

An existentialist reading of K.S. Maniam's 'The Return'

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Abstract- According to Peyre (1948:21), the fathers and forefathers of existentialism were mostly Germans, but it was adapted and transformed by the French and was re-exported to the rest of the world. Peyre's inference reduces the history of existentialism to a nutshell. Existentialism can be defined as an intellectual movement that reflects all aspects of modern life. In literature, this theory acts as a useful approach to analysing literary works in order to make sense of the complexities, contradictions and dilemmas surrounding the characters. The purpose of this research paper is to study the novel of Subramaniam Krishnan, popularly known as K. S. Maniam, an Indian Malaysian academic and novelist, from an existentialist perspective. His novels deal with the lives and problems of the post-colonial Indian Diaspora in Malaysia. In 2000, he received the Raja Rao Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Literature of the South Asian Diaspora. His first novel 'The Return' is an autobiographical novel which deals with cultural struggle and cultural identity. This novel will be analysed from an existential perspective.

Keywords- Existentialism; Meaninglessness; Choices

INTRODUCTION

What does the word 'existentialism' mean? Existentialism is a distinct philosophical and literary movement which belongs to the 19th and 20th centuries, for it grew largely out of the hopelessness and despair of post-war Europe (Mulan, 1992: 453). However, elements of existentialism can also be found in the thought (and life) of Socrates, in the Bible, and in the work of many pre-modern philosophers and writers. This philosophy is pursued by many philosophers from whom a number of different schools derive their origin, which makes the meaning of the word rather confusing. The label 'existentialists' by itself is rather meaningless and because of the diversity of positions associated with existentialism, the term is impossible to define precisely. Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard all have a certain existentialist dimension in their writings, as do Camus, Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger, with whose works the term existentialism has been equated since World War II. The fact that writers with such diverse philosophical orientation should all have become identified with existentialism is an important indication that existentialism has many forms and that among existentialists, there are probably more differences than similarities (Stumpt, 1993:448).

The original and fundamental meaning of existentialism in the sense of Kierkegaard's usage of it is simple and straight forward. Existentialism is a rejection of all purely abstract thinking and the absoluteness of reason. Instead, it insists that philosophy should be connected with the individual's own life and experience, with the historical situation in which he finds himself, and that it should be a way of life (Howard & Etna, 1992). It should be a philosophy capable of being lived. All this, is summed up in the word 'existence' (Roubiczek, 1964). According to

David (1999), existentialism is the attempt to "overcome" various forms of alienation: from the world, one another and oneself.

In literature, existentialism is a form of literary criticism which analyses the struggles of characters in literary works to define meaning and identity in the face of alienation and isolation. According to Rickman (2001), more than any other recent philosophical movement, the existentialists have communicated their ideas through plays, novels and short stories. He goes on to give two reasons as to how existentialism and literature are interrelated. Firstly, the philosophy is about human life and its problems and secondly, existentialism insists on the uniqueness of individuals (Rickman, 2013). Since the time it came into play till now, a number of literary works have been identified as examples of existential literature. Among these would be Albert Camus, who rejecting the label, wrote novels that typically represent characters caught up in situations and systems well beyond their control, and the ways in which they cope with such seeming futility; Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose characters and their specific dilemmas transcend cultural boundaries and speak to the shared problems of all humans living in modern times; Franz Kafka who has been associated with twentieth century existentialism; Sartre who took existentialism in a very positive direction and advocated for the downtrodden, and continually struggled for a more egalitarian society based on the worth of each individual; and also the theater of Beckett which is truly a mirror held up to the insanity of modern existence (Rahn, 2011). The purpose of this research paper is to evaluate K.S. Maniam's 'The Return' with the intention to prove that this novel has the characteristics of existential literary work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism can be seen as a revolt against traditionalist philosophy; it is concerned with being rather than with knowing. Two major contributors to this ideology are the German philosophers Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). There are also several French writers : Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). The term '*existentialism*' actually has its origins from the nineteenth century with strong link to a brilliant Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard's writing only gained credibility after almost a century of his demise. Kierkegaard's contribution lies mainly in the queries raised in his works, 'What sense can be made out of human existence?' and 'What is the purpose of human events?' His fundamental insight was the recognition of the concrete ethical and religious demands confronting the individual. The demands were so serious in intensity that man's intellectuality was insufficient to enable him to face it. According to Kierkegaard, there was a need for subjective commitment. Most of his work tended to reveal an image of human life as being full of anguish and absurdity, harrowing and meaningless (Howard & Etna, 1992). In describing the human existential situation, Kierkegaard distinguished between people's present state, that is, what they now are, and what they ought to be, or what they are essentially. There is, says Kierkegaard, a movement in one's essential to one's existential condition, a movement from essence to existence. Thus, it can be concluded that existentialism stresses on the individuality of existence.

