
Existentialism in Niranjana Nayak's The Other Side of the Rainbow

Dr. Upama Behera

Asst. Professor of English, S.C.S (Autonomous) College Puri,

Email ID: beheraupama.5@gmail.com

Article Received: 03/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 05/06/2025**Published Online:** 07/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.110

Abstract: The paper sheds light on the existential dilemmas faced by two students during their time on campus. Niranjana Nayak in his debut novel, *The Other Side of the Rainbow* delves deep into the inner psyche of his characters to explore love and loss, happiness and trauma, and life and death in their ambitious and arduous journeys. Nayak's two first-person narrative perspectives arrest the attention of readers to the existential crisis of the two friends. The novelist, who happens to be one of the protagonists, has depicted his life experience truthfully. Thus, the story hints at the autobiographical narrative technique. The writer reveals his instinctive capability to articulate the emotions, struggles, and feelings of his characters. Set in the late 1980s, the story revolves around Arun and Rajiv, the two boarders of the prestigious East Hostel, Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, who grapple with personal choices, social expectations, and academic pressures in their hostel lives. Based on these precepts, the paper aims to analyze how the two characters frequently find themselves at crossroads, facing dilemmas that compel them to reevaluate their beliefs and make decisions that shape their destinies. Agonized life and discovers his boundless ability to bring about positive change in his life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Expectations, Trauma, Dilemma, Destiny

Introduction: Niranjana Nayak, an English teacher by profession, is an illustrious academician and poet of Odisha. Nayak has composed more than two hundred poems for various magazines of repute. In *The Other Side of the Rainbow*, the novelist emphasizes a lot on the realities of life, suffering, anxiety, alienation, freedom, frustration, despair, death, futility, guilt, responsibility, etc. He shows a deep interest in the basic issues that affect the existence of his characters. He states that individuals should make choices, make decisions, and participate actively in life situations. As a staunch believer of existentialism, the novelist, through the character of Rajiv, advocates for freedom by rebelling against his overprotective father. Freedom is the most essential principle of Existentialism. It is believed that the principle of freedom gave existentialism its founding value.

Although existentialism has its origins in the past, it was popularized by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Jaspers,

Gabriel Marcel, and Paul Tillich. It is Soren Kierkegaard who coined and used the term existentialism for the first time. The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre clarified that existentialism is optimistic as it is a theory of action. In his book *Existentialism and Humanism* (1956), he explained it as:

Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusion from a consistently atheistic position. Its intention is not in the least that of plunging men into despair. And if by despair one means as the Christians do- any attitude of unbelief the despair of the existentialists is something different. Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstration of the nonexistence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed, that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of his existence, what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception by confusing their despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope (Sartre, 1956, P. 56).

Existentialists state that human exists first and then they look at society, think about it, and then individually perform. His thinking and his doings are only possible due to his existence. The book *Marxism and Existentialism* (1965) by V. Walter Odajnyk explained that:

Existence is the primary source from which everything flows. It is only later, by living, thinking, and acting that man defines perspectives that emphasize individuality, human responsibility, and freedom. As his nature forms what is called his essence ñ that he is and will be (Odajnyk, 1965, P. 9).

As originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values". According to, John Paul Sartre 'Existence precedes essence'. So it's totally up to us how will we use our existences to shape our natures and values, and to create our own 'essence'. That means, on the existentialist view, we bear total responsibility for who we are, and what decisions we make. We are solely responsible for our actions. According to, Sartre, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does". Freedom is usually presented positively but Sartre modelled that our level of freedom is so great it's 'painfull'. To fully comprehend our freedom, we have to accept that only we are responsible for creating or failing to create our purpose. Without rules or order to guide us, we have so many choice that freedom is overwhelmed. This personal responsibility to shape our own life's meaning carries significant anxiety-inducing weight. Many of us experience the so-called existential crisis where we find ourselves questioning our choices, careers, relationships, and the point of it all. We have so many options. How do we pick the right ones to create a meaningful and fulfilling life? In this regard, we can agree with Kierkegaard's thought, "that our existential freedom leads to anxiety about the limitless possibilities available to us".

