

T.C.

İSTANBUL YENİ YÜZYIL UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT

ANGLO AMERICAN AND CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME



EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE ORANGE GIRL* BY
JOSTEIN GAARDER AND *EAT, PRAY, LOVE* BY ELIZABETH
GILBERT
MA THESIS

HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM

22131308901

İSTANBUL, DECEMBER 2024

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HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM
22131308901
ORCID NO: 0009-0001-4567-2607

SUPERVISOR
ASIST.PROF.DR.UĞUR DİLER
JURY MEMBERS
PROF. DR. GÜNSELİ S ÖNMEZ İŞÇİ
ASIST. PROF. DR. ALİ YİĞİT

İSTANBUL, DECEMBER 2024

T.C.
İSTANBUL YENİ YÜZYIL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ

TEZ ONAY BELGESİ

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

I prepared my project following the thesis writing rules of the Institute of Social Sciences at Istanbul Yeni Yüzyıl University, and I hereby declare that;

- I have obtained the data, information, and documents provided within the thesis according to academic and ethical rules,
- I have submitted all information, documents, evaluations, and results under the requirements of scientific ethics and moral rules,
- I have cited all works that I have used in the project by appropriately referring to my sources,
- I have not made any changes to the data used,
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if found otherwise, I accept all loss of rights that may occur.

6/12/ 2024

HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM

PREFACE

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Asist. Prof. Dr Ugur Diler, for his endless support and care during the whole process of the production of this thesis and to my former supervisor, Asist. Prof. Dr Asghar Heidari, for his support in clearing the path by providing ideas and suggestions in the philosophical aspects of this study. The benefits I got from their careful observations, wise decisions and personal experience played a significant part in conducting successful research.

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My parents, siblings, and friends have been the most important encouragement for me to overcome all the difficulties and challenges in my life. Without their love, support and motivation, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish my goals.

ISTANBUL, 2024

HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM

ÖZET

ÇAĞDAŞ EDEBİYATTA VAROLUŞSAL TEMALARI KEŞFETMEK: JOSTEİN GAARDER'İN *PORTAKAL KIZ* VE ELİZABETH GİLBERT'İN *YE, DUA ET, SEV* ADLI ESERLER ÜZERİNE BİR ANALİZİ

HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM

ORC-ID: 0009-0001-4567-2607

Bu tez, *Portakal Kız* (Jostein Gaarder) ve *Ye Dua Et Sev* (Elizabeth Gilbert) adlı eserlerdeki varoluşçu temaları kimlik, özgürlük ve anlam arayışı ekseninde incelemektedir. Çalışma, Jean-Paul Sartre ve Søren Kierkegaard gibi filozofların ana kavramlarını içeren varoluşçu teorinin bir genel bakışıyla başlamakta ve her iki romanın da edebi bir analizine zemin hazırlamaktadır. *Portakal Kız*'da başkahraman Georg, kendini keşfetme ve varoluşun geçiciliği ile yüzleşirken, *Ye Dua Et Sev* Elizabeth Gilbert'in kişisel keşif ve ruhsal uyanış yolculuğunu ele alır. Bu iki eserin karşılaştırmalı analizi, varoluşçu temaların modern toplumda yaşamın karmaşıklıklarını anlamada nasıl içgörüler sunduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, edebiyatta varoluşçuluğun kişisel ve toplumsal anlam arayışının bir yansıması olarak rolünü vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anlam, Çağdaş Edebiyat, Kendini Keşfetme, Özgürlük, Varoluşçuluk.

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE ORANGE GIRL* BY JOSTEIN GAARDER AND *EAT, PRAY, LOVE* BY ELIZABETH GILBERT

HEBA MUSTAFA ABDULKARIM

ORC-ID: 0009-0001-4567-2607

This thesis explores existential themes in contemporary literature by analysing *The Orange Girl* by Jostein Gaarder and *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, focusing on themes of identity, freedom, and the search for meaning. The study begins with an overview of existentialist theory, including key concepts from philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard, setting the foundation for a literary analysis of both novels. In *The Orange Girl*, protagonist Georg grapples with self-discovery and the temporality of existence, while *Eat Pray Love* documents Elizabeth Gilbert's journey of self-exploration and spiritual awakening. A comparative analysis of these works reveals how existential themes offer insights into navigating life's complexities in modern society. This study highlights the role of Existentialism in literature as a reflection of personal and societal searches for purpose and authenticity.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, Contemporary Literature, Existentialism, Freedom, Self-Discovery.

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INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, which arose in the late 19th century, questions conventional ideas about human existence, consciousness, and freedom. It also sparked a passionate intellectual debate that still impacts modern thought. It rose as a reaction to the difficulties presented by modernity, such as the gradual decline of conventional belief systems and the existential distress caused by greater personal independence. Existentialism stands out among the various philosophical groups that have captivated the imagination and stimulated profound introspection. Even so, it garnered considerable recognition during the 20th century due to the scholarly contributions of visionaries like Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus. Jean-Paul Sartre's influential article *Existentialism is a Humanism* introduces Existentialism significantly. Sartre delineates the fundamental principles of existentialist philosophy in this passage, affirming that existence takes precedence over essence. This notion implies that individuals shape their identities via actions and decisions rather than conforming to pre-established essences or natures. Sartre famously asserts that "Existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1943, p.439), embodying the fundamental principles of existentialist philosophy.

Existentialists have claimed that man has no fixed nature or essence, as other species and creatures do. Each human being utilises decisions which define him. Choice is, therefore, crucial to human life since consciousness is open to limitless alternatives, and it is unavoidable. From the perspective of most existentialists, a man's primary differentiation is the freedom to choose, which is an absolute freedom. Since man has obtained ultimate freedom, defending his acts by pointing to anything outside himself is impossible, and he has no explanations for anything he does. He first exists in the world as a free being. For Sartre, "man is condemned to be free carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (Sartre, 1957, p.52). According to this quotation, even the refusal to choose is recognised as a decision. And freedom of choice includes commitment and responsibility. That is to say, ultimate freedom comes with a profound and complete responsibility. Existentialists suggest that one must exhibit commitment and dedication to be free and accept the dangers of freedom because it is solely a personal decision. "There is no choice without

decision, no decision without desire, or desire without need, no need without existence” (Winn, 1960, p.15). Concerning this assertion, existence is the basis of decision-making. Apart from that, the nature of freedom is that “Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being free” (Ellis, 1988, pp.14-15). Then, “man is free, man is freedom” (Sartre, 1948, p.34).

Several factors contributed to the emergence of Existentialism in the history of philosophy. Initially, rational sciences could not demonstrate their absoluteness, hence denying the existence of absolute truth. The main reason for the formation of Existentialism was the loss of belief in a divine entity, specifically God, due to the devastation and losses of war. Previously, God served as a reference point. Nonetheless, with the absence of God, the vision became blurred for individuals. The veiled comprehension of the universe led to a shift in the notion that language is transparent; this period of wars led to the recognition that words act as representations of thoughts or objects without any function beyond that. Contemporary civilisations rely on the notion that signifiers consistently point to the signified and that reality exists inside the signified. In postmodernism, nevertheless, there are just signifiers. The concept of any stable or permanent reality disappears, along with the notion of the signified to which signifiers refer. From the existentialist perspective, there are just surfaces without depth, only signifiers without signified. This perspective indicates that language has no purpose of communicating meaning to offer communication, and man has no trustable reality, which will give a basis for the existentialist in his search for existence. Existentialism places the person at the centre and challenges his existence without the first signified.

Meanwhile, religious existentialists incorporate God as a radical aspect of defining freedom. Religious existentialists do not see the human being as “the man of will” but as “the man of faith” (Alssid, 1964, p.211). God already subjected humanity to their fate. Human beings are one of God’s creatures labelled God-Like as they have some characteristics comparable to God’s characteristics. However, religious existentialist thinks that humans tend to have a dark side, which is their human side of the characters that drives them out of their God-Like character. The

freedom for religious existentialists is more concentrated on the struggle to receive redemption from God and to go back in contact with the spiritual part of oneself. The comparison of the two viewpoints suggests that there is one thing in common. Humans' freedom will always come with responsibilities and consequences that are inseparable. Freedom for atheistic existentialist means a struggle for humankind to better their situations in life. For religious existentialists, it requires acknowledging responsibility for decision-making and a dedication to one's choice. Yet, that is the meaning of faith, in which one willingly sacrifices his desire and will to God's will.

Existentialism has significantly influenced other domains beyond philosophy, encompassing literature, psychology, sociology, art, and film. The literary tradition of Existentialism has a significant historical background that scholars can trace back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Existentialist themes have their origins in earlier philosophical and literary works. However, the formal establishment of Existentialism as a separate literary movement is because of the writings of prominent authors such as Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Samuel Beckett. These authors explore the existential condition through their literary works. In his work, *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera asserts, "The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence" (Kundera, 1988, p.44). This quotation indicates that many existential philosophers have discussed existential concepts through literature and fiction. This discussion establishes an unbreakable partnership between the philosophy and literature of Existentialism. Existentialist literature frequently focuses on exploring topics such as alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning within a world that appears meaningless. For example, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* portray characters who struggle with the lack of meaning and confusion of reality. In general, existential literature presents diverse themes that dive into the complexities of human existence, prompting readers to address fundamental inquiries regarding life, values, and identity.

Existentialism, apart from literature, influences modern media and society through television shows, films, and other storytelling forms that engage philosophical concerns. For instance, series like *Black Mirror* and *The Good Place*

examine human existence and the meaning of life under today's technology and modern ethics framework, compelling people to seek autonomy outside these extensive constraints. Similarly, films such as *Fight Club* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* portray main characters experiencing disillusionment with contemporary existence, emphasising discovering oneself, a crucial aspect of existential philosophy. These examples illustrate the necessity for personal growth that individuals experience in a dynamic and highly complicated environment. At the same time, especially in light of the modern belief that freedom is boundless and individuals are not constrained, Existentialism emphasises the need for individuals to assume complete responsibility for their freedom. Nietzsche asserts that "freedom is the will to be responsible for ourselves" (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 36). Existential literature and media have actively addressed existential issues examined in philosophical works for thousands of years, demonstrating their continuous relevance.

The emphasis of Existentialism on contemporary culture and the individual becomes increasingly relevant in modern society since most societies and cultures are losing their distinctive features and becoming more vulnerable to the emergence of various cultural and societal ideologies. This relevance is because traditional structures such as religion, community, and established norms are no longer valued or considered relevant in modern times. Thus, the search for life's purpose has been crucial in leading a genuine existence. With the collapse of universal truths, people are now responsible for constructing their identities and finding purpose in a world where humans' decisions may determine their existence.

This thesis investigates how contemporary literary works of art continue to engage with existential issues. It examines how these existential issues are not restricted to philosophical context but are essential to literary narratives that mirror the modern human experience. The thesis analyses the primary topics of existential concerns by studying two literary works of art. The first novel under consideration is *The Orange Girl* (2004), written by Jostein Gaarder, a Danish writer. The second piece is the memoir *Eat, Pray Love* (2006) by Elizabeth Gilbert. The thesis explores Existentialism's key themes and ideas, such as freedom and responsibility, the search for meaning, death, and self-discovery. It employs a comprehensive

approach that combines philosophical analysis and literary interpretation to examine the different aspects of Existential thought. There are two primary justifications for selecting these particular literary works.

The first significant reason is that both novels explore existential topics, including but not limited to identity, freedom, choice, and the search for meaning. Through an existential perspective, readers can acquire a more profound comprehension of how these ideas appear in the characters' experiences and the overall storylines of the novels. Secondly, *The Orange Girl* and *Eat Pray Love* present contrasting viewpoints on existential matters, providing an opportunity for comparative analysis. While one novel emphasises exploring human relationships and memories to find meaning, the other focuses on pursuing self-exploration and spiritual satisfaction. Examining these viewpoints in combination can enhance the comprehension of various expressions of Existentialism in literature. Three chapters in the thesis thoroughly examine the existential issues in the two chosen novels. After that, it concludes with a summary of the key ideas and the research findings.

The first chapter presents an extensive overview of existential theory within the realm of literature, intending to highlight the connections between Existentialism and literary works. While the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are employed, this analysis will also incorporate and briefly examine the perspectives of other existential philosophers, such as Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, to broaden the scope of the discussion. In particular, Nietzsche's philosophy is essential to examining existential themes in contemporary literature, specifically his perspectives on individuality, which align with the existential search for meaning. He asserts that "freedom is the will to be responsible to ourselves" (Nietzsche, 2008, p.66). This statement addresses the issue of freedom and responsibility in modern existential literature. Nietzsche's emphasis on responsibility and the search for real meaning is evident in the analysis of both works, underscoring the manifestation of these existential concerns in different literary contexts. Moreover, the chapter comprehensively explains existential philosophy's fundamental principles and terminologies. Terms such as bad faith, absurdity, and authenticity enable readers to gain sufficient

understanding to engage with the literary investigation of the two novels. Concepts such as Sartre's bad faith, which implies self-deception to avoid existential responsibility, are crucial for comprehending characters' decisions in existential narratives. As Sartre states, "To live in bad faith is to flee from the responsibility of freedom" (Sartre, 1943, p.52). The concept will subsequently be applied to the protagonists in the two novels when they reveal their illusions and confront the consequences of their actions.

The second chapter analyses the protagonist, George Roed, in Jostein Gaarder's novel *The Orange Girl*. *The Orange Girl* was first published in London by Phoenix House in 2003. The story is an intriguing topic for investigation, both in its thematic significance and psychological dimensions. The character in the novel, specifically the orange girl, is unpredictable due to the story's unexpected plot and mysterious narrative style. In this narrative, the character of *The Orange Girl* significantly influences the plot while the plot simultaneously impacts the characters. Both features are close to one another and associated, making it clear that the novel mainly depends on its characterisation. The story of *The Orange Girl* is presented from the point of view of George Roed, a fifteen-year-old child who is the son of the orange girl. George speaks not only about his mother but also about the love story of his mother and father, Jan Olav, who died when George was four years old, and about his life journey, which is full of significant concerns. In this case, without realising it, the answers to his questions exist in a book holding a collection of letters written by his father long ago and the book was found in his first baby stroller. In this novel, Jan Olav writes his love journey very interestingly, like a puzzle piece that George sees and answers his questions about life. Based on the intriguing tale, the researcher examines the main character utilising existentialist theory, which defines numerous characteristics of the characterisation of the characters produced from the storyline. The narrative is a motivating and compelling story as it teaches the readers that they should cease to investigate human existence and the planet; the end of all their investigation is to arrive at some conclusion. The narrative is highly intriguing, and the message is inspirational. The novel's writing is exceptionally straightforward, yet the setting is present, and the narrative incorporates both the first and the third person point of

view, giving the book the sensation of a modern fairy tale. To answer the puzzle of *The Orange Girl*, Georg Roed must use philosophy and his searches. But the truth is more complicated than he could have anticipated. The narrative is a search for Enlightenment, spirituality and love.

The first part of this chapter explores the protagonist's experience with an existential dilemma initiated by discovering a letter from his deceased father, thereby revealing a deeply concealed truth. Due to this revelation, Georg starts to examine his identity, purpose, and place in the world, which aligns with existentialist concerns regarding authenticity and self-exploration. As Kierkegaard states, "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God wishes me to do, is to find a truth which is true for me" (Kierkegaard, 1956, p.15). The search for a genuine truth emerges as a central element in George's journey as he gradually uncovers challenging facts concerning his father and family. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the existential weight of individual freedom and the responsibility to behave honestly and morally uprightly. Throughout the novel, Georg grapples with the existential concerns of freedom and responsibility. He must confront the consequences of his decisions, including the choice to find the truth about his father's history, which involves confronting distressing realities and making challenging ethical assessments. Next, the chapter explores existential concepts of temporality as Georg struggles with the temporary essence of human existence and the fleeting nature of life. The views within the novel on time, memory, and the progression of generations emphasise existentialist concerns regarding the temporary nature of human existence and the quest for meaning in light of mortality. The novel *The Orange Girl* presents various existential problems that encourage readers to reflect upon the complexity of human existence and their search for meaning in a world characterised by unpredictability and vagueness. The story challenges readers to contemplate existentialist philosophy and participate in introspection over their existential journey by diving into themes of identity, freedom, choice, and the search for authenticity.

