

Abstract/Executive Summary

Abstract of the thesis entitled, “The Concept of Suffering in the Existentialist Thought of Søren Kierkegaard”

- **The Study and its Context**

The present study attempts to analyze the concept of suffering and its meaning patterns from the point of view of the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. It is inspired by both the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and the inexorability of suffering world-wide and the inescapability of it in every culture. According to Kierkegaard, suffering is the highest subjective truth, which he discusses in the context of religiosity.

Kierkegaard always discusses the concept of suffering from the various stages of life or life orientations. There are three basic stages, namely, aesthetic, ethical and religious. Among these three stages, he considers the religious mode of existence as the highest and existentially creative. This stage is the stage of highest subjectivity in which a subjective individual can understand the highest subjective truth that is suffering. This subjectivity is understood and explained as authenticity. The authenticity of the subject is existential which is concerned with the inward feeling of the individual. For Kierkegaard, only an authentic being can enjoy freedom. Human beings are absolutely free in making decisions, choices and doing actions. According to Kierkegaard, since man is absolutely free to choose, she/he is responsible for what she/he chooses and as a result of her/his choice, she/he is also responsible for own suffering.

The present study makes a more situated attempt to address the concept of suffering in the existentialist thought of Kierkegaard from a contemporary angle which can offer yet another intimate reading of the Kierkegaardian concerns.

- **The Scope of the Study**

In the contemporary world the understanding of suffering demands more of interpersonal and cross-cultural terminology as the self is dissipated into irrecoverable ingredients of power and subjugation. As we know, suffering involves dissolutions, alienation, loss of personal identity or a sense of meaninglessness. It results from the stripping away of beliefs and symbols by which we construct a meaningful narrative of human life in general and our own lives in particular. Suffering is often compounded by a sense of threatened or lost of dignity and/ or life meaning. Now, if we look at the present scenario of the world, then we will see that people are suffering tremendously mainly because of the present global crisis, such as ecological crisis, ethico- moral crisis, and political crisis and so on.

In this context, the meaningful living is possible only by critical thinking or by critical self- reflection. It becomes possible only when we think ethically and that too interpersonally and cross-culturally. In other words, our responsibility to ourselves becomes interpersonal and cross-cultural and we have to recover ourselves interpersonally and cross-culturally. But, the question is to what extent ethical actions can help to end the crisis tendencies which induce suffering.

The existentialist vocabulary in this context would tell us that every individual being is intrinsically related to herself /himself, other people and the world as a being- in - the- world. Human being is related to every field- culture, religion, politics and others. They exist in 'a cultural way' since culture is to be experienced as an integrated pattern of shared experience, knowledge, beliefs and behaviour which make them relational being. Similarly, they also exist in a religious way or in political way where they can share their

experiences and beliefs. As it has been pointed out by many thinkers of our time, in the contemporary world, the problems or crises arise in a multi-dimensional manner with ecological, cultural, religious and political impact.

- **The Objectives of the Study**

1. To highlight how Kierkegaard establishes the relations between religion, morality and suffering which makes him understand the meaning of ‘eternal happiness’ that an individual can attain by understanding the meaning of suffering.
2. To explicate along with Kierkegaard that the concept of suffering as the highest subjective truth, which can be understood only in religious life (‘religious’ in the Kierkegaardian sense) in conjunction with the meaning of freedom and authenticity and finally,
3. To make a contemporary understanding and theorization of Kierkegaard’s concept of suffering.

- **Methodology**

The present study is mainly a thinker based one. However, it is conceptually mediated. Therefore, it is descriptive to a large extent. Since the data/sources/literature of the study are texts, both primary and secondary sources, by and on Søren Kierkegaard, the study relies mainly on the works of Søren Kierkegaard and on Kierkegaard translated into English.

- **Chapter-wise Data- The Course of the Argument**

The first Chapter titled, **The Concept and Meaning of Suffering**, explores into the meaning of human suffering. Human suffering is one of the most important features of

the worldly life that can be regarded as universal, inseparable and subjective experience of human being. Suffering is one of the most important features of human life that everyone at one point or another in his or her life will have to face and struggle with it. The inevitable experiences of suffering and evil encouraged people to find out the reasonable explanation and philosophers, theologians and thinkers have tried to solve and understand the problem of human suffering. They have tried to find out the answer of the questions, such as, ‘why do people need to suffer?’ Or, ‘what is the ultimate cause of human suffering?’.

All religions have tried to find out a path that has lead to a complete end of suffering. Here, the question is how we can find such a path. Or, how can we find a path which has the capacity to lead us to complete elimination of suffering. Every religion shows a path for overcoming suffering. There are different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam etc that have forwarded different views in their treatment of suffering and also forwarded such path for overcoming suffering.

The concept of suffering also has a significant philosophical meaning as well. From the ancient time to modern age, philosophers tried to explain the concept of suffering and also tried to find out the problem of suffering. The theories such as hedonism, utilitarianism and deontologist try to explain the meaning of suffering in their own characteristic ways.

Anyhow, the present chapter elaborates the quite evident reality that suffering is the most profound and disturbing experience of humans’ life. The very word ‘suffering’ has a significance that is related to our sense of life’s meaning. Suffering is a distinct kind of experience which exists in every aspect of our life.

