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Research Article

From Neorealism to Urban Absurdity: Existential Inquiry in K. Balachander's Aakali Rajyam

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Abstract
Existentialism remains one of the most diverse schools of philosophy that has seen its pervasive applications across domains such as art, drama, psychology and cinema. The presence and transformation of existential thought in Indian cinema specifically K. Balachander's Telugu film, Aakali Rajyam is explored in this article. Building upon the philosophical lineage established by Satyajit Ray and early post-independence filmmakers, an attempt is made to demonstrate how Balachander shifts existential inquiry from national allegory and social epic to the intimate terrains of domestic life, urban precarity, and individual aspiration. Through close analysis of narrative structure, stylistic form, and character psychology, it can be argued that Aakali Rajyam stands as the most rigorous existential movie in Balachander's oeuvre, capturing the Camusian absurdity, alienation, and internal moral friction that define the lived experience of unemployment and disillusionment. The study also highlights the decline of philosophical engagement in contemporary Indian cinema, noting how commercial pressures and accelerated narrative forms have displaced earlier traditions of introspective and complex storytelling. By revisiting Balachander's films, the enduring value of cinematic narratives that foreground existential tension and human vulnerability within socio-culturally specific contexts are discussed.

Keywords: Existentialism, Indian Cinema, Aakali Rajyam, Narrative Form, Urban Alienation, Camusian Absurdity, Satyajit Ray, Philosophical Cinema, Unemployment and Modernity, Character Psychology, Post-Independence Aesthetics.

1. Introduction

Existential thought in early Indian cinema took shape through a confluence of neorealist aesthetics, moral complexity, and the cultural disorientation that followed independence, a period in which the nation faced the simultaneous burdens of reconstruction, modernisation, and the psychological aftershocks of colonial rule. As stated by Gokulsing "Indian cinema often reflects the anxieties of a society caught between tradition and modernity" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 3). The cinema of this era began to reflect a quiet but persistent interrogation of human purpose, vulnerability, and moral solitude, shaped by the tensions between tradition and modernity that defined postcolonial life. Postcolonial anxiety was perhaps the driving force in literature and cinema during this era. As posited by Prof. Jyotika Virdi, "Postcolonial cinema is deeply invested in questions of identity, agency, and the fractured self" (Virdi, 2003, p. 9).

Neorealism introduced an observational mode that foregrounded ordinary individuals rather than heroic figures, allowing filmmakers to explore the fragility of human aspirations within settings marked by poverty, migration, and social transformation. Characters were no longer moved only by external melodramatic forces but also by internal conflicts that revealed their isolation, doubt, and desire for meaning in an uncertain world. These early films gave Indian audiences new visual and emotional vocabularies for understanding postcolonial existential experience, presenting human beings as agents who must navigate an ambiguous reality without the security of stable social structures or inherited certainties.

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) was central to this formation because his films presented characters who confronted the uncertainty of their own existence in ways that resonated with both philosophical inquiry and social reality. His narratives foreground individuals caught at moments of transition, where inherited certainties no longer suffice and personal desire becomes entangled with social pressure. In films such as Pather Panchali (1955), Aparajito (1956), and Charulata (1964), Ray explored states of longing, displacement, and introspection, revealing how humans negotiate identity within fragile emotional and cultural landscapes. His cinematic method, marked by quiet observational detail, an unhurried rhythm, and the extensive and expressive use of silence, encouraged viewers to inhabit the interior lives of his characters as they grappled with loss, aspiration, and the subtle yet diverse anxieties of everyday existence.

Ray's work established a distinctly Indian mode of existential reflection, one that drew its depth from the textures of ordinary life rather than from overt philosophical exposition, and one that demonstrated how cinema could illuminate the complex interplay between personal consciousness and the shifting realities of postcolonial society. In essence, Ray's films carried the rationale of existentialism as worded by Satre, "We are left alone, without excuse" (Sartre 34).

K. Balachander's cinema belongs to this lineage yet transforms it by shifting existential inquiry from grand historical narratives to the intimate crises of ordinary lives of ordinary people. While earlier Indian films often treated personal struggle as an extension of national allegory or social reform, Balachander directed attention toward the emotional interiority of individuals who confront meaninglessness within the routines of domesticity and the unpredictability of urban life. His characters do not articulate philosophical anxiety explicitly; instead, they experience it through strained relationships, thwarted aspirations, and internal conflicts born of social constraints. This movement from outward spectacle to inward turbulence situates his work at the crossroads of neorealism and psychological drama, allowing existentialism to emerge organically from culturally specific situations such as unemployment, inter-linguistic barriers, caste-inflected domestic pressures, and the demands of family duty.