The third chapter of this study examines the memorial *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. Elizabeth Gilbert is an educated, ambitious journalist with everything an average American woman would want — a husband, a lovely home

in New York and a good profession. Aside from all her previous joy, Elizabeth was suffering from pain, anguish and a great deal of perplexity. After going through a divorce, severe depression and a struggle to balance between both worldly pleasures and spirituality, she chooses to embark on a journey of self-discovery. She encounters various individuals throughout her trips to Italy, India, and Indonesia. Elizabeth lives different experiences that make her trip much more worthwhile, which finally leads to her self-discovery and a complete understanding of the arrangement of priorities in life through this indulgence in life's simple yet meaningful aspects. Elizabeth's exploration of her identity and personal growth in the novel aligns with existentialist philosophy, providing valuable perspectives on the human experience and continuing pursuit of fulfilment and overcoming limitations. In the first section, Elizabeth Gilbert embarks on a transformative journey of self-exploration, leaving her conventional existence to find genuineness and contentment. The protagonist's pursuit exemplifies existentialist issues with the significance of living by one's authentic identity and values instead of adhering to societal norms or external influences.

The second section focuses on Elizabeth's journey, which ultimately leads to her achieving a more profound comprehension of existential liberty and accountability. She uncovers a deep sense of empowerment and self-realisation by embracing her autonomy and assuming responsibility for her life. The circumstances she has encountered emphasise the existentialist concept that individuals possess the freedom to construct significance in their existence, especially when confronted with challenges and ambiguity. Ultimately, within the novel's three sections—eat, pray, and love—Elizabeth tries to attain various forms of meaning beyond limitations. In Italy, she indulges in sensory gratification and the appreciation of life's uncomplicated joys, embodying existentialist motifs of accepting the current moment and deriving happiness from the ordinary. In the Indian environment, the protagonist engages in spiritual practices and meditation, engaging in a contemplative exploration of existential inquiries relating to the essence of being and the desire for internal tranquillity. She experiences love and establishes connections in Indonesia, embodying the existentialist conviction in the significance of interpersonal relationships and human connection in pursuing

meaning. The novel addresses how individuals may navigate their pathways, make decisions that match their authentic selves, and achieve purpose and pleasure. Through Gilbert's journey, readers reflect on their search for self-discovery, struggling with universal issues of identity, belonging, and satisfaction. *Eat, Pray, Love* is a captivating tale of determination and self-regeneration, reminding us that the route to enlightenment exists in the most unexpected places, inside the depths of our souls.

The conclusion of the thesis provides a comparative examination of the two novels, highlighting their similarities and differences and concluding on how existential themes still significantly impact contemporary literature. The presentation of the analysis of existential challenges in these modern works offers various advantages in the search for meaning in a world lacking meaning. Both novels provide a profound comprehension of human conditions and allow introspection and individual development, as they offer existential challenges to the reader to reflect on their beliefs, values, and decisions. Gilbert's journey motivates the modern reader to investigate the specific factors that provide them happiness and satisfaction separate from society's oppressive, restrictive, and expected aspects. Simultaneously, Gaarder's novel invites the reader to find pleasure and explore life by embracing its small and everyday occurrences. Existentialism encourages a comprehensive re-evaluation of fundamental assumptions, as it has highlighted neglected truths and aspirations. However, one must surely exceed its limiting constraints. The attention of Existentialists like Kierkegaard on some elements of the human experience, while disregarding others, could distort the absolute and entire character of existence. For instance, some existentialists emphasise individual subjectivity above social or communal experiences, thereby minimising the relevance of relationships, societal structure, or historical context. This narrow emphasis risks giving a fragmented or incomplete picture of life, leaving out components such as collaborative action, shared human ideals, and the importance of culture and tradition in establishing identity. This thesis seeks to present a complete study of the two novels containing all these characteristics without focusing on one and disregarding the other to obtain a decent degree of knowledge of the effect of existential issues in literature.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consider a scenario where two individuals coexist in the same universe, but one is confined to a predetermined and restricted existence while the other embarks on a journey of self-discovery, exploring how their identity evolves. The question is which individual will achieve genuine authenticity in their life and which one will only exist as a replica of their surrounding surroundings. However, the answer may appear straightforward and evident to specific individuals. Indeed, the situation is not easily understandable; it is more complex than it seems. Human nature is inherently resistant to being constrained inside specific frames; however, occasionally, it may look otherwise. Human beings shape their own identities through their actions and behaviours. In this process, they strive to avoid being influenced by external factors, including nature and social culture. Freedom is undeniably crucial to human beings since it may mean the fundamental essence of human existence. Kierkegaard asserts that human existence is changeable and not fixed. It signifies that humans consistently transition from possibility to existence. The primary objective of Existentialism is to challenge the existence of any inherent qualities that require definition, as well as the importance of the act of defining itself. Thus, our essence, which encompasses our unique characteristics, is shaped through a process rather than being innate. The following paragraphs attempt to clarify the origins of Existentialism, elaborate upon the five essential principles of Existentialism and significant existentialism proponents, and highlight the significance of Existentialism as a philosophy. Existentialism appears in the Socratic precept, know thyself. Socrates was the earliest philosopher to raise inquiries about the existence of humans and regard persons as products of knowledge. St. Augustine holds an existential perspective on the inherent immorality of humanity, with a focus on the individual's existence and an existential approach to active engagement. In the 19th and 20th centuries, several writers, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Kafka, played a significant role in the development of Existentialism and are frequently regarded as pioneers of the movement.

The prominent figures of this movement were primarily French, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, and Maurice

Merleau-Ponty. However, the foundational ideas of the movement were established earlier in the nineteenth century by pioneers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Additionally, influential German philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, as well as notable Spanish intellectuals José Ortega y Gasset and Miguel de Unamuno, also contributed to the conceptual groundwork of the movement in the twentieth century. The fundamental concepts have also been elucidated in significant literary works and in addition to the theatrical works, brief narratives, and extended fictional works created by intellectuals like Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, Parisian writers such as Jean Genet and André Gide, Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Norwegian authors Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun, and German-language rebels Franz Kafka and Rainer Maria Rilke also contributed to the literary landscape. The movement is also apparent in the literary works of American writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway from the Lost Generation, as well as mid-century authors like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsburg, and William S. Burroughs from the Beat Generation. Norman Mailer, who identified himself as an American existentialist, also contributed to this movement (Cotkin, 2003, p.185).

Existentialism contains a variety of complex thoughts and concepts, but it revolves around some fundamental themes and notions crucial to existentialist thinking. Encompassing concepts such as existence precede essence, alienation, anxiety, and the encounter with nothingness and freedom. The idea of existence precedes essence, coined by Jean-Paul Sartre, is a vital and foundational element of Existentialism. It represents the fundamental comprehension of the Existentialist philosophical framework. The phrase existence precedes essence, refers to the philosophical concept that any inherent essence or purpose does not predetermine an individual's life because their actions and choices are what do so. Sartre argues that human existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals come into being, confront themselves, and emerge in the world before determining their identity (Sartre, 1948, p.28). This argument asserts that the presence or existence of something is essential for it to possess its inherent nature or essence. Sartre also alleges that an individual "will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself" (Sartre, 1948, p. 28). According to Bohlmann, existentialists

believe the universe lacks any absolute purpose, and individuals must create unique meaning for their existence (Bohlmann,1991, p.14). Unlike the Aristotelian belief that essence comes before existence and that humans exist to fulfil a specific purpose, Sartrean Existentialism posits that humans have no predefined purpose or meaning. Instead, people establish their identity through the emergence of their distinct lives in response to the obstacles presented by their existence in the world. According to Sartre, life does not have an inherent purpose. Before experiencing vitality, life holds no significance (Sartre,1957, p.49). Therefore, life lacks inherent significance or objective unless individuals construct it.

The attempt for existential significance in human existence leads individuals towards limitless life alternatives that ultimately result in a void state. The absence of meaning is the primary cause of human anxiety, which is the second fundamental concept of Existentialism. “Anguish is the manifestation of freedom” (Ellis, 1988, p.15). The recognition of nothingness, as understood by existentialists, is seen as liberating since it allows individuals to comprehend that they have the freedom to determine their own identity, as any predetermined essence does not bind them. Anguish arises from the belief that when people make choices for themselves, they also make choices that affect all humanity. The consequence of this action is a deep sense of accountability, which causes individuals to experience sorrow. Anxiety arises when faced with the need to make a decision and take action without any evidence to confirm the correctness of the chosen course of action. The feeling of distress does not assure the action’s appropriateness but indicates that numerous potential outcomes could result from this particular action. Heidegger argues that death is another feature closely connected to anxiety. When humans acknowledge death as a possible outcome for themselves rather than just something observed by others, they experience anxiety. This concern is not detrimental but enables an individual to live a more genuine life. As he accepts death as an unavoidable eventuality, he begins to behave without constraints in the presence of the opportunities presented by each day. According to Heidegger, anxiety is the human’s perception of their existence in the world, their ability to make choices and their awareness of mortality. (Heidegger, 1996, p.47)

Another essential aspect of Existentialism is the concept of absurdity. The

concept of absurdity in Existentialism emphasises the conflict between the human desire for purpose and the indifferent nature of the universe. Albert Camus employed the idea of absurdism in his 1942 anthology, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus drew a parallel between the human desire for order and meaning and that of the Greek mythological character Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to repeatedly push boulders up a mountain, only to see them roll back down to the bottom. Camus argues that the sense of absurdity can be triggered by various factors, such as perceiving the cruelty and apathy of nature, acknowledging the temporary character of human existence, or realising that death exposes the futility of human life. Camus aims to communicate that, much like Sisyphus, individuals persistently strive to comprehend the meaning of existence but ultimately realise that their findings only result in a downward spiral. He suggests that we should embrace the irrationality of existence and commit ourselves to imbue it with significance and intention: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1956, p.78). The Greek hero demonstrates his honourability by seeing the hopelessness of his purpose and, through his conscious decision to transcend his destiny, resolutely refuses to surrender or engage in self-destruction. These primary notions of Existentialism have been extensively explored and analysed in various literary works, serving as a guide for scholars and individuals seeking to discover the meaning of their existence. However, it is crucial to note that the importance of Existentialism extends beyond the pursuit of life’s meaning, as it has significant implications in various other domains, such as literature, psychology, theology, and cultural thought, which the subsequent paragraphs discuss.

1.1. Existentialism in Contemporary Literature

Significant societal transformations occurred later in the twentieth century and after World War II, particularly in technology and science. Notably, the development of nuclear weapons, mass media, telecommunication, and information technology (with the internet being particularly noteworthy) has effectively reduced the world into a global community where knowledge is accessible to nearly all individuals within the framework of industrialisation. These reactive and

evolutionary shifts prompted an examination of the function of culture and art. Recent and rising social, political, and literary ideas have encompassed various disciplines, including art, architecture, film, sociology, communication, and philosophy. One of the prominent literary movements that has emerged is Existentialism. It signifies a wholly novel framework in intellectual vocabulary and cognition. From a philosophical standpoint, it represents the loss of certainty, meaning there is no ultimate truth. According to Farhangpour and Abdolsalami, “humans do not have an inherent connection with rationality; instead, they result from historical and cultural factors and the continuous flow of ideas.” (Farhangpour & Abdolsalami, 2016, p.5). Existentialism, as a philosophical framework, offers a coherent explanation of the attitudes and thoughts of contemporary individuals. The postmodern individual develops in an environment where truth is fragmented, they lack agency, and their sole opportunity to challenge is in the current moment. During that period, Existentialists emerged to provide insight into his situation. Existentialism regards humans as autonomous individuals who are accountable for their own lives. He is the one individual responsible for generating significance. They provide him with additional dimensions as an individual connected to the past, present, and future rather than just being a creature of the present. Finally, they give him the strategies to confront and manage that nonsensical environment that refuses to accept universal truths. As one can notice, the beginning of this chapter examined the prominent principles and ideas of Existentialism, which do not belong to a particular era within the existentialist period. Contrary to popular belief, these concepts are timeless and continue to appear in contemporary literature. Flynn argues that Existentialism explores the core elements of human existence, such as freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning, which remain relevant in modern writing and thinking (Flynn, 2012, p.87). The following sections analyse and describe the significance of employing Existentialism in contemporary literature. They also provide examples of existential themes employed by modern authors and illustrate how these topics address existing societal and individual concerns.

Existentialism and the Existentialists distinguished themselves from other philosophical movements by employing plays, novels, and short stories as mediums

to convey their perspectives, recognising the profound relevance of these art forms to our existence. Since 1970, significant cultural activity in literature, film, and art has incorporated existentialist and postmodernist ideas. The audience has been allowed to contemplate the essence of existence by taking a moment to ponder existentialist theory. It presents the reader with a variety of circumstances that initially seem incomprehensible. However, upon careful consideration, the reader comprehends the logic underlying these concepts, can establish a connection to them, and apply them to real-life events. Contemporary literature employs existential themes to directly confront significant human anxieties and explore the complexities of the human experience. Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* is an enthralling and intellectually stimulating work of literature that explores the intricate complexities of identity, reality, and the ambiguous lines between truth and fiction. It is a trilogy of interconnected stories that follows the lives of the three main protagonists as they negotiate the complex streets of New York City. The tale portrays characters struggling with a disordered and purposeless environment. In Auster's universe, the physical layout of the streets of New York takes on a symbolic meaning that represents the essence of existence, requiring careful interpretation, much like the need to analyse and explore life itself. Within the enigmatic and unexplored realm of Manhattan's urban landscape, New York becomes an irrepressible presence that defies scrutiny, compelling its residents to forge their own intangible and fleeting narratives amidst the bustling city streets. The unpredictability and disorder of the streets exemplify Albert Camus's concept of the absurd. The primary emphasis on absurdity in the narrative demonstrates the enduring nature of one of the fundamental principles of Existentialism. Auster's application of existential motifs in *The New York Trilogy* creates a link with contemporary readers by tackling timeless inquiries on human life. These topics remain highly relevant during a quick transformation and unpredictability period. The examination of identity, purpose, and loneliness in literature reflects contemporary society and individual concerns, offering readers a perspective to analyse their own experiences and existential dilemmas.

Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* is a notable contribution to contemporary literature because it combines surrealism, magical realism, and

existential concerns. This work mirrors current anxieties and further investigates the nature of human existence, individuality, and the nature of reality, which are prominent subjects in contemporary literature. Murakami conceals the boundaries between fact and fiction, constructing a narrative realm in which the supernatural is integral to ordinary existence. This method aligns with the current trend in writing to examine the limits of reality, provoking readers to question their senses and contemplate the essence of existence. “In dreams, you do not need to make any distinctions between things. Not at all. Boundaries do not exist.” (Murakami, 2005, p.383). This quote exemplifies the novel’s thematic investigation into the elasticity of dreams and reality. *Kafka on the Shore* exemplifies fundamental aspects of modern writing by seamlessly combining genres, delving into the concept of identity, intertwining fact and fiction, addressing issues of solitude, and engaging in philosophical investigations. The elements mentioned above contribute to its profound nature, striking a chord with contemporary readers by mirroring their existential preoccupations and the intricacies of modern existence.

