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**Assertion of Self in Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties***

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This thesis entitled "Assertion of Self in Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Baikuntha Thapa, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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### **Abstract**

Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties* presents the story of an existentially conscious hero Eguchi, who chooses and fixes his own way of life himself in spite of being sexually impotent at an old age. Disregarding his own condition of sexual impotence and social conventions and beliefs he keeps on continues visiting the house of the sleeping beauties secretly paying a lot. Abandoning his own wife and family life in this course, he exercises his freedom and choice of action himself ignoring all direct and indirect outer forces and listening to the call of his own inner heart. So much so, his frequent visits without the accomplishment of any goal from the secret house of the sleeping beauties reflect the qualities of the revolutionary Sisyphusian hero in him, which help him to assert his true existence.

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## I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Yasunari Kawabata, the most acclaimed Japanese writer, was born in a family with good status in Osaka on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1899. His father was a highly cultured doctor and a literary genius, from whom Kawabata inherited his feeble, sensitive nature and a keen literary interest; which later grew in him in such a way that he became the first Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968. He was to know sorrow early in his life as he lost his father at the age of two, a year later his mother, and consequently, his only one sister, and grandfather too, before he was grown mature. These sequential deaths made a powerful impact on his sensitive mind and brought in him the feeling of susceptibility whether he was also destined to die young. But he went on struggling and making his own career choice by himself. He had got a choice for becoming from his early life, which encouraged him to choose a Middle School for his study. During his elementary years, he dreamed of becoming a painter, but later he decided to be a writer with his incessant reading.

Kawabata maintained a separation with his peers and disliked of being around other people from his early life at school. It is perhaps because he was from upper class and, lost his parents and relatives or because of his own ill health. Later, he practised a homosexual affair with a friend pseudonymed 'Kiyono' during his final year at Middle School, which he mentioned in an account serially between 1948-52. Anyway, he got a brilliant performance in his study at school, which he continued and secured his degree in Japanese literature from Tokyo Imperial University.

Influenced by early classics of Japan, he decided upon a career of an author for himself even at his school life. Keeping his promise to himself, that of devotion to letters, he contributed frequently to various literary magazines, and began to attract attention as a writer. But he has said to have arrived in the world of literature with the

publication of his novel *Snow Country*. After the publication of this book, he devoted himself fully to literature and literary activities. He was elected the fourth president of PEN Japan chapter. He was also elected an honorary member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; and was also invited to lecture at the University of Hawaii later in 1969, from where he received an honorary doctoral degree. But the bitter fact is that he was found dead on April 16, 1972. It is still debatable whether it was an accident or suicide.

As a distinguished Japanese writer, Kawabata has got his own typical style of writing. In his writings, the story does not depend upon the plot, but upon the delicate impressions the author seeks to produce. Commenting on his general writing technique, Sinha posits, "What [ultimately] happens to the hero or the heroine is of secondary importance for Kawabata" (298-99). He further states that "loneliness and death are dominating motifs of Kawabata's writing. [. . .] The surface of his writings may appear to be sensual, but darkness and emptiness lie under it" (299). Anyway, he views that his technique was brilliant in itself. "[He] [o]ften put the European narrative technique in the shade. Kawabata's writing is the reminiscent of Japanese painting; he is a worshipper of the fragile beauty and melancholy picture language of existence in the life of nature and in man's destiny" (300).

His own quotation from the Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1968 gives his attitude to literature: "My own works have been described as works of emptiness, but it is not to be taken for the nihilism of the West" (301). In this regard, Francis Mathy also tries to ensure that Kawabata was not a nihilistic writer: "Fortunately, Mr. Kawabata is not a 'nihilistic thinker'. In the first place, he is not a thinker [. . .]" (212).

Kawabata's one of the best works *House of the Sleeping Beauties* was published in 1961. It was translated into English by Edward Seidensticker. It was

regarded as the best book published in Japan in 1960 because of his "avant-garde theme" as S.M. Sinha opines (299). It is a story of an old man of 67, Eguchi, the protagonist's frequent visit to a secret house of the sleeping beauties, though he is sexually impotent. Being impotent too, why does he pay for and visit the naked beauties and sleep beside them time and again is the central issue of study in this research work. And the research will examine the existential motif behind the protagonist's frequent visit to the beauties.

The research work analyses the protagonist's desire to assert his self. Despite the sexual impotence, he visits the house of the sleeping beauties frequently by his own choice. The research work is a testing of a tentative hypothesis that the protagonist Eguchi, asserts his existence through these visits there.

His continuous visit to the beauties signifies his attempt for the assertion of his self, as the title of this research has proposed. Anyway, before doing the analysis of motif, it would be better to have a brief look at what assertion and self refer to.

Assertion refers to the affirmation or claim of something. More clearly, it refers to the action of claiming or stating something forcefully. To assert something is to make other people recognize by having firmly and confidently. Thus, assertion after all means the act of affirmation.

Self is the existence or being of a person which gives the quality of individuality to him/her. It is in fact a person's inner being, including the mind and spirit i.e., the ego. Similarly, it can also be defined as individual identity, character, or essential qualities of somebody or something. It is one's own person which is distinct from all others. To sum up, self is distinct existence of somebody which is essentially different from that of others; and to have one's self established, one has to act differently in a situation by making his/her own choices. It is achieved especially to



have one's own different identity. And the assertion of it is the act of affirming this being. But before analyzing how and why this being is affirmed in this work, it is better to analyse the situation that leads the protagonist make the frequent visits to the house of the sleeping beauties.

The protagonist has a problem of impotency. Though he was potent until his old age which has now brought him in such a condition that he can't hold any sexual relationship with the women. But he doesn't want to show the sense of defeat to others, and more importantly within himself too; he is not ready to accept it. So, he happens to seek the secret house of the sleeping beauties run by a woman, where he makes the frequent visits not in order to fulfil the desire of sexual intercourse, but for the fulfillment of his desire of affirming his self, that he has not yet surrendered to his present condition. Rather, he has tried to prove himself to be like the Sisyphusian hero, who, without accomplishing the goal, continues his repeated action with full determination. The urge of his inner self is that of struggle and a remarkable effort to make his own world by himself. He is in a sense destined to be impotent at this moment of old age, but he doesn't believe on this destiny and tries to make his destiny by oneself. He is on go like Sisyphus and makes his own choice, fate and destiny as far as possible. He has indeed a hatred of the death of his sexual power and a passion (for the life) of his sexual potency. He is on the other hand fully responsible for the act he has done. He has made his own choice to do so, regardless of any instruction or advice of his family members, society, or any other authority. The major problem lies on contradiction between his real condition and the choice of his action that he makes. His body doesn't demand the company of the beauties, but his real self keeps him pushing into the absurd action to perform. It is all for nothing except for the protagonist's will to assert his existence by overcoming the problem that he has. So

this research attempts to analyse the existential motif behind the frequent visit of the protagonist to the house of the sleeping beauties.

### **Review of Literature**

The act of the protagonist's frequent visit to the secret inn in Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties* has attracted the attention of many critics since its publication in 1961. But the critics have taken this act either as the result of eroticism, or the sense of female domination, or nihilistic feelings on the part of the protagonist.

Kokusai Banka Shinkokai finds a kind of nihilistic eroticism reflected throughout the novel. For him, the old man makes the frequent visits to the house of the sleeping beauties because of his "sexual fantasies." In this regard he further states:

In this novel, the desire and resignation of the old man appear in a nihilistic light, always haunted by the shadow of age and death. The secret inn the old man, Eguchi, visits is a secret place of enjoyment for old men who are approaching their death. [Visiting] the place five times, [and] lying by the side of a sleeping beauty, [Eguchi] remembers his experiences with the various women he has met in his life [. . .]. This novel depicts the height of abstract eroticism in delicate beautiful Japanese language. And it is throughout filled with sexual fantasy of an extremely abstract nature. (93-95)

Similarly, for Armando Martins Janeira, the old man visits the house of the sleeping beauties with a disgusting scene of desire within himself, which is aroused from the ugliness of his old age. In this context he opines:

The story exposes the ugliness of life, the nauseating scene of desired shown in an impotent old man. Could there be anything uglier than an

old man lying the night through beside a girl put to sleep, unawaking? Had he not come to this house seeking the ultimate in ugliness of old age? Purity is strained by then eagerness of decay and death. The virginal shine of the young bodies is married by the girls' need for money, and by the rotten lust of the dirty old man. What kind of world is this in which the highest purity of a human being is at the mercy of material need and has to be sacrificed to the vicious satisfaction of corrupt old men smelling death? (168)

Thus, he finds the old man's visit to be vicious and corrupt, since it makes exploitation over the virginity of the young women there, which is also compared with their economic crisis.

Taking a slightly different standpoint from that of the above mentioned critics, David M. Chess views that the old man visits the secret house of the sleeping beauties just to unravel and bring up his past memories, of which he has already been alienated from. In this context he comments:

[T]his is an old man who has paid to spend a night chaste but lecherous in bed with a young woman drugged into insensibility. We see from this man's viewpoint, as he spends a number of nights in this house, and his stand range truncated relationships with the sleeping women bring up memories and ideas from his unlovely past [. . .]. The novel [takes] young women as figures of what one can be alienated from. (49)

Van C. Gessel hints at the cause of isolation for this act of protagonist, which, according to him, is caused because of the loss of physical power, before the loss of emotional desire in the mind. For him, "the advent of old age brings with it yet

another form of isolation: the loss of the physical powers of sexual intercourse without the loss of the emotional desire for intimate contact" (189).

Kato Shuichi studies this fiction from feminist perspective. For him, the protagonist Eguchi makes the frequent visits to the sleeping beauties because he takes women as the objects to be played with: Women are "beautiful objects appealing in their own subjective reality" (243). He further goes on making comments in this regard and says that *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is "an extreme case" of such objectification of women among all to her works. With regard to how the protagonist takes the beauties -- merely as the objects or plaything -- he comments, "In a strange house by the sea an old man is able to look at and fondle a young woman who has been anaesthetized; the young woman of course is completely unconscious of what he is doing. [. . .] woman is to be seen, not herself to see" (243-44).

Yukio Mishima, in the introduction to *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, also posits similar view of inhuman treatment to the women, i.e. the sleeping beauties by the males, represented by Eguchi. In his view, Eguchi confidently plays with girls there in such a way as if they are simply the dolls. He states:

Kawabata describes the first of the sleeping beauties' the sixty-seven-years-old Eguchi spends the night with-as if she were being caressed by words alone. Of course, it hints at a certain inhuman objectivity in the visual quality of the male lust. [. . .] Thus, the girl who has become a 'living doll' is for the old man 'life that can be touched with confidence. (9)

Concentrating is on the same act of the protagonist's visit to the house of the sleeping beauties frequently in such an old age too, Arthur G. Kimball puts forth a series of questions, by categorizing different features of different age factors, perhaps

to emphasize on his old age, despite which the protagonist keeps on visiting and sleeping beside the beauties. For that he analyses and inquires:

People in their thirties sometimes experience the first traumatic shudder in realization of time's fleetness. By the forties, horizons have constricted, doors have closed, the vocational crisis is reached. At fifty, the backward look begins, the crisis of identity becomes acute, depression sets in. And what of the old man, nearing the end? what hopes and pleasures remain? What self-deceptions lure him on? what does he hope to gain from the house of the sleeping beauties? (99)

After observing all these critical responses from different scholars, it has become more relevant to make research on the issue of his existence. The critics, despite their different views, unanimously agree on the fact that the protagonist's frequent visits to the house of the sleeping beauties are either because of eroticism or sexual fantasies, or because of the ugliness of old age or even because of his past memories to fulfil them. But these arguments don't seem all the way sound. Since he has already become impotent, the arguments of sexual fantasies or eroticism do not seem relevant. So much so, he does not will to perform such act with the beauties because of his sense of eroticism. So far as the matter of ugliness of the old age is concerned, he might not have visited there frequently to avoid it or to seek solution of it since it is not possible to do simply visiting there. The argument of the fulfillment of past memories or that of psychological cause also does not seem so strong since the senility of old age has already brought him into the world of sexual impotency; and on the other hand, he could also manage it from his own wife, not abandoning his family life.