Following him, Heidegger and Sartre were the major thinkers connected with this movement. Martin Heidegger, a mid-twentieth century German philosopher was principally concerned with the question of what it means 'to be'. Heidegger rejected the label of "existentialist" and describes his own philosophy as an investigation of the nature of being, in which the analysis of human existence is only the first step. Heidegger's contribution to the development of the existential movement is not to be thought of lightly. He actually gives a more decisive reason for the use of the term existentialist - a reason closely linked with the etymology of the word '*exist*'. In some of his writings, the word is spelt with a hyphen, '*ex-ist*', thereby drawing attention to its derivation from the Greek and Latin words meaning 'to stand from'.

Heidegger's method of examining questions related to man's existence in nature was formed around an approach to interpreting ancient texts known as hermeneutics. Such an approach contends that meaning is contingent upon interpretation. An interpretation is never entirely detached and analytical, but is always to some extent biased by factors such as the interpreter's beliefs, language, and practices (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998: 83). Heidegger (1962) further expressed his views that it was not possible to adopt a detached analytical view point for examination of what it means '*to be*', since such an examination takes

place in the context of certain physical and historical states of affairs (Zahorik & Jenison, 1998: 83). Heidegger further goes on to state that man is "*thrown*" into situations in which he must continually act and interpret. As a result of this '*thrown*' state, man is forced to continually act and in doing so, he is unable to detach himself from the world. He terms this as 'the nature of existence is man's being – in – the world' (Heidegger, 1962).

Humanity is, in Heideggerian sense 'thrown-into-the-world', and for Sartre, 'man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards' (Sartre, 1957:28). For Sartre, a person exists, then recognizes and distinguishes his subjectivity. Thus, he asserts there can be no essential nature upon which man can call for ethical guidance in determining his actions. In essence, every man is responsible for each and every decision or choice he makes. Sartre outlined a complex psychology encompassing many interpretations of human existence. His discourses on imagination and emotion were consequently steps towards the final development of a psychology of human existence and nothingness (Jones, 2001: 368). A clear evidence of this is seen in Sartre's (1956) treatise 'Being and Nothingness' which contains a chapter exploring ideas related to an existential psychoanalysis. Most of his work, both novels and plays are based on themes that concern human struggles.

Sartre (1958), on the other hand, had a totally different perception as to existentialism. Sartre's arguments can be summarized in the following manner. According to him, there is no God and as such there is no human nature or essence, which can serve as a prior norm. Bereft of necessary norms, man is what he makes himself to be; his "*existence*" precedes his '*essence*'. He goes on to assert that if existence precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is. In choosing, he chooses himself and his world. Each man is likewise responsible for all men, because 'in choosing himself he chooses all men'. He retains the concept of a universal human condition while denying any normative essence to man. His premise is that 'freedom in respect of concrete circumstances can have no other end and aim but itself'. He adds that our freedom 'depends entirely on the freedom of others and their freedom depends on ours' (Flynn, 1984:33). Sartre's idea developed through three phases. Sartre's first phase encompassed a morbid period, arguably influenced by his experiences in the French resistance during the Second World War. The second phase was characterized by a lack of skepticism, when he adopted a more rigorous and scholarly approach to his thinking. The third phase included ideas of both the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and ontology as expounded by Martin Heidegger and encompassing aspects of Marxism (Jones, 2001:368). Rather unusual for a philosophical movement, existentialism even achieved cult status in the years following the end of the Second World War, and Sartre and his circle - most notably Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus - became high-profile figures (Sim, 2000:10). It was through this development that he was to propose the idea of psychoanalytic

