



EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM AND BURDEN OF CHOICE: A SARTREAN ANALYSIS OF GHANI KHAN'S POETRY

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Abstract

This paper examines the existential aspects that are clear in the works of Ghani Khan using the theory of Jean-Paul Sartre in his existentialism work. Specific focus is made to the appearance of existential freedom, bad faith and the burden of choice in the ten samples of poems used. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study establishes a way in which the poetic voice of Ghani Khan speaks out the battle of definition of self, moral autonomy and authenticity in the world that no longer has a pre-ordained destiny. When applied to the poet, the dictum of Sartre which states that "*existence precedes essence*" becomes a directive to understand to what extent the poet has rejected social identifications forced upon him, religious determinism and conformity in philosophy. The inquiry makes it clear that the work of Ghani Khan not only agrees with the existentialist concepts but also localizes them in the socio-cultural framework of Pashtuns and their society. Therefore, verses represent a place of existential protest, providing an original combination of self-mysticism and contemporary philosophic angst. The study points out the proximity of the poetry of Ghani Khan to the existential meaning in modernity and identifies him as one of the important, though less-written-about, existential poets in the South Asian literary heritage.

Keywords: *Bad Faith, Burden Of Choice, Existential Freedom, Existentialism, Ghani Khan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pashto Poetry*

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1. Introduction

Existentialism emerged in the twentieth century as an intellectual movement, mostly in Europe in reaction to the crisis of meaning that had been created by modernity. The movement was rooted in the post-World War I disillusionment and influenced by such founding figures as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger and saw its most clearly formulated and effective expression in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism as advocated by Sartre dictates that, existence rather than essence comes first and therefore denies the fact that human beings come with a fixed purpose and that they must rather construct their meanings independently, and they achieve this by way of their free decision and/or action. Along with the accompanying empowerment, this state of affairs is at the same time troubling, as it places the onus of the development of one's being directly in the hands of the individual, without the influence of divine will, external destiny, and firm systems of moral codes.

These developments were manifested simultaneously in the West and in the poetry of such a significant Pashto poet as Ghani Khan, who lived during the twentieth century but whose works present similarly deep meditations on freedom, self-realization and nonconformity to the rules of the society. Although often acclaimed in terms of its mystical echo and aesthetic complexity, the work by Khan has been relatively less likely to be analyzed in terms of an existential perspective. And there are defiance, quizzing, the longing, the inexhaustible fascination with what the self has to do with choice, responsibility, and authenticity (concepts which blend with Sartrean thought). Not only, therefore, does the interpenetration of the Pashto poetic tradition and the Western existential philosophy determine the creation of a new and promising field of cross-cultural literary analysis, but also indicates the further transnational processes of any literary tradition.

Whereas Sartrean existentialism has found wide usage in Western literature, no systematic attempt has ever been made to employ it to make sense of Eastern poetic traditions especially Pashto. The work of Ghani Khan, the writer, which has often been regarded as seminal, has been subjected to little analytical treatment in the context of existentialism. Existing literature focuses more on its cultural, Sufi, and aesthetic aspects but not on the fact that the poet also deals with the problems of the burden of choice, existential freedom, and bad faith, which are also main characteristics of the Sartrean existentialism. The given study thus examines this unstudied intersection and not only documents the dearth of existential approaches to Ghani Khan but also the secondary lack

of academic commentary on freedom, anxiety, and responsibility on poems of the region which are both so closely attuned to universal existential concepts.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the presence of existential freedom in Ghani Khan's poetry.
2. To investigate the theme of burden of choice in Ghani Khan's selected poems?
3. To analyze the emergence of bad faith in the poetry of Ghani Khan through the lenses of Sartre.

Research Questions

1. What elements of existential freedom emerge in Ghani Khan's poetry?
2. How is the theme of burden of choice depicted in Ghani Khan's selected poems?
3. How does Ghani Khan illustrate the concept of bad faith as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre's?

