



HOW *THE WEARY GENERATIONS* EMBODIES SARTREAN EXISTENTIALISM: NAIM'S *ANGUISH AND THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM*

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Abstract

The study conducted here is an attempt to compare Existentialism to *The Weary Generations* by Abdullah Hussein (originally written in Urdu as *Udaas Naslein*). More specifically, the Sartrean version of Existentialism has been identified with the lead character in the novel. The pervasion of such a philosophical trend in Urdu literature has been relatively recent with regard to self-discovery. Naim is an embodiment of what is outlined in the existential dilemma. He experiments with his life to unfold the untold arenas; likewise, the existentialist philosophy is a shift from essentialism. It rather lays more weight on the individual in the process of becoming. The connections between the two have been juxtaposed using hermeneutical analysis to weigh either side (Hussein, 2014; Sartre, 1943). The lead character—Naim—is so confused about his being that his attempts to define himself remain incomplete. As a result, he does not commit to one particular mode of living but rather prefers a continuous unfolding of the self. The same is endorsed in Existentialism: that human beings must not conform to a set of values but should consciously make choices out of their free will. The burden of freedom nonetheless makes it even more difficult for individuals to choose and reject.

Keywords: *Authenticity, Existentialism, Freedom, Identity, Partition.*

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1. Introduction

The Weary Generations is an epic novel that portrays the partition of the subcontinent. It begins in the early 20th century. It was a time of great unrest throughout the world, especially in the subcontinent, due to a continued subjection of the Indian people at the hands of the British. So, a group of people with mixed religious beliefs started to oppose British rule. They made political parties which systematically campaigned for freedom. There were then differences among them; Muslims wanted a separate homeland for themselves in the areas where they existed in the majority. The struggle is manifest in the novel. The lead character—Naim—is an embodiment of change and transience (Hussein, 2014; Sartre, 1943). He is so prone to change that his self is submerged in ways to decipher meanings for himself.

The connection between the main character Naim and existentialist thought is inevitable as Naim represents a typical mindset of that particular time he existed in. A man of reasonable education to understand the dynamics of his times, Naim could participate in political discussions at a very young age. His circle of acquaintances is influential and therefore he is a part of the Muslim elite of British India. Together with the literate minds of the country, Naim started to believe that this occupation of foreign power must be overthrown for self-rule.

The novel itself does not endorse any such philosophical underpinnings, but there are plenty of instances which ostensibly indicate how characters feel one way or the other about life as such. There is a constant reiteration about how a being unfolds his/her self, especially in those troubled times—the time of war and upheavals which perhaps never happened across the globe at least at one point of time in history.

The 20th century was a breakthrough in terms of unprecedented human energy manifested in the form of warfare, ammunition, scientific exploration, emerging social theories and whatnot. Similarly, it opened newer vistas for understanding the human condition which was not easy to do resorting to all the already available theories.

Moreover, man's condition worsened not only spatially but spiritually as well. This catastrophic decline in man's ability to align himself with the fabric of society led him to understand the world around him otherwise. It was for this and other reasons that compelled philosophers like Sartre and, of course, his predecessors to expound Existentialism.

As for Urdu literature, the shreds of Existentialism crept in very subtly. It was after the partition that authors here in this region tried to connect themselves to the ever-changing man's relationship to himself/herself first and later to society. *The Weary Generations* is none but such an attempt to encompass what went wrong with humans, especially at the time of partition. Human nature was exposed to the utmost and many new

facets surfaced that later haunted the migrants' present so much so that they dwelt in their past instead of the present.

Living in the past, often characterised by nostalgia, became a prevalent phenomenon among a significant portion of adults who became obsessed with the traumatic events of partition. This sentiment is a complex and multifaceted emotional response that can be better understood by delving into its various aspects.

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was a traumatic and pivotal event in the region's history, resulting in significant changes to the human condition for millions of people. The displacement caused immense suffering, with refugees facing violence, hardship, and loss of life during their journeys. The trauma of the partition had a profound psychological impact on those who lived through it. Many people experienced deep emotional scars, and the memories of the violence and displacement haunted them for the rest of their lives. It reshaped the lives of millions of people and left a lasting impact on the region's history, politics, and social fabric. The memories of the partition continue to influence the collective consciousness of the people of India and Pakistan to this day.

