

THE STUDY OF EXISTENTIALISM IN ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVEL '10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD' THROUGH THE CHARACTER OF LEILA

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ABSTRACT

The presented study scrutinizes Elif Shafak's novel 10 Minutes 38 Second in This Strange World and investigates the major character of Leila through the lens of Existentialism. The researcher examines this novel with parallel theories of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche. These theories help researcher to intersect the novel to understand the circumstances faced by Leila and to comprehend the reason behind the absurdity, meaninglessness and loneliness in her life. The study has been conducted by qualitative method in which the primary source of this study is Elif Shafak's novel 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019), and different theories of Existentialism through which researcher textually analyzed the work. The other information also gathered from different articles as secondary source of data collection which is mentioned in reference section. This research showcases the elements of Existentialism in Leila's character: how society, institutions, norms and customs make us the irrational being, where she is finding the answer of her existence, she always feels unwelcomed and unknown towards the world and herself. Leila who always wanted to know the purpose of her life, felt disowned by people and God who never saved her, and these situations lead her die miserably.

Keywords: 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World, Elif Shafak, Existentialism, Absurdity, Meaning of Life, Loneliness, Existence of God

1. Introduction

Existentialism is a controversial philosophical movement of the 20th century that came after World War II which actually represents the miserable and absurd idea of a human's life (on the basis of political unrest). Its most prominent thinkers include Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. It emphasizes the individual's freedom and responsibility to create their own meaning in life. Existentialists believe that there is no inherent meaning in the universe, and that it is up to each individual to find their own purpose. And in search of life people face existential crisis, dread and anxiety. The people of absurd school also believe in 'we are born without wanting to be born and we die without seeking to die'. Although it's a movement of the 20th century, it is still relevant with 21st century people's search for meaning despite being in a different situation and time.

In the 21st century, existentialism continues to be relevant as it addresses fundamental questions about human existence, freedom, and the search for meaning in life. In our fast-paced, interconnected world, many individuals find themselves grappling with existential concerns such as the purpose of their lives, the impact of technology, and the pressures of modern society. Existentialism offers a philosophical lens through which we can explore these issues and reflect on our own existence. It emphasizes the importance of individual agency and personal responsibility, encouraging us to make authentic choices and create our own meaning in a world that can often feel chaotic and uncertain.

In 21st century's literature Elif Shafak, British-Turkish, considered as the most celebrated author of this time, who writes the novel "10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World", unearths the existential crisis of human's life while using the themes of violence, humiliation, deprivation towards the rights and oppression. This novel moves around with a story of women named as Tequila Leila, who belongs to a small town reaches to the brothel, in the chaos of the surroundings she lost herself and the meaning of life, and die in vulnerable and devastated state, she recalls all those things in the span of "10 Minutes 38 Seconds" where her heart stops the beat but her mind works and drag her to the graphic memory of her meaningless life. The objective of this study is to identify aspects of existentialism in this novel. Through exploring the character of Leila and her struggle to comprehend, the absurdity of life, the importance of freedom, the portrayal of marginalized individuals.

2. Literature Review

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the individual's existence, meaning of being existed and the choice of will depends on other's relations with an individual, Martin Heidegger called it as 'Dasein' a Germanic word, means 'being there' (Sein und Zeit '1927; Being and Time'), where he claims the existence with means of existing and living in the world. Like any school of thought Existentialism also stands with multifarious different individual minds. Bigelow (1961) states that the division of Existentialism can be based on two groups 'ungodly and godly'. Ungodly or atheistic existentialism has existentialists like Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and in godly existentialists are Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. Existentialist philosophers argue that human beings are 'thrown' to the world's inherent meaning. This jeopardizing task creates absurdity, alienation, ambiguity, anxiety and despair in human's life. Albert Camus is the one who highlighted the idea of absurdity in human's life in his essay (The Myth of Sisyphus: 1942) as the futility of a search for meaning in an incomprehensible universe, devoid of God, or meaning. While Kierkegaard's absurd idea goes parallel with religious level in humans' life, which he considered as irrationality of once religious beliefs.