1.2. Authentic Identity in Existentialism

The primary focus of Existentialism is to establish significance within a world that appears to lack purpose. As a result of this lack of meaning, individuals face difficulties in establishing their genuine identity. Existentialists claim that each individual possesses a fundamental division inside their identity. An existential crisis occurs when an individual becomes conscious of this division. Upon recognising the existence of a separate and unique self, the individual is inclined to relinquish the importance placed on superficial identifications. Therefore, he must now ascertain whether anything significant is essential to his existence. Consequently, individuals frequently isolate themselves from social connections and hobbies to impartially analyse the gap in their sense of self. Nevertheless, the procedure is inherently distressing and challenging, as the individual relinquishes the feeling of security associated with their prior identifications. Furthermore, the division in one’s sense of self can appear so enormous that it results in the dominant mindset of, Why does it make a difference? The answer to this question drives individuals to pursue a personal quest for self-discovery and explore their identity. The subsequent paragraphs explain the

significance of identity in Existentialism and the fundamental components involved in the pursuit of identity in existential literature.

Heidegger distinguishes between two forms of existence: authentic being and inauthentic being. “Authentic being is rooted in the explicit sense of a situation, and inauthentic being, moving automatically in the established ruts and routes of the organised world” (Blackham, 1952, pp. 92-93). Both Sartre and Heidegger argue that genuine identity can only be attained by recognising and actualising one’s potentialities while also establishing one’s principles and purpose in life. This idea is, indeed, the essence of existentialist dedication. The existentialist asserts that individuals can shape their persona, with cowards choosing to be cowardly and heroes choosing to be heroic. Furthermore, the existentialist believes that cowards can overcome their cowardice and heroes can relinquish their heroic nature if desired. The crucial factor is the overall dedication (Sartre, 1948, p.43). Existentialism regards authenticity as necessary, as it involves transforming the senselessness of absurdity into a purposeful existence (Critchley, 1998, p. 149). This transition can be regarded as a type of dedication, as explained by Sartre in his work *Existentialism and Humanism*, “There is no difference between free being – being as self-committal, as existence choosing its essence – and absolute” (Sartre, 1948, p.47).

Therefore, authenticity is not an inherent quality of consciousness or human existence; instead, individuals strive to achieve authenticity by dedicating themselves not as a fixed characteristic but as a manifestation of their freedom. However, achieving actual existence, similar to being for itself, is a challenging endeavour that demands bravery and strength to reject societal morality and ideals and resist conforming to established unquestioned conventions. On the other hand, Sartre asserts that acting genuinely solely for authenticity or being recognised as authentic is not genuine behaviour at all. “To attribute authenticity to someone is to acknowledge the nothingness in that person’s being and the fact that he/she does not try to disguise it in bad faith” (Golomb, 1995, p.150). Seeking authenticity solely for authenticity does not qualify as commitment, as it undermines the individual’s genuineness. If an individual rejects their complete human nature, precisely their existence as a self-conscious being, this rejection is referred to as

inauthenticity. An individual who lives inauthentically fails to engage in becoming and instead exists solely in a state of being. Authenticity refers to being truthful and genuine to one's fundamental nature. To live genuinely, individuals must recognise their freedom and the responsibility to shape their own identity despite the inherent unease that comes with it. This self-awareness pertains to the act of confirming one's own identity and necessitates a strong dedication.

The pursuit of authentic identity is a fundamental theme in existential literature. The primary features of this theme encompass isolation, confrontation with pain and suffering, and spiritual exploration. Alienation is the primary crucial aspect. Individuals often associate themselves with a particular group to gain recognition and be valued by others. Typically, an individual experiences a loss of identity and feels a sense of alienation or estrangement. Existentialists argue that when confronted with the challenges of life, humans often want to distance themselves from the four fundamental aspects of existence, "they are convinced that modern man lives in a fourfold condition of alienation: from God, from nature, from other man and from his own true self" (Alssid, 1964, p.206). Alienation from God occurs when individuals perceive life as exceedingly tricky and miserable and believe that the fate imposed upon them by God is unjust. He believes that God, who should be a source of assistance, only confers upon him an insufferable weight. The state of being disconnected from God is the most shocking consequence of one's actions since it leads to a loss of belief in Him.

The second form of alienation relates to the disconnection from the natural world. Human beings must always establish a connection with nature to ensure their survival. The human species' inherent, instinctive, and essential connection is between males and females (Beauvoir, 1974, p.814). No matter how significant the advancements man makes in overcoming nature, they will always constrain him, and he cannot escape the obligations they impose upon him. For instance, by conquering nature, he establishes civilisation as a means to liberate himself from the demands imposed by nature. The enslavement of men in this society poses a threat to the survival of humanity, leading to the alienation of human beings from nature.

The third aspect is the estrangement from other individuals. Human beings are commonly referred to as social beings, as they consistently require the presence of others and cannot survive in isolation. By living with other individuals, one has the chance to recognise and understand their existence. Nevertheless, living with others requires adherence to social regulations, values, and conventions. All of them, however, have been demonstrated to pose a greater danger to his survival than provide any advantages. When people feel overwhelmed and overpowered by regulations and societal conventions, they may isolate themselves from others. The fourth form of alienation refers to the separation of man from himself, particularly concerning the inherent dignity of the individual human soul. His preoccupation with sin and the dark aspect of human nature might act as his attempt to restore depth to the flattened image of man inherited from the Enlightenment.

Another critical aspect of the search for identity is the direct encounter with pain and suffering. This factor embodies the existential conviction that confronting and accepting one's pain is crucial for attaining accurate self-awareness and genuineness. Unavoidable events occur in every individual's life outside our control. Nevertheless, the outcomes of this situation are not predetermined; instead, they depend upon our perspective and approach towards hardship. The experience of human pain is a multifaceted phenomenon. Rodgers and Cowles stated that "The individual and subjective nature of suffering contribute to the overall complex nature of this concept. Since suffering cannot be readily observed or measured, it has a unique mystery and abstractness" (Rodgers and Cowles, 1997, p.105). Kierkegaard emphasised this concept by highlighting that suffering can function as a noun and verb. Like the Norwegian equivalent, the Danish term has a meaningful etymology. The verb *lide* originally meant moving on, walking, or travelling. Therefore, it suggests a dynamic mindset: To suffer is to undertake a voyage.

Kierkegaard criticised individuals who disregarded suffering while prioritising the pursuit of happiness. He saw this attitude as a state of forgetfulness towards one's existence, which, as Furchert asserts, might have detrimental consequences, "For those who prioritise happiness above all else, suffering has the power to strip away everything." (Furchert, 2012, p. 261). Surrender is a response that arises in the face of suffering. The weight of the situation appears enormous;

there is a lack of effort to engage in a factual confrontation. Bitterness or psychiatric issues may ensue. Kierkegaard's concept of the internalised attitude towards suffering entails acknowledging that suffering is an inherent aspect of existence. According to Heidegger, this signifies a transition towards genuine existence. The encounter with one's mortality and vulnerability is a common trigger for this. The experience of suffering in this context is not something that originates from outside or is separate from oneself. Instead, it can occur as a deliberate inside encounter. Enduring hardship does not grow less complicated as a result. However, it takes on an existential aspect that belongs to the inquiry of significance. It possesses the ability to bring about significant modifications.

Recognising sorrow and pain prompts individuals to investigate other aspects of self-discovery, including spiritual exploration. Spirituality entails a deep exploration of the purpose and significance of one's existence, whereas Existential philosophy mainly depends on the idea that individuals have a fundamental preoccupation with the meaning of their existence. The following paragraphs highlight specific elements of existential philosophy. They also examine the impact of engaging in spiritual study as a means of discovering one's own identity. This selection is due to its influence on how individuals comprehend the significance and purpose of their existence, which is considered the primary focus of spirituality. Existentialist philosophy assumes that all individuals have a shared concern about the meaning of their existence. Spirituality, on the other hand, is seen as an active exploration of the meaning of one's own life. Spirituality is an essential component of the inquiry into the essence of existence, as asserted by Heidegger, who believed it to be an integral part of Dasein's fundamental character. An individual's understanding depends on meanings inherent within established cultural frameworks or constructed by the individual. (Heidegger, 1996, pp. 10-15). When individuals adopt these meanings, they become spiritually more significant in their relationship. The key significances under this existential framework of spirituality pertain specifically to an individual's existence and the essential objectives of their life. Ultimately, the search for authentic identity in existential literature is a deep and meaningful expedition characterised by the dynamic interaction of alienation, confrontation with pain and suffering, and introspective

examination of the spiritual realm. Alienation emphasises the individual's conflict with cultural conventions and the resulting isolation, leading them into self-exploration. Encountering grief and suffering triggers individual development and a more profound comprehension of oneself, unveiling the essence of one's authentic identity. Finally, spiritual exploration provides a means to transcendence and a more profound sense of purpose, ultimately leading individuals towards an authentic existence. These characteristics emphasise the concept that one's actual identity is formed by accepting life's inherent difficulties and actively seeking personal truth.

1.3. Freedom and Responsibility in Existentialism

Existential literature deeply examines the concepts of freedom and responsibility, exploring the essence of human existence and the significant consequences of individual decision-making. Influenced by existential philosophy, these works highlight the individual's innate ability to determine their future without being limited by predetermined nature or societal restrictions. Alongside the privilege of freedom, there is the substantial obligation of making genuine decisions and confronting the consequences that follow. Existential literature explores the delicate balance between the thrilling possibilities of freedom and the severe obligations of responsibility by depicting its characters' challenges and introspective journeys. It emphasises the pursuit of authentic self-identity. The subsequent paragraphs explore the existentialist notion that humans possess the autonomy to express their own decisions and elucidate how this freedom creates a profound sense of responsibility for one's actions and life path. Furthermore, the following parts support the preceding ones by offering a straightforward illustration of exploring these issues in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*.

Existentialism revolves around the central concept of freedom. Freedom can mean "The capacity of self-determination. That is, the capacity to decide what to do" (Omorgebe, 2002, p.36). Humans possess inherent freedom as reasoning beings and should be free to carry out their activities. A free action refers to an action that an individual consciously decides to carry out and has the option to refrain from performing. According to Bourke, people are free to make choices and

engage in activities without external constraints. Freedom, in essence, refers to the ability of an individual to possess the inherent capacity to do action according to their own volition. (Bourke,1966, p.45). Existentialists do not discuss the concept of free will as it is traditionally precise in classical philosophy. According to existentialists, freedom is not a characteristic of the will but rather an inherent aspect of human existence. Existentialists do not seek to provide evidence for the existence of human freedom. They perceive human freedom as the fundamental framework of human nature and a vital requirement for human life. Attempting to demonstrate the concept of human freedom is comparable, according to existentialists, to trying to establish the existence of humanity. Existentialists, particularly Sartre, perceive freedom as distinct from the capacity to attain success or acquire desired possessions. It is necessary to point out to common sense that the formula to be free does not mean obtaining what one wishes for, but rather determining oneself to wish. In other words, success is not essential to freedom (Sartre, 1993, p.481). Therefore, the existentialist concept of freedom prioritises the capacity to desire and make choices freely rather than focusing on the actual outcome as the objective of freedom. Humans are inherently destined to be accessible because they are in a concrete state or circumstance. Sartre asserts that humans bear immense responsibility for the universe and their existence under their freedom. Moreover, this total responsibility is not a form of giving up; it is merely a rational need resulting from the outcomes of our liberty. Every event that occurs in life belongs to the self. Therefore, life has no random occurrences (Sartre, 1993, pp.553-554).

Sartre argues that man is condemned because he cannot make himself and is thrust into the world. However, he bears full responsibility for his actions once he is introduced to the world. Freedom is the ultimate good in Sartre's ethical philosophy and political thought. Human beings possess the freedom to make choices. To exist is to make choices that define one's own identity. Nothing is imposed upon it externally or internally that it can accept passively. In any circumstance, individuals face the necessity of making a decision, and even the act of not making a decision is itself a choice. If a person possesses freedom, they bear sole responsibility for their choices. If a man is experiencing anger, it is because

he has deliberately chosen to be furious. Sartre argues that man can even decide his moods and conditions. Human beings bear full responsibility for their decisions. It is not permissible to provide excuses. One's decision does not offer any means of escape. Sartre argues that freedom is inherently limitless and that the only restriction on one's freedom is freedom itself (Sartre, 1993, p. 439).

Existential literature depicts characters wrestling with the significance of their decisions and the consequences of their behaviour. The subsequent paragraphs examine Sartre's use of the concepts of responsibility and freedom in his literary work, *No Exit*. *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre "is centrally important both as a crucial text applying the philosophical precepts that dominated the post-world War II era and as a formulation of a new kind of drama that significantly influenced the theatre in the second half of the 20th century" (Mamboral, 2016, p.2). Sartre states that the play revolves around three main themes: relations with other people, encrustation, and freedom. When you hear the statement "hell is other people, I want you to keep this in mind" (Burt, 2007, p.411). Therefore, readers of Sartre typically interpret this play as a manifestation of various existential ideas and principles, including existence, essence, freedom, responsibility, and bad faith. The following paragraphs exclusively centre on the themes of freedom and responsibility and their portrayal in an existential work of literature.

Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, characters in Sartre's *No Exit*, are trapped in an empty chamber in hell for eternity by a Valet upon their deaths. Initially, each of the three individuals rejects any responsibility for any sins or wrongdoings that may have led to their imprisonment in this location. Subsequently, Inez implores the other two individuals to cease lying and admit that they are responsible for the terrible situation of facts. Inez acknowledges that her actions are not influenced or controlled by any external force, including God. Consequently, she believes confessing her wrongdoings and accepting the ensuing accountability is preferable. However, Garcin and Estelle are unwilling to take the weight of guilt and avoid admitting their misdeeds for a while. The clash of viewpoints is crucial to the play's progression, as it highlights the interactions between willingness and freedom and responsibility and suffering on the other. This interplay is only possible if one believes in the absence of God. Nietzsche argues, "As long as God exists, a subject

which overcomes itself cannot come into being” (Lackey, 1999, p.473). The belief in divine providence, encompassing God’s oversight, control, and decree over all things, implies that human freedom is negated and absolves individuals of all responsibility for their actions. From an analogical perspective, experiencing freedom and bearing the weight of duty serve as conclusive indications that God no longer exists. It is important to note that in this context, the death of God does not mean the rejection or denial of God (Foale, 2000, p.74). Instead, it is an ethical obligation that enables “rationality ... to be man’s proper nature through which he frees himself from prejudice and false opinion in the pursuit of the true and the good” (Roney, 2013, p.95). Therefore, Inez requests that Garcin and Estelle engage in a conversation as free individuals who recognise their belief in the absence of a higher power and prepare them to accept the consequences of their actions since the nature of human existence and authenticity necessitates the adoption of such a mindset. Following the overarching principles of human life, as described by Sartre, Inez, Garcin, and Estelle commence the process of admitting their wrongdoings, which unavoidably entails affirming their conviction in the nonexistence of God. They display hesitation and wariness while engaging in that game-like action, but they have ultimately been compelled to define themselves through their unsettling connection. They engage in free conversation, providing each other with the tools to inflict torment. The three characters torture one another by direct harassment or indirect reminders of their ability to choose whether or not to commit their crimes, emphasising that their freedom of choice renders them accountable for the violations they have committed.

The game-like interplay between Inez, Garcin, and Estelle arises from their mutual conviction in the absence of God. Interestingly, the characters’ conviction in the nonexistence of God allows them to experience the delight of exercising freedom; at the same time, it will enable them to fill the void left by God’s absence. Susan Foale explains that Nietzsche suggests that after killing God, man desires to surpass his limitations and take the place of God, thus assuming the role of the divine language (Foale, 2000, p.73). This perspective elucidates the reason behind Inez, Garcin, and Estelle’s persistent confession of their transgressions despite the torment of revealing their wrongdoings or offences in front of others. In *No Exit*,

God's death is the fundamental basis for the absolute liberation that Garcin, Inez, and Estelle enjoy. Within *No Exit*, the concept of God's death is an encouragement for human productivity and inspiration. It inspires individuals to establish their sense of existence based on their perspectives rather than relying on overarching histories like the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an. Although attempting to guide human affairs, these narratives inadvertently limit human creativity and freedom. To summarise, existential literature, as demonstrated in Sartre's *No Exit*, explores the themes of freedom and responsibility, emphasising the philosophical belief that individuals are inherently bound to be free in a universe devoid of a higher power. The characters in Sartre's work, confined to a room indefinitely, represent the unavoidable existence of freedom and the consequent obligation that each individual must accept for their decisions. This inquiry highlights the fundamental principle of Existentialism, which states that humans are responsible for navigating the challenges and opportunities of freedom without supernatural guidance. They must create their own identity through genuine and accountable actions.