Therefore, giving different meanings to a context with characters sometimes so erratic, a narrative with the help of Existentialism makes the work more relatable. Since a work like *The Weary Generations* did make an impact on the sufferings of individuals, the realisation of the loss was far greater than the merriment of the achievement of a new homeland. Naim and his close associates wander off in search of an elixir for their freedom. However, the pricey freedom is only accessible at the cost of Naim's life.

Apparently, *The Weary Generations* is a recount of an entire generation of trauma-stricken migrants who unwillingly accepted to let go of everything they had. The sudden change in their status produced certain emotions which affected their mental state so much that what they all wanted was to cherish the memories of a forsaken land.

Naim is a product of his time. He is egotistical and stubborn and does not subscribe to the views of his contemporaries. Very much like existentialists, he does not commit to one mode of living throughout his life. His attempts to quench his intellectual longing are only realised when he meets Anees Rehman who happens to share his personality. They together spend some very quality time at a guest house near a river. There are long periods of silence when they spend time there and it is this very solitude that provides an opportunity for both to reflect on the choices they have made in their lives.

Linking various themes of *The Weary Generations* to Existentialism becomes viable since both are products of troubled times. The former was born in a world that was rampant with injustice, cruelty, poverty, social inequality etc., whereas the latter came into being as a result of the man's ever-growing dissatisfaction with the modern world. In other words, a world that did not adequately define man's relationship with himself and nature.

However, this quest was no easy task. It required all the courage to shun the already-established beliefs as to man's rational understanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Existentialism and Literature

Existentialist literature surfaced before, during, and after the World Wars in the twentieth century. The necessity for such literature was so felt as the human condition worsened in the backdrop of the wars which not only annihilated the physical edifice that man had erected for so long, it too shook the invisible self which had grown corpulent. Each piece of literature produced with an insight into Existentialism shed light on a personal self but was also applicable to selves other than being in the first place. Literature provided a platform for this particular philosophy to thrive using short stories, novels, and dramas.

Albert Camus (2016), in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," famously explored the concept of the absurd by examining the mythological figure Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity. Camus argued that Sisyphus, despite his seemingly meaningless task, could find a form of liberation and purpose by embracing the absurdity of his existence.

Another work that manifestly sheds light on the human condition is *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse (2011). It so truly depicts what Sartre calls existence precedes essence. Young Siddhartha, wearied by regular religious practices, wants to find meaning for his existence by experiencing newer ways. He becomes an ascetic to see if his thirst for meaningfulness is quenched. He, unfortunately, forsakes it for another way to give meaning to his self, by becoming too worldly. In other words, he turns materialistic to find out if this mode of life satisfies him. Siddhartha renounces this as well to become a ferryman. In this very last stage, he is shown to have acquired what he wishes for all his life: nirvana—a state of bliss. The whole novel seems to be an existential struggle owing to an existential dilemma. Not committing and giving meaning is central to Existentialism, which is why the lead character tries to unfold his self in every new given situation.

The Wall by Sartre (1969) is another remarkable depiction of the human condition in precarious circumstances. The idea of wait and death is the theme of this story. Perhaps, a new meaning is given to existence when one dies. This experience is altogether different from experiences one undergoes. The horror attached to being dead is negated by the protagonist of this story: Pablo Ibbieta. However, at the end of the story, he lies to his murderer and saves himself from the experience of death. This "lie" which Ibbieta tells is purely out of a hope that it could not anyway become truth but inversely becomes the reason for the death of his friend.

The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka (2009) is yet another work that portrays an existential crisis. This crisis, however, is very creepy. A human transforms into a whole

new being. It is difficult to name that being when reading the short story, but it is not human anyhow. Nonetheless, it signifies how fragile existence is. Gregor Samsa's family is weary of his new existence since this physiological change is beyond comprehension or meaning and amplifies their financial worries. Moreover, his transformation is less important to them and his care more cumbersome.

