980):

Sartre is considered to be the pioneer of modern existential movement as well as French existentialism. In fact, he is Existentialism for many. He produced not just philosophical works but also creative literature like novels, short stories and plays that were based on existential thought. His major concern was the idea of Being. He introduced two states of being: being-in-itself, the objects like trees, stones, chairs and so on and being-for-itself, the sphere of human consciousness which is always outside and ahead of the human. “Existence precedes essence” is his famous maxim. Sartre says that man is what he makes of himself. Man tries to conform to the conventions of society and thus loses his uniqueness. An individual’s actions are not only responsible for him, but also influence others. Thus, Sartre believes that human condition is predominantly that of anguish and despair. And an individual’s subjectivity and individuality leads to forlornness. Major works by Sartre include “Nausea” (1938), “Intimacy” (1939), “Being and Nothingness” (1943), “The Age of Reason” (1945), “Troubled Sleep” (1949) and “Dialectic Reason” (1960).

15.2.6 Gabriel Honore Marcel (1889-1973):

Marcel, a French philosopher, focused on the major experiences of human life. He stressed on the idea that it is impossible to conceptualize the important aspects of human life sufficiently. His thoughts work on the ideas of presence and absence; appeal and response; fidelity and betrayal; availability and unavailability; despair, recollection, courage and hope. His major contribution to existentialism includes conception of ‘Primary and Secondary Reflection’, distinction between ‘having and being’ and the concepts of ‘incarnation’ and ‘participation’. Major works by him include “Metaphysical Journal” (1927), “Being and Having” (1935), “Creative Fidelity”, “Homo Viator”, “The Mystery of Being” (2 vols.) (1951) and “Man Against Humanity” (1951).

15.3 IMPACT ON LITERATURE

Existentialism finds its roots in the writings of many nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers. This philosophy is a very free collection of perspectives, aesthetics, and approaches that deal with the world and

its intrinsic difficulties. In general sense, existentialism talks about the ever-occurring problem of finding meaning within existence; there are no meanings or structures that precede human existence, the way they are to be found in religion. Therefore, the individual must find or create meaning for self.

Existential thought has earned an undue reputation for pessimism as well as nihilism. Yet it is somewhat understandable to certain extent as the idea of created meaning comes to some as eventually meaningless or absurd. Also some popular concepts linked with existentialism, strike the average human as dripping with pessimism, for instance angst, boredom, or fear. However, nothing in the philosophy of existentialism speaks of a negative view of humanity or human reality. Moreover, the major part of it talks about the infinite capacity for ethically and intellectually engaged people to make change in the world. It can be said that positive change is a must for a true existentialist, otherwise the existence is nothing but emptiness personified.

From the inception of existential thought, it has influenced many fields and art is one such, which is highly affected by the philosophy. Each field of art has contributed to the existential philosophy, whether it be the novel first or the cinema later. As per many existential philosophers, literature is a major media to communicate the central views of the philosophy. It can be said that an existentialist novelist absorbs the contemporary ideas of his/her time and makes them reach his/her audience with the help of literature.

In world literature, Fyodor Dostoyevsky is universally acclaimed as his works display many literary movements with the help of the myriad characteristics that he showcases. An exemplary novel, *Crime and Punishment*, is an insightful example of how if existentialist thinking gets tainted, it may lead to ethical putrefaction and personal loss. Franz Kafka and his works have been associated with twentieth century existentialism since a long time. Kafka's aesthetics were greatly influenced by the human destruction. His most famous works is the novella, *The Metamorphosis*. He never completed a full-length novel. He saw the individual as trapped in a system that was beyond his understanding. For him, existence was a form of power exercised over personal independence. Albert Camus, one of the most influential existentialists, represents characters in his novels that are trapped in situations and systems which are beyond their control and their ways to deal with these are equally ineffectual. Camus time and again focused on the themes of the absurd and the secluded nature of human existence. A small trace of more positivist attitude is visible in his novel *The Plague*, in which the residents of the city, trapped, are required to beckon inner strength and determination in order to fight the ultimate negative force of death. The only person who denied Nobel in literature, Jean Paul Sartre, had a few but notable literary contributions. Drama was equally influenced by

existential thought and Samuel Beckett made a notable contribution to it. His drama was a rejection of conventional traditions and aesthetics. His plays include characters that are strange and incomplete; people who are not aware of their goals and lack a purpose in their lives. Beckett represented the true picture of modern life insanity with the help of his work, which portrayed existence as confusing, frustrating, difficult and meaningless.

