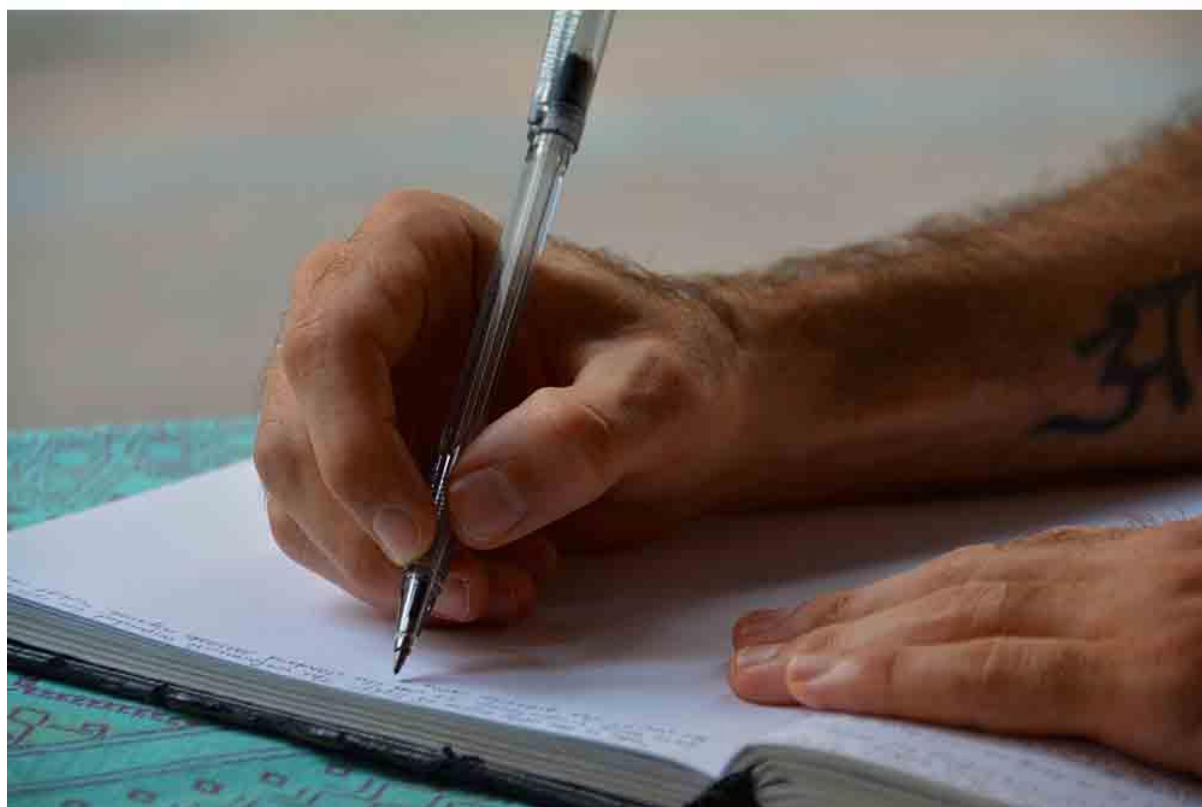


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The Existential Theme of Death in the Short Stories of Yashwanta Chittala

Abstract

Existentialism is a major philosophy that took birth in the western world during the time of two world wars that took place in Europe. Pessimism and related aspects like death, dismay and suffering are the main traits of this philosophy. Though this philosophy influenced the western writers to begin with, it did not take much time for the writers around the world to come under its sway. In India too, the post independent era which is popularly known as 'Modern Period' in literature is mainly influenced by the existential philosophy. Yashwantha chittala is one of the major Kannada existentialist writers in whose works all the traits of existentialism can be seen. The current paper tries to explore the way in which the existentialist tenet of death has been presented in his short stories.

Key Words: Existentialism, Death Conscious, Modern Era, Anxiety, Quantum Theory of Modern Physics

Yashwantha Chittala is an Indian counterpart of the existentialist writers of the west. Meaninglessness of one's existence and inability to come out of anxiety and despair connote the constant struggle and conflict of life in his works. Struggle with the outside world and inside one's self is the essence of his writings. Pessimism and related aspects are something

foreign to Indian tradition in general and to Kannada literature in particular. Chittala's short stories, therefore, have set a trend in the world of Kannada literature. He is a silent spectator of human nature, but unfolds many hidden traits of human beings in each of his works portraying different situations. His characters struggle to come to terms with society and also with themselves. This aspect is made clear in his novels and short stories. The writer's concern here is to discover the relevance of individual's existence in the expanded universe and the abstract society. In his works, Chittala has also made use of his experience in corporate world and its dehumanized relationships and this adds a new dimension to Kannada fictional world.

