

EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF EXISTENTIALISM IN THE NOVEL AFTER DARK

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Abstract

After Dark, written by Haruki Murakami, is an exemplary modern Japanese novel which throws light onto the plight of modern man. Despite the sweeping winds of modernity, people who belong to the third world are always on the journey to solve the mystery of life. In this attempt, they discover that existence itself is meaningless, unless the purpose of life is fulfilled. This paper explores this concept of existential crisis through the inner conflicts of the characters like Mari Asai, a teenager, her twin sister Eri Asi, a glamdoll who is in a state of deep sleep, Takahashi, the trombonist and minor characters like Kamaru, who runs a brothel. Mari Asai is the epitome of the existential crisis encountered by people living in this generation. In a world where the survival of the fittest is the motto, people like her are pushed back. They are always reminded of their solitary absurd existence. They are in a constant state of nausea; always agitated by the abusive words of society. On the flip side of the coin, her sister Eri Asai is the embodiment of beauty and intelligence, but she is in a state of passivity. Her sleep is evocative of the absurdity of existence. Takahashi stands somewhere in the middle. He is the one who tries to figure out the distorted reality of the lives of the sisters. He is also torn apart by the inner conflicts that is augmented by the realization that he is an orphan. His entire life is a saga of untold pain and existential crisis. Similarly, the minor characters in the novel are also threatened by the futility of being alive.

Keywords: Existentialism--Existential Struggle-Gloom-Soren Kierkegaard-Despair-Sartre-Nausea-Camus-Meaning-Absurdity-Essence-Fear-Loneliness-Mtyth Of Sisyphus-Archetype-Modern Man

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Human beings are cast into this alien world with a mission to find out the real latent meaning of their existence. Existentialism is a 20th century philosophy, based on this concept, "existence precedes essence"(Sartre 34) .The origin of existentialism can be traced back to philosophers like, Soren Kierkegaard, Frederich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. According to existentialists human life is incomplete and meaningless. Therefore, man must create his own meaning in the absurd world. The novel *After Dark* (2004) written by the prolific Japanese writer Haruki Murakami has existentialist elements. The novel reverberates with the existential ideas of the German philosophers Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus and French philosophers Jean Paul Sartre and Michael Foucault .In the paper, the theory and application of existentialism is attempted. To explore the concept of existentialism, three works are chosen: Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Kierkegaard wrote *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), under the pseudonym 'Anti Climus'. The concept of 'despair' appears in the work. This sickness unto death is what Kierkegaard calls 'despair'. Despair is the interminable and incurable malady. Sickness is a metaphor for despair-a malady of self. The paradox is that though despair is universal, human beings never recognize the despair, deeply embedded in their souls. Escape is a complicated form of despair and is followed by the urge to existence (Kierkegaard's writings Vol.19).

According to Kierkegaard, both desires are either good or bad. There exists a conflict between the infinite and the finite .Despair is good in the sense that it augments self awareness , which can nourish one's inner strength .On the flipside of the coin, despair is suffering and it increases misery (Vol.19).

Self is not a metaphor for a set of relations .It is determined by a set of relations between a person and the outside world .Self can transcend body as well as brain. It is not the concept of relating to one self that is contradictory; but it is the aspects of personality which is contradictory (Vol.19). It is the existence of self that causes despair in man.

It's in a nook of a night restaurant named Denny's that Mari Asai, a nineteen year old girl meets a young trombonist, Tetsuya Takahashi. As Mari has nothing to do except read a book, she becomes ready to talk to Takahashi. Takahashi recalls that he had a date with Eri Asai, sister of Mari Asai. Then Takahashi notices Mari. That's how he identifies Mari in the restaurant. Mari is initially agitated by the sudden intruder, later finds Takahashi a good chap. Mari agrees that she is totally different from her sister Eri. "We live in two different worlds" (Murakami 34).Takahashi wonders at this possibility, "you are born to the same parents, you grow up in the same house, you both are girls .How do you end up with such widely different personalities?"(4). Takahashi recalls how the sisters behaved in the swimming pool.

