

A Study on 'Outsiderism' in Manik Bandopadhyay's Outcast Heroes

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Abstract: This paper aims to ascertain the notion of outsider and the subsequent crisis of existentialism in the works of the Bengali Writer Manik Bondopaddhay; the legacies of which can be traced back to the works of Austrian writer Franz Kafka, French writer Albert Camus and many others. 'Outsiderism' can be labelled as an offspring of the philosophical movement 'Existentialism' sharing some common psycho-philosophical concerns like the stress on concrete individual existence or subjectivity, moral individualism or individual freedom, commitment and choice, dread and anxiety etc.. The essence of these issues is very dominant in Manik's outcast characters in the novels Putulnacher Itikatha, Dibaratrir Kabbo and Padma Nadir Maajhi. The anomaly and incongruity in accomplishment and execution of the above psycho-philosophical concerns have turned the protagonists of Manik into untouchable outcasts exploding accumulated angst of helplessness.

Key Words: *Outsiderism, Existentialism, Alienation, Death, Crisis, Dilemma, Struggle*

Objective and Methodology:

The objective of this research is to ascertain a place for the works of Manik Bandopadhaya in the universal context of existential crisis and philosophy in literature. This field of Manik has not been well researched so far. The treasure of existential philosophy in Manik's works requires proper attention to be explored. So this paper aims to show that Manik's works are as wealthy as those of any other western author in dealing with 'outsiderism' as a universal phenomenon, and to explore Manik's pedantry in dealing with this modern philosophy to apply successfully in Bengali literature.

A qualitative evaluation is utilized for this research project leveraging objective methods like consulting primary and secondary sources e.g. novels by Manik and some other literary texts by other existentialist writers, online and printed journals and other research works on Manik. Among the specified documents there were Putulnacher Itikatha, Dibaratrir Kabbo and Padma Nadir Maajhi by Manik Bandopadhaya; The Outsider and Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus as primary sources; Existentialism and Humanism by Jean-Paul Sartre and some other texts have been mentioned in the reference section. The research methodology for this paper required gathering relevant data from the specified documents and compiling them in order to analyze the material and arrive at a

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more comprehensive understanding and historical reconstruction of the lives of alienated protagonists and their subsequent crises and dilemmas. To reach the goal of this research, in-depth character have been analysed and comparisons of personality traits among the major representative characters of the texts have also been made.

The peculiar sensation of being 'outsider' in an awfully known world in which an individual inhabits, precedes the predicament of existence and questions the purpose and rationale of being alive where nothing seems to be in orderly and meaningful. In fact, an outsider is one who does not belong to, or is not part of a group or organization; somebody who is alienated from the whole and, then, undergoes the frequent crisis of existence as a free individual. S/he suffers the predicament for her/his position as a trapped one; feels the problem of the absurd role in society; experiences the dilemma between being and not-being a part of the whole; bears the failure to serve as human being; endures the scarcity of belongingness and, finally, goes through the ultimate consciousness of being an outcast. That is to say, all the turmoil of an outsider sums up into the complex crisis of existence. In fact, human being is outsider in two ways: first, s/he is outsider to her/his very being, in terms of existence and essence; and secondly s/he is outsider to her/his surroundings. However, the conception of outsider and the trend of 'outsiderism' in literature emerged as one of the essential aspects of European existentialist philosophical thoughts immediately after the devastations of the two World Wars and put its imprint on the contemporary sub-continental literature, specifically on Bengali novelist Manik Bandopadhyay's (1908–1956) novels *Putulnacher Itikatha* (1936), *Dibaratrir Kabbo* (1935) Padma Nadir Majhi (1936) [translated in English as *Boatman of the Padma* (1948)] etc. In fact, the existentialist philosophy crossed over any phenomenological boundaries of time and space, and travelled from different European countries to Russia and then to the Indian subcontinent, frequently impregnating itself with multiple dimensions of local flavour.

Following the trail of Dostoevsky, probably the greatest to bring existentialism in literature [1], many influential writers came up with their respective works to deal with existentialism in literature. In the early 20th century the novels of Frantz Kafka, such as *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926) and the novella *Metamorphosis* (1916), present alienated individual confronting bizarre surroundings full of strangers; Kafka's heroes are forlorn, tormented and anxious which reflect the influence of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche. [2] In the works of Manik the same impulse of isolation and alienation is traced, as found in the protagonist Herombo in *Dibaratrir Kabbo*, who is indifferent and unattached to anything worldly- he is apathetic to remember his own daughter; and the sense of estrangement is also marked in the protagonist Shashi of *Putulnacher Itikatha* (1936), who is almost a replica of Kafka's Joseph K. As a continuation of the concept Camus' philosophical essay, "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" (1942) and the novel *The Outsider* (1943) broke new grounds to offer a reasonable solution to the predicament of human being's absurd existence as an outsider in this ephemeral world in which an indifferent individual is condemned to live and die a miserable death.

