Portrayal of Modern Sisyphus in Dilip Chitre's Poem 'Father Returning Home': An Analogous Study

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Abstract: *The situation 'to be or not to be' is internalised by the world. Modernism has posed very agonizing and terrifying challenge in front of modern people, philosophers and psychologists - 'Do we exist or merely survive ?' Existence calls for purpose and meaning whereas survival is just a matter of clinging to life. The situation created by binary opposites resulting from the paradox of science and technology, rapid industrialisation, globalisation, modernisation, urbanisation, etc. caused existential crises in cosmopolitan cities across the world. The question 'who am I ?', the very spirit of existential crises, is the watchword of modern life as modern life is tarnished by existential issues such as anxiety, absurdity, alienation, estrangement, monotony and futility of human labour, relationship loss, hopelessness, meaninglessness, etc. resulting in loss of paradise of humanity.The pangs of these existential issues are extensively portrayed in modern English poetry. This paper attempts an analysis of these existential issues depicted and denounced in Dilip Chitre's poem 'Father Returning Home'. The study is effectuated in the light of the myth of Sisyphus from Greek mythology who is punished by gods with futile labour in the underworld eternally.*

Key Words: *Urbanisation, Existential crises, the myth of Sisyphus.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Modernism is an offspring of late 19 and 20 century. It signifies changes and shifts revolutionizing various walks of life as an effect of rapid industrialization, detrimental world wars, great economic depression, globalization, urbanization and certainly because of science and technological advancement and its paradox. And cosmopolitan cities have been captivated by these changes and shifts intensely victimizing modern society. The demons of modern life such as existential crises, nihilism, individualism, spiritual bankruptcy, failure of social norms, etc. have paralysed the soul of humanity. These evils of modern life are deeply assimilated in cosmopolitan cities which symbolize modern life and civilization. Modern people are neither in paradise nor in inferno but stuck somewhere between them which has left them to wonder whether it is life in death or death in life. Existential crises faced by them have damaged the very spirit of their lives as modern life is characterised by despair, isolation, estrangement, alienation, monotony and futility of human labour, hopelessness, meaninglessness, etc. The soul and body of modern people is disconnected, rather their soul and body both are taken away by science and technology and materialistic lifestyle.

Modern poetry voices this disenchanted state of modern life which is embedded with existential crises and is tarnished by them. Modern American English poet T S Eliot uses the metaphor of 'the waste land' for describing it. According to him modern people are reduced to the state of 'etherized patient'. His poem 'The Hollow Men' aptly describes the condition of modern people. His hollow men are filled with emptiness and straw like scarecrow. These stuffed men are-

'Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion'
(The Hollow Men)

They are the people who are reduced to stone images to be ferried across the miseries and mundane in the dead and cactus land. The words of modern African American poet Langston Hughes would best describe modern life-

'Life is a broken –winged bird
That cannot fly'
'Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.'
(Dream)

Modern Indian English poet Dilip Chitre also condemned existential crises in cosmopolitan cities in his poetry. His poem under discussion 'Father Returning Home' depicts an etherized state of an old man who is a victim of alienation, estrangement, hopelessness, meaninglessness, etc. in cosmopolitan city like Bombay.

In a nutshell, the condition of modern people who are living life without being alive and dying without being dead because of existential crises is not different from Sisyphus from Greek mythology who is punished by gods with futile, monotonous and hopeless labour eternally.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:
Paradox of Science and Technology and Life in Cosmopolitan Cities in Modern World:

In Greek mythology, Icarus, for escaping imprisonment, crafted wings of feather and wax. He neglected his father's advice not to fly very close to the sun which resulted in melting of wings and his falling to death. The phrase 'fly too close to the sun' derived from this narrative refers to not to be reckless and defy limitations. This analogy is aptly applicable to the paradox of science and technological advancement and life in cosmopolitan cities in modern world.

