



Regional Existentialism: A Study of Jayant Khatri's Short Stories

Dr. Manoj Chhaya

Head and Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri R.R. Lalan College, Bhuj.

ABSTRACT

Region and culture are often thought to be synonymous. They produce a collective impression on literature. Kachchh, the largest district in Gujarat, is a distinctive region. With its atypical geography, Kachchh has been a subject of demographical and cultural studies. It is interesting to see how this region has produced characteristic literature. This paper studies some of the short stories by Jayant Khatri (a Gujarati writer from Kachchh writing between 1940 to 1967) in order to examine the hypothesis that regional conditions and culture shape the literary-philosophical paradigms. Jayant Khatri is better known as the pioneer of modernism in Gujarati fiction. His literary fame rests on his 42 short stories that generally depart from the common philosophical, didactic and socialist writing of his contemporaries. Kachchh, the native region of Khatri, forms the setting in many of his stories and provides a platform for his philosophy. Khatri's treatment of themes reflects existential concerns strongly rooted in the region. Khatri's outlook does not imitate the western thesis of existentialism but rather develops a local philosophy of life.

I

Region is one of the dynamic social concepts. It has been variously understood as 'a homogeneous area with physical and cultural characteristics distinct from those of neighbouring areas' (Vance and Henderson, 1968: 377) or 'a geographic area unified culturally, unified at first economically and later by consensus of thought, education, recreation etc. which distinguishes it from other areas' (quoted by Dixit, 2004: 183) with a focus on the spatial and geo-political aspects of the notion. But as Russett (1967) observes, simple geographical definitions do not explain the ambiguity of the notion¹. It is historical and socio-cultural (and even economical) contiguity that provides shapes the meaning of the term 'region'. As a result, the notions of region and culture are often thought to be synonymous.

The second definition quoted above takes culture as the most important criterion unifying a region. Culture in turn is another broad and elusive concept. Similar to the concept of region, culture too has been understood as a comprehensive, coherent as well as fragmentary concept (see Ranter, 2000). In order to comprehend a pattern, culture studies resort to 'cultural phenomena' (socially constructed artefacts; social facts in Durkheim's sense of being collectively created and shared) such as, 1) Cultural activities like producing goods, raising and educating children, making and enforcing policies and laws, providing medical care. 2) Cultural values, schemas, meanings, concepts. 3) Physical artefacts such as tools, books, paper, pottery, eating utensils, clocks, clothing, buildings, furniture, toys, games, weapons and technology which are collectively constructed 4) Psychological phenomena such as emotions, perception, motivation, logical reasoning, intelligence, memory, mental illness, imagination, language, and personality are collectively constructed and distributed 5) "Agency" directed at constructing cultural phenomena and it is also influenced by existing cultural activities, values, artefacts, and psychology.

Philosophy and literature are cultural phenomena. Any philosophy tends to be culture-specific as it owes its existence to a shared perspective. Literature, on the other hand, shares a dialectic relationship with culture and philosophy. Traditional critical approaches to literature often sought to trace philosophical theses in a text while modern literary theory takes a text to be a self-sufficient trope ("[Il n'y a pas de hors-texte](#)"). Critical studies applying philosophical theses to literary texts reduce them to be slavish vehicles of philosophy. Moreover, whether a philosophical paradigm can have universal significance is also a debated issue. Notwithstanding these debates, western literary-philosophical ideas and movements have continued to influence regional literatures in India. Creative and critical traditions in Gujarati are no exception in this regard. A considerable body of western philosophical critical thought exists in Gujarati. Several critical works consider Gujarati texts from the viewpoint of western '-isms' but few try to study the 'contextuality' of a thesis (see Vijlivala 2006, Yagnik, Trivedi and Malkan). The question Vijlivala (2006) asks is whether western philosophical paradigms are consistent with Gujarati tradition or they are superimposed over a creative text. In order to answer this question, the texts should be analyzed for the traces that justify a particular thesis.