Some critics even believe that Kawabata's male protagonists possess the sense of female domination in them, and the objectification of women is also there behind old Eguchi's visit to the sleeping beauties in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* too. But in the case of Eguchi, this doesn't seem to have been applied. Because, by going and sleeping beside different beauties he has exploited them neither physically nor mentally since the beauties are in unconscious condition. When there is no woman to experience and say that Eguchi has dominated them, then what is the use of that domination even if he might have thought to have done? So, such arguments of male domination also do not do justice to this character, Eguchi. So far as the question of repeated visits to the virgin beauties but not others is concerned, it is his choice and act of freedom, which the present study will analyse in the subsequent chapters too.

The protagonist Eguchi is conscious of his existence. One exists up to the extent one makes choices. The protagonist keeps on making choices throughout the story. He chooses to visit the inn secretly, pays for that, though gaining nothing special from there. And after reaching the beauties -- the choice of his activity he makes -- he takes heavy dose of sleeping tablets or whisky for a sound sleep. In his latter visits, he rather intends to die beside the beauties instead of surrendering to his condition of impotency outside there, in front of the society. By abandoning his family and social life and by enjoying himself in the dreams and memories of the sleeping women more than the awoken women, he exercises his freedom indeed. He gets a sense of strong determination in his choice of action, which always helps him to assert his existence. He doesn't feel defeated at any cost, and for that he doesn't accept any given features.

He rather goes on creating his own meaning of life, as Sartre says, "The world does not give meaning to individual, one must make meaning for oneself" (142).

Since he is fully conscious of his own existence, he happens to negate those features which are given to him, and lives the life of choices as Sartre himself says, "Consciousness is such that it is always free to choose and free to negate the given features of the world" (142). And in the climax of his world of choices, the chosen act becomes his fate. Anyway, he fixes his destiny by himself not believing in any other powers, but the power of his own strong will emerged from his heart.

Anyway, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is the story of a self-seeking hero, Eguchi. To analyse his motif, the research depends on the theoretical ideas from Existentialism.

## II. EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a mode of philosophy, which deals with the interpretation of human existence. The term existentialism comes from "existence", and it has its Latin root ex "out" + sistere from stare "to stand" (Cuddon 316). Thus, existence means to stand out in the universe. Philosophically, existentialism applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship or lack of one with God. Since this philosophy flourished only after the great World Wars, it makes its base to the dread and holocaust of the World Wars, which brought a radical change in the concept to view the human being as a manifestation of the absolute value. Due to the holocaust of the Second World War, the certainties and scientific reasoning that ruled the 19<sup>th</sup> century smashed into fragments. Anxiety and uncertainty ruled the fragmented world, since the world wars gave rise to the feelings of despair and separation from the established order. It proved that human rationality worked no more. The terrified people of the western world began to think over the role and activities of individual. In such a situation, they developed the idea that people have to create their own values in the world in which the traditional values do not work. The traditional belief of absolute being who was supposed to rule and guarantee human happiness ceased to work, since a widespread sense of anxious helplessness appeared in man. As the people experienced the untold suffering thrown into an incoherent, disordered and chaotic universe, the belief in the concepts like unity, rationality, morality, value and Christianity faded.

The sense of unification collapsed and the people felt themselves alien in the universe. In such a situation, the existential belief holds that one has to make choices and create oneself. One exists upto the extent one makes choices. People are free to



make choices for their actions, and of which they are fully responsible too. Nobody was there to guide and help them. And as such the feelings of loneliness, frustration, anxiety, and absurdity accompanied them. The writers of the contemporary era could not escape the situation. So, the writers like Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Franz Kafka. captured the human loneliness and meaninglessness of actions in their works. The problematic condition of the modern world became their subject matter. The Holocaust of the World War had even brought the concept of 'Death of God'. The feelings of alienation and existence without justification became dominant aspects of literary texts, which were fully addressed by the existentialists.

Richard Tarnas in *The Passion of the Western Mind* comments:

The anguish and alienation of twentieth century life were brought to full articulation as the existentialists addressed the fundamental naked concerns of human existence – suffering and death, loneliness and dread, guilt, conflict, spiritual emptiness and ontological insecurity, the void of absolute value or universal contexts, the sense of cosmic absurdity, the frailty of human reason, the tragic impasse of the human condition. (389)

Thus, the sense of insecurity, absurdity and spiritual void was captured by the writers. Man was just given existence without essence. He was entrapped by morality, fear and uncertainty. In such a situation, the existentialists presume that individuals have free will and are thus entirely responsible for their actions. They assert that individuals freely construct and use (or choose not to use) their own value systems, forming their own sense of being and creating meaning in the process.

Existentialism opposes the idea of traditional philosophy, which advocates for the objective truth, or believes in absolute being. The traditional philosophy also

speaks for the truth that is universal, or true for all. But according to this philosophy, the truths are subjective. What is true to one may not be true to another. Whether the thing is true or false, that depends on the decisions the individual makes. For making decisions, one is free. Thus, existentialism focuses on freedom, individual existence and the choice. However, this emphasis on freedom is not new with the existentialists. Renaissance humanists also focused on freedom. They took freedom very positively. Due to freedom, man can expose unlimited potentiality. Thus, for them freedom was boon. But existentialists take freedom as a curse. Because of freedom, man himself is responsible for whatever he does. That's why, Sartre says, "Man is condemned to be free" (56). Due to this freedom, there is no one to dictate us what to do and what not to do. We have to do work(s) by ourselves. However, both of the visions talk about freedom and human beings but not about God and cosmos.

The existentialists, however, are split into two major camps since the Second World War. One of that is in the vein of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the Christian existentialist, who declared himself to be the first existentialist too. The philosophers of this group were also called theists, since they believed in God. They emphasized that "true freedom – including freedom from conflict and despair – may be found in God, who bridges the finite and the infinite" (Gaarder 116). In this regard, Soren Kierkegaard tried to restate and elaborate upon the belief that through God and in God man may find freedom from tension and discontent and therefore find peace of mind and spiritual serenity, an idea that has prevailed in much Christian thinking over many centuries. But after Kierkegaard, the existential thought was greatly expanded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Martin Heidegger, Carl Jaspers and others, whose ideas in turn influenced a large number of European philosophers, in whose works are to be found the sources of atheistic existentialism.

These latter existentialists opposed the existence of God. Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus are other existentialists of this group. Nietzsche's expression "God is dead" has a lasting impact in existential philosophy. There is no God to determine our existence. First we exist, then create essence ourselves. We are what we make ourselves to be. In that sense we are in the state of becoming, not in the state of being. We don't know what we become after all because we are constantly choosing and creating ourselves. It is not possible for us to be without choice. Even when we are not choosing, we are still choosing not to choose. In this context, Macintyre says, "Even if I do not choose, I have chosen not to choose" (149). Since we make choices, we create meaning ourselves. Then, there is no transcendent absolute to govern our existence. This view of choice is almost common to all existentialists.

Focusing on the importance of choice, the existentialists of later phase have shown much uncertainty in the life of man on earth, and have stressed on the choice of their own destiny. For them, human life on earth has no fixed role to play, and has come without any defined beginning. Man is a sole director of his destiny. In this regard, Sartre's view quoted by Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje in *A History of Western Thought: From Ancient Greece to the Twentieth Century*, goes like this:

We are like actors who suddenly find themselves on stage in the middle of a performance, but without having a script, without knowing the name of the play or what role they are playing, without knowing what to do or say, yes, without even knowing whether the play has an author at all – whether it is serious or a farce. We must personally make a decision, to be something or other – a villain or a hero, ridiculous or tragic. Or we can simply exist immediately. But that is

also choosing a role and that choice too is made without our ever knowing what the performance was about. (444)

In this way, total uncertainty and meaninglessness or purposelessness was there in man's life. In such situation this philosophy has emphasized on man's need to struggle to create meaning by making his own choices, though baseless.

Although existentialism got its prominence in the post-war years, the attempts to attain understanding of existence goes back to classical Greek philosophy too. The elements of existentialism can be found in the philosophy of Socrates too.

Protagoras also held the idea of subjective truth. "Man is the measure of all things," said the Sophist Protagoras (qtd. in Gaarder 62). By that he means that the question of whether a thing is right or wrong, good or bad must be considered in relation to a person's need. Similarly, man-centered philosophy was developed by Socrates as well. The philosophers before him were concerned with the issue of cosmos; but he shifted the focus to man. He laid stress on human existence. Though not termed as existentialist, he gave the philosophy, which supports existentialism. Like modern existentialists, Socrates laid stress on individuality and viewed that self is prior to everything. So, he asked people to understand the need of the self by saying that the real joy springs from the heart. 'Know thyself' was his motto. Thus, he made people responsible towards the self. Commenting on Socrates, Richard Tarnas says:

In Socrates' view any attempt to foster true success and excellence in human life had to take account of the innermost reality of a human being, his soul or psyche. Perhaps on the basis of his own highly developed sense of individual self-hood and self-control, Socrates brought to the Greek mind a new awareness of the central significance of the soul, establishing it for the first time as the seat of the individual

waking consciousness and of the moral and intellectual character. He affirmed the Delphic motto "know thyself" for he believed that it was only through self-knowledge through an understanding of one's own psyche and its proper condition, that one could find true happiness.

(33)

In this way, Socrates assured that the true happiness for an individual comes only after he is able to make his own choice of action, that is the truth for himself, the subjectivity indeed.

