

The Quest for Identity and Self-Discovery: A Study of Existential Crisis in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

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Abstract

The main objective of this term paper is to analyze the theme of existential crisis in Anuradha Roy's famous novel *The Folded Earth*. The term "existential crisis" refers to facing the crisis of one's existence. This mainly talks about how people view themselves, as well as their meaning and goals in life. When people feel unsure about their purpose, options, or freedom in life, they are experiencing an existential crisis. Many persons who experience existential anxiety believe that life is meaningless and that there is no purpose to it. Confused thoughts concerning one's sense of identity might also result from an existential crisis. Some of the greatest existential philosophers and writers are Friedrich Nietzsche, Hegel, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus and Simon de Beauvoir, etc. This novel *The Folded Earth* is written by Roy, a recent Sahitya Akademi Award winner, which traces the story of a young woman Maya who creates a new life for herself in the foothills of the Himalayas. It deals with how she becomes alone in her life and questions her existence in this world. It is a time of internal turmoil for Maya when she struggles with self-identity, meaning, and purpose in life. She fights with many traumatic experiences like alienation, anxiety, depression, identity crisis, etc. Then, after leaving her tragedy behind, he decides to go for exploring a new life. Thus, this novel explores the "new woman identity" in modern-day society. The theme of this novel is based on political and religious conflicts in society, patriarchal suppression, inequality, the psychological instincts of a person, identity crisis, and the desire for a new peaceful life. Although the novel has various themes the effect of existential crisis is dominant over the novel.

Keywords: Existential Crisis, alienation, psychological instincts, *The Folded Earth*.

Abbreviation:

TFE – The Folded Earth

Introduction:

Anuradha Roy is a well-celebrated Indian novelist, who was born in 1967, in Calcutta, India. She is an accomplished writer, journalist, and editor, and has yet another accomplishment to be honored in India. She has recently won the Sahitya Akademi Award for her best-selling novel "All the Lives We Never Lived" in 2022. Her books are all well-known across the world. She is the only Indian on the long list of 13 authors for the Man Booker Prize. Now, she is living in Ranikhet, Uttarakhand, where she is running a scholarly press named Permanent Black with her spouse Rukun Advani. Her books are all well-known

across the world as some books are *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008), *The Folded Earth* (2011), *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018) and *The Earthspinner* (2021). She mainly discusses the conditions of women in the present society through the themes of love, alienation, patriarchy, class struggle, political dilemma, sexual abuse, betrayal, men-women relationships, the quest for freedom, and the struggle for making the identity. For her outstanding contribution to Indian literature, Roy received the Nilimarani Sahitya Samman in 2020.

Life is all about ups and downs. Every person feels challenges and problems in life which raises the question of the self in his mind. A crisis turns into an existential crisis when the existential facts are confronted and experienced as a relationship. Emotional agony, a disrupted sense of integrity, helplessness, hopelessness, worry, guilt, dread, and loneliness are some of the sentiments that come naturally with the conflicts. A beneficial outcome of an existential crisis is the identification of new meaning and values for oneself. In simple terms, when a person speaks about people and their daily lives, about their battle for survival, or about anything else having to do with what they do or do not, is known as an existentialist. Mainly, the word 'Existential Crisis' is concerned with the theme of existentialism which is related to the field of psychology and psychotherapy. It is also a school of thought in philosophy. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'existentialism' as "a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the person as a free and responsible agent determining their development through acts of the will". Thus, Existentialism is a movement associated with the contemporary era of the 20th century. After the Second World War, it became widely used.

Studying the dilemma of human life is the subject of existential philosophy. It is focused on a man's life experiences. It is an attempt to answer the question "Who are you?" by coming to our roots and sources. Existentialism is the rejection of all rational and scientific philosophy as well as any merely abstract thought. Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard is the first and earliest existentialist philosopher who coined the term "existence" and "existentialism". Therefore, he is also regarded as the father of modern existentialism. He pointed out that "subjectivity is truth, subjectivity is reality," and he opposed Hegel's "Dialectical Method" and claimed that "objectivity is truth." He argues that an individual thinks of everything about oneself and therefore one's knowledge or truth is subjective. Therefore true faith too is subjective. According to him all essential knowledge concerns existence (Kierkegaard). He regards himself as a Christian and theistic existentialist who thinks that a person can only come to know himself after experiencing "intensified awareness" of a divine encounter. Along with Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher, is regarded as one of the first existentialist philosophers. He especially deals with the idea of Superman, the death of God, and the will to power through her works.