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Though the consciousness of being outsider tormented human being from time immemorial, it resurfaced as an essential ingredient of modern crisis of modern man. A conscious modern man cannot but be an outsider because he does not find his match of thought to settle down with the mainstream. So, human characters as outsiders are current in any world classics as well as in the sub-continental literature of modern times. Accordingly, Manik inaugurated the modern man's crisis of existence and the subsequent consciousness of 'outsiderism,' in Bengali literature, especially through his works like *Diba Ratri Kabbo*, *Putul Nacher Itikatha* and *Padma Nadir Majhi*. The modern crisis in Manik's characters could easily be compared to that of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, and even, to that of Baudelaire and Dostoevsky. In comparison with Camus or Sartre or Kafka, Manik is equally vigorous and bold in creating Bengali Mr. Meursault in Herombo or Bengali Antoine Requentin in Jadob. Camus starts his *The Outsider* with Mr. Meursault who is indifferent at the death of his mother [3] whereas Manik ends his *Diba Ratri Kabbo* with Herombo who reacts indifferently at the suicide of Anondo on glowing fire. [4] Like many other successful thinkers and literary figures Manik's existentialism is revealed not merely in his novel's themes and contents - it neither depends merely on the use of contents throbbled with Freudian Psychoanalysis nor Marxism nor "social realism." [5] Without denying the importance of these contents it could be said that Manik's real modernism depends on his basic viewpoint of life and living. Manik contributed in this field by creating such characters as are, in one way or the other, the modern outsiders. Herombo, Kuber, Shashi, Jadob, Anondo or Kusum- all are modern men suffering the same predicament of existence; all are the outsiders in their own worlds: Kuber cannot consume his own rightful earnings; Shashi is the only educated person who alone understands the tricks of Jadob; Jadob has to sacrifice his life, may be against his own will, to fulfil the expectation of frenzied illiterate crowd; and Kusum is very lonely with her desires and fails to make the other understand. As expressed in her angst: "My body feels something when I stand beside you, *Chotobabu!*" [6] [21] The unsympathetic reply comes: "Body! Body! / Don't you have heart, Kusum?" [6] In fact they represent the eternal predicament of 'everyman', an ordinary individual, with whom the audience or reader is supposed to be able to identify easily, and who is often placed in extraordinary circumstances [7]. So, "the characters of Manik's novels are not (specifically special) human beings, they are the projections of (every) human being - every single human part of human being." [8]

Here, Manik's characters gradually realize that they are in a continuous confrontation with and conflict against a grand invisible and extremely powerful divine-like antagonist who is incessantly squeezing away their all essence of idealism. They are, in fact, compelled to act like puppets in the hands of that sports-loving adversary. At a certain period when their back set against the wall of limitations, they confront the bitter truth that there is no other way out than surrendering to the treason of fate. Manik explores the very fact that it is very hard for the experienced and well acquainted man to revolt, to stand straight. Because they know the forthcoming obvious strike, the existence of darkness

even in the light. So Manik's protagonist Kuber cannot revolt against Sheetalbabu who does not pay for the fish he takes from him [9], but seldom strikes and retaliates, yet not to soften and pacify the way of living but only to prolong it. They live as incarnated Sisyphus. Their lives are limited within the tiresome and repeated cycle of ascending and descending, striking and retreating, going forward and coming back. There are no free choices other than prescribed options. Thus, they are outsiders in their own world and alienated from their own choice of path and, hence, their existences are overlooked. Therefore, Manik is much more concerned to explain an individual human being's psychological position as an outsider sometimes conceived willingly by character like Herombo in *Dibaratrir Kabbo* or sometimes imposed by the social order on Kuber in *Padma Nadir Majhi* as Kuber, a fisherman cannot even consume the fish that he catches, rather the *Mahajon* (boss) seizes it from him against his (Kuber's) will. This gives Kuber the feeling of an outsider in his own world where he cannot exercise his own right because he is weak, powerless and socially inferior in class order. On the other side, Herombo is indifferent to his relations; he is given choices but chooses none. And Shashi is compulsorily bound to choose such a life too. Presumably, Manik's intention is to discover the fact that human beings in this society are like puppets that are compelled to act being controlled by some invisible thread, and there is no other way out.