1.4. Mortality and the Search for Meaning in Existential Literature

Mortality is a significant subject in existential writing, acting as a profound cause for contemplating existence and living authentically. This theme emphasises the limited duration of human life, forcing characters to face the unavoidable reality of death and its consequences for their lives. Contemporary literature digs into the existential examination of mortality, uncovering the profound concerns and philosophical investigations that characterise the human experience. This analysis will explore how contemporary authors explore mortality, highlighting the eternal significance of existential themes and their influence on modern storytelling and character growth. Additionally, they examine the perspectives of existential philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, who consider mortality a fundamental aspect of the human condition. These philosophers emphasise the concept of being toward death. Furthermore, it illustrates modern writing through Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, and explores the depiction of death in this literary piece.

Literature provides various perspectives on death, dying, and mortality. One might argue that death is highly advantageous to literature. The novels utilise death as a narrative tool to evoke emotional responses, provide unexpected plot developments, build suspense, and generate enigmatic elements for the readers. Moreover, a profound and inherent link between mortality and narrative appears. Life and death allow us to share narratives, which often include an element of deception due to their storytelling nature. These narratives may sometimes make more sense than the ordinary reality of life and its eventual conclusion. Strubel regards storytelling as an existential act of the most significant importance in our lives. Storytelling aids us in preserving a semblance of order and temporarily creates the illusion that death does not exist. Literary depictions of death encompass more than just the portrayal of the physical act of dying or personal grief. Instead, death is a broader canvas for many projections, dreams, and metaphors related to social issues. Literature explores the concept of death by employing metaphors and character portrayals. Karl S. Guthke claims that Western art and folklore have opted to anthropomorphise the abstract notion of death despite the presence of various other options. Guthke claims that by personifying death and its victims, death inherently takes on a gendered identity as a cultural creation. Given that death is a widespread theme, it is inevitable for it to be portrayed in a victimised manner in these works. Guthke argues that in Western societies, both males and females have been represented as death figures. However, there has been a shift in popularity towards female death figures, especially throughout the twentieth century (Guthke, 1999, p.173).

Heidegger perceives man as a being to death. In his book *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents death as a phenomenon that helps the self achieve genuine existence; within his inauthentic state of being, the self disperses itself through a preoccupied engagement with objects. Consequently, as long as humans are alive, they remain incomplete, fragmented, and challenging to reintegrate into their entirety (Heidegger, 1962, p.276). Iwuagwu says, “Heidegger sees death as the phenomenon which helps us to gather man back from his dispersion into wholeness” (Heidegger, 1962, p.37). Death confronts the self with its ultimate possibility of existence. According to Heidegger, dying is not simply an event that

happens to a person at the end of their life. Instead, it is how a person exists. Man is a being constantly moving towards death, starting from the day they are born and continuing throughout their existence. Sartre does not conform to this. According to Sartre, death exists beyond our current circumstances and capabilities. An external force affects us and turns us into something external. During our existence, our freedom is rendered impotent in the face of death, which originates externally from ourselves. While Heidegger describes the self as a state of existence that is oriented towards death and views death as the ultimate potentiality of the self and one of the possibilities for humans, Sartre argues against the idea that we can experience death in a specific setting since death cannot be considered as one of our potentialities. This notion is because having possibilities implies having options, but being dead entails having no options. This statement suggests that death represents the boundary or limit of freedom. According to Sartre, death is the annihilation of potential and exists beyond what is possible (Sartre, 1993, p.534). The absurdity of death lies in the lack of control over the timing, location, and circumstances of one's mortality. Frequently, death arrives abruptly and unexpectedly, causing one's goals or aspirations to shatter. Death signifies a complete extinction of all desires. The for-itself, also known as freedom, is an enduring anticipation, while death means the termination of all anticipations. According to Sartre, the for-itself or liberty ceases to permanently exist when death becomes present (Sartre, 1993, p.540). Like other inherent aspects of existence, death represents the ultimate constraint on an individual's autonomy. The concept of death is beyond the comprehension of consciousness or freedom, as it signifies the absence of the self. Upon death, the conscious self transforms into an unconscious being, losing its state of nothingness and becoming an object.

McCarthy's dystopian novel, *The Road*, depicts the struggle for survival of a father and son in a desolate and inhospitable world. The main protagonists live in a condition almost devoid of hope, as the harsh weather and food scarcity have jeopardised all possibilities of existence. Consequently, many survivors have turned to murder as a method to stay alive. The boy's mother commits suicide as a means of resolving her sadness, while the father chooses to persist in living and caring for his son while enduring ongoing hardship. The duo decide to travel

towards the coastline for a milder climate. Nevertheless, persisting to reside in their current location will result in exposing the youngster to the dreadful experiences of famine and murder. The father's poor health contributes to his problem, bringing him closer to death. This impending demise leaves his child abandoned and vulnerable to the challenges of their environment. The father holds a massive burden of responsibility for living, leading him to question life's value. Although the mother believes that suicide is logical and justifiable in the face of such a catastrophe, the father and son choose to persist and endure their difficult circumstances together.

In response to the horrors of starvation and cannibalism, the mother's awareness of the meaninglessness of life compels her to reject life entirely. Camus asserts that the profound need of the mind, even in its most complex processes, mirrors the unconscious sentiment of humans when confronted with their universe: it is a persistent yearning for familiarity and a hunger for lucidity (Camus, 2000, p.17). The mother desires unity and coherence amid a lack of purpose, although she acknowledges that she will never attain such ideals. Instead of considering living in a world of post-apocalyptic disorder, the mother becomes devoid of the desire to continue living and expresses her want for eternal nothingness with utmost sincerity. Devoid of belief in God and lacking any expectation of an afterlife, she faces the inherent lack of purpose in life and her inability to control the irrationality of existence. She articulates her existential crisis in her last confrontation with her spouse, demonstrating her endeavour to employ logic in the face of absurdity. She doubts the possibility of survival as she interrogates her husband in response to his assertion that they are survivors. She inquires, "What exactly do you mean by that? We are not individuals who have successfully endured or outlasted a complex or challenging situation. We are like the undead in a horror movie." She desires to terminate her life physically before enduring torment and suffering, as death has already befallen her. Perceiving life's lack of purpose and despair, and "in a universe stripped of illusions and illumination, humans experience a sense of being foreign, unfamiliar. The individual's exile is irreparable since they are devoid of the recollection of a forsaken abode or the anticipation of a forthcoming territory" (Camus, 1956, p.6).

Human beings yearn for unity, a feeling of coherence, due to their recognition of the folly of existence, yet they will ultimately be unable to attain it. Unexpectedly, the individual becomes aware that existence ultimately ends in mortality and that there is no existence after death awaiting them, resulting in a profound feeling of complete despair. In response to the crisis, Camus examines two primary existential options: suicide or continuing to live (Camus, 2000, pp.6-7). Choosing to end one's life through suicide might be seen as a comprehensible choice, as it signifies an acknowledgement that life has become overwhelming or incomprehensible. One possible response to the absurd, which some may consider extreme, is to reject and give up on life entirely. Camus's core inquiry revolves around the reason behind the persistence of individuals in living their lives despite their recognition of the inherent meaninglessness of existence. Meaning is a significant property that humans assign to various aspects of the world, including natural disasters, art, relationships, financial assets, as well as sentences, judgements, values, and nature. The concept of meaning is widely recognized as a powerful driving force in various domains, including public health, work, education, politics, and leadership (Morrison et al., 2007, p.75). Experiencing a sense of purpose and significance is crucial in promoting well-being and health (Steger, 2009, p. 80). Philosophers and psychologists have formulated ideas regarding the meaning of life, which can be understood on an individual level and in a broader sense. Several researchers have explored these views, such as Battista and Almond (1973), Cottingham (2003), and Glaw (2016). A commonly recognized threefold definition of meaning in life includes purpose (having specific goals to strive for or deriving advantages from particular events), significance (feeling a sense of value or importance), and coherence (experiencing a feeling of understanding and order in the world and one's own experiences) (Edwards and Tongeren, 2019, p. 722). The subsequent paragraphs present the notion of the pursuit of meaning as a crucial motif in existential philosophy while also mentioning notable existentialists associated with this particular issue. Additionally, a literary example explores this theme vividly.

The concept of existential meaning should be differentiated from the notion of value. A meaningful life is subjectively valued, where the individual believes

living such a life is valuable. Existential meaning is not always linked to the outward attribution of value to life, particularly in socio-economic terms. For example, one could argue that a meaningful life does not necessarily equate to a wealthy or highly productive life in financial terms. An individual not deemed productive in a socio-economic context may lead a personally rewarding and meaningful life. A meaningful life is internally valued and assessed by the individual living it. While external appraisals of human life and its significance may hold some importance, it is crucial to recognize that life cannot be deemed truly important unless the individual is living that life personally holds this belief. Hence, external sources' attribution of worth and significance to human life is less important than the internal conviction that one's life has meaning. This internal sense of meaning is primary and essential for existential significance. Whether internal or individual meaning alone is enough to constitute a meaningful life is a matter of philosophical contemplation.

A sense of nothingness characterizes Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. It signifies that within the context of the drama, existence lacks meaning or is devoid of meaning. The actions of the two significant characters demonstrate their inactivity and passivity as they wait for the arrival of Godot, a character who does not appear until the end of the play. They eagerly anticipate his arrival, hoping to attain Enlightenment and experience profound satisfaction. However, Godot himself is an enigmatic entity that remains unknown to all. While waiting, they frequently engage in disagreements, attempt suicide without success, and make efforts to escape the location but remain still. In the Greek mythological story, as narrated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternal punishment of repeatedly pushing a stone up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom every time he reached the top. Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus characterizes him as an essential absurd hero, embodying the essence of an absurd existence. Sisyphus's absurdity is evident in his unwavering dedication and enduring torment, as well as his eternal destiny of perpetually labouring on a task that can never be completed: "The Gods had condemned Sisyphus to perpetually push a boulder to the summit of a mountain, only for it to roll back down due to its weight inevitably" (Camus, 1956, p.396). This means that, as long as one

acknowledges that life is nothing more than an absurd fight, the ridiculous struggle can be defined as the repetitive task of rolling a large rock to the peak of a mountain, only for it to fall again and again. Despite this, one can still find satisfaction in this effort. The absence of any penalty is more horrible than engaging in labour that is both fruitless and hopeless. Therefore, Sisyphus embodies the quintessential ludicrous hero and his punishment is a metaphor for the universal human condition.



2. ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN *THE ORANGE GIRL* BY JOSTEIN GAARDER

2.1. Exploration of Identity

The Orange Girl by Jostein Gaarder is a thought-provoking story that explores profound philosophical concepts like identity, freedom, responsibility, and mortality. Gaarder's novel leads readers on an introspective journey as they follow the protagonist, Georg, who uncovers the enigmas of his father's history through a sequence of letters. This story resembles the fundamental principles of existentialist philosophy. The novel explores scientific, intellectual, and spiritual topics, focusing on contemplation rather than providing definitive answers to issues about existence. The plot revolves around Georg, a fifteen-year-old adolescent who stumbles upon a letter addressed to him, written by his deceased father, Jan Olav, almost ten years ago. Unexpectedly, the mother finds it behind the pushchair; this letter assumes the function of a dead message, enabling Georg to gain insight into his father's character in an unattainable manner. The primary objective of his father's correspondence is to relay to Georg the narrative of the mysterious Orange girl, whom Georg's father diligently sought in both Oslo and Seville and to compel him to unravel this perplexing riddle. His deceased father persistently urges him to unravel the enigma from beyond the grave. Georg develops a fixation on uncovering the girl's identity. He ultimately unravels the puzzle when he comprehends that this mysterious girl is none other than his mother.

Jostein Gaarder first made significant contributions to the fields of philosophy and theology through his publications in textbooks. In 1986, he released his first book, *The Diagnosis and Other Stories*. Subsequently, he authored two literary works targeting young readers before releasing *The Solitaire Mystery*, which garnered the prestigious 1990 Norwegian Literary Critics Award and the Ministry of Cultural and Scientific Affairs' Literary Prize. Gaarder achieved international renown by publishing his much-acclaimed book, *Sophie's World*, in 1991. *Sophie's World*, his inaugural book translated into English, achieved the highest sales in Germany, France, and Great Britain. *Sophie's World*, released in 1995, achieved global success by being translated into forty-four languages and

becoming the best-selling book worldwide. Additional books by the author include *The Frog Castle* (1988), *The Christmas Mystery* (1992), *Bibbi Bokkens Magic Library* (1993), *Through a Glass, Darkly* (1993), and *Hello? Is anybody there?* (1996). The following works are also by the author: *Brief Life, That Same Flower* (1996), *Maya* (1999), *The Ringmaster's Daughter* (2001), *Checkmate* (2006), and *The Yellow Dwarves* (2006).

Jostein Gaarder has written many books that have garnered criticism from multiple critics. Since its debut in English in 2004, *The Orange Girl* has been acknowledged for exploring the profound wonder of the world, although subtly and delicately. Mikhail Bakhtin asserts that the writer possesses exceptional skill in conveying narratives with great subtlety. He writes, "Gaarder takes the most ordinary happenings and magically writes about them, creating a truly refreshing tale" (Bakhtin, 2006, p.34). Similarly, other reviewers argue that *The Orange Girl* explores themes such as alienation, mortality, and mysticism, which have received extensive debate since the aftermath of the World Wars. John Thieme asserts that "the narration of the forthcoming death of Jan Olav is the representation of alienation of modern man" (Thieme, 2003, p.64). From an individual's perspective, the theme of *The Orange Girl* suggests that it is a story about a contemporary person's isolation from society.

The Orange Girl explores identity in depth. The sensitive and revealing letters George receives from his dead father, Jan-Olav, accelerate his quest for self-discovery. These letters document Jan Olav's passionate quest for the mysterious Orange Girl and compel Georg to comprehend and establish his sense of self in connection with his father's encounters. This trip aligns with Sartre's concept of existentialism, which posits that individuals must create their own identities via their choices and actions rather than being defined by assigned roles.

The novel also explores the intrinsic freedom and responsibility of being human. Georg wrestles with the liberty to interpret and react to his father's death, exemplifying Sartre's concept of absolute freedom, where each action is evidence of one's independence. However, this freedom comes with a significant sense of responsibility, as Georg must manage the expectations established by his father's

story and his ambitions. The dynamic relationship between freedom and responsibility highlights the existential weight of determining one's fate in the face of the impact of previous experiences and the unpredictability of what lies ahead. The concept of mortality is significant in *The Orange Girl*, as the story contains reflections on life and death. Jan Olav's letters engage in a hypothetical conversation with Georg, challenging him to face the truth of death and the briefness of life. Georg's experience of death leads him to search for significance and coherence that transcends his father's bodily passing, coinciding with Camus' notion of the absurd and the human impulse to discover meaning in a seemingly senseless world.

