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Existential Overtones in Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Puppet*

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the indigenous Tuareg tribe of the Saharan desert with reference to the twentieth century philosophy, Existentialism. The philosophy highlights the individual existence, choice and freedom. The novel, *The Puppet*, an enthralling story of bloody betrayal and revenge inspired by gold lust is analyzed in the aspect of searching for one's true self. The paper deals with a nomad's purpose of life, the tribe's attitude towards commercialization and how they turned their back towards nomadic life, which made them to go to the extent of murdering. The Tuaregs who are known for freedom with a traditional past are slowly losing their culture due to commerce. The paper stresses the fact that the present condition is due to their incorrect choices or preferences of the tribe and not destiny.

Key Words: Tuaregs, indigenous, existentialism, freedom, traditional past, culture.

Full Paper

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Existentialism is a twentieth century philosophy that highlights individual existence, choice and freedom. This philosophy is the study of existence and the ways human beings find themselves existing in the world. The concept is that humans exist first and then each individual spends a life span altering their essence or nature.

> Existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout their life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. And personal choices become unique without the necessity of an objective form of truth. An existentialist believes that a person should be forced to choose and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions. (All About Philosophy).

Existentialism is the journey and search for one's true self and true personal meaning in life. Ibrahim al-Koni's works are based on 'search' for something. It may be a spiritual search, search for paradise (Waw), search for identity or search for something that is lost. Ultimately the characters in the works of Ibrahim al-Koni are in constant search of their 'true self'. "The main objective of this part will therefore be to show how myth is currently reconstructed in the heart of magic realist novels and how these contribute to the search for identity and the preservation of cultural heritage in Alkoni's novels" (Cozza 121). The 'search' is one of the significant themes in his novels.

Ibrahim al-Koni’s works are based on the indigenous Tuareg tribe of the Saharan desert. The Tuaregs are nomadic people who are known for their freedom. They are so proud of their traditional past but in the current technological world, their traditional culture is at stake. They

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keep searching for their paradise through nomadism but in the desert trilogy of Ibrahim al-Koni, *The New Waw Saharan Oasis*, *The Puppet* and *The Scarecrow*, the search is based on materialism and corruption. The indigenous people of the Tuareg tribe are manipulated by the conspirators that they could find their true self in the materials like gold and commerce which once they rejected and considered a sin. This act took the tribe to adversity.

Existentialism originated in the nineteenth century by the famous philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzche but neither of them used the term in their work. In the twentieth century, the legendary French existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simon de Beauvoir popularized the existential themes such as freedom, commitment, boredom, alienation, absurdity, dread, and nothingness through their scholarly and fictional works. But Jean Paul Sartre is considered to be the first existentialist. Jean Paul Sartre says that man is nothing else but what he makes of himself which is the first principle of Existentialism.

The prominent philosophers Plato and Aristotle said "everything has essence." Jean Paul Sartre said "existence precedes essence". Essence is "a certain set of core properties that are necessary, or essential for a thing to be what it is" (Existentialism). For example, the essential property in a pen is the ink filled chamber with the socket and tip and not the cover which is made up of metal or brass or wood. The essence gives purpose which is called "Essentialism". So obviously, existence precedes essence which means man exists first and it is up to him to add essence in his life.

Existentialism also stresses to find the purpose of life. But the reality to be pondered is that, the purpose differs in each and every individual's life. Each one's purpose varies according to their dreams. According to existentialism there is neither good nor evil. No one can judge

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whether something is good or bad. Anything that is done without hurting or disturbing others is acceptable. One has the choice to do whatever pleases him/her. None has the right to interfere in someone's life unless and until the latter hurts the former.

In Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Puppet*, the second of his desert trilogy, the leader firmly believes that his purpose in life is to be a nomad. He also strongly stuck into the age old traditions and follows the path of his grandfathers. "Our grandfathers didn't tie themselves to the land. In their endless migrations they didn't practice commerce." (Koni 61). He is so clear that he didn't want to tie himself with the land but he is sure that he wants freedom. He did not want the people of his tribe to be slaves to the land. So he strongly opposed commerce. Ultimately the purpose of his life is freedom. He wanted to be free from materialization. "What need does a nomad have for commerce?" (Koni 61).

According to the existentialists, man exists first, encounters himself, surges into the world, and then defines himself. Existentialists are against the society which imposes its ideas on a child. Right from the childhood, the parents or the society imbibes their stereotypical ideas into the child's head. Though parents support their child, they indirectly suck out the choice, freedom, free will and the personal responsibility of their child.

Existentialism can also be compared to Rousseau, the famous western philosopher's thought, 'Naturalism'. "Rousseau does not want the child to form any habit. The only habit that the child is to form is to contract no habit at all. Habit is contradictory to nature." (S.P. Chaube and Akilesh 64). Actually Rousseau wants everyone to be natural and live according to his/her own will with total freedom. He insists to be natural and to come out of the technological world. "By the term "natural man", he does not mean an uncivilized person. In fact, by this term he

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means that person who acts according to his original nature and is not compelled to follow social restrictions." (S.P. Chaube and Akilesh119).

> Most importantly, it is the arbitrary act that existentialism finds most objectionable-that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed. Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire thus they are dehumanized and reduced to being an object. Existentialism then stresses that a person's judgement is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values." (All About Philosophy).