The Death of Ivan Ilych by Leo Tolstoy (2004) is yet another example of a man's realization that existence is all that matters. Death is a marker that ends all the suffering a man undergoes during his lifetime. Ilych's sense of failure at the end of the story is perhaps very significant because the futility of his existence is now exposed to himself. He is, apparently, unable to change his state due to his illness which could be diagnosed. He realizes that he has never been truly happy all his life. It was rather an illusion that he always thought to be a reality. And he has not existed the way he wanted; all his existence was meant for others; a meaning given to self, based on your surroundings. It also implies that societal forces define your being.

Finally, *Nausea* by Sartre (2000) can be classified as a classic example of disenchantment with one's existence. Roquentin, having spent about 10 years of his life researching a French aristocrat, gradually realizes that he has been living in the past. He does not experience the present as it must be done. His doubts grow to such an extent that he starts keeping a diary to note down strange sensations that he now feels. A nauseated feeling overcomes him. He is disillusioned that he has been living someone else's life so much so that he gives up his work. For him, existence in the present matters most.

2.2. Existentialism and Urdu Literature

As for Urdu literature, the shreds of Existentialism crept in very subtly. It was after the partition that authors here in this region tried to connect themselves to the ever-changing man's relationship to himself first and later to society. *The Weary Generations* is none but such an attempt to encompass what went wrong with humans, especially at the time of partition.

Intizar Hussain's (2007) short story "Akhri Aadmi" is a marvelous depiction of a man's quest to stay a human being despite the fact the whole town has now transformed into monkeys. The existential dilemma that Alyasaf undergoes is nothing new for humans. They always look for the right meaning to give to themselves. Emotions such as anxiety, fear, terror, alienation, and angst are at the core of human struggle.

Aag Ka Darya by Quratulain Haider (2010) is a significant novel among those which ostensibly deal with the themes Existentialism revolves around. Time is thoroughly visited in the novel, *Aag Ka Darya*. It has paramount importance and perhaps everything is at the mercy of the same. No one transcends time in the novel except time itself. It is this complex quality of time that makes the whole story inexplicably interdependent.

Kaya Kalp by Intizar Hussain (2016) is another short story that deals with the themes of anguish and terror. The prince is ironically named Azad Bakht, which refers to his ultimate slavery to fear and anxiety. It is precisely this fear that makes him so timid that despite being a prince, he cannot imagine confronting the giant.

2.3. Existentialism and The Weary Generations

The Weary Generations is a remarkable work that illuminates the human condition during times that remain unspeakable for many. The way the novel deals with a variety of characters to edify the story is so engaging that every character feels inevitable in their entirety. Moreover, every character serves as an embodiment of the weariness that has shrouded them for centuries. Their true selves have been forgotten, leaving them in search of their authentic selves. Consequently, their reconciliation with the present state of affairs in a new homeland is highly complex. Their identity is composed in a manner that leaves indelible marks upon their souls.

Naim, the lead character, embodies the emotions that other characters undergo across various stories. To some degree, the protagonist in all these narratives suffers from one or many symptoms of existential crises. Their beings are pugnacious, constantly quarreling with everyday facticity. Primarily, the anguish Naim feels pervades the novel and is symbolic of the central theme of Existentialism. As the lead character, he represents the era. His critical condition embodies the experiences of millions who perhaps felt the same but never realized it. This realization is quintessential because it manifests in Naim's actions from his first appearance. The delineation of his life rests on the fact that he never settles in one place. He is often fidgeting, and a sense of boredom frequently intrigues him to leave things halfway through. This reflects an inability to complete any given task.

The idea of being "complete" is important for linking the character to perennial angst. This angst resides within everyone and can make individuals so dissociated from the outside world that their being is threatened, brought to the very verge of non-existence. Naim undergoes a similar situation; even when he commits at different stages of life, he eventually regrets having done so. While this regret may not be very explicit, it is through the nonchalance of the character that it is evident.