The word "exist" in this context does not merely mean "to be" or "to live." According to existentialism, the act of existing is how a person who projects himself freely into the world comes to understand who he is. Man's ability to project himself into the world is determined by the notion of essence he chooses to represent. As a result, existence is a process of free becoming and a true transformation of one's actuality. A French philosopher and playwright, Jean-Paul Sartre is another important figure in the philosophy of existentialism who popularized the term 'existentialism' during the 1940s. He gives his famous classic statement from his *Being and Nothingness* "Man is on his own", and "Man is condemned to be free" (Sartre, *Existentialism From*). A concept of freedom might be said to be inherent in existentialism. According to Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of human reality, to exist is to choose, and to stop choosing is to stop being. Hence, the ability to respond to daily demands and make decisions is a function of our consciousness. He further states that the independence of an individual is influenced by social systems,

but not entirely. Individuals who have their own goals and preferences go beyond the parameters since they are a part of the original project, which they may not be completely aware of. In existentialism, what matters is not just our physical existence but also its form and structure, or what we "are." It is clear from this that existentialism is a philosophy of the subject as opposed to the object. It claims that there is no "general will" to which "individual will" is subject and that human acts and decisions are not mechanical and unaffected by physical and biological processes.

The French philosopher, Rene Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum," which may be interpreted as "I think therefore I am," turns out to be the foundation for both subjectivity and reason. Existentialism passionately rejects group rules and ideals and celebrates the individual. Jean-Paul Sartre in his Existentialism is a Humanism speaks that existentialism seeks the flourishing of the human individual i.e., the unfettered realization of our most fundamental nature (Sartre, *Existentialism Is*, 52-53). Thus, Existentialism strives not only for existence but also focuses on one's individuality as a person and as an object.

Another well-known theistic existentialist is Karl Jaspers, who is well-known for his books. He states that "Man is always more than what he knows, or can know, about himself" (Jaspers). According to his opinion, men relate to one or the other of the several world perspectives to find their own identity. Finding their identity and understanding who they are at different points in their lives may be difficult for many people. They are experiencing an existential crisis right now. Existential crises occur during confusing and high-anxiety periods, that is, times when a person is trying to resolve and find the answer to the tough questions: Who am I? and What can I contribute to the world? People who are in the midst of an existential crisis will experience high anxiety levels (Bugental). Until the crisis is acknowledged, addressed, or resolved, the anxiety will not completely go away. An existential crisis is a by-product of larger social issues that individuals have internalized (Jameson & Hardt). To minimize unfavorable effects on oneself and society, people must deal with each type of existential crisis as it occurs.

There are some other great philosophers and writers who contributed to enlightening this philosophy from the ancient to the modern age in literature. It is said that existentialism has its roots in India. According to Dr S. Radhakrishnan, its origins are found in Buddhism and Indian Upanishads. In consideration of this, Dr S. Radhakrishnan comments "Existentialism is a new name for an ancient method. The Upanishads and Buddhism insist on knowledge of the self: "atmanam viddhi" or "Know thyself". It means that because of ignorance, man is a victim of selfishness. To transcend this temporary life, Buddhism maintains that man must fully understand his duty. Thus, by becoming conscious of the eternal, he can be free from sorrow and suffering. In the modern age, there are several Indian writers whose works deal with the theme of existentialism like R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arun Joshi, Manju Kapur, Amitabh Ghosh, and many other contemporary writers. Anuradha Roy is one of the outstanding contemporary novelists who depicts the issues related to human existence in this world through her novels.

The Folded Earth is the second most popular and best-seller book written by Anuradha Roy. The novel won the Hindu Literary Prize in 2011 and was also shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011. This novel is set in the foothills of the Himalayan region and its beautiful small town Ranikhet in India. This novel presents a good portrayal of the human relationships in the society. It reflects women's suppressed emotions, unsolved issues, and many hidden realities of human life. It is also the story of unfulfilled desires, love & loss, the memory of the dark past, betrayal, and hope for a new life.

The quest for freedom is one of the prominent aspects of existential crisis. Having the freedom to make one's own decisions is what it means to be an individual. This novel deals with the story of a young woman Maya, who is the female protagonist and narrator of this novel. She is always caught between the life she