I wonder how it turns out that we all lead such different lives. Take you and your sister for example .At that point ,do you like to go your separate ways? One puts on a bikini like a little flag and lies by the pool looking sexy and the other puts on her school bathing suit and swims her heart out like a dolphin (16).

This echoes a concept in *The Sickness Unto Death*, that different aspects of personality are contrasting" (Kierkegaard 60). Soren Kierkegaard observes in his *The Sickness Unto Death*:

Some people live on the level of sense ,they live in the basement and do not want to rise up to the higher level of the spiritual or physical world. In other words, people are immature and want to stay that way. So despair is a negativity; ignorance of it, a new negativity. (44)

Eri's predicament is similar. She continues her sleep, without making an effort , to restore her vibrant past. Kierkegaard adds that "the person in despair realizes that his weakness is to despair over earthly things ,but instead of allowing himself to be opened to the external, he entrenches himself in despair and despair over his weakness"(34).This concept is called 'inclosing reserve'. Eri's sleep is evocative of this despair.

There are frequent references about "a man without a face" in the novel. "We cannot tell by looking at him whether he has decided for himself not to move or he has placed himself into some kind of situation that makes him move"(50).

The absurd ambience inside Eri's room is augmented by the unclear passage of time. It's impossible to say if its day or night. The identity of the man cannot be revealed even by the omniscient narrator, the camera. "The mask has been both handed down from ancient times with darkness and sent back from the future with light"(39). The mask clings to him like a second skin and it's impossible to comprehend the feelings of the man. His entire face is covered with a mask. His lack of emotions denotes his insensitivity towards mundane existence .Even the room is devoid of any movements (12). He is a state of despair and is uncertain about the future.

Yet another instance of 'despair 'can be seen when, chatting with Takahashi at the night restaurant , Mari reveals that she has always confronted an existential crisis in her life. Her parents used to compare her, with her sister Eri .Her parents wanted her to score good marks ,while they wanted Eri to be a model. They even made Eri follow a special diet .She says, "It is not easy to think that way ,if people have been telling you, you are ugly from the time you are little"(128). Mari could never make friends nor was she good at sports. She was always bullied by other kids. That's why she always wanted to be an escapist. Mari reveals that she wants to go to China, as a means to escape her despair . Kierkegaard presents the same idea in *The Sickness Unto Death* that "the desire not to escape is a more complicated form of despair ,which is followed by the urge to existence"(109) .Kierkegaard observes that

sickness is a form of despair .Mari is a victim to this ailment as testified by the lines, "I hated school so much that, I would throw up my breakfast and have terrible stomach aches and stuff"(168).

In Volume 19 of Kierkegaard's collective works, there is a mention of 'losing self'. An example for this concept appears when, Mari recollects that she never had choices in her life .She was often overruled by her parents' boundless ambitions. "My parents were not too happy about it, though. They wanted me to go to some prep school. They had our roles picked out for us, the elder sister, the Snow White, the younger sister a genius."(189). Her plight can be described in terms of what Kierkegaard has called 'losing self': "the greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in this world ,as if it were nothing at all .No other loss can occur quietly ;any other loss-an arm, a key ,five dollars ,a wife etc is sure to be noticed"(vol.19).

While Mari Asai and Takahashi are talking in the night restaurant, Kaoru,the female manager of a love hotel, Alphaville, where people come with prostitutes. Kaoru was once a successful wrestler. She could amass great fortunes ,once she became popular. People swarmed around her like bees. Once she lost her wealth and fame, she sunk into the abyss of despair. "I felt bad like, what the hell I was doing with myself for the past ten years" (66). This testifies the despair faced by modern man-the reality that nobody cares for his fellow beings .Kaoru becomes happy when Mari helps her to talk to the prostitute who was beaten black and blue ,by Shirakawa in the love hotel, Alphaville.

Towards the end of the novel, we find that there occurs a shift in the sleeping position of Eri.

