

Existential Strain in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: August 28, 2018

Accepted: October 18, 2018

Published: October 31, 2018

Volume: 6 Issue: 4

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Keywords:

Existential Elements,
Qualitative,
Maps for Lost Lovers,
Christian Existentialism,
Primary Data,
Rife

ABSTRACT

Pursuit of essence is the topic and it is a comparative study of the existential elements in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*. To look out the meanings of the nature is something about the pursuit of essence. Meaning from nature means to know about the nature and to know about the facts and figures of the nature by man's own effort and for himself. Comparison is of existential elements in both pieces of literature. The study examines the Existential elements in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*. This study is comparative and of Qualitative in nature. Different schools of Existentialism like Christian Existentialism are also part and parcel of research. Primary Data was collected from the text. The analysis of data showed that existential elements were rife in both of the pieces of Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is concerned with the aspects of human existence and their struggles. It is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence. Different but very simple questions are asked in it like "why I am? What I am doing? Why I exist?" Existentialism is that is something where an individual is free to think and to make its decisions by himself but one should remember that such decisions are taken for immediate purposes so the individual is responsible for his the actions and reactions. In existentialism individual tries to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. Different theorists have also used this theory in their work to have the taste of existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre is the major figure and Kierkegaard is known as the father of existentialism other than, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Samuel Becket, who are the big names in the field of modernism and whenever modernism is talked about, existentialism should be automatically considered as a part of study. There are some key factors which are to be explored with reference to the concept of Existentialism:

(I) Absurdity (II) Anxiety (III) Meaninglessness
(IV) Non-existence of God (V) Free will

Researcher has taken Nadeem Aslam as the author whose works essentially show the above mentioned perspective. Nadeem Aslam was born on June 11, 1966, in Gujranwala,

Pakistan. He moved to UK when he was a teenager. His family migrated from Pakistan. He was a student of Bio-chemistry in Manchester but later he left the University and wanted to become a writer. *Season of Rain Birds* which he wrote in 1993 is his first novel that won the award for him. Different authors are having different point of views about Nadeem Aslam and his *Maps for Lost Lovers* is considered as a good piece of fiction which is

"Heartbreaking... A must read... The characters are so real the reader wants to speak with them... Aslam is a very skilled and talented writer. He gives us a window into a community we don't often see. (The Decatur Daily)

Maps for Lost Lovers is a story in which characters are following norms of existentialism in different ways through their actions and dialogues. This novel is divided into different sections which are named as seasons. *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a novel about the struggle of the individual versus society, about the dislocation and about the brutality as well. One of the characters in the novel is Suraya and Suraya is divorced by her husband in Pakistan in a fit of drunkenness and, according to Islamic law, has to get married to and divorced from another man in order to be reunited with her first husband and their child. Desperate, she starts an affair with Shamas, hoping he is going to be the route out of all this but this does not work as she thinks.

Maps for Lost Lovers starts with poetic expressions as the main character Shams is standing at the terrace in a cold snowy evening.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Statement of problem is this that "Existence precedes essence" and how we can relate Existential aspects from *Maps for lost lovers*. Nadeem Aslam used metaphors in his writings and promotes individualism. Through this power in his writing he strongly banished the Pakistani culture in *Maps for lost lovers* which shows nothingness in his writing. There is uncertainty in the novel but there is a plot and story in the novel; presents certain conflicts and elements to be absurd. These things are leading towards Existentialism which is discussed in form of characters.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research will help to establish a new perspective of looking at the novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. It is helpful to understand the human behavior, human choices and the consequences of these choices. The study scrutinizes the existential aspects of Aslam's writings and also finds out the behavior of migrants with their own country when they found nothingness. And the readers will understand more clearly about the Existentialism through this research. Researcher's study will help in future other researchers as well because doing research on Asian writers is not an easy task.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research work is having different objectives in it, and they are discussed in the upcoming chapters. These objectives are as follows:

- To find out the usage of Existential aspects in *Maps for Lost Lovers*.
- To show human behavior through different characters in *Maps for Lost Lovers*
- To evaluate the concept of existentialism in both pieces of literature.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for present study are

- What kind of Existentialism is portrayed by writers through different characters in both pieces of literature included in Study?
- Why the characters in *Maps for Lost Lovers* are banishing their typical Pakistani Culture which is one of symptom of appearance of Existentialism shown through the text?
- Why do characters in *Maps for Lost Lovers* fall down in existential strain?

