

EXISTENTIALIST STANCE IN NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND**Dr. Avinash Y. Badgujar**

Research Guide

Head, Dept. Of English

Art's Commerce and Science College,
Varangaon., Jalgaon (M.S.)**Sapkale Savita Prakash**

Research Student

Shri Gulabrao Deokar
College of Engineering,
Jalgaon (M. S.)**Abstract**

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a noticeable figure in the development of modern literature. He is considered as one of the first existentialist. The writers like Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy pioneered it in late 19th century. However the term existentialism was coined by Gabriel Marcel in the mid 1940's which was adopted by Sartre. The literature has its golden age of romanticism and artistry in early 19th century. Later on in late 19th, the trend turned to be critical on society, religious idealism. It was Dostoyevsky who handled these themes in his writing. As a critic, philosopher, journalist and novelist Dostoevsky bears deep psychological insight, ability to see and analyse woes of others. His 'Notes from Underground' is considered to be one of the first existential works of literature. The very beginning, 'I'M A SICK MAN a spiteful man an unattractive man, that's what I am' discloses his unparalleled realistic style. The present paper is an attempt to study how the 'Notes' bears a deep vision of an epoch. Also it discloses social and psychological turmoil of the characters that leads them in isolation, detachment and alienation from mainstream of the society. It also exposes ennui, inactivity, intellectual and moral vacillation and incongruity.

Keywords: *existential stance, from romanticism to merciless realism, Dostoyevsky's psychological insight, Notes from Underground, unparalleled realistic style, detachment and alienation.*

EXISTENTIALIST STANCE IN NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

- Sapkale Savita Prakash

- Dr. Avinash Y. Badgujar

The 19th century is referred as golden age of Russian literature. It began with romantic tendency towards the exploration and ended with dominant Russian realism. Aleksandr Pushkin with the rise of romanticism introduced new level of artistry to Russian literature. In the late 19th century, the writers like Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy introduced realism through their works. At the close of the century, the themes based on realities like love stories and grudges, war, scientific positivism, nonsense were reflected in the literature.

Among the contributors, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) is considered one of the prominent writers in the development of modern literature. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), contemporary to Dostoevsky, also had realistic expression in their works. Though there is no trace of the interaction among them, many of the tenets of existential philosophy appeared in their writings. Fyodor Dostoevsky and Søren Kierkegaard are regarded as founders of existential philosophy. However, the term ‘existentialism’ was coined by Gabriel Marcel in the mid 1940’s which was adopted by Sartre.

Existentialism is a group of attitudes, religious and artistic thoughts during and after the Second World War that emphasises existence rather than essence and sees the inadequacy of human reason to enigma of the universe as the basic philosophical question. Talking of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre explains, ‘What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.’¹ Existentialism, much practised in modern literature, deals with the consideration of individual’s conscious being. A number of existential works present the themes like quest for self in alien universe, hollowness man feels within the depth of his soul, cynical attitude towards the established social norms etc. Existentialism has various interpretations. Robert Solomon reveals it as philosophical realization of self, while Fernando Molina considers

it as a type of philosophising which endeavours to analyse the basic structure and to call individuals to awareness of their existence on its essential freedom. It is philosophical movement that deals with modern man's conscious state of psyche, existence, place and function in the world. Earnshaw Steven states, "...its concerns are fundamental and immediate to ourselves – who am I? What am I? What life shall I live? How shall I live it? 'adopting' this attitude, there is an inherent sense of dynamism, of process, journey, discovery, enlightenment and relation that is felt and believed to be more than the building of self contained..."²

Fyodor Dostoevsky had a great impression on modern literature. As a critic, philosopher, journalist and novelist, Dostoevsky bears a deep psychological insight, ability to see and analyse woes of others. He handled a variety of themes in his literary works through which he made expressions to human psychology in chaos. His major works include *The House of the Dead* (1862), *Notes From Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Brother Karamazov* (1880), *The Idiot* (1869) *Demons* (1872) etc. Dostoevsky's fictions are combinations of traditional Russian effusiveness with sensational life. His works bear complex analysis of human psyche that suffers from torment, extreme situation.

His *Notes from Underground* is considered one of the first existential works of literature. It is an exploration of an unnamed isolated narrator who outrages harsh realities of life. The Notes bears the existentialist stance towards the cell world as it presents striking images of reality, emotions, rationality, culture, society etc

The very beginning, unparalleled realistic style 'I'M A SICK MAN a spiteful man an unattractive man, that's what I am.'³ discloses the unnamed narrator. The underground man appears sick physically and psychologically. He opens himself through painful, angry expression. The underground man, who suffers much of his hyperconsciousness and inactivity, has settled into a corner under the floorboards. The 'Introduction' to *Notes from Underground* refers the floorboard as a space inhabitable human but inhabited by rodents- small animals with strong sharp front teeth. According to Russian folk legend, the floorboard is the abode of devils, demons, or evil spirits. The underground man means himself as non-human – an animal or Unclear Power. The underground man is living a life of animal – thinks himself as a mouse. The underground man likes to be away from the world. He admits that he did not wish somebody to meet him see him, recognise him, so he went to various obscure places.