Naim's successes and failures carry little weight because meaning lies beyond conventional honors or horrors. These are social constructs rather than inherent truths. As Nietzsche (2008) aptly points out, truth is often nothing more than a will to exercise power. The creation or recreation of truth is in fact pragmatic to specific conditions. Hence, the pursuit of transvaluation is necessary for individuals seeking their authentic self. Without it, they would never be able to delve into the depths of the abyss of suffering. The ability to dive into this abyss is required to carve out an individual who is insensitive to the sensitivity of sensation—a state that is neither easy to reach nor simple to retain.

Anxiety also pervades the entire novel. It is present in every character, though for most, it remains an unknown emotion. Denying it is difficult because it is not always explicit. Instead, it resides in the depths of the subconscious, triggering and directing many actions. In other words, anxiety is an offshoot of fear. Fear is an all-encompassing emotion in the novel, dominant whenever decisions are made or unmade. Anxiety may be termed the beginning that culminates in fear at a certain point in each character's life. Though it subsides at times, its presence is undeniable and lingers behind every move. This is clearly seen in Naim's actions, as he manifests a life led into oblivion due to great anxiety.

The Weary Generations spans a century, encapsulating a plethora of incidents, events, and legends. Everything that happens suggests an oncoming struggle for freedom—a freedom from external masters whom the subjects believe have robbed them of their identities, leaving them at the mercy of fate. A nation desperate for freedom loses not only its identity but the very sense of loss itself. This identity crisis culminates in unpredictable, atrocious behavior.

Therefore, Naim, who joins the freedom movement in the later part of the novel, seeks salvation and purgation. For Naim, salvation is the absence of suffering. He tries hard to reach his destination to find a more comprehensive meaning for his wandering being, but he does not succeed. He dies near the end of his hardship-laden journey. His death is not even nominally mentioned by the author, suggesting an end to his suffering. Existence remains essential in defining one's being.

Anything regarding an afterlife is a matter of speculation. However, the author deals with the theme of "death before death" throughout the novel. This refers to the severity of brutal and terrible experiences that cannot be adequately conveyed through the medium of language. Language is insufficient to cater to the horrors of pain one feels. This incapacity to communicate is what refers to "death before death". Death is not necessarily the physical cessation of one's connection to the outside world; it is at times manifested through a lack of ability to communicate.

Toward the end of the novel, Naim suffers from this very condition. His silence conveys more than his words ever could. While his silence may be attributed to the horrible experiences he undergoes as partition begins, he is so tormented that words lose their efficacy. Thus, it becomes wiser for the individual to resort to silence, even though the implications of that silence outreach apparent meanings. His self is so weary that discovering new meaning is left to fate—the inverse of the struggle he underwent throughout the novel. His only chance of giving authentic meaning to his self was staying alive. Death, a common sight during migration, makes every migrant impatient to reach their destination. At the core of this struggle remains the fear of the unknown.

3. Methodology

The following section attempts to deal with the approaches which are used to decipher the text of *The Weary Generations*. Hermeneutics is used primarily to interpret data. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and there are several versions of it. Nonetheless, here in this study, a few are applied that best fit the text in question. They are divided into four sections: Schleiermacher and Dilthey; Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics with a reference to Husserl's phenomenology; Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2008; Heidegger, 2008); and Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur, 2022). Each section will comprise the most important aspects a particular version of the theory expounds on. Since attempting to incorporate a lot of philosophised analysis may be out of the scope of the present study, its relevance with the interpretive theories is the task at hand.

Hermeneutics is an interpretive theory that helps us explain texts. The theory has evolved out of Phenomenology. The word phenomenology has come from the Kantian phenomenon meaning ".....that which shows itself in itself....." (Heidegger, 2008). The relation between a word and its interpreter is essential in understanding any text. Whereas logos means language and is related to discourse and letting something be seen through speaking. The focus of phenomenology is on the fact that things have been understood the way they have been right from the beginning of time and thus stand unquestioned. Essentially the meaning of being which has been taken for granted since time unknown must be questioned critically.

