

EXISTENTIALIST ANALYSIS OF THE BENGAL TIGER AND THE BAGHDAD ZOO BY RAJIV JOSEPH

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Abstract

This study explores existentialism—focusing on themes such as absurdity, existential anxiety, and individual freedom—to provide a framework for interpreting literature. Specifically, it applies existentialism to analyze *The Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* by Rajiv Joseph through close reading and critical analysis methodologies. The analysis highlights human suffering and the individual struggle to find meaning, as depicted in the characters of Tiger and Musa. Tiger spends his days staring at the bars of his cage, symbolizing the existential search for purpose within life's figurative "cage." Similarly, Musa's experiences reflect the ongoing quest for meaning amidst the chaos of the Iraq War. The play captures the absurdity of existence, illustrated through Tiger's realization of his captivity and the universal human yearning for answers. The study concludes that the play's central characters grapple with suffering and the search for purpose, even after death. Tiger personifies the human condition, embodying the existential struggle for meaning and freedom.

Keywords: *American Occupation, Existentialism, Iraq War, Meaning Of Life, Rajiv Joseph*

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1. Introduction

Rajiv Joseph's most famous work, *The Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo*, is a riveting play set against the backdrop of the Iraq War with America. The play was first premiered in 2009 and is set in Iraq during the early days of the American occupation of Iraq. It follows the story of an American soldier, an Iraqi citizen, and a Bengal Tiger who once lived in the Baghdad Zoo. The play also describes the death of the Tiger, who becomes a ghost in the later part of the play. In addition, the play is documentary-like since it is based on a real story that was published in a newspaper. Joseph himself appeared in an interview in which he revealed that the initial story was a part of an article in the newspaper about an incident that took place at the Baghdad Zoo, which he read in 2003 and then set his story (Hamad & Ahmed, 2023).

Through a unique style of storytelling, Joseph used the spirit character of the Tiger, formerly a resident of the Baghdad Zoo, to portray the themes of violence, morality, and existentialism. After escaping from the bombing, the Tiger becomes an observer and participant in the brutal and chaotic reality of war. An American-born Joseph shows the harsh realities of American troops and the lives of Iraqi people. He examines how their experiences overlap under the harsh impacts of occupation, trauma, and disintegration. Moreover, the characters, especially the Tiger, struggle with their purpose and the meaning of life in a chaotic world and after death as well. As Qurratulaen Liaqat said, the most interesting character is the Tiger, who is a human-looking entity that can talk with the audience in human language and, most importantly, has an afterlife in which he haunts murderers like Kev. Moreover, he philosophizes and fights with his carnivorous nature (Liaqat, 2018).

Furthermore, this play examines the questions of existence, the conditions of Iraqi people, and the search for the meaning of life. With the help of existentialist philosophy, the play portrays the nature of humans when they face the uncertainty and absurdity of life. However, existentialism is a philosophical theory given by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which centers on the search for meaning for every individual in a hostile universe. This play by Joseph, *The Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo*, resonates deeply with this theme as people grapple with guilt, the desire for forgiveness, and the quest to understand the ongoing violence and chaos in their country. The Tiger's discussions and deliberations with dead people highlight the pointlessness of seeking ultimate significance in a world destroyed by war and conflict to maintain superpower status.

This study examines how the characters of this play deal with the absurdity of their situation, and Joseph's characters invite the audience to reflect on the human condition under extreme circumstances of war, forcing both characters and the audience to think about existence in a world that seems meaningless and purposeless. Moreover, this research employs a qualitative approach by utilizing the close reading method of the text. The main objective of this research paper is to find the elements of existentialism in this play and how the main characters find themselves as absurdists, having no existence.

2.Theoretical Framework

2.1.Existentialism Theory

Existentialism is a philosophy that views human existence as mysterious, emphasizing freedom of choice along with the responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. It underscores the uniqueness and isolation of individual experiences in a hostile and/or uncaring universe (Sasan, 2023). During World War II, existentialism gained popularity as a way for people to reaffirm the value of individuality and autonomy. From the 1930s through the 1970s, it evolved into a prominent philosophical and cultural movement.