In the novel *The Puppet*, though the leader wants to follow his heart by following nomadism, the conspirators in the tribe impose their ideas into him insisting him to abandon the traditional nomadism. This is what occurs in the current society. A man who lives according to his free will is imposed stereotypical thought by the society and his individualism is destroyed and is dehumanized. Man, instead of enjoying his freedom and instead of exposing his creative thoughts is almost jailed into a formulaic, routine life.

Jean Paul Sartre says that man is condemned to be free and because he is thrown into the earth he is responsible for each and everything he does. According to the existentialists, whatever the situation may be, once a man enters the world he is responsible for the things happening in his life. It is the choice that matters. The path a man chooses is based on his character. In The Puppet, the leader Aghulli, is baffled to make a choice whether to support the gold transactions in the desert or not. He is even devastated to learn that his supporters are hording gold. He is

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even surprised to see people interested in commerce existed in the desert. "The leader looked at him stealthily, curiously observing him through the evening's gloom. As if to himself, he whispered, "I wouldn't have suspected that a creature this fond of commerce existed in the desert."" (Koni 51). When the leader did not bow down to the rules imposed by the conspirators, he is assassinated. The leader Aghulli is responsible for his own death because of his choice of not being careful despite knowing the cunning strategy of the conspirators.

According to Jean Paul Sartre, man should live authentically. "If there are no guidelines for our actions, then each of us is forced to design our own moral code, to invent a morality to live by." (Existentialism). People look for some authority for answers. But the word 'authority' is itself false because they are also humans who are looking for an answer in life. Authorities are people just like everyone and struggle to figure out who they are. So it is not likely to depend on them for answers.

In the novel *The Puppet*, the conspirators look for an authority through the leader Aghulli. But the answer they are searching for in the leader is with a bad intention of destroying the desert with corruption. As the leader opposes their thoughts and didn't give an answer according to their will, they murder him. When people look for an authority for an answer, they don't get satisfied because the authorities are also mere people looking for an answer in life through other sources.

Fate or Destiny is the progress of event outside a person's control, considered as predetermined by a supernatural power. There is something in every life that is controlled by a supreme power which cannot be denied. But as Shakespeare says, it is up to us to control our

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destiny which is the reality. It is true that God exists. But if a person makes wrong choices, God cannot help it. It is then of no use to blame fate.

In the novel *The Puppet*, the leader Aghulli is tried to be manipulated by the conspirators to start business transaction with gold. The conspirators tried to control the thoughts of the leader by speaking about fate. "it has been a fatal mistake from the start to forbid transactions in gold." (Koni 53). But it would have been a fatal mistake if he had allowed it. But unfortunately, though the leader has the power he is assassinated for not allowing business transactions. Rather than pointing it as fate, it is the carelessness of Aghulli, the leader. He is an Aristotelian tragic hero and his tragic flaw is 'Careless Nature'. Despite knowing about the cunning strategies of the conspirators, he did not take any effort to abolish them or to destroy their plot. This in turn plucks away his life.

In the famous Greek mythology, Helen of Troy or Helen of Sparta is said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. She married the King Menelaus of Sparta. She was kidnapped by Prince Paris of Troy which is the reason of the Trojan War. The Prince knew that the kidnapping process would lead the country into destruction. Still he made the wrong choice because of the love he had for the beautiful woman. The choice and decision he took in a minute hid his face from the consequences he and his people would face in the future.

Likewise in the Bible also, Adam and Eve took a wrong choice to consume the apple provided by the serpent without even thinking about the repercussion they would face for the sin. They were in a state of Hamlet's famous phrase, "To be or not to be". They had a choice "to eat or not to eat". But they failed in making a right choice. Eve was captivated by the apple whereas Adam was captivated by the female charm.

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Every action has a reaction. So man is responsible for his own acts. But some events and situations in a man's life are unpredictable and it is God that allows in life to punish, mould and make things better in a man's life. It is up to a man who takes it positively and handles it in a positive manner rather than being disheartened.

Existentialism is a philosophical perspective that focuses on the experience of an individual and the way he or she understands and recognizes the world. But the imperative fact is that society should not confine an individual's life or actions that it suppresses an individual's life and suppresses his thoughts, actions and creative ideas. Sometimes fate can be changed by wisdom. It is definitely not right to point the finger at fate for every errors committed by a man.

The value of existential thought lies in the freedom of a person. The primary virtue of existentialism is authenticity. Here, the people of the Tuareg tribe are authentic which mean they are true to their conscious. The leaders and the people of the tribe in the desert who has freedom and travel with a purpose face a drastic change because of corruption. It leads them to a state of disorientation, confusion, agony and the world became meaningless for them. This is because of the wrong choice they took in a fraction of second by selecting commerce instead of their freedom. Greed sneaks into the minds of the Tuaregs which lead to their fall.

Greed is a desire to possess more than one need or more than what is needed. It is an insatiable hunger for something which is already in excess. None can fulfill the wishes of a greedy person. Man becomes selfish when he is possessed by greed. This is what happens in the Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Puppet*. Greed for commerce peeps into the life of the Tuaregs who are leading a traditional life. They not only abandon the tradition but also become corrupt. Greed and corruption is the reason for their punishment from God.

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One needs wisdom to make the right choice. When one allows greed to enter into the heart the choice obviously becomes erroneous. Greed hides the good intentions and so obviously everything goes wrong which ultimately lead a person to commit crimes. So it is also important not to be ravenousness for the awful instead choose the right one with wisdom.

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