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“The impact of the existentialist movement on Urdu fiction, (especially novels)**Dr. Rehana kausar¹, Dr. Shaista Hameed Khan^{2*}, Dr. Wasif Latif³**¹Associate professor, Head of Urdu Department, Lahore college for women University, Lahore.^{2*}Associate professor, department of Urdu, GC University, Lahore.³Assistant professor, Department of Punjabi, GC University, Lahore.**Abstract**

Over time, many experiments were made in the Urdu novel. And while the novel experimented with technique and language, it was also influenced by various movements and trends. There are many novels in Urdu literature that come before us as representative literature of various movements and philosophies. The good news is that the scope of this genre of Urdu literature is so wide that all kinds of topics can be discussed in it. The existentialist movement was a turbulent movement, also had a profound impact on the Urdu novel. In This article discusses this topic.

Keywords: existentialist. Movements, Urdu literature, Philosophy, formulation, existence transcends.

Introduction

As an intellectual and literary movement, Existentialism emerged with remarkable force in the mid–twentieth century. At its core, this philosophy affirms the sovereignty of individual freedom, the solitude of the human condition, the burden of meaninglessness, the tremor of anxiety, and the grave responsibility of choice. It first flourished in Europe, where thinkers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre shaped its most influential formulations. In time, its intellectual resonance extended into Urdu literature, leaving a lasting imprint upon its imaginative and critical traditions.

“Existence” stands among Sartre’s most vital concerns, and he openly identified himself as an existentialist. Yet what, in truth, is existence? Is it merely to remain alive, or does it signify a deeper mode of being? Plants and animals live—do they therefore possess existence? Sartre appears to answer these very questions himself. He writes:

“Plants and animals are indeed alive, but they are not conscious of their being. This consciousness belongs solely to human beings. Therefore, to possess existence is to possess awareness of existence.” ¹

In this formulation, existence transcends biological survival; it becomes a matter of self-awareness. To exist is not simply to live—it is to know that one lives.

In existential discourse, Ali Abbas Jalalpuri advances a distinctive and thought-provoking interpretation. He maintains that the term should not be translated as wujud (existence), but rather as maujud (the existent). In his view, the rendering of “Existentialism” as wujudiyyat is imprecise. He traces the semantic and philosophical roots of the term to affinities within Sufi metaphysical thought and clarifies the subtle distinctions involved. He writes:

“Some have translated ‘Existentialism’ as wujudiyyat, which is not accurate. ‘Existence’ is better rendered as maujud. Moreover, wujudiyyat corresponds more closely to ‘Existent,’ while ‘Being’ in our intellectual tradition signifies wahdat al-wujud—the Unity of Being—or hama ost (All is He). Those Sufis who subscribe to this doctrine are known as wujudi.” ²

In this formulation, Jalalpuri underscores the delicate task of translating philosophical vocabulary across intellectual traditions, where a single term may carry centuries of metaphysical nuance.

A keen awareness of social conditions and historical transformation is likewise discernible among the exponents of existentialism. The entire edifice of existential philosophy begins with a profound sense of separation—an experience of estrangement or alienation—which, passing through various stages, manifests itself in multiple forms. What is man? What is his place in the contemporary world and society? These questions arose with particular intensity in the mind of Søren Kierkegaard, inspiring not only his own reflections but also influencing subsequent existential thinkers in their search for answers. Kierkegaard declared:

“Individual and personal existence is synonymous with individuality. In other words, every moment of human essence can be understood and judged only in the light of that individuality.” ³

For Kierkegaard, existence was inseparable from subjectivity. Human essence does not reveal itself in abstract systems or collective identities, but in the inward, lived experience of the individual.

Kierkegaard was of the view that religion, in its truest sense, bears no essential relation to society. By religion he meant Christianity alone, for he himself was a pastor. Yet he believed that truth does not reside in the collective rituals of the church; it is not guaranteed by congregational worship. Rather, truth dwells within the inward depths of the individual. Faith, for him, was not a public performance but a solitary encounter between the self and the Absolute. The history of the

Urdu novel is not of great antiquity. This genre entered Urdu literature under the influence of Western fiction and rapidly gained recognition. Its early fortune lay in the presence of mature and gifted writers who, through the strength of their intellect and artistry, not only consolidated its foundations but elevated it to remarkable literary heights.

Subsequently, the movement of Modernism endowed the Urdu novel with a new perspective. Before this, the novel had seemed scattered across diverse formal experiments; Modernism reorganized its essential elements and presented it in a fresh tonal and structural harmony that became its distinctive signature. A dynamic and transformative movement, Modernism proved a milestone in the evolution of the Urdu novel. Writers of varied intellectual temperaments turned toward fiction, resulting in a proliferation of novels that explored the philosophy of life, the dilemmas of humanity, shifting social realities, and the visible impact of modern science and technology.