In comparison with contemporaries like Balu Mahendra, Bharathiraja, K. Vishwanath, and later Mani Ratnam (in his early works), Balachander's engagement with existential themes is distinctive in both tone and method. While, Balu Mahendra foregrounded loneliness through atmospheric visuals and melancholic silence, creating an aesthetic of introspection that often centred on female vulnerability, Bharathiraja's films examined rural identities and the anxiety produced by the transition to modernity, though his characters typically retained a rootedness in community that mitigated existential isolation. On the other hand, K. Vishwanath explored spiritual fulfilment, artistic purpose, and moral refinement, but his narratives tended toward harmony and resolution rather than the open-ended uncertainty characteristic of existential thought. Mani Ratnam's early work introduced a modern psychological sensibility, though his protagonists often grappled with political or social ideologies rather than the quieter metaphysical dilemmas Balachander foregrounds. Against this backdrop, Balachander stands

out for his willingness to maintain unresolved tension and to portray characters who must confront their solitude without the consolations of community, ideology, or transcendence.

The cinematic trends of Balachander's active decades further illuminate his originality. The 1970s and 1980s in South Indian cinema witnessed a surge in commercial melodrama, heroic masculinity, romantic spectacle, and socially themed narratives that promised resolution through reform or moral clarity. At the same time, art cinema movements in other regions pursued austerity, political critique, or allegorical storytelling. It was also during this era that Indian cinema began to imitate and adapt the Angry Young Man movement, presenting protagonists who suffered under socio-economic frustration, rising unemployment, political corruption, and the steady erosion of public trust in institutions. This shift redefined the cinematic hero as a figure shaped by systemic injustice, whose personal disillusionment mirrored the broader anxieties of a society grappling with instability and unfulfilled promises.

Balachander positioned himself between these poles by crafting films that were accessible yet psychologically intricate, socially grounded yet resistant to simplified closure. His Telugu movies, in particular, captured the anxieties of a generation confronting urbanisation, educational competition, shifting gender roles, and the changing moral fabric of middle-class life. In this environment, his commitment to depicting characters who navigate existential dilemmas without easy answers marked him as a filmmaker who expanded the thematic possibilities of mainstream cinema while preserving its emotional immediacy.

Of all the films, the most existential and the one pertinent to the present social conditions is Aakali Rajyam (1980). Its exploration of unemployment, stalled aspiration, and the erosion of selfhood under economic pressure aligns closely with the contemporary landscape in which young adults navigate precarious work, unstable social expectations, and an uncertain future. The film portrays a protagonist who confronts a world that refuses to recognise his effort, education, or emotional labour, reflecting a condition that resonates deeply with the anxieties of the present generation.

In Aakali Rajyam, existential despair does not arise from dramatic catastrophe but from the quiet, relentless humiliation of unmet promise, a humiliation that mirrors the experience of many who seek dignity and purpose in systems that offer neither security nor direction. The narrative's strength lies in its honest representation of urban drift, failed opportunities, and the psychological toll of waiting for life to begin.

Balachander does not romanticise struggle or offer consolatory resolutions; instead, he depicts a life that unfolds in liminal spaces such as cramped rooms, deserted streets, and informal networks of survival. These environments amplify the protagonist's sense of insignificance, rendering him a figure caught between hope and futility. This sense of suspended existence has become increasingly relevant in an era marked by competitive job markets, rising living costs, and widespread disillusionment among educated youth. Through this portrayal, the film illustrates how existential angst today is less a philosophical abstraction and more a material condition shaped by economic insecurity and social fragmentation.

Balachander's emphasis on the fragility of human connection in precarious times thus anticipates the emotional architecture of modern life. The movie endures because it articulates an existential condition that remains unresolved in society, offering a cinematic mirror to the anxieties and quiet devastations that define the experiences of many today.