Existentialism also discusses the idea of freedom as a necessity of a human's existence, and encourages us to make authentic choices and create our own meaning in a world that can often feel chaotic and uncertain. For Sartre, man can find his mean of existence with his own ideology of 'being' and man can only fulfil his identity gap by using his will as a motivation, which is his responsibility, as he said, "we are alone with no excuses" "man is condemned to be free", (Sartre). Nietzsche's philosophy of eternal recurrence, shows that man's prospect only can change when he himself breaks the chain of repetitive actions on the basis of his own choices, which make it 'right' to do things again. Existentialists also believe that the question of once existence came with marginalization which creates a vagueness in one's authenticity and develops loneliness. Martin Heidegger's idea of "the They" or "the others" stands for this societal pressure, which creates feelings of loneliness in an individual's life. Sartre called it 'bad faith' (Being and Nothingness, 1943), individuals deceive themselves with their own limitations while avoiding the responsibility of the 'being', this is an illusion of man's own existential choices. Nietzsche gives us the only way out is an individual's 'will power' to be truly free (The Power to Will, 1901).

There is always a debate about what existentialism is, but the more specific answer we conclude it as, ‘the problem of existence’, which varied differently through the different existentialist writers. Harold Bloom, Jeffrey Fisher and James Roberts, irrational understanding of the world in characters can show the existence crisis and absurdity in play waiting for Godot (Harold Bloom, 2008; Jeffrey Fisher and James Roberts, 1980). Kafka and Dostoevsky have also been discussed as existentialist writers, Ajoy shows the suffering of their protagonist how they felt lonely in ‘the crowd’ (Ajoy, 2017). Walter Kaufmann discussed Shakespeare’s work with an existentialist lens, through characters and meaninglessness of life which end in death. (Kaufmann, 1956; Kaufmann, 1980). As we go through the literary landscape of existentialist, it becomes clear that the examination of the absurdity of human life, the search for meaning, and the sensation of loneliness are all major topics within this philosophical framework. The purpose of this literature study is to bridge the gap between existentialist philosophy and its manifestation in Shafak's novel by shining light on how Leila's character embodies and grapples with the existential difficulties offered by the aforementioned philosophers.

3. Conceptual Framework

Existentialism is a form of philosophical inquiry that explores the issue of human existence (Wikipedia). The word existentialism is defined as the absurd idea of human life through a person's choices and lack of understanding of the world (Oxford dictionary, 129). Although, there is no certain definition, but multiple thinkers. This study was also conducted under different perspectives of existentialism, such as Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus. Nietzsche’s existentialism suggested individuals to live life fullest as there nothing exists more than life and accept its existence in this world (Temri), but Sartre belief in human existence as an accident which have no purpose (Bhandari), in Camus perspective humans existence is absurd (Arinze Onwuatuegwu, 2020). In this research, researcher applied these beliefs in the context of the chosen novel, which helps to saturate the deep analysis of Leila’s character and shed light to unravel all the aspects of human existence.

4. Methodology

The researcher used the qualitative method for the study, which focuses on the Existentialist perspective of the novel, through textual analysis and the close reading of the text. The content of the chosen novel explores and explains the impact of existentialism in Elif Shafak’s novel ‘10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World’, by analyzing its deep meaning. The primary resource of this research is Elif Shafak’s novel 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World, from which the researcher takes the text and analyzes it with Existentialism theory to evaluate the central character Leila. The data has been analyzed through textual analysis by collecting those statements from the novel, which specifically highlight Existentialism.

5. Textual Analysis

5.1 The Absurdity of Life

The absurdity of life can be seen as a reflection of the uncertainty and unpredictability that saturate our existence. It is recognition that despite our desire for clarity and meaning, life often presents us with situations that defy logic and rationality. The novel 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World often reflects the absurdity of life through the experiences of its central character, Leila. Through her journey, the author skilfully highlights the unconventional and