The Medieval age was mainly dominated by religion. It was therefore characterized by the belief in God. Everything in this period was seen through the eyes of God. Man was considered to be the sinner, and thus was expected to surrender before God for salvation. Yet, in such religious period too, the main ideas of existentialist theory were common with some philosophers like Saint Augustine. Augustine, in his philosophy, asked man not to go outside himself in the quest of truth. He promoted self-awareness and assured that truth should be searched from within. He affirmed the existence of human ego in the soul. He gave focus to the individual self. Richard Tarnas, accepting that Augustine embodied the existential elements, comments like this:

Augustine was the most modern of the ancients: he possessed an existentialist's self awareness with his highly developed capacity for introspection and self-confrontation, his concern with memory, consciousness and time. His psychological perceptivity, his doubt and remorse, his sense of solitary alienation of human self without God, his intensity of inner conflict, his intellectual skepticism and sophistication. It was Augustine who first wrote that he could doubt

everything, but not the fact of soul's own experience of doubting of knowing, willing and existing-thereby affirming certain existence of human ego in the soul. (144)

In this way, the seeds of existentialism were growing in one way or the other in the Medieval age also. The end of Medieval age was the birth of Renaissance. The traces of existentialism continued in Renaissance period too. So much so, Renaissance was the revival of classicism. Like the classical philosophers, Renaissance artists also laid stress on individuality. Their main concern was the human being not God. The artists, for the first time, gave importance to the perspective, that is, subjectivity. They tended to believe that everything is as the viewer views it. Man became the center of discussion. Humanism flourished to a large extent. Human potentialities were valued. Every aspect of human life, which was seen through divine light, once again revolved around man. In this regard, Jostein Gaarder in *Sophie's World* comments, "The Renaissance resulted in a *New View of Mankind*. The humanism of the Renaissance brought a new belief in man and his worth, in striking contrast to the biased medieval emphasis on the sinful nature of man. Man was now considered infinitely great and valuable" (199).

The view that human being exists through choices of actions but not through any predetermined essence had been implanted. As Gaarder says, there was view that "horses are born, but human beings are not born-they are formed" (197). In fact, such view of humanism became one of the prominent features of existentialism, which was later taken to be synonymous to existentialism by one of the predominant existential philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre in the 20th century. To clarify this fact, Sartre says, "By existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a

human subjectivity" (10). Montaigne, one of the Renaissance philosophers, gave importance to the issue of the self. The decision for himself and by himself, the individuality became an interesting matter for them, which is also a remarkable feature of existentialism. The Renaissance philosophers, in fact, tried to explore the self by talking about it frankly and openly. Clarifying Montaigne's handling of the self, Charles Van Doren in *A History of Knowledge* remarks:

Montaigne, at least, could speak for himself. He could say what he was, what he wanted, what he feared, what hurt him, what amused and pleased him, what struck him as vain and foolish in other men. Thus, he placed himself for the center of things, believing that even if this attention might seem self-centered to some people, nothing would prove more interesting. (145)

After observing the line of development up to Montaigne, we can draw a conclusion that existentialism did not arise in the literary world dramatically and accidentally rather it has its connection with different era from the classical philosophy though it did not get the same title or name. It began as a distinct philosophy only in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard criticized Hegel's philosophy to be abstract and having nothing to do with human existence. And thus he established existential philosophy by himself focusing on the importance of human existence, freedom, and choice, by criticizing Hegel's idealistic philosophy.

Modern existentialism has been greatly influenced by the philosophical method known as phenomenology, originated by German thinker Edmund Husserl and pursued into the existential realm by his student Martin Heidegger. Self or subjectivity is the primary concern for this method. According to the philosophy of

phenomenology, there is no single truth but many truths which are determined by how one appears with them. So, there is no objective truth for this philosophy.

Basically, it is known as a method to examine the structure of human experience. In this regard, Thomas Mautner in *The Dictionary of Philosophy* comments:

Husserl's method, simply stated, was to find and examine the essential structure of experience, with the aim of establishing the universal truths necessary to basic consciousness [ . . . ] Heidegger borrowed the phenomenological method and applied it to more personal problems, questions about how human beings should live, what they are, and the meaning of life and death. (142)

Thus, Heidegger, one of the propounders of modern existentialism, took phenomenology to be the base of his philosophy. For him, as Mautner posits, "Phenomenology becomes a method for disclosing [one's] being" (142). As Mautner himself further claims, existential philosophers, not only Heidegger, but Jean Paul Sartre and many others also continued this method with certain refinements on it. On this regard, Mautner's comment is:

Phenomenology is the attempt to describe our experience directly, as it is separately from its origins and development, independently of the casual exaltations that historians, sociologists or psychologists might give. Subsequently, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty pursued and continued to refine the phenomenological method, while by no means accepting Husserl's conclusion. (319)

For phenomenology, to become the base of existentialism, its focus on subjectivity has supported a lot. As Raman Selden states, it is, "a modern



philosophical tendency which stresses the perceivers' central role in determining meaning [ . . .]" (48). Similarly, Skirbekk and Nils Gilje have defined phenomenology in this way:

Phenomenology aims to describe the every day items that we use, as they appear to us; the pencil, with which I am now writing is described as it is in this context. Phenomenology attacks the view that the pencil is only a collection of atoms. In this sense, we can say that this school aims to reconstruct the universe in all of its diversity and fullness, with all of its qualities, as opposed to a one-dimensional standardization based on scientific philosophy. (440)

After observing them, we come to the conclusion that individuality, self, subjectivity are given emphasis by phenomenology. Things are how they appear in our consciousness. There is no absolute thing in the world. So, all understandings and perceptions are subjective. And that is why truth is also subjective.

These qualities of subjectivity, individuality and self greatly influenced existentialism. Human being is the focus of existentialism. Human freedom, choice of action and their destiny by themselves, and the sense of alienation and absurdity are some of the features of existentialism that are common to almost all existential philosophers.

Since it is not possible to include the discussion about all existentialists in this short research work, the present chapter basically centers around Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and Heidegger, the representative figures of existentialism and bring out the issues that are relevant for the study.

### **Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**

Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, is regarded as the first existentialist because he called himself so. He is said to have shaped twentieth-century existentialism by initiating its focus on individuality, subjectivity and freedom. His concept of "freedom of the will" became very important for latter existentialists too, which, later, Sartre also insisted on. His point of individual or personal responsibility became the shared concern for all the modern existentialists. He advocates that individual existence is prior to everything. Supporting this concept, Jostein Gaarder in *Sophie's World* remarks: "Kierkegaard had a sharp eye for the significance of the individual. We are more than the children of our time. And moreover every single one of us is a unique individual who only lives once" (377).

In establishing his philosophy of freedom and subjectivity, Kierkegaard reacted against the Hegelian concept of rationalist philosophies, which emphasized the importance of rationality and collective spirit. Against this concept Kierkegaard focused on individual human being and his or her particular life-defining decisions. He emphasized the personal importance of concrete choices. Instead of Hegel's 'dialectic' of the course of history Kierkegaard "urged the necessity of an 'either/or' philosophy and an existential dialectic, one that emphasized choices and personal responsibility rather than overall rationality" (Mautner 224).

Like Sartre and Camus, Kierkegaard has a keen support on passionate personal choices for an individual existence. He believes that we are free to make choices. And one exists upto the point of making choices. Existence for him is not simply 'being there'. Supporting this view of Kierkegaard, Thomas Mautner in *Dictionary of Philosophy* comments:

Existence, according to Kierkegaard, is not just 'being there' but living passionately, choosing one's own existence and committing oneself to a certain way of life. Such existence is rare, he says, for most people simply form part of an anonymous 'public' in which conformity and 'being reasonable' are the rule, passion and commitment the exceptions. (224)

Thus, Kierkegaard even doubts within himself, that most people do not possess true existence since they can not make personal choice and true commitment and simply choose to live easily, the life of common people in general. One must be bold to make one's own choices for him.

It is in the course of making his own choices, Kierkegaard's own chosen way of life was Christianity. Unlike Nietzsche and Sartre, he believed in the existence of God. As a result, he is categorized as a theistic existentialist. But in believing God also, he does not see any rational reasons. For him, religion is the matter of faith and that is also determined by our choice. He always focused on subjectivity. Supporting this view Mautner remarks, "To be or become a Christian, according to Kierkegaard, it is necessary to passionately commit oneself, to make a 'leap of faith' in the face of an 'objective uncertainty'. One can not know or prove that there is God, one must simply choose to believe" (224).

Thus, Kierkegaard does not believe in any system, rules and regulations to determine for an individual, rather, one's choices are responsible for his or her life. No one is compelled to follow a predetermined way of life, rather protest against it is promoted by him, that is in accordance with one's own choice. His concept of 'leap of faith' is the faith by an individual alone, which is not undertaken by groups of people united in faith. Instead of earlier concept of reason in religion, he focused on faith.

True faith, according to him, is difficult, yet it is very important to be a human. Only faith could combine the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, and confirm what an individual truly is for him. According to him, each individual, by faith, establishes his own relationship with God.

Kierkegaard believes in subjective truth. Search for objective truth is meaningless for him. There can't be any truth that is universal, rather it is individual. Instead of one single truth, there are many truths which are personal. Jostein Gaarder's comments, "According to Kierkegaard, rather than searching for the Truth with a capital T, it is more important to find the kind of truths that are meaningful to the individual's life. It is important to find "the truth for me". He thus sets the individual, or each and everyman, up against the 'system" (379). Kierkegaard's concept of "subjective truth" has influenced the twentieth – century existentialists, who always emphasized on subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's concept of "Despair" is also very important for existentialism. Despair is the feeling of having lost all hope; for what he calls "sickness on to death" (380). Yet he does not take it to be the condition of total hopelessness. Because of an eternal self in us, which wants existing forever, one does not reach to the condition of dying out of despair. Anyway, it leads to the individual to adopt futile 'efforts'. In this regard, Kierkegaard himself in *Existential Literature* says:

It is not a disease from which one could die, but is precisely the agony of not being able to die because of being an eternal self. The individual is in despair over himself, tormented by the inability to get rid of himself. This inability leads to futile efforts on the part of the individual, either to escape from himself or to be who he truly is.

(164)

Thus, Kierkegaard proved to be the foundational figure of modern existentialism, who paved the way for many 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialists by giving away the basic concepts of it like freedom, subjectivity, choice, and despair.

### **Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)**

Nietzsche, one of the most influential philosophers of Germany, made a critique on Western philosophical tradition and Christianity emphasizing the self to a large extent. According to him, both Western philosophy and Christianity taught abstraction, so they were corrupt. He criticized western education system because that was historically motivated. It only teaches about the heroic past and makes people surrender before that heroism. Then the true individualism is collapsed because of it. Instead, he seeks education that serves life. The historical knowledge does not serve life. For him, life should be the center of everything. In an essay "On the Use and Abuse of History," he states, "We need [education] for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action or merely for glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to use history only in so far as it serves living" (152).

Similarly, in the case of religion, or that of Christianity, he views that it snatches away true individuality from a person by making him prostrate before unseen power. Instead, his focus is on self-understanding and self-control. He thus emphasizes freedom. For him, Christianity loots away freedom by making one bow down before the God all the time, reminding him/her that s/he is the product of sin. Thus, it does not serve life, rather makes individual discouraged. Nietzsche places life at the center.

Instead of following the tradition of Christianity, Nietzsche rather does not believe in the existence of God. He proclaimed the death of God as a world-

shattering event. For him, God is not there. Even if he were there, he is dead. That is why, there is no authority or God to determine our existence. Christianity for him, is the shelter of weak and disabled people, which harbors slave morality. In his famous essay "The Death of God and the Antichrist," he tries to clarify the point this way:

The Christian conception of God-God as God of the sick, God as a spider, God as a spirit – is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine as ever attained on earth. It may even represent the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types. God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal yes. God is the declaration of war against life, against nature and against will to life ! (912)

Individual freedom is another focal point of Nietzsche. He highly values it. An individual for him is never made to accept any imposition from any power. Rather, he is master of himself to decide for himself. In this context, Roger Scruton comments, "Nietzsche sought for a 'life-affirming' skepticism which would transcend all the doctrines that stemmed from the 'herd instinct', and so allow the individual to emerge as master, and not as a slave of the experience to which he is condemned" (186).