Modern films represent the existential thought in many ways. Chuck Palahniuk, Stanley Kubrick, and David Lynch have contributed by creating works that follow the nineteenth century existential philosophy. Palahniuk exemplifies how the existential ideas can still be a part of work that has its root in contemporary expression.

The existential philosophy gained fame as well as experienced the loss of it at an almost equal speed, due to many reasons. The first among many reasons for the same is that all the periods of literary history get their name in retrospect. As far as existentialism is concerned, very few people considered themselves as existentialist. It was never an organized movement. In fact it is a hazy and unstructured connection of ideas, doubts and manner of inquiry. Secondly, the usage of existentialist thought in popular art reduced its value by making it a mere product, something that was of low quality so much so that many thinkers stayed away from it. Contemporary literature, in its process of adoption and modification of philosophical and aesthetic perspectives, harms them as many different contending voices represent the same from their point of view. Still, Kafka and Sartre are considered as major source of inspiration by many even now and this shows that existentialism has not lost its hold completely.

15.4 MAJOR WRITERS AND LITERARY WORKS

***Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare**

Hamlet is one of those works in English that surprise the reader. The protagonist of the play, Hamlet, is one of the best examples of existential characters written ever. The famous line, “To be or not to be, that is the question?” is something that captures the essence of existentialism. Hamlet is an existential hero, who ponders over the ideas of death, suicide and murder and reflects on how these affect the rich and the poor alike. For him the question of action and conviction, justice and revenge is of prime importance. He struggles between all these and feels sad about the decision he has to take. He feels all this as he does not relate his situation with the conventional, predefined narrative of life. His final decision, after its execution, escapes his control, like all our deeds do. It can be said that all the characters experience the same absurdity.

***Notes from the Underground*, by Feodor Dostoevsky**

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* is divided into two sections. The first deals with topics like illness, rationalism, malice and utopia. It tries to state that rational and utopian systems are based on a completely wrong assumption that all the human beings are rational. In the second part the underground man interrelates with the world outside. Here he experiences downfall due to his trivialities and self disgust. The novel states that systems that are rational and utopian, in spite of being good for us, will fall apart as we, humans, are too sick, adamant and irrational to cooperate.

***The Death of Ivan Ilych*, by Leo Tolstoy**

The importance of death in existential philosophy is well-known. It not only deals with the ultimate vanity of human life and deed leading to a dismal end but also talks about the fact that if one does not face the reality of death the result can be equally frustrating. In this novel, Tolstoy, who is not an existentialist, talks about living a life that is authentic, by acknowledging the importance of facing death. A person who ignores the reality of death will have life that is unfocused and eventually distorted. The central character of this novel is no different from other people with an attitude to avoid the reality of death. When he is on death bed people around him treat him with the same attitude as a result he becomes a mere social role. In the face of this situation people around him avoid the subject of his death and consequently avoid him and he eventually dies.

***The Trial*, by Franz Kafka**

The characters in *The Trial* portray the nameless, faceless functionaries which carry out the so called necessity of the system of which they are part. The absurdity that the protagonist faces is the absurdity of life and of all the systems that human creates in order to understand and manage life. The strength of the novel is the direct and instinctive emotions that it communicates. The reader gets a slight hint of a deep truth that the novel tries to convey; a truth that changes the meaning of life and reverberates the works of existentialists. The novel remained unfinished as Kafka died but that adds to the beauty of it as it is open to interpretation and we may never understand it completely.

