

Astarag: A Philosophical and Literary Analysis

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Abstract:

The novel *Astarag* by Homen Borgohain presents a profound exploration of old age, death, and human existence within the socio-cultural context of Assam. This chapter analyzes the philosophical and literary dimensions of the novel by applying existentialist, naturalist, and humanist frameworks. The narrative revolves around the protagonist Dilip, whose intellectual reflections on his father's ageing and death reveal deep psychological and philosophical conflicts. The study highlights the role of time, nature, and social transformation in shaping human consciousness. It concludes that while the novel engages with existential anxiety and naturalistic determinism, it ultimately affirms a humanistic vision centered on love, dignity, and the continuity of life.

Keywords: Astarag, existentialism, naturalism, old age, Assamese novel, humanism

1. Introduction

Astarag occupies a significant place in modern Assamese literature due to its intellectual depth and philosophical engagement with life and death. Unlike conventional narratives driven by plot, the novel emphasizes introspection, dialogue, and psychological analysis.

The protagonist, Dilip, represents the modern intellectual individual grappling with existential questions. His reflections on his father's physical and mental decline form the central narrative thread. Through this, Borgohain explores broader concerns such as mortality, meaninglessness, and the transformation of social and cultural life.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present chapter is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze the thematic representation of old age and death in *Astarag*.
2. To examine the influence of existentialism and naturalism on the narrative.
3. To explore the role of time, nature, and social change in shaping the novel.
4. To evaluate the philosophical message conveyed by the author.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining existentialism, naturalism, and humanism.

3.1 Existentialism

The philosophical ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre provide a basis for understanding Dilip's psychological conflict. Sartre (1943/2003) emphasizes the individual's struggle to create meaning in an inherently meaningless world.

In *Astarag*, Dilip experiences existential anxiety as he confronts the inevitability of death. His reflections reveal a deep fear of the extinction of consciousness, aligning with existential concerns about absurdity and nothingness.

3.2 Naturalism

Naturalism, influenced by Émile Zola, views human life as determined by biological and environmental forces (Zola, 1880/1964).

Dr. Sharma's scientific explanations in the novel reinforce this perspective. Dilip gradually shifts from existential questioning to accepting death as a natural process governed by the laws of nature.

3.3 Humanism

Despite its engagement with existential and naturalist ideas, the novel ultimately reflects a humanistic outlook. It emphasizes compassion, dignity, and emotional connection. The concluding message highlights the enduring value of love and human relationships.

4. Review of Literature

Satyendra Nath Sharma (n.d.) observes that Assamese novels have evolved toward psychological realism and existential inquiry.

Hiren Gohain (2008) highlights the role of modern criticism in interpreting literary texts through contemporary theoretical perspectives, particularly in relation to social transformation and identity crises.

Govind Prasad Sharma (n.d.) emphasizes that themes of death and human suffering are central to modern Assamese fiction.

Shailen Bharali (n.d.) focuses on narrative technique and psychological depth in Assamese novels, noting the importance of dialogue and introspection.

However, there is limited focused research on *Astarag*. This study attempts to fill this gap by providing a philosophical analysis using existentialist and naturalist frameworks.

5. Theme of Old Age and Death

The central theme of *Astarag* is the exploration of ageing and mortality. Dilip's father's gradual physical and mental decline provides a realistic depiction of old age. The deaths of Kaliram Pandit and Mathura Pandit reinforce the inevitability of death.

The novel contrasts rural and urban experiences, suggesting that urban life intensifies loneliness and psychological distress. Death is presented not only as a biological reality but also as a deeply emotional and social experience.

6. Existential Conflict and Intellectual Inquiry

Dilip's character embodies existential conflict. He struggles to reconcile the inevitability of death with his desire for meaning and continuity. His reflections reveal anxiety, doubt, and philosophical questioning.

Influenced by existential thought, Dilip initially resists the idea of death as mere annihilation. However, his interactions with other characters and his observations of reality gradually reshape his perspective.

7. Naturalism and Acceptance of Reality

The influence of naturalism becomes evident through Dr. Sharma's scientific explanations. The human brain, despite its complexity, is subject to decay and destruction.

Dilip's realization that human beings are part of the natural order marks a turning point in the novel. He moves from resistance to acceptance, recognizing death as an inevitable natural process.

8. Role of Time and Social Transformation

Time plays a crucial role in *Astarag*. It not only causes physical deterioration but also brings about significant social and cultural changes. The transition from rural to urban life disrupts traditional values and relationships.

