



**Shivaji University
Kolhapur, Maharashtra**

Centre For Distance Education



M. A. Part-I : English
(Semester I : Paper C-2)
Fiction in English up to 19th Century
(Semester II : Paper C-5)
Fiction in English : Modern and Postmodern

(Academic Year 2018-19 onwards)



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M. A. Part-I English Paper-C2 & C3

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Existentialism and Modern Fiction

*Albert Camus - The Outsider***STRUCTURE:**

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Existentialism
 - Introduction to Existentialism
 - The Historical Background of Existentialism
 - Existentialism in Literature
 - General Characteristics of Existentialism
 - Conclusions
- 1.2 Albert Camus - Life and works
- 1.3 Plot summary of *The Outsider*
- 1.4 Major and Minor Characters in *The Outsider*
- 1.5 Themes in the novel
- 1.6 Characters and Names
- 1.7 Check Your Progress
- 1.8 Exercises
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 1.10 Books for Further Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES:

1. To acquaint the learners with Existentialism and general characteristics of Existentialism.
2. To acquaint the learners with the major Existentialist writers.
3. To highlight Existentialism in Modern and Postmodern Fiction in English.
4. To acquaint the learners with Albert Camus' *The Outsider*

5. To make the learners to incubate different aspects of Achebe's *Outsider* such as themes, symbols, idioms, existential paradox and major accomplishments.

1.1 Existentialism:

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It states that existence precedes essence. Man exists and in the process man defines himself and the world in his thoughts, and wanders between choice, freedom, and existential angst. It is based on the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make their decisions despite existing in an irrational universe.

Introduction to Existentialism :

Existentialism is a term applied to a group of attitudes current in philosophy, religious and artistic thought during and after World War II — which emphasize existence rather than essence, and recognizes the inadequacy of human reason to explain the enigmas of the universe as a basic philosophical question.

Existentialism may be described as a modern youngest philosophy. It is so difficult to find its roots in any of the ancient philosophies. It is a modern twentieth century philosophy. Its main exponents are (i) Soren Kierkegaard the Danish Philosopher (1813-1855), (ii) Jean Paul Sartre, a French Writer, (iii) Karl Jaspers, German Philosopher, (iv) Reinhold Niebuhr, a leading protestant theologian. Soren Kierkegaard is often considered to be the father of them all, but Friedrich Nietzsche is a crucial figure at the origins of the developing line of atheistic existentialism.

Contemporary existentialist philosophy views man as participating in a world of things and events, and encountering other men. The meaning of human existence is that it is man's nature to exist "to stand out into reality, to participate in being, as if presence to all that is." Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, described a discourse of the individual man more than a century ago, with keen psychological insight.

The Historical Background of "Existentialism":

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary perspective that focuses on the experience of an individual person and the way that he or she understands the world. After World War II, some philosophers and writers saw the world as an individual

place without a set of universal rules that applied to everyone. In light of the large number of casualties, the Holocaust and the use of the first atomic bomb, post-war writers in particular found societal rules and values especially unreliable.

Philosophers were trying to understand what it meant to have a self and how human beings could live an ethical existence. After the Second World War, existential writers started to think of human beings in more individualistic terms, as confused and powerless as they might be in the universe. Instead of focusing on society's expectations of a person, existential philosophers and literary figures aimed to explore the meaning individuals created for themselves. Existentialist-type themes appear in early Buddhist and Christian writings (including those of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas). In the 17th Century, Blaise Pascal suggested that, without a God, life would be meaningless, boring and miserable, much as later Existentialists believed, although, unlike them, Pascal saw this as a reason for the existence of a God. His near-contemporary, John Locke, advocated individual autonomy and self-determination, but in the positive pursuit of Liberalism and Individualism rather than in response to an Existentialist experience. Existentialism is a term applied to the work of a number of philosophers since the 19th century who, despite large differences in their positions, generally focused on the condition of human existence, and on individual's emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts, or the meaning or purpose of life. Existential philosophers often focused more on what is subjective, such as beliefs and religion, or human states, feelings, and emotions, such as freedom, pain, guilt, and regret, as opposed to analyzing objective knowledge, language, or science.

Existentialism in its currently recognizable form was inspired by the 19th Century Søren Kierkegaard the Danish Philosopher (1813-1855), Jean Paul Sartre, a French Writer, Karl Jaspers, a German Philosopher, Hermann Heidegger, a leading Protestant theologian, and writers like the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) and the Czech Franz Kafka (1883-1924).