II

Western literary philosophies, techniques and traditions are often overtly and infelicitously applied to Indian texts but very few texts actually justify such associations. Originally, existential philosophy has diverse characteristics. Existential themes form the core of several literary works in numerous

languages and at the same time attempt to explain the nature of arts.ⁱⁱ In Gujarati fiction, Chandrakant Bakshi, Suresh Joshi, Shreekant Shah, Madhu Rye and Radheshyam Sharma, among others, have been well-acclaimed for treating existential themes in their novels. Existential themes in Gujarati literature are by and large limited to novels and there have been a variety of charges on the validity of the approach (see Vijlivala 2006). Jayant Khatri is known to be the pioneer of modernism in Gujarati Literature and his influence is evident even on the writers like Bakshi. Writing between 1940 to 1967, Khatri's literary fame rests on 42 publishedⁱⁱⁱ and 11 unpublished short stories. He was not a prolific writer and could not complete a novel he had started but his experimental themes and style have been a subject of considerable study. English translation of ten of his stories has also been published (2004).

Ame Buddhimaano (We intellectuals), Yaad...ane Hun (My Memories), Ame (We), Anand nu Mot (Ecstasy and Agony), Avaj Ajvalan (The Glow and the Sound), Ardho Divas (Half a Day), Cybil and Dead End deal with urban characters and their isolation. All the characters try to 'create' their existence while trying to fit into it. On the other hand, *Damo Arjan, Kaal Juna Dungra (Old Hillocks), Dhaad (The Robbery), Matino Ghado (Earthen Pot), Naag, Gopo* are the stories of misfits in scarcely populated area. Khatri has noted about his experiences that made him write, 'I have grown up among the wretched... they have taught me the art of communion and struggle...It is from them that I learnt what smothers human life and how. In a moment of epiphany, I can see through the inhibitions of man. It is this philosophical vision that makes me write' (Mehta 2000a: 5). He is not generally taken to be an existential writer, perhaps because he did not write any novel or because his existential treatment was quite personal. In one of his letters, he has mentioned Camus only as a reference and not as an influence. While narrating his experience writing about Kachchh, he says,

There is a peculiar thing with me as a writer. I am terribly attached to my place and my people. I know very intimately the earth I trod upon. The wail of wind on duty, rocky desolate plains... the evenings that die without glamour and the night sky so crystal clear that it almost speaks to you – they are all so intimate to me that when I am left alone with them, I feel so very despondently happy – as if I am having date with my sweetie (have you read Camus's *Adulterous Woman?*) The same way I feel with my people – he may be an ordinary labourer, a farmer, a housewife, pimp or a prostitute – I know them through and through. I know all 'whys' and 'hows' about them (Mehta, 2000a: 7).

Most of his stories are set in Kachchh, a queer region that denied any contiguity with the neighbouring regions. It has always been a 'remote' place and has created a parallel culture in Gujarat^{iv}. With its arid unpopulated landscape, hillocks and *rann*, Kachchh has all the features of a romantically wretched land. Kachchh is an active thespian in Khatri's stories. Often it is the place that creates the incident. Many of Khatri's stories have an urban setting too, particularly Mumbai, but Kachchh shaped his sensibility^v. Thus Kachchh lends the stories contiguity of stance. Hostile nature of the region in Khatri's stories undercuts all the codes of morality and ethics. Existential amorality emanates from the hostility of nature in the region. Understanding that being is 'no thing', he appreciates the struggle to create an identity and isolation in the process.