The novel reflects the impact of modernization on Assamese society, highlighting the loss of connection with nature and the rise of individualism and alienation.

9. Nature and Human Existence

In *Astarag* by Homen Borgohain, nature emerges as a central thematic and symbolic element that significantly shapes the narrative structure and the philosophical orientation of the novel. It functions not merely as a passive backdrop but as an active force influencing the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development of the characters. The natural environment in the novel is intricately connected with human life, reflecting harmony, continuity, and existential grounding.

Dilip's childhood relationship with nature is depicted as intimate, organic, and deeply meaningful. His early experiences in the rural setting reveal a sense of unity between human existence and the natural world. This harmonious relationship aligns with the broader literary understanding that nature serves as a source of emotional stability and moral insight (Gohain, 2008). The rural landscape, with its simplicity and ecological balance, provides a context in which life appears integrated and purposeful.

However, this equilibrium is disrupted with the movement toward urban life. The process of urbanization introduces alienation, fragmentation, and psychological unrest. Dilip's detachment from nature mirrors his growing existential anxiety and emotional instability. As noted by Hiren Gohain (2008), modern Assamese literature often portrays urbanization as a force that weakens traditional bonds between humans and their environment, leading to a sense of isolation and identity crisis.

The novel further suggests that the disconnection from nature is not merely physical but also psychological and spiritual. The absence of natural surroundings intensifies feelings of loneliness, particularly in the context of ageing and death. This idea resonates with the critical observations of Shailen Bharali (n.d.), who emphasizes that nature in Assamese fiction often symbolizes life's continuity and emotional rootedness.

Moreover, Borgohain uses nature symbolically to represent permanence in contrast to human transience. While individual lives are finite, nature continues to exist, offering a sense of continuity and renewal. This perspective reflects a naturalistic understanding of life, where human beings are seen as integral parts of a larger ecological system (Zola, 1964).

Ultimately, *Astarag* conveys that human existence cannot be fully understood in isolation from nature. The novel advocates a return to a more balanced relationship with the natural world, suggesting that such a connection is essential for psychological well-being and philosophical clarity. Through Dilip's journey, Borgohain illustrates that harmony with nature fosters acceptance, resilience, and a deeper appreciation of life.

10. Philosophical Message of the Novel

The novel *Astarag* by Homen Borgohain presents a deeply layered philosophical vision that brings together elements of existentialism, naturalism, and humanism into a coherent and meaningful reflection on human life. At its core, the novel confronts the inevitability of death and the fragility of human existence, yet it does not succumb to pessimism or nihilism. Instead, it transforms these realities into a source of introspection and ethical awareness.

From an existential perspective, the narrative raises fundamental questions about the meaning of life, the fear of death, and the uncertainty surrounding human existence. Dilip's inner turmoil reflects the universal human struggle to find purpose in a transient world. However, the novel gradually shifts from existential anxiety toward a naturalistic acceptance of life's processes. Death is ultimately portrayed not as an anomaly or tragedy alone, but as an integral and unavoidable aspect of the natural order.

At the same time, Borgohain does not reduce human life to mere biological determinism. The novel moves beyond naturalism to affirm a humanistic outlook that highlights emotional depth, moral responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. It emphasizes that while the physical body deteriorates, the values of love, empathy, and human connection retain their significance.

Dilip's final realization marks a crucial philosophical resolution. He comes to understand that although individual lives are temporary, the essence of human affection and the beauty inherent in life persist beyond individual existence. This realization reflects a mature and balanced worldview.

Moreover, the novel implicitly critiques the changing social structure, particularly the neglect and isolation experienced by the elderly in modern society. It advocates for a more humane and compassionate social order in which ageing individuals are treated with dignity, care, and emotional support. In doing so, *Astarag* not only explores philosophical questions but also offers a moral vision for society.

In essence, the philosophical message of the novel lies in its affirmation that life, despite its limitations and inevitable end, is meaningful through love, compassion, and shared human experience. It encourages readers to embrace both the reality of death and the responsibility of living with sensitivity and humanity.

11. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Astarag* is a significant work of modern Assamese literature that offers deep insights into the human condition. Through its exploration of old age, death, and philosophical inquiry, the novel achieves both intellectual depth and emotional resonance.

By integrating existentialism, naturalism, and humanism, Borgohain presents a holistic vision of life. The novel ultimately affirms that despite suffering and mortality, human existence retains meaning through love and connection.

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