Research questions are as important for a research as a soul in body. So the above mentioned questions will elaborate the study and research in the upcoming chapters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nadeem Aslam was born on June 11, 1966, in Gujranwala, Pakistan. He moved to UK when he was a teenager. His family migrated from Pakistan. He was a student of Bio-Chemistry in Manchester but later he left the University and wanted to become a writer. *Season of Rain birds* which he wrote in 1993 is his first novel who won the award for him. *Maps for Lost Lovers* his second famous work and it was completed in 11 years. Aslam mentioned in an interview that the first chapter took six years to complete. *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a story of the Pakistani Immigrants in England, story of the struggle of individual versus society. In this novel character of Chanda is killed in the name of honor by her brother. And in this novel it is seen the author criticizing religion and Pakistani Society.

Existentialism is a movement and literary theory in which human free will is discussed. Existentialism is concerned with the aspects of human existence and their struggle. It is a chain of meaninglessness and absurdity. Existentialism is the mixture of human's free will, meaninglessness, absence of God and absurdity. As the previous studies explained existentialism in different texts such as "We are aware of who we are and fully responsible for our existence" (Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and human emotions*, Phill vasselto, 2002). Existentialism is a philosophy that brought up greatly in the 20th century after World War II.

Existence precedes Essence. And Jean Paul stated this as: "Human project is to create by a free choice a life that is noble and beautiful self-construction" (Gutek, 109). Existentialism is all about what a man wants to become he should go for it because there is no interference of God in human's life. Soren Kierkegaard also presented the same idea "Man has total freedom and he is free to choose and become what he wills himself to become" (Wingo, 397).

The individual turns into himself immediately after the World Wars which bring about depression and anxiety. The ideology of existentialism concentrates on the discordance between the individual and the world he occupies. A clear-cut definition of existentialism cannot easily be made as the philosophers who are considered to be existentialist deny that they belong to the existentialist ideology and claim that their thoughts differ from each other in every angle. On the contrary, the emphasis is on the utmost individualism. There is not a concordant and systematic Consciousness of the universe. Everything is random and purposeless. Human beings observe themselves in a chaos. Therefore, it is impossible to produce logical explanations about the world. The only thing that a human being does know is his existence.

The feature of the existence is not predetermined. The human being acts according to his qualifications and realizes himself. (Şener, 298). Many of previous studies, researches about existentialism clear the concept of its chains. As many articles suggests that existentialism is an important phenomenon of human's life. An article named as "You are your life. And nothing else" shows (Antonia Case, 2014) in this article she mentioned that "we alone are responsible for creating a meaningful life in an absurd and meaningless world". Soren Kierkegaard defined Existentialism as a series

of choices which brings meanings to our meaningless life but he also added that all the choices are up to the man himself (Antonia, 2014).

This research is about the Existentialism and comparison of its elements in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. *Maps for Lost Lovers* covered these elements in the text as “She realized how it must’ve got there, such accursed practices such godlessness” (*Maps for Lost Lovers*, 30).

Same thing is discussed in another research and article named as “Godlessness in the last days, in the last days there will come time of difficulty, for people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud” (bible gateway). Some quotations are also presented the same idea of Godlessness such as “I have no fear of after death life! Even if there is such thing, it is God who should be worried. I am sure I have good reasons to present but I am not sure he might have good excuses for his injustice.” (M.F. Moonzajer, godlessness).

Maps for Lost Lovers also covered the terms of Christian Existentialism in it such as in the line “they live in a society named as Dasht-E- Tanhai (loneliness) seemingly godlessness with white society” (*Maps for Lost Lovers*, 11). *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a story in which two lovers are killed in the name of honor. Chanda is killed by her brother because she was living with Jugnu like a couple before marriage.

“Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Jean-Paul Sartre). *Maps for Lost Lovers* presented absurdist theme of Existentialism as the story of murder of Chanda and Jugnu. The same thing is discussed in the article named as “Little Murders” (Atish Kumar). *Maps for Lost Lovers* also covered the theme of meaninglessness such as “We should realize that we are weak and should bow down before the strong” (Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*). Kiran a character in *Maps for Lost Lovers* presented free will in her character, “Kiran is a Sikh and wanted to marry Kaukab’s brother a Muslim” (Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*). The same theme of meaninglessness and Nothingness is discussed in the other writings of Sartre, for example, “I could not think clearly about my death, but I saw it everywhere” (Sartre, *The Wall*). Meaninglessness and hopelessness are also discussed in the writings of Sartre such as *The Wall* separates hopes with nothingness. Ibietta is the character in *The Wall* who shows the nothingness, fear, hopelessness and existentialism in the story because he was not able to differentiate between life and death. *Maps for Lost Lovers* presented godlessness in it when Chanda argues with Shamas “My parents were responsible for marrying me with the godless people, so you should stay a Hindu without any concept of God” (Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Existentialism is now a day rooted mostly with the concept of existentialism in Christianity. A central investigation in Kierkegaard’s writings is how the individual human being can come to talk about their own existence. And only the existence is the main part of human’s life. Christian existentialism depends on Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christianity.

Kierkegaard stated that the universe is radically paradoxical; its greatest paradox is the ascendant union of God and humans in the person of Jesus Christ.

He is also having a personal relationship with God that supplants all prescribed moralities, social structures and general norms. He argued that social conventions is essentially a personal aesthetic choice made by individuals. As the previous studies explained existentialism in different texts such as “We are aware of who we are and fully responsible for our existence” (Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and human emotions*, Phill vasselto, 2002). Existentialism is a philosophy that brought up greatly in the 20th century after World War II. Existence precedes Essence. And Jean Paul stated this as: “Human project is to create by a free choice a life that is noble and beautiful self-construction” (Gutek 109).

Kierkegaard stated that every individual must make independent choices, which then construct his existence. Every individual suffers from the anguish of indecision (whether knowingly or unknowingly) until he commits to a particular choice about the way to live. Kierkegaard also proposed three main points with which it becomes easy to understand the conditions that issue from distinct life choices: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.

Nadeem Aslam author of *Maps for Lost Lovers* also used the term of Christian existentialism because in his writing characters are having a faith in God but they are also criticizing their faith and fate because of God. Existentialism as mentioned in a chain of meaninglessness and it can be seen in the novel when Chanda was killed. Existentialism is also talking about the absence of God and it can be seen with the starting line “nothing can be done” and in *Maps for Lost Lovers* in form of fight between the individual and society. Existentialism is emerged as a critical era against idealism. Jean Paul states “man is nothing but else his life is”.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The mode of this research is qualitative and comparative in nature. Qualitative is because nothing is compared statistically in this research and literature mostly presents qualitative kind of data to be analysed. Textual material is used by the researcher for getting primary resources. The material is initially taken from the text of the novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* secondary sources will also be utilized in form of Critical books, journals, online essays and online articles as well. This research will be exploratory and explanatory in nature. The mode of this research is qualitative and comparative in nature. The material is initially taken from the text of the novel *Maps for lost lovers*, secondary sources will also be utilized in form of Critical books, journals, online essays and online articles as well. This research will be limited to the qualitative and explanatory and comparative research.

ANALYSIS OF MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS

Maps for Lost Lovers is basically a story which is in first thought considered as an investigative story but later on it is

realized or can be understood that there is a story of a couple who were killed at the very start. The main stream running through the book is the story of Jugnu and Chanda, they both decide to live together, and thus invite the ire of not just their relatives, but almost all the residents of their town Dasht-E-Tanhai.

The story begins with Jugnu's brother Shamas welcoming the first snow of the season and mulling over things. Happenings in the story can be studied through the characters themselves, but it is always the author telling readers their story. It is mentioned earlier in the story that there is a struggle between society and individuals, so none of the character is having different story. A girl from Sikh society is prohibited from meeting her lover, the reason is that he is a Muslim.

One mistakenly divorced girl is desperate to find a man who will agree to marry her and divorce her as Muslim rules prescribe, so that she can go back to Pakistan to live again with her husband and child. The son, in the story, tries to study medical, or at least something related to it, but fails and fails again. Then his white girlfriend convinces him to do what he wants to study that is the study of art but he struggled to do it because of limitations. The wife who left her husband, but cannot tell to anyone the fact that he has beaten her. The charm of the book, for readers at least lies in its prose, where it describes hundreds of stories. There are so many examples of existentialism in *Maps for Lost Lovers* but these examples are defined by both denotative and connotative meanings.

