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## EXISTENTIALIST POETRY, WRITTEN IN TELUGU IN ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA, AN INCISIVE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** Five renowned poets from the land of Telugu in India have trodden the way of existentialism; they are local indeed but their thoughts are global and centered around man. For them, man is their music and man is their message. The trait of existentialism is clear that people are entirely free and they are responsible for what they make of themselves. The poets urge the individuals to take responsibility for their actions and choices they make. The five poets vehemently state that humans are living in a disorderly world where people ought to make their choices and they should stand for the consequences of their choices and actions; they can never make their disasters, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars or any supernatural elements when they are sick in fortune. These existentialist poets explore questions which are related to the meaning, purpose, and value of human existence as a whole. The common conceptions in their existentialist poetic thought comprise existential crisis, dread and anxiety in the face of an absurd or disorderly world, as well as authenticity, courage, and virtue. The poets have borrowed the thought from the West and produced their own poetry.

**Key words:** existentialism, supernatural, pangs, existence, dilemma, pangs, limelight, optimistic, skeptics, subjectivity, individualism.

The Western born existentialism, a mid-nineteenth century philosophical movement which has influenced the world literature, inclines towards three major themes, analysis of human existence, moral individualism and centrality of human choice. Encyclopedia Britannica defines that the term itself suggests one major theme: the stress on concrete individual existence and, consequently, on subjectivity, moral individualism and freedom of choice. By and large, existentialism is human centered and it denies any external force or supernatural element on human either to make him good or evil instead, man is responsible for it for man makes man. In the public consciousness, at least, Sartre must surely be the central figure of existentialism. With the possible exception of Nietzsche, his writings are the most widely read. Although uncomfortable in the limelight, he was nevertheless the very model of a public intellectual, writing hundreds of short pieces for public dissemination and taking resolutely independent; so independent that he declined the Nobel Prize for his works. His writings are most clearly existentialist in character. According to Sartre, people are not born inherently valuable, but rather constantly create the value in their own lives. Rather, he argues, his existentialism is humanist in the sense that it refuses to appeal to God to make sense of the human condition and grounds the moral aims and truths of human life in humans themselves. He reiterates that existence precedes essence, an undeniable statement.

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, played a major role in the development of existentialist thought. He criticized the popular systematic method of rational philosophy advocated by the German historian and philosopher GWF Hegel. He also ran against Pascal in the generality of fundamental values and beliefs. Kierkegaard emphasized the absurdity inherent in human life and wondered how any systematic philosophy could be applied to the ambiguous and uncertain human condition. In his works, he explained that each individual should attempt an intense self-contemplation of his or her own existence.

The existentialists including the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche suspected the significance of systematic reasoning. They held that rational clarity is desirable wherever possible, but the noticeable point is that the most important questions in life are not accessible to reason and science. The existentialists further emphasized that the understanding of a situation by someone who is directly involved in that situation is superior to that of a detached or an objective observer. Thus in existentialism subjectivity plays a pivotal role. At the same time, the behaviouristic approach examines how motivations are learned and how internal drives and external goals interact with learning to produce behaviour. Perhaps the most prominent theme in existentialist writing is the freedom of choice. Existentialists think that human beings do not have a fixed nature or a ubiquitous mind-set, as other animals and plants do. Each human being makes choices that play a key role in forming his or her own nature. In the formulation of the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, existence precedes fundamental nature.

Freedom of choice further requires commitment and responsibility otherwise it may lead to anarchy for we all have limited freedom. Existentialists have argued that when individuals are free to tread their own path, however they must accept the risk and responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads them to. Thus the subjectivity, moral individualism and freedom of choice are proved to be the three distinctive characteristics of existentialism. In most of the cases the existentialist thought invariably, indivisibly includes atheism or agnosticism. Hence many existentialists are found to be either atheists or skeptics. The next pertinent point is a number of existentialist philosophers mostly used literary forms in order to convey their thought. They also emphasized that existentialism has been as vital and as extensive a movement in literature as in philosophy.

The themes the existentialist writers choose are also quite different. The 19th century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky is one of the greatest existentialist figures of literature. In *Notes from Underground*, the alienated anti-hero rages vehemently against the optimistic assumptions of rationalist humanism. In his magnum opus '*Crime and Punishment*,' the hero Raskolnikov's philosophical elevation begins with crime. In prison he agrees that without the crime he would not have reached the point of asking himself such important questions and experiencing such desires, feelings, needs, strivings and inner explorations. Existentialist themes have also reflected in the theatre of the absurd. This drama tends to eliminate much of the cause-and-effect relationship among incidents, reduces language to a game, minimizes its communicative power and reduces characters to mere archetypes. Moreover it makes place nonspecific and views the world as an alienating and incomprehensible entity. The best examples of this kind of dramas are Eugene Ionesco's '*Rhinoceros*' and the Irish-born writer Samuel Beckett's '*Waiting for Godot*.'

