



GSJ: Volume 10, Issue 2, February 2022, Online: ISSN 2320-9186

www.globalscientificjournal.com

**Existentialism in the Works of Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan: A Comparative
Study**

Qaisar Khan, Najia Asrar Zaidi

Department of English Literature, University of Balochistan Quetta.

Abstract

This article will study existential notions embedded in Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan's works. Both Tagore and Ghani Khan belonged to the colonial age where persecution of people dwelling in the sub-continent region was deeply rooted in social, political, cultural and economic spheres, that too, perpetrated by the imperial British Empire. The social and geo-political landscape of that era portrayed plethora of structural shackles that were conspicuously highlighted and criticized by Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan pertinent to their respective regions. This study would be based on examination of various poems and prosaic pieces of Tagore and Ghani that shed light upon their respective narratives about the true essence of freedom and finding constructive meaning of life. Their quest was also to forefront the domains that largely substantiate freedom and spirit of liberty in the masses. The subject matter of their narrative was to present the prevailing socio-moral loopholes that are largely responsible for lethal degradation of the socio-political fabric of the colonized region. The study will also focus

on the works of the two poets that are based on notions pertinent to the widely prevalent fault lines in the domains of society, culture, politics and economy.

Keywords: Existentialism, Human Freedom, Structural Persecution, Colonial Coercion

Introduction

The Deity has created human being as a free creature. The Divine wisdom endowed human with the power to reason and intellect, yet he/she has failed to deliver according to the will of the God. A life full of illegitimately created boundaries, slavish miseries, shackles and coercive conventions in spheres of politics, culture, economy and society is as old as history itself. Among all the creatures, human enjoys absolute freedom, yet there are various obstacles which negate his/her freedom. Humans are taught to obey social, political and economic constructs; and these cannot be exercised in many areas of life. History is witness to the fact that man has never been free, not even in the most glorious of ages. Man, be him a citizen of developed country or of an underdeveloped nation, is bound to the rules and regulations set by the society. The legitimacy of these self-styled rules can neither be questioned nor violated, otherwise the consequences might be fatal and chaotic for one. As compared to the developed world like Europe and USA, human living in the developing regions is more prone to slavish designs and conventions. Conventionally speaking, the freedom only belongs to the elite, be him/her from any walk of life. Humans of globalized world are confronted with Existential crisis. The region in which we are dwelling contains a number of socio-political and economic chains. Lack of Existential notions and their attainment can clearly be witnessed in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan. Being citizens of an oppressed region, they excellently manifested the social evils shrouded in the guise of customs, traditions and laws through their prose and poetry.

Interestingly, Ghani Khan was an alumni of Shantiniketan Academy (currently Visva Bharati University), founded by Rabindranath Tagore, where he studied arts and sculpture. Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan's Existentialism is multi-layered. They think of human as a free creature whose freedom has been deliberately curtailed for the pursuance of certain social evils under the pretext of norms, values and customs of society.

Imprints of making human a slave through self-styled norms, political tyranny and economic oppression can clearly be observed in Ghani Khan's various poems like, *Qismat (Destiny)*, *Da Jashn Attan (Dance of Celebration)*, *Mazhabo Ta (To the Religions)*, *Palwasha (Light Ray of Moon)*, *Nurse, The Pathans*; and Tagore's *Gitanjali*, *The Post Office* along a number of his other literary pieces. They have not only criticized the pseudo-religious customs but also questioned and negated the oppression, colonization, economic exploitation and manipulation of human rights of people of the deprived regions, especially the South-Asian region. In their prose and poetry, they have dealt with aforementioned tyrannical designs with an iron fist.

Literature Review

In the eyes of Rabindranath Tagore, human is a free entity in the true spirit of words. Existentialism also regards that human should be analysed through subjective approaches. Tagore is well aware of adversities, difficulties and challenges pertinent to human life. He is of the view that human should be liberated in letter and spirit. Similarly, this tendency is also emphasized by the existential school of thought (R. Patil, 2018).

Tagore's lack of resistance to confront British coercion can be observed in the themes of his novel "The Home and the World (Wikipedia, 2016)". "While the entire novel centres on the Swadeshi movement, the author of the novel is not advocating it but rather warning his audience of the dangers of such a movement. Tagore knows that it is possible for even a seemingly peaceful movement to turn quickly into aggressive nationalism. Such a change would do the country more harm than good (Wikipedia, 2016)". The above mentioned lines exert that Tagore was resistant to any nationalist movement which would confront the British rule. On the behest of Colonizer, he, being a colonized, favoured the oppressor.

