

EXPLORING EXISTENTIALISM THEMES IN SELECTED PLAYS BY EUGENE O'NEILL AND GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

This research paper explores the manifestation of existential themes in the dramatic works of Eugene O'Neill, the Nobel Prize-winning American playwright, and Girish Karnad, the acclaimed Indian dramatist. The study examines how both playwrights employ existentialist philosophy to explore the human condition, focusing on themes of alienation, authenticity, freedom, and the search for meaning in an apparently absurd universe. Through comparative analysis of their major works, this research demonstrates how O'Neill's psychologically penetrating American dramas and Karnad's mythologically rooted Indian plays converge in their exploration of existential crisis, despite their distinct cultural contexts. The methodology employs textual analysis, comparative literature approach, and existentialist theoretical framework to examine selected plays including O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night," "The Iceman Cometh," and Karnad's "Tughlaq," "Hayavadana," and "Yayati." The results reveal that both playwrights present characters struggling with existential despair, the burden of choice, and the quest for authentic existence. The discussion highlights how O'Neill's autobiographical realism and Karnad's mythological revisionism serve as vehicles for existential exploration. The research concludes that both dramatists effectively demonstrate that existential themes transcend cultural boundaries, offering universal insights into the human predicament of existence in a seemingly meaningless world.

Keywords: Existentialism¹, Eugene O'Neill², Girish Karnad³, alienation⁴, absurd⁵.

1. Introduction

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement that emerged prominently in the 20th century, fundamentally concerns itself with individual existence, freedom of choice, and the search for meaning in what appears to be a meaningless universe. This philosophical framework has profoundly influenced modern drama, providing playwrights with a lens through which to explore the deepest recesses of human consciousness and the fundamental anxieties of contemporary existence. Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), often regarded as the father of American drama and the only American playwright to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature (1936), revolutionized American theatre by introducing psychological realism and existential themes that were previously unexplored on the American stage (Britannica, 2024). His plays delve into the psychological depths of characters struggling with addiction, family dysfunction, and the weight of past failures, presenting a distinctly American perspective on existential despair. Girish Karnad (1938-2019), the Jnanpith Award-winning Indian playwright, emerged as a significant voice in post-independence Indian English drama. Karnad found a new approach of drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. His innovative use of myth and folklore as vehicles for exploring existential themes created a unique synthesis of traditional Indian

narratives with modern philosophical concerns. The significance of this comparative study lies in its examination of how two playwrights from vastly different cultural backgrounds employed existentialist themes to illuminate universal aspects of human experience. While O'Neill drew from his personal experiences and American social context, Karnad utilized Indian mythology and historical narratives to address similar existential concerns about identity, choice, and meaning.

2. Literature Review

Existentialism in drama has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to European theatre of the absurd. However, the application of existentialist themes in American and Indian drama requires deeper investigation. This study examines Eugene O'Neill as a social critic presenting new possibilities of human existence, by using the ideas of three existentialist thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and R. D. Laing (PhilPapers, 2024). Previous research has established O'Neill's connection to existentialist philosophy. The paper employs psychoanalytic and existentialist perspectives to understand the characters' inability to confront their realities and the consequences of their denial (ResearchGate, 2025). Scholars have particularly focused on his masterpiece "Long Day's Journey into Night" as a profound exploration of existential failure and family dysfunction. Regarding Karnad's work, Karnad's concern is with the life of the modern man that is very complex and lacks in wholeness. The employment of the old tales is to focus on the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and conflicts (International Journal of Current Research, 2024). His outlook towards the present is coloured by prevalent thinking impelled by Marxism, Freudianism and existentialism, symptomatic of a fundamental change in the outlook of the modern man (ResearchGate, 2020). Recent scholarship has begun to explore comparative aspects. Game of Chess which Girish Karnad first used in his play Yayati is a recurrent symbol in the play. In both the plays the game of chess stands for existential feeling of alienation and complexity of human relationships (Academia, 2017). However, comprehensive comparative analysis focusing specifically on existential themes remains limited.

3. Objectives

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the manifestation of existential themes in the selected plays of Eugene O'Neill and Girish Karnad, focusing on alienation, authenticity, freedom, and the search for meaning.
2. To compare and contrast the approaches employed by both playwrights in presenting existential crises within their respective cultural contexts.
3. To examine the universality of existential themes across different cultural and theatrical traditions.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of myth, realism, and symbolism as dramatic techniques for conveying existential philosophy.

4. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology combining textual analysis, comparative literature approach, and theoretical framework based on existentialist philosophy. The study design follows a descriptive and analytical pattern, examining primary texts through close reading and interpretive analysis. The sample consists of carefully selected major works from both playwrights: Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey into Night" (1956), "The Iceman Cometh" (1946), and "The Emperor Jones" (1920); and Girish Karnad's "Tughlaq" (1964), "Hayavadana" (1975), and "Yayati" (1961). These plays were chosen for their prominence in each playwright's oeuvre and their clear manifestation of existential themes. The analytical tools include existentialist theoretical concepts drawn from philosophers such as Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard, focusing on themes of authenticity, bad faith, alienation, and the absurd. The technique involves systematic textual analysis examining character development, symbolic elements, thematic concerns, and dramatic structure to identify existential elements.

Data collection involved comprehensive analysis of primary texts, supplemented by scholarly articles, critical essays, and biographical materials to provide contextual understanding. The analysis process began with identification of existential themes in individual plays, followed by comparative analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences between the two playwrights' approaches.

5. Results

The analysis reveals significant manifestations of existential themes in both playwrights' works, though expressed through different dramatic modes and cultural contexts. In Eugene O'Neill's plays, existential themes appear primarily through psychological realism and autobiographical elements. The paper employs psychoanalytic and existentialist perspectives to understand the characters' inability to confront their realities and the consequences of their denial (ResearchGate, 2025). "Long Day's Journey into Night" exemplifies this approach, presenting the Tyrone family's struggle with addiction, regret, and the impossibility of escaping their past. The play demonstrates what Sartre would call "bad faith" - the characters' refusal to accept responsibility for their choices and their retreat into illusions and substances. O'Neill addresses tough, real-life issues of addiction, guilt, and betrayal. When the play appeared on Broadway, nothing like it had been seen before (Kennedy Center, 2024). The existential dimension is evident in the characters' confrontation with the meaninglessness of their existence and their inability to communicate authentically with each other. "The Iceman Cometh" further explores existential themes through the concept of pipe dreams and the necessity of illusions for survival. The play suggests that while truth may be philosophically superior to illusion, human beings require certain deceptions to make existence bearable - a theme that resonates with existentialist concerns about authenticity versus survival.

Girish Karnad's approach to existential themes differs significantly, employing mythological and historical frameworks to explore contemporary existential concerns. This paper attempts to interrogate Girish Karnad's 'Hayavadana' from the perspective of existentialism relating the protagonist to main concerns of existential paradigm such as freedom, choice, responsibility, finitude and death (Academia, 2019). "Tughlaq" presents an idealistic ruler whose attempts to create a perfect society lead to chaos and disillusionment. In Tughlaq almost all characters can be seen in the light of existentialism, but the most important is Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. His individual identity, his so called absurd decisions, his frustration, his individual way of thinking about life, are all good examples of the themes of existentialism (Yumpu, 2011). "Hayavadana" explores the quest for completeness and identity through the mythological story of a man with a horse's head. The play examines the absurdity of human desire for perfection and the tragic consequences of attempting to transcend natural limitations. Individual's variety of responses to fear and anxieties forge a paradoxical identity which tries to avert the inevitability through human efforts and subverts the symbolic identity, to seek meaning in interpersonal relationship and life (Global Journal of Human-Social Science, 2019). "Yayati" presents the mythological king who exchanges his old age for his son's youth, exploring themes of responsibility, sacrifice, and the consequences of denying natural order. On the suggestion of Kurtkoti, Karnad, in Yayati, tried to reinterpret the myth psychoanalytically like Eugene O'Neill (CustomWritings, 2024). Both playwrights demonstrate similar concerns with the alienation of modern individuals, though O'Neill focuses on psychological alienation within family structures, while Karnad explores social and cultural alienation within broader societal contexts.

6. Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals remarkable convergences between O'Neill and Karnad's treatment of existential themes, despite their different cultural contexts and dramatic techniques. Both playwrights demonstrate that existential anxiety is a universal human condition that transcends cultural boundaries.