This is my bed. There are pyjamas ,that much is certain. But this is not my place. My body is numb all over. If I was asleep here, it was for a very long time,very deeply. But I have no idea about how long I have been here. (194)

She is confronted with the following questions, who could have carried her and for what purpose? Is she likely to be dead? Is this an afterlife? She tries to assure herself that she is the self same woman , but fails in the attempt to do so"(184).She feels that her body has lost it's essence and is becoming a cavern. An unknown hand strips away her organs and memories. She is aware of the fact that, "she will end up as a convenient conduit used for the passage of external things"(115).She is a victim of what Kierkegaard has called, 'despair', in his *Sickness Unto Death*: "The person in despair realizes that his weakness is to despair over earthly things ,but instead of allowing himself to be opened to the external ,to salvation, he entrenches himself in despair and despair over his weakness"(123).

Tetsuya Takahashi is the one who makes the morbid introvert, Mari reveal her past and her relationship with others. He too finds a confidante in Mari. He unravels his bitter past before her. His mother died at the age of seven. His father was an anti-

social, who was often associated with crimes and was sent to jail. So Takahashi had to lead a miserable life. He had to toil from dawn to dusk to make both ends meet. He was more or less like an orphan. He was raised by his step-mother. "Well, finally once you become an orphan, you are an orphan till the day you die"(148). Though his father came back from jail, he was not freed from the feeling of being orphaned. He could never make friends. Nor was he good at studies.

While learning law, the 'Tachikawa' case shook him. Tachikawa was a cold-blooded criminal and a drug addict. He killed an old couple with an axe and set the house on fire. He was deserted by his own family. Each time he was freed from the prison, he would commit another crime. When Tachikawa was sentenced to death, Takahashi was not supposed to share any feelings with him. But he felt that, "It was like whole of the world's electricity supply suffered a voltage drop. Everything got one step darker, colder. Little tremors started to go through my body and I couldn't stop shivering"(98). He says that he feels like crying. "Between him and me, there shouldn't have been anything in common, no link at all".(99) He feels that all human beings are caught by the tentacles of law and are getting sucked into darkness, which is again, the saga of existential struggle. He is a victim of 'despair'.

He recalls his date with Mari's sister Eri. Although Eri was sitting in front of him, "she was a million miles away from him"(74). The words that he spoke to her were sucked up by a transparent sponge. They were apparently talking, but the words that came out of her mouth stopped making it all the way to him.

Takahashi does not find his career as a trombonist fruitful. So he wants to pursue the life of a lawyer. He believes that life is not simple. He says that, "I found myself less and less able to see other's problems"(101). He cannot identify himself with others. He finds a gulf between his life and that of the others. He feels that the legal system is like an "octopus without heart and he feels a deep terror. And a kind of hopelessness, a feeling that I would never run away from this being; no matter how far I went"(97). His inability to develop a warm bond with his father, underscores his inner conflicts. He stands as the archetype of modern man. "Being alone was never hard for me"(75). He finds himself in the abyss of 'despair'.

The novel *Nausea* written by Jean Paul Sartre in 1938, deals with the existential struggle faced by man. It is about a dejected historian, who becomes convinced that inanimate objects and situations encroach on his ability to define himself, on his intellectual and spiritual freedom, evoking in the protagonist a sense of 'nausea'. The titular 'dark' in *After Dark* refers to an all engulfing gloom that lingers on in the characters' for the existential crisis faced by man. The opening sentence of the novel is evocative of 'nausea'.

Midnight is approaching and while the peak of activity has passed, The basal metabolism that maintains life continues undiminished, producing the baso

continuum of the city's moan ,a monotonous sound, that neither rises nor falls but is overwhelmed by foreboding(1).

This echoes the concept of 'nausea'. "Nothing happens when you live. The scenery changes ,people come in and go out ,that's all .There are no beginnings .Days are tracked onto days without rhyme or reason, an interminable monotonous condition" (Sartre 3). A similar instance occurs in *After Dark*. "The street is bright enough and is filled with people coming and going-people with places to go and people without a place to go, people trying to hold time and people trying to urge it forward"(1).