existentialism and his major thesis 'Being and Nothingness' (Sartre, 1956). Existentialism's popularity wields a lot 'to the literary endeavors of the Satre circle as well as the bohemian life-style of that circle than on philosophically dense works such as 'Being and Nothingness'; but some sense of that work nevertheless seeped through into the public consciousness and it remains arguably the greatest work of existential philosophy (Sim, 2000:10).

Camus, another leading existentialist believes that the goal of existentialism is to escape nihilism. He said, "In the darkest depths of our nihilism. I have sought only for the means to transcend nihilism" (Camus, 1995). He asserted that the one who lives an authentic existence is the one who rebels against that absurdity and creates meaning. Karl Jaspers believed that there could not be a universal science of being. Each science deals with objective data. Hence each Science deals with a particular mode of being, with a particular kind of object. To think scientifically, then, is to have access to only one kind of data, namely, objective data. The self, the individual, the whole complex of the subject - all this subjectivity is part of Existence. Jaspers believes that the task of philosophy is to deal with Existence, whose subject matter is based upon the existential thinker's immediate inner and personal experience. 'There is a level of Being', says Jaspers, 'that the existential thinker can grasp, a level that is neither subjective but is the creative source of experience, and this is Existence'. Existence for Jasper, 'is something that can never become a mere object and it is the source whence springs his thinking and acting' (cited in Ehrlich and Wisser, 2003). Personal existence, he continues, is the centre and direction of reality; it is an error to reverse this conclusion and to say that reality consists of objects (Stumpt, 1993:465). If existence philosophy can be said to have "*function*", it is to make the mind receptive to what Jaspers calls transcendent. The human situation is described as a movement from knowledge of objects to a second stage, where the individual recognizes in himself or herself the foundations of existence, and finally to a third stage, where a person becomes conscious of striving towards his or her genuine self (Stumpt,1993: 466).

Existential philosophers have no particular system as their opinions on religion and politics vary. They can be religious, agnostic or atheist. Some are liberal, others moderate or conservative. Atheism has become an important cause for the problems that gave rise to existentialism, since the breakdown of the religious tradition of Europe greatly aggravated the growing sense of life's worthlessness and meaninglessness. In their struggle against this meaninglessness, some existentialist took an openly atheistic position and drew out all the consequences of such a position in formulating their approach to life. Others turned once again to religion in order to rediscover there what they believed had been missed by rational and scientific thinkers. Whether they were theists or atheists, the existentialists all agreed that traditional philosophy was too academic and remote from

life to have any adequate meaning for them. They rejected systematic and schematic thought in favor of a more spontaneous mode of expression in order to capture the authentic concerns of concrete existing individuals. Though they are different in many aspects, they agree that traditional philosophy was too remote from life to have any meaning for them. The emergence of this thought is inevitable for over the centuries, 'the individual had been pushed into the background by systems of thought, historical events and technological forces' (Stumpt, 1993:449). These various philosophers remained fascinated and overwhelmed by the major theme of all varieties of existential thinking, namely the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe. Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, a man is nevertheless obligated to act morally in a world where death renders everything meaningless. He alone must determine what constitutes a moral action although he can never foresee the consequences of his actions. The changes that were taking place caused 'man to experience insecurity and anxiety which was intensified by historical events, particularly wars which showed a similar disregard for the feelings and aspirations of individuals' (Stumpt, 1993: 449).