6.1 Convergence of Existential Approaches: Psychological Realism vs. Mythological Symbolism

O'Neill's contribution to existential drama lies in his psychological realism and unflinching examination of family dysfunction. Eugene O'Neill said that his goal was "to get an audience to leave the theatre with an exultant feeling from seeing somebody on stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering but perhaps inevitably being conquered" (Kennedy Center, 2024). This philosophy aligns closely with existentialist emphasis on the dignity of struggle in the face of apparent meaninglessness. The treatment of authenticity differs significantly between the two playwrights. O'Neill's characters struggle with authentic self-expression within the constraints of family relationships and social expectations. Their inability to communicate honestly leads to tragic consequences, as seen in the Tyrone family's destructive cycle of blame and self-deception. The existential crisis manifests through addiction, regret, and the weight of unfulfilled dreams. Karnad's innovation lies in his synthesis of traditional Indian narratives with modern existential concerns. Karnad's ever and anon fertile mind ventured hard to strike a novelty to test Indian contexts and lives at the backdrop of western existentialism to examine certain issues and the universality of such themes (Drishti, 2024). His use of myth serves multiple purposes: it provides cultural authenticity, offers symbolic depth, and creates distance that allows for objective examination of existential themes. Both playwrights explore the theme of choice and responsibility, though from different perspectives. O'Neill's characters often choose addiction, denial, and illusion as escape mechanisms from unbearable realities. Karnad's characters face choices between personal desires and social obligations, often leading to tragic consequences when they attempt to transcend natural or social limitations.

6.2 Universal Themes and Cultural Specificities in Existential Expression

The concept of alienation appears prominently in both playwrights' works. The Existentialists' influence on Karnad's thinking dominates his characters. Karnad portrays a dysfunctional family of unfulfilled quenchers, desires, passions, and their grievances (ResearchGate, 2023). O'Neill's characters experience alienation within their families and from their authentic selves, while Karnad's characters experience alienation from their cultural identity and social roles. The use of symbolism as a dramatic technique proves effective for both playwrights in conveying existential themes. O'Neill employs fog, addiction, and physical spaces as symbols of psychological states. The fog in "Long Day's Journey into Night" becomes a metaphor for the characters' retreat from reality, while the saloon in "The Iceman Cometh" represents the human need for illusion. Karnad uses mythological transformations, historical parallels, and ritualistic elements to symbolize existential conditions. The horse-human transformation in "Hayavadana" symbolizes the impossibility of achieving perfect completeness. The influence of Western existentialist philosophy is evident in both playwrights, though manifested differently. The contemporary Indian English Drama is innovative and experimental in terms of technical and thematic qualities. It does not spring out of any specific tradition, rather reinvestigates folk lore, religion, myth, legend and history (Academia, 2017). While O'Neill's existentialism emerges from personal trauma and American social criticism, Karnad's existential themes arise from the tension between traditional values and modern consciousness. Both playwrights demonstrate that existential themes possess universal validity while requiring culturally specific modes of expression. O'Neill's psychological penetration into American family dysfunction reveals universal patterns of human suffering, while Karnad's mythological framework addresses the same fundamental questions about meaning, identity, and choice through culturally resonant narratives.

7. Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that existential themes in drama transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, finding expression in both American psychological realism and Indian mythological drama. Eugene O'Neill and Girish Karnad, despite their different cultural backgrounds and dramatic techniques, successfully explore universal aspects of human existence - the struggle for authenticity, the burden of choice, the experience of alienation, and the search for meaning in an apparently absurd universe. O'Neill's contribution lies in his psychological penetration and autobiographical honesty, presenting existential themes through the lens of

American family dysfunction and social criticism. His plays demonstrate that existential despair is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived reality affecting ordinary individuals struggling with addiction, regret, and failed communication. Karnad's innovation involves his synthesis of traditional Indian narratives with modern existential concerns, creating a unique dramatic form that addresses universal themes while maintaining cultural specificity. His use of myth and history provides both distance and depth, allowing for objective examination of existential conditions while honoring cultural traditions.

The universality of existential themes in both playwrights' works suggests that the human condition, regardless of cultural context, involves fundamental questions about meaning, choice, authenticity, and alienation. Both dramatists offer no easy solutions but rather present the dignity of human struggle in the face of existential challenges. This research contributes to the understanding of comparative drama and the global manifestation of existential themes in literature. It suggests that while existentialism emerged as a Western philosophical movement, its concerns are fundamentally human and find expression across diverse cultural traditions. The study also demonstrates the effectiveness of both psychological realism and mythological symbolism as dramatic techniques for exploring existential themes. Future research might explore existential themes in other non-Western dramatists, examine the influence of indigenous philosophical traditions on existential drama, or investigate the contemporary relevance of existential themes in digital age theatre. The comparative approach employed in this study could be extended to include playwrights from other cultural contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of existential drama as a global phenomenon.

8. References

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