Like Kierkegaard and Sartre, Nietzsche advocates for choices. He values the actions of an individual made at present by his/her own choice. It is not the past that determines one's being and action, rather it is the present which provides opportunity to act according to choice and even to set forth the example. In this regard, Thomas Mautner in *The Dictionary of Philosophy* says, for Nietzsche, "No moment is more important than the present, in which one has the opportunity to make active choices that influence the character of the whole" (292).

Nietzsche's concept of 'the herd' is also a basic existentialist concept. Like Kierkegaard he attacked 'the herd' that is, the submersion of the individual in larger public groups or forces. The concept of the 'herd' has been a central, negative concept in existential theory. Generally, it signifies a life that is opposite of individuality. Commenting on this fact, Linda E. Patrik in *Existential Literature* comments, "Instead of being a life in which an individual acknowledges and uses his freedom, the life of the herd is a mass-produced life of conformity" (148). Such life of conformity lacks creativity, courage, and inwardness, that is, individuality. When we live our life as part of the herd, we do not develop our own beliefs or create our own values, but simply adopt the prevailing beliefs and values of society. It is therefore he denounces the herd against individuality.

In this way, Nietzsche, as an existentialist, focused on individuality, freedom and choice of action.

### **Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)**

Heidegger, one of the existentialist philosophers from Germany, is a leading theorist though he claimed that he was not an existentialist. Despite his claim, his influence on Sartre, Camus, and the whole existentialist movement is quite significant. Rather, he is often called the darkest of the existentialist school, since his focus was on alienation of human being. According to him, the universe is alien to us and we should face the problem of being as we have to create our own existence by making choices. Thus, he also focused on choices of the individual. He developed a theory of 'Dasein', i.e., a particular way of existing. He is fully concerned with human existence. For him the principal object of investigation is the search for the being (Sein) and more particularly man's being (Dasein). He distinguishes between 'Dasein' and the ordinary way of existing, i.e., the existence of the things in the world around

us. The things have their distinctive properties, since they are determinate. But their kind of being is different from the being of man which is temporal, and gets changed.

In this regard, his view as quoted in *A Dictionary of Philosophy* is:

The sort of being that I manifest is not that of a thing-with-properties. It is a range of possible ways to be. I define the individual I become by projecting myself into those possibilities which I choose, or which I allow to be chosen for me. Who I become is a matter of how I act in the contexts in which I find myself. My existence is always an issue for me, and I determine by my actions what it will be. (183-84)

Thus, his concept of not accepting any predetermining forces is quite existential one, which also proves his affinity to existentialism. So much so, his focus on human existence makes him even more existentialistic.

For Heidegger, being is not realized in normal situation. It does not occur all the time. It is realized only in the state of anxiety, boredom, or ill-at-ease. He makes this view clear in one of his essays "What is Metaphysics?" In this way, "It erupts when one is bored, profound boredom drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals being as a whole" (4).

Since human being is thrown into an alien world, he has to face the feeling of dread. He is bounded in the historic temporal contexts for Heidegger. So, one has to face a lot of problems. But the redemption is also possible, only through the practice of freedom. His ideas, as quoted in *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* are as follows: "The final redemption lies in that freedom, which time alone provides the freedom to make my life. What I choose is to be and thereby to change from thrown-



ness to resolution. In that change lies the realization, and acceptance of morality" (260).

Heidegger hereby seems to accept the historic temporal contexts to bound an individual, yet at the same time, he talks of freedom as the means of redemption. Anyway, freedom is valued by him too. Thus, like other existentialists, Heidegger also talks about freedom, individualism and choices.

### **Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)**

Sartre, a French philosopher, was the leading advocate of existentialism. He was the first man to coin the word 'existentialism' and define it. It is Sartre himself who made existentialism widely popular. He was offered the Nobel prize for literature in 1964, but he made the existentialist choice to refuse it. Personal freedom, responsibility, choice and action are the major points of his focus. Thomas Moutner remarks, "At the heart of his philosophy was powerful notion of freedom and an uncompromising sense of personal responsibility [. . .] Sartre insisted that people are responsible for what they make of themselves" (379).

Though he emphasizes on freedom and choice, he is also aware of many constraints and obstacles to human freedom. But he advises the individual to negate such situations which bring obstacles. In this regard Mautner's comment on him is, "[O]ne is never free of one's 'situation', Sartre tells us, but one is always free to 'negate' that situation and to try to change it. To be human, to be conscious, is to be free to imagine, free to choose and responsible for one's life" (379).

As Sartre is an atheistic existentialist, he does not believe in the existence of God. For him, there is no God to create human essence. Rather, man exists first, and creates his own essence by himself. In other words, man himself makes what he will be. In this regard, in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* he remarks:

It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, [. . .] What is meant here by saying existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself. (15)

Thus, according to Sartre, we don't have any essence at birth, rather we are free. Non-human things instead, have essences, for example, a computer to be made, has its essence before its existence. But in the case of human beings, we create our own essences, choosing and then freely acting on our choices.

Sartre defines his ontology in terms of the opposition of 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself'. In the course of inquiring into the meaning of being, he makes such distinction. It is consciousness that distinguishes these two realities. Human beings, being conscious of oneself are 'for-itself' whereas other things, since they are not conscious of themselves, are 'in-itself,' Sartre himself clarifies the distinction:

Whatever exists and is conscious – not only conscious of other things but also of itself – is For-itself. Whatever is real but is not conscious is In-itself. Basically, human beings are For-itself, but it is more complicated, [. . .] elements of our bodies, that are In-itself, even though we are for-itself in so far as we are conscious. (23)

The things, 'in – itself', have no will or idea to change themselves. Although the non-conscious beings like plants change overtime, "[t]hey have no conception of what they will become [. . .] what one could become that marks the For – itself as so very different from the In – itself", Sartre further clarifies (23).

Existence and Freedom are very closely associated for Sartre. He can not imagine the existence without freedom of thought and action. It is the choice of one's action that makes who one is. Our freedom of action is the ability to choose an action and to act on our choice as he argues. Making it more clear Linda E. Patrik comments:

Sartre's equation of existence and freedom is the key to his claim that human beings have a special kind of reality – existence – that distinguishes from non human things. Existence involves freedom of thought and action: Both our ability to be self – conscious and our ability to launch ourselves into action are aspects of human freedom.

(40)

Freedom of thought involves one's decision whether to ignore certain actions committed to the past, or each individual is free to interpret himself and his actions. It is both freedom of thought and freedom of action, that not only determine who one is but also who s/he will be, the future self, resulting from future actions. Sartre says, "Because existence precedes essence, my future self is not already made or programmed to turn out in a specific way, instead, it will be my free creation" (41).

Sartre also associates freedom and responsibility by saying that they go hand in hand in existentialist theory. In this regard he remarks, "[B]ecause we are free and create our own individual essence thorough our actions, we are also responsible for who we actually become" (41). What each of us does depends on our own choice. So, we are each responsible for our choices and our actions.

Another basic existentialist concept Sartre presented is 'anguish.' Generally, anguish is known as a severe pain, mental suffering or unhappiness. But in existentialism, it has a positive connotation. Sartre argues, "Existential moods such as

anguish and despair, are not simply painful psychological processes that get in the way of understanding oneself and the world: they provide self reflective evidence about human existence" (42). Thus, anguish for him helps know the truth. In defining anguish he says, "It is a mood that reveals to the individual how her freedom makes her responsible for the values embodied in her actions" (42). Anguish is unlike fear, it is rather a kind of anxiety, which makes one sense that nothing other than one's own will makes him/her choose how to act.

In this way, Sartre, like other existentialists, stresses upon freedom of choice and action, personal responsibility, subjectivity, anguish and so on, giving rise to the view of existence precedes essence.

### **Albert Camus (1913-1960)**

Camus was a central figure in the French existentialist movement. As an atheistic existentialist, he is basically known for his view on absurdity of human life, choice, and meaningless work without accomplishing the goal. Absurdity of life is his major concept. He believes that human being is an isolated existent in an alien universe. The universe doesn't possess, any inherent truth, value or meaning. The condition of man is absurd and his search for any purpose is meaningless and fruitless. We are simply keeping the illusion that the universe has a meaning. M.H. Abrams comments on Camus' existentialism:

Albert Camus, views a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning and to represent human life – in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from nothingness when it come toward the nothingness where it must end as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. (1)

Although Camus inherited the concept of alienation from 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers Hegel and Marx, he converted it into a more personal sense of feeling separated and alone. Existential alienation is felt when one does not know another one's thoughts and feelings even while living together. Linda E. Patrik views, "Our individual freedom also creates differences between what we and what others find meaning in the world" (50).

Camus' concept of authenticity is very important basic existentialist concept. The tendency to settle into a life dictated by the prevailing opinions and values of the majority is considered to be inauthentic for many existentialists like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger too. So, they made a severe attack on "the public", "the herd" and "the they" respectively. Similarly, Camus, also with his view of authenticity, does not accord with mass opinion, calling it to be the inauthenticity. Linda E. Patrik's remark is:

Falling under the influence of mass opinion, we become inauthentic because we neither seek, nor create what is most meaningful to us as individuals. When we live the way that everyone else does [. . .] we do not use our freedom to create ourselves as unique individuals; instead we become slaves to a communal standard [. . .]. In contrast, authenticity is being true to oneself as a free individual. It involves fully acknowledging one's own freedom and decisiveness in undertaking the particular actions that go into the creation of one's own essence. (50)

While ensuring the values set by the mass, one loses his/her freedom and individuality. Thus, Camus as an existentialist values individual freedom, and

responsibility, since he also believes that one creates his/her own essence by himself/herself.

Camus' concept of absurdity and the absurd hero has a lot to do with existentialism. Along with him, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and other existentialists too regard absurdity as a central feature of human life. Since the world does not possess any meaning, value or truth, the condition of modern man is also absurd; yet one has to continue it without feeling any sense of defeat and surrender. For Camus, absurdity lies in the irrationality and chaos of the universe, especially in the way that death brings them in human life. Yet, in such a situation too, it is the absurd hero, who maintains full awareness of the absurdity of his/her life by rebelling against the forces that diminish freedom. Death, as mentioned above, is one of those forces.

Being fascinated with the question of how individuals act in the face of the absurd, Camus created several characters who act in ways that counter to social expectations. Sisyphus is one of such characters. His heroism in "The Myth of Sisyphus" helps him to assert his existence. He does there the repeated action of pushing the rock up the mountain, though without accomplishing the goal. In doing so, he defies the God, which is normally not expected in society. He does so only by his own personal choice, and creates meaning for himself in a meaningless situation too. In this regard, Thomas Mautner comments on "The Myth of Sisyphus" that Camus asserts that by a refusal to knuckle under, man (symbolized by Sisyphus) can create meaning through a free act of affirmation in which he gives meaning to a situation which until then had none" (63). Sisyphus' heroism is more clarified by Linda E. Patrik in this way:

The absurd hero is epitomized by Camus' Sisyphus, who endures an absurd life that has been narrowed down to endless labour without

results. What makes Sisyphus a hero is that he uses what freedom he has left to rebel against all restrictions on his freedom. Sisyphus' scorn for the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life form the heart of his revolt. His rebel spirit succeeds in overcoming the conditions and forces that make his life absurd. (52)

Thus, rather than surrendering to the conditions, the Sisyphusian hero overcomes them and asserts existence.