often harsh realities of existence. From the start till the end for herself she always felt absurd, the definition of life which her mother told became true for her as she said ‘childhood was a big, blue wave that lifted you up ...thought it would last forever, vanished from sight.’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 12). and her suffocation didn’t end till her death when she got brutally murdered and thrown into the bin, felt nothing more than a useless creature and the world is still the same without her ‘life goes on with or without us’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 5). Leila's experiences also demonstrate the existentialist idea of the absurdity of human existence. She is marginalized and victimized by society, with her identity reduced to her physical appearance and her occupation. The novel shows how societal norms and prejudices dictate the way Leila and her friends are seen and treated, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of these constructed societal constructs, as Shafak’s explains, ‘She was a foreigner and, like all foreigners, she carried with her the shadow of an elsewhere’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 115). Leila is rejected by her family for her choices, faced with violence and abuse from customers, and ultimately marked as "unclaimed" and forgotten by society after her death. These experiences highlight the harsh reality faced by marginalized individuals who are judged and marginalized based on factors beyond their control. Shafak also shows the existentialist perspective of the absurdity of life from Leila's memories. The cyclical nature of her experiences highlights the repetitive struggles and challenges that humans face throughout history, ‘her memory as a graveyard... she had no intention of reviving them’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 52). By depicting the eternal repetition of oppression and suffering, the novel offers a critique of the oppressive power structures that perpetuate human misery, and pessimistic view towards the God’s existence and authority, ‘If there was a God up there’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 190).

5.2 Loneliness

Another major aspect of existentialism which we can witness is existential loneliness through the character of Leila. One of the ways Elif Shafak does this is by showing how Leila, the main character, feels abandoned and isolated when her family disowns her because of her lifestyle. It is heart-breaking to witness her loneliness and the deep sense of longing she experiences for connection in her final moments before death. Leila is rejected by her family for her choices and ultimately marked as "unclaimed", and consigned to ‘the Cemetery of the Companionless’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 189). It is fascinating to see how characters in the story try to escape their existential loneliness. Leila, for example, delves into self-deception and constructs her own version of reality to cope with her overwhelming sense of isolation. Another character, Sinan, suppresses his true desires and conforms to societal norms, which only pushes him further into a state of loneliness.

5.3 Meaning of Life

Existentialism emphasizes the importance of living authentically, urging individuals to reflect on their values and beliefs and pursue their own path, regardless of societal norms. The central character Leila who is a vibrant and resilient character in the novel "10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World." She faces numerous challenges throughout her life that resonate deeply with the concept of existentialism. She endures discrimination and violence, which can make her question her own worth and agency in the world. Despite these obstacles, Leila strives to find meaning in her life and assert her own existence, proving her strength and determination in the face of adversity. As she makes her own family ‘Water Family’, ‘the Five’ (Shafak, 2019, p. 199), which becomes the purpose of her life.

5.4 Questioning the Existence of God

Leila's character also shows sceptical views towards God. Shafak's exhibits Leila's character as the exemplar character to understand take this sacred and personal connection of a person hand with our convenience. For her, it was hard to understand God and the religion of his father, who always makes her guilty even if she is the one who is suffering. She never understands how her father knows what God thinks right, 'How do you manage to see with the eyes of Allah? I've always wondered.' (Shafak, 2019, p. 108). Another place Shafak shows the dread and anxiety of the characters by comparing God with Mr. Chaplin and called it 'Divine Deafness' (Shafak, 2019, p. 231). The concept of Divine Deafness is a metaphorical expression that depicts a perceived silence or lack of response from God. The lines bring to light the deeply personal frustration and disappointment that individuals may experience when their prayers seemingly go unanswered. It emphasizes the individual's longing for meaning and connection, and the potential disillusionment that arises when those needs are unfulfilled.

6. Discussion

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World, highlights the vulnerable side of the world where anything can be possible but nothing is certain, which creates a chaotic situation and the existential crisis for human. In this study researcher applies different theories of Existentialism to analyse the central character of Leila and identify that this character delves into the complexities of the human condition and highlights the universal struggle for meaning and identity. It also skilfully addresses existential questions and the impact of mortality, while emphasizing the significance of human connection. The narrative techniques employed effectively to convey the message and inviting readers to reflect on their own existence.

7. Conclusion

"10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World" deals with the powerful exploration of existentialism. Through the character Leila, the novel delves into the complexities of the human condition, highlighting the universal struggle for meaning and identity. It skilfully addresses existential questions and the impact of mortality, while emphasizing the significance of human connection. The narrative techniques employed effectively convey these themes, inviting readers to reflect on their own existence. Leila's sense of alienation wasn't captive to the mere 10 minutes and 38 seconds; rather, it saturated her entire existence in this bizarre and purposeless world, where she perpetually scuffled with the ubiquitous notion that her very existence was a maverick.

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