Existentialism has not been confined to any one particular country or continent. Many writers of the different nations across the world consciously or unconsciously expressed existentialist concerns in their literary works. In this aspect, there is no exception to the Modern Telugu Poetry which has witnessed some poets who come under this category. There are five renowned poets, in whose poetry existentialist thought and expressions are strikingly apparent. They are 'Bairagi, Ajanta, Ismail, Mohan Prasad (Mo) and Srikant Sarma.' They have given a new dimension to modern Telugu literature with their essentially existentialist thought in poetry. The five poets have not confined themselves to any particular ideology. They supported no contemporary literary movement nor belonged to any political or social group. They have written poetry with a subjective perspective. Poets of this class are more introverts rather than extroverts. Such outlook or temperament is the essence of existentialism.

The first three poets of the five, Bairagi, Ajanta, Ismail are purely existential poets. Mohan Prasad, popularly known as 'Mo' is a unique poet as he uses surrealistic and his own private images with the blend of existentialism in his works. Because of these efforts, his poetry is complex. He plainly says that a poet need not be a preacher. Srikant Sarma's poetry is an amalgamation of symbolism, imagism and existentialism each in its proportion. Ajanta, whose Christian name is Penumarti Viswanatha Sastry, did not write voluminous poetry. Though his poetry has a little progressive temper, he was aloof from the progressive literary movement. He had his own perception of things that he liked most and he reflected it in every poem he composed.

Ajanta believes that unless the present social inequalities are totally destroyed through a revolution, a new classless and casteless society would not be possible to be born. It shows that he is in favour of a radical and progressive change in the societal setup. In spite of his progressive reformist thoughts, Ajanta refused to be a political propagandist or a member of any association. Because of Ajanta's unique perception of things, he

remained detached from the trappings of the mundane life and all the literary movements of his time. Though he liked Sri Sri and even wrote a poem on him, he had never been a votary of Sri Sri's ideology or his political and literary movements. All these things mirror his existential philosophy. Ajanta asserts that in every human being he could see himself. That makes his humanism, universality, cultivated individuality and elevation of mind distinctly clear.

In this poem, 'As the Trees Crumble,' Ajanta viewed the existence of modern man and portrayed man's despair, his loneliness and his helplessness. The poet felt that man found no road to reach his destination. Ajanta here turned a little pessimistic, which trait can often be found in existentialist poets. In the poem Ajanta struck a hopeless and discordant note about the existence of man. Along the road the protagonist witnessed the trees collapsing and the whole scene was bleak and gloomy. He could not die as he was not allowed to die; he had neither life to live nor death to die. In other words it is life in death or death in life. From Ajanta's point of view, all through the journey of life, even if one has a decisive mind to reach one's goal, there is no guarantee that one can achieve it surely because of the inescapable uncertainties of life.

In the poem, 'Curved Line,' Ajanta pointedly described in the opening lines of the poem themselves how powerful the existence of man is and what it would be after one's existence. He suggested by implication that there was an effect and impact of man's existence on the things around even after his death. It's also shown that there was horror and disaster after one's existence. Not only that, when the existence proved ineffective for whatever reasons and whatever circumstances, that very existence would become so negative as to one turns into a devil. Ajanta knew it well that the existence of man was for a definite purpose but that's not actually known to that very man himself. He took it to be a secret play and applied it to the writing of poetry also. Just like the purpose of one's existence is not known to one, it so happens to the poetry. That's why the poet held that poetry was a secret play which was completely obscure, unforeseen and incomprehensible.

Ajanta opined that at the end of the life as well as a poem, nothing would be left except obscurity. The poem shows that the surest of certainty in the world is only death which he conceived to be a stage of evolution but not an end. Thus Ajanta compared the existence of man to that of a poem. He also felt that death and birth would exist side by side. This is the theistical way of thinking. It is found, in the poem, Inner Lamentation where Ajanta emphasized that death is not an accident but an evolution. He believed that death was not physical but moment to moment life. Here he trusted in reincarnation or rebirth which is close to Hindu philosophy. He went ahead saying that death was life too as it would lead to another life. The other side of the coin of existentialism was also shown by Ajanta in his poem, 'Inner Lamentation.' In the poem an unbearably stark and caustic picture of the existence of man in its most absurd situation was envisioned. The very first line depicts the sale of bodies. It conveys the degraded state of the existence of man, which is like a commodity, in a rather sarcastic manner.