"But it is there even when absent, drawing attention to its own disappearance" (Aslam, 5)

There are two different ways of understanding the existential element in the above given examples from the text. Denotatively it means to just find the attention in any surrounding area, while contextually it will be understood and covers the existential element of creating meanings in a meaningless situation. Same thing is described and found out by the researcher while drawing attention in symbolized form with the meaninglessness and nothingness situation of life. "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."

It was same kind of situation when shamas was standing in the balcony of his house. And he was in great depressed mind of state although it can be seen in the whole novel that shamas is the only character who knows the traditions and he knows how to cope up with other people of the society. But after the murder of jugnu and Chanda he was also in depression and tries to find out the reason of their murder.

Aslam has portrayed this scenario in very poetic words that is to find attention in their own disappearance. So as it is mentioned earlier that finding meanings in meaningless situation is the name of existentialism and it is available in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Here are different examples of the same point from different pieces of Literature. "We encourage parents to ignore this meaningless nonsense. (Times, 2009)

"He tries to find out meanings of personally what he desired in his life". (Aslam, 3)

In the eye of existentialists, finding out meanings for their own benefit and for their own sake is one of the major priorities. Same findings are mentioned in the above given example where the character is trying to find out the meanings of his life. Context of the novel shows that people migrated from Pakistan to United Kingdom and then the murder of two characters on the name of honor made it difficult for all the other characters to know about the meanings of their lives.

All other characters are also busy in thinking the reason of the murder and also question that what is the purpose of their lives? Shams is one of the major characters in the novel and he stands in the balcony, thinks about the murder and then thinks about the meaning of his own desired life. He tries to find out meanings of life in the same way like other peoples of the story. And existentialism is the finding of meanings in meaningless situations. "Life has no meaning, each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer." (Joseph Campbell, Meanings of Life).

No one can be happy till one finds out his desired meanings of desires. Existentialism is that kind of philosophy in which individuals own choices and desires are of worth importance. "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life." (Albert Camus, Happiness: Meanings of Life). Other examples of the same context can also be found out from the text. For example "He tries to inhale but can't breathe because of undesired situation of life" (Aslam, 33). The given example presents the same issue of finding meanings in meaningless situation and lives according to the desired life.

Nothingness is a situation when an individual couldn't leave anything to live. He is left with no purpose, no meanings and no faith left behind in him. Nothingness in existentialist plays is very common because it is a major part of the philosophy. In the story of *Maps for Lost Lovers* nothingness can be seen through different lines, for example:

"He does not know what to do about the knock and in his life." (Aslam, 5)

He "does not know what to do" means that he does not know about the meanings of his life. He has nothing to do because he thinks that he does not know even what to do in his life. He is meaningless and he is unable to find the situational and required meaning. This thing can also cause anxiety which is also an important part of existentialism. Excess of anxiety leads towards a rigmarole of existentialism and a situation in which a person does not know what to do in one's life.

Different lines show different point of views for example "He lay down in a complete paralyzed form because of the shock of jugnu's murder" (Aslam, 45). Paralyzed person can represent the elements of anxiety, fear and nothingness. Anxiety is shown in the above lines because the way Aslam portrayed the situation of Pakistani migrants. It can cause anxiety for the characters and the readers. And this thing is well understood that anxiety is clearly in the domain of existentialism.

“He said, I want to leave this life, but the world won’t let me go”, (Aslam, 8)

Nothingness and meaninglessness are two interlinked things in the existential philosophy. If a situation comes where meaninglessness becomes the part of human’s life but at one point or time this meaninglessness turns into nothingness and nothingness creates existentialism. In the above given example character wants to leave the world because he is not living his desired life in the story of the novel therefore he tried to leave the world and get rid of his life. Life has become meaningless for him and he has to do nothing in his life so he selects the way of doing suicide. Conflict is one of the major parts of existentialism. As it is mentioned earlier in the above mentioned chapters that conflict can be of different types for example in this novel there are two types of conflicts.