Manik's protagonists Herombo and Shashi are inert, indifferent and puppet-like who could also be labeled as rebels against the traditional norms and values of normal human being because they are prone to reject the code of normalcy. Thus, their lives expose paradoxes of living. Herombo is indifferent to his wife's death, rejects Supriya's love, but at the same time adores Anondo's beauty. Therefore, he cannot afford to be a normal man. Shashi, though not always indifferent, is an epitome of helpless human being as well. He knows the origin of the problem but cannot help, rather plays a role of an inert audience. Incidents around him take place and proceed in their automatic course. Though he is part of the process, he is an outsider because he is utterly powerless to change the pace and do anything better.

However, Manik's first novel *Dibaratrir Kabbo* is full of symbols, metaphors, romantic love-affairs and, most importantly detachments. In this novel all the symptoms of modern crisis that we come across – dilemma of choice, uncertainty of life and living, meaninglessness of existence – are revealed through the complex lives of his protagonists. Though Manik has indulged himself in bestowing his novels with metaphors and romanticism, it is obviously his brilliance that successfully creates such a protagonist like Herombo who upholds the post-World War I complexities and crisis of the thoughtful mind of middle class citizen who bitterly confronts the terse self-questioning and introspection, and ultimately feels himself 'outsider' from the whole social structure. It can also be added that Manik's modern viewpoint and crisis of life are vividly sketched through the abnormal life-style of Maloti as a drunkard under the pretention of religious practice, the familial complexities with her husband and the subsequent psychological and physical detachment from each other. But Herombo's angst exceeds that of any other's because he is highly

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educated and "habituated in leading a complex life. He is not an ordinary man. His mind is always guilt-ridden; he has surrendered continuously; he is trapped in so many times that he feels dizzy; his head staggers. It is really tough for him to gather happiness, pleasure and contentment". [10] His culpable feelings are not due to his wife's suicide but for some more deep seated mysterious reasons; this guilty feeling is the basic tendency of his character which alienates himself from others- for this reason he cannot love anyone- he is unable to respond positively to any kind of love devoid of attachment. Regarding love "he is cold like ice". [4] That is why he always tries to escape from Suprya. Since he is not an idealist, it should not be misunderstood that he rejects her offer of love fearing the sin of adultery. In fact he is indifferent; an alienated human being detached from the contemporary antagonistic society. He has a family- a wife and a daughter. He has no remorse for his wife's death and regarding his daughter he comments, "I had a daughter of two years. I am saying 'I had' because fifteen days ago I saw her. If she is dead by this time, she is no more now". [2] [21] That is, he is free, alienated and detached from any kind of worldly affection, love and passion. It is to be marked that Manik had already said what Camus later brought through his protagonist in the novel *The Outsider* through the statement: "Mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know". [3] The unsympathetic existential failure to be integrated and the harsh consciousness of bitter emptiness automatically mess up the thoughts and feelings and alienate man thrusting him/her into the sufferings of outsiderism. Herombo's own words unfold the dangerous meaninglessness of living and the precarious crisis of existence:

What'll man do? He has to live fifty or sixty years but he has nothing to do.... But man is helpless. He is bound to feel up the vast emptiness in him. Man tries to fill this gap up with complex sums, with his good manners and behaviours, with pieces of steel and also with a lot of rubbishes....why man is madly working? Because, he has nothing else to do. He has no real work....There is no end of life in this life. Man will always seek out for its purport and significance. But he'll never get to it. [11] [21]

On a whole, the protagonist of the novel is overrun with numb meaninglessness, harsh emptiness and bitter failure. He is a failure not only in his thoughts and feelings, he is a failure in his practical life too; he can succeed in nothing- neither in married life; nor in accepting Supriya's offered love; nor in gaining Anondo for life. His failure and meaninglessness of life has made him not only the modern figure but has graded him as an anti-hero of modern life because "the anti-hero is the man who is given the vocation of failure" [12], putting him/her in mental exile as an outcast.