In the same way, another existentialist poet Aluri Bairagi, popularly known as Bairagi, experiences the paucity of right words to convey his ideas emphatically and effectively. He is constantly at war with his inner self to capture the right word to use it in a certain context. Such a situation arises when writers abandon the beaten track and take an untracked one. The existentialists of the West, like Kierkegaard, also felt the same dearth of words and so they coined new words and phrases. They called it a specialized vocabulary. For example the word 'thrownness' is to describe the idea that human beings are thrown into existence without having chosen it. In the same way, there are phrases like, 'thing in itself, being in itself, being for itself, non-positional consciousness, positional consciousness' etc. Bairagi had a very deep concern for the oppressed and the depressed and decried the morally degraded existence of people who are supposed to be better individuals. Bairagi conceived that economic inequalities would lead to frustration and hunger like a tiger's paw knocks at and scratches the starved human hearts. His perception is that the poor should prefer to die than to allow the oppressor to enjoy their exploitation. Bairagi strongly felt that the things of mere beauty are futile. He holds that unless the basic needs are fulfilled, human beings can't enjoy the beauty of anything. So, a thing of beauty may not look beautiful to the one whose stomach is empty.

W.H. Davies, a famous British poet in one of his poems expresses that he cannot enjoy the things of beauty. He laments, 'Can I admire the statue great, When living men starve at its feet? Can I admire the park's green trees, A roof for the homeless misery?' Here is a pertinent point about existentialism. Both Kierkegaard and Jean Paul Sartre steadfastly believed that existence would precede essence. It is seen in Kierkegaard's work 'The Repetition.' Like the characters in the poem 'Voices in the Well,' the literary character in Repetition, the Young Man questions the reason and problems of existence and laments 'How did I get into the world? Why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought by a peddling shanghaiier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager? I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?'



Though Bairagi was basically a radical humanist and as a poet he was rather influenced by T.S. Eliot's magnum opus 'The Waste Land' and 'Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy. He did not belong to any particular literary movement or group as the other existentialist poets did. He composed poetry on a purely personal and tragic note. It seems he identified himself with the misery found around. One feels, on reading Bairagi's poetry, like listening to the voices of the travelers who got lost in a distant desert. Bairagi identified himself with the lot who suffer from moral degradation and social debasement. As he viewed the world from his existential stand point, he visualized that in every moment of man's existence he felt the excruciation of birth and death. Bairagi believed that unless and until one would identify oneself with the world, one couldn't speak correctly. He, in his foreword to his *Voices in the Well*, declared emphasizingly the importance of perception that was based on personal, emotions, experiences, impressions, feelings and opinions rather than superficial facts or borrowed ideologies.

His '*Voices in the Well*' is an elaborate description of man tortured by the pain of existence. In the poem there is a well that symbolizes the decadence and death. There is neither hope nor help within the reach of those got trapped in the well. It reflects the discomfiture and discomposure of the human existence. Those who remain in the well can't see any light. They have neither any support to climb up the well nor any comfort to be able to live there itself. They cry out aloud but their voices are not heard. Bairagi became a little pessimistic and felt that there was nothing like development of art, architecture, and civilization or any solace or comfort in the world. Bairagi struck a note of despair showing the reversal of the wheel of time. He portrayed the total and utter ruin of man in all his existential essentials. He pointedly focused on the absolute downfall of man who has not known the very purpose of his very existence. Bairagi gave up hope saying that the darkness would never be dispelled underlining the fact that the downfallen might not be lucky enough to see the light of the day in their lifetime. He found no civilization in the so-called civilized world. He believed that the present moment was like an abandoned baby.

There is similarity between the voices in Bairagi's poem '*The Voices in the Well*' and that of T.S. Eliot's poem '*The Hollow Men*.' In both the voices the unending, pathos, hopelessness, loneliness and degradation are vividly perceivable. It is found in Bairagi's poetry that in every minute of his existence, man experiences the anguish of birth pangs and death distresses. Man has to face the problems thrown on him by the past. The speaking voices in the poems of Bairagi failed to determine what is right or what is wrong. All that they need to do is to act. He felt that instead of opening the doors of action, knowledge and wisdom, they are making reticent. Man wants to be led from darkness to light, from illusion to reality and in this world full of doubt, he needs to have a little faith.