One is Conflict of man Vs society and other is conflict of man Vs nature it can be seen in the story that when Jugnu and Chanda were killed in the name of honor. Jugnu and Chanda were living in the migrant’s society named as Dasht-E-Tanhai. They loved each other very strongly and they were living together without marriage. Existentialism talks only about individuals life, their choices, freedom and free will but it also talks about those conflicts which leads towards nothingness and nothingness is the way towards existentialism. Conflict is one of the major themes of the story and in the theme of conflict existentialism falls. Kiran says, “but I was not able to do anything”. (Aslam, 14)

Nothingness is one of the major elements of existentialism and it is a main part of the absurd theater as well. One of the research questions of this study (Why does the character in novel fell down in existential strain) is related to the contextual background of the characters. As in the above given example where Kiran says I was not able to do anything, situation makes it difficult for the character to adopt any situation for selecting ways to survive. Situation is mentioned in the story that Kiran’s father had lost all other family members while migrating from India to Pakistan. Sometimes situation comes where a person can’t do anything and even don’t have any solution for the survival in tough conditions. Same is the case with Kiran in the story where she is having no choice to do anything in her life.

“I don’t want to see them or work next to them to I don’t mind working next if I am forced to, as long as I don’t have to speak to them, as long as I don’t have to talk”. (Aslam,223)

Existentialism is such kind of philosophy which covers the element of meaninglessness in human’s life. Nadeem Aslam uses the word “I” which shows the individual’s importance in his writings. In the above given example repetition of the word ‘I’ tells the story that the character is the follower of his own choices and free will. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather serve one another humbly in love.” (Bible, Galatians 5; 13). So the usage of the word ‘I’ explains the meaning of the whole example, and also the element of meaninglessness is there. Everything is meaningless for the character because she has nothing to do in her

life and which she gets to do is useless for her. “Allah does not considered them worthy enough to place them in any position” (Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers, Winter*)

In the above given example Nadeem Aslam uses elements of Christian existentialism. Christianity in existentialism means to have faith on God but only as a compulsory part of religion. Characters in *Maps for Lost Lovers* are arguing with the God’s nature. Chanda and Shamas are the two main characters behind this statement in the story.

Nadeem Aslam also explains the reason of faith in God, the contextual history of the story tells the readers that they were very mentally disturbed by their migration. They were not living a happy life because many of the limitations were also there, when they have migrated from Pakistan to England. So limitations of religion make it difficult for the migrants to survive with full faith of God. “He is not a believer, so he knows that the universe is without saviors”. (Aslam, 56)

“Because they did not believe in God and did not trust in his salvation”. (Bible, Psalm, 78:22)

From the biblical reference it is clear that Nadeem Aslam uses the Christianity point of view of Existentialism in the story of *Maps for Lost Lovers* e.g. “after the disappearance of character they had denied all kind of knowledge” (A Breakfast of butterfly eggs, *Maps for Lost Lovers*) means the non-believing in the characters of *Maps for Lost Lovers* is filled by the contextual history of the writer.

“What do you want me to say to you?”

“Nothing

Who is the one treating the all?

Why are you believing?”? (A breakfast of butterfly eggs, *Maps for Lost Lovers*)

Characters of Chanda and Jugnu tried to live together without marriage. And the norms and traditions of the society do not allow them to do that. Conflict, which is an important part of existentialism, can also be seen through the overall story of the novel.

CONCLUSION

Maps for Lost Lovers has been analyzed in existential strain. Existentialism is a kind of movement that discusses the importance of individual’s identity and questions belief in God. Nadeem Aslam seems to deal with existentialism in multiple ways. He applies existentialism in different style but from inner meaning he is delivering the same point of view as Existentialism portrays. According to researcher there is reason behind this difference and that reason is of territorial boundaries and contextual history. Contextual history tells that the people of the time when *Waiting for Godot* was written were greatly depressed by the effects of World War and they were left with no faith in God rather they started to believe in their own multiple identities. While the contextual history of *Maps of Lost Lovers* is somehow related with its author’s background history. *Maps for Lost Lovers* is Existential in strain but it sometimes relates to identity and faith’s point of view and the other time it seems to be touching Conflict and free will point of view.

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