RECURRING THEMES IN EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a philosophical movement or tendency, emphasizing individual existence, freedom and choice. It was a philosophy which influenced many diverse writers in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result of its diversity, the term remains ambiguous till today. However, an analysis in this theory has brought light certain themes common to virtually all existentialist writers. The term itself suggests one major theme i.e. the stress on concrete individual existence and consequently, on subjectivity, individual freedom and choice. Besides these, constant themes highlighted by the philosophers are absurdity, dread and anxiety. These individual themes will be analyzed in isolation to illustrate why philosophers consider them common tenets of the theory.

INDIVIDUALISM

Existentialism presents a world where the individual is an isolated being, '*abandoned*' into existence, for no apparent reasons (Satre, 1958: 439). This is further illustrated by Heidegger's argument in 'Being and Time' (1927) of our being '*thrown in existence*' (Heidegger, 1962:321). Thus existential man is abandoned in a world where there is no external reason for existence. As a result of this, man experiences a sense of anguish at the situation. The first philosopher to express the importance of viewing humanity subjectively and as individuals was Soren Kierkegaard, and he was followed by Friedrich Nietzsche (Price, 2000: 466). This idea of being alone in the world without God is clearly illustrated by Sartre's protagonist,

Roquentin in his novel *Nausea*. Roquentin sees life in its nakedness:

'Never until these last few days have I understood the meaning of existence.....And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things; this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the spare grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft monstrous masses, all in disorder - naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness...' (Sartre, *Nausea*: 171).

Post-war European man found himself in a desolate and featureless landscape without any signs to guide him, without any hope that he could by his efforts bring about a better world; he found himself with an existence and responsibility foisted upon him which he had not chosen and did not particularly want (Charlesworth, 1975:2). This idea of individualism can be seen to have bloomed from the 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. He was the first writer to call himself existential and he insisted that the highest good for the individual is to find his or her own unique vocation. The traditional view as to choices of man is that it involves an objective judgment of what right and wrong. Existentialists have argued that there is no rational basis for moral decisions. The 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche further contended that the individual must decide which situations are to be considered as moral situations.

THE ABSURD

Satre (1956) asserts that since there is no God, then there is no reason to exist. Yet, he goes on to add that we do exist in an absurd and meaningless world. The world is without meaning and in such a world, we feel alienated and this creates a sense of despair, boredom, nausea and absurdity. Camus (1955), on the other hand, strongly disagreed with the label 'philosopher of the absurd' (Price, 2000:485). However, he said that anyone who does not view the relationship between human beings and the world as absurd lives in self-deception. To him, 'the absurd means living with anxiety, discord and friction' (Price, 2000: 486). The notion of absurdity implies that there is no ultimate reason why things are as they are. In '*An Absurd Reasoning in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*' (1955), he asserts that in 'a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels like an alien, a stranger' and his exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of the lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (Price, 2000:5).

Thus, the notion of the 'absurd' plays a central part in Camus' thoughts.

THE CHOICES

Perhaps the most prominent theme in existential writing is that of choice. Jean-Paul Sartre said human beings exist in an absurd situation facing despair. If we are to find meaning in life, then we must create our own world and its own values by making responsible choices. Existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence. Thus each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature. As seen in Jean-Paul Sartre's argument, existence precedes essence. Danto (1975) summarizes the effect of Sartre's writings as follows:

'Sartre's whole point is to purge consciousness of all states, so that there is no 'inner life' and everything hence forth [is] relegated to exist 'out there', in a region of the phenomenal field, so that consciousness itself is a kind of transparency, a 'nothing' which is merely on openness to a world to which it adds no tincture of its own' (Danto, 1975:63).

For some existentialist (Heidegger and Jaspers for example), the existential possibilities, is as much as they are rooted in the past, merely lead every project for the future back to the past, so that only what has already been chosen is chosen. For others (such as Sartre), the possibilities that are offered to existential choice are infinite and equivalent, such that the choice between them is indifferent; and for still others, the existential possibilities- implies risks renunciation and limitation. Some of the more serious risk would be seen in man's descent into authenticity or into alienation or even his degradation from a person to a thing. When a man decides to escape from the banality of anonymous existence which hides the nothingness of existence or the nonrealistic of its possibilities behind the mask of daily concerns - his understanding of nothingness leads him to choose the only unconditioned and insurmountable possibility that belongs to him - death.