In his poem '*Raskolnikov*,' Bairagi portrayed the existential dilemma and endless agony of Raskolnikov, the hero of *Crime and Punishment*. After killing the old pawn broker and her step-sister, being prompted by the extraordinary feelings, suffers from immense sense of guilt. This feeling increases in him and makes him thoroughly repentant. That repentance further becomes unbearable. He wants to reveal the whole thing to Sonia to lighten his heart. The hero of '*The Crime and Punishment*,' Raskolnikov commits a crime and undergoes a different kind of punishment which is more internal than external. One may escape from the world outside but how can one get away from one's own conscience? He feels that he is an extraordinary young man and kills two women. He takes away the money which he cannot use either for himself or for his mother and sister. Besides, the feeling of guilt haunts and suffers him through and through. At last he pours out his heart to Sonia revealing his crime. Before he confessed to Sonia, he says to her, '*Sonia...! I have a bad heart, take note of that. It may explain a great deal. I have come because I am bad. There are men who wouldn't have come. But I am a coward and...a base...mean wretch. But.....never mind....Sonia! That's not the point. I must speak to you now, but I don't know how to begin.*'

'*The Dilemma*' is a poem, of Bairagi, full of doubts and questions of the existential realities of man. He says that there is 'cloudedness' in the human world. He used the Sanskrit word *viswa vyadha* which means universal agony. He searched for the right way to get rid of the human misery. He journeyed through desire and liberation in the poem. Bairagi presented the universal dilemma 'to be or not to be', the biggest problem which suffered Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and also Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. The poem '*Prostitute*' in the anthology *Shadows of Darkness*, Bairagi penetratingly looked into the existential realities through the fanciful pal of romanticism. In the poem the poet underlined the fact of the ultimate reality of existence in absolute starkness. He tore off the mesmerizing veils of romantic illusions.

Ismail, another existentialist poet, is a lover of trees, canals, boats, rivers and objects of nature because he intimately attached himself with them all. He too, like the other poets of this clan, composed poetry on his own experiences and feelings rather than anything from outside. It is commented that he was explorative in seeking experiences from his own existential perception. Ismail employed symbols and images to stimulate an identical experience or feeling in the reader, in order to drive the point home effectively. For instance, in his

poem the Stone, he, on observing the existence of the stone, commented first that the stone was blind, deaf and dumb. But suddenly realization dawned on him. He said that it too had a heart that would beat for it became warm when it was left in the sun. So, the sun was its lover. It is commented that Ismail's Stone has a story to tell which is as deep and pathetic as Tagore's 'Subha.'

Like other existentialists Ismail held that freedom is the life breath of a poet and no poet worth the name should allow himself to be tied down to any single ideology whether it is political or social. 'Donkeys in Anantapur' is one of his political poems with satire being the undertone. Ismail wrote the poem while the conference of Marxist Revolutionary Poets was holding its sessions in Anantapur. It shows the poet's shrewdness in sarcasm. But at the same time Ismail felt that poetry had a psychotherapeutic effect of purifying the human heart of its coarseness and making it sensitive to beauty and virtuousness. Ajanta also believed that though there was injustice in the society, it would necessitate no revolution. He thought that the poets, by eliciting sympathy and fellow feeling, could bring in a change in the society. Ismail's poems are very short, some of them are with less than twenty words but it is not mini poetry. The poems are not to surprise the reader but to communicate his ideas to him effectively in a pointedly short way. For instance, the poem 'Suicide' consists of only fifteen words in English.

Most of the existentialists have conceived that death is the end of human life. Any thought based on superhuman theory has been beyond their comprehension and vision. They hold that the birth and the death are the only realities in life for them. This phenomenon occupies the central position in the existential outlook. In the poem 'Suicide,' the lady character finds that the whole world is like a thorn and there is neither pleasure nor peace in her life. She is caught between the birth and death. The tenure betwixt and between the two realities bestows on her pangs and fears. Her quest to find the purpose of her existence dies within. She becomes tired of her painful existence in the awful world and so she bids good-bye and gets good riddance from it. Ismail compared the world to a thorn whose pricking is intolerable.

Existential philosophy believes that each human is an isolated being and is thrown ignominiously into an alien world. No two persons think alike and no two look alike. Every human being, by his or her existence is not just unique but also unchangeable. When all are human beings, why can't one find likeness in looks and mind in at least one among them? Can this be understood? Eric Bentley, a well known critic states, 'Existentialism also underlines the quality of being incomprehensible, and, therefore, the quality of having no value or significance; the meaninglessness of the universe and the sickness which man feels upon being confronted with the fact of existence. In Kierkegaard's work, 'The Repetition' the protagonist, Youngman also wonders whether there is an overseer of his existence. He says that he has complaints, about the irreconcilable differences, to make. Ismail, in the poem 'The Disk,' comparing man to a record wrote that the creator of a disc could be found out when it was replayed or when it came to the end, whereas the creator of man could never be found even though man lived a second life. The poet believed that death would close down everything. His idea is even though there is reincarnation, a man may not get the same looks and mind that he had possessed in the previous birth.

