Introduction - Indian Writing In English Fiction, The Advent of Existentialism, Concepts of Major Existential Thinkers, R.K. Narayan’s Works And His Approach To Life As Seen Through His Novels

Indo-Anglican literature, which forms almost an integral part of English literature, has now attained a distinct place in the literary landscape of India. Indian writing in English fiction has been acclaimed around the world for its innovative and radical new approaches to storytelling. The multitude of such writing explores India in its various aspects. Apart from the continued literary output by older generation of Indian English writers, we also have newer generation that explores the contemporary angst, alienation and existentialism felt by the ‘middle class liberal humanist’. Analysis and portrayal of human relationship has been of perennial interests for all who have contributed towards the growth and development of different genres of literature. It has become very essential to explore the essence of ‘India’ in Indian fiction and its various representations.

R.K.Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras. His father was a provincial head master. He spent his early childhood with his maternal grandmother, Parvathi in Madras and used to spend only a few weeks each summer visiting his parents and siblings. As his father was the headmaster of the Maharaja's High School in Mysore, he moved back in with his parents and obtained his bachelor's degree from the University of Mysore. It was here that he had an access to his father’s library and got acquainted with all English writers through ‘The Strand Magazine’ and books.

He began his writing career with Swami and Friends in 1935. Most of his works including Swami and friends is set in the fictional town of Malgudi, which captures everything Indian while having a unique identity of its own. His writing style was marked by simplicity and subtle humour. He told stories of ordinary people trying to live their simple lives in a changing world.

Narayan has 16 novels to his credit. He has written short stories, essays and articles. He won numerous awards and honours for his works which include: Sahitya Akademi Award for The Guide in 1958, Padma Bhushan in 1964, and AC Benson Medal by the Royal Society of
Literature in 1980. He was elected as an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1989. Besides, he was also conferred honorary doctorates by the University of Mysore, Delhi University and the University of Leeds. R.K. Narayan’s life spanned the twentieth century which meant that he belonged to both an old and a new world.

My study is about the existential maturity shown by R.K. Narayan’s characters at the time of crisis, how they overcome them and how they decide to lead a fulfilling life. It also explores the psyche depth of his characters.

Existentialism is a 20th century philosophy that is centered on the analysis of existence and the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The early 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, posthumously is regarded as the father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual has the sole responsibility for giving one's own life meaning and with living life passionately and sincerely, in spite of many obstacles and distractions including despair, angst, absurdity, choice, boredom, and death.

Existentialistic ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair following the Great Depression of 1930 and World War II. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War I and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated by philosophers well into the 1970s and continues on to this day as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one’s preferred moral belief system and lifestyle).

In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth.

The term existentialism was first adopted as a self-reference in the 1940s and 1950s by Jean-Paul Sartre, and the widespread use of literature as a means of disseminating their ideas by Sartre and his associates, notably the novelist Albert Camus. Existentialism "was as much a literary
phenomenon as a philosophical one." Sartre says that Existentialism is humanism because it expresses the power of human beings to make freely-willed choices, independent of the influence of religion or society. He regarded desperate situations as 'privileged situations'. Karl Jaspers speaks about the discontent and unrest indicating the birth of the future. His views are similar to the Hindus. “My true Self, the one; and therefore I reach my authentic being in identifying myself with the One.”

Gabriel Marcel emphasizes the importance of fidelity and the openness of possibility of ‘communion with others’ as well as the primacy of hope.

In the history of Indian English literature, R.K.Narayan reigns supreme with his portrayal of humanistic perspectives. Narayan's greatest achievement was making India accessible to the outside world through his literature. Many of his characters control their behaviours and have a natural capacity to make decisions about their lives. Malgudi is an imaginative town where the imaginary characters created by this genius writer live. He does not shut his eyes to the evil prevailing in daily life. He says that characters of Malgudi seem to him universal. Narayan is often appreciated for his realistic portrayal of his character’s joy, sorrows, aspirations, frustrations, achievement, failures, feelings and above all human foibles. In Narayan's works, the individual is not a private entity, but rather a public one and this concept is an innovation that can be called his own. His works provided his western readers the first works in English to be infused with an eastern and Hindu existential perspective. As he explores the psychological implications of human behaviour, we are able to grasp his philosophical stance.

According to him, the material available to a story writer is limitless. Every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically but in outlook, habits and day to-day philosophy. Narayan understood that the society is not standardized or mechanized and is free from monotony. Under such conditions, he only had to look out of the window and pick up the character.