Hermeneutics means "to interpret" (Richard, 1969). It makes humans capable of deciphering layers of meanings behind any text or thoughts. Since language is the sole medium of communication—be it in any form, verbal or nonverbal (every mode of communication is a type of language)—excavating to unearth meaning is a daunting task. Hermeneutics theoretically provides a frame of reference to approach meaning/s which is otherwise not viable.

3.1. Research Questions

1. What are the key existentialist concepts and principles as outlined by Jean-Paul Sartre, and how do they relate to the character development of Naim in *The Weary Generations*?
2. How do Naim's existential journey, choices, and existential crises in the novel *The Weary Generations* align with or diverge from Sartrean Existentialism?

3.2. Research Design

The present study is qualitative in nature. This research design employs hermeneutics to explore the relationship between Sartre's Existentialism and the character Naim in *The Weary Generations* while interpreting existential themes within the context

of the novel. It offers a structured approach to analysing complex literary and philosophical texts and uncovering deeper meanings.

Hermeneutical analysis has been selected solely for the purpose of interpretation since it offers a wide range of arrays such as historical and critical. The layers of meanings that surround the text *The Weary Generations* are open to a wide choice of interpretation. Since meaning is interwoven in a complex set of layers, it is important to decipher it with a lot of elements which either lie within the text or sometimes beyond.

The first to attempt hermeneutics as an art of interpretation that originated out of phenomenology were Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey. Schleiermacher emphasizes that the understandability of a text is not viable as it is strange to the reader. What is odd is mysterious for interpretation and what is clear is superfluously understood. Dilthey on the other hand stresses the need for a methodology that can explain human sciences like natural sciences. The understanding of man's activity is as significant as making sense of a natural phenomenon (Critchley, 1998).

Spiegelberg (1984) examines whereas Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's phenomenology is based on his idea of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is the ontologic-ontic entity which refers to the capacity of being to question its own being. Heidegger illustrated how "the they" (*das Man*) form and impact *Dasein*'s existence. Heidegger's method for hermeneutic inquiry involves three aspects: reduction, construction, and destruction.

Furthermore, Gadamer (2008), in his essay *On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection*, defines what is the function of Hermeneutics as a discipline. The entire understanding of the world as it is and otherwise and the edifice man has erected with the help of language. Language enables us to rule the world. It is the language that makes us contemporary with the world. Without language, the authenticity of truth is always dubious.

Dowling (2022) explains that Ricoeur on the other hand in *Time and Narrative* argues that literary works are driven by their own rules and logic and if external forces and doctrines are applied to them, they are distorted. Ricoeur maintains that, just like in metaphor, there is a non-textual reference involved in mimesis: both the temporality revealed in mimetic configuration and the world opened by living metaphors are not solely inner linguistic phenomena (Ricoeur, 2022).

3.3. Existentialist Analysis

The themes in *The Weary Generations* represent a new dimension to human experiences, ranging from folly to perfection, happiness to sorrow, restlessness to peace, and life to death. These emotions convey how humans of a specific part of the world fared through the hardships during the time period depicted in the novel. Understanding the text through the lens of Existentialism is one way to decipher the core of such an account of human tragedy.

The lead character, Naim, is an embodiment of discovering his self through various means. As the novel is divided into three parts, so is Naim's personality, which changes significantly throughout the story. His adherence to one particular viewpoint is only transitory, and this ephemeral nature is a trait that Existentialists regard as true to one's existence for the real meaning to uncover.

3.3.1. Existence precedes Essence

The concept of "existence precedes essence" is a foundational idea in Existentialism. It asserts that individuals are not born with predetermined natures or inherent meanings; rather, their existence is a blank canvas upon which they paint their essence through their actions and choices. This idea emerged in the aftermath of World War II, when Existentialists sought to explore the nature of human existence in the absence of transcendent or predetermined meanings.