Man and woman are like two wheels of a cart or two rails of a track or two wings of a bird. One can't work without the other. Both are together the beauty of the world. But Ismail wondered if both of them were engaged in destroying each other's freedom, what would remain of them in the world. Freedom of every individual is the essence of existentialism. But freedom can be used either way, for destruction as well as for construction. As a matter of fact the powerful takes hold of the freedom of the powerless which is evident everywhere. When one feels superior to the other, equality dies and inequality permeates there. That's what exactly is happening in the world in the modern times. Both of them ought to know that freedom is the quintessence of life. The fall of moral values and others make man think that there is no essence in man's existence. Ismail wrote in his tiny poem Creation that man and woman ought to play the roles of the wick and the flame to brighten up their lives. Now they are, of course, the wick and the flame again, but the difference is they are each for the other's fall.

Ismail gave importance to his own perception of things and he seldom liked any labels, for he thought that would impede his thinking. According to him, poetry of ideas is futile and short lived. He didn't like to preach and make platonic statements in his poetry. Communicating his experiences through his poetry, which he had obtained when he observed the immediate surroundings from existential outlook, gave him contentment. Poetry is a kind of relationship between the poet and the world. In that aspect Ismail is essentially an existentialist poet. R.S. Sudarshanam, in his essays on modern Telugu literature, comments, 'Poetry all over the world is the collective dream of man waiting to come true. Therefore the disappearance of poetry would mean the disappearance of man.'

Mohan Prasad, well-known as 'Mo' is not just modern but most modern in thought, expression, presentation, usage of linguistic subtleties and experimentation. He, therefore, occupies a remarkable place in Modern Telugu Poetry. 'Mo' turns his deaf ear to *sabda* (sound) and *artha* (meaning) which are inseparable like

body and mind and Parvati (goddess) and Parameswar (god). But as a poet with existentialist leanings, the soul does not exist for him; only the other elements do. Thus he showed a new direction to the Modern Telugu poetry. He depends mainly on *sabda* of the word. V. Mandeswara Rao comments, 'Mo's poetry is like a fish and if in your anxiety you pull it out and examine it in relation to what it means word for word, it ceases to be.' Mo's 'Twilight Language' stands out as a distinguishable example of his experimentalist outlook. He has used his metaphors, even sexual symbols and private symbols without hesitation. He does it purposefully because of his irrepressible urge to vent his sincere contempt for certain ugly and undesirable things in the society. Naturally contempt is shown in a contemptuous jargon which is a kind of calling a spade a spade.

As Mo's feelings are strong and vigorous, he can't but choose the same kind of lexicon. It is commented that Mo's poetry plays a hide and seek game between 'whatness' and 'howness.' He is always seen sincerely and steadfastly making an attempt to prove himself through his own words. Probably it might be the reason why the readers consider his poetry to be a hard nut to crack. 'Mo' has a unique place in Modern Telugu Poetry, He has taken up an entirely different and a totally offbeat track, which no one till now has dared to trek nor liked to incur the wrath of the convention ridden world of readership by doing so. This daring step ahead and aside of conventionalism, has given his poetry at once an unparalleled base and structure. At the same time, Mo's thoughts are not limited to any fixed parameters, but they are rather universal. In this regard V. Mandeswar Rao comments, Mo's poetry talks about man's predicament, agony and self-pity which are not confined to any particular country.'

'Mo' produces a number of new words with new meanings, new effect and import out of the worn-out vocabulary. Apart from it his powerful way of using juxtapositions makes his poetry not just an experimental exercise in thought but also a linguistic innovation. Mo's logic is astoundingly enlightening and amazingly an intellectual exercise. To tell an untruth or to present illogicality in his poetry, he uses a particular sign or a symbol and the symbol can be his private one which may be difficult for the reader to make out. Noteworthy point is, 'Mo' always seems least bothered about any complaints or criticism of this aspect of his poetry. He argues if an untruth cannot be said by using a particular sign or symbol, even a truth too cannot, in the same logic, be said using the same sign or symbol. The other peculiarity that can be found in Mo's poetry is, in a number of cases it is paradoxical. Sitaram, a critic and poet, claims Mo' is a poet of paradox. It seems he doesn't allow his reader to comprehend him in just one reading, but demands multiple readings. This observation is straight away proved and supported by the reflection of another literary critic and linguist of repute Chera (Chekuri Rama Rao). He admits that he himself displayed a callous attitude towards 'Pyre and Pain' the first ever volume brought out by Mo, and neglected it. Chera accepts that it was a great blunder and it took two decades for him to rectify.