In his most remarkable story *Dhaad*^{vi} (translated as *The Outlaw*), mangrove trees on the shore symbolize the struggle for survival. Ghela says to Pranjeevan,

Look....Have you ever given a thought as to...how it (the tree) is able to survive? The roots of this tree first go deep into the mire so that they gain strength...however as [when] they do not get any nourishment from the mire, its [the] roots come out of the ground and spread themselves all around the trunk. It is through their thorns that they get nourishment from the air....and yet this plant which has grown after such perseverance and stood straight with dignity, is eaten up and sucked by our camels... Pranjeevan, that is the secret of life. (Khatri, 2004:101)

Ghela had only one solution to all problems – "there is only one way to solve the mystery that is life, and to overcome all its hurdles. You just have to be domineering – be more than a match for others – and then make them submit to you" (101). At the end of *Dhaad*, Khatri proves the futility of Ghela's efforts to be 'more than a match' and at the same time celebrates his dignity. Ghela's philosophy of 'being more than a match' can also be seen as a part of his struggle to attach some meaning to his life. The protagonists of *Dhaad, Khara Bapor (High Noon), Matino Ghado (Earthen Pot), Anand nu Mot (Ecstasy and Agony), and Tej Gati and Dhvani (Light, Speed and Sound)* conclude an unthoughtful action, similar to Meursault. Perhaps, the sexual compromise of Ranal and Lakhdi in *Matino Ghado* and *Khichadi* respectively could have been avoided in some other part of the country. The consequent murder of Saheb in *Matino Ghado* is not a deliberate action. Just as Meursault does not lament his act, Lakhdi in *Khichadi* adapts herself to the situation. Perhaps she has accepted the meaning of her existence.

Khatri's idea of absurdity of life comes through clearly in *Damo Arjan*, a short story with a mad protagonist. Unable to understand his own being, the protagonist towards the end of the story indulges in dissecting flies, cockroaches and other insects in order to grasp the meaning of life. The unstated reason for Damo Arjan's madness is his inability to make both ends meet and survive with his wife and twelve children. Similarly, *Tej, Gati and Dhvani, Dead End* and *Cybil* are the narratives of isolation that depict a vain struggle for the essence.

Khatri explores the existential paradigm not only in depicting the meaningless human struggle to survive in hostile conditions but also in portraying intellectual and urban alienation. While for Damo Arjan death offers an escape route, for Madhu, Umed, Chandrika and Haribhau in *We Intellectuals* death has no consolation either. All the characters suffer from alienation. The idealism of college days and their belief in communist regime that sustained them gives way to the harsh reality of life outside, shattering their sense of self. As the narrator remarks, 'there was no place for we intellectuals!' Yet, except Navin, the characters try their best to carry on.

Khatri's existentialism is not borrowed from the west - from Kierkegaard, Camus or Sartre. For him a story was a unified piece that should take its shape from some intense experience. Khatri's existentialism is not nihilistic but rather 'survivalistic'. This tendency in Khatri's philosophy bears comparison with Sartre's statement 'Existentialism is Humanism' and distinguishes him from those practitioners of existentialism who try to 'transplant' and 'translate' existential philosophy. A faithful depiction of what Khatri had observed and what he had felt leads him to develop his own philosophy of

existence. As Vijlivala (2006: 13) notes, Camus, Sartre and Kierkegaard lived and wrote what they thought while Gujarati writers can write on isolation and faith both! Thus superimposition of philosophy creates a split in a text, but Khatri's affinity with his place and his people has created an independent regional paradigm of philosophy in Gujarati literature.

NOTES:

ⁱ Dixit (2004: 183) quotes four other definitions that variously focus on homogeneity and difference to define the concept.

ⁱⁱ Existential philosophy also attempts to understand the nature of art, perhaps with a view to finding some meaning through it. Thus existential criticism can either evaluate the treatment of existential themes in a work of art or understand the very being of a text from an existential perspective.

ⁱⁱⁱ His stories are collected in three volumes: Khara Bapor (1968), Phoran (1972) and Vehtan Jharna (1975). Three edited anthologies by Chandrakant Topiwala, Suresh Dalal and Dharendra Mehta have also been published.

^{iv} Two important studies on Kachchh are *The Black Hills* (Williams) and *Shruti ane Smruti Kachchh* (Dholakia).

^v For a detailed account of the development of Khatri's art, see Mehta (2000 a).

^{vi} Interestingly, the story is adapted into a full-length novel by Vinesh Antani (2003) and also made into a Gujarati film. The novel explores the existential concerns further.

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