The paradox of science and technological advancement is that it is always accompanied by demons of humanity. The soul of modern life is science and technology and the soul of modern people is blemished by existential crises such as anxiety, alienation, isolation, hopelessness, meaninglessness, monotony, etc. Science and technology has been providing plethora of alternatives, choices and destinations but the journey of humanity has become an ordeal posing many challenges. It is a paradox that it has given sight which has blinded humanity; it has given voice which has silenced humanity; it has provided network connection which has distanced humanity; the more it tries to save time, the more constraints of time we face; the more it offers freedom, the more entrapped we are! The modern life is haunted by these binary opposites. This condition reminds the words of Soren Kierkegaard- 'Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity' (1941:17). As the divorce between setting and actor will result in meaninglessness, similarly the paradox of science and technology has created existential issues. And because of existential issues modern people are divorced from their lives as material growth is soaring higher and higher and humanity is flattening more and more. Actually, the problem is neither with science and technology nor with modern people but with their being together in disorientation.

Existential Crises in Modern Life:

If you are facing the challenge of 'who am I?' and 'to be or not to be' i.e. state of being or not being, you are facing the challenges of existential crises. According to Jameson and Hardt 'the concept of an existential crisis mainly exists in a modern society because modern society offers individuals from diverse groups many choices.' Paradoxical simultaneous amplification and negation of science and technology, rapid globalization and urbanization have taken a toll on humanity. It has built the wall of existential crises with the bricks of anxiety, individualism, alienation, absurdity, hopelessness, isolation, estrangement (self and from society), meaninglessness, pointless suffering, monotony of labour, etc. Existential issues have created physical and mental alienation and estrangement and left modern people questioning their roles. These issues have divided the very self of modern people resulting in a situation in the words of Jack Ernest 'existence is a crime and opinion is the punishment', 'Life is complex; even in the lap of glorious success one can become lost. Is life magic or tragic?'(2017).

Existential crises may reflect in various forms. Emotional existential crisis is characterised by emotional vulnerability, anxiety, lack of coherence, distress, forlornness, etc. Cognitive existential crisis results in indecisiveness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, etc. Anti-social behaviour, addictions, dissociation, detachment, isolation, estrangement, etc. are the signs of behavioural existential crisis. These crises have devastative effects on modern life and have posed many challenges in front of philosophers and psychologists as these are the crises which have no ultimate solution and are present endlessly. Existential writers such as Jean-Paul-Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, etc. studied and illustrated these issues with different perspectives and dimensions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:
This paper examines adverse effects of existential crises on the lives of modern people in cosmopolitan cities. It attempts an analysis of these crises depicted by an internationally acclaimed Indian poet in English, Dilip Chitre, in his poem 'Father Returning Home' in the light of an analogy of Sisyphus from Greek mythology. The study is effectuated by using qualitative research framework.

Father Returning Home by Dilip Chitre

My father travels on the late evening train

Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light
Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes
His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age
Fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.
Now I can see him getting off the train
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.
He hurries across the length of the grey platform,
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,
His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onwards.

Home again, I see him drinking weak tea,
Eating a stale chapatti, reading a book.
He goes into the toilet to contemplate
Man's estrangement from a man-made world.
Coming out he trembles at the sink,
The cold water running over his brown hands,
A few droplets cling to the greying hairs on his wrists.
His sullen children have often refused to share
Jokes and secrets with him. He will now go to sleep
Listening to the static on the radio, dreaming
Of his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking
Of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass.

4. ANALYSIS:

Dilip Chitre is the most celebrated Indian poet in English and Marathi as well. His creative sensibility is not confined only to creative writing but created an indelible mark on translation, painting and film making also. He is the recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for translation and poetry. His poetry unfolds the different layers of urban sensibility especially in cosmopolitan city like Bombay with universal appeal and relevance.

Dilip Chitre's father, Purushottam Chitre, who migrated from Baroda to Bombay, might have inspired the present poem. It portrays urban sensibility and existential crises faced by modern people and especially by old people. In this poem, the poet condemns the existential issues like alienation, isolation, estrangement, hopelessness, meaninglessness, monotony of labour, etc. The poem has universal appeal as the plight of old man portrayed in it can be the plight of any person in any cosmopolitan city and not only Bombay.

The old man in the poem is a modern nomad ferrying from home to workplace and back again without any orientation with the surrounding. He is a solitary figure in a world crowded by people and in his house surrounded by his children. He is quarantined not only in the outside world but in his house as well. In the first stanza, the poet picturises the old man's appearance which suggests detrimental life conditions modern people live in. His travelling on late evening trains suggests his ling and late working hours. His commuting in suppressing and suffocating atmosphere and amongst silent commuters aggravates the pangs of monotony of labour and signifies his alienation and estrangement. He is just like T S Eliot's Prufrock from his poem 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock' who is as isolated as an etherized patient in civilization which is like hell. It reminds us T S Eliot's portrayal of London in which 'each man fixed his eyes before his feet' (The Waste Land). It is fragmented modern society and disillusioned modern people.