No contemporary literary movements in Telugu literature can move 'Mo'. Neither is he a member of any political or literary organization or group. He is always aloof and away from them himself being a lover of freedom. It is the exact reason why he does not get branded either by any movement in the modern Telugu. Mo's poetic heart and sensibilities respond to various happenings and developments not getting bogged down to any particular school of poetic philosophy or thought. Chera comments, 'Mo has kept himself away from the contemporary literary movements. Somehow they cannot move him. Still as an individual he responds to the rights of a citizen.'

Apart from the surrealist and experimentalist aspects, there are existentialist elements in Mo's poetry. Like the other existentialist poets in Telugu, 'Mo' doesn't confine himself to any one particular ideology exclusively. He also believes in individual freedom and freedom of choice which are the main characteristics of existentialism. His existentialist genius can be found in 'Repetition' and 'Secret Notation,' to quote only two prominent works of his. Mo wonders 'Does the goal of life lies in death?' This one pertinent question makes one think deeply about the false notions that carry away the humanity. Outwardly the question above looks quite innocent but it does try to explore the intricacies of the two extreme points of every individual existence, the birth and the death. They are at once individual and universal in their appeal. But, 'Does death close all or release the soul from the body; which is greater, the body or the soul?'

These are the points Mo ponders over in his poem 'Mortal Truth; Immortality.' As it is already stated that almost all the existentialists are either atheists or agnostics, He, it seems, belongs to the second category as he believes that body is better than soul, if at all there is a soul, he doubts. Though it is said that body is mortal and soul immortal, he declares that the mortal is truth for him. He further clarifies that what does not exist is unreal, so he believes in what he sees. 'What is mortal is the truth and what is immortal is illusion.' The poet's imagination travels into the unexplored and the explored worlds. It continues its travel even into the remote regions of the universe trying to unify itself with the flashing images in their vacuums and shapes in their concrete haze salvaged from an overburdened mind. The archaic and rustic vision of the poet thrusts through the confined walls of civilization. The result is an enthralling force of the unutterable description of the



unspeakable. A. Krishna Mohan rightly observes, 'Images constructed in accordance with the surrealist notion contain a dose of absurdity as also an element of surprise.'

Mo's contribution to surrealist poetry in Telugu is remarkable. It is rightly said that he is the unparalleled stalwart in this branch. He conceives surrealist poetry as a step beyond the poetry of experience or even the poetry of existentialists. The poet, in his 'Don't You Uncurtain,' feels that in poetry skilful and careful arrangement of words is not important. It is because the surrealists reject all kinds of controls such as logical thinking, rationality, socially acceptable morals and behaviour and artistic conversations. He also rejects the conventional mode of writing owing to his surrealist inclinations. It can be understood just with a single glance at his work that Mo vehemently rejects all kinds of conventional mode of writing. Sometimes a whole poem is in the form of only one sentence as though it has neither a beginning nor an ending. It is considered that existentialism has its own influence on Mo. That can be witnessed in his 'The Secret Notation.' The questions in the poem remind one of that of Meusault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' novel 'The Outsider.' The hero just a day before his execution wonders as to what if he dies then and what difference is there if he dies after fifty or many more years.

In the existentialistic philosophy such questions about the past or present or future are quite natural and pertinent. The existentialist style of thinking and presentation along with the influence of T.S. Eliot on Mo are distinctly witnessed in the following few lines. They are packed with all the different facets of existentialism with a tinge of symbolism, 'Munna.....Had we ever been before? Because I know that time is always time. And place is always only place. And what is actual, is only actual only for one time and only for one place.' Obsession with the death wish, self pity, and tragic or pessimistic view of life are seen in Mo's poetry. It is because of his existentialist leanings. A little pessimistic thought is a characteristic of existentialism which, it is argued, looks at life as a series of incidents rather than as the outcome of conscious efforts. In certain aspects it should not be mistaken that Mo deals with the status quo of certain things. His personal symbols denote deeper perspective of the very basic dimensions, facts of the existence of every individual as also of the entire universe. For that matter, the same dimensions and facets are equally applicable and the existentialist philosophy itself is established on those pillars. In another poem in Secret Notation, Mo presents eternal things like silence, harmony, distance, time, birth and death in his own inimitable way in which existentialistic flavour is clearly found.