'Death' is a commonplace in the stories of Chittala. The major influences for the writer to write the stories centred on death are his wide reading of the works of Karl Jung, Levis Straus, Henrick Zeamer and above all, the two incidents from his personal life, the untimely death of his brother and the suicide of his father. The question that haunted Chittala was that what kind of enigma death is whose working no one could decipher, including science that claims to find answers to so many things on the earth and even beyond. The stories, 'Aata' (The Game), 'Adrushta' (The Luck) and 'Payana' (The Journey) are regarded the representative stories of Chittala that present the different faces of death.

'Aata' (The Game), which the author claims to be his favourite story is inspired from the modern Physics- quantum theory and theory of relativity. Quantum theory is a stream of study of modern physics that explains the nature and behaviour of matter and energy in the atomic and sub atomic level. This stream of knowledge deals with physical phenomena at microscopic scales, studying the behaviour of protons, electrons and other particles that make up the entire universe. These particles have completely unique properties. Yet, one cannot be explained without considering the influence of the others. To explain what exactly influenced Chittala, it is better to elucidate the concept of quantum entanglement. An entangled system

is the one whose state function cannot be expressed just by its local constituents. Thus entangled particles refer to those which are intrinsically connected with each other. In an entanglement the state of a particle is expressed as superposition of states of many such particles connected with each other. Various types of interactions will decide entanglement of quantum systems. Entanglement is said to be broken when the entangled particles are perturbed through interaction. This property should be same irrespective of the spatial separation between them; this seems to violate the laws of causality. For example if a spin zero particle decays into two 'spin half' particles and if we assume such an entangled system is separated by a very long distance so that even light takes considerable time to travel between them. If we measure spin of one particle along some axis and then the spin of the other particle on the same axis, it should be opposite, but in a complementary sense. Here, violating the law of relativity, communication travels faster than the speed of light. This appears to be a paradox. But a possible resolution to this paradox is to assume that the result of measurements depends on the predetermined variables called 'hidden variables'. They will effectively determine the states, right from the time of separation till the measurements are done. This means each particle carries all the required information with it. There is no need for transmission of information at the time of measurement. Einstein and others originally believed this was the only resolution to this paradox and the accepted quantum mechanical description should be incomplete. However the experiments suggested that there are no such hidden variables. This theory made the author weave the plot for the story 'Aata'. In the words of Chittala,

'The inspiration behind the story 'Aata' is modern physics- quantum theory and theory of relativity, which struck me while I was reading about its principles and consequences. Everything in the universe is interrelated. One cannot exist without the other. As I read this theory, strange imagination lingers in my mind. Does my waving

of a finger in the air can make changes in the pattern of the universe?..... I was taken aback by the image that was created, which further inspired me to write ‘Aata’’. (YCS 65)

‘Aata’ narrates the story of the death of Narasimha, a young and healthy man. The story is narrated in such a way that the readers feel as though the entire universe anticipated Narasimha’s death and expressed the same through the hints. The premonition of death is felt by Budana Sahib in his feeling of unexplained fear and anxiety. He, who is the narrator of the story, is the symbol of wisdom and ripeness. As the story begins, Budana Sahib walks to his granddaughter’s house with an agitated mind. The nature symbolises the agitation of his mind for there are indications of heavy rains. As he passes through the shop of Narasimha, he notices that there are no lights and that the shop has been closed early. While walking to his granddaughter Fatima’s house, Budana Sahib meets many young men of the village heading towards Narasimha’s house for the latter has invited them for a game of cards. By the time the old man reaches his destination, Narasimha’s house is filled with his friends Nagesha, Sarvottama and others. His friends describe to Narasimha’s mother about a strange and terribly looking man standing near their home, with a rope in hand and a blanket on his body. They are panic-stricken as they describe him. Though the members of Narasimha’s family at once feel uneasy by the description of the man who resembles ‘Yama’, the death god, Narasimha brushes aside their fear telling them that he too saw the same man near his shop in the afternoon and now he might be standing in their backyard to protect himself from the heavy rain.

As the young men play and the spirit of the game reaches its peak at post midnight hours, Narasimha screams remembering something horrible. He takes his finger to the candle light and screams, ‘Grandma, snake! Probably I was bitten by a snake and not a rat during the night’ (SK-1 256). On the other end of the village, Budana Sahib who was sleeping in his

granddaughter's house suddenly wakes up with an untold anxiety and starts walking towards his daughter's house. As he passes through Narasimha's house, he sees a group of people gathered in the courtyard, who are making preparations for Narasimha's hearse. Budana Sahib just exclaims, 'Khuda Ka Merzi' (the will of the god).

The author has effectively linked the image of the black man with rope, the agitation in the mind of Budana Sahib and the unforeseen death of Narasimha. The interplay of the light and shade, the image of the snake and its venom- everything adds to the effect of the story. The author wonders at the participation of the entire universe in the trivial matter of a death that occurs in Hanehalli, a village that is located in the remotest corner of the world. Thus, the author brings home the idea, nothing is isolated in the world and each and everything in the world is interlinked.