On the other hand, Shashi the protagonist of Manik's *Putul Nacher Itikatha* is the projection of contemporary youth who is struck by the post World War crisis, inertia and maddening self-questioning. Since Shashi is educated, and since his education alienates him from his own superstitious society, his helplessness is incurable and irremediable, his weariness is terser and defeat is more heart-

rending. He knows the treachery and truth about Jadob's so called self-willed death which the uneducated ignorant mass takes as an execution of divine scheme. He is very conspicuously eye-catching character in Bengali literature to realize the helplessness of human being which makes him secluded from others and subsequently alienates him as an outcast among the mainstream. Despite all of his craftiness, slyness, dexterity and knowledge he is helpless and fragile before his dumb surroundings. As Kuber, the protagonist of *Padma Nadir Majhi* is not aware of the revolt, there is no weariness in his defeat; but, on the other hand, Shasai as a knowledgeable person gets the chance to reform the life-style and change the viewpoint of the villagers. But miserably he fails to do so. That is why he is more helpless and distressed at the end of the novel. He is unable to prevent suicide and cure the diseased.

Death is another very crucial fact in existentialist philosophy, which Manik has rendered both graceful as well as awkward treatment in his novels. In the suicide scene of dancing Anando the death is captured as a romantic beauty in the eyes of Herombo, the hero of *Dibaratrir Kabbo*. But since Shashi is a doctor, death is not romantic to him. Rather, death is a cruel reality, and, at the same time, mysterious and inexplicable. Manik who was a student of science used to visualize "thousands of signs of a new mysterious world in his mind". [8] Accordingly, his creation, Shashi enters the world of science while studying medical science, and feels the mystery of death in his heart. With this he realizes the ultimate vulnerability, the failure of all his endeavours. The death of Basudeb's son, and that of old Yadab couple and Shendidi, continuously reflect the same endless mystery and the pain of helpless failure. Shashi does not get the chance to save thunder stricken Harughosh, but he earnestly fights to save Basudeb's son and Shendidi. But, at last all his scientific knowledge turns to prove worthless. The worthlessness of his very knowledge and power ultimately portrays Shashi's limitations and the meaninglessness of human fate as well. Herombo in *Diba Ratrir Kabbo* also feels this meaninglessness of life but finds consolation by sacrificing individual existence putting emphasis on broader scheme of spreading humanity. He says:

... We are to die one day. If we weren't human being, if every one of us would have limited ourselves within some self-created border, we would have thought that death will make our life meaningful. The consciousness for which we don't live but thinking about life itself unlike animals; we don't die except thinking about death, that very consciousness tells us that human being dies not humanity. Hence, the flow of human race asserts that life itself is not unsuccessful. [4][21]

If viewed through the eyes of Dr. Shashi, the death story of Yadab couple can add a new dimension. The people of the village Gaodia believe that saint Yadab's death is a "self-willed death" (*Ichchhamrittu*). But, since Shashi is a doctor, he knows the truth that it is not Yadab's divine power to die a "self-willed death" but a harsh self treason. Yadab fears death, and this can be affirmed by his use of stick at night to frighten away snake. But this is his promise of self-willed death made to the illiterate villagers that compels him to commit suicide along with his

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wife by taking excessive opium. He is helplessly stuck in his self created vicious circle; he cannot but die because people know him to be a saint.

Even though Shashi earnestly tries to prevent Yadob from committing suicide, he feels inert before the crazy ignorant mob which really believes the fake story of self-willed death. The helplessness and the meaninglessness of his own role in the very incident are exposed to himself with its utmost bitterness. As a doctor he is unable to perform his duty, but here, he cannot even try to cure the dying people. Here Shashi is an outsider and alien because "alienation, as Hegel understands, is the failure of the will of the individual (Shashi in the novel) to identify with larger will of the society (uneducated frenzied mob in the novel)". [13] The writer has presented to us such a situation in which even after knowing the root of the problem and the remedy of the disease Shashi's role turns to be that of a helpless inert audience. He remains outsider to the whole process:

"Shashi was meticulously observing the both (Yadab couple) from the beginning.... Sticky sweat and a pale shade had covered Yadab's face, his eyes became tightened. Shashi was a doctor, the only educated man among three or four thousand mob frenzied with excitement and great enthusiasm. Shashi Shivered" [6] [21].

But Shashi did not find any other more effective role to play other than watching helplessly. As a result, two lives (Yadob couple) extinguished before his eyes. With this incident the meaninglessness of human endeavour in this cruel and adverse world is bitterly exposed to the outsider Shashi and to the reader as well. Shashi could not reach core of the heart of the old man dwindling in the midst of life and death. He could not solve the mystery why "death appeared to be magnificent and desirable" [6] for Yadob.