Another remarkable aspect of Mo worth mentioning is his confessional style of poetry, which is thought to be quite rare in the Telugu poetry as a whole. As a reflection on the contemporary society with myriad inequalities, Mo pours out his pain which often makes the reader think he is nihilist, who rejects all theories of morality or religious belief. But the fact should not be missed that the nihilism in Mo's poetry is nothing but the mirror image of the nihilism of the society and surely, not of his own. In the process of exhibiting his own self to the world outside, the poet talks derisively about the inequalities, injustices violence, discrimination and desperate conditions that are eating away into the vitals of the human existence. Several literary observers often point out at the disorder in Mo's poetry, of which they obviously fail to trace the root cause. Sri Sri intervenes in the process of history and internalizes the same and then speaks. But Mo sheds this way of interfering and internalizing. He opts for reflective method. He just expresses his disapproval on the process of history. Nevertheless, Mo strongly feels that the process should not be as it is going on now.

When Mo's poetry is thought of, obscurity and complexity are also thought of. Of course, due to the overload of signs and symbols, the reader gets confused. If in a reasoned manner, in a sequential order, one cares to follow the images, his poetry can be clearly made out. Yet getting a clear perception of Mo's poetry certainly depends on the literary comprehending capability of the reader. The distinguished existentialist in Mo can be perceived in Secret Notation, from his anthology 'Pyre and Pain.' The three distinguished aspects of existentialism as have been enunciated by the existentialistic philosophers. The characters are crystal clearly depicted here with that natural and inseparable tinge of humanity. They have rather enlightening touch of a philosophic attitude that does take both the life and death in its stride in a spirit of sportiveness.

It is said that Mo's poetry can never be read; it has to be studied. That is exactly true, In order to analyze every piece of a poem written by Mo, one has to become one with the poet to understand and enjoy the true sense and essence of his poetry. What has exactly made Mo's poetry difficult is the imagery and the unusual symbols he creates being very different, innovative, strong and complex. Besides the admixture of prose and poetic muse in an immersing style, he gives a new form to the poetry. The rather thought-provoking observations and analysis made by B. Tirupati Rao on the style and import as also the impact of Mo's poetry can be considered to be an almost exact evaluation of the poet's contribution to the Modern Telugu poetry. He comments that it is not just the collective conscience but collective inner-conscience that is found in 'Mo'. The disorder that is seen in the poetry is because he has reflected in his poetry the disorder that exists in the society as a whole.

It is observed that as long the critics have attempted to apply the age-old and outdated measuring scales of literature to appraise and evaluate Mo's poetry, they have utterly failed, it is said. As they are not prepared to accept their failure, they even have had gone to the extent of imputing all sorts of odd motives to his writings. But it is felt true that after only 1980s, when realization dawned on the critics that Mo has had caused a compelling situation through his innovative, offbeat, totally radical writings that the critics too had but to go for matching scales of measurements discarding the old ones.

Srikant Sarma gives priority to mould his experiences into poetry with a feeling. Like the other existentialist poets he never binds himself by any ideology. His 'Songs of Experience' was published in 1976. But another set of 'Poems,' an anthology, was published in 1994. The poems are not given individual titles. But every poem is a different slice of his experience and feeling. Man gets experience from the existing things around. Out of that experience feeling comes out. In other words, experience is physical and feeling is psychological as it emerges from the former and constantly engages the mind. When the latter becomes intensified and haunting, man begins to feel existence once again, of course, in his psyche, in the same situation or experience which previously generated that feeling in him. Unless feeling exists in the mind, man can't express it in any way.

Now that man is a psychological being, his mind cannot be separated from his body and vice versa. An existentialist poet or writer, therefore, ought to believe in the existence of his body and its physical responses as well as his mind and its psychological responses as well, though the latter are not seen but felt. Milton, the great epic poet also particularly emphasizes the essential importance of mind in his *Paradise Lost*. The mighty sentences are, 'The mind, in its own place and in itself, Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.' From this stand point; existentialism is not just physical or materialistic but also psychological and even spiritual. Two of the prime characteristics in existentialism are freedom of choice and feeling of personal responsibility. The two can never be had without the application of the mind. What separates an existentialist poet from other poets is apparent. The former is entirely subjective or introspective in observing or experiencing things and the latter is extrospective in his perspective and feeling.

Ismail also opined that poetry is the relationship between him and the world. It is to say that his own subjective reflection is poetry. It is nothing but the outlook of an existentialist poet. Freedom in respect of the individual is undoubtedly a state of mind to be distinguished from the state of affairs. In his *Confessions* Rousseau realizes the importance of support and encouragement to the uniqueness of one's own existence. Like Ajanta, Srikant Sarma too respects dreams. It is because dreams furnish some useful or necessary images and emotions during sleep. Besides, they supply imaginative thoughts. He has also felt that the dreams work like a bridge between the past and future. Romantic and existentialist poets seldom like to give up dreams. They think that the existing world is too much for the human beings. Due to this factor, people are afraid of being alone and they want to live a gregarious life.