Like Sartre, Camus also insists on choices. For him, choices of an individual may lead to repetition, similar to the act of Sisyphus, and repetition leads to a sense of absurdity. But there exists man then. Sisyphus is given the choices indeed. He doesn't surrender to God and makes a choice, though he chooses the tough work, yet he exists through this choice. He chooses to face punishment, rather than bow before the God.

To conclude, Camus advocates freedom, individuality, choices and consequently the human existence. He never promotes surrender and defeat. His heroes, as represented by Sisyphus, undergo a challenging task and uphold heroism, and then assert their own existence.

Analysing the ideas of these leading existential philosophers, we can draw out a conclusion of the shared views on existentialism. Ongoing paragraphs attempt to summarize existentialism.

The concept of 'existence' or 'being' is integral in this philosophy. What does it mean to exist for human being? The question is answered by the existentialists by distinguishing between the existence of human being and that of other things. Human beings exist but other things live. It is consciousness that plays vital role. Human beings are conscious not only of other things but also of themselves. Existence

precedes essence applies in the case of human being. There is no prior and fixed essence or purpose for them to come into existence whereas in the case of other things, the function or essence is fixed before it comes into existence.

The issue of freedom and choice is another important theme of existentialism. Since there is no essence fixed at birth, an individual is totally free to create his/her own essence, or character through the way s/he exists as a human being, choosing by oneself and acting freely on the choices. This freedom of choice determines an individual. An individual exists upto the extent s/he makes choices. Freedom and existence go hand in hand.

Responsibility is also equally important in existentialism. Since an individual chooses his own action, fixes his own destiny by himself, s/he is totally responsible for his/her action. As the individual exercises freedom to choose and act ,and bears responsibility too, individuality is also the point of focus in existentialism.

The existential moods like anguish, and despair are also very important in existentialism. The existentialists, help to disclose the truth. Such moods for them help to understand oneself and the world, and provide self-reflective evidence about human existence.

Similarly, alienation, a sense of feeling separated and alone, is another important theme of existentialism. Alienation may come to an individual at several level: alienation from nature, alienation from the continuance of life, and alienation from others. The world itself often appears to be hostile and incomprehensible to the human. Similarly, alienation from the continuance of life brings anxiety and boredom, yet there is no regret or remorse. So, it is optimistic philosophy too. Alienation from others occurs when one cannot have access to another's thoughts and feelings.



The concept of the 'herd' is another basic theme of existentialism.

Existentialists in common attack on the 'herd'. It is named differently by them as 'the they', 'the crowd', 'the public' and so on. Since an individual cannot use freedom, the life of herd is discarded by the existentialists. The 'herd' promotes mass-produced life of conformity where the predetermined values are to be followed. But existentialism in general is the critique on such authoritarian social norms. It focuses on the protest against the social system instead. Hence, protest is also another theme of existentialism.

Likewise, absurdity and the concept of Sisyphusian hero is almost common to the existentialists. The world is absurd. Human life is also absurd, and meaningless. One does repetitive and meaningless work in this meaningless world. In such situation, one must conclude that all is well and go on making his/her own fate or destiny, choice and control as far as possible. Man is responsible for his actions and free to choose his destiny by oneself as Sisyphus did. Sisyphus chose his own fate and kept on raising the stone upto the mountain repeatedly without accomplishing the task. Similar is the fate of modern man, and similar is to be done for one to exist.

Now, if we go through *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, these elements can be found from the beginning to the end of the story. The protagonist Eguchi determines his own existence through his own choices. He uses his freedom, and chooses to visit the house of the sleeping beauties, even though he is old and impotent. Though he is impotent, he still chooses not to surrender to his condition. He does not have any sense of defeat in him. In doing so, he resists and rejects the social and family values that hinder his freedom and individuality. He is not hopeless but always optimistic.

The next chapter will study about an individual Eguchi, who using freedom of choice determines his life asserting his own existence.

### III. ASSERTION OF SELF IN *HOUSE OF THE SLEEPING BEAUTIES*

The story of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* begins with old Eguchi's visit to a secret house ruled over by a woman in her mid-forties. Eguchi is the protagonist of the novel, who is 67 years old, a sexually impotent man. Although he is sexually impotent, he goes on visiting the secret house of the sleeping beauties frequently, where the sleeping beauties one at each visit, is laid asleep in a secret room, completely naked, in a hypnotized condition. Eguchi goes near her, undresses himself, takes her in his arms, but does nothing regarding 'human relation'. He plays with her breasts, nipples, lips, hips, and other organs, of which the writer has made a vivid description. But there is no reaction from the beauty, and Eguchi also sleeps beside her quietly for the whole night taking some sleeping tablets or whisky.

The senility of old age makes Eguchi do nothing especially regarding sexuality, so the beauty appears to be merely a living toy for him. He has got a despair of old age too, which creates a sense of boredom in him. But he seeks relief from this boredom by visiting these beauties frequently. After visiting the beauty once, he makes a promise within himself that he will not return there again. But after fifteen days, he makes a second visit and after seven days of the second visit, he makes third visit, and in this way, he makes five visits altogether there. And in his last visit he wants to die beside the beauty.

Thus, he is rather ready to die but does not surrender easily to his condition of sexual impotence. In his youth, he was potent and had three daughters too. But now he exercises his freedom of choice indeed to indulge in unlimited dreams and memories of such women without any hesitation at paying more than for women awake. In fact, he makes a choice to do so.

He doesn't show any interest in family and social life. He rather faces challenge, protecting his own freedom. In his ultimate visit to the sleeping beauty, he shows the will to die beside her. He does everything by his own choice, and does not believe in any destiny or fate.

Before Eguchi, some other old people also made similar visits to the house of the sleeping beauties and used to feel themselves 'alive' beside the beauties. In the despair of old age and impotency, they also seek their existence there. But Eguchi is different from them in some ways. He does not feel the sorrow and happiness, the regrets and loneliness, as intensely as the others do.

Anyway, by going there, sitting beside the beauties and closely observing the secret organs of the beauties, he tries to overcome the sense of sexual impotence and asserts his self there. He doesn't feel to be defeated. Without accomplishing the goal too, he continues his action. He is like the Sisyphusian hero. So, the present research work attempts to analyse the existential motif behind his frequent visit to the house of the sleeping beauties. It will be carried out using the theoretical modality from existentialism.

### **Alienation of the Protagonist**

Alienation is the feeling of being different from what we are normally used to. An alienated person is generally not usual or acceptable for common people. A person has a sense of alienation when one does not get friendly and sympathetic behaviour from the people around. If a person is in trouble of something but the world is not friendly and adoptable then one takes oneself to be alienated. Eguchi has to face the similar problem. He finds himself alienated from the world of sexuality when he gets himself impotent with his approaching old age and senility out of it.

In fact, the story of Eguchi contains the pictures of alienation of various kinds: from the other, from the nature, and from life. In the world, where young people seem to enjoy indulging themselves in sexual relationship, old Eguchi finds himself alienated among them. So, he happens to take shelter in the secret inn, run by a woman, where the anaesthetized beauty is laid asleep for him, at a high cost. He is expected there to 'sleep well' and for that he takes help either of sleeping medicine or of drinks and simply sleeps beside the beauty. The following conversation between Eguchi and the woman who has run the inn, shows how he first approaches the inn:

"Here is the key. I hope you sleep well. If you have trouble getting to sleep, you will find some sleeping medicine by the pillow."

"Have you anything to drink?"

"I don't keep spirits."

"I can't even have a drink to put myself to sleep?"

"No."

"She's in the next room?"

"Oh ?" Eguchi was a little surprised. (15)

In the inn, Eguchi does not have to spend the happy and 'social' life. He is fully "aware of an unpleasant emptiness" for himself there (16). So, he smokes cigarette and sinks himself deeply into the 'bad dreams' sleeping beside the beauty. He has to spend sleepless nights mostly, and the nights full of dreams. Dreams are nothing but the symbols of being alienated from normal life; of which the more discussion will be done later while analyzing the symbols. Anyway, he can neither express his thoughts and feelings nor can he even converse and exchange his ideas with anybody there in the inn. The only thing he can do there is to play with the organs of naked beauty:

"Are you asleep? Are you going to wake up?" It was as if he were asking so that he might touch her hand. He took it in his, and shook it. He knew that she would not open her eyes. Her hand still in his, he looked into her face. What kind of girl might she be? The eyebrows were untouched by cosmetics, the closed eyelashes were even. He caught the scent of maidenly hair. (18)

He is already alienated from others, i.e. other women, with whom he came into contact at different modes of his life. In his youth, he was in love with two-three girls. Not only this, but he had affairs with others' wives too. But "he, now sixty-seven, had lost many friends and relations, but the memory of the girl was still young" (30). The advent of old age has brought with it an agonizing form of isolation in him - the loss of the physical powers of sexual intercourse without the loss of the emotional desire for intimate contacts. Since the depth of sex is very vast, he has still got the desire to know more about it, or to experience it more and more. But physically he becomes weak, and is condemned to be alienated from this world of sex and sexuality. The narrator in this regard comments, "The immeasurable expanse of sex, its bottomless depth – what part of it had Eguchi known in his sixty-seven years?" (39)

The young naked beauty of course is completely unknown/unaware of what he is doing. In such a situation, Eguchi is caught between his own sense of integrity and hopelessness. Feeling the paradoxical strangeness of his visit, he complains inwardly that "not the smallest part of his existence reached her" (20). Since his existence is not noticed by the subsequent beauties too, the young women here have been used as figures of what one can be alienated from. And this is the situation that has been

faced by Eguchi. He has not got love, affection, and friendship from anywhere. So, the hopelessness of love and loneliness has brought in him a great sense of alienation.

The alienation, at another level, is the alienation from nature, which too Eguchi has faced. He fails to understand the world into which he is 'thrown.' The world instead appears before him to be hostile and incomprehensible. The approaching winter season and the nearby sea with its rising waves; both universal symbols of death, suggest the mood of alienation again. These are the natural forces beyond his control, which add up to his sense of alienation.

At a higher level of alienation felt by Eguchi is the alienation from the continuance of life. In the world shaped by inevitable death, Eguchi starts feeling alienated from life itself. Since the universe is indifferent to whether we are born or whether we die; this thought starts dominating Eguchi's mind, and he is always haunted by the shadow of both old age and death." Since the death is our master, the wish to continue his life eternally shatters. So, at the end of his life, he wishes to die by the side of the beauty, but she is not awake. In a distasteful remark Eguchi asks with the woman, "She wouldn't even wake up then?" (73) Hinting towards the hopelessness of his life, her reply goes in this way in the conversation between them:

"Made to order if you wanted to commit suicide and take someone with you."