Shashi was stirred with the abyssal mystery of death as well as he was moved with the complex chemistry between man and woman. He could not reveal the mystery of his sister, Bindu's inner psyche. She is bound to live a life of a drunkard like her husband. Her abnormal life brings dangerous perversion in her character. For this perversion her calm and quiet family life appears to her as a mere tasteless and colourless object. [14] Shashi is thrust into another mystery; he cannot understand why she did not commit suicide to avoid this dishonoured and perverted life. He thought, "There was a bottle of poison on the shelf, why didn't she take the poison that day?" [6] Bindu like Camus' Sisyphus [15] ceaselessly draws the burden of life as a protest against the meaninglessness of existence. [16] She appears to be a moving account of the agony of being in the world.

In short, Manik's all the characters are source of problems to themselves because they cannot mould or reshape themselves to fit the society. They are the outsiders suffering the crisis of existentialism. Most of them know the bare fact that they have to act according to the will of their infinitely powerful opponent: nature or society or the creator. They have no better option other than shouldering the yoke of responsibilities which are predestined to them.

Though some influential thinkers and literary figures of the 19th and 20th centuries, like Dostoevsky, Sartre, Kafka, Manik and Camus gave the concept of

'outsiderism' its natural impetus, it is not to be taken for granted that 'outsiderism' emerged distinctly with them - its history goes beyond the beginning of civilization. The consciousness of being outsider is discovered only when human being started thinking critically that to be a conscious human being is to be an-outsider. [13] These thinkers only contributed to give this long felt but not explicitly exposed concept a literary and artistic mold. They brought the very fact overtly before us through the numerous characters in their works. Gregor, Meursault, Herombo, Shashi, Kusum, Yadob, Sisyphus and Joseph K. - all are the representative-bearers of the predicament of the eternal human being. It is not only the crisis of modern man; rather modernism brought the issue to the fore. Some disastrous modern crisis, like the two devastating World Wars, decline of human values, disintegration and breaking down of the world order, one after another, helped to ignite the very sensation of being outsider in human being. Being born and brought up around the time of World Wars, the creators of the protagonists mentioned above were all, one way or the other, victims of these disorientations. Their personal experiences helped themselves to unfold the veil of such precarious situation of human being and expose to us. [17]

In this connection, Manik's world is essentially chaotic, and this is why it is impossible to derive a specific philosophical or religious code from the protagonists of this world. Even though the chaos and paradoxes can easily be acknowledged in this world, only the events that occurred around themselves and around their characters can reveal the basic absurdity of things and the essential nature of human existence as outsiders. [8] Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, humans are nevertheless obliged to act morality in a world where death renders everything meaningless. They can never predict the consequences of their actions, and hence, they come to regard their total freedom of choice as a curse. That is why, Manik's protagonists like Kafka's are caught midway between a notion of good and evil, whose scope they cannot determine and whose contradiction they cannot resolve. Deprived of any common reference and impaled upon their own limited vision of "the law," they cease to be heard, and much less understood by the world around them. They are isolated to the point where meaningful communication fails them. [18] When the typical Manik hero is confronted with the question of his identity, he cannot give a clear-cut answer. Manik's heroes are thrown out to survive in such a world.

Finally, The guilt of existentialist heroes, as of Manik's, lies in their failure to choose. At the same time, Shashi in Manik's *Putul Nacher Itikatha* is an outsider and drifter in a world devoid of metaphysical anchoring and suffering from the crisis of absurdity and alienation. And in this sense, they all are modern-day relatives of that great hesitator and outsider Hamlet, the victim of his exaggerated consciousness and overly rigorous conscience. [18] The understanding of this insecurity and the subsequent quest of its origins are very closely linked to the existential and 'outsiderism' motifs in the writings of 19th and 20th centuries. The writings mentioned in this paper are powerful indictments of an individual's alienation from the contemporary technology-driven civilization, which Karl Jasper in his *Man in the Modern Age* regarded as a social disease - the corrosive encroachment of Capitalism; the ever-growing

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reliance of objective criteria of thoughts having been paid for by ever deepening ignorance of the real nature of humanity. So, Jadob sacrifices his life to satisfy the hunger of mass consumer of his spectacular death, turning his concrete individual existence or subjectivity meaningless. On the other hand, Shashi cannot practise his moral individualism. Even though he knows the secret, he cannot help the blind mass to awake from their superstitious slumber. Moreover, Kuber does not have that individual freedom to sell his own fish and live better life and Herombo's commitment is loose and choice versatile. To go further, Jadob, his wife and Anondo end their lives resulting dread and anxiety. Therefore, all are outcasts surpassing the traditional code of normalcy.

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