Existentialism in The Other Side of the Rainbow: Nayak knows that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of despair and hopefulness, still, he derives hope from this very uncertainty of life. His optimism was founded on the imperfections of man and is based on his theory of evolution that life is constantly progressing to higher and higher levels. So, he depicts how he goes through the roller coaster ride of pleasure, compassion, confusion, tension, and hope before evolving into society as an accomplished and intelligent individual with a professional life par excellence. Set in the late eighties, the story revolves around Arun and Rajiv, the two boarders of prestigious East Hostel, Ravenshaw College, Cuttack who grapple with personal choices, social expectations, and academic pressures in their hostel lives. The research shows that the narrator happens to be one of the protagonists of this campus fiction. The fiction, *The Other Side of The Rainbow* begins with a poem capturing themes of invisibility, inner turmoil, and hidden emotions. Rajiv, the narrator, while exploring the items from a hidden trunk, finds some old photographs and a specific black-and-white photo of a friend. These items evoke a longing for the past, reminding him of the enduring presence of memories and how the past often returns, either as a comforting dream or a haunting recollection. Here, the author employs a dual-narrator format in this novel, allowing the story to explore contrasting yet complementary perspectives on identity, growth, and relationships. Through the voices of two characters on similar but distinct paths of personal development, the narrative highlights different facets of the coming-of-age experience. This dual narration enables different interpretations and reactions to shared events in the lives of Rajiv and Arun, adding depth to the character development and enriching the reader's understanding of each character's growth and the factors that shape them. Each character evolves by learning from or contrasting with the other, making the friendship itself a catalyst for change. By having Part I of the book narrated by Arun, the author underscores the significant impact Arun has had on Rajiv's life. Arun, as a narrator, offers a contrasting lens through which to explore the themes of existentialism: suffering, anxiety, hope, despair, alienation, and survival. Growing up in poverty and neglect, Arun's life is shaped by emotional scars that are both a product of and a reaction to the brutality of his circumstances. His family, particularly his father, embodies resilience, but Arun's shame about his father's occupation reflects his initial sense of disconnect from his roots. Over time, however, Arun comes to understand his father's sacrifices as integral to his survival and identity. Arun's sense of alienation, exacerbated by his experience as a subaltern, fosters deep internal chaos. His marginalized existence shapes his view of the world and his emotional isolation. A sense of self-denial makes him the worst sufferer. As a different human being, he can't understand his relationship with Ruby. It was not acceptable for a proud intellectual being like Arun to be in love with somebody. A part of himself rejects Ruby while the other accepts Ruby for his purposeful existence in this world. So, he can't tolerate Ruby's betrayal. He battles the war within himself. The invisible war leaves him wounded. According to Rajiv, Arun was fighting to uphold his dignity, the essence of his existence.

The divide between Arun and Rajiv is rooted in this disparity of experience—while Rajiv, born into privilege, is detached from the harsh realities of survival, Arun's life has been shaped by the struggle for basic dignity. Arun's ambivalence toward Rajiv highlights this

emotional gulf. Arun believes Rajiv cannot comprehend the pain of growing up neglected, the trauma of crushed dreams, or the rootlessness that arises from being pushed to the margins of society. Rajiv remembers how often Arun had quoted Mark Twain:

Every man is a moon and has and has a dark side of him that he never wants to show to anyone (Nayak, 220).

While Arun's journey is one of survival and self-reflection, it is also marked by an eventual recognition that his identity is inseparable from the struggles of his past. The metaphor Rajiv uses to describe their relationship:

We were like two boys running along the side of a railway track, throwing stones and making faces at each other. Then, suddenly, one of us tried to cross the track to meet the other but failed to hear the whistle of the speeding train (Nayak, 220).

This captures the sudden, irreparable separation between lives shaped by different realities. Arun's view of Rajiv as someone incapable of understanding his suffering reflects the emotional distance that defines their bond. Rajiv's love for his friend shows his obsessive personality disorder. Arun, just before his death distances himself from Rajiv due to his attitude toward life. After the suicide of Arun, Rajiv blames himself for not being able to save his friend's life, but he couldn't due to his selfishness and vulnerability. He realizes the importance of the existence of all human beings. So, he reflects:

It was not all about. 'I, me, and myself.' It was about our togetherness, the need to share all our happiness, woes, and afflictions and sail through the rough patches of life. Being together confirms and consolidates our faith in our friendship and helps us sort out our existential crises (Nayak, 214).

Rajiv's journey is not just one of personal growth but also a search for meaning in his relationships. His reflections on his failure to fully connect with others—especially Arun and Saswati—serve as a poignant examination of the emotional barriers that inhibit genuine intimacy. While his journey towards understanding Arun's struggles and reconciling with his guilt is significant, the core of the story lies in Rajiv's path to enlightenment. His eventual sense of closure is not simply the result of the passage of time, but a hard-won peace forged through confronting his guilt and the missed opportunities that have shaped his life.