The Orange Girl encapsulates the existentialist exploration of living with authenticity and purpose through its intricate storytelling and profound character growth. By applying this philosophical perspective, we can better understand how Gaarder explores the fundamental inquiries regarding one's sense of self, autonomy, accountability, and mortality in his work. This analysis finally emphasises the lasting significance of existentialist ideas in contemporary literature. The following paragraphs explore three primary existentialist themes present in *The Orange Girl*. The first theme revolves around exploring identity, explicitly highlighting the transformative experiences that George and his father undergo, revealing crucial aspects of their true identities. The second theme explores the notion of freedom of choice and the corresponding obligations that accompany this freedom. The last theme explores mortality and examines how George's acceptance of his father's death influences his understanding of the meaning of life. Jostein Gaarder skilfully presents several facets of identity exploration in the character of George and his father, Jan-Olav, in *The Orange Girl*. The idea manifests itself in the story through three primary approaches to identity. First, George experiences a transformation in his identity throughout the novel due to his decisions and experiences, mainly after he reads his father's letter, which connects to Sartre's concept of existence preceding essence. Secondly, relationships are essential under the existential concept of intersubjectivity, which explores how interactions with others affect personalities and profoundly influence the characters. The final feature discussed within this topic is the temporal

transitions of existential time, specifically between the past and present in the story. These aspects emphasise identity's fluidity and the existential character of time.

In *The Orange Girl*, Sartre's idea that existence precedes essence is examined via Jan Olav's inquiry to find his true love and self-discovery. Sartre confirmed that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world — and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre, 1956, p. 14), which means that we create the essence of our existence by the free decisions we make in life and that our existence comes first. According to Sartre, the decisions and actions we accomplish construct our worth. Because of this, inanimate objects are not like human beings. Given that the essence of inanimate objects is what gives rise to their creation and existence. On the other hand, humans are responsible for their decisions and subsequent behaviours and are aware of their existence, which shapes their essence. The father tries to captivate his son's imagination and existential discovery by proposing an idea of how the World has been before any evidence of human development and any form of interference from any external authority. "I'm talking about the time when a human being was a human being, a complete and proud human being, no more and no less" (Gaarder, 2004, p.114). This quote affirms existentialism's first and fundamental principle, which states that man exists as he is. His self-perception does not just define him, but rather his intentions and how he envisions himself once he already exists - how he desires to be after deciding to exist.

Regarding the earlier idea, The father's character further emphasises the character of the son and the notion that existence precedes essence by drawing a direct comparison to the universe. Gaarder uses the universe as a metaphor since it is the most easily understandable representation compared to the Human World. "The physical development of human beings necessarily had to precede the psychological. Perhaps the physical nature of the universe is merely a necessary external material for its self-awareness" (Gaarder, 2004, p.109). In this context, existentialism asserts its purpose as a means of reverting to the material and visible aspects of existence. The concepts of existence and being are not synonymous. As Sartre stated, stones have existence, but they cannot function independently without the mental activity that gives form to their being (Sartre, 1956, p.73).

Jostein Gaarder also refers to another central concept in existentialism: existence precedes essence in his novel by making the father pose questions to both the reader and his son that prompt reflection on the true nature of humanity and its origins. In the novel Jan- Olav asks his son, “Who are we who live here? Every person in the plaza was like a living treasure full of thoughts and memories, dreams and desires” (Gaarder, 2004, p.81). When Jan Olav questions each person’s unique journey, he references Sartre’s idea that people do not have an innate or shared essence or value; instead, they are born and then build their essence. Staring attentively at the individuals in the plaza, Jan Olav realised that every individual have a distinct route, which leads the protagonist to contemplate and examine his own since he, too, had his path, aspirations, experiences, and desires. “I was engrossed in my own little life on earth, but that applied to everyone else in the plaza as well” (Gaarder, 2004, p.81). This quote highlights the notion that many individuals mistakenly believe that their own lives and experiences are unique and worth telling, whereas, in reality, every person has distinct experiences that hold significant personal significance. Existentialism seeks to communicate that despite life’s apparent radical nature, it inherently holds genuine importance for every individual. According to Flynn, Sartre argues that as each person experiences life uniquely and independently, that individual alone is ultimately accountable for their deeds (Flynn, 2012, p.12).

Gaarder further examines the concept of identity by exploring the existential theme of intersubjectivity, which primarily focuses on how our relationships with others influence and mould our sense of self. Intersubjectivity was initially introduced in *The Fifth Meditation* by Husserl. In this book, Husserl explicates the central concept of intersubjectivity as the recognition of others through perceiving them. However, how can they be identified? Furthermore, what is to be recognised? Husserl endeavoured to identify a solution to these two questions. The individual I identify in the Other is essentially a reflection of myself in terms of my mannerisms and conduct, as recognition is established by the resemblance of the Other’s visible actions to the self. The actions taken by the Other result in establishing connections and relationships that ultimately profoundly influence all parties concerned. George undergoes a profound change

in his thinking and behaviours throughout the story.

If I'd learnt anything from my father, it was that I had no right to meddle in things that didn't concern me. I had to be careful not to get too close to a fairytale whose rules didn't include me (Gaarder, 2004, p.143).

George established a connection with his deceased father through his letters and words. The relationship influenced George's perception of himself and demonstrated how human interactions go beyond direct engagement to alter one's existential perspective. In addition, the narrator employs an omniscient first-person point of view to utilise projection, a narrative model of intersubjectivity. Projection encompasses artistic techniques that enable the narrator to fully convey the character's thoughts and internal moods. Projection also creates a narrative that provides a complete understanding of the character and the environment, instead focusing on a small portion of reality as perceived through the character's perspective. This concept is evident in *The Orange Girl*, where the narrator discusses various human experiences and their potential impact on those around us.

The most infectious thing I know is laughter. But sorrow can also be contagious. Fear is different. It isn't as communicable as laughter or sadness, and a good thing too. Fear is almost entirely a lonely thing (Gaarder, 2004, p.120).

In this quotation, Jan-Olav aims to transmit to his child the significance of fully embracing one's emotions while also drawing attention to the equal influence of emotions on ourselves and others. The quote begins by making a broad statement about the various emotions people experience and how these emotions might affect others. It then goes on to focus on a specific emotion experienced by individuals. Emphasises the existential concept of exploring one's identity through profound introspection, which can result in a distinctive and individualised personal experience. By engaging in thorough analysis and connecting the events, one might grasp the significance of Jan-Olav's consistent teachings to his son in his letter. George, who is currently thirteen years old, is in the process of exploring and understanding the World. Given his age and stage of development, he would greatly

benefit from the guidance and support of a father figure. George appears to struggle with interpersonal relationships with those of the opposite gender, as he openly expresses. “I have no idea how I’d react if she suddenly held my hand and looked me deep into the eyes. I don’t know what I’d do if she began to cry, either” (Gaarder, 2004, p.37). By diving into the characters’ psychological condition and actions, one gains a comprehensive knowledge of George’s journey of self-exploration, facilitated by his bond with his father. Furthermore, this example demonstrates that projection, represented as a matrix that allows access to the character’s consciousness within the narrative structure, does not coincide with the limited knowledge possessed by the narrator.

The final notion explored in the novel on the search for identity is the usage of time and the transitions between the past and present employed by the author. Throughout the story, the main character goes on a profound journey, experiencing continuous shifts between the past and present. This journey establishes the act of reading the letter, symbolising the third line that links George to his deceased father. “You couldn’t understand that the letter was for you. And I found it strange, too, thinking that one day you might perhaps read it. Time, George. What is time?” (Gaarder, 2004, p.124). In this quote, the father describes the moment he was sitting and writing a letter to his child, who will eventually read it. Nevertheless, the father was primarily wondering about the upcoming future and whether the boy would have the opportunity to read his father’s current written work. The remark demonstrates that the father is not questioning the current situation but is wondering what will come. “Time has been an endless source of perplexity mostly due to its elusive nature” (Fedosova, 2015, p.77). Fedosova’s assertion regarding the elusive nature of time relates to Jan-Olav’s incapacity to anticipate or guarantee that his son will have the chance to read the letter and George’s quest to uncover his future by exploring his father’s past. In literature, modifying time is a primary technique for crafting distinctive and innovative narrative routes, such as time travel and temporal changes.

The father’s letter symbolises the journey from the past to the present, as it is a shared object in both dimensions. George decides to work with his father on a book, using the same computers his father used a decade ago to write the letter. “I

could open the old document and type straight into it, before, in the middle of, and after, my dad's text. Then I would really feel as if I was writing a book with Dad" (Gaarder, 2004, p.140). Regardless of the different temporal dimensions in which the father wrote the letter. Both the son and the father were able to establish a means of communication using a permanent inanimate object that outlasts human lifespans. This relationship would not have been conceivable without the existence of time. As Tymieniecka states, "Time is mainly a network surrounding the human" (Tymieniecka, 2007, p.275). This quote clarifies how George can discover specific elements of his identity through the network (Time) that surrounded his father in the past and today surrounding him.

The Hubble Space Telescope also functioned as a bridge symbol between the past and present. Since its creation, this telescope has represented a significant advancement for humanity in pursuing knowledge and exploring the unknown. The satellite is mentioned multiple times throughout the story, primarily as a shared passion between George and his father. "And so it wasn't so odd any more that both Dad and I had been interested in the Hubble Space Telescope. I'd inherited my interest from him" (Gaarder, 2004, p.131). Throughout his growing up, George has been captivated by the telescope. However, he has never been able to ascertain the precise cause of his fascination. After experiencing the shifts of time, he gained a clear understanding of the reason behind the existence of this aspect of his identity. The Hubble Space Telescope is an object that has existed in the past and continues to exist in the present. It serves as a literary metaphor that represents the passage of time and facilitates the exploration of identity. Ricoeur says time is complex beyond measuring days, months, and years. It encompasses perception, identity, and culture (Ricoeur, 1984, p.223). This notion underscores the significance of employing The Hubble Space Telescope as a metaphor beyond its literal function in this literary composition to convey the concept of bridging two distinct historical periods and relating it to the process of self-discovery.

2.2. The Concept of Freedom and Responsibility

Existential philosophy centres around the concept of freedom. By exercising free will, the human can construct their reality. Existentialist thinkers assert that a

state of being characterises man's existence. He possesses the ability to determine his desires and is accountable for all of his choices. Consequently, his acts and decisions are what solely define him. The ability for self-formation empowers the individual to shape and refine their character, and by their choices and deeds, they establish their values. As Sartre puts it, "My freedom is perpetually in question in my being; It is not a quality added-on or property of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being" (Sartre, 2007, p.566). In other words, freedom does not require proof or debate. It is an undeniable fact that one must personally encounter. Human beings possess a significant amount of freedom they can access if they take advantage of it. Freedom is an exceptional pursuit that involves recognising and fulfilling the needs of one's innate existence and manifesting one's genuine identity. Freedom consists of facing options, formulating judgements, and embracing them.

This theme is present throughout the novel through the characters' consistent decision-making and the subsequent burden of the consequences that come with those choices. Jan-Olav experienced a critical moment of determined action, where, in a state of euphoria, he swiftly made a choice that often requires significant contemplation due to its importance. "I tumbled in and announced that I was going to be married" (Gaarder, 2004, p.75). This action occurred due to two factors. First, Jan-Olav possessed a high degree of independence in his surroundings, which enabled him to express his decisions openly and freely. The second factor is his psychological state at the time. The surge of the endorphin hormone greatly facilitated his decision-making process. However, this decision lacks mindfulness and profound thought, resulting in his immediate remorse the moment he said it. "My brain stopped producing endorphins altogether, and I wasn't euphoric any longer. I understood nothing. I understood less than I'd ever done" (Gaarder, 2004, p.75).

The instant Jan-Olav regains consciousness is the cause of the sense of responsibility accompanying every freely made decision. "as soon as consciousness emerges, responsibility necessarily follows" (Bautista, 2015, p.24). In his work *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre presents a parallel notion to the sense of responsibility that Jan-Olav experienced to elucidate the concept of the

responsibility that individuals have, even in the context of their decision-making. “even though such decisions proceed simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire. I am thereby committing not only myself but humanity as a whole” (Sartre, 1948, p.24). Jan-Olav’s attitude of responsibility towards others becomes evident when he subsequently experiences a significant burden and tells his son. “I almost feel a sense of guilt that I was partly responsible for bringing you into the world” (Gaarder, 2004, p.127). This line affirms the subsequent outcomes that resulted from his first decision to marry the orange girl during a moment of euphoria. However, these sequential events and the accompanying feelings of guilt and responsibility would not have occurred if Jan-Olav had not possessed a sense of freedom that enabled him to live through this experience. George inherits the same sense of freedom that his father experienced during his lifetime. Jan-Olav presents his son with a hypothetical inquiry, asking what he would select if given the opportunity:

What would you have chosen if you’d had the chance? Would you have elected to live a short span on Earth only to be wrenched away from it all, never ever to return? Or would you have said no, thank you? (Gaarder, 2004, p.127).

While the answer to this question may be hypothetical and not applicable, George’s response is influenced by the existential thoughts expressed in his father’s letter and his personal experience of freedom. After careful contemplation and self-reflection, he has arrived at his answer and choice. “I choose life. I choose the little patch of Good that is allocated to me, and maybe there is even a being who might be called the Good one” (Gaarder, 2004, p.147). Thus, George chooses existence and links his decision to the limited positive aspects of life. For him, this positivity is the driving force behind his desire to continue living, even though he had no control over being born and despite his father’s burden of guilt. Sartre asserts that when deciding between two options simultaneously, humans affirm the superiority of the chosen option, as they are incapable of intentionally selecting the worse one. Human beings’ selection is consistently the better option, and nothing can be good for us until it is suitable for everyone (Sartre, 1943, p.20). George’s decision has proven beneficial not only for himself but also for his father. Now, his father can

be reassured that his initial choice to look for the orange girl, fall in love with her, marry her, and bring George into the World is not something he should feel guilty about or regret. Ultimately, George desires all of these circumstances to occur to lead the life he currently enjoys despite the sorrow he experiences as a result of his father's death.

Jan-Olav experiences a persistent sense of remorse following nearly every decision he makes throughout the story, mainly when the orange girl is there. He describes an emotional moment to his son, vividly remembering when he stood before the orange girl just as she prepared to leave. "I couldn't find the right words, George; there were far too many to choose from" Due to this stress, he goes on to say, "I think I'm in love with you!" (Gaarder, 2004, p.55). This statement emerges not alone due to the variety of options available to him presently but also because of his freedom, enabling him to select from these various possibilities. However, because of this radical freedom, he affirms the subsequent emotion that occurred. "I regretted it the moment I'd said it" (Gaarder, 2004, p.55). Human beings have the freedom to make choices. To exist is to actively select one's pathway; nothing is imposed upon it externally or internally that it can endure. In any circumstance, individuals have to decide, and even the act of not making a decision is still considered a choice. If a person possesses freedom, they bear sole responsibility for their choices. If a man is angry, he has consciously decided to be angry. Sartre argues that man can choose even his moods and conditions (Sartre, 1956, p.439). Human beings bear full responsibility for their decisions. It is not permissible to provide excuses. One's decision has no escape path, even following intense regret. It remains a choice.

George's sense of responsibility is apparent in his actions towards his mother. While reading his father's letter, she interrupts him by knocking on his door. Despite the interruption, he successfully tells her his father wrote about her. The mother abruptly bursts into tears in response to his words, although George remains clueless about the unexpected emotional reaction he has triggered. He says, "I couldn't tell what havoc I might have wreaked out there" (Gaarder, 2004, p.97). This quote implies a moment of reflection in which George acknowledges his independence and the profound influence his choices can have. It also aligns with

Sartre's concept of existentialism, which posits that humans have an inherent burden with the necessity of freedom. Humans have to make decisions, and these decisions ultimately determine the course of our existence. Nevertheless, the privilege of freedom accompanies the obligation of responsibility. The fact that George cannot anticipate the outcomes emphasises the weight of this obligation. He acknowledges that his activities can have unexpected and potentially detrimental consequences.