Loneliness is a problem of only human beings. But the trees, even though alone somewhere, are not only beautiful by themselves, to themselves and in themselves, but also promote and embrace beauty. Besides existing in dreams, they create a dream land of leaves, flowers, fruit and birds. To Srikant Sarma, the dreams are the flickering lamps at nights that wave garlands and decorate the gateways. The dreams would brush off the pretty leaves of tears. At times he himself might disappear like yesterday's water in running brooks or any watercourse, but neither the dreams nor the brooks in the dream would ever cease to exist. His 'Song of the Sky' is indeed a unique poem as it is an amalgamation of existentialism and philosophy. He says that the world is agony and death spread and people are living beneath a venomous tree. From the existentialist stand point there is endless agony in the world as the very world is not made in accordance with the dispositions of the individuals. In fact they are all thrown into it. Therefore the existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard called it 'throwness' which is responsible for the chaos, human misery and all.

It is relevant to quote Mathew Arnold here, though he was no longer an existentialist poet, who wrote in his poem *Dover Beach* that there is unending human misery in the world. He also used a metaphor and said that the individuals in the world are like some ignorant armies who are fighting in darkness. Arnold found no joy, no love, no light, and no peace in the world. He further added that Sophocles also had felt the same when he looked at the Aegaen Sea. Bairagi in his 'Voices in the Well' says that people in the well are in darkness, they try to come out of the well but they can't. Similarly, the hollow men in T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Hollow Men*, cry with their dried voices but they are not heard by others. There is confusion of futile efforts and exertions of people in both the poems. In the same way, Arnold has written that people in the world are in a disorderly environment; they don't help one another, nor do they know what they do and where they are.

In the poem 'Silence Is the Goal' Srikant Sarma shows optimism and universality. He exhorts whether life is bearable or unbearable, every individual has to think that there are many more individuals who belong to the same group. He wants to say that a sufferer feels solace when he meets other sufferer as he realizes the fact



that he is not the only sufferer in the world. The poem also underlines the necessity of widening human vistas and perception. His poem 'The Lake' is an excellent example of the amalgamative skill of Srikanth Sarma's love for nature and his existentialist outlook. In spite of the lake being static, it looks at the sky to have a glimpse of the past. The poet writes that the lake is solitary and knows nothing of the sun and sound. Yet again it has its own experiences. It is the experience of its existence. Unless it is conscious of its own existence, it cannot feel the experience.

Existentialists opine that the existence of man is absurd for, he is born without asking to be born and he dies without seeking death. He lives between the certitudes of birth and death. He is trapped in his body. In the poem The Little Cottage, Srikanth Sarma compares his body to a cottage which he has inherited at his birth remains with him till he receives the last call following which it goes up in flames. It is an end to all his knowledge, festivities, friendships, romances, desires, bonds, thrills and tears. Death is the surest of certainty and it closes everything. Srikanth Sarma quite symbolically presents the universal significance of existentialism in his poem 'The Drop.' One individual generates the other, thus all the individuals together form the community. It's a never ending process of universally occurring creative activity that goes on quietly. If an individual becomes comparatively brighter and greater, he adds glory to the community around. Then at such a glorious state of an individual's personal attainments, he or she becomes universal.

At the same time, other individuals identify themselves with that great individual. Thus all become one and one becomes all. Srikanth Sarma metaphorically observes that universe dwindles itself into a drop while a drop splits itself forming into the universe. Sarma takes a snipe at those who take the negative and unproductive aspects of existence. He criticizes that such people praise the hollow humanist outlook while virtually abusing the right and the real attitude which in fact separates man from other living species. He complains that some people, out of foolishness or something else, misuse the rarest opportunity i.e. special state of existence with most valuable and helpful extra faculties which make them a unique existentialist entity on the earth. He opines that if humanity is missing its essence, it should be accepted that any life is greater than the human life. Srikanth Sarma is a master of new poetic idiom and a specialist in using symbols and images with an admixture of dreams to drive his existentialist ideas home effectively. When something moves him, the only way he can communicate it is, readily turning it into an image. He is full of pathos as find man becoming money minded and bloodthirsty. Meanwhile the poet feels sorry for the state of man who is being haunted by scores of problems, of which some are his own making and some are thrust upon him. Thus the five famous poets in Telugu contributed their mite to the thought of existentialism. They exposed the predicaments of humans and their pens added another angle to look at the human existence.

The analysis ends with a mighty quote of John Keats.....

*'How fevered is the man, who cannot look,  
Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,  
Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book?'*

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