The novel portrays the plight of Eri Asai and Mari Asai in alternating chapters. Everybody wanted Eri's attention.But it was Takahashi's friend who gets a chance to date Eri. Takahashi accompanies him on a double date .He meets Mari Asai and Eri Asai there. Once a successful model, Eri is now in a deep sleep in a room. "It would be hard to tell that, it was the room of a young girl .There are no clothes, stuffed animals or other accessories to be seen .No posters or calendars"(31). The reason of her sleep is unknown. Mari says that one day Eri said that she wanted to take a deep sleep and from that day, she drifted into a profound sleep. The food placed in her room is consumed by her, despite any apparent movements in her posture. Her plight is reminiscent of the feeling of nausea ,mentioned by Jean Paul Sartre in his existential novel, *Nausea*.

Objects should not touch because they are not alive. You use them, ,put them back in place ,you live among them, they are useful .But they touch me and it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them, as though they were living beasts. (34)

It's said in the novel that Eri's existence is placed in the threshold that separates the organic from the inorganic .Even the photographs inside her room convey the same idea. She is alone in all her photographs-no family, no friends. She hates the bare existence of things (25). She is a victim of the feeling of 'nausea'.

Shirakawa is the man who assaults the prostitute, as he gets angry, when the woman has her period. He takes off all her valuables and clears off the love hotel. He maintains a stoic indifference to life. "His face remains expressionless ,neither breaking into a smile of satisfaction, nor frowning with disappointment at the results of his work"(80),His room is without any furniture ,except a painting of Edward Hopper titled, 'Loneliness' He tries to handle things analytically. He is an archetype of the modern man, who tries to make meaning out of his absurd life; he says that, "I have got an apartment and I want go back there ,but I have nothing to do there, nobody is waiting for me"(67). He prefers it this way. He thinks that as long as he is able to concentrate on his work, he doesn't have to be distracted by practical trivia,

towards the end of the novel, Shirakawa contemplates on the interrelationship between thought and action."Is action merely the incidental product of thought or action the consequential product of thought?"(182)He echoes the assertion of Sartre that existence precedes essence(34).

Kaoru is in search of Shirakawa to punish him. Mari and Kaoru engages in a brief banter and she reveals several of her inner thoughts-about her past , her relationship with others, to Kaoru. Like Kurogi, Kaoru is of the opinion that sex is devoid of any feelings .She reveals that she has engaged in sex with many men ,not out of love but out of fear and compulsion. She experiences the solitude and perpetual fear faced by human beings. Her plight is suggestive of the feeling of 'nausea' ,explained by Sartre."If I exist, it's because I am horrified at existing . I am the one who pulls myself from the nothingness to which I aspire(34). She is of the opinion that, "no one can predict when or where such abyss will sweep people"(105).

The Myth of Sisyphus is a philosophical essay written by Albert Camus in 1942.In the essay, Camus introduces his philosophy of the absurd: man's futile search for meaning, unity, and clarity in the face of an unintelligible world,devoid of God and eternal truths or values. Does the realization of the absurd require suicide? Camus answers: "No. It requires revolt." He then outlines several approaches to the absurd life. The final chapter compares the absurdity of man's life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology, who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. The essay concludes, "The struggle itself ...is enough to fill a man's heart."

There's a reference to a myth about three brothers in the novel .Takahashi tells Mari about it, to convince her about the necessity of making meaning out of absurdity. The brothers went out for fishing and were caught in a storm .They drifted on the ocean for a long time until they washed up on the shore of an uninhabited island. That night they were shown a hill by a god in their dream and were assigned the duty of pushing the boulders up the hill; they can enjoy fortunes once, the tedious task is accomplished. The place where they stop will be the place where they live .The younger ones quit the task, but the elder brother continues .He has no regrets. The elder one stands as the archetype of the man, who is in the existential struggle for making meaning, as exemplified by Camus' Sisyphus. To put it in a nutshell, each character in the novel is a stereotype of modern man. Though we are living amidst all kinds of luxuries, deep inside we are tormented by the searing flames of existential crisis. Mari Asai confronts this, when she is always likened to her charming sister, Eri. She feels that she lacks something, even when Takahasi tries to convince her. Eri is always in a deep sleep, which is symbolic of the narrow twilight zone between birth and death. Takahashi lives with the pain of

being an orphan. He considers himself as an outcaste in the world, which is exclusively meant for the rich and powerful. Even minor characters are haunted by the trauma of their melancholic existence.

References

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