

## **FREEDOM OF CHOICE AS AN EXISTENTIAL FEATURE**

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### **Introduction:-**

Existentialism is a renowned philosophy flourished during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has influenced every walk of life. It is found reflected in painting, poetry, films, music and in all arts. Existential philosophy has different shades. It is associated with various aspects of life. Existential themes unfold the life from different angles. Existential philosophers have thought about existence from different perspectives. Existence Precedes Essence, Humanism, authenticity, inauthenticity, individuality, subjectivity, Self, freedom of choice are some of the crucial themes discussed by existentialism. Among these themes, in this paper freedom of choice from the perspective of existential thinkers is explored.

### **Freedom of Choice:**

Freedom of Choice is one of the foremost themes of existential philosophy. Freedom in existential philosophy is denial of social values, family bonds, fate, experience, inheritance and many other similar elements. Freedom suggests capacity of building life according to our own plan and actions. Freedom signifies power of selection in human beings. The ability to choose is itself freedom for existential thinkers. Man has an ability to decide his own plan for life and behave accordingly is freedom. He rejects conventional standards, beliefs and morals and gives importance to personal desire. This type of freedom to choose develops 'self understanding'. This understanding arising from self decision and action is a fresh, novel experience different from customary socio-cultural principles and experiences. Such freedom is portrayed in the novels of existential writers. Many characters are found with freedom of choice in the fictional work of existentialists. In the novel 'The Stranger' by Anita Desai the protagonist takes coffee in front of the dead body of his mother and gets involved in sex with girlfriend the very next day. This behavior is called rejection of socio-cultural norms and behaving as per own desire. In this way, individual should take risk and make own choices is the principle of existentialism.

### **Freedom of Choice and Authenticity of Existence:**

A person aware of his freedom is the most authentic existence for existential philosophers. "Choice translates necessity into freedom. This does not mean, however, that necessity is dissolved. The self still remains a synthesis of necessity and possibility, but it takes on a new qualification. In every act there is a hidden necessity or a factor of facticity. If necessity were dissolved, finitude would vanish, and the self would become an infinite or absolute freedom. But as long as it exists, the self remains a finite and actualized freedom, which means that it has a destiny, or as Heidegger would say, it 'exists factically'." (O.Schrag 191) Existentialism demands subjective interpretation of life from every individual. To them life is subjective choices and subjective experiences and hence along with 'being' choices and actions of being are of primary importance. Sartre simplifies that, "Existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible...which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and human subjectivity." (Sartre 24) This subjectivity presupposes that individual choices and actions are different therefore meanings are also different and those meanings are regularly changing as the choices and actions change. An outsider's questions to an existentialist should be "What do you find when you think about yourself, what is going on inside you, what are your primary immediate experiences?" And the existentialist as insider would reply, "You may well ask, for every time I look I find something different." (Harper 10)

### **Freedom of Choice and its Acceptance**

Freedom of choice is not acceptable to many people. Even Sartre like existential philosopher interprets it negatively as, "We are condemned to be free because freedom brings choice and subsequently responsibility for our actions." People think that we have no control is better for life because we have no responsibility. But existentialism strongly believes in choice, action and responsibility. Life is a sum total of choices made, actions taken and responsibilities accepted of own actions. "Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose" (Sartre 54). Man has freedom of choice is accepted by many thinkers and intellectuals. Bhagwad Gita while describing the relations of God to men specifies the first relation as 'Observer'. Observer has a role to observe. He is not a creator, generator, developer or anything else. I am a passive observer of your choices and actions. As a mother observes the selection of toys and playing of her child with its own choice and performance in the same way God says, I am observing how you behave with your free will.