Existential issues have been extensively explored in both literature and philosophy. Soren Kierkegaard, the founder of existentialism, stated that each person is responsible for giving life purpose and living it with passion. He emphasized people's subjective experiences over the objective facts provided by science and mathematics. The key characteristics of existentialism include individual freedom, existential anxiety, and the absence of inherent meaning.

- **Individual Freedom:** Existentialism places a high value on personal autonomy and decision-making. It asserts that individuals have the freedom to choose how they wish to live their lives.
- **Existential Anxiety:** Existentialists often examine the fear and trepidation individuals feel when confronting life's inherent uncertainties and challenges (Newton, 2021).
- **Absence of Inherent Meaning:** Existentialism denies the existence of an objective or intrinsic significance to life. It suggests that individuals must create their own meaning and values (Newton, 2021).

2.2. Research Objectives

- I. To identify the existential elements in the play *The Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.
- II. To explore how the main characters grapple with absurdity.

2.3. Research Questions

- 1) How do existential elements play an important role in the lives of the characters in the play?
- 2) How do the portrayals of the main characters reflect their confrontation with absurdity?

3. Literature Review

According to Gihan Samy Ibrahim Al Basuony (Basuony, 2016), the writer has presented the Iraqi war, a significant event in postmodern history, as represented in several plays, including Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. The drama is based on an actual incident in which a rare Bengal Tiger was killed by some U.S. soldiers at the Baghdad Zoo. Since it documents this true incident and features actual names, historical locations, and historical figures, it qualifies as a documentary drama. Basuony demonstrated how much the play reflects the culture that drives the events, whether that culture is that of the playwright or the characters (Americans and Arabs), by using the new historicist technique. Therefore, it is possible to view the play as a result of the interaction between American and Arab cultures it encountered. While the Iraqis perceived this war as the destruction of their culture, the American soldiers initially saw it as a mission for freedom. The dramatic approach, however, captures shifting viewpoints as the characters interact. Through literature and the interaction of cultures, the current reading offers an opportunity to comprehend intellectual and cultural history.

Mohamad El-Sebaey Ibrahim Zayed (Zayed, Gadallah, & Metwalli, 2024) examined a society's human trauma during and after a conflict. It focuses on writing that aims to depict life as it ought to be. The literary works included here, however, deal with catastrophic tragedies that portray Iraqis who, in general, bear the consequences of the American crisis as well as the great poverty and underdevelopment that prevailed at the time. This study examines two theatrical works in which the audience is confronted with disaster: Jawad al-Asadi's *Baghdadi Bath* (2005) and Rajiv Joseph's *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (2012). The nightmare that all Iraqis went through during the conflict is aptly

illustrated by these works. When it comes to the catastrophe of war, we suppose that it may have human causes. The analysis focuses on the catastrophe of the war in Iraq. The researchers attempt to depict the characteristics of humanity during the catastrophe. The study examines the connections between conflict and the world we live in, citing the violent past and perplexing present of Baghdad. The true causes of the conflict are also examined, and the effects of the U.S. invasion of Iraq on humankind are documented. The researchers have selected the 2003 U.S. war on Iraq and its aftermath as the study's focus in order to direct their examination. According to many viewpoints, the paper guarantees peace for people while stepping down war and bloodshed.

Mohammad Ali Ahmed portrayed the Iraq War of 2003 (Ahmed & Hamad, 2023) in Rajiv Joseph's play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. One of the pillars of postmodern history is widely acknowledged to be the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The play took a documentary approach to the conflict. It is based on a true incident about how two American troops killed a rare Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo. The drama qualifies as a documentary because it is based on actual names, historical locations, and historical figures. The American invasion of Iraq, which was carried out under the guise of both counterterrorism as part of American policy and humanitarian motives, is ironically depicted in this paper using the Just War Theory. The adverse consequences of war on both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians are also discussed in the study.