Existentialism philosophy is by most standards a very broad categorization of perspectives, aesthetics, and approaches to dealing with the world and its inherent difficulties. There are therefore countless permutations and flavors of existencialism, which cross disciplinary lines and modes of inquiry. In the most general sense, existentialism deals with the recurring problem of finding meaning within existence. Even this perspective, there are no meanings or structures that provide one's own

existence, as one finds in organized religion. Therefore, the individual must create meaning for his or her self. Some of the popular tropes associated with existential philosophy, such as angst, boredom, or fear, likewise strike the observer as dripping with pessimism. However, nothing in the philosophical thought of existentialism dictates a negative view of humanity or reality. In fact, much of the philosophy revolves around the limitless capacity for individual intellectually engaged persons to enact change in the world.

Existentialism in Literature:

The writings of Soren Kierkegaard provided the base upon which later philosophers and artists built up the edifice of existential philosophy. Kierkegaard was a philosopher deeply interested in human psychology and Christian ethics. His principal concerns were with how people responded under crisis, and the choices made in the shaping of one's life. One of his most famous works is *Fear and Trembling*, an exploration of the nature of faith in the face of complete loss. A speculation on the psychology and emotions of Abraham when asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, *Fear and Trembling* is a fundamental work in the development of Christian existentialism. More than that, Kierkegaard paints a portrait of loneliness, secrecy, doubt, and finally resignation to fate. His work complements the simplistic and ideal notions of religious faith, showing real and absolute faith as a kind of limitless, timeless sacrifice to an unknowable being.

Martin Heidegger was an important early philosopher in the movement, particularly his influential 1927 work *Being and Time*, although he is vehemently denied being an existentialist in the Sartrean sense. His discourse on ontology is rooted in an analysis of the mode of existence of individual humans and his analysis of authenticity and anxiety in modern culture make him very much an Existentialist in the usual modern usage.

Existentialism came of age in the mid-20th Century, largely through the scholarly and fictional works of the French existentialists, Jean Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980), Albert Camus (1913 - 1960) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961) is another influential and often overlooked French Existentialist of the period.

Sartre is perhaps the most well-known, as well as one of the few who actually accepted being called an "existentialist". *Being and Nothingness* is

his most important work, and his novels and plays, including *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1944), helped to popularize the movement.

The art world has been enormously influenced by the current of existential thought, even from its very beginnings in the nineteenth century. First the novel, and later the cinema each had unique contributions to make to existential philosophy. Many existential philosophers have intimated that literature is especially well positioned to communicate the central tenets of their philosophy.

In world literature, the writings of Franz Kafka have long been associated with twentieth century existentialism. Born to Jewish parents in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Kafka lived through the turmoil of the First World War. The death and destruction which ravaged Central and Western Europe most definitely had an impact on Kafka's aesthetics. Like many existential writers, Franz Kafka saw the individual as being caught up in systems and bureaucracies that were beyond understanding. He approaches the inherent terror of existence with a wink and a nod.

Existentialism is rooted in both affirmation and rebellion, and Camus brilliantly described how the two interpenetrate. But humanistic psychology virtually excludes revolt.

Albert Camus was a French-Algerian philosopher, journalist and author who is generally described as an existentialist writer. He started to his career as a journalist, and he is also known as a playwright and actor in Algeria. He worked for an anti-colonialist newspaper while he was a journalist, and he also wrote about poverty in Algeria. From 1944 to 1947, he worked as editor-in-chief of the *Combat*, which was an important underground newspaper. Millions faced the horrors of Nazi regime, they saw the unprecedented slaughter of this war, and nobody could accept that human beings have a purpose or a rational meaning. Wars, famine, starvation. . . On the one side, there are some people who are starving. On the other side, there are some people who live in luxuriousness. It is beneficial to focus on Camus's masterpiece, *The Stranger*, to understand his philosophy. The main character of the novel is Meursault who is considerably passive. In his novel, Camus successfully fictionalizes his key concept or in another words "the absurd". According to Albert Camus, life is absurd and full of unfairness.

Albert Camus's novels typically represent characters caught up in situations systems well beyond their control. In *The Stranger*, the protagonist Meursault randomly commits a murder on the beach, yet seems to lack deep human feeling. The prevailing themes of the novel are isolation and ostracism, and the sense of being insignificant within the larger systems of society. The absurd and the nature of human existence is definitely a recurring theme for Camus. In "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" (1942), Albert Camus uses the analogy of the Greek myth of Sisyphus (who is condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a hill, only to have it roll back to the bottom again each time) to exemplify the pointlessness of existence, but shows Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning and purpose in his task, simply by continuing to apply himself to it.