"Please do, if you feel lonely about doing it by yourself."

"And when you are too lonely even for suicide?"

"I suppose there are such times for old people." "Have you been drinking? You are not making a great deal of sense."

"I've had something worse than liquor." (73)

In this way, Eguchi has faced double alienation in two ways: Alienation from others and alienation from oneself; and alienation from women of the society and the women inside the house of the sleeping beauties. Because of the former kind of alienation he decides to leave not only his family, but the society also, since he is alienated from his family and sexual life. As he cannot satisfy his own wife and the other women of the society sexually, he thinks himself to be alienated from the normal social convention. And again, in the house of the sleeping beauties too he finds himself alienated from the beauties, since there are beauties for him but they are completely unconscious like the dead bodies. Because of this, he finds himself to be mocked at there, as the owner of the inn uses words like "virgin", "experienced", "promiscuous" and so on indicating to him:

"You won't do anything wrong, I know and so it wouldn't be right if she weren't pretty."

"It's not the same one?"

"Isn't it better to have a different one?"

"I am not as promiscuous as all that."

"Promiscuous? But what does it have to do with promiscuousness?"

(38)

As such, she mocks at him with the word promiscuousness. Similarly, she even seems to tease him by saying that she has offered him "experienced" girls. "Oh? What do you mean when you say she is more experienced? After all she's sound asleep" (38). This is the reply out of rage by Eguchi to the owner woman of the inn. Similarly, her repeated word "virgin" for the girls too annoys Eguchi, so he eventually remarks them to be "virgin prostitutes" (43).



To sum up, Eguchi exists isolated because of alienations of various kinds that appeared in his old age. There is nobody to help him in his problem, since it is quite individual one. So, he has to lift up the whole burden himself. He is ceased to be treated as human being or friend by everybody, rather he is a stranger among the people around him. So, he is alone in the crowd and sense of alienation befriends him.

### **The Protagonist's Despair of Old Age in the Novel**

When a person finds oneself helpless and alienated, the sense of anxiety as well as despair comes to the mind. Since despair is the feeling of having lost all hope, it is even called the 'sickness unto death'. A person cannot see the ray of hope in life. One starts regarding oneself failure and nothing else. There is no satisfaction in ongoing life. So, one wishes for the change. In the case of Eguchi, the despair has come up with the advent of old age. The ugliness of his old age has brought in him the condition of sexual impotence and because of which he has to take a company of women, who are all the time in a deep sleep, unconscious indeed. The narrator hereby comments on Eguchi in this way:

In his sixty-seven years, old Eguchi had passed ugly nights with women. Indeed the ugly nights were the hardest ones to forget. [. . .] could there be anything uglier than an old man lying the night through beside a girl put to sleep unawaking? Had he not come to this house seeking the ultimate in the ugliness of old age? (17)

Thus, Eguchi begins his quest. Since despair is a kind of disease, it brings an agony of not being able to die but the individual, and despair over himself is tormented by the inability to get rid of himself. Such inability leads to the futile efforts on the part of the individual, either to escape from himself or to be who he

truly is. It is in the same course, Eguchi starts visiting the secret inn. Except for the despair of old age, he has no other purpose or curiosity to visit there as the narrator comments, "He had come neither to expose its sins nor to pry into its secret practices. His curiosity was less than strong, because the dreariness of old age lay already upon him too" (18).

The despair, associated with the feeling of loneliness and emptiness often brings in him a sorrow. Since he finds within the inn that the girls are not for him even though he finds a music on their body, he even shows the desire to flee from there:

He felt a surge of loneliness tinged with sorrow. More than sorrow or loneliness, it was the bleakness of old age, as if frozen to him. [. . .] the girl sent out the smell of young warmth [. . .] the old man seemed to feel music in the girl's body. As if he wanted to flee, he looked at the four walls, so covered with velvet that there might have been no exit. (21)

Before Eguchi, the other old men also, as described, went to the house of sleeping beauties when the despair of old age was too much for them. All, along with Eguchi, did so only after they lost hope of their sexual lives in the company of their women. This remark of Eguchi suits them too: "It seems like a very long time since I lost hope in every last woman. There is a house where they put women to sleep so they don't wake up" (22). Since the women could not be enjoyed their company as women, they were not 'real women' for those old men. They were rather the means to console the old men whose happiness has been already vanished, and only the sense of anxiety and despair has filled their mind. The narrator remark on this regard is as follows:

It was a house frequented by men who could no longer use women as women; but Eguchi, on his third visit, knew that to sleep with such a girl was a fleeting consolation, the pursuit of a vanished happiness in being alive. And were there among them old men who secretly asked to sleep forever beside a girl who had been put to sleep?" (59)

Eguchi grows fully irritable when he is mocked at by the woman of the house of the sleeping beauties. When she comments him as being senile and helpless like other old men, he growls at her by saying, "I am all right" (60). Though his body has already ceased to function as that of normal young men his mind is still clear. His vision is, so that, of one in his last extremity. Accepting his hopeless condition of old age, he says in the final chapter: "An old man lives next door to death" (81).

Out of his mood of anxiety and despair, the sense of fear and hallucination comes to him. He seems to hear somewhere a ridiculing voice directed towards him. So, he utters the things like this: "Is it some devil in there trying to laugh at me?" (77). Then, the voice in reply echoes: "Nothing as simple, I'm afraid. You're making too much of your own sentimentality and your dissatisfaction at not being able to die" (77). Anyway, it proves his condition that is full of despair.

The height of despair seems to be reflected in these lines by Eguchi himself: "That's why I have come to die on a night like this, with a young girl's skin to warm [. . .]" (11). He, thus, expresses his wish to die eventually beside the beauty there. Full of anxiety, he seems to be quite frustrated and has lost all hope. He finds himself quite lonely and sees emptiness everywhere, which encourages him to search for his existence.

Having already abandoned the family, Eguchi has frequented the visits to the secret inn at this old age not for other aim but to console himself from the feelings of

lonely emptiness and cold despondency. Not only this, he has also established a relation with sleeping medicines and drugs at the inn. With the mood of despair and despondency, he doesn't feel any sense of danger in taking such medicines. He rather wants to assert his own existence by sleeping beside these hypnotized beauties upto the point of his death. People may suspect that he died from the heavy dose of such medicines or drugs, but Eguchi sees no ultimate alternative, except that the company of beauties. In his final visit, he has been allotted with two girls; and between whom he expresses his death wish. The narrator's comment on this regard goes like this:

Would this not be a most desirable place to die? To arouse curiosity, to invite the disdain of the world – would these not be to cap his life with a proper death? [. . .] He could not calculate the injury he would do to his family, but to die in his sleep between, for instance, the two young girls tonight might not be the ultimate wish of a man in his last years? [. . .] he would be carried off to a miserable hot spring inn, and people would be told that he had committed suicide from an overdose of sleeping medicine. (93)

In this way, despair, an existential mood, encourages this old man for the quest of his individual self. It is this psychological torture, which makes him decide to abandon his family and social life for the sake of his individuality indeed. This is the despair of his old age, which creates in him the mental unrest. So he can not even sleep properly. He always dreams, and ultimately happens to take heavy dose of sleeping medicines and drugs. And at the culmination of despair, he starts believing that death will be the end of these all sufferings. There will be no anxiety and despair after death. Thinking this he loves to die beside the beauties. He, however, does not

want to die among the family members and society for he does not expose his cowardiceness anywhere. He simply chooses the place to die, but does not die yet.

### **Choice and Responsibility of the Protagonist**

One has to lead one's life oneself by making his/her own choices. We have freedom of action. Our freedom of action is the ability to choose an action and to act on our choice. Each individual is the director of his/her actions that s/he chooses to perform rather than being the puppet who undergoes these actions. Since no other person or force can step in and take control of our conscious actions until we freely choose to allow it, our act of choosing has a vital role for our existence. What each of us does depends on our own choice. As we are free to choose and create our own individual essence through our actions, we are also responsible for who we actually become. The similar case is applied in the case of Eguchi. He has made a choice himself for his actions and not only of it, his whole career. He has also borne a full responsibility for his choice and action. He undertakes freedom of choice and responsibility hand in hand.

Being full of despair and having the sense of alienation created from his condition of sexual impotence with the advent of old age, Eguchi makes an existential choice to abandon his family and social life first. This choice by him, however, does not lead him to the state of defeat and escapism. He rather ascertains his choice of action by fixing it to the frequent visits in the house of sleeping beauties, of which he is fully responsible too. He doesn't do it by being guided of any external force. He does not inwardly agree so easily that he is destined (by God or any super power) to be impotent at this age of his life. So, he goes on making choices of himself and for himself. As one exists upto the extent one makes choices, and Eguchi too, in this course, does not cease to make choices. He himself chooses not to surrender to his

condition of sexual impotency. In his youth, when he was potent, he chose to have affairs with many young women, and even flirted with many women and geishas. The remarks -- "she was a geisha with whom he had for sometime been familiar", "Eguchi had had a lover before he was married" and the reference that he had three daughters of his own suggest that he passed a family life and held affairs with many other women outside (24). This was indeed his choice.

Now, in his old age of 67, being unable to have the sort of 'human relationship' with the women, he again chooses to visit the sleeping beauties in an inn perhaps out of certain curiosity, or perhaps he thought it was the real place of choice for old man like him to express happiness and sorrow there. He simply enjoys to describe the beauties' hair and other organs and play with them, being quite away from the world of sexuality:

Eguchi had first wandered into this secret house out of curiosity, but it seemed to him that men more senile than he might come to it with even greater happiness and sorrow. The girl's hair was long, possibly for men to play with. Lying back on his pillow, Eguchi brushed it aside to expose her ear. The sheen of the hair behind the ear was white. The neck and shoulder too were young and fresh. (20)

Eguchi has now stopped choosing the women awake at this age of life. In a condition of losing hope for sexuality, he makes choice to take women as doll or plaything sometimes, for what he has chosen sleeping beauties. But as the writer says, those sleeping beauties are not only dolls or toys, rather they are the 'life' to be touched with confidence for an old man like him. And Eguchi too seems to have chosen to do the same:

She was not a living doll, for there could be no living doll; but, so as not to shame an old man no longer a man, she had been made into a living toy. No, not a toy: for the old men she could be life itself. Such life was perhaps, life to be touched with confidence. To Eguchi's farsighted old eyes the hand from close up was yet smoother and more beautiful. (20)

In this way, he prefers women asleep than the women awake, paying for them highly, just to lie beside them and sometimes play with their organs. Is it not his personal choice to pay for the girls from whom he could not get any sort of 'benefit'?

Eguchi, as well as the other old men like him, does not hesitate to pay more for those sleeping women for they know nothing of such men. The narrator remarks, "They were quite free to indulge in unlimited dreams and memories of women. Was that not why they felt no hesitation at paying more than for women awake? And the old men were confident in the knowledge that the girls put to sleep for them knew nothing of them" (44). Although they might have felt a kind of guilt to pay for and spend purposeless nights beside the unconscious women, yet it can also be guessed that they could even have felt a pleasure there, as the narrator's remark of suspicion on this regard goes like this: "But was it without feelings of guilt that the old men paid money for young girls who were sacrificed to them; or did secret feelings of guilt actually add to the pleasure?" (47). Anyway, it is the matter of their choice to do so. Being different from the uncommon old men, Eguchi makes such choices that do not normally accord to the existing social norms and values.