Though regarded as an ordinary story by many critics, 'Adrushta' (The Luck), creates a scene where the readers feel as though they see and witness death from a very close proximity through the eyes of a young boy named Neelakanta. As the story begins, Neelakanta the main character of the story has been suffering from a fatal fever for the last three days. To see him comes Pokka, his friend and brings with him the news of the arrival of his 'new brother' whose existence was not known to him till now. He also tells that his new brother has come today and he would bring him when he comes to see him in the evening. After Pokka leaves, the fever of Neelakanta intensifies and the uncertainty about his survival is expressed through the words of his parents and others. Neelakanta feels as though he stands on the threshold of death. In his half conscious state, he listens to the story of Pokka's brother- his imprisonment in the jail in Goa, the reason unknown to him, the struggle which he had to undergo to come to his home town from there, the fever that he was infected with as soon as he entered the village etc. Though Neelakantha is not in a condition of responding to the words of the people around him, he listens to them as he sleeps. Pokka comes to meet his

friend Neelakanta who has been recovering from his fever after two weeks to break the death news of his new brother due to a fever that turned out to be fatal. Death holds the central place in the story. Further, the title of the story is justified by Neelakanta's miraculous recovery from his fever, while Pokka's new brother who comes to the village with lot of hopes and aspirations becomes a victim of the fever. Thus it is the luck that saves Neelakanta.

The third story in the series is 'Payana' (The journey), that narrates the final journey of a Sales Executive, along with narrating his routine journey related to his profession. The protagonist of the story who is not addressed by his name, but by his designation as just the Sales Executive accepts his death with the same steadfast spirit as he accepts his life. His preparation for the final journey to reach the final destination of life is beautifully presented by the narrator.

As the story begins, the protagonist is visited by a stranger and is ordered by him to be ready at the early hours in the morning that is, when the cock crows, because they have to start early. A very interesting fact on the part of the protagonist is that he neither enquires about the stranger nor about the place they are to go the following day. The stranger who visited him casting a hypnotic effect on him did not expect any question from him. As soon as the stranger was off, the Sales Executive begins to make preparation for his next day's journey. He begins to fill his suitcase with the clothes scattered around and goes to shave the beard about which he is very particular. He orders the hotel authorities to keep the bill ready and also makes a request with them to provide his clothes from the laundry as early as possible. From the reply of the hotel manager, we come to know that this room was booked for ten days and the sales executive is curtailing his stay there. He does not reveal the reason for this, but simply says, some inevitable reason has occurred which has made him to leave early. After making doubly sure of the programme of getting up early in the morning by

requesting the hotel manger and generously tipping the room boy to wake him in the early hours the following day, he starts contemplating about his journey.

He is astonished about his attitude of not questioning anybody, either his boss or his friends. When his boss asks him very frequently to go on business trips and his friends come out with the sudden ideas of going to movies or to such other places, he obliges without a word. Today he has got an opportunity to disobey his boss by cutting short his business trip. He dials the number of his boss to tell him about his personal engagement for the sake of which he cannot complete his sales trip. But he does not get connected to his boss's number. Missing an opportunity of quarrelling with his boss, he starts laughing hilariously and thinks of going to bed as it is already midnight. He does not even switch off the lights in the room for the darkness may prompt him to sleep for more time. In the middle of the night, he anxiously gets up with the thought of missing the person whom he is waiting for. At that hour he thinks of the attire he has to wear to go with the man. He remembers the appearance of the man who has asked him to go with him. He is dark and has rugged look, with big moustache, holds a rope in his hand, the same man whom we read about in the story, 'Aata', resembling Yama, the Death god. For the first time in his life he becomes sceptical about somebody which is much unlikely of his attitude.

At the end of the story, we see that there is a lapse on the part of the room boy for he fails to wake him up at the early hour. With much hesitation and feeling sorry for his mistake, he comes into the room to see if the man has gone already, but, only to find him lying dead on his bed in his full suit and the suitcase lying beside him.

The description that the author gives to show the readers the way in which the man in the story welcomes death is really astonishing- the image of the death in the form of a stranger calling the man to go with him, the salesman's answer in the hotel register for the question about his next destination as 'destination not known' adds to the beauty of the

narration. The crux of the story flashes to the readers only at the end with the death of the salesman. This story at once brings to our mind Emily Dickinson's poem, 'Because I could not stop for Death', where the poet waits for Death with the enthusiasm of a bride waiting to get married with her groom. Here, in this story, with the same enthusiasm the salesman waits for the stranger, who is nothing but death.

Thus, Yashwantha Chittala is definitely one of the noted writers of the modern or Navya era writing under the influence of existentialist writers like Kafka, Camus and Hemingway. He definitely opened new vistas in Kannada literary world by his varied themes both in his short stories and novels.

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