Crisis and Man: Literary Responses Across Cultures

Mallika Krishnaswami, Professor and HOD of French, Christ University, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT
Myth of Sisyphus exemplifies the situation man finds himself in irrespective of his ethnic and geographical background. Art and cultural forms gave expression to this situation and the intensity of the expression depended upon the political and social dimensions. War or peace, man is always condemned to struggle with his problems, moral or otherwise. Post war English writers focused on the social problems the British society found itself in and its helplessness in dealing with them. It was the era that produced highly individual novelists of the age and William Golding is one among them. Golding’s novels take a pessimistic view of the human race in the face of crisis. Lord of the Flies (1954), is a simple adventure tale that is turned into a moral allegory of political power where surfaces the inherent evil nature of man. An escape from the horrors of war reveals that man cannot run away from it as evil is his basic nature. Existentialism which called for a search for meaning was a predominant theme in French literature of the post war era and Albert Camus is one of its finest exponents. With all his existentialist leanings he refused to be labeled one, preferring instead to advocate the theory of the absurd, best epitomized in L’Étranger (1942) (The Outsider). Camus’ La Peste (1947) (The Plague) shows the solidarity of a community in the face of a crisis which in the beginning threatens to destroy their spirit.

Influenced by their western counterparts, Indian writers began to experiment with the different forms. The 60s though were termed as a period of dark modernism as tossed between a clash of traditional culture and western modernity, they searched for a suitable form. Influenced by the writings of Sartre, Camus and Kafka, the writings of Ananthamurthy reflect the Indian existential view of life. Samskara (1965) deals with the creative and moral crisis of a high priest, torn between the ideals he has lived by and the reality of having given in, to his carnal pleasures.

This paper tries to see whether human crisis is shaped by external factors which could be addressed politically or otherwise or whether they are inherent in man with no permanent solution.

Keywords: Social problems, crisis, existential leanings, solidarity, clash of tradition and modernity.

INTRODUCTION
Camus’ (1970) response that the aim of a creative artist is “to depict the passions of his day” and that “in the 17th century, the passions of love were at the forefront of people’s minds but today, the passions of our century are collective passions, because society is in disorder,” and that “artistic creation, instead of removing us from the drama of our time, is one of the means we are given of bringing it closer.” (353) is as relevant today as it was in the last century.

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) best exemplifies the situation man finds himself in, irrespective of his ethnic and geographical background. Beginning with the question of suicide and whether life is worth living or not, Camus opines that when the question of the absurdity of life crops up, it’s not to be taken lightly because although “such feelings are remote because their source is a fortuitous occurrence outside the control of the individual …they are deeply present within the self because of their unsettling emotional intensity” and this feeling “signifies more and differently than what any explanation of the Absurd says and it is up to other forms of discourse , to literature in particular to supplement the inadequacies of philosophy.” (Carrol, 2007, 56-57)

No age or society has been, is or will be, free of crises in some form or other. Be it the evolutionary crisis of the days of the cavemen or the crisis that came about with the enlightenment or the existential crisis that was the engagement of writers who probed the meaning of existence in an irrational and meaningless world in the aftermath of the wars, crisis and man seem to be made for each other just as Adam and Eve.

Art and literature have always been an excellent means to express this anguish or angst that has dogged mankind since the dawn of civilization. More so has it been in the twentieth century when reeling under the impact of the wars, people were trying hard to get a hold on life. It is not surprising therefore that people across the world turned to the men of letters not only to find a better explanation of their predicament but also to seek a solution to their seemingly helpless condition. And no country has succeeded more in attempting to create an awareness of man’s fate or improving it then the country which launched the doctrine of art for art’s sake. Be it the novelists,
Stendhal, Balzac and Proust or the poets, Hugo or Baudelaire, French writers have always considered themselves moralists. Two of the most successful successors in the modern age were André Malraux and Albert Camus who despite refusing to be termed ‘existentialists’, were keen to make the world a better place to live in, conscious as they were about the role of their forefathers in the French Revolution. As des écrivains engagés or committed writers, they believed that “ideas must be lived, not thought” and tried through the might of the pen to show the way to salvation (Peyre, 1968).

The scene in post war England was no different. The social problems that the British society found itself in and its helplessness in dealing with them formed the major themes of writers like William Empson, Frank Kermode and F.R. Lewis through the different genres of literature. Some of the others to join the bandwagon in the attempt to expose the social evils were Iris Murdoch, Antony Powel, Richard Hughes and William Golding. Taking up the daunting task of lending artistic expression to his first hand experiences of war and his views on life, fearlessly, Golding not only earned his place as a distinguished novelist but as a great moralist of his times.

In Subbarao’s view (1987) “Golding’s artistic responsibility borders on a deep kind of moral accountability to his age and to the fellow men” whose conscience he tries to awaken through his “intricately crafted, sometimes fibular, at times parodistic …deeply committed and serious novels.” Contrasting between the good and the evil, the beautiful and the ugly, Golding’s novels are a true reflection of the evils that ail society which caught up in a world of power, wealth and greed seems to be leaving behind all the values which made life happy. Vividly portraying the selfish characteristics of the modern Western man, Golding’s novels highlight the evil nature inherent in human beings. If society today is ruled by violence, oppression and hatred, it is because of its own failings and weaknesses. In Golding’s view man is essentially an animal whose basic instinct is aroused at the least provocation throwing to the winds all sense of culture and decency. But all is not lost since there also exists in man, some amount of decency which may come to his rescue. Lord of the flies is a perfect example of this inherent failing. Fleeing the horrors of war, a group of British school boys find themselves marooned on a deserted island when the plane crashes there. In the absence of any adult survivors, they take control of their lives, albeit for a short while, before the bestial elements in them threaten to take over completely if not for the help that comes just then.

Indian writers, influenced by their western counterparts experimented with different forms and with the social reform movements sweeping in the wake of colonialism, the historical and romantic novel gave way to the realist or social novel in the 19th century. The earliest writers like Bankim Chandra and Apte tried to discover the identity of India through the creation of ascetic characters some of whom were historical and helped in fighting the aliens like the Mughals. The novel was also used to criticise the social evils and moral degeneration of the Indian society. The characters who were shown as ideals of personal and social morality were basically Indian, the scene not withstanding in Karnataka. The early 20th century writers like Guvadi Venkata Rao, Shivarama Karanth, Kuvempu and Masti Venkatesha Iyengar wrote works of pure realism, filled with the struggle for independence, the caste and the class struggle which held mankind. Greatly inspired by writers like Camus, Sartre and Kafka, the writers of post Independence like U.R. Ananthamurthy, P. Lankesh, Poorna Chandra Tejaswi, Chandrasekara Kambara and Girish Karnad probed the existential crisis of man. U.R.Ananthamurthy’s Samskara is a perfect example of the clash between tradition and modernity. Pitted against the religious Brahmin Praneshacharya is Naranappa, a man of lax morals who dares to defy all norms of brahminhood, openly flaunting his immoral lifestyle with a low caste woman. As he had sullied brahminhood, the people of Durvasapura refuse to bury his body for fear of sullying theirs. Even the great Praneshacharya, the Crest- Jewel of Vedic learning, cannot give them an answer, tossed as he in this war of values.

Since literature is said to not only re-present society being the medium through which social beliefs, values and norms of a culture are conveyed, much depends on a writer and what he conveys. Camus’ appeal to artists, “whatever our personal frailties may be, the nobleness of our calling will ever be rooted in two commitments, difficult to observe: refusal to lie about what we know, resistance to oppression” (Peyre, 1968) could be the guiding beacon to writers of all cultures.

References