Tagore kept hostile views regarding Swadeshi movement not on the basis of Hinduism and Hindutva ideologies but on the behest of British and his such views are also presented in his novel. Through his characters he depicted protest against this movement. "During the campaign to make Swadeshi movement successful, nationalist emotions were invoked to boycott the imported productions. In these words of Bimala, Sandeep (Wikipedia, 2016) manifested rigid resistance against the sale and purchase of such productions.

"Sandip laid it down that all foreign articles, together with the demon of foreign influence, must be driven out of our territory". Whereas, Nikhil was of the view that he is unable to impede the flow of these foreign productions. That is why he undermined this attempt of tyrannizing the market(Wikipedia, 2016).

“He was a freedom fighter, scholar, painter, and writer and yet above all, he was a man with humility. He believed that all the problems of the human life could be resolved with the education. He thought that poverty, pestilence of communal conflicts, and industrial backwardness did stifle the society because of insufficient education. He advocated against the dilemma of women and contended for the welfare of women and for their independence by means of his letters, essays, and short stories. Through his writing, he could build vital and upright women role models in order to render the social justice that was due to them at that time”(Immaculate, 2018).

“He believed a woman could construct and shape the destiny of the nations. He demonstrated through his female protagonists in his novels the growth of women with the passage of time. The lead characters of his novels are depicted as tolerant, submissive, and broadminded. Many of the novels authored by Tagore investigate the life of the middle class family and the plight of Indian women who were not freed from the shackles of social injustice in a patriarchal Indian society”(Immaculate, 2018).

The notion of freedom for Ghani Khan is material and applicable in every aspect of life be it in this world or hereafter. Ghani considered human a free entity ranging his freedom from soul to attainment of connection with Divinity. On the other hand, Tagore kept different view of freedom. “In all his writing, he ranged himself on the side of freedom—political, social, and personal. But the surest sign of his genius was the paradoxical way in which he imagined a metaphysical freedom. Ordinarily, we think of life as the realm of free action, death as confinement and nullity. But, for Tagore, it was life that meant confinement in subjectivity, while death was liberation into the free play of being”(Kirsch, 2011).

Ghani Khan conspicuously rejected the set social norms and their so-called arbitration between God and human. In his book “The Pathans” he states that, “entities like the sorcerer, the divine and the one who

performs witchcraft are some of the biggest enemies of human. They not merely engender shallowness for soul but also transform the intellect into a latent phenomenon. Such adverse circumstances impede the development of human to strive in the face of ignorance on which the former thrives. They plunder both human fortune and intellect. On the pretext of attainment of light and Divinity, these entities have brought human to the verge of dark and gloomy horizon. These are the parasites and diseases that have prevailed on national proportions through infecting the intellects of the populous(Ghani, 1940, p. 31).

Moreover, Ghani Khan criticized the Britain's exploitation of local masses and their traditional norms and value. Since a century, the British has been involved in bribing and corruption of the dweller of sub-continent. Ghani says that the dominance in the contemporary regions belongs to the people installed and awarded to those backed by British. "The powers that be retain the tribal authority in the region"(Khan, 1940, p. 44).

In his poem "Nurse", Ghani beautifully portrays the image of woman which is full of affection, love and respect.

Serving the needy and the painful, is not service but worship

Like mother, kindness and love is nature of Hawa (Eve)

These fights with death is masculinity and valor

This kindness in the flames of pain and white beacon in darkness

Every creature is offspring of woman, having greatness and beauty

Daughter of beauty and mother of life, for this God created Hawa

We poets have made her Saaqi or beloved

The rotten western civilization made her a tranquil devil

Neither made her mother, nor a sister

Neither left her able of this world nor the hereafter

The real place of Hawa is kindness, love and service

These fights with death, is not service but worship

(Khan, 1950, pp. 1-5,8-14)

On the one hand Ghani has placed woman on the higher status of society. On the other hand, he criticizes the western culture where woman has been deprived of prestigious roles of mother, daughter and wife. The West deprived woman of her privileges of this world and the hereafter.