***The Stranger*, by Albert Camus**

THE existential novel by Camus, *The Stranger*, deals very passionately and concisely with the theme of death. The central character Mersault leads a life of dead emotions but takes physicality very seriously. He doesn't cry at his mother's funeral. In a fight with the Arabs Mersault undecidedly pulls out his guns and shoots an Arab. This is the central incident of the novel. This incident makes him revisit his life; his perception transforms and he understands the meaninglessness and absurdity of life.

***No Exit*, by Jean-Paul Sartre**

Sartre repeatedly states through his works that you are a result of the choices you make; a result of your creation. Human beings constantly define the world around them in their way, but people around define us in their way by objectifying us. We all yearn for the approval and acceptance of people around us, but when we do this we put ourselves in trouble. The play revolves around three characters, Garcin, Estelle and Inez in hell. The characters engage in long conversations that delve on the above mentioned concerns of humans. The predominant theme of the play is that people seek approval and acceptance of others but they are different from each other and hence never get it.

***The Blood of Others*, by Simone de Beauvoir**

The story revolves around the transformation that takes place in the lives of two characters, Jean and Helene, in the course of their participation in the French Resistance. Jean is a person who does not ever take responsibility of his deeds but his action to join the French Resistance kills the escapist in him. Helene is a girl with free spirit. She is in an illusion that she never bothers about others, but actually she lives her life through the different lovers she has. Eventually shaken and changed by the French Resistance, she joins the movement and is a changed person. Different from the view of Sartre, de Beauvoir says that though we look at other people as objects; it is not the only way we deal with people around us.

***Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett**

Two characters of the play, Vladimir and Estragon, do nothing in the play except sit, talk and wait. Apparently they are waiting for a person named Godot. In their wait they are entertained by two other characters, Pozzo and his servant, Lucky. At the end of every act a boy comes to announce that Godot would not be coming today but will surely turn up the next day. The action of the play is absolutely absurd. All their attempts to leave, die, in short to escape the wait are in vain. The play is not one to one with the existential philosophy but it definitely raises some basic existential concerns like hopelessness, anguish and misery. It is a rich play in the sense that it is open to multiple interpretations and yet does not fit into any single sense completely.

***Run with the Hunted*, by Charles Bukowski**

Run with the Hunted is a posthumous collection of short stories, poems, and excerpts from novels of Charles Bukowski, arranged in the order of the period in his life from where they have come. Bukowski has been created by his works; an act of self creation and artifice. Written in a true existential fashion, his work is raw and uncolored by romanticism. He recreates the world as it is.

15.5 LETS SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt

- About the origin and development of existentialism
- About the impact it had on art
- About various existential philosophers and their major contributions
- About major existential literary works

15.6 KEY WORDS

<i>anguish</i>	extreme pain, distress or anxiety
<i>death</i>	the end of life
<i>despair</i>	to no longer have any hope or belief that a situation will improve or change
<i>essence</i>	the basic nature of thing
<i>existence</i>	reality as presented in experience, the manner of being that is common to every mode of being
<i>existential</i>	of, relating to, or affirming existence, grounded in existence or the experience of existence

15.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Descriptive questions

1. Discuss in detail the origin of Existentialism.
2. Elaborate on the development of the existential movement with special mention of the major thinkers.
3. With the help of suitable examples, explain the impact of existentialism on literature.

- **Match the following**

<i>Waiting for Godot</i>	Fyodor Dostoevsky
<i>The Stranger</i>	Samuel Beckett
<i>The Metamorphosis</i>	Albert Camus
<i>Crime and Punishment</i>	Franz Kafka

- Answer in one or two sentences:

1. Who is known as the Father of Existentialism?

2. Who gave the maxim “Existence precedes essence?”

3. Which work of Kafka remained unfinished?

4. Existentialism came as a reaction to which global event?

ANSWERS

- Match the following:

Waiting for Godot Samuel Beckett

The Stranger Albert Camus

The Metamorphosis Franz Kafka

Crime and Punishment Fyodor Dostoevsky

- Answer in one or two sentences:

1. Jean Paul Sartre is known as the Father of Existentialism.
2. Jean Paul Sartre gave the maxim “Existence precedes essence”.
3. *The Trial*, a novel by Kafka remained incomplete due to his death.
4. It came as a reaction to the two world wars.