DREAD AND ANXIETY

Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually cruel to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension which he called dread. The word 'anxiety' or 'angst' in German has a similar role as dread and this is seen in the work of the 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger states that anxiety results after the individual's confrontation with nothingness. This is further illustrated in Jaspers thesis. He said dread is experienced because of man's emotive understanding of the nullity of the possible, or as he says, of the possibility of nothingness. In the philosophy of Sartre, the word nausea is used for the individual's recognition of the pure contingency of the

universe and the word anguish is used for the recognition of the total freedom of choice that confronts the individual at every moment. 'Anguish' is another word which is linked to the theme of dread and anxiety. 'Anguish' is actually a result that emerges when man recognizes that he cannot simply inherit values or derive them from the way the world is which means things have the meanings and values we give them and situations change from moment to moment. Living in the face of absurdity includes revolting against human injustice. Because there is no God to rule the world, and the world is indifferent to human hopes and desires for happiness, humans must create and become masters of their own fate. The superiority of the human spirit is its ability to transcend the dread and futility of life in the face of the absurd.

THE RETURN

The Return has been identified as Maniam's autobiographical novel that charts the poignant journey of self-discovery of an Indian boy growing up in Malaya and gradually moving apart from his family and immediate surroundings (Watson, 2001). The characters in the novel consists of a community of Indian immigrants dependent on a system of colonial patronage and cowed by their circumstances of the rubber plantation economy from which they draw their livelihood, which causes them to turn on themselves, angry, shrewish, violent, engaged in unremitting conflict, and dominated by the seemingly arbitrary viciousness of the men folk (Watson, 2001). In his commentary on the text, he uses a list of vocabulary that is closely related to existentialism. Among these would be the phrases describing the community as having "divisions and separations", "class and status are demarcated by territorial and social boundaries", and "recorded disappointments and failure" (Watson, 2001).

Maniam's 'The Return' can indeed be seen as an existentialist novel and evidence for this claim can be seen through an in depth analysis of the style adopted by the author as well as the portrayal of the characters and language used in the novel. The most prominent evidence of the elements of existentialism in the novel can be seen in the poem that Maniam uses as a conclusion to his novel titled 'Full Circle'. The researcher will prove her argument that Maniam is indeed an author who comes within the umbrella of existential writers by analyzing this poem. The poem which is written as a tribute for his Naina (father) is a pent up declaration of his frustration living in a time where he find that he is 'lost for words'. The poem begins with the line 'Have you been lost for words?' and ends on a strong assertive tone that words are 'vague knots of feelings, lusterless, cultureless buried in a heart that will not serve'. The line 'Have you been lost for words?' is repeated three times and the idea that words will not serve (adequate) is repeated twice. The use of these repetitions emphasises the inability of words to express the disconsolate feelings experienced by life in those times. To Maniam, life during the era is one that is filled with

frustration and depression, for man lives a life of loneliness fighting the devils within and outside. The surroundings and people do not give any meaning for existence. Man is shown to be living in isolation within a crowd. In existentialism, man is lost, living in an absurd world where religion, morality and society do not provide any meaning for existence. This is seen in the following lines:

*The dregs at the bottom of well water is
the ash of family prayers you rejected.
The clay taste of deep-rootedness you
turned aside from-for the cleanliness of
chlorine (p.173).*

Besides the poem, the characters and language used in the novel too are characteristic of existential literature. Though this novel is autobiographical, there are 3 main characters in the novel; Periathai (the author's grandmother), Naina (the author's father) and Ravi (the author) who reveal themselves as existential characters. Periathai is the first character that we are introduced to in the novel. This is seen in the very first few sentences.