2.Literature Review

Existentialism pioneered by Jean-Paul Sartre has remained a mainstream philosophical ideology in understanding the human situation, especially with regards to freedom, personal responsibility, and the fear of choice. In *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre writes that, existence pre-exists essence, and therefore, human beings are not defined by a pre-determined nature but must define themselves, via the conscious willful acts of choosing. Flynn et al. (2006) explain this statement and align the radical freedom by Sartre with the feeling of anguish and alienation. Catalano et al. (1998) elaborate more on the topic as they provide an elaborate discussion on the phenomenology of Sartre and how self-deception and bad faith works. Moran et al. (2000) develop a phenomenological reading in order to discuss intentionality and self-awareness as the means of forming existential reality, and Moran et al. (2004) explore metaphor and self-deception as the means of bad faith. Solomon et al. (2007) contextualize Sartrean existentialism in a larger message in terms of the culture and ethics. Barnes et al. (2000) take a gendered approach to Sartrian themes of literature and Flynn & Le Mahieu (2010) address the expression of existentialist notions in contemporary poetry. All these articles taken together create a strong theoretical corpus on applying Sartrean existentialism to literature and even to texts not belonging to the Western literary canon.

In the existing scholarly literature on South Asian poetics, a notorious absence of attempts in engaging with existentialist thinking is evident, especially when it comes to addressing the records of Abdul Ghani Khan. The oeuvre of Ghani Khan inflexibly asks philosophical questions that question social conventions and emphasize individual free will, which makes his poems suitable to continue existentialist interpretation. Answering the question of whether blind faith and conformity are some of the philosophical veins in the poetry of Ghani Khan, Safa et al. (2022) prove the existence of the similarities between a critique of blind faith and conformity offered by Ghani Khan and the description of bad faith presented by Jean-Paul Sartre. Khalid et al. (2023) explore the negotiation of dignity, rebellion, and the self-seeking Ghani Khan by associating them with a concept of existential authenticity. According to Amir and Khan (2024), Ghani Khan is placed in the history of Romanticism, as he has used the notion of symbolism and spiritual resistance. In a similar vein, Jamil et al. (2024) engage in a comparison of the mystical reading of Ghani Khan and W. B. Yeats by identifying metaphysical concerns. According to Iqbal et al. (2014), Ghani Khan is considered in the context of the modernist approach, stressing that he rejects the linear interpretation of roles and uses individual identity. In the book by Iqbal and colleagues, an ecocritical interpretation places his poems as a mindfulness practice on nature, loneliness, and self-discovery (2022). Lastly, a recent article named *Mysticism in Pashto Literature* (2021) treats the question of divine love and fate to which Ghani appealed and represents his spirituality as a demand on the self to find meaning rather than a heir to a story of faith.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, a significant gap remains in the application of Sartre's existential theory to Ghani Khan's poetry. While researchers such as Safa et al. (2022) and Khalid et al. (2023) hint at philosophical undertones and internal conflict, there is no comprehensive attempt to map Ghani Khan's poetic themes directly onto Sartre's existential triad of freedom, bad faith, and the burden of choice. This gap leaves unexplored the profound ways in which Ghani Khan's verses reflect a struggle for authenticity in a world governed by cultural, religious, and psychological constraints.

Despite the growing body of academic research, there is still a major gap in the integration of Jean-Paul Sartre existential speech into the poetic work of Ghani Khan. Whereas Safa et al. (2022) and Khalid et al. (2022) allude to the philosophical overture and inward pressure encountered in Khan verse, a systematic treatment remains yet to draw the recurrent motifs of the poet into the triumvirate of existential freedom, bad faith, and the call of choice formulated by Sartre. Accordingly, there has yet to be developed, including within the context of artistic production, a significant and satisfactory study of

how the cultural, religious, and psychological forces of a limiting environment are rendered in the artistic production of Khan, a quest of authenticity.

3. Research Methodology

The research design used in the current study is qualitative research, which is aimed at providing a deeper, thematic study of some of the poems by Ghani Khan, in a focus using the philosophy of existentialism by Jean Paul Sartre. A qualitative methodology is considered most suitable given the interpretive agenda of the research as well as the fact that the research is based on the philosophical nuance. The research questions existential freedom, bad faith, and burden of choice as analytical tools by adopting theoretical and philosophical approaches to going literary criticism.

The data employed in the research is solely secondary and includes the poetry of Ghani Khan, the works of Being and Nothingness and Existentialism is a Humanism by Sartre, and the already existing discursive literature. They specifically chose the poems on the basis of thematic unity with the issues of personhood: freedom, choice, alienation, and personal responsibility. The way of data collection embraces close reading, intertextual comparison, and thinking philosophically over a long period. The several times that each of the texts is read out enable one to extract repeated motives and structural devices which can find correlation with existentialist ideas.