Research Objective

- To compare and evaluate Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan's concept of Existentialism coupled with their respective mode and domain of satire on set social and moral machinations that manifests their proximity with the Deity followed by comparison and examination of woman's existence, in their literature as an epitome of strength, courage, beauty, respect, affection and eternal blessing.

Research Question

- Is Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan's literature against the established social, political and cultural norms and values of the society as depicted in their works?
- Did they differ in their approach to portraying women's Existential entity, rights and freedom as conferred upon them by human-beings and Nature's law?

Discussion

Being the staunch believers of human equality and freedom, Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan promptly rejected the socially constructed stigmas and set beliefs, traditions and conventions that are largely responsible for curbing human existence in a free, serene and tranquil environment. Their prose and poetry contained reformative designs meant to support virtue, freedom and sanity over evil patterns and coercive social beliefs. Undeterred by the resistance that came in their path in the form of political, social and religious discriminations and stigmatization, both the literary giants of the South-Asian

region adamantly resonated their concerns, reservations and grievances in their works. They proved resolute voices for their readers and common people who failed to voice their concerns in a similar way. They are still loved and admired merely due to the notion that they never resorted to hypocrite tendencies and spoke their heart in sophisticated literary manner.

“Living in bad faith” is what Jean Paul Sartre has termed human inability to resist the patterns of coercion that curb his/her freedom and liberty. Sartre was of the view that the human existence in this world is meaningless until he gives it a meaning to it through freedom and free will. He maintains that those who live in chains are living in bad faith and they are actually not justifying their existence in this world. According to Sartre, freedom is manifested in human’s actions and free will. As far as the connection of Existentialism with this research study is concerned, Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan have maintained through their literature that freedom is the only factor that would provide meaning to human life. They are of the view that people of the sub-continent have lost their will to be free and have become oblivious of true meaning of existence, therefore, freedom in every sphere of social existence is vital for their entity. In the light of the opted research topic, the analysis has portrayed that human freedom and individual identity has been at grave stakes in the colonial and post-colonial eras. The people of South-Asia have been chained in the shackles of beliefs, dogmas, cultural and traditional narratives. Neither men nor women have been free in a true sense of the word. The denial of rights of the majority by the powers that be have slithered society to the threshold of chaos, anarchy and turbulence. According to the selected literature of two contemporary literary figures, the theory of existentialism is one of the vital panaceas for the reinvigoration of the social fabric. The persistent structural flaws can be averted to a great extent through application of the theory coupled with similar reformative endeavors.

It is vital to mention here that the domestic, regional and global human rights organizations are working to ensure human freedom, equality and inclusivity on pandemic proportions. As per its capacity and domain, every platform is striving to materialize the freedom of human in individual and collective spheres, that too, on more constructive structures. Such organizations have been struggling to build human potential and

capacity coupled with ensuring justice, rule of law and security through trainings, awareness programs and resistance-based initiatives. From realizing gender equality to human equality, freedom and inclusivity, the aims and motives of rights organizations have been functional since the inception of modern age followed by globalization and neo-liberal patterns. The loopholes, however, still persist. Human freedom has been grinding amidst political, cultural, social and economic coercions. The dominant forces in every sphere of social existence often suppressed the pressure of such voices resonated for the provision of rights and continued their oppression at a full pace. The vitality of existentialism and existential narratives of Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani are substantial to be materialized in the contemporary scheme of things to let prevail human freedom, equality and inclusiveness. Through constructive structural reforms, the status and stature of detrimental characters in the social fabric should be minimized stretching from pseudo-religious entities to political, social and cultural exploiters.

There is no denying the fact that the literature of Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan was against the established social, political and cultural norms and values of the society. Through their resistive and critical literary approaches, they conspicuously spoke against the prevalent patterns in the society that have endangered both human freedom and social stability. The widely prevalent evil of corruption in politics, economy, cultural traditions and individual spirituality are being comprehensively criticized. Being the staunch believers of human equality and freedom, Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan promptly rejected the socially constructed stigmas and set beliefs, traditions and conventions that are largely responsible for curbing human existence in a free, serene and tranquil environment. Their prose and poetry contained reformative designs that are meant to support virtue, freedom and sanity over evil patterns and coercive social beliefs. Undeterred by the resistance that came in their path in the form of political, social and religious discriminations and stigmatization, both the literary giants of the South-Asian region adamantly resonated their concerns, reservations and grievances. They proved resolute voices for their readers and common people who failed to voice their concerns in a similar way. They are still loved and admired merely due to the notion that they never resorted to hypocrite tendencies and spoke their heart in sophisticated literary manner.

Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan's literature portrayed their explicit dimensions of resistance against the established social, political and cultural norms and values of the society. In the wake of expanding horizon of British imperialism in terms of armed patterns and socio-cultural, political and economic ones, both literary giants have maintained their voices against such exploitative and tyrannical designs. Moreover, they do not advocate the armed resistance rather they believed in systematic, peaceful and resolute uprising that would not only prove advantageous to the contemporary generation, but the preceding generations would also harness the fruits of such struggles.

Gender discrimination, like today, was deeply rooted in the times of Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan. Women in that age were confined to the four walls of their houses and were denied the fundamental freedom and basic human rights. Patriarchy and male dominance have engendered plethora of gender-based disparities and marginalization. In these dismal circumstances it was the literature of Tagore and Ghani Khan that provided a voice to women's grievances. They gave them an equal status to that of men. Both the literary giants of the South-Asian region presented that woman have an entity that is not only affectionate but also powerful, resolute and invulnerable. It is only the social construction that has deprived women of their due status. Moreover, they were the pioneers of an era that surfaced women as an equal entity and resonated their voices in the chambers of society. Women in Tagore and Ghani's literature are epitome of love, harmony, strength and affection that have been greatly undermined by the patriarchal mindset. Strong women with resolute characteristics are the hallmarks of both of literary figures. While, comparing Rabindranath Tagore and Ghani Khan pertinent to their narratives regarding women and their role and status in the contemporary society, it can be safely concluded that both writers in their respective region and time decried the fouls of misogyny, patriarchy and gender-based coercion. They have resonated their voices against male dominance and set socio-cultural beliefs, norms values and traditions. Moreover, they have continually argued in favor of women empowerment and stated that horizontal social, political, cultural and economic prosperity is greatly contingent upon inclusion of women in letter and spirit. They have also regarded woman as symbol of respect and affection and appealed to the social milieu to abide by the obligations of due respect to women and treat

them on the basis of equity, equality and respect. On a general perspective, this study provides an academic and research-based insight into the vitality of human freedom and multifaceted factors that have curbed it in every sphere of social existence. It is pertinent to mention here that the primary reason behind the literary endeavors of Tagore and Ghani was to shatter the glass ceilings of structural coercions and usher into an era of peace, harmony, inclusiveness and enlightenment.

Conclusion

Beyond the shadow of any doubt, Tagore and Khan possessed a unique narrative in terms of human freedom, that too, in the midst of coercion of British Empire and plethora of structural fault lines in the social, political and cultural fabric of the contemporary South-Asian region. The voice of Tagore in Bengali and English languages and that of Khan in Pashto incredibly highlighted the impediments pertinent to existential narratives of their respective epochs. It can be safely concluded here that no research work has been done on this specific topic and domain earlier, that too pertinent to South-Asian literature, therefore, it carries a prominent status regarding its vitality and viability of a unique research-oriented outlook and essence. Comparison of both writers may open flood gates of new horizons of research in the domains that are imperative to human freedom and liberty. Such research studies would further enable the readers to not merely enhance their capabilities but also establish in them a sense of standing against the tides of systematic tyranny and oppression.

References:

- Ghani. (1940). *The Pathans*. Peshawar: University Book Agency.
- Immaculate, S. M. (2018). Social Justice in the Writings of Rabindranath Tagore. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities (IJELLH)*.
- Khan, G. (1940). *The Pathans*. Peshawar: University Book Agency.
- Khan, G. (1950). Nurse. In G. Khan, *Latoon*. University Book Agency.
- Kirsch, A. (2011). Modern Magus: What did the West see in Rabindranath Tagore? *The New Yorker*.

R.Patil, V. (2018). The Message of Existentialism in Tagore's "The Post Office". *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*.

Tagore, R. (1913). Here is Thy Footstool. In *Gitanjali*. Wikipedia. (2016). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from Wikipedia the free Encyclopedia.

© GSJ