According to Camus, when an individual's longing for order collides with the world's lack of order, the result is absurdity. Human beings are therefore subject to an indifferent, ambiguous and absurd universe, in which meaning is not provided by the natural order, but rather can be created (however provisionally and unstably) through human actions and interpretations.

There is another name worth noting in existentialist literature, which is Samuel Beckett. His *Waiting for Godot* is one of the most known absurdist plays. He struggled to overcome new challenges. Samuel Barclay Beckett was an Irish playwright, novelist, poet and theatre director who had notable experimental and innovative works in both English and French. His plays had made him one of the most important figures of "Theatre of the Absurd", the movement which offers its audience the idea of existentialism and the theme of absurd. The themes like lack of rationality, the way of people live and the quest for meaning of human existence are handled in the play very artfully. Samuel Beckett reflects the ideas of absurdity and existentialism skilfully in his masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*.

Simone de Beauvoir, an important existentialist who spent much of her life alongside Sartre, wrote about feminist and existential ethics in her works including "*The Second Sex*" (1949) and "*The Ethics of Ambiguity*" (1947). Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) wrote scholarly and fictional works that popularized existentialist themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd, freedom, commitment, and nothingness.

Kierkegaard saw rationality as a mechanism humans use to counter their existential anxiety, their fear of being in the world. Sartre saw rationality as a form of "bad faith", an attempt by the self to impose structure on a fundamentally irrational and random world of phenomena ("the other"). This bad faith hinders us from finding meaning in freedom, and confines us within everyday experience.

Kierkegaard also stressed that individuals must choose their own way without the aid of universal, objective standards. Friedrich Nietzsche further contended that the individual must decide which situations are to count as moral situations. Thus, most Existentialists believe that personal experience and acting on one's own convictions are essential in arriving at the truth, and that the understanding of a situation by someone involved in that situation is superior to that of a detached, objective observer (similar to the concept of Subjectivism).

Although Sartre is considered by most to be the pre-eminent Existentialist, and by many to be an important and innovative philosopher in his own right, others are much less impressed by his contributions. Heidegger himself thought that Sartre had merely taken his own work.

The twentieth century's greatest existential thinker was undoubtedly Frenchman Paul Sartre. Uniquely, Sartre was the only person to ever decline the Nobel Prize in Literature award. His was a life committed to activism and the advancement of social causes. In *The Nausea*, Sartre tells that story of an academic who becomes aware of the intense singularity of his own existence. This leads to the realization of complete freedom, but also complete isolation. In the novel, this freedom is terrifying. The title explains perfectly the feelings of the protagonist when confronted with his own essential Being.

Contemporary film and literature have by no means given up the ghost of existential thought. Chuck Palahniuk, Stanley Kubrick, and David Lynch all have created works of art that follow a direct line from nineteenth century existential philosophy.

Major Existentialist Writers: de Beauvoir, Simone (1908-1986), Beckett, Samuel (1906-1989), Bukowski, Charles (1920-1994), Camus, Albert (1913-1960), Dostoyevsky, Fyodor (1821-1881), Heidegger, Martin (1889-1976), Ionesco, Eugène (1909-1994), Kafka, Franz (1883- 1924), Kierkegaard, Søren (1813-1855), Marcuse,

Herbert (1898-1979), Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844-1900), Thoreau, Henry (1817-1862), Sartre, Paul (1905-1980)

General Characteristics of Existentialism:

1. **Existence before Essence:** Existentialism gets its name from an idea that life is only understandable in terms of an individual's existence, his personal life experience. It says a person lives (has existence) rather than is (has essence), that every person's experience of life is different from another's, and individuals' lives can be understood only in terms of their commitment to life responsibly. The question existentialists ask is, "Who am I?" with its suggestion of the uniqueness and mystery of each life and an emphasis upon the personal rather than the impersonal. To the existentialist, man is the centre of the universe, the centre of infinity, and from this view comes much of the rest of existentialism. Among the leading atheistic existentialist philosophers are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus.

