

# **Introduction**

## **0.1. The Study and its Context**

The present study embarks on 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. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is known as the father of existentialism. The whole existentialist thinking has its roots in the philosophy and the mystic-religious teachings of Kierkegaard. According to Kierkegaard, suffering is the highest subjective truth. He has discussed the concept of suffering in the context of religiosity.

To understand Kierkegaard's treatment of suffering, we must understand that Kierkegaard always discusses it from the point of view of 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. Since, man is absolutely free to choose and therefore 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. Moreover, as suffering has a moral meaning in the context of sharing the suffering of the other and also in the context of serving the other, the study intends to recast Kierkegaard's philosophy in the contemporary perspective of the ethics of interpersonal relationship.

## **0.2. Søren Kierkegaard- A Brief Biography**

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen on May 5, 1813 and passed away on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1855<sup>1</sup>. The Three most intimate relations that Kierkegaard was having in his life, perhaps, decided and influenced his life and thought in a major way were: His Father, Mother and his lover. Both of his parents were of Jutlandish descent. His father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, was raised a shepherd boy. Kierkegaard's mother, Anne, was Michael Kierkegaard's second wife and gave birth to all of his seven children. Her entrance into the household had been as a servant girl. While Kierkegaard wrote much in his journals about his father, he rarely wrote of his mother. She died in 1834 when Kierkegaard was twenty-one.

In 1840, Kierkegaard became engaged to Regine Olsen (1822-1904), who was then eighteen years old. He had met her years earlier, but she was too young to pursue. She was from a well-to-do family in Copenhagen. It did not take long, however, for him to feel that he had made a grave error. He broke off the engagement the following year after returning her engagement ring. There were at least two reasons for this break. First, he felt that he was unsuitable for Regine due to his severe bouts with melancholia and he was probably right. Secondly, he believed that he would not live much longer, since his

health had always been poor—he had been rejected by the military as unfit—and he felt that a curse lay on his family due to his father having cursed God. This was reinforced by the deaths of his mother and siblings (except for his eldest brother) in rapid succession. Since a broken engagement might tarnish the reputation of a young woman, Kierkegaard tried to make Regine believe that he was a scoundrel, so that all blame would rest upon him alone. This plan failed due to her ability to see through his charade. After the dissolution of their relationship, Kierkegaard began his writing career<sup>2</sup>.

As Michael Watts says, he was an outstanding iconoclast and rebel of his times, who inaugurated a new path of thinking and genre of thinking which was called existentialism later. As it has been observed,

...his authorship evolved in conscious opposition to the cherished beliefs and conventions of the academic and religious institutions of his day. In his relatively short life of forty-two years, this deeply sensitive Danish religious philosopher wrote more than twenty-five books, all in the Danish language, and most of them under a variety of different pen-names<sup>3</sup>.

Though he was virtually unknown during his life time outside of his homeland in 1930-40 as a result of the response to the existentialist thinking, Kierkegaard and his work began to achieve philosophical recognition and his books are translated into both French and English. Presently, Kierkegaard's works enjoy international readership and global recognition.

Kierkegaard's philosophy, as many as pointed out differs fundamentally from the 'system making' efforts of great philosophers, such as, Aristotle, Leibnitz, Kant and Hegel. From another angle, he has been described, "as 'the greatest Protestant Christian

of the nineteenth century' and 'the profoundest interpreter of the psychology of the religious life...since St. Augustine' ”<sup>4</sup>.

As Sylvia Walsh observes, some of the postmodern thinkers understands Kierkegaard as a bland of,

An ironist, a knight of faith, a poet, a seducer (or, at any rate a contemplated one), a martyr and auto-castrated sacrificial victim, a virile and macho male who renounces sex, a phantasmatic dreamer seeking rebirth as a child and son of his father through writing, a comic genius deliberately exposing himself to ridicule, a spendthrift, a political reactionary, a protector of the family secret (speculated on here as the rape of his mother by his father, perhaps also expressing in an Oedipal fashion the unspeakable desire of the son), and finally a woman hater and even a mother hater...<sup>5</sup>.

As Michael Watts says, the goal of Kierkegaard's authorship can be divided into two main categories,

collection of what he termed 'aesthetic', writings which he wrote under a variety of pseudonyms, and a series of 'religious' works that for the most part were published under his own name. His aim in the first was to prevent various life- views on existence by providing the reader with a wide range of alternative ways of existing, in a manner that would enable the reader to see the false and empty values by which most people lead their lives. In his religious writings he wished to help his readers become aware of the true nature of Christianity<sup>6</sup>.

### 0.3. 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. It would be worth remembering the *Sāmkhya* concept of three-fold misery which falls on us, namely, *Ādhidaivika*, *Ādhibhautika* and *Ādhyatmika*, the nature of suffering that are caused by God/ the Divine power, self-inflicted or by nature or physical reasons respectively. It would be also interesting to mention a study broadly on Indian Philosophical systems of thought, which attempts to argue that the concept of *dukkha* as suffering is more with a universal evaluative import than equating it with a factual pain thesis<sup>7</sup>.

Suffering arises from ecological crisis is the result of centuries of abuse of our earth and environment. The main cause is the numerous overlapping developments that results from violent actions, whether in the shape of colonialism, industrial development, wars, economic growth and so on. It is woven in our daily existence.

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.

#### **0.4. 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.

### **0.5. 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.

### **0.6. 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. Every individual has to face this experience and also has to struggle for it. Because, suffering is the inalienable truth of our life from which no one can run away.

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. It has been observed that "suffering as a feature of the worldly life is a universal, inseparable and subjective experience in human being"<sup>8</sup>. 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.

Existentialism is basically a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical movement whose roots can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly to the philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The second chapter of the present study recognizes the main nine existentialist thinkers, namely, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus and Emmanuel Levinas. Generally, these thinkers have diverse outlooks, although they discuss certain general ideas which are coming from the philosophical approach known as existentialism.

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. In 'Either/Or', he shows "the medium of various pseudonyms, the life- views are allowed to 'speak for themselves', leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusions."<sup>9</sup>

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. To understand suffering- the highest subjective truth, the individual has to make commitment in front of God. Freedom of choice implies the possibility of future. The possibility of future brings the individual into a state of despair. In this state of despair, the individual becomes totally powerless or helpless to struggle with himself what he suffers. Here he needs some help from outside. According to Kierkegaard, at that time, only God can help him to overcome from this situation of despair. At the moment of helplessness or powerlessness, only faith can provide the strength of the individual.

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.

### **0.7. Towards the Conclusion of the Study**

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.

## Notes and Reference

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<sup>1</sup> D Anthony Storm. <[www.http//SørenKierkegaard.org/Kierkegaard-biography.html](http://SørenKierkegaard.org/Kierkegaard-biography.html)>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. I have quoted verbatim the primary biographical information of Kierkegaard from the above article of D Anthony Storm.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Watts. *Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Walsh. 'Kierkegaard and Postmodernism'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 29, No. 2, April, 1991. 115-116.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Watts. *Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007. 4.

<sup>7</sup> B.K. Matilal. *Logical and Ethical Issues: An Essay on Indian Philosophy of Religion*. New Delhi: DC Publishers, 2004. 13-33.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*. San Francisco: Harper, 1996. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Watts. *Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007. 191.