*'My Grandmother's life and her death in
1958, made a vivid impression on me.
She came as the stories and anecdotes
about her say, suddenly out of the
horizon, like a camel, with nothing
except some baggage and three boys in
tow' (p.1).*

The initial description gives us a vivid description of her existentialist existence. The phrases 'she came ... with nothing' can be interpreted to mean there is no significant past to help her in the present. Further the phrase 'except some baggage' creates a picture of her being laden with problem which is heavy and burdensome fulfilling the picture of existentialist existence where the present is bleak. The novel starts with an abundance of words and phrases that indicate the idea of existentialism. Some of these words are listed below with the description of the images that they create in the minds of readers.

- 'most barren of lands' – environment which is alienating and the superficial 'worst' maximizes the situation.
- 'brooded' and 'humped' – captures the state of frustration and lack of hope that Periathai was undergoing.
- 'nothing' – existential meaninglessness

Characterization in literary works is done in many ways. The description given by the narrator as explained above is just one of the ways. Characterization is also done by description of one character by other characters. In 'The Return', characterization is drawn explicitly through other people's views. One of the villagers claimed that Periathai 'wanted to light her own lamp'. This clearly indicates how man in the existential era attempt to create meaning in a meaningless condition. This attempt is seen to be a frustrating one and this is shown by Periathai's numerous attempts in trying to survive in the absurd words which are filled with despair. She struggles to survive and takes on

various tasks; she first sold saris that she had brought from India, she sold goods of the textile merchant, Letchumunan for a cut, took on the job of tinker, she went around casting away the 'evil eye', she also did farming for self-use and finally she sold 'vadai'. All her attempts to survive conveys Satre's idea of 'existentialism' where the individual is an isolated being 'abandoned into existence'. However, there is one slight difference here, for in Satre's definition of existentialism, the individual is alone without God but in the case of Periathai, God is still prevalent. This is shown in Periathai's elaborate prayers on Fridays. However, when she was on her death bed, the narrator gives a bleak picture of God's presence.

*"But somehow Nataraj glowed dully.
The light that fell from the tier lamps
didn't throw the tin trunk, mats, lamps
and hand-cart into solid relief as it had
on Periathai's ritual Fridays" (p.9).*

The ending part of Periathai's life is described by the narrator in an effective manner. The choice of words captures the anxieties of existence where man is deprived of all metaphysical guidelines. This is seen in the words 'it was also a land hunted by ghosts, treaded lightly by gods and goddess, violated by murderers, where a widow went through the fire to reach a dead husband'.

The narrator's father, Naina can also be seen as an existential character if we trace his life path. Initially, the narrator merely gives a portrayal of the father as a very common man of the time running a laundry and has strict political loyalties to the 'Tamil tongue and Indian religious practices'. He is shown to be very aggressive and coarse. This is seen in his speech and acts. The whipping, slapping and hitting that he continuously gives Ravi and Karupi are evidences of his aggressiveness.

*Late that night, she whimpered as my
father thrashed her with a rattan cane
(p.19).*

*I was suddenly lifted from the floor and
flung against the cups, pots and jars on
the kitchen table (p.32).*

Towards the later path of life, he is seen to fulfill the description of an existential character. His continuous struggle to earn a living to support and feed his wives and children is depicted so clearly that it evokes feelings of empathy in the readers. This pathetic state of his life is captured and portrayed clearly. He actually projects most of the characteristics identified as the common characteristics of an existential hero. He starts off by trying to adapt to the people and environment around him. According to Wicks (2003:30), "communalism, the situation where an individual's ultimate loyalty and affection is given to his or her ethnic group, permeates the Tamil family in the heart of 'The Return'. Naina follows the norms and practices of the people in his neighborhood. This is evident in his reaction to the 'white man's cry in a foreign language' telling him to send Ravi to an English school. His reaction is seen in Ravi's reflection.

*I remember my father's laughter. Still
chuckling, he returned to sorting the
dirty clothes before going to the laundry
(p.15).*

After some time, Naina starts to feel the restriction and humiliation heaped on him by Menon. This intensified the frustration he was going through in trying to make a living. Then, one day, he just erupted and decided to stand up for his rights:

*He scolded me in the office, in front of
all those people. ...I won't bend my knee
to anyone anymore (p.125).*

The death of Periathai left a deep impact on him. This is the turning point in his life. His reactions at that time reflect the absurdity discussed in existentialism. His refusal to bury his mother and reaction to his brother's and Karupi's comments captures the absurdity noticeably. When Karupi says "The woman can't stay there too long", he reacts aggressively.