2. **Reason is Unable to Deal with the Depths of Life:** There are two parts to this idea: first, that reason is relatively weak and imperfect, (people often do not do the "right" thing), and second, that there are dark places in life which are beyond reason, to which reason scarcely penetrates, (meaning we often commit acts which seem to defy reason, to make no sense). Existentialism unites reason with the irrational portions of the psyche, insisting that people must be taken in their wholeness and not in some divided state; that the whole of a person contains not only intellect, but also anxiety, guilt and the will to power. The emphasis of the existentialist is not on idea, but upon the thinker who has the idea. Existentialism accepts not only people's power of thought, but their fallibility, frailty, body, and above all, their death. People are felt to find their true selves not in the detachment of thought but in the involvement and agony of choice and in the personal commitment to choice.

3. **Alienation:** Existentialism holds that, since the Renaissance, people have slowly been separated from concrete earthly existence. Individuals have been driven to live at ever higher levels of abstraction, have been collectivized out of existence and have driven God from the heavens, (or, what is the same thing for the existentialist), from the hearts of men. It is believed that individuals live in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other people, and

our own "true" selves. People have become hollow, powerless, faceless. At a time in our history when mankind's command over the forces of nature seems to be unlimited, existentialism depicts human beings as weakened, ridden with nameless dread.

4. **"Fear and Trembling" and Anxiety:** The optimism of the 18th and 19th centuries gives way, after WW I, to the Great Depression, WW II and the Holocaust, to a feeling of pessimism, fear and anxiety. Another kind of anxiety facing individuals in the 20thC when the philosophy of existentialism develops is "the anguish of Abraham," the necessity which is laid upon people to make "moral" choices on their own sense of responsibility. In the parable, Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham thus becomes the paradigm of one who must make a harrowing choice, in this case between his love for his son and his love for God, between the universal law which states, "thou shalt not kill," and the unique inner demand for his religious faith. Abraham's decision, which violates the abstract and collective law of man, is not made in arrogance, but in "fear and trembling."

5. **Encounter with Nothingness:** According to the existentialists, for individuals alienated from God, from nature, from other people and even from themselves, what is left at last but Nothingness.

6. **Emphasis on Freedom and Responsibility:** Existentialists believe that man is the cynosure of the universe and nothing else is equal to 'man'. The fundamental thing of a man's personality is the necessity of unfettered and unbridled freedom. It discards anything which stunts and stifles this development of personality. All of these ideas either describe some loss of individuals' freedom or some threat to it. Existentialist writings bear upon freedom. Albert Camus asserts the possibility for improvement, if not hope.

7. **Emphasis on Subjectivity:** Existentialists consider objectivity as the enemy of man's life as it tends to give the man a secondary place. It goes against all attempts to ignore the uniqueness of his subjective experience. Truth or value is revealed in the subjective experience of living. Man experiences the truth within him. Thus, subjective awareness is the unit of existentialist philosophy.

8. **Mind is the Source of all Forms of Knowledge:** Existentialists believe that mind is the spring of all knowledge. They view that critical dilemmas of an individual's life are neither solved by intellectual exercise alone nor by laws of

thinking. The solution comes through conflicts of the mind as well as the anxieties, agonies and adventures into unknown territories.

Conclusions:

The 20th century was a traumatic period due to horrors like World War I. Also, the emergence of philosophies like those of Nietzsche and Freud, which denied the existence of god and that a human is a being superior to any other. Along with it, the discoveries made in quantum physics rendered the world in the eyes of the contemporary people in such a way that they had nothing else to do but cling on subjectivity and accept it as truth in order to have a glimpse on a bright future in their minds, which does not have to be questioned by objective knowledge. Certainly, it left a trait on literature.

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and must make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation for the core of existence. It holds that, as there is no God or any other transcendent being, the only way to counter this nothingness (and hence to find meaning in life) is by embracing existence.

Thus, Existentialism believes that individuals are entirely free and must take personal responsibility for themselves (although with this responsibility comes angst, a profound anguish or dread). It therefore emphasizes freedom and decision as fundamental, and holds that the only way to rise above the essentially absurd condition of humanity (which is characterized by suffering and inevitable death) is by exercising our personal freedom and choice.

Existentialism has become a salvation for all those who found themselves in a world where Sartre says, in the middle of the play without a script. Even though it can be argued whether existentialism brings salvation or not, it definitely makes people question their erroneous interpretations of the world, and forces people to face the very essence of themselves, the essence that comes after existence. Existentialist literature is characterized with a theme of alienation, as existentialists think that every individual is essential alone. He or she is essential deficiency of communion with others. That every individual is essentially responsible for his own determinations. That existentialists avoid principle and ideology. One of the most visible traits of