It appears a tone of despair in the opening chapter of the novel 'I have failed not only to become spiteful – but to become anything else vicious or kind, scoundrel or honest man, hero or insect.....' (NFU, p-8) It is an illusion what the intelligent man of 19th century wants to become. His actions are infected with idea. The underground man recites he could become nothing he did nothing as simply because of laziness. Throughout the novel, the underground man has a lot of expressions depicting his failure, alienation, frustration, ennui etc. He is one of the first anti-heroes, lacking the traits of romantic heroes. The underground man goes on reflecting on various as he considers himself as conscious rather heightened conscious as he states '... to be too much aware of things is an illness...', (NFU, p 9) he considers himself as intelligent. Being an intelligent, the underground man can't stop thinking, thinks too much in a wrong way. He strives for goal no matter whither. The underground man here pours out the meaninglessness of human existence

'The only reason I consider myself to be an intelligent man is that throughout my life I never been able either to begin or to finish anything sole function of every intelligent individual is to chatter – that is , quite deliberately to pour the contents of an empty bottle into a jug with nothing in it.' (NFU, p-19)

. The underground man discloses the falseness of human being in part I of the novella. All that human being behaves, encounters is hollow. The life of human being is absurd. The underground man defines human being as an ungrateful creature on two legs- as his behaviour is unreasonable. The underground man urges frustration through such bitter expressions that raise the questions about human – their existence. He talks about man's propensity to distort the truth intentionally. 'The whole business of being human really does entirely consist in man proving to himself every minute of the day that he is human being and not an organ stop!' (NFU, p.29)

The second part reflects practical illustrations of more abstract ideas. It discloses the narrator's progression from his youthful perspective – full of romanticism and ideas of beautiful and sublime – to mature perspective – cynical about beauty, literariness. The underground man throughout the novel narrates striking and surprising images of reality, emotions rationality, culture, society relations etc.

Yelizaveta Rapoport denoting the existential tenets in *Notes* states,

'The "underground man" struggles to define himself, and to place himself into the world, into a reality in which he feels he does not belong. What makes this novel unique is the

infinite ability and desire the “underground man” possesses to indulge in introspection. He struggles to attain a sense of connection with the outside world”⁴

The underground man suffers from his own effacement of humiliation. He is alienated as he fails to establish to maintain relation with people, is incapable to interact normally. He confesses he desires to be left alone. The underground man contradicts when he finds pleasure in pain, feels a delight of despair. The *Notes from Underground* is an outstanding example of psychological skills, which were later explored by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and modern psychology.

Dostoevsky has made the narrator as if addressing to the readers, and readers are supposed to reply to the comments made by the narrator, the underground man. Use of too much ‘I’ reveals the self of the underground man. The underground man talks of uncertainty of human life – absurd concepts of human life, the inactivity, meaninglessness of human life. ‘We have all lost the habit of living, we’re all cripples.’ (NFU, p114) For human being, as underground man says, living has become a habit. Human do not live the real life –real freedom. He believes that our actions are controlled by laws of nature since there is no one to blame; no good reason to act. The underground man assures that ‘we will be asking for immediately for the controls back again.’ (NFU, p114) The underground man has no hope for modernisation of thoughts, no hope of adjustment in society. The *Notes from underground* strongly urges the existential quest at the close and make the reader to think over human being – existence – freedom.

‘we don’t even know where a live man lives these days and what this “live” means, and whether it has namewe shan’t know where we belong or what to hold on to; what to love what to hate, what to respect and what to despise. We even find it wearisome to be human beings – human beings with our own real flesh and blood.....’ (NFU, p114)

The underground man, being honest, discloses his own stupidity. It’s his courage that makes the underground man to carry out the extreme in his life. The notes do not end. As the thinking is ongoing process, the underground man has much more to say. But he does not want to disclose anymore. He declares, ‘I don’t want to write any more from “under the floorboards”’. (NFU, p115)

The *Notes from Underground* is a existentialist stance, as it develops a way of thinking about the fundamentals of one’s being, raises questions of existence. It also exposes ennui, inactivity, intellectual and moral vacillation and incongruity. It offers a stand to the philosophy

developed during and after the Second World War. The *Notes from Underground* bears a psychological insight that discloses social and psychological turmoil of the characters that leads them in isolation, detachment and alienation from the mainstream of the society.

Works Cited:

Sartre Jean-Paul *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. a public lecture given in 1946 in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, edited by Kaufmann, Walter. Trans. Philip Mairet, Meridian Publishing Company, 1989

<<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>>

Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2007

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. Trans. Zinovieff, Kyril and Hughes, Jenny. *Notes from Underground* Oneworld Classics, 2010 p-7(further references are cited in abbreviations NFU)

Rapoport, Yelizaveta. *Fyodor Dostoevsky: An Analysis of Existentialism within Notes from Underground* <<http://web.international.ucla.edu/media/files/Rapoport.pdf>>