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing textual analysis as the primary method. Textual analysis involves a close and thorough examination of the text to interpret its deeper meanings, themes, and implications. In this study, close reading is utilized as a critical approach to analyze the existential elements of the play *The Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*. By carefully interpreting the text, this method explores how the characters grapple with feelings of absurdity and a lack of meaningful existence in both the physical and metaphysical worlds. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the existential dilemmas presented in the play and their broader implications.

4. Textual Analysis and Discussion

Existentialism frequently draws attention to the absurdity of human life and the tension that exists between the universe's quiet indifference and people's search for life's intrinsic worth. The protagonists in *The Bengal Tiger in the Baghdad Zoo* are caught in the crossfire of war, which prompts them to consider their meaning in suffering and the reason they are alive.

The Tiger's Dialogue: A symbol of existential inquiry, the Nominal Tiger's thoughts were heard by the audience. Prior to being shot by a soldier, he muses about his imprisonment and what freedom is:

"I pace this cage every day, looking at the bars and wondering, 'Is this it? Is this all there is?'" (Joseph, 2003, Scene 1, Act 1).

The above line exemplifies the concept of absurdity. Here, the cage of the Tiger reflects the struggle of humans who follow the same routine every day to find the purpose of their existence in this world. However, like the Tiger, it is already known that there is no one to answer this question or help find the reason for life. In addition, the Tiger spends all his time looking at the bars and thinking that this is all for him. Similarly, the Iraqi people had only war for them; their people were dying every day, and no one was there to help them. This line, with its metaphysical meaning, shows that the people of Iraq were searching for the meaning of life in war, like the Tiger in the "cage." The idea of the absurd is best illustrated in this line: the Tiger's realization of his captivity mirrors the human search for meaning in the figurative "cage" of life, knowing that there might be no answers.

The Ghostly Tiger, now free but tortured by even more profound issues, reappears as a ghost after being killed. From a physical hunger to a spiritual one, his voice changes:

"I'm dead, and nothing is clearer. Death didn't bring knowledge; it just brought more emptiness" (Joseph, 2003, Scene 2, Act 2).

The above line reflects the work of Sartre and Camus, who reject the idea of knowledge and truth derived from external forces such as death or religion. As existentialism explores the absence of meaning in life and the hereafter, we see in this line that when the Tiger was dead, he failed to find any clarity. He states that those who think there is life after death should know that death does not bring any knowledge; it just brings more emptiness. This supports Sartre and Camus' comments about death: that there is no life after death. This illustrates the existential theme that death is an extension of uncertainty rather than a conclusion. The Tiger is a perfect example of Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which is about a fight that never ends.

Death and the Afterlife The drama is filled with death, which questions the characters' ideas of what comes next. Together with other ethereal presences, the Tiger's post-death reflections highlight the ambiguity of life after death.

Uday Hussein's Ghost: This existential concept is altered in the case of Uday Hussein, a ghost that haunts his former palace. Even after passing away, he is still caught in the same cycle of egotism and power-hungry behaviour that characterized his life. His character makes the viewer wonder if identity and purpose stay the same after death or if anything changes drastically.

"I am Uday, prince of Baghdad, and even in death, I hold the same throne. This is my fate—cursed with consciousness, no peace" (Joseph, 2003, Scene 1, Act 2).

This line highlights the conflict between identity and meaninglessness. Uday's claim to be the prince of Baghdad even after death shows his attachment to an earthly identity despite the irrelevance of such a title after death. This exemplifies the effort to let go of conceptions that formerly defined life but now exacerbate his existential pain. The "curse" of awareness in death corresponds to Sartre's notion of bad faith: clinging to illusions rather than facing the absurdity of life. Uday's misery derives from his inability to see past these illusions and recognize the true emptiness of his existence. It highlights the existential fear that people can remain trapped in their past and nature beyond death, unable to move past or change.