Viktor Frankl, a psychologist also believes that “even when we cannot control actions, we can still choose how to react to any given situation. ...even after being in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany to illustrate that even in terrible circumstances humans can choose how they view and react to life.” (Frankl 49) Life according to existential philosophy is made of our decisions. We are free beings to choose. By choosing, we organize the meaning of our life “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself; he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is. We can even choose not to choose. And, in not choosing we have taken an action and made a choice. ... I can persist in manifesting myself in a certain kind of employment because I am inferior in it, whereas in some other field I could without difficulty show myself equal to the average. It is this fruitless effort which I have chosen, simply because it is fruitless – either because I prefer to be the last rather than to be lost in the mass or because I have chosen discouragement and shame as the best means of attaining being.” (Sartre 472)

### **Freedom of Choice does not Connote Isolation**

Freedom of choice does not connote isolation and separation from others. We all are inhabitant of the world and it is absolutely difficult to get isolated from the world, worldly relations and influences. Even Heidegger calls Dasein’s “average everydayness.” “Dasein and the world are not two distinct entities that can vary independently of each other. They are complementary... Dasein’s approach to the things around it is a practical one of circumspect concern rather than disinterested contemplation”. (Inwood 97) People in the world must have a relation with the worldly objects including human being. This is necessity of every individual because we are alone in this world. “By declaring that man is responsible for and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system” (Frankl 133).

Our choice is for work and work is associated with the others and world. This means that my freedom of choice is associated with others and the world. Eg. I cannot drive my car on footpath or I do not have freedom to fling stone at streetlight. This brings to notice that for having choice we should be conscious of our existence. “Consciousness refers to awareness of one’s individuality, awareness of thoughts and emotions, dreams, desire, and most importantly, the finiteness of life, one’s mortality. As conscious beings, individuals cannot

logically be regarded as causally determined by unconscious forces by antecedent psychological conditions of his or her life.” (Lavine 358)

### **No Choice for Freedom of Choice**

It is interesting to mention that many people in the world have no choice or freedom of their own. They work because they suppose to work. They have even no freedom to choose their work. It is mostly chosen by parents or imposed by the circumstances. “Man has not chosen the particular situation in which he finds himself ‘in the world,’ and he feels himself oppressed and hemmed in by a strange and hostile environment. These limitations of his human situation are not only of a physical but also of a psychological nature. In certain moods man feels himself not only as a prisoner in his surrounding world but also, as it were, imprisoned and enslaved by his changing emotional reactions, by his instincts and urges.” (Reinhardt 237) It is true, that is why, many intellectuals raise question why everybody has not the same degree of freedom and choices in the life? Answer to this lies in different situations of the individuals. All lives are not equally placed hence there are different choices and degrees of freedom.

Existentialist philosophers also not contradict with this because they too believe that choice is made from available alternatives at a particular time in a particular situation. “Man constantly makes his choices concerning the mass of present potentialities; for which of these will be condemned to nonbeing and which will be actualized?” (Frankl 144) Consequently, life is limited to a particular situation in the world at a particular time. It is subjective in context. “The existentialist meaning of the world is disclosed only when the question is subjectively formulated: “How do I exist in the world?” (O.Schrag 27) Relationship among the people gives meaning to world. Individuals are arranged in these relations which makes their life meaningful. Accepting this logic leads to the conclusion that our existence in the world also includes past events and many other deterministic factors. Individual in the world is aware of these relations, past events and determinant factors. He carries them with him. He molds them and gets molded by them. One who is aware of his world is at the same time designing it with his life. From the above discussion it is evident that freedom of choice is available in specified situation and at a specified time. “A life goes on inside, varied and complex, depending on the individual, but also conditioned by certain fundamental limitations of knowledge and experience”. (Harper 87)

Outsider hardly knows about people’s decision and life. It is purely subjective process. Harman adds that, “Even many analytic philosophers seem to be coming around to  
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the view that all perceptions and statements emerge from some sort of dark background, whatever this might be.” (G. Harman 161) Freedom of choice is existential major theme. Existentialism appeals to choose authentic life. Our choice should not turn into inauthenticity or bad faith, for that awareness is needed.

Thus, freedom of Choice is one of the essential themes discussed by existential philosophers. It is reflected in literature in a unique way.

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