The analytical technique applied is a thematic content analysis design of identifying and analyzing recurrent patterns within the explored topic. Sartre has his own theoretical model and patterns created in the poetry of Ghani Khan. The idea of existential anxiety, spiritual rebellion, denial of deterministic fate, and individual opposition of itself to self and society are traced and critically discussed. Often, lines of the poems are given as a reference to ground each interpretation in textual proof.

4. Theoretical Framework

The research is based on the existentialist philosophy and in particular on Sartre, in his most popular publications Being and Nothingness (1943) and Existentialism Is a Humanism (1946). The theory of Sartre's existentialism is largely based on the principle of existence over essence i.e. human beings are not created with purposes or identities and therefore they must use their own mind and follow certain choices to determine who they are. The ontological freedom comes with the so-called burden of choice: an individual is in the complete responsibility of his/her forming essence. This freedom has implication

that can cause anguish, alienation and anxiety which are fundamentals in the structure of Sartre.

One of the most important Sartrean terms incorporated in the work is bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), the self-deception that occurs when people reject their freedom and instead adopt their predetermined position in the society or undergo a deterministic self. According to Sartre, all existence in bad faith is a kind of self-betrayal because a person does not want to bear the burden of his/her decisions. This structure helps in better comprehending the poetry by Ghani Khan, especially when the poet is opposed to culture, religious fatalists, and tradition of doing moral things in a certain way.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

Ghani Khan's poetry presents a poignant philosophical inquiry into existence, freedom, and the human condition, echoing the core tenets of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. This chapter explores ten selected poems through a thematic lens, drawing on Sartre's ideas of bad faith, existential freedom, and the burden of choice as outlined in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Each poem reveals a unique manifestation of these themes, underscoring Ghani Khan's introspective and existential poetic vision.

In the poem "The Rainbow, (*Da Budai Taal*)", Ghani Khan reflects on self-creation and the search for meaning amid chaos and disillusionment. He writes, "*I'm the ultimate physician of all ills afflicting me;... I'm creator of your charms*". This line supports Sartre's view of existential freedom — that humans are the authors of their essence. Sartre emphasizes, "*Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself*" (Sartre, 1943). Ghani Khan rejects external determinism and instead asserts subjective authorship of beauty and pain, echoing Sartre's idea of self-defined existence.

The poem "I" illustrates the theme of bad faith, especially in the rejection of socially imposed identities. The speaker declares, "*I'm neither the gardener nor the lord of the garden / Why burden me then with the garden's tales?*" By refusing to accept external definitions, Ghani Khan's speaker mirrors Sartre's claim that bad faith involves playing socially imposed roles to escape the anguish of freedom. This refusal to conform is an existential rebellion against a fixed self.

Ghani Khan's "Come and Tell Me, Pious Priest, (*Waya Waya Mullah Jana*)" interrogates traditional structures of religion and philosophy with the repeated line: "*Is life just a question mark, or does it have an answer?*" The ambiguity and refusal of final meaning reflect Sartre's assertion that existence precedes essence — that life has no

predetermined purpose. Instead, we are condemned to be free and must invent our meaning (Sartre, 1943). The poem critiques bad faith in religious dogma and advocates existential self-realization.

In "Ebbing Life, (*Jaam ki Ghut Ghut Kameegi*)" the poet mourns the futility and impermanence of existence: "*Drop by drop the goblet empties, / The red wine of ecstasy / To the dregs is drained.*" The passage evokes Sartre's idea of the burden of choice and the human condition as fundamentally absurd. The slow decline toward meaninglessness and existential fatigue in the poem represents Sartre's concept of nausea — the confrontation with the contingency of existence.

The existential dilemma intensifies in "Question or Answer! (*Sawal Jawab*)" as Ghani Khan poses a barrage of metaphysical inquiries: "*Is life Pharoah and his pride, / Or just madness and joy of youth?*" Here, life is framed as a continuous dialectic between illusion and absurdity. The search for fixed answers represents the human attempt to flee existential anxiety, yet the very framing of these questions implies a Sartrean awareness of radical freedom and subjective meaning-making.

"Either Make of Me a Friend, (*Ya Me Sam Da Zargi Yaar ka*)" confronts divine absence and spiritual despair, a theme deeply tied to Sartre's atheistic existentialism. Ghani writes, "Why did you create me then? / Was there need for me to be?" This existential interrogation of God reflects Sartre's view that without a divine creator, man is "abandoned" — and must confront the anguish of being responsible for his existence (Sartre, 1946). The poet's yearning for existential purpose amid silence resonates with the Sartrean idea of absurd hope.