The failure of both Rajiv's and Arun's relationships—whether romantic or platonic—stems not from external influences, but from internal barriers that prevent emotional connection. Arun's relationship with Ruby, despite its significance, reveals his difficulty in opening up, while Rajiv's connection with Saswati reflects his inability to fully appreciate emotional depth. Both men's emotional isolation and reluctance to confront their internal conflicts hinder their ability to form meaningful connections. This failure in relationships is not just a personal failing but also a reflection of the wider emotional landscapes they each navigate, marked by unresolved guilt, past trauma, and an inability to break free from their limitations.

The epilogue, "The Road to Redemption," reflects on the narrator's attempt to find closure after thirty years, unravelling a deeply personal story buried in memory. The narrator grapples with sorrow, lost dreams, and the passage of time, recalling painful moments like the death of a close friend. Rajiv acknowledges how memories and past experiences can shape our present lives:

I recall the last moment of misunderstanding with the girl who had never forsaken me, no matter how rude I was to her. I remember the guys who had once made this life worth living when I was about to crumble down under the pressure of repressive parental pressure. I miss all those beautiful days. But one can't cling to the past for an indefinite period. It is the pastness of the past, that intervenes with our present, making it difficult to accept the eternal flux of time as the only reality. However, life moves on...(Nayak, 232).

However, regardless of how deeply we are connected to or affected by the past, life continues to move forward. This is the "eternal flux of time"—the idea that everything is in constant change, and nothing remains static. To live fully in the present, one must learn to reconcile with the past and release its hold on our current life, accepting that time's passage is an unchangeable reality. While memories and past experiences may inform who we are, they don't have to define or confine us. Accepting the continuous flow of life allows us to find peace and meaning in the present, even in the face of change.

A visit to Arun's village reveals changes over the years, with Arun's family now financially stable. Rajiv, with his son and wife, contemplates the significance of this journey, hinting at future revelations. A chance encounter with Saswati evokes nostalgia and regret over past mistakes. Themes of lost connections and missed opportunities are central to the reflection. Perhaps, in the end, the muse represents a part of Rajiv himself. It is this newfound detachment from his suffering that allows the muse to become a source of inspiration, fueling his creative expression rather than holding him back.

Conclusion: Nayak through his characters of Rajiv and Arun portrays the features of Existentialism. Existentialists believe that we are what we make of ourselves, and that we are not predestined by God or society. As a result, existentialism insists on willed actions as the ultimate determining factors in life. Rajiv as a character of free will understands the purpose of his life and attends spiritual awakening, whereas Arun succumbs to his inner turmoil and finally surrenders his life. The study is a significant one as it predominantly deals with the student life of the narrator at the prestigious Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. The novel becomes a testament to the power of introspection and spiritual awakening, as Rajiv moves beyond his past to find peace in the present. While Rajiv ultimately finds peace and reconciles with his past, Arun's journey takes a tragic turn. His loss highlights the fragile nature of human connection and the vulnerability of the inner journey, even within the framework of a friendship that, at its core, has the potential for redemption. The paper highlights how relationships can both inspire and act as a mirror to one's deepest insecurities. As the readers embark upon a journey of seeking to unravel the life of some unknown people, gradually they

realize the novel is highly relatable to their own shared and lived experiences, identifying themselves with one or the other character cutting across generations. Therefore, for a real existentialist, positive change is essential to live a happy life; otherwise, life loses all meaning, purpose and satisfaction. With this perspective, existentialism is not at all about pessimism but rather about making positive, significant changes in one's life. Thus, the study by shedding light on the existential crisis of the characters in the fiction, *The Other Side of the Rainbow*, contributes to the proper growth and development of students and readers in understanding and discovering the true meaning of life.

Works cited:

Mishra, Deepa. Reviewed. "*The Other Side of The Rainbow*. 2024.

https://www.facebook.com/groups/244997962974702/posts/1832115730929_576/

Mohapatra, Himanshu. Reviewed. *The Other Side of The Rainbow*. 2024.

Nayak, Niranjana. *The Other Side of The Rainbow*. Notion Press, 2024.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. 1946.

<https://www.generation-online.org/c/cexistentialism.htm> (p56).

Shinde, Suhas, Samadhan Subhash Mane. *Existentialism and Post-Independence Indian English Novels*, Shodh Disha, vol.62. pp.172-176, 2023.

Walter, Odajnyk, *Marxism and Existentialism*. New York: Anchor Book, Doubleday and Co., 1965.

<https://www.saveaquote.com/Quotes/Atheism>, p.2. Dec., 2014.

https://ethics.org.au/about/Ethics_Explainer:_Existentialism. The Ethics Centre, 11 Dec., 2018.