It is in the course of making existential choices, Eguchi chooses to take medicines and cigarettes at night to help him forget all his pains. It is he himself to choose these ways because he is fully responsible for what he has become of himself.

With the help of such medicines and drugs he tries to forget the women of his past and now wants to indulge himself in the love of those unawake beauties. He chooses to sleep with the beauty by "bringing his chest to her and drawing her hips toward him, sleeps a warm sleep" (54).

It is quite interesting to see the dialogues between Eguchi and the woman of the inn, who runs it. He is not even allowed to stay there after the beauty awakes, and he can not let his emotions out, if any, there with the beauties. Yet he chooses to visit such a place again and again. A part of such dialogue between them is like this:

"I wonder."

"Can't I stay until she's awake?"

"That's exactly the sort of thing we can't allow."

"But she's too good a girl."

"It's best just to keep them company and not let foolish emotions get in the way. She doesn't even know she's slept with you. She won't cause you any trouble."

"But I remember her, what if we were to pass in the street?"

"You mean you might speak to her? Don't do that. It would be a crime." (55)

Thus, it is supposed to be a crime to talk to those girls even at other times. Yet Eguchi makes a strange choice to visit them frequently.

However, Eguchi chooses to have a 'death like sleep' beside the beauties. "He was much taken with the thought of sleeping a deathlike sleep beside a girl put into a sleep like death" (59). He is very much fascinated with the young beautiful face of the beauty, as the narrator questions: "For Eguchi when he came to this house, there



was nothing more beautiful than a young face in dreamless sleep. Might it be called the sweetest consolation to be found in this world?" (63)

Anyway, he does not lose his hope at any rate. He chooses not to commit suicide and die at any juncture of his life. But he makes plans himself and moves ahead. He doesn't choose such acts which do not help him to fix his individuality. Situation would be different for him if he chose another way of life. Therefore, he himself is responsible for whatever he does in his life.

### **Freedom and Existence of the Protagonist**

There is a very close connection between freedom and existence. Existence involves freedom of thought and action. Both our ability to be self conscious and our ability to launch ourselves into action are aspects of human freedom. Human existence would not be possible without such freedoms. Our freedom of thought involves the idea that each individual is free to interpret himself/herself and his/her actions. In this course, someone could decide to ignore certain actions s/he committed in the past when s/he thinks about who he/she is. Similarly, our freedom of action is the ability to choose an action and to act on our choice. Existence does not simply mean to be alive. Even the plants and animals are alive, but they do not exist. But human beings exercise the freedom of choice and thus exist by freely making choices of their own future by themselves. Eguchi in the novel does the same. He exercises his utmost freedom to determine his own existence. Since freedom can not be separated from existence, Eguchi asserts his own existence by practising the freedom of indulging himself with the sleeping beauties by making the choice of abandoning his family and social life. Even though he is already impotent, i.e., unable to have company with women, he decides freely to sleep beside the beauties by paying for it.

Giving priority to individuality, Eguchi decides himself what to do and what not to do. After being sexually impotent with the advent of old age, he does not surrender to it. He, instead of simply accepting his condition and remaining idly at home with the family members, freely decides to make a visit on a secret inn where the naked beauties in their sleep could be enjoyed. He tries to make himself free and decides to go there. In doing so, he does not follow the convention of other old men who tried to persuade themselves by suppressing the mental desire though they were lost physically. Such case is there in Eguchi too: "Eguchi, now sixty-seven, had lost many friends and relations, but the memory of the girl was still young" (30). Because of such a memory and desire that remained in his mind, he tries to have company of naked beauties, and there with them too, he tries to practise freedom in this way by describing the beauty's breasts and other organs:

Her breasts seemed to be beautifully rounded. A strange thought came to him: why, among all animals, in the long course of the world, had the breasts of the human female alone become beautiful? Was it not the glory of the human race to have made women's breasts so beautiful? It might be so too with lips. Old Eguchi thought of women getting ready for bed [. . .]. (27)

Thus, Eguchi practises his freedom of action by visiting the beauties and simply describing their organs. In the course of protecting his individual freedom, he is even ready to crush the rules and regulations set by others. Firstly, he breaks the rules by visiting the secret inn, and secondly he even tries to "come up against the secret rule of the house of the sleeping beauties" (35).

When he grows tired of visiting the house of the sleeping beauties, he tries to break its strict rules in the course of exercising his freedom. And even though he was

tired, he chose to increase the frequency of his visits there. He tried to make himself free there by violating the rules when necessary, but it was not to do so since the beauties were unconscious and unresistent for what he did with them:

He was growing a little tired of the 'house of the sleeping beauties'.

And even as he wearied of it the number of his visits increased. He felt a sudden urging of the blood: he wanted to use force on her, break the rule of the house, destroy the ugly nostrum, and so take his leave. But force would not be necessary. There would be no resistance from the body of the girl put to sleep. (90)

It is his freedom of thought that helps Eguchi feel himself ever young, enjoying the company of quite young women. He was always "quite free to indulge in unlimited dreams and memories of women" (44). He, ignoring the wife and his family life, "felt no hesitation at paying more than for women awake" (44).

Eguchi did not simply want to live in this world, since he was very conscious of his own individual human existence. Since existence precedes essence in the case of all human beings, he also wants to exist himself by creating his own 'essence' by himself. For that he did not simply agree that man, either old or impotent, should not search for the company of young girls. Rather, by freely practising his existential choice, he goes on choosing his action and making his own fate and destiny. He is never found to be the devotee or believer of God since it collapses his true existence. The intimate thoughts of this old man often go back to the source of his existence. He deeply meditates on it. In his sensual yearnings and erotic fancies of searching such a secret inn of the beauties, he in fact makes subtle attempts of searching for the meaning of his life.

Small wonder may arise in the readers when the old Eguchi begins his first visit to the secret house with an "unpleasant emptiness" (40). But, as the readers first suspect, then gradually realize with deepening awareness, that the 'emptiness' is Eguchi's own. For the old man's series of visits to the house of the sleeping beauties is a series of confrontations with himself, a set of experiments indeed in self-analysis in which his existence is very much at issue. Since the presence of another person in the meeting is simply a body, Eguchi there is quite introspective, searching for his own being. His questions, inquiries, charges and anxieties are all met only with silence or by himself. At such a time and situation, any 'dialogue' is self-generated, self-sustained, and ultimately self-directed.

On his first visit the anxious Eguchi finds himself investigating his past. As an older person, he often remembers, recreates, and sometimes writes "the story of his life" to define his existence, so he relieves events from earlier days. And it is on his second visit after two weeks, he is found to be more nervous than before, and he decides to violate the rules but resists the temptation. Similarly, in a consequent visit, confronting with a woman who is a 'death-in-life,' he relieves his past loves and puzzles over his existence.

To conclude, Eguchi, being an old impotent man, never lets his individual freedom go to crisis. He does not associate with those people, who, after being old and sexually impotent, simply leave women's company. Eguchi is quite different from such people. Though physically weak and failure, his idea is always free, and thus goes on exercising his freedom by making the choice of actions by himself. He never confesses with others since it kills his true existence. He always searches for unconditional freedom and existence.

### **Study of Symbols and Setting in *House of the Sleeping Beauties***

While going through the novel, we find many symbols at work. The narrative has got both progression and thematic unity with the use of certain symbols. The winter season, for example, is one of such symbols in the story. Eguchi's visits to the secret house follow this deepening season – winter; that autumn turns into it and the rain falls become sleet and snow. And his final visit is made in 'the winter.' The suspense too deepens as Eguchi's thoughts also become increasingly serious and disturbingly death-oriented. These lines associate these two facts: "The wind carried the sound of approaching winter, perhaps because of the house itself, perhaps because of something in old Eguchi" (16).

The use of stronger medicines and sleeping tablets as the healers for sleepless nights of Eguchi, is the other symbol. With the growing urge to join the sleeping beauties in their death-like sleep, Eguchi uses sleeping medicines blindly. He can 'sleep well' only after he takes sleeping tablets. So, in the very beginning, in his first visit to the inn, the woman of the inn suggests him by saying: "You will find some sleeping medicine by the pillow" (15). His existentially troubled mood gets relief with the use of such medicines. On the other hand, the sleepless nights and dream also suggest the same thing, that they signify his alienated condition, and thus the search for his existence out from the life of the 'herd' and commonality.

The recurrence of certain similar images used in the novel also heightens the unity and symbolizes the thematic aspect of probing for existence by the central character Eguchi. Virginity, sexual experience of the past, pregnancy and babies; blending with the thoughts of flowers, parts of woman's body, blood and the sleep of death. signify the existential exploration of Eguchi. He deeply concentrates on them in the course of clearly defining his present existence. The writer symbolically probes

the human heart and womb with the crimson curtained velvet room of the sleeping beauties. Indeed, the crimson curtained room is both heart and womb. It is heart, where an old man living a death-in-life confronts his paradoxical opposite, a young woman who is life-in-death, here he relieves his past, loves and puzzles over his existence. Eguchi probes deeper and deeper into his consciousness or 'heart' as he returns repeatedly to the secret house. And it is womb, as in its warm comfort Eguchi's thoughts turn to pregnancy, sex, baby, blood and death. It is a feminine world, where the women of Eguchi's life parade through his dreams and reveries.

So much so, the house where the sleeping beauties are laid asleep, can itself be taken symbolically as an alienated world. And the beauties there are also the alienated beings, since they are quite detached from the society, or the normal life. So, the visits of the protagonist there are also the activities of being thrownness and dejected for him. This all signifies that he is existentially troubled character, and thus goes there to assert his real existence. And in this way the title of the novel also matches to this existential theme.

In the novel, there are many contradictions apparent first in the nature of the story itself. First of all, ugly old man sleeping beside beautiful young girls, where the young girls are alive but death-like in sleep. They are real persons, but the situation is artificial. Similarly, the opposites of life and death, old age and youth, ugliness and beauty, reality and illusion and so on continue throughout. Eguchi's thoughts expand these themes. On his first visit, he recalls that he has passed ugly nights with women. "The ugliness had to do not with the appearance of women but with their tragedies, their warped lives" (17). But he himself wonders if there is anything 'uglier' than an old man lying beside drugged girl. He often tries to break the rule, but is caught between his own sense of integrity and the hopelessness of the situation even if he

should "break the rules" (18). Feeling the paradoxical strangeness of his visit, Eguchi complains himself inwardly that "not the smallest part of his existence reaches the girl" (22). This in fact causes the sense of alienation. On the other hand, these all above-mentioned contraries show that the comfortable oneness of things has been broken.