His 'unseeing eyes' imply either his indifference to the outside world or his inability to comprehend it or metaphorically they are disconnected from the body. His untidy and dishevelled appearance and 'his bag stuffed with books is falling apart' may connote that his acquired knowledge, experience and overloaded information is unintelligible as despair and hopelessness has taken over his mind and life. His getting off the train is compared to dropping of a word from a long sentence. This thought-provoking comparison indicates his redundant, estranged, detached and alienated state. As dropping of a redundant word from a long sentence does not affect semantic and syntactic existence of the sentence, the old man is like a dropped word from the syntax of modern life. The verbs 'hurries', 'crosses' and 'enters' highlight fast-paced life full of efforts and troubles.

As per Erikson's theory of psychological development, old age is a stage of reflection on life. In old age existential crises reach the climax. Therefore, family members should be their backbone and should behave like planets in a solar system during this phase of life. But the old man suffers from anxiety, loneliness, isolation, emotional vulnerability, fear, loss of relationship and purpose and meaninglessness at home also. He is a stranger not only in the

outside world but in his home also. The second stanza picturizes his humdrum existence in his own home. He is alienated by his children. The phrase 'home again' implies weariness caused by estranged mechanical life. At home 'drinking weak tea' and 'eating a stale chapati' illustrates lack of warmth and care in his life and in his relationship with his children. Books have replaced people in his life. Everything is mundane and hopeless. Albert Camus, an existential thinker, says 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm- this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement'(1991:17). The old man goes to toilet to contemplate on the meaning of life. His condition is just like a protagonist Gregor Samsa from Franz Kafka's novella 'The Metamorphosis'. Gregor Samsa, who is a travelling salesman, suffers from existential crises as he is alienated from the rest of the world and after his metamorphosis into a huge bug he is alienated from his family.

The line 'Man's estrangement from a man-made world' implies multivariate things such as simultaneous magnification and estrangement, alienation and isolation in man- made world and man's commitment to the modern world but inability to understand it. 'Trembling' and 'cold water' suggest lack of stability and warmth in his life. As 'sleep' symbolizes death, only that consolation is left to him. He is rejected by his children and he depends on the company of radio. On radio he does not listen to enthralling songs but to static i.e. just noise which is not comprehensible just like modern life and world. He is dreaming of his ancestors and grandchildren i.e. his past and future. His present is hopeless and meaningless; therefore, he is trying to seek the meaning of his life in relation to his forefathers and grandchildren.

The metaphor of Sisyphus aptly describes the existential crises faced by the old man in the poem. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by gods with eternal futile labour in the underworld because he stole gods' secrets and chained death. Pluto who was the ruler of the Greek underworld could not bear the sight of his deserted and silent empire. With the help of god of wars, he liberated death. Sisyphus after his death woke up in the underworld and obtained permission from Pluto to return to earth to chastise his wife as she had cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square as per his orders. After coming back to the earth he did not want to go back to the underworld. Mercury came and seized him by collar and led him to the underworld. Gods punished Sisyphus with an eternal task of rolling a rock to the top of a mountain from where rock would fall back because of weight. In this dreadful punishment his whole being would be exhausted without accomplishing anything. This stony toil reduced him to stony being with endless suffering.

Existential crises approximated life in cosmopolitan cities to hopelessness and meaninglessness leaving people in senile and absurd condition. Modern people's efforts to cope with the challenges posed by existential crises are as futile and meaningless as Sisyphus's action. They are rolling up the rock of modern life to meaning, hope and prosperity, etc. but because of the weight of existential crises the rock rolls back to nothingness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, etc. Therefore, the plight of the old man which represents the plight of people in cosmopolitan cities in modern world can be best understood in the light of an analogy of Sisyphus from Greek mythology.

5. CONCLUSION:

Thus, Existential crises have diminished the world to the waste land by shrinking humanity and creating absurdity and meaninglessness. Monotonous and futile rhythm of modern life is analogous to Sisyphus's action in Greek mythology. The end to the miserable plight of the old man in the poem i.e. to the miserable plight of modern people is unknown, but at least the intensity of it can be decreased by perceptual changes.

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