Sartre's existential philosophy revolves around the idea of radical freedom, which he believed was the defining characteristic of human existence. Sartre (1943) argued that there is no preexisting human nature or predetermined purpose that governs an individual's life. Human beings are "condemned to be free," meaning they are thrust into a world without a predefined essence or meaning. This freedom, while liberating, is also accompanied by profound responsibility and anxiety.

Naim's decision to enlist in World War I and the consequences he faced demonstrate his responsibility for his choices and the impact on his existence. His dissatisfaction with every preoccupation he engages in reflects the existential anxiety he experiences in the absence of external guidance or predetermined paths.

The concept of authenticity is central to navigating the anxiety of freedom and living a meaningful life. Authentic individuals fully embrace their freedom and take responsibility for their choices and actions, while living in "bad faith" involves evading one's freedom and responsibility. Naim's non-conformist nature and his attempts to give meaning to his self are symbolic of his rejection of "bad faith" (Sartre, 2000).

3.3.2. Existentialist Ethics

Existentialist ethics are not based on external authorities or predefined moral codes, but rather on individual choices and actions, grounded in the recognition of freedom and responsibility. Sartre's existential ethics are centered on the idea of authenticity, where ethical principles arise from individual choices and the specific circumstances of each situation.

Sartre's (1943) concept of "the other" illustrates the responsibility individuals have in recognizing and respecting the freedom of others. Authentic ethical choices involve treating others as free and equal individuals (Sartre, 1943).

The synthesis of these philosophical insights paints a comprehensive picture of human existence as a dynamic process of self-creation, where essence emerges as a fluid

and evolving entity shaped by our interactions with the world. This view challenges the notion of a static human nature and urges us to embrace our capacity for transformation and self-discovery.

Naim's individuality unfolds gradually, and his self-discovery is an amalgam of experience and curiosity. His choice to find solace in rural life and his recommendation to his brother Ali reflect his rejection of conformity and his pursuit of an authentic existence.

3.4. Challenges of Existentialism

While the concept of "existence precedes essence" celebrates human agency, it also presents challenges. The weight of constant decision-making and the uncertainty that accompanies radical freedom can be overwhelming. Sartre's (1943) idea of "bad faith" illustrates the tendency to evade this responsibility by conforming to societal norms and roles, which comes at the cost of an inauthentic existence.

The assertion that existence precedes essence holds significant implications for ethics, as individuals are responsible for creating their own ethical values and principles. This can be a daunting task, as it requires constant moral reflection and the willingness to confront the existential anguish that comes with freedom.

Naim's struggles throughout the novel, his dissatisfaction with every pursuit, and his ultimate fate reflect the challenges of navigating the existential condition. His silence towards the end of the novel conveys the incapacity of language to capture the horrors of his experiences, suggesting the notion of "death before death"—the inability to communicate the severity of one's suffering (Heidegger, 2008).

As a result, the analysis of *The Weary Generations* through the lens of Existentialism sheds light on the profound implications of the idea that "existence precedes essence." Naim's journey, marked by constant change, dissatisfaction, and the pursuit of authentic self-discovery, mirrors the existentialist themes of freedom, responsibility, and the burden of choice. The novel's exploration of human experiences in the aftermath of a traumatic event like partition further underscores the relevance of existentialist thought in understanding the complexities of the human condition.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion summarises the key findings of the study, highlighting the connections between Sartrean Existentialism and the character of Naim in *The Weary Generations*. It emphasizes the novel's portrayal of the human condition during the turbulent times of partition, where individuals grapple with existential dilemmas of freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning.

The study concludes that the novel's exploration of existential themes, such as the burden of freedom, the quest for self-discovery, and the absurdity of existence, aligns with the core principles of Sartrean Existentialism. The lead character, Naim, embodies the

existentialist struggle to define one's essence in the face of a world that offers no predetermined purpose or meaning.

The analysis suggests that *The Weary Generations* serves as a powerful literary representation of the existential crisis faced by individuals during the partition of the Indian subcontinent, a time marked by profound upheaval and the loss of identity. The novel's ability to capture the nuances of human experience and the search for authenticity in the midst of chaos makes it a significant contribution to the understanding of Existentialism in Urdu literature.

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