Since the setting of the novel is after of the Second World War, some traces of the damage or lasting effects of World War II can be found in it. Eguchi often becomes dreamful with some unpleasant dreams concerning to the effects of Second World War in him. He talks about the birth of the deformed baby in this way:

His next dream was most unpleasant. One of his daughters had borne a deformed child in a hospital. Awake, the old man could not remember what sort of deformity it had been. Probably he did not want to remember. It was hideous in any case. The baby was immediately taken from the mother. It was behind a white curtain in the maternity room, and she went over the commenced hacking it to pieces, getting it ready to throw away. (32)

In this way, such a great effect is created in the birth of the new babies. They were born totally deformed and handicapped after Second World War, for a long time in Japan as shown in Kenzaburo Oe's *Personal Matter* as well, where such evidences of the birth of deformed babies are explicitly found; and the cause for that has been shown to be the devastation of Second World War. The effect of bombs that were dropped to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two great cities of Japan, which is the historical fact indeed. And it is also the historical fact that the babies that are born still now in some parts of Japan get deformed. This was all the lasting impact of Second World War in Japan.

The Second World War and its effects as mentioned above brought in people the feeling that human condition is essentially absurd. After the horrors of Second World War, a kind of rebellion had been arisen against the essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and tradition that held the assumptions that human beings are fairly rational creatures, living in intelligible universe, and part of an ordered social structure. But the existential beliefs and practices that arose after the devastation of World War II held that the universe possesses no inherent truth, values and meanings, no unity and oneness remains, and so on. Since many lives and properties were collapsed and even the future generation was affected as to have been born deformed, the belief and hope of modern men shattered and they started probing into the meaning of human life on earth, so they started searching for their true existence by exercising their freedom of choice. Thus, the situation also has to do a lot for existentialism, and thus on a particular case, that of Eguchi. He too seems to have troubled existentially and tries to assert his own individual self by himself through the frequent visits to the house of the sleeping beauties though in sexually impotent and old, weak, condition of his body.

Finally, the analysis of all the symbols and setting proves that the protagonist Eguchi has reached in an alienated condition first. He has then started viewing that he, as an isolated existent, is cast into an alien universe that possesses no inherent truth, value and meaning. Rather, in the life after the great World Wars, he has to commence the fruitless search for purpose and meaning. He is totally practising to search for his true self indeed.

### **Eguchi as a Sisyphusian Hero**

Since both the world and the human life are absurd and meaningless, one does repetitive and meaningless work without accomplishing the goal in this meaningless



world. In such a world, the hero is one who, like Sisyphus, goes on making his/her own fate by making his free choice of action and bearing the responsibility of what he/she does or becomes. As Sisyphus chose his own fate and kept on raising the stone upto the mountain repeatedly without accomplishing the task, similar is to be done for one to exist in this world. Eguchi also does like Sisyphus. He also chooses his own fate of repeated action of visiting the house of the sleeping beauties though accomplishing nothing ultimately since he is already an impotent old man.

Since absurd refers to unusualness, an absurd is the person who has meaningless ambitions and work. S/he is tormented by absurdity, i.e., the sense of being abandoned in the world and the feeling that the world does not give meaning to individual. In such a situation, an absurd hero must make meaning for himself. One must make his/her own fate amongst the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world. So, knowing his/her torment and fate, a man still wishes to go on doing all absurd things. He/she does work repeatedly but accomplishes nothing. Eguchi, too chooses to do so by visiting and sleeping beside the hypnotized beauties where he cannot even wake her up. What goal regarding 'human relationship' can he accomplish from there? So he is doubtful in this way in his first visit to the house of the sleeping beauties after hearing the directions of the owner woman:

'And please don't try to wake her, not that you could, whatever you did she's sound asleep and knows nothing. The woman said it again:  
'She'll sleep on and on and know nothing at all, from start to finish. Not even who's been with her. You needn't worry.' Eguchi said  
nothing of the doubts what were coming over him. (14)

In this way, the woman directs him not to do anything regarding the achievement of any 'goal' there. So much so, he himself is unable to do anything regarding sexuality

with the beauties since he was already old, weak and more importantly impotent. Yet he, being full of the sense of absurdity and despair takes sleeping pills and continues sleeping besides the beauties. The narrator says, "He would do well to take the sleeping medicine of his pillow"; he even wants the "stronger drug" to take and continues his repeated absurd tasks (24). As it is said that pleasures of life lie in absurdity, he goes on repeating absurd work by making second, third, fourth and other visits, as if lasting forever as an eternal punishment, though futile work. Eguchi thus makes second visit to the house of the sleeping beauties in this way:

Old Eguchi had not thought that he would again go to the 'house of the sleeping beauties'. He had not thought when he spent that first night there that he would like to go again. So it had been too when he left in the morning. [. . .] It was about a fortnight later that a telephone call came asking whether he might like to pay a visit that night. (34)

Thus, though he "had not thought to revisit" (35), he visited it again. He continues his effort like Sisyphus. As it is believed that one must conclude that all is well, and go on making his/her own fate, choice and control, as far as possible, his own destiny; Eguchi too assures by saying "I am all right" (70). And he also goes on making choices of futile labour like that of Sisyphus by making similar sort of consequent visits there which do not show any hope of accomplishment of the goal. Since such a struggle is to fill man's heart with happiness, he also enjoys such visits, plays with different organs of the beauties; praises their breasts and other secret parts by saying that "the cleanliness of the women's secret part is their property" (65). Instead of being detached from such fruitless visits, he enjoys absurdity of it by making other more visits:

Eight days after his second visit old Eguchi went again to the 'House of the sleeping beauty'. It had been two weeks between his first and second visits, and so the interval had been cut in half. Was he gradually being pulled in by the spell of girls put to sleep? [. . .] You may be disappointed, but please put up with her. (57)

Eguchi thus went on making the 'empty' visits to the secret house by paying, more and more for that. He has thus himself narrowed down to endless labour without results. He goes on enduring an absurd life indeed.

Like Eguchi, many other old men too, tormented by the feeling of absurdity in the life of their old age, made similar visits to the house of the sleeping beauties. And they also wished to feel the sense of 'success' by such repeated doings in this absurd and meaningless world. The narrator talks about them:

Old Kiga, who had introduced Eguchi to the house, had of course not revealed the secrets of the other guests. There were probably only a few of them. Eguchi could imagine that they were worldly successes. But among them must be some who had made their success by wrong doing and kept their gains by repeated wrong doing. They would not be men at peace with themselves. (67)

Eguchi in fact, got the hatred of the death of his sexual power, and his passion for (the life of) his sexual potency. Motivated from this condition of him, he is wholly used up toward accomplishing nothing like Sisyphus. Struggle is remarkable effort from man's side to make his own world. Eguchi too struggles at his best. But toward the end of his life, he starts to "live next door to death" (81). So, he becomes conscious of this unavoidable fate. Yet, the special feature of him is that he is ready even to die but does not surrender to his condition of impotency. He wishes to die

beside the sleeping beauties in this secret house itself, but does not accept the sense of 'defeat' among the people of the society. In this final visit, he goes to the inn "to die on a night, with a young girls' skin to warm him [ . . . ]", but he never confesses, as it will hamper on his individual existence (81). So, he is indeed a Sisyphusian hero for his uncompromising sense of commitment for the repeated meaningless task even upto the end of his life.

Thus, Eguchi, proving himself superior to his fate and condition, asserts his own existence freely. He chooses his own action of repeated absurd task without accomplishing the goal but he does not have any sense of defeat and surrender.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The research centers around the protagonist Eguchi's motive behind his frequent visits to the house of the sleeping beauties. To this extent, why he makes certain choices instead of others is the key factor which guides the research. The secret inn, or the house of the sleeping beauties is the only place for him to assert his own individual existence in the case that he is sexually impotent and thus helpless, in a sense, in the outside world. The study examines these events of his repeated visits, which in fact are the results of his free choice of action for the assertion of his existence. In order to maintain his freedom of choice and true existence, Eguchi does not surrender to his own condition of sexual impotence rather continues this absurd act like that of the mythical hero Sisyphus.

The protagonist Eguchi feels himself alienated in the world of sexuality. The senility of old age and impotency make him unfit among others, so he appears to be uncommon in the society. Since the environment around him does not become friendly and adoptable for him, he happens to take shelter in the house of the sleeping beauties where he thinks that he would overcome the sense of sexual impotence. But the pitiful thing for him is that he is once again alienated there inside the house of the sleeping beauties too, since the beauties are offered to him only in the unconscious condition, who can never help him to share his feelings, emotions and experiences. However, he is not a bit pessimistic over there. He plays with the organs of the beauties, and spends the nights in any way there and does not cease to visit the place again and again.

The visible contrast between his physical condition and his inner will makes the research move forward. Physically he is old, weak and almost helpless, but he has got a strong desire to live, or to continue the life; the life of his sexuality indeed. An

old man, abandoning his society and his family life, hereby struggles and breaks the conventional beliefs and practices by paying for and visiting the secret place of the beauties from where he gains nothing special as normally expected to be done. He has got in fact the strong desire in him to have the continuance of his sexual self even in his old age too. In the case of Eguchi, the despair has come up with the wish to have change and a breakthrough in a traditionally expected way of life.

Eguchi has lived the life of choice throughout different phases of it. He chose to marry, chose to have affairs with many women in his youth and even made an existential choice to have visits over the secret inn at his old age of sexually impotent condition. He does so because he is ready to bear the full responsibility of what he has been doing. He neither follows the suggestions and advices of others nor believes in any unmoved power to guide human life. He, therefore, lives for himself in the way he chooses to do. And finally, he expresses his wish to die beside the beauties, which is also another choice in his life that is promoted out of the sense of responsibility in the individual himself. No outer force works in Eguchi's life and choice of action but rather depending on his own choice, he asserts his own individual existence.

Eguchi practises freedom and existence hand in hand. He is always free to live his life in the way he himself chooses. Mainly, in visiting the secret inn frequently, he has exercised the utmost degree of individual freedom. Since he is free to choose and free to deny the given features, he negates his own condition of impotence and chooses to visit and pass fruitless life there beside the hypnotized beauties. He enjoys paying more for the women asleep than the women awake, which is also the act of freedom that is solely limited to himself individually. Since 'existence precedes essence' in his case, he does not believe and stick to any prior

essence. Instead, he first lives the life of freedom and creates his own essence by himself. He is fully aware that no real existence is possible without the practice of freedom openly. So he freely chooses to visit the beauties to assert his own true self.

In visiting the beauties repeatedly without any sense of defeat, Eguchi reflects the meaninglessness of modern world, where one has to affirm one's existence forcefully by involving himself/herself in such absurd activities. Since the world itself is absurd and his condition is also absurd, he promotes the activity of absurdity as Sisyphus does. Without accomplishing the goal Sisyphus keeps on raising the stone up the mountain and similarly, Eguchi keeps on visiting the house of the sleeping beauties just for affirming his true individual self. Since the world does not give any meaning to him, he creates his own meaning by upholding this unfinished journey without surrendering and without having any sense of defeat to his condition. His expressions like 'all is well' show that he has always got hope for the continuance of his sexual life though it may not be possible in reality. Outwardly, he is threatened by his condition to remain silent and live passively, but he does not compromise for his true self and individuality.

To conclude, Eguchi maintains his real existence and freedom of choice even in the condition of being sexually helpless. He chooses freedom for the sake of freedom itself throughout his life. His frequent visits to the beauties despite his being already impotent guarantee his real existence reflecting the story of Sisyphus. By giving priority to freedom and choice all the time in his life, he asserts his true individual existence.

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