

(Dis)ability and Existentialism

Kajal Verma

Dyal Singh College
University of Delhi, Delhi, India
kajalverma.verma96@gmail.com

Abstract

What is the meaning of life - my life? Each one of us suffer from this universal state of being in an existential crisis in our lives. According to an existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existence precedes essence." Sartre believed that any meaning that our lives have, is given to it by us. But what happens when we forget our own selves (such as in case of Alzheimer's), and how do we make our lives more meaningful when we have physical limitations to enjoying our lives?

The purpose of this paper is to look at (dis)abilities through an existential lens and the portrayal of the same in cinema. Through this paper, we will discuss movies like *A Moment to Remember* (2004, Dir.: John H. Lee) that deal with the lives of intellectually disabled characters. *Sparsh* (1980, Dir.: Sai Paranjpye) is a Hindi feature film that beautifully depicts the life of a visually impaired person. Films like these not only address the complexities of living with a disability, but also express and acknowledge the emotional and perceptive division between the worlds of an abled and a differently abled person.

Keywords:

existentialist; dysfunction; disability; dissociation; Sartre; essence

Introduction

Each time we are encountered with the word "existentialism", we make an association of the word with a deep dive into understanding of the meaning and purpose of our existence. We begin to think if each and every action we take, each and every day we spend, each and every thought we have, each and every choice we make, is in any way adding to the agenda we might be sent upon this Earth (or universe) with or is all of this meaningless? Disability adds another layer to such existentialist inquiry.

Disability, nowadays, isn't just a physical or mental limitation. It is an amalgamation of a person's health condition as well as the environmental factors that influence them. According to UK's *Equality Act 2010*:

A person (P) has a disability if—

(a) P has a physical or mental impairment, and

(b) the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on P's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (Equality Act 2010, UK)

I wanted to emphasize on the existentialist experience that an individual might face as a differently abled person through mentions of films such as "A Moment to Remember (2004, Dir.: John H. Lee)" and "Sparsh (1980, Dir.: Sai Paranjpye)".

A Moment to Remember (2004, Dir.: John H. Lee)

A South Korean film opens with Cheol-su (the male protagonist) saying his first dialogue that gives an insight into the movie's plot:

When a memory's gone, so is the soul, they say. (A Moment to Remember 2004)

A Moment to Remember traces the life of a couple who meet each other at an unexpected time of their lives and fall completely head-over-heels in love with each other. Su-jin (the female protagonist is a cheerful fashion designer who has a tendency to forget things and Cheol-su is a rough construction site's foreman who displays sheer masculinity. Despite their difference in social status, they get married. As they begin to settle into their married lives, Su-jin's forgetfulness gets so serious and intense, that they decide to seek medical help. That's when Su-jin is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At this moment, the doctor makes a very significant statement explaining Alzheimer's to Su-jin; he says:

A mental death will come before a physical one. (A Moment to Remember 2004)

Su-jin becomes upset by the falsity of the concept of foreverhood, and suggests to Cheol-su that they should part ways. She begins to feel the burden of existentialism - what's her love worth if she doesn't remember her love?, what's her life worth if everything she does keeps getting erased? In one of the scenes, Su-jin pees in front of the family, which goes on to reflect that she loses her skills and her ability of self-control. This is important because Existentialism says that each one of us has free will and we are all responsible for our own individuality. However, Su-jin due to her ongoing dysfunction, grieves the loss of the same "will" that the existentialists talk about.

This experience is not limited to Su-jin but affects Cheol-su the most since he is in close proximity to her, not only physically but mentally too. Su-jin goes through an emotional turmoil, a struggle only she can understand. She keeps forgetting and remembering Cheol-su in parts. Every time her memory comes back, she is reminded of all that Cheol-su's been dealing with because of her, of all the times they've spent together and decidedly checks herself into an assisted facility.

Existentialists believe that each person must define themselves in an absurd, illogical world. For the ones suffering with Alzheimer's, each day is new, quite literally. For them, existence isn't just a concept, it's a question mark. Jean Paul Sartre believed that existence precedes essence, meaning, human beings exist first, and only later define themselves. Su-jin, although essentially remaining the same person, has to redefine herself from time-to-time. She does that by sketching the vague images of Cheol-su her memory serves her, while having no clue of who this person is, battling with her own self, her own mind every time anything familiar crosses her. This suffering, this disorientation and dissociation adds "crisis" to the "existential".

Sparsh (1980, Dir.: Sai Paranjpye)

Sparsh, as the name suggests, is about "touch"; just not the physical touch, but the touch of love. Anirudh (the male protagonist) is a visually impaired principal of NavjivanAndhvidyalay (a school for the blind) and Kavita Prasad (the female protagonist) is a sighted school teacher. Both of these characters have a secluded and lonely existence. Anirudh asks Kavita to volunteer at his school and she obliges.

Grounded on the real life story of Ajay Mittal, this film portrays how society cannot view a differently abled person beyond their condition or impairment. It highlights that a (dis)abled person has to acclimate into a world that serves the abled people. It addresses the normal/abnormal binary and that is the beauty of this movie. Anirudh's existential upheaval is based on the pity and charity that the society associates with differently abled individuals. Kavita, on the other hand, is facing an emotional withdrawal since her husband recently passed away.

However, Anirudh has a strong self-esteem and his "essence" of life is to be independent, to not depend on anyone regardless of their inabilities. He epitomizes that disability is not an inability. Anirudh derives the meaning of his existence through the education of the blind children, yet, he lives in a dark universe. He falls in love with Kavita but fears that she pities her. This sends Anirudh into an optimistic doctrine of existentialism; which states that:

Since man's destiny is within himself; nor for an attempt to discourage man from acting, since it tells him that the only hope in his acting and that action is the only thing that enables a man to live. (Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism)

Kavita, on the contrary, wishes to enter the dark universe of Anirudh, but she questions if she is trying to justify her second love as a duty, as a sacrificial act, or if the passions are real. She tries to conceal her anguish but as existentialists have believed:

Anguish is evident when it conceals itself. (Kierkegaard, Existentialism)

Kavita somewhere believed that educating the blind children and aiding Anirudh was her responsibility as an abled person, and since Anirudh always contested being dependent and being seen as a charity case; this made her fall into this rabbit hole of anguish, the kind that existentialism describes. This leads to a dent in their relationship.

The movie ends with Anirudh and Kavita being 'touched by the depth of their emotions'.

Conclusions

Everyone is handicapped by society. Existentialism is a multitude of different concepts and phenomena. It's nothing else than an attempt to bring meaning to your lives. (Dis)ability or non-disability, we all experience it in different ways. The existentialists believe that a man is always in the making and you are responsible for giving purpose and making a difference. In his Journals and Papers, Kierkegaard notes that "there is nothing worse than thinking of your own emotional life as twaddle."

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Author's bio-note

Kajal Verma is a Philosophy student in Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi. Her area of interests include Women's Studies, Marxian theories, Cultural Studies. She wishes to bring valuable social change. She is the Content Head at Vikirya, an LGBTQ+ awareness society.