Musa's Inner Turmoil: Musa, who was a gardener before becoming a translator, stands in for the average person who is troubled by survival impulses and remorse. His memories of Uday and the violence he saw haunt him. The violence he engaged in and his continued life as an enabler raise doubts about what it means to be decent in an immoral environment.

"I am both the man who planted roses and the man who watched them burn" (Joseph, 2003, Scene 2, Act 2).

This statement resonates deeply with the existentialist notion of self-awareness and self-choice. Here, Musa accepts the dual identity, implying a confrontation with the absurdity of existence. In addition, Sartre emphasized that humans are free to make choices, but there is a responsibility that comes with freedom. Musa embodies this freedom by planting the roses and watching them burn. Through the existentialist lens, Joseph highlights the dual role of human existence, as he can be someone who plants roses and, at the same time, destroys those roses with his freedom.

Alienation and Isolation A common theme in existentialist literature is the sense of alienation, in which people feel cut off from both the outside world and themselves.

Through the protagonists' solitary experiences against the chaotic backdrop of Baghdad, Joseph's drama vividly depicts this.

The Soldiers' Displacement Two American troops, Tom and Kev, have trouble feeling like they belong and have an identity. Kev's spiral toward insanity and Tom's disenchantment with the war booty highlight their extreme loneliness in a strange country where everything appears irrational and uncertain.

“This gold toilet seat is worth more than any of us here. I touch it and feel a god, but that’s just it. We’re worth less than objects” (Joseph, 2003, Scene 1, Act 1).

The above line depicts the reality of the modern world, where objects are more valuable than humans. Joseph shows the dehumanization of humans in a materialistic society, contrasting the notion of existentialism, which insists upon the inherent value of human beings. This reflects how society has changed and also a loss of existential authenticity: things are considered more worthy than humans, as the "gold toilet seat" is worth more than the people who were present there. When they touched it, it felt like a god to them. Here, the gold toilet seat also represents the absurdity and meaninglessness of prioritizing objects over people.

The Tiger’s Soliloquies: The Tiger feels alone as a result of his post-mortal adventure. He finds himself torn between the living and the dead, no longer bound by a cage but by life itself:

“I roam without form, but I am still confined. The bars have disappeared, but the prison is bigger now” (Joseph, 2003, Scene 2, Act 1).

Roaming without form implies a lack of identity and attachment to a fixed self. People are confused about their identity, questioning who they are in this environment. In addition, the idea of a bigger prison highlights the absurdity of existence. As Albert Camus said, life is fundamentally contradictory; humans find meaning in a universe that offers none. Similarly, in these lines, the physical disappearance of bars does not have value for men because outside of these bars, there is a bigger prison.

Freedom and Choice Existential philosophy places a strong emphasis on the notion that responsibility accompanies freedom. The choices the characters make and the results that follow demonstrate this idea.

Musa's Dilemma: The moral complexity of dictatorship is demonstrated by Musa's decision to work for Uday in spite of his better judgment. Long after Uday has passed away, his choices continue to plague him, leading him to wonder what freedom really means.

"I had the choice to leave or stay, to live or die. But each path brought its own chains" (Joseph, 2003, Scene 2, Act 2).

The above line from *Bengal Tiger at Baghdad Zoo* highlights the existentialist notion that freedom comes with the weight of responsibility for every individual. Here, Musa has been given the freedom to stay or leave that path, but he will be responsible for his choice. Moreover, existentialism challenges individuals to make choices themselves, even when their options are constrained. The speaker's knowledge of the "chains" indicates a comprehension of this dynamic, but it also reflects the difficulties of completely accepting the responsibility of freedom in an honest manner.

5. Conclusion

This present research study has very rightly presented the concepts of existentialism in the play *The Bengal Tiger in the Baghdad Zoo*. The researcher concludes that the play contains existential elements and portrays the absurdity and lack of interest in life through the character of the Tiger. The Tiger faces absurdity throughout his life. Also, the study reveals that the characters of the play try to find the meaning of their life and the freedom of life.

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