The second Chapter, **The Concept of Meaning of Suffering in the Existentialist Thought**, seeks out the concept of the meaning of suffering in the core concerns of existentialist thought. Suffering is one of the most important features of human life. It is to be noteworthy that suffering is a mode of our existence. To avoid suffering is to avoid own existence. To come to the real grips with suffering, we must examine it existentially and only then we can come to know the mystery of its existence. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that tries to find out individual's independent existence. According to it, first a person exists in the universe, and after that he tries to define himself in order to understand the nature of life. Actually, the whole philosophy of existentialism is concerned with being rather than existing. This movement of philosophy declared that the individual has fully responsible for creating the meaning of his life and, this can cause suffering and angst which eventually lead an individual being to discover the true nature of his essence.

The chapter ends with highlighting Søren Kierkegaard as a theistic existentialist philosopher who situates suffering in the context of his idea of God and subjectivity.

The third Chapter, **The Concept of Meaning of Suffering in 'Either/ Or'**, takes its concern of the concept of meaning of suffering in 'Either/ Or', one of the major works of Søren Kierkegaard. 'Either/ Or' is a very important work of Kierkegaard where he has given an detail analysis of the ability of understanding suffering in different stages of life. Human being has to suffer as a result of their action. Result of action is related with the decision of choice of the individual. It is only the individual who is responsible for what she/he chooses. In the very act of choosing, the individual has to pass through 'either/or' option. She/he has to decide either to do or not to do. This very act of choosing is difficult

for individual, especially for real choice. According to Kierkegaard, we are suffering because of our inability to choose the real. In his book 'Either/ or', he has put forward an analysis of the very act of choice and how it is different in every stage of life of an individual. The three stages of life, the aesthetic, the ethical and religious shows us different life approach and this differentiation arises primarily because the incapability of choosing the real one. According to Kierkegaard, in the first two stages, aesthetic and ethical, the individual failed to make a definite choice which is different from the religious stage. For him, religious stage is the highest stage where individual can make real choice and can understand the highest subjective truth. The book 'Either/ Or' discussed these three stages of life and difficulty of understanding the highest subjective truth in aesthetic and ethical stages. Actually Kierkegaard's intention is to encourage readers to look at themselves honestly and to see in the text 'Either/ Or' as a reflection of their own lives, as the expression of a set of values in comparison with other values that might offer a more satisfying and fulfilling existence.

The fourth Chapter, **Suffering and Freedom**, discusses the nexus between suffering and freedom, particularly in the existentialist thought of Kierkegaard. According to Kierkegaard, the realization of the highest subjective truth is possible in authentic existence. Only an authentic individual can realize the highest subjective truth that is suffering. But, the question is, 'how to realize authentic existence?' Or, 'what do you mean by authentic existence?'. Actually authentic existence is to be realized in terms of decisions, choices and actions. Authentic means to choose oneself to be free. In other words, it means freedom to choose oneself to be free. Now the question is, 'what does it mean to choose oneself?'. There are two sense of meaning related to choosing oneself.

First, choosing oneself means unconditional choice of oneself as absolute. Second, it means taking responsibility for what one chooses.

According to Kierkegaard, only an authentic individual can understand what suffering is. Only an authentic being can make the real choice. An individual can become authentic only in religious stage of life because it is the highest stage where the individual is able to understand the highest subjective truth. The fourth chapter highlights how according to Kierkegaard authenticity, freedom and suffering are interlinked in the self realization or subjectivity which understands suffering as the highest subjective truth which can be realized only by an authentic individual.

- **Conclusion**

As the concluding observation the study proposes a ‘three level’ hermeneutic interpretation as schemas of understanding to situate the question and the concept of suffering in the existentialist thought of Søren Kierkegaard from a contemporary point of view. It is a proposal to read beyond the text and context of Kierkegaard’s engagement with suffering by adding the suggestiveness of the contemporary context as well. The three hermeneutic schemas can be seen as three dimensions of situating the concept of suffering. They are: 1. the interpersonal 2. the other -oriented, and 3. the intercultural.

The interpersonal dimension of the meaning and concept of suffering has the Kierkegaardian universe of ideas and terms of reference. It is, the study proposes, situating oneself/individual/person within and on the rock bottom of authenticity to view suffering inter-personally. In other words, suffering as authentic subjectivity and freedom or authentic subjectivity as the source of transcending suffering into freedom is conceived to be moving from the self to the other or broadly to the interpersonal dimension. For

Kierkegaard, our own suffering interpersonally awakens us to what the other is going through and it creates in us a compassion through which relieving actions can be motivated. In this continuity of suffering, yet a meaning might be found for our own suffering. Perhaps, suffering that we have in our lives can be regarded as meaningful as it teaches us to care for others. Søren Kierkegaard tries to explicate the concept of suffering that can be understood only through self-realization that is possible only through self-reflective thinking.

In the other-oriented dimension, the study offers to engender a quasi-transcendental perspective to locate the concept of suffering in the self and the other relationship by virtue of contrasting the interpretative possibility of extending Kierkegaard's concept of suffering and authenticity to Albert Camus and Emmanuel Levinas in order to suggest that the primary interpersonal dimension of suffering in the thought of Kierkegaard entails an Other-oriented or the idea of suffering of the Self which begins from the Other.

By invoking the third dimension of 'the intercultural', the study etches out that the concept of suffering according to Kierkegaard engenders and coincides with the contemporaneousness of the concept of suffering with the first two dimensions in situating the concept of suffering in the recovery of self through 'the suffering towards the other' through culturally locating the self and the other through intercultural dialogue and discourse.