*Naina grasped an old butt of coconut
leaf and beat her, mechanically...(p.
136).*

Ravi captures the impact of Periathai's death on Naina lucidly.

*I recognised the spirit that had touched
Periathai and now possessed Naina. He
continued the battle Periathai had
begun: to drive some stake into the
country (p.140).*

According to Simandan (2010), Ravi is highly influenced by Periathai's vision of life and tradition. And their shared desire to own land and build on it comes from the fact that their roots are still in the farming community which Periathai was part of before immigrating to Malaysia. His faith in God diminished at this point and this is seen in his act of nearly thrashing his wife's attempt to light the tier lamps. However, he returned to his worship with a twist. He started praying to Nataraja but finally he created his own God.

*He fashioned his own urns, lamps, jars,
and statues with many arms and faces,
out of the clay he brought from the
river... he began to chant in a garbled
language. It embarrassed me to hear
him recite a rhythm mounted on Tamil,
Malay and even Chinese words (p.170).*

Dread and anxiety which are essential characteristics of existentialism is clearly shown in Naina. At the last stage of his life, he showed tendencies of being hounded. This is shown in the way he becomes violent and goes around the house attacking unseen enemies.

*He always takes the parang to bed. And
he has bored holes in the wall (p.164).*

He admits to the feelings of dread and anxiety to Ravi.

*You don't know the evil eye of the
people...(p.166).*

Naina's last action shocks the readers and this sense of meaninglessness is captured in an interesting manner.

You've always used them... They are useless now... (p. 170).

Readers are clearly shown how, man has lost a grip on life; nothing makes sense. Practices in the past (using incense, lamps and ritual vessels) have no meaning anymore. The charred site represents man's existential man's life symbolically. Death is the ultimate choice.

Ravi, the protagonist in the novel is also an example of an existential hero. Existentialism presents a world where the individual is an isolated being and this condition prevails in Ravi's life. For the existentialists, life is absurd; it makes no sense and has no meaning or ultimate purpose. It is up to the person to make sense in order to create meaning and purpose for his/her life. Ravi and his family lived in a Hindu community within the hospital compound that was governed by Menon or the 'Aiyah' which means 'chief'. The story is related to us by Ravi. It starts with his narration of his grandmother's life and struggle. He then proceeds to tell the readers about his young life in the hospital compound which he calls 'the long house.' While describing these difficult times, Ravi slowly starts to disassociate with his life as a member of the downtrodden group and slowly assimilates the English lifestyle. He rejects his roots; both culture and religion for what he thinks had better things to offer-the Western way of life.

Ernie exerted a considerable influence on my life that first year in The English School (p. 26).

There are two main interrelated reasons that make Ravi decide to estrange himself from the traditions of his family; the first one is the access to a new privileged knowledge that enables him to acquire a different social status and the second is the literature, and the colonial mythology that comes with it, that gives him the capacity to transport himself into a dream world, far away from the poverty and restrictions of his life in the family (Simandan, 2010). The existential condition of his life was made bearable through the escapism given to him through the pursuit of education. It provided him not only knowledge, but also a space to retreat into the world of comics, fairy tales, and eventually novels (Simandan, 2010). The surroundings and environment in which Ravi grew as a young child was filled with hardship, fear and anguish and the moment he had the opportunity to escape, he grasped it with totally joy.

It was terribly exciting, a complete contrast to the world we lived in. I longed for escape from the filthy squabble of my neighbours, the pettifogging playmates in the hospital compound, and the arrogant, vengeful administrative personnel (p.50).

Ravi's isolation begins with the acceptance of the English language and culture and with the acceptance, comes the disgust with the community around him who constantly bad-mouth with clashes developing constantly (Imakulit, 2011). The new world he was exposed by Ms Nancy and her stories gave him hope.