Some of his novels delineate existential predicament of its prominent characters. They carry with them a sense of alienation, loneliness, depression etc. His novels depict the existential dilemmas of the characters in the hostile world. Achieving liberation in their everyday life through their activities does not turn out as an escape but a realization of the human potential and the ability to
live in harmony by making their own choices. While displaying humanism, Narayan discovered that the ‘ordinary’ is the most extraordinary aspect of civilized living.

His novels verbalize down to earth the life of the common ordinary individuals thriving to intermix tradition with modernization. Often depicting the Hindu tales of traditional Indian folklore, his novels are essentially rooted in the events from the everyday life. Through his novels and short stories he made a thorough psychological probing of the individuals in the society. Throughout his work Narayan focuses on unique experiences which change our vision of life. Though he restricts himself to the canvas of Malgudi, Narayan’s existentialistic view is founded on the realities of life. He had witnessed both the World Wars during his life time and many a times was himself a victim to the existential themes to a certain degree. In his autobiography, *My Days*, he writes that when his father did not permit him to marry the one he loved only because of the mismatch of the horoscopes, he sulked, avoided going out, did not speak to anyone and was totally wrapped in gloomy reflections. He also fell into an existential abyss after his wife Rajam’s death. Many times human struggle is itself Narayan’s existential hero.

In order to understand existentialism in the novels and characters of R.K. Narayan, I have chosen the following five novels for my study – *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *The Dark Room*, *The Guide* and *The Vendor of Sweets*. A brief outline of these novels is given below:

**The Bachelor of Arts (1937):** This novel deals with the most crucial stage of a man when he is about to finish his education and enter the real life. The protagonist Chandran faces all kinds of difficulties regarding education, job, love and marriage. He had lost interest in his life and even thought of committing suicide and had renounced the world. But the novel ends with an optimistic note and gives the message of continuity of life. While at the end of the existential cycle is self-realisation, the Hindus believe that life must go through the four stages of life and one must struggle against all odds. This is the essence of this novel and Narayan has succeeded in conveying the message that life should be lived and not negated.

**The English Teacher (1939):** Through the protagonist Krishnan, he has thrown light at the sense of loss at the death of his wife Sushila. It brings into sharp focus the theme of human
loneliness even giving it at one point a tragic edge. He undertakes an emotional, intellectual and
spiritual journey during the course of the novel. To reach his goal of a ‘harmonious existence’ he
psychically communicates with his wife and bridges the gap between life and life-after-death. He
relies on his wife Sushila to guide him beyond the grave in his ‘Self-Development’.

The Dark Room (1938) : The novel presents the struggle of a sensitive woman Savitri
struggling to come into terms with her predicament as the wife of an adulterous husband after
having married for fifteen years. Savitri has received nothing from her husband Ramani except
rebukes and abuses. He treats the children similarly. She then revolts and leaves the house in
despair to commit suicide. She is saved, decides to live an independent life but realizes the
futility of her attempt to escape from her bonds with the temporal world and returns home.

The Guide (1958) : Raju the protagonist in the novel faces existential crisis in every phase of
his life but due to self realization is able to identify his potential, lives in harmony by making
his own choices and brings about changes. Raju in the end, decides to face death rather than
abandon his unique experience of selflessness. Thus in this existential crisis, he chooses Death.
Marco and Rosie the other characters in the novel too suffer from separation and loneliness
which teach them the bitter and better truth of life.

The Vendor of Sweets (1967): The novel presents a powerful story of the father-son
relationship and the tensions caused by the difference of outlook between the old and new
generation. Narayan focuses on the genesis of the barrier between Jagan and his son Mali that
could be traced to an early trauma of the boy; the boy watched his mother suffer helplessly while
his father did little to help her. Jagan’s alienation, anguish, quest for identity and his philosophies
are well projected as a failed parent and husband. The novel ends with a positive note by Jagan
self- analysing which leads to his self-development.

Narayan knows that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of love and the ugliness, of despair
and hopefulness, but he derives hope from this very imperfection of life. His optimism was
founded on imperfections of man and is based on his theory of evolution that life is constantly
progressing to higher and higher levels. One must note that while a remarkable degree of
existential alienation is presented, it also differs from its common European counterpart. Narayan’s characters are alienated but they are seldom completely rootless and are never left in a void of meaninglessness. They manage to make some meaning of their lives. For him alienation and estrangement seem to be natural consequences of man’s existence and do not rule the possibility of finding meaning in life. We find that the meaning is often found in small things and not in momentous happenings. R.K.Narayan envisions and proposes a milieu where his men realize the significance of using the freedom to choose and make their lives happy, joyful and meaningful.