2. Origins of Aakali Rajyam

Aakali Rajyam emerged at a moment when India was witnessing rising unemployment among educated youth, significant migration to metropolitan centres. By 1980 there was growing disillusionment with the promises of post-independence modernity. K. Balachander conceived the narrative in response to these social pressures, choosing to depict the emotional and psychological consequences of economic stagnation rather than approaching the issue

through overt political commentary. The film is the Telugu version of his Tamil work Varumayin Niram Sivappu, produced and shot simultaneously, a decision that reflects Balachander's recognition that the aforementioned social and personal anxieties transcended linguistic boundaries in South India during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

By situating his protagonists in an urban environment which asserted and demanded anonymity, and faced with inflated expectations, and scarce opportunities, Balachander captured a social milieu that required cinematic attention. The origins of the film therefore lie not only in narrative invention but also in Balachander's sensitive engagement with the lived realities of a generation that struggled to reconcile education with employability and idealism with survival.

3. Plot of Aakali Rajyam

The plot centres on Ranga, an educated but unemployed young man who migrates to the city with the hope of securing meaningful work. Although qualified and ambitious, he encounters a system that repeatedly denies him opportunities, forcing him to drift between odd jobs and temporary arrangements. He shares living space with other unemployed youth, and their collective experiences illuminate the precariousness of urban existence, where each day becomes an exercise in endurance rather than advancement. The narrative portrays Ranga's gradual confrontation with the fragility of dignity under conditions of poverty, as well as his attempts to maintain moral integrity despite unrelenting hardship. His relationship with Devi introduces an emotional dimension to the story and demonstrates how economic instability strains personal bonds and limits the possibility of a stable future. As circumstances deteriorate, Ranga accepts modest work that offers him a measure of self-respect, choosing honesty over pretence in a world that refuses to validate his aspirations.

The film concludes with a subdued acknowledgment of reality rather than a triumphant resolution, epitomising Balachander's commitment to depicting existential struggle as an ordinary condition shaped by the pressures of contemporary life.

4. Aakali Rajyam in an Existentialist's perspective

Aakali Rajyam exhibits an existentialism that is fundamentally social, material, and grounded in everyday survival, rather than metaphysical or overtly philosophical. The film portrays existential anxiety not as the search for abstract meaning but as the lived experience of individuals who confront a world that neither recognises their aspirations nor offers them a stable place within its structures. Balachander shapes a form of existentialism that aligns with the concerns of Camus and Sartre yet remains deeply embedded in the socio-economic conditions of late twentieth-century India. Several distinct forms of existentialism emerge through the film's narrative, characterisation, and visual design.

The essence of the whole film is poignantly captured in the song penned by the lyricist Atreya, popularly known as Manasu Kavi or "Heart's Poet." In the following lines, the lyricist distils the stark realities faced by the unemployed youth of the period:

3ಮದುವೆ 6ಟ್ಟೆ e´ðc ದು ಟ್ಟ ೦. / ದು&s e3ðo...

ĭgØoØ3o‰oe¦=/6? £c&/ C `ÈFeGoŒHo´.

which can be roughly translated to:

> 'Anyway, we don't have food to eat, so let us appease our hunger by singing a song; in an independent country (like India) where Death is equally celebrated on par with Marriage.'

Here, the comparison of death in a free country to an auspicious wedding intensifies the existential tension, suggesting that for the unemployed youth of the nation, even death acquires a tragic dignity that life itself refuses to grant.

Through this song, the film articulates the contradictions of modern India, where freedom coexists with deprivation and where the promise of progress fails to accommodate the lived realities of countless individuals.

The words convey a bitter irony. Even when there is no food to eat, one is expected to console hunger through song, and in an independent nation, where death itself is ceremonially equated with marriage. Atreya's verses transform the everyday struggle for survival into a profound commentary on systemic neglect, reducing hunger to a metaphor for the wider realm of existential crisis endured by the marginalised.

The film goes on to explore various facets of existentialism with a myriad of events that occur throughout the plot. Some of the prominent forms include:

The first and most prominent form is absurdist existentialism, expressed through Ranga's confrontation with a world that is indifferent to individual effort or education. His repeated attempts to secure employment meet with bureaucratic inertia, unresponsive institutions, and opaque systems that reduce human beings to insignificant figures in a crowded urban landscape. This evokes Camus's understanding of the absurd, where effort and expectation collide with a reality that offers no coherent reward or justification. The film's portrayal of endless job queues, humiliating interviews, and arbitrary rejections captures the absurdity of striving within systems that refuse to acknowledge the worth of the individual.

A second form of existentialism evident in the film is alienation, both social and psychological. Ranga exists physically within the city but emotionally outside its rhythms. He drifts through crowded spaces without belonging to any of them, and his friendships, though supportive, cannot overcome the underlying condition of displacement that shapes his existence. The shared lodging with other unemployed youth intensifies this sense of alienation: even within companionship there remains the knowledge that each person is ultimately alone in facing the crisis of meaning. This aligns with Sartrean themes in which human beings confront themselves as solitary agents, unable to rely on collective structures for identity or purpose.