2.3. Mortality and the Meaning of Life

Throughout the novel, the characters experience Albert Camus's concept of absurdism and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. George and Jan-Olav discover and create meaning through reflection and their personal experiences. Additionally, the characters' encounter with death is evident, particularly in George's handling of his father's death, which highlights the broader existential theme of mortality. Within this theme lies the notion of legacy and continuity and how the father's letters serve as a way to exceed death and convey the significance of life. The concepts of absurdity and mortality are primarily interconnected, as absurdity is not confined to the human mind or the external environment but rather arises from mutual interaction. Death is the ultimate conclusion for all things, including the absurd. The term "absurd" refers to something characterised by an evident absence of reason, common sense, proportion, or conformity with accepted concepts. It refers to something that lacks logic or has logical contradictions, hence leaving it meaningless. Camus believed that the absurd originated from the inherent contradiction faced by humans in their inability to rationalise and explain their existence within the confines of human understanding. He asserts that the totality of reality is a unique challenge for humanity, as our capacity for reason forces us to constantly seek, examine, and analyse life as its whole. So Camus said, "...that odd state of the sour in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, it is as it were, the first sign of absurdity" (Camus, 1956, p.67).

In the novel, Jan-Olav must stick to specific rules set forth by the orange girl to maintain a relationship that lasts a lifetime. However, he perceives these

rules as lacking significance and chooses to break them. However, later on, he affirms that these rules must be followed regardless of how senseless they may appear. “But one isn’t allowed to ask about such things once one has been transported into the most wondrous dream world by the touch of a wand. One must simply accept the conditions, however incomprehensible they seem” (Gaarder, 2004, p.78). The word “conditions” in this remark represents the fundamental principles or guidelines that govern human existence, which individuals are obliged to conform to, even if they may appear meaningless or lacking significance. From this, it is evident that absurdity implies the absence of harmony or connection between two or more things. Consequently, the principles governing existence and comprehending the purpose of life. As Eric Fromm states, “breaking up of connecting links holding things together is an absurdity” (Fromm, 1969, p.85). Meaning and life are opposed. They similarly absorbed his father’s perspective on life through reading. George begins to comprehend the concept of life’s absurdity and develops his ideas about it.

Life is short for those who are indeed able to understand that one day the entire World will come to a complete end. Not everyone is capable of that. Not everyone has the ability to comprehend what going away for all eternity really implies. There are too many distractions, hour by hour, minute by minute, to hinder such an understanding (Gaarder, 2004, p.144).

George has realised that life can sometimes lack meaning, as everything one has invested can suddenly vanish. However, not everyone is capable of understanding or grasping this intricate concept. Martin Esslin already articulated the idea of emptiness by asserting that the World is absurd, signifying the absence of inherent meaning or purpose (Esslin, 1961, p.5). Nevertheless, Jan-Olav’s quest for meaning is about altering existence’s intrinsic irrationality. His infatuation with the orange girl is a metaphor for his pursuit of meaning in life before his death. He persists in pursuing her despite her rules and restrictions, reflecting the innate human compulsion to seek meaning in a world devoid of meaning. He writes to his son:

George, we have already agreed that we only need to follow the real clues about the orange girl. If I revealed all the thoughts and fancies I gradually wove around her. I'd have to sit at my computer for a whole year, and I haven't got that long (Gaarder, 2004, p.60).

After careful analysis, this quote discusses the excessive examination of life. Humans tend to construct their meanings of the World to find purpose, whether through religion, society, education, or other aspects of life. "People could not live without doing something, and they do what they consider that it must be done and what they love to do" (Radovan, 2020, p.50). However, Jan-Olav advises his son to focus solely on genuine evidence when searching for his meaning in life, as indulging in other illusions can lead to significant harm and prove pointless, given that humans are approaching the end of their existence sooner than expected. The meaning of life is not a preconceived notion but rather a realisation that an individual achieves through a journey of exploration initiated by the existence of human beings. The discovery journey is full of difficulties and challenges and undeniably problematic. However, with a sense of purpose, the anguish endured becomes justified. George, stirred by his father's remarks, pauses his reading and rises to his feet to immerse in a moment of reflection. While pausing, he gazes out the window and says:

It was still snowing hard. But that doesn't matter, I thought. Even if it's overcast on Earth, the Hubble Space Telescope can take crystal clear pictures of galaxies many billions of light years away from our own Milky Way (Gaarder, 2004, p.110).

This quote includes two symbolic representations of life's hardships and the spirit of determination that overcomes these challenges. Firstly, the snow and its accumulation on the ground symbolise the difficulties in life that gradually build up and hinder one's progress. The second symbol is the Hubble Space Telescope, which symbolises the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. This pursuit allows humans to gain a broader perspective on their lives and helps them stay focused on

their path. The telescope is a constant reminder of the greater purpose of existence and why individuals are here in the first place. The inherent quest for purpose and search for meaning cannot be disregarded when considering the outcome of everything, which is death. “The man who accepts his death may find in this experience a strong spur to making something of his life and may succeed in some accomplishment that robs him of the fear of death” (Kaufman, 1959, p.92). This assertion establishes the fundamental connection between the meaning or purpose of existence and death. Despite the inherent fear of mortality, it is the primary motivation for individuals to seek meaning throughout their limited time on Earth, even though it will eventually end. Mortality is an unavoidable reality that all individuals will inevitably face at some point. Mortality is the sole shared, unmanageable, global phenomenon every human encounters. As Tillich states, “From the moment of birth, one is in the process of dying. Nothingness, nonbeing, death is an ever-stalking threat waiting for that decisive point in time when it brutally hurls the living soul out of existence” (Tillich, 1952, p.45). Jan-Olav expresses to the Orange Girl, “We’re only in this world once” (Gaarder, 2004, p.104). He highlights the impossibility of gaining a second opportunity to experience life on this planet. He utters this sentence far in advance of the period when he begins to fall ill. This highlighting is a foreshadowing of his imminent acceptance of mortality and departure from his family. Separating from his family causes him significant anguish, which he expresses by emphasising that “there is so much here to leave! There is so very much we leave behind” (Gaarder, 2004, p.123). The primary consequence of death is the complete loss of an individual’s possessions and accomplishments, resulting in significant suffering. As Heidegger states:

Death does reveal itself as a loss, but rather as a loss experienced by the survivors. The suffering of this loss, however, does not furnish an approach to the loss of Being as such, which is suffered by the person who died. We do not experience in a genuine sense the dying of others but are at most always only present (Heidegger, 1959, p.239).

Hence, the loss that Jan-Olav is referring to may inflict significant anguish upon him during his current existence, but its significance will diminish when he ultimately leaves this World and experiences the event of death. Nevertheless, George and his family will continue to experience this profound anguish of bereavement for the duration of their lives. However, in this scenario, there is one factor that distinguishes it from a conventional death: the continued presence of the deceased father through a letter he left for his son. This letter serves as a symbol of legacy and continuity. The information and events detailed in this letter give George a deeper understanding of his deceased father. “In a way, you know me better than many others” (Gaarder, 2004, p.118), his father comments. This quote indicates that death may mark the cessation of life, but it does not signify the termination of human interactions or the mental emotions that humans experience towards one another. As Iwuagwu claims, “Death may terminate my physical existence; it cannot destroy the idea of me” (Iwuagwu, 2015, p.359).

3. AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN *EAT, PRAY, LOVE* BY ELIZABETH GILBERT

3.1. The Protagonist's Quest for Self-Discovery

As conveyed throughout the thesis, existentialism addresses the pursuit of meaning in a regularly absurd existence. However, Albert Camus discusses the concept of hopeful absurdity that lies under the surface. “Camus believed that, despite the limitations in perspective and the absurdity of life, humans can make decisions that lead to less suffering. This is not the eradication of evil; it is instead the work of humans to reduce suffering when they can” (White, 2006, p.557). This quote suggests that rather than eliminating evil, humans are responsible for minimising suffering wherever possible. The quote also highlights Camus’s optimistic perspective on absurdity, a theme explored by Elizabeth Gilbert in her book *Eat, Pray, Love* -which this chapter analyses. Gilbert sheds light on her protagonist’s challenges, who manages to triumph over them and discover her true self, refusing to succumb to despair and meaninglessness. The main character, Liz, experiences two major catastrophes that are among the most significant challenges a person may encounter: a complicated divorce and the subsequent emergence of depression.

Nevertheless, she persists and undertakes a solitary expedition lasting one year, attempting to discover her genuine identity. The first theme of this chapter examines Liz’s journey of self-discovery through the lens of two prominent existentialist concepts. The first concept is embracing absurdity and using crisis as a catalyst, as proposed by Albert Camus. The second concept is the notion of a leap of faith, as defined by Soren Kierkegaard.

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argued for the inherent pointlessness and fruitlessness of human existence, symbolised by the eternal punishment of Sisyphus. Condemned by the gods and their enforcement, Sisyphus endlessly push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom. He consistently and tirelessly attempts to wrap up the rock, but every time he succeeds, the rock returns and must begin over indefinitely. The concept of absurdity and the complete lack of purpose in a specific part of life applies to the

contemporary existence of human beings. Metaphorically speaking, how many attempts have you made to ascend a mountain by pushing a boulder uphill, only to have it repeatedly descend? How many attempts can you make to roll a rock up a hill before you stop? The answers to these questions lie in the protagonist's choice to abandon her marriage after several unsuccessful attempts to maintain it. After repeated attempts to repair the relationship, she ultimately decides she no longer wants to stay on this path. She says "I was trying so hard not to know this, but the truth kept insisting itself to me. I don't want to be married anymore." (Gilbert, 2006, p.10). The idea of ending her marriage has been ingrained in her mind, and she cannot dismiss it, as it did not arise suddenly. The persistent presence of this thought in her head is a clear indication of the mental suffering she experiences while attempting to make it succeed, which in itself is a sufficient kind of punishment. She realizes that "I had finally noticed that I seemed to have reached a state of hopeless and life-threatening despair" (Gilbert, 2006, p. 15), which signifies the extreme level of absurdity that demands salvation. As Camus states, "There is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless human endeavours" (Camus, 1956, p.75). Like Sisyphus, the main character endeavours to utilise the crisis she is experiencing to comprehend the purpose of her existence. She says, "I became a student of my own depressed experience, trying to unthread its causes" (Gilbert, 2006, p.51). This quote highlights the absurdity and hopelessness she is experiencing and employs Camus's concept of seeking meaning in a world lacking meaning. Recognising the absurdity of existence liberates individuals from the constraints of traditional knowledge and societal norms, empowering them to assert their autonomy and find significance in a seemingly meaningless universe.

Individuals who exercise this existential freedom are burdened with significant accountability for their choices and actions, as they are obligated to go through the complexities of life with integrity and genuineness. While the existential crisis may initially elicit sentiments of terror, pessimism, or nihilism, it also presents individuals with an opportunity to embrace their inherent freedom and determine their path despite the intrinsic meaninglessness of existence. Existentialism offers a profound perspective on human existence, wherein the

experience of an existential crisis acts as a catalyst for self-reflection, individual growth, and the pursuit of an authentic way of living. As Camus puts it, “One day, the Why arises, and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement” (Camus, 1956, p.10). After embracing the absurdity of life, Liz chooses to embrace other familiar areas of her life that she often engages in without any significant accomplishments. She thinks to herself:

So be lonely, Liz. Learn your way around loneliness. Make a map of it. Sit with it for once in your life. Welcome to the human experience. But never again use another person’s body or emotions as a scratching post for our own unfulfilled yearnings (Gilbert, 2006, p.68).

In this quotation, the main character consciously embraces her loneliness and confronts it rather than seek relationships to find satisfaction. This idea aligns with Camus’s concept of embracing the inherent absurdity of existence. “ The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Camus, 1956, p.123). Therefore, after acknowledging the absurdity, one must embrace a life filled with profound emotion and resistance towards it. Another aspect of existential exploration is the concept of Leap of Faith, which Soren Kierkegaard proposed. Kierkegaard defines a leap of faith as an individual’s personal and subjective decision to embrace faith and the unknown, even without solid rational proof. It entails deliberately dedicating oneself to a course of action or set of beliefs that go beyond rational thinking, frequently in uncertainty and caution. Kierkegaard stressed that this leap is not about irrationality but rather about acknowledging that many elements of life, particularly those requiring profound personal dedication and significance, cannot be wholly comprehended or justified based on reason alone. A direct correlation exists between the protagonist’s path of accepting absurdity and Kierkegaard existential characteristics. Firstly, she has journeyed to completely unfamiliar countries, and secondly, she has encountered new situations which she had never before experienced. From the very beginning of the story, Liz’s existence is characterised by infinite limitations and regulations that hinder her from uncovering her true identity. Subsequently, after accepting the

absurdity, she gradually liberates herself from these constraints, and her internal ideas start to astonish her. “I felt this weird division in myself, and my mind stepped out of my body for a moment. I spun around to face my heart in astonishment and silently asked, “YOU DO?” (Gilbert, 2006, p.26). This quotation is relevant to Kierkegaard’s notion of the subjectivity individuals undergo when they embrace the leap of faith and the internal differentiation that occurs inside them to perceive things in their most authentic form and from a distant perspective. According to Evans, “Kierkegaard believes that to live as an authentic self requires a leap. A leap beyond rational proof and evidence, a leap into the personal commitment of faith” (Evans, 2009, p.93). Here, Kierkegaard emphasises the significance of such a journey. Kierkegaard carefully suggests that the truth we passionately seek is beyond our preconceived notions of our comprehension of the world we inhabit. Subjective realities are inherently ongoing and constantly evolving as long as an individual remains alive. These truths are the foundations upon which we build our reality and modify the past falsehoods that humans often accept and adhere to without ever challenging them or encountering something of a distinct form.

The journey of self-discovery undertaken by Liz and the obstacles she encountered throughout this process would not have been possible without her initial decision to abandon all attachments, consequences, and hesitations and go on a singularly focused expedition. “The only thing more unthinkable than leaving was staying; the only thing more impossible than staying was leaving. I didn’t want to destroy anything or anybody. I just wanted to slip quietly out the back door, without causing any fuss or consequences, and then not stop running until I reached Greenland” (Gilbert, 2006, p.13). Leaving has always been challenging; regardless of one's efforts to do it meticulously, we always leave some remnants and imprints that clearly show our prioritisation of ourselves over all else. This concept is closely connected to Kierkegaard’s concept of transcending ourselves - or embracing freedom from all constraints - to uncover our authentic selves. “In order to swim, one takes off all one’s clothes- in order to aspire to the truth, one must undress in a far more inward sense, divest oneself of all one’s inward clothes, of thoughts, conceptions, selfishness, before one is sufficiently naked” (Kierkegaard, 1980, p.592). This quote emphasises the existential journey towards self-realization

as eliminating disingenuousness and embracing the unfamiliar. Kierkegaard's notion of stripping to pursue truth corresponds to Gilbert's aspiration to discreetly flee her life, thereby exposing a mutual recognition that authentic self-exploration frequently necessitates a bold venture into the unknown, surrendering oneself from the familiar yet insincere aspects of existence. Furthermore, it emphasises the need to be open and willing to face one's identity without being influenced by societal norms and personal expectations to attain a genuine life.

3.2. Freedom and Responsibility

Following the incidents mentioned earlier, the protagonist started a process of self-discovery to establish her identity. She began to exercise independence and also began to contemplate the significant consequences associated with each decision she took. From an existentialist perspective, Gilbert's choice to abandon her established life, including her marriage, home, and career, to travel the world and pursue greater understanding and satisfaction can be interpreted as a manifestation of freedom and an acknowledgement of the accompanying responsibility. As Sartre states, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 1943, p.143). This quotation emphasises the existential concept that freedom carries the unavoidable responsibility for one's actions. Gilbert's choice to end her marriage and abandon her previous lifestyle follows Sartre's notion of freedom: she acknowledges her capacity to exercise autonomy and embraces the weight of accountability that comes with such decisions. Within her memoir, Gilbert outlines four distinct phases she underwent before ultimately pursuing her independence.