The sight of the new flowered wallpaper, painting of a yacht and the poster of pine trees on a rocky landscape, the sun a sparkling, ephemeral ball, lighted up a pleasant, opportunity filled world within me (p.117).

However, this was only a temporary relapse. Subsequently, he realized that this picture of a beautiful and comforting world was not as he had imagined.

The snow wasn't as white as I had imagined it to be: it muddied the moment the flakes touched the ground. The sky was almost always clouded (p.147).

The 'choice' that he had made is also reflective of existentialism. His decision does not give him any solace. What causes readers to empathize with his condition is the way Maniam records Ravi's life journey in a stark and realistic manner. The world (he) had known fell apart again at the end of the novel', where he expresses his inability to console his mother at the death of his father:

'I gazed at her searching for words to console her. I was relieved when one of the Town Council men approached me' (p.171).

Maniam ends the novel with a portrayal of Ravi as a truly existential hero, who living in an absurd and doomed situation tries to create meaning by making choices available to him but ultimately realises that there is no escape as he is unable to rise above meaninglessness. This is captured by Ravi's (Maniam) confession:

But I had not walked away from Naina , or Periatthai, for they were still vividly in my mind.

Besides the three main characters, other minor characters too are shown to represent man living in an existential world. Their lives too are morbid. The other two characters that we are introduced to are the carver and Murugesu. The carver was introduced to us as a man who had come from India with hopes of getting a lucrative job. However, he is disillusioned and struggles to exist with no hope.

His trudging through a series of rejections had made him a perpetual wanderer, a dependent on his story-creating chisel. He must have put all his disappointments, nostalgia and dreams into those four pillars (p.4).

Murugesu, the teacher who was brought from India specially to teach in the Tamil school in Riverside Estate too can be considered to be representative of existential man. His hopes are destroyed quickly.

He didn't last for more than three months. Even after two years of disillusionment in Malaysia, he retained that stimulating air of scholarship and imagination....This very ability destroyed his future (p.16/17).

After only three months, he was forced to leave his job as result of the young men's conspiracy and subsequent false

accusation. Murugesu is shown to go on living on a day to day existence. His jest for the job became the tool for his destruction. His zeal and passion destroyed him and he merely went round the Indian homes coaching the children in Tamil (p.17). The fact he refused to leave the estate quarters or to defend himself brings to mind Heidegger's idea of man being 'thrown' into situations where one is forced to constantly act and in doing he is unable to detach himself. Besides the characters, the language used in 'The Return' clearly categorizes their novel in the category of an existential novel. Ravi's claim that 'we were inhabitants of invincible landscape' (p13) brings to mind what Chartworth (1975) says about the period where man found himself in a desolated and featureless landscape. Ravi's description of his family as a work force, not a unit of affection, living together (p.93) is evidence of individualism where Satre (1956) claims that existentialism presents a world where the individual is an isolated being. Besides, the language, other literary expressions used in the novel too supports the contention that it is an existential novel.

CONCLUSION

Since existentialism is not only a philosophical but also a literary movement, it can be concluded that it is a new way of looking at human nature and the lives of individuals. The philosophers themselves have no particular system but they are in agreement in their quest to answer questions relating to the issue of choice, individuality, freedom, meaning, self-identity, authenticity, alienation, despair and mortality (Price, 2000:491). In Maniam's 'The Return', the key characteristics of existentialism is found both in his characters and the language used. Migrants and immigrants are faced with diverse cultures and lifestyles. In the novel, Ravi and the whole Hindu community are integrating into a country that is freeing itself from the clutches of colonialism. In whatever country, these migrants and immigrants are obliged to adjust and conform at the risk of their own cultures and traditions (MIGRANTE, 1999). This state of struggle is captured succinctly by Maniam. Although the novel is distinctly and unmistakably diasporic, his characters transcend the cultural boundaries by exhibiting characteristics of existentialism.

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February 1998