The film also presents another form of ethical existentialism, one centred on the question of authenticity. Ranga repeatedly refuses opportunities that compromise his sense of dignity or moral integrity. His decision to accept modest work rather than engage in deception reflects a conscious attempt to live authentically, even when authenticity demands sacrifice. For Sartre, authenticity requires acknowledging one's freedom and refusing to act in bad faith, and Ranga embodies this principle by choosing an honest existence over socially prestigious deceit. The tension between survival and self-respect thus becomes an existential struggle rather than a purely economic one.

Finally, the film articulates a form of existential despair, a slow, inward collapse that emerges from the accumulation of mundane humiliations rather than sudden catastrophe. The despair arises from the recognition that the external world will not alter to accommodate individual effort or desire, and that meaning must be negotiated internally despite material hardship. Ranga's relationship with Devi illustrates this dimension, for their affection falters under the weight of insecurity and the impossibility of planning a future. The inability to construct stable emotional or economic foundations becomes an existential condition that defines their lives.

In these ways, Aakali Rajyam deploys multiple strands of existentialism, merging philosophical concepts with lived social realities. Balachander's achievement lies in revealing how existential angst arises not merely from abstract questions of meaning but from the intersection of aspiration, dignity, and systemic indifference within the fabric of everyday life. The film's existential force derives from its depiction of life without anchoring meaning, a condition in which individuals must confront the collapse of social assurances and the instability of identity. Ranga's experiences demonstrate how meaning cannot be derived from education,

social structures, or relationships, for each of these fails him in different ways. He remains exposed to a reality that offers no external validation of worth, compelling him to confront his agency in its starkest form. His decisions, particularly those concerning dignity, labour, and self-respect, emerge from a recognition that he must construct meaning in a world that provides no guidance or consolation. This exposure to existential uncertainty is not temporary or dramatic but continuous, woven into the fabric of daily survival.

In comparative terms, Aakali Rajyam sustains its existential condition with greater intensity and thematic coherence than the other films of Balachander. The film refuses closure, refuses reassurance, and refuses to redeem its characters through romance, duty, or reform. It remains faithful to the existential insight that human beings must navigate a reality that is neither fair nor meaningful, and that dignity, if it exists at all, must be constructed within the unyielding conditions of the present. For this reason, the film stands as the most rigorous and resonant existential text within Balachander's Telugu oeuvre.

5. The Decline of the Representation of Philosophy in Indian Cinema

The philosophical richness that earlier defined significant strands of Indian cinema has gradually diminished, giving way to more market-driven, spectacle-oriented forms of storytelling. Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Guru Dutt, and later K. Balachander treated cinema as a medium capable of sustained reflection on human existence, moral ambiguity, and the fragile interiority of individuals confronting their worlds. Their works approached philosophy not as abstract doctrine but as lived experience, grounding existential inquiry in ordinary life, social transition, and emotional complexity.

Over time, however, the industrial pressures of contemporary filmmaking have reoriented cinematic priorities toward rapid narrative consumption, heightened sensationalism, and a visual grammar shaped by commercial imperatives rather than contemplative insight. As a result, the space for philosophical introspection has narrowed considerably. The decline is also linked to shifts in audience expectation and cultural tempo. The modern viewer is often positioned within an accelerated media environment that privileges immediacy over meditation, clarity over ambiguity, and resolution over uncertainty. Therefore, as posited by Manjunath Pendakur in her book Indian Cinema (2003) "Cinema functions as a social text that both mirrors and reinforces the contradictions of Indian society" (Pendakur 45).

Films that once allowed silence, stillness, and ambivalence to create emotional and intellectual depth have been replaced by narratives that seek constant stimulation. This shift has reduced the presence of characters who grapple with existential despair or moral complexity and has diminished the cinematic exploration of themes such as alienation, ethical choice, authenticity, and the search for meaning. Contemporary Indian cinema does, on occasion, return to philosophical motifs, yet these instances remain isolated rather than constitutive of a sustained tradition. The decline of such representation does not signal philosophical absence in society but rather the diminishing willingness of mainstream cinema to engage with complexity in narrative form. Re-examining works like Balachander's therefore becomes essential not only for their historical value but also for their capacity to illuminate what has been lost and what might yet be reclaimed in the evolving narrative landscape of Indian cinema.

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