The initial phase is characterised by tiredness, as the protagonist says, "I'm exhausted by the cumulative consequences of a lifetime of hasty choices and chaotic passions" (Gilbert, 2006, p.69) and the decision to get into a second relationship just after undergoing a divorce. She failed to allow herself to heal and instead actively engaged with another guy, although still recovering from the previous commitment. Furthermore, this underscores her acknowledgement of how her past choices have resulted in a condition of emotional and psychological exhaustion. Here, she is facing the unfortunate truth that her previous actions,

marked by hasty judgements and unbridled cravings, have led to a life that seems overwhelming and difficult to handle. This recognition is significant in existential philosophy, underscoring the need for individual accountability. Gilbert has both physical and existential exhaustion; she is tired of the burden of her previous decisions, acknowledging that she alone bears the responsibility for the present condition of her existence. This understanding is consistent with existentialist perspectives such as those of Jean-Paul Sartre, who contended that humans are destined to pursue freedom and must accept the consequences of their decisions (Sartre, 1943, p.150). With an awareness of the combined influence of her previous choices and the instability of her interests, Gilbert sets a process of profound change in motion. Eventually, she realises that attaining genuine freedom necessitates transcending impulsive choices and harmonising her life with her identity. The first stage is essential in establishing the groundwork for the subsequent significant transformations as she gradually assumes accountability for her life and embarks on a journey that provides her authentic satisfaction and peacefulness.

Within the second stage, Gilbert becomes aware of her complete autonomy as a human being, whereas all acts and obligations are solely her own. “You can let yourself off the hook anytime you want, Liz. That’s the divine contract of a little something we call free will” (Gilbert, 2006, p.173). This quotation implies that freedom is intrinsically linked to the ability to make choices. In this context, free will is shown as a sacred ability, underscoring the capacity of individuals to determine their paths and accomplish transformations in their lives at any given time. This notion is compatible with the existential concept that humans have an innate capacity to make decisions, consequently moulding their existence and identities. As MacQuarrie explains, “If freedom is almost identical to existence itself, there is no humanity without freedom. Freedom may be dangerous, but there is no human dignity without freedom, and the risk of increasing freedom must constantly be taken” (MacQuarrie, 1972, pp.180-181). Asserting that freedom is not only a characteristic of human existence but is inherently connected to the core of human nature. This assertion emphasises that freedom, despite its possible risks, is crucial for preserving human dignity and genuineness. It embodies the existential

conviction that individuals must consistently pursue their independence, regardless of the inherent dangers and obligations. Gilbert's acknowledgement of her capacity to make choices at any given moment demonstrates comprehension of individual accountability and the eternal essence of freedom. Furthermore, it elaborates on the need to wholeheartedly adopt this freedom, despite its apparent threats, to attain human dignity and genuineness. Eventually, Gilbert realises the next stage and the certainties necessary to achieve her freedom, an essential element of human existence that requires individuals to consistently balance choice, responsibility, and authenticity.

In the third stage, Gilbert begins to analyse her decisions and determine how much she may assume responsibility. She asks herself, "What are my choices? What do I believe that I deserve in this life? Where can I accept the sacrifice, and where can I not?" (Gilbert, 2006, p.88). The problems Gilbert presents demonstrate an inherent conflict in her ability to make significant decisions in her life. She faces her independence directly, enquiring if she genuinely deserves it and what compromises she is prepared to make. This insight is a profound realisation of one's fundamental nature, acknowledging that freedom is not just about having choices but about making decisions that are in harmony with one's identity. Furthermore, her contemplation of sacrifice refers to the fundamental consequences of every option, a recognition that every choice she makes can profoundly shape her existence. As Peter Jones asserts, "When choosing can kill, either yourself or another, the responsibility of freedom is at its weightiest, and the benefits of bad faith are at their most tempting. When choosing is seriously dangerous, the meaning of choosing, the meaning of freedom, is most present" (Jones, 2015, p.95). The quotation emphasises the existential concept that freedom is simultaneously a generous endowment and a weighty responsibility. Gilbert's introspection on her choices and sacrifices reflects the claim that when choices carry potentially serious consequences, the obligation of freedom becomes clear. A genuine sense of freedom necessitates a profound involvement with one's principles, aspirations, and the possible consequences of one's behavioural choices. This idea aligns with the existential viewpoint that freedom encompasses the capacity to make decisions and the bravery to confront the consequences of such decisions. This stage

strengthens the existential conviction that authentic life necessitates individuals to accept their freedom fully, recognising both its potential and obligations.

Undoubtedly, attaining the final stage has taken a considerable amount of effort. Following Elizabeth's struggles, she confronted societal conventions and anticipated behaviours. Finally, Elizabeth acknowledges the importance of pursuing her life and independence and assumes full responsibility. "What I ultimately had to respond to was the reality that every speck of my being was telling me to get out of my marriage" (Gilbert, 2006. p.98). She also characterises doing the opposite of what one wants as "an act of grievous irresponsibility" (Gilbert, 2006, p.99). This quote demonstrates her awareness of the need to confront her reality. Despite the significant challenges and cultural norms, the choice to end her marriage reflects a shift towards individual authenticity. Listening to her inner voice and consciously taking action following it aligns with the existential conviction that freedom entails making decisions that deeply connect with one's identity, especially in difficult or painful circumstances. As Nietzsche puts it, "What is freedom? To have the will to be responsible for oneself" (Nietzsche, 1968, p.51). In this quotation, Nietzsche perceives freedom as a state where individuals take full responsibility for their decisions. Thus, freedom is not only the lack of restrictions but a deliberate engagement in making choices that align with one's beliefs and principles, regardless of the outcomes. In the novel, Gilbert attentively follows her inner self and ignores her uncertainty, social expectations, and the subsequent consequences. She selectively attends to her inner self and deliberately refines her authentic identity. Through her behaviour, she exemplifies Nietzsche's concept that the responsible individual is the one who assumes complete accountability for their acts, regardless of the obstacles to overcome. Gilbert achieves her ultimate goal of attaining independence by deliberately choosing to obtain a divorce, embarking on a worldwide journey, and thoroughly documenting these experiences in one book. Despite struggling with uncomfortable emotions and perplexity, she accepts full responsibility for her life. Nevertheless, she eventually realises that genuine freedom can only be attained if she expresses her choices and acknowledges that she alone is responsible for her happiness and fulfilment.

In conclusion, Gilbert's journey towards self-discovery and search for herself dives into the theme of freedom and responsibility. From an existential perspective, her path exemplifies the recognition that genuine freedom depends not on the ability to make decisions but on accepting the accompanying level of responsibility. The journey undertaken by Gilbert serves as a prime example of the existential concept that the pursuit of an authentic existence requires the confrontation and acceptance of the consequences of one's freedom. Furthermore, the decisions made by Gilbert to follow her inner voice and take control over her life exemplify the existential concept that freedom is a continuous dedication to self-awareness and personal responsibility, which ultimately results in the satisfaction derived from the courage to take charge of one's existence.

The last part of this chapter explores the concept of pursuing meaning in *Eat, Pray, Love* in an existential manner. The protagonist thoroughly explores each country to achieve a particular goal. "I finally started learning Italian. Also, I found an Indian Guru. Lastly, I was invited by an elderly medicine man to come and live with him in Indonesia" (Gilbert, 2006, p.22). This quotation elaborates on the specific grounds that influenced Elizabeth's decision to choose those three nations. The last part of the chapter proposes to establish a connection between the journey to these three nations and Soren Kierkegaard's three stages of life. Evan argues that Kierkegaard's discussion of human existence delves into the concept of reflection (Evan, 2009, p.20). Elizabeth's situation is evident when she decides to leave her country. However, throughout her journey, she experiences many differences in moral principles among the countries she visits, which provides her with a profound transformation in her life and boldly leads her to make any choice regarding her life events. The judgements made by Elizabeth demonstrate her true nature. The development of her identity elucidates Kierkegaard's notion of interconnected stages that individuals go through in constructing their lives, progressing from one stage to the next in pursuit of life's meaning. According to Kierkegaard, "There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. The metaphysical is an abstraction, there is no man who exists metaphysically" (Kierkegaard, 1940, p.430). Each stage symbolises a distinct phase of existence, resulting in an individual journey towards the search

for meaning. The aesthetic sphere centres on the enjoyment and sensory manifestations of existence. The primary focus of this stage is that life exists only to enjoy delight and pleasure without any consideration for its profound significance or moral implications. However, the ethical sphere is more advanced and encompasses more principles than aesthetics. It embodies a dedication to ethical obligations, personal growth, and responsibilities. Furthermore, it highlights the decisions individuals make and mirrors their values and the well-being of others. The last sphere is the most advanced among all. Individuals strive to find purpose at the religious stage by connecting with the divine. Moreover, it encompasses a more profound comprehension of existential significance. The following paragraphs conduct an in-depth analysis of these stages concerning the quest for meaning in *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Italy is the initial destination of Elizabeth's journey. She recognised it as the optimal destination to visit after all her hardships. "In this dark period of loss, did I need any justification for learning Italian other than that it was the only thing I could imagine bringing me any pleasure right now?" (Gilbert, 2006, p.24). The quote explicitly indicates that the primary objective of visiting this country is pleasure. Ever since she arrived in Rome, she immersed herself in all the delightful aspects of life that one might encounter there, including the cuisine, language, culture, and scenery. Elizabeth's prompt decision to pursue pleasure stems from her firm conviction that it is the sole recourse available to her following her traumatic experiences. It corresponds to Kierkegaard's concept of instant self-consumption. Kierkegaard asserts, "The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality. Through the choice, the personality immerses itself in the thing chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in consumption" (Kierkegaard, 1954, p.167). This quotation suggests that individuals derive significance from whatever activities provide them with enjoyment and pleasure by fully engaging with the event. Despite its superficiality, it is nonetheless preferable to the possibility of being overwhelmed by the detachment from decision-making and the absence of purpose. Thus, Gilbert's desire to acquire proficiency in Italian reflects a decision deeply connected to the aesthetic quest for pleasure and individual contentment. It corresponds with Kierkegaard's concept

that the personality is moulded by consciously making decisions. This concept emphasises the need to select something that offers happiness to fill life with meaning, particularly during the aesthetic phase, when sensory feelings and personal gratifications are equally important. This notion emphasises that even when seeking basic pleasures, individuals make conscious decisions that shape their lives and search for meaning.

While seeking the happiness of life in Italy, Elizabeth fully engages herself in all forms of pleasure to explore the significance of existence from an aesthetic perspective. She provides a profound description of a meal she tried, “I love my pizza so much, in fact, that I have come to believe in my delirium that my pizza might actually love me, in return. I am having a relationship with this pizza, almost an affair” (Gilbert, 2006, p.83). This quote emphasises the sensual pleasure and immediate, engaging experience that Kierkegaard alludes to. “The aesthetic choice is either entirely immediate and to that extent no choice, or it loses itself in the multifarious. Thus, when a young girl follows the choice of her heart, this choice, however beautiful it may be, is in the strictest sense no choice since it is entirely immediate and because when one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment, and therefore can choose something different the next moment” (Kierkegaard, 1954, p.171). He contends that decisions made for aesthetic pleasure lack authenticity since they arise from impulsiveness and the need for instant gratification rather than contemplation or dedication to a real purpose. Gilbert’s witty depiction of her passionate relationship with pizza exemplifies the temporary, brief pleasure one derives from aesthetic engagements. Viewed from an existential perspective, this exemplifies the first stage of the search for meaning, when individuals may pursue satisfaction through instant gratifications. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard argues that these pleasures are ultimately unsatisfying in the long run due to their artificiality and lack of dedication. This idea leads to an existential understanding that one must go beyond superficial artistic endeavours to discover genuine purpose and significance in life.

The ethical stage characterises Elizabeth’s expedition to India, during which she acquires knowledge about spirituality and engages in mediation. The ethical stage is shifting from a life exclusively centred on pleasures to one that

prioritises duty and commitment. Gilbert's time in India embodies this transformation. The individual endeavours to discover an alternative purpose in life by connecting with her inner peace and achieving reconciliation with past decisions and actions. Her responsibilities towards the ashram reflect a more profound dedication to self-control and ethical responsibility. She writes, "We are all given work here, and it turns out that my work assignment is to scrub the temple floors" (Gilbert, 2006, p.137). The metaphorical representation of scrubbing clean the temple floor symbolises cleansing her heart, refining her soul, and applying ordinary daily work to spiritual practice for internal purification. This feeling of obligation and duty is an essential characteristic of the ethical stage. As Carnell states from Kierkegaard's words, "A person enters the ethical stage the moment he perceives serious relation between (1) the essence of self, (2) the necessity of moment-by-moment choosing, and (3) a sense of duty which is nourished by the eternal" (Carnell, 1965, p.67). The quote clarifies that throughout the ethical phase of life, individuals acknowledge their moral obligations and that their acts need to be guided by a superior ethical framework. Applying this quotation to Gilbert's willingness to scrub the temple floors demonstrates her active participation in this phase of life. She approaches her work not simply as a job but as a deliberate action that links her to a greater goal. This notion aligns with Kierkegaard's concept that one's decisions and behaviours should reflect a profound comprehension of obligation and accountability. Gilbert's decision to pursue her task with passion and seriousness exemplifies her commitment to ethical living, where every action, regardless of its extent, adds to her identity and illuminates her continuous search for meaning.

Another component of the ethical stage is the process of seeking meaning via interactions with others. In the novel *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth demonstrates this feature by elucidating how individuals place their belief in the road they follow when someone else provides them with evidence of their prior experience. She writes, "When you are standing in that forest of sorrow, you cannot imagine that you could ever find your way to a better place. But if someone can assure you that they themselves have stood in that same place, and now have moved on, sometimes this will bring hope" (Gilbert, 2006, p.75). The accuracy of the claim that others

have seen comparable challenges and successfully overcame them corresponds with the ethical dedication to community and collective human encounters. The connection and unity facilitate individuals in diving into meaning even at the most intense periods of pain. Individuals might derive optimism and courage to persist in their search for meaning by contemplating the experiences of those who have navigated comparable paths. As Kierkegaard claims, “The ethical is the very breath of the eternal and constitutes even in solitude the reconciling fellowship with all men” (Kierkegaard, 1940, p.136). The ethical stage of life serves as a linking force among individuals because of their shared experiences, ethical obligations, and duties. Despite feelings of loneliness, individuals can nonetheless obtain hope and purpose from the awareness that others have personally encountered and overcome comparable challenges—asserting the notion of community and collective humanity that is fundamental to ethical existence. The shared human experience depicts the ethical stage as a process of seeking significance, which entails acknowledging one’s interdependence with others as a component of a broader and universal human experience that ultimately results in a more meaningful existence.

In Indonesia, Gilbert progresses to the final stage, known as the religious stage, by engaging in spiritual devotions and interacting with the Balinese healer Ketut. This level is characterised by integrating the lessons she gained in Italy and India. Individuals in the religious stage seek significance beyond mere aesthetic pleasure and ethical obligation to establish a profound relationship with the highest power of God. Having reached this point, Gilbert appears genuinely in her era of discovering meaning. She writes, “I respond with gratitude to anyone who has ever voyaged the centre of that heart, and who has then returned to the world with a report for the rest of us that God is an experience of supreme love” (Gilbert, 2006, p.15). At the novel’s beginning, Elizabeth searches for love with little understanding of spiritual forces. Ultimately, her search revealed that the one constant and ultimate love may be discovered either via religious beliefs or from inside oneself. As Gonzalez states, “Faith is related directly to God, and not to his law. The religious person knows both that God commands and that God forgives” (Gonzalez, 2014, p.339). It is evident that Gilbert’s appreciation for people who

relate their encounter with God as profound love aligns with Kierkegaard's concept of the religious stage. Both perspectives include the conviction that genuine spiritual comprehension arises from an intimate and immediate connection with the divine rather than merely conforming to outward rules or instructions. A journey to the centre of that heart is a profound and introspective exploration of one's innermost self to uncover the existence and essence of God. The internal journey described here reflects Kierkegaard's concept of the leap of faith, in which an individual transcends ethical existence to adopt a direct and personal connection with God. Hence, both quotations underscore the notion that the quest for significance, within the framework of the religious stage, revolves around uncovering the divine via individual encounters and inward transformation rather than rigid conformity to religious rules.