The poem "Amongst Ourselves, (*Khpalo ki*)" articulates a disillusionment with religious hypocrisy: "*In your name, when pious priests / Mount the pulpit... / Venom from the mouth they spew.*" This theme of bad faith — where individuals deny their freedom by hiding behind religious or moral roles — parallels Sartre's critique of institutional inauthenticity. Ghani Khan, like Sartre, exposes the falsity of identities constructed through external validation.

In "The Hermit's Sonnet, (*Da Faqiraano Ghazal*)" the poet meditates on mortality: "*This world is no more / Than a dwelling, whose fate / Is extinction and loss.*" The transient nature of life and the call to reject worry ("*Why fret over it?*") reflect an existential confrontation with being-towards-death (though more Heideggerian, Sartre also acknowledges this as a key motivator of authentic action). Ghani Khan's refrain of detachment is a poetic form of existential freedom, choosing to face meaninglessness with creative resignation.

In "Pious Priest and Madman, (*Sawal Jawab da Lewani ao Mullah*)" the questioning of spiritual binaries and rejection of divine logic mirror Sartre's ideas about moral subjectivity. Ghani asks: "*What is Mecca? Madman, tell me?*", dissolving religious metaphors into poetic absurdity. This playful irreverence echoes Sartre's suspicion of pre-fabricated moral codes. The madman becomes the figure of existential clarity, liberated from bad faith, much like Sartre's ideal of the authentic man.

Finally, in "The Fairy Princess, (*Da Khapiroo Shahzadgy*)" the speaker longs to flee the burden of the self: "*But where will you take refuge? / From one's self one cannot flee!*" This reflects Sartre's central idea that there is "no exit" from self-consciousness and that we are "*condemned to be free.*" The burden of awareness is inescapable, and Ghani's speaker, like Sartre's existential subject, must confront this burden without consolation.

This research set out to investigate the presence of existential freedom and the burden of choice in Ghani Khan's selected poetry using Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework. The findings suggest that Ghani Khan's poetry demonstrates a profound engagement with Sartrean existentialism. Poems like "I," "The Rainbow," and "Either Make of Me a Friend" reflect existential freedom in their rejection of essentialist identities, religious determinism, and social expectations. The poetic self refuses to accept imposed meanings and embraces the responsibility of self-definition—an embodiment of Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence."

On the other hand, the theme of the burden of choice is equally pervasive. Through poems such as "Question or Answer!" and "Amongst Ourselves," Ghani Khan dramatizes the existential anxiety that accompanies radical freedom. The poet's struggle with divine silence, moral ambiguity, and the limitations of cultural norms exemplifies Sartre's idea that humans are condemned to freedom and thus bear the weight of all their actions.

Ghani Khan's criticism of religious dogma, idealization of the self, and assertion of individual agency also parallels Sartre's critique of bad faith. Rather than hiding behind societal roles or divine commands, the poet urges readers to confront the nothingness within and act with responsibility, even in a meaningless world. His existential imagery—often surreal, ironic, and mystical—articulates the psychological anguish of choice and the human necessity of self-creation.

In summation, the poetry of Ghani Khan articulates a rich existential tapestry wherein Sartrean ideas unfold poetically. Through motifs of divine silence, existential anguish, rebellion against norms, and radical freedom, Ghani's poems mirror Sartre's assertion that human beings are free, responsible, and alone — tasked with the unbearable weight of crafting meaning from nothingness. The thematic analysis in this chapter

confirms that Ghani Khan's poetic consciousness resonates deeply with existentialist philosophy, offering a rare South Asian articulation of Sartre's ontological despair and freedom.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper confirms that the poetic vision of Ghani Khan is not only cultural or spiritual; it is existentialist. His work is congruent with the Sartrean themes of existentialism, and is rare in that it is a poetic South Asian take on the personal liberty, ethical accountability, and existential angst of forging defining meaning in an unconcerned universe. Ghani Khan confronts external authority and self-doubt and becomes a source of truth during the state of turmoil. His poems are not just art, not just philosophizing; they are simultaneous voicing and questioning, What is it to be a man without illusion and how shall he live nobly in the terrible power of free consent?

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