**Existentialism and it's characteristics :**

Existentialism got developed mainly in the first half of 20th century in continental Europe.

Although it is primarily a philosophical movement, we can find its ‘roots’ and ‘branches’ (basis

and influence) in various fields, such as art, literature, religion culture, etc.. Traditional

philosophy did not bother about the problem of concrete existence, like death, love, despair,

body, finitude, anxiety, hope, etc. As humans were caught up in the trap of their naked and

concrete existence, they could not get away to an ideal and abstract realm. In such a situation

existentialism made its appearance not as a stroke of chance but of necessity. The luxury of philosophizing was not limited to the few arm-chair philosophers; existentialism brought

philosophy to the appeal of the ordinary humans.

Existentialism is an elusive notion that escapes all definitions. The term itself is surrounded by a

certain amount of confusion, ambiguity and lack of precision, since it includes the widely

disparate philosophers and philosophies, ranging from Kierkegaard’s theistic commitment to

Sartre’s categorical denial of the existence of God. Besides, what was intended as a serious type of philosophy has been vulgarized to the level of a fad so that the existentialist label gets applied to all sorts of peoples and activities. At the same time, the difficulty in defining existentialism is in keeping with the nature of its philosophizing. All the thinkers of this movement are against constructing any ‘system’ of philosophy, and hence it is more appropriate to address this movement as a way of philosophizing rather than a philosophy. Just as existentialism refuses to be labeled as a ‘system,’ so also most of the thinkers of this movement do not want to be categorized as ‘existentialist.’ Although no adequate definition of existentialism is possible, the following seems to be quite significant: “Existentialism is a type of philosophy which endeavours to analyze the basic structures of human existence, and to the call individuals to an awareness of their existence in its essential freedom.” From this definition—so also from most of the other ones—it is evident that existentialism first of all deals with the question of the human who alone is said to be existing. Secondly, existentialism is not a theory about the human, but it is a call that keeps on calling the human away from the intellectual and social forces that destroy freedom, and from the stifling abstractions and automatic conformity. It bids and challenges each individual to sort out the

existential problems in authentic freedom, instead of taking easy answers from someone else. It

pays heed to those existential questions that are usually passed over by the academic

philosophers. Instead of retreating to a realm of eternal truths, existentialism hugs close to the

terrain of ordinary living. Thus existentialism has brought about a revolution in philosophizing.

Existentialism does not refer so much to a particular philosophical system as to a movement in

contemporary philosophy. Since it includes several philosophies with opposing characteristics, it

is difficult to show any set of clearly defined characteristics that will mark off existentialismfrom all other forms of philosophy. All the same, we can still point to certain general characteristics of existentialism.

The first characteristic of existentialism is that it begins philosophizing from human being, rather

than from reality in general. The human being that is referred to in existentialism is a subject

that exists, rather than an object that is. Formerly the human has been submerged in the

physical cosmos as just one of the items in nature. The existentialist subject is not the

epistemological subject—the subject that stands apart as the knower to the known, rather it is the ontological subject that exists. Here the term ‘to exist’ has a meaning, more comprehensive than the term ‘to be.’ The term ‘existence’ has to be taken in the dynamic and active sense of the ‘act of being,’ rather than the mere ‘fact of being;’ and it implies a width of meaning that

includes the human as the centre of feeling, of experience, of freedom, of actions and thought,

and thus an incarnate being-in-the-world. Such a subject is passionately involved in the

actualities of existence, and philosophizes not merely with reason, but the whole person with

one’s feelings and emotions, with will and intellect, with flesh and bones, philosophizes. Thus

existentialism begins with the human as existent.

Although existentialism begins with ‘existence,’ it does not take ‘existence’ as a notion, but as

experienced by oneself. Thus we can say that existential philosophy arose from the existential

experience of existence. Different philosophers has had varying experience of existence, and it is with one’s basic experience of existence that each philosopher carries out one’sphilosophizing:

in Jaspers it was an awareness of the brittleness of being, in Heidegger, Dasein as being-towardsdeath, in Sartre, the experience of existence as nauseating and superfluous, in Marcel and Buber, the experience of the ‘I’ as necessarily related to a ‘thou’, in Levinas, the experience of the epiphany of the other and of one’s ethical responsibility in the face of another, etc. Existentialism can be described as an attempt to philosophize from the stand point of ‘actor’

rather than of ‘spectator.’ The attitude of Aristotle was that of a spectator, looking at the world

impersonally. Kierkegaard on the other hand philosophizes from his own personal experience.

Philosophy arises as a response to the questions, to be met on the existential level, rather than on the conceptual level. The existentialist does not stand back from the problems as an impersonal analyst or spectator, but grapples with them as one who is involved in them. The questions are not matters of ‘intellectual curiosity’ but of ‘vital concern.’ Marcel’s distinction between mysteryand problem corresponds to ‘actor’ and ‘spectator.’ The problem lies over against me to be analyzed by me as an epistemological subject. I do not approach the problem with my uniqueness, but as an impersonal I, that could be replaced by anyone, even by a machine. A mystery, on the other hand, is a question which involves the very ‘being’ of the questioner. The problems can be solved and an exhaustive solution can be given; but no solution can be given for a ‘mystery.’ The standpoint of an ‘actor’ is found in all the existentialist thinkers. Marcel and Kierkegaard were personal thinkers, who reflected on questions arising from personal experiences. There is a close relation between biography and philosophy in the case of Kierkegaard. For Marcel philosophy was part of his spiritual itinerary.

Another characteristic of existentialism is that it functions as a corrective to the traditional

tendency of engulfing the human in the physical cosmos. It stands as a protest against all that

threatens human’s unique position as an ‘existent.’ This is why Kierkegaard revolted against the

Hegelian exaltation of the absolute at the expense of the individual. He was also against

submerging the individual in the collectivity or universality. Heidegger calls the human from

being the ‘they-self’ (das Man) to one’s ownmost self. Sartre wants the human to take over one’s freedom in good faith rather than to evade it in bad faith; in short, existentialism asserts the human freedom, and calls the human to appropriate it; thus existentialism functions as a

corrective to the traditional tendency of depersonalization and of reduction of the human in

collectivity.

If existentialism has been a corrective to the traditional way of thinking, then its advent was

taken as a ray of hope to the humans in a situation of strangled thought. In various respects the

humans have been strangled. To the religionless human, cut off from the divine, hope is given

with a person-centred religion. To the humans who are unable to find in themselves the answers

to the problems that beset them, the message of existentialism seems to be addressed. Jaspers

shows that even in the face of earthly disasters, the human can still affirm one’s relationship to

the transcendent. Heidegger speaks to the human thrown into the world, that s/he is faced with

the possibility of choosing the authentic self.