CONCLUSION

Following the First World War, artists sought new ways to articulate their emotions and desires. For example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) has a narrator undergoing a profound inner crisis amid Europe's efforts to recover from the devastating war. He employs many images of death and resurrection as he struggles to comprehend how a new civilization might emerge from the damaged landscape of battle. Similarly, another poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Elegies* (1923), seeks to reevaluate current life and values. The pursuit of new literary conventions persists post Second World War as authors endeavour to transcend conventional norms and investigate novel forms. This thesis examines contemporary writing through the lens of existential themes and how it has prompted writers to engage with philosophical existentialism.

The thesis aims to analyse the continuing and deep connection of contemporary writing with existential issues. Analysis of the two novels, *The Orange Girl* by Jostein Gaarder and *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, demonstrates existential themes such as the search for meaning, identity, and freedom of choice and responsibility. Based on this analysis, it was argued that meaning and identity are not predetermined but rather formed by individual experiences and intentional decisions. The investigation highlights existential philosophy's significance in comprehending contemporary human experiences and the universal need for a meaningful existence, as existential themes remain in modern writing as authors confront the absurdity of existence. Literature is a powerful medium for examining the complexities of human existence, whether through catastrophic settings, metaphysical odysseys, or identity investigations. By facing the absurd, contemporary authors urge readers to contemplate the essence of meaning, purpose, and authenticity in a society that frequently appears oblivious to our existential questions. Nevertheless, this analysis reveals differences between these two worlds from which the characters come. These differences arise from variations in previous knowledge, culture, and life roles, directly impacting their quest for meaning and their viewpoints and decisions in life.

Considering the continual struggle of modern readers with fundamental questions on the meaning of life, individual freedom, and the search for meaning in a very complex world, existential issues remain profoundly relevant in both society and literature. Contemporary readers were drawn to *The Orange Girl* and *Eat, Pray, Love* because of their comprehensive exploration of the fundamental existential challenges many individuals encounter today. Both novels address enduring issues in personal and profound forms. *The Orange Girl* presents philosophical narratives that explore the mystery of existence through a conversation between a son and his deceased father, prompting readers to contemplate their encounters with separated people who have profoundly influenced their lives. With a profound feeling of genuineness and spiritual connection, *Eat, Pray, Love* explores the contemporary individual's challenge to adapt to life's circumstances and the responsibilities of daily existence.

Jostein Gaarder's profound expertise in philosophical research and teaching of the novel is evident in his work. Among his works, *The Orange Girl* offers a variety of intellectual concepts, making it a valuable material for philosophical research. Furthermore, the novel incorporates several existential challenges by employing various elements and questions, constantly stimulating the modern reader to contemplate life and its significance. On the contrary, Elizabeth Gilbert presents these topics based on her own life experiences and solely on her conviction that life may follow the desired course unless one desires differently. These variations significantly influenced the style in which each of those two writers articulated their concepts. The presentation of this diversity and unique perspectives gave the thesis sufficient data to conclude the comparison.

The first significant distinction influencing the narratives' progression is the beginning of the search for meaning. George's life in *The Orange Girl* exploded back and forth as he learned about the present and future from his father's letter from the past. This event supports Kierkegaard's idea that "life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 52). Elizabeth in *Eat, Pray, Love* embarked on a search for meaning from a single starting point, namely her divorce, and proceeded with her journey from that particular moment forward. Supporting Sartre's notion that man is only a product

of his self-construction in a single moment of realization, he wonders, “Why am I here? What does my life mean?” (Whipple and Tucker, 2012, p.97). The novel embodies the continuing search for meaning, originating at a critical crossroads when the protagonist decides to create her identity and explore her true essence. Another significant difference is the protagonists’ willingness to recognise and accept responsibility. From the moment George is born, the reader of *The Orange Girl* can observe Jan Olav’s deliberate attempt to assume full responsibility to the extent that he begins to doubt the rationality of his choice to introduce a child into the world. The concerns and sense of guilt experienced by Jan Olav were partly a result of his strong sense of responsibility. In the novel *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth ended her marriage due to several factors, the primary one being her desire to avoid having children and her lack of willingness to assume the responsibilities of parenthood. This distinction underscores the theme of self-exploration in both novels and how this exploration results in distinct life decisions that may be understood from multiple perspectives.

The final significant difference is in the genre of both novels, which significantly influences the overall order of events and actions. In *The Orange Girl*, Gaarder skilfully integrates philosophical thoughts with the process of maturing, resulting in a work that is readily comprehensible yet rich in philosophical concepts that may be explored via profound reflection. On the contrary, Gilbert skilfully combines memoirs with self-help aspects while emphasising real-life storylines and situations. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that even Gaarder used actual locations, dates, and events in his narrative. However, this difference has a realistic impact on both novels, supporting the idea that existentialism comes from deep sorrows and struggles. As Wartenberg says, “Existentialism refers to the fundamental dilemmas that human beings face during the course of their lives” (Wartenberg, 2008, p.5). This shared element illuminates the other similarities between the two novels. Existentialism is intrinsically linked to Modernity, resulting in works exploring existential themes, often including one or more aspects. The novels analysed in this thesis demonstrate a distinct use of symbolism, stream of consciousness, and multiple viewpoints. Incorporating these components generated a perception of resemblance between both novels and enhanced their

relationship. One common feature employed by both Gaarder and Gilbert is symbolism. Gaarder employs the colour orange, the Milky Way, and the snow to establish connections and convey existential philosophical concepts that would have been challenging to communicate strictly through their literal meanings and explanations. Furthermore, Gilbert used specific details, such as the careful cleaning of the temple's floor and her resilience in the face of insect bites, to symbolise the strength she acquired throughout her journeys.

An additional point of similarity is the stream of consciousness both writers employ to express their inner ideas and personal development. Within *The Orange Girl*, Gaarder employs this style via the deliberate shift of the main character between his thoughts and internal reflections as he reads his father's memories and inner reflections. These shifts fill the narrative with subjective experiences and the fluidity of time. Furthermore, Gilbert uses the stream of consciousness to elucidate her emotional and psychological development as she searches for meaning and self-exploration. By applying this element, both stories emphasise the existential dilemma that the main characters have to confront. Moreover, it underscores the conflict and inner anguish of uncertainty and individual choices.

A further shared characteristic of both works is the employment of a first-person omniscient narration, which strongly enhances the significance of their existential exploration. Within *The Orange Girl*, the first-person perspective corresponds to the distinct voice of his deceased father as communicated through the letters, establishing dialogues that facilitate reflection of both the past and the present—enabling the reader to examine the search for meaning from two distinct temporal perspectives. Likewise, Gilbert's choice of the first person in *Eat, Pray, Love* enables the book to be rich in her personal yet universal experience with human suffering, healing, and self-realisation. From this narrative perspective, both main characters assume the role of self-aware and observant instructors for the reader, encouraging them to reflect on their existential concerns. Indeed, the correlation between personal experiences and philosophical reflection enhances the possibility of the themes arousing emotional and intellectual impact on the reader. Although this thesis addresses a range of themes in *The Orange Girl* and *Eat, Pray, Love*, it also has a few limitations, of which three will be discussed below. The first

limitation is the representation of two novels, which, while sufficient and rich in existential themes and aspects, fail to include other contemporary works from diverse cultures, philosophical perspectives, and geographical backgrounds that also explore other existential themes and present them in distinct contexts. Hence, this thesis may not comprehensively address contemporary literature's complex nature and divergence of several existential themes.

The second limitation is that while existential philosophy dives extensively into investigating the novels' characters and themes, it nevertheless restricts the range of research from various perspectives and viewpoints. For instance, including humanistic psychology or Eastern philosophical traditions would have significantly enhanced the analysis of both cited novels. Hence, the exclusive emphasis on existentialism fails to consider other equally significant aspects of the novels and their characters' journeys, thus limiting the study to a narrower examination of the thematic components.

Finally, this thesis mainly focuses on the literary features of the books and the profound philosophical concepts, while it does not extensively address the external influences that impact the writers and the story's elements. For instance, the intellectual setting in Norway influences Gaarder's views and shapes Gilbert's perspective inside the post-9/11 Western context. An in-depth analysis of these external factors would result in a more comprehensive understanding of how essential themes are influenced by individual self-reflection and the external environment.

Examining the characters in this thesis concludes that the existentialist is defined by his ability to confront fear, seek authenticity, and reconcile with death. The existentialist's perspective on choice, decision, and responsibility is exceptional. The existentialist understands the fundamental significance of choice, which possesses a vast horizon and must be maintained in its pure potentiality. The decision that follows from a choice, while constraining the existential subject's perspective, must be honoured and integrated into the continuum. Immersed in a culture of irresponsibility, where society, fate, spirituality, and genetics are perpetually blamed, the existentialist will recognize that the attribution of guilt,

despite its alluring facade, is futile and obscures the reality. The criteria and discoveries of existentialist characters may be accepted and applied to daily life, significantly enhancing individuals' lives and facilitating their ability to cope with their circumstances' various constraints and burdens.

However, the cost that man must pay to ensure this level of awareness is tremendous. Clemence asserts that "it calls for the full, open-eyed awareness and acceptance of what existentialism calls "situation-limits" (Clemence, 1966, p.502). These limits include human suffering, loneliness, anxiety, and, most importantly, fragility and the certainty of death. Confronting these circumstances with complete honesty requires bravery, as does recognising and utilising the profound freedom through which humanity defines itself. Thus, existentialists attribute significant significance to human confrontation with suffering, emphasizing the bravery to confront hardship and the necessity of accepting full responsibility for one's acts with integrity.

Thomas R. Flynn asserts that "existentialism is a philosophical movement with literary applications rather than a literary movement with philosophical pretensions" (Flynn, 2012, p.249). This indication does not imply that philosophical novels should be undervalued; instead, Sartre's *Nausea* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Plague* were highly esteemed and awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Nonetheless, both Sartre and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir examined the interplay between philosophy and art, particularly literature. The two held divergent views of literature's function as a vehicle for philosophy, yet existentialism ultimately embraced openness and tolerance towards all perspectives, hence facilitating literature. Furthermore, the twentieth century's world wars profoundly influenced several generations of writers, who felt a moral imperative to intertwine existential inquiries with literature. The feeling of catastrophe and void resulting from the war drew them to existentialism, which reinstated a sense of duty in humanity. Individuals reasserted independence over their acts, which were now characterized as entirely by choice and not influenced by external circumstances.

The concepts expressed, studied, and deliberated in this thesis represent an extension of several prior studies. Research on the impact of existentialism on human comprehension of fundamental life features has indicated that Existentialism has significantly influenced human comprehension of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion. It is crucial to note that this theory is entirely original, as no prior research on existentialism about these two novels exists. Nonetheless, the thesis draws inspiration from two previous studies examining the characteristics of both novels' main characters. The first is titled *An Analysis of the Main Characters' Personalities in Jostein Gaarder's Novel The Orange Girl*, while the second study is titled *Personality of the Main Character in Elizabeth Gilbert's Novel Eat Pray Love*. The studies examine principal qualities directly connected to the core concept of existentialism, which is that existence precedes essence, which is the focus of this thesis.

The initial research indicates the protagonists' evolution in *The Orange Girl* as they discover the true essence of life via various experiences. "Based on the study results, it can be found that the formation of the character's personality in the novel *The Orange Girl* comes from the self-exploration the character has to go through" (Anada, 2022, p. 68). This quotation corresponds with the findings presented in this thesis and with Sartre's existential notion that individuals first exist and then navigate life in search of their real identities and ideals by recognising and accepting the freedom of choice and responsibility.

Along the same lines, the second study examines Elizabeth Gilbert's path through significant life experiences that ultimately enabled her to discover her authentic self, free from societal restraints and other influences. "Her desire to find what she was missing made her a strong woman, and she never gave up before what she was looking for could be found" (Ramadani & Valiantien, 2023, p. 403). This study's conclusion corroborates the thesis analysis of the protagonist in *Eat, Pray, Love* via an existential perspective. She chooses to explore her true identity, embarking on a journey of self-exploration, persevering through challenges until she attains a destination that provides fulfilment and clarity on her life's purpose. Consequently, the findings of this thesis expand upon these two studies by examining the motivations of the main characters in both novels while

incorporating a comprehensive analysis of the events and transformations the characters undergo from an existential perspective. Ultimately, it concludes that existential themes influence contemporary literature, transcending specific periods, places, or genres.

Existentialism underscores individual liberty, accountability, and the subjective nature of existence, significantly impacting various dimensions of human thinking and society. Existentialism contests the conventional perspective of objective reality, highlighting the significance of subjective interpretation and individual experience. This significance has resulted in acknowledging several epistemologies and facilitated more intricate and diverse interpretations of knowledge. Existentialism posits that reality is subjective, with individuals constructing meaning and purpose. This thought has reassessed conventional theological and philosophical frameworks, focusing on individual autonomy and self-determination. Existentialism has profoundly influenced morality by highlighting human responsibility and the significance of personal choice. This influence has resulted in acknowledging the intricacy of ethical decision-making and the necessity for empathy, compassion, and comprehension amid moral ambiguity.

Existentialism has inspired individuals to investigate and establish their ideals based on their experiences and convictions. This inspiration has resulted in an enhanced awareness of the variety and an acknowledgement of the significance of personal authenticity and uniqueness. Moreover, Existentialism has profoundly influenced religion by questioning conventional doctrines and highlighting the importance of individual spiritual experiences, which has resulted in an increased focus on individual spirituality and an acknowledgement of the significance of personal religious experiences. Existentialism has significantly influenced human comprehension of knowledge, truth, morality, values, and religion by underscoring the importance of individual freedom, responsibility, and personal experience. Its effect is evident in several domains of human thinking and culture, and its significance is expected to persist for many years ahead (Sasan, 2023, p.5).

Ultimately, it can be claimed that existentialism is an essential philosophical doctrine that has impacted several literary figures throughout history. This thesis examines the application of existential themes and approaches in scholarly works. Existentialists focus on existence, change, liberty, and self-awareness, among other aspects. Two modern works, Jostyn Gaarder's *The Orange Girl* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love*, exemplify existentialist characteristics and themes, including the notion that existence precedes essence and concepts of freedom and responsibility, self-discovery, and the search for meaning. These writers emphasize that existentialism is a significant philosophy focused on discovering the self and the meaning of life via free will, choice, and personal responsibility. A comparative examination of the existentialist elements in *The Orange Girl* and *Eat Pray Love* Jean-Paul Sartre has sought to contribute to critical studies about the diverse backgrounds of authors, and both novels have been examined from the perspective of world literature studies.

The Orange Girl and *Eat, Pray, Love* examine the existential search through different yet harmonious methodologies—one rooted in philosophical thought, the other in a personal and spiritual journey. This study examines these two novels concurrently, revealing how contemporary authors address existential themes, modifying them to reflect the problems and complexity of modern existence. The novels demonstrate that meaning and identity are not static but are shaped by human experiences and deliberate decisions. The combination of philosophy and narrative underscores the significance of existentialism in developing a profound comprehension of human experiences, especially in a culture that perpetually pursues meaning and self-discovery. These findings demonstrate how contemporary literature reinterprets and provides accessibility to the enduring human quest for a meaningful existence for a 21st-century reader.

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