is facing and what she wants to be. She is a single girl child of her parents. Her father is a wealthy businessman who wants to make his daughter just like him. She feels dominated by his father from childhood “All through my childhood, I was my father's pet. He had put aside his disappointment at not fathering a son and had begun to take perverse pride in me, his only child, the girl who won all the prizes in school, his bright-eyed, adoring devotee” (TFE 63). He wishes to marry her with his choice of person so that she can live with her family after marriage and fulfill her responsibility as a successful woman in her father's business. He tells everyone that she is a princess and future owner of his pickle factory “Meet the princess of Begumpet Pickles! One day she will become the first female industrial magnate of this country” (TFE 63). When her mother objects to him for forcing her to live a life of his expectations, he becomes angry “She'll live here and run the business, and I'll arrange a husband for her who lives with us. Why am I earning all this money if not for my grandson?” (TFE 63). But she has different choices and needs for herself. She has felt dominated by his father since childhood. This clearly shows that Maya is suffering from the patriarchal suppression under her father. It makes her think about her existence in this world. She has no right to live life on her terms and conditions. In a patriarchal society, generally, women are consistently denied their sense of identity, uniqueness, and self. This same situation creates helplessness and psychological pressure in her life. This kind of conflict may make people anxious not simply about their choices but also about how those decisions will affect their whole life and existence. The feeling of loneliness is also an important theme in this novel. It finds that Maya suffers from the problem of being alone. She always wants someone's presence in her life. Her family formally disowns her when she marries a Christian boy who is outside her faith and caste. She has desires for a happy and peaceful life with her husband Michael but destiny has its own choices. This decision of Maya changes her life completely. She has sacrificed everything for Michael, but their marriage does not last much longer because Michael has more passion for mountaineering than he has love for Maya “What I had not known was that his need for the mountains was as powerful as his need for me (TFE 7). which demonstrates that Maya has not received any attention from Michael even though Maya shares his passion for trekking and mountaineering. She is simply viewed as a commodity that was acquired in the name of romance and marriage. In her marriage, her feelings go unnoticed and unrecognized. After marriage, she wants true love of Michael but she also realizes that her husband is an adventurous person and he has much love and passion for her life's goals and achievements “He was with me, but not with me (TFE 6). Suddenly, she faces a great disaster in her life and she loses her husband on his last trip to the mountain track. He died in the forest because of an injury. Now, she is all alone in this world with her grief. After listening to the news of Michael's death, she behaves insanely “I had been out all day on scorching streets, walking at random, getting into buses without looking where they were going, pausing at parks, shops, then walking on, until shops shut and traffic thinned” (TFE 10-11) which represents Maya's disturbed condition. She is left alone by everyone as she states “I was alone. I had no contact with friends: I had lost them over the years of being wrapped in Michael. I had in effect no family although my parents did not live in the same city” (TFE 11) and must accept the bitter reality of her loneliness. Later, she decides to leave her native place and goes to Ranikhet, a hill station so that she can escape from the memory of her past life. Here, she spends most of her time with the natural surroundings and works as an English teacher in a school. Her life takes a new turn again when she meets a young boy named Veer who is also a mountain climber and resembles her dead husband. She has many expectations from Veer in her alienated life. She says “Until Veer arrived, I had found no one in town to spend time with” (TFE 182). She thinks that Veer is the person who can cure her from her loneliness. But in the end, she comes to know that Veer is the real

cause of her disastrous life. She finds that Veer is the person who left her husband in the forest while he knew that it meant the death of Michael. Yet he did not help him and left him in the injury. He betrays his friend same as he betrays Maya on behalf of his uncle's illness. She again feels alienation "I felt utterly, absolutely alone. Wrapping my arms around my knees, I held myself as my body shook with sobs. I wept as if Michael had died the day before" (TFE 246).

Maya is a lady who always repents for her decisions yet she dares to face adversities in her life. She is always a very confusing personality. She does not believe in her decisions and therefore, she always tackles the grief and despair in her life. She utters "I could have chosen differently. I could have found a better-paid job elsewhere. I could have returned to my own family. I had been a source of bewilderment to my mother why I did not go back to my old life at home after Michael's death. The edge of my father's anger was blunted now that Michael had left my life. All I had to do was to tell him that I had been wrong and misguided and beg him to trust me again" (TFE 20).

The loss of the relationship is a major factor in existentialism. In this novel, Maya faces the loss of her father, mother, her lover Michael, and Veer. But the death of Michael affects her life deeply "I have erased that name from the book of my mind, but still the prisoner of my love" (TFE 40). It means that she tries to escape from her past so that she can live an independent life. At the end of this novel, it observes that Maya runs a successful pickle shop which makes her own identity as an independent woman.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that Anuradha Roy gives well portrayal of human existence in her works. The paper successfully explores the elements of existential crisis as loneliness, feelings of guilt, trauma and suffering, anxiety, and the quest for making self-identity in the novel *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy. This novel represents an exploration of the contemporary social, political, and psychological issues that play crucial roles in making the existence of a person. It also includes several levels that discuss individuals who are having trouble with their pasts and trying to achieve self-reliance and mental clarity in their everyday lives.

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