After 1974, existentialism emerged as a prominent and influential tendency within the Urdu novel. Fiction of this period gave intense expression to human anguish, psychological unrest, uncertainty, inferiority, loneliness, self-torment, doubt, fear, obsession, and interior monologue. Alongside these appeared remorse, resistance to mechanized civilization, estrangement from collectivism, a yearning to preserve fleeting moments, fragmentation, alienation from religion and metaphysical certainties, self-deception, and escapism. These themes permeated both poetry and prose, reflecting the deep anxieties of modern consciousness.

In the aftermath of the Partition of India, engagement with European thinkers intensified the effort to understand life's meaning and purpose. Classical philosophers such as Socrates and Plato were re-examined in the light of new historical conditions; their ideas were revised and extended. The devastation of two World Wars and widespread global turmoil cast grave doubt upon the very significance of human existence. The ascendancy of rationalism and materialism pushed spiritual grandeur into the shadows. Surrounded by suffering and uncertainty, modern man grew inwardly hollow and began to reflect upon his own existence and identity, wandering restlessly in search of self-recognition.

In such circumstances, existential philosophy awakened humanity to the realization that the true value of life lies in existence itself. It places man before the universe and reminds him that he is responsible for the difficulties he encounters. He must determine his own path, make his own decisions, and confer meaning upon his own life. The fundamental aim of existentialism is to free man from blind fatalism and grant him awareness of his own significance—an authentic freedom in which he shapes his destiny and accepts the consequences of his choices.

Existential thinkers maintain that existence precedes essence: man first comes into being, and only afterward fashions his essence through action. Without human existence, no theory, abstraction, or supposed essence retains value. Time assumes exceptional importance within this framework, for man lives within a finite temporal horizon. His bond with the past and his hopes and dreams for the future render him sensitive and emotionally charged. This very condition keeps him in a state of perpetual thought, anxiety, and unrest. As a result, he becomes vulnerable to anguish, doubt, loneliness, and intense desire, confronting the persistent crisis of identity.

The existential impulse in the Urdu novel reveals itself not in abstract philosophical debate but in the inward struggles of its characters. In *Basti* by Intizar Hussain, migration, civilizational decline, and the crisis of identity embody existential uncertainty, suspending the protagonist between past and present. In *Udas Naslain* by Abdullah Hussain, the central figure Naim grapples with questions of life, death, and religion that plunge him into existential anxiety. Similarly, in *Deewar Ke Peechay* by Anis Nagi, individual freedom and rebellion against collective coercion constitute the central thematic concern. In *Aag Ka Darya* by Qurratulain Hyder, questions of time, history, and human identity unfold within an expansive civilizational panorama. These examples demonstrate that existentialism in the Urdu novel manifests not as overt philosophical exposition but through inner conflict, alienation, and the relentless search for meaning.

Anis Nagi, a distinguished poet, novelist, and critic, was deeply influenced by the philosophy of the absurd, and the intellectual imprint of Albert Camus is unmistakable in his work. In creative literature, Camus is regarded as a representative novelist of existential thought, articulating in his own manner themes that resonate with those of Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Deewar Ke Peechay*, Nagi foregrounds individual liberty, arguing that collective freedom alone is insufficient; authentic significance lies in personal autonomy. He raises the crucial question of the limits of individual freedom—how far it may extend, and where it must confront responsibility.

Written largely in the mode of interior monologue, the novel at times reveals, through the author's sharp and incisive style, a clear preference for intellectual freedom over collectivist conformity. The echo of Camus's *The Rebel*—with its meditation on rebellion and individual consciousness—can be discerned within its pages. Indeed, a spirit of intellectual defiance marks Nagi's temperament as well.

Deewar Ke Peechay is not merely the tragedy of an individual; it reflects a broader social and national malaise. Outwardly, it narrates the inner torment and self-dialogue of a professor. Yet beneath this personal anguish unfolds a panorama of societal disorder: domestic disarray, corruption within the judiciary, conspiracies of false witnesses, moral decay, the deterioration of hospitals and educational institutions—everywhere, it seems, the law of the jungle prevails. The novel poses a searing question: will anyone arise to remedy these injustices? And why do we ourselves remain silent in the face of chaos and inequity? These questions form the intellectual foundation of the work.

Regarding the novel, Qazi Javed observes:

"To read this novel is to pass through the full anguish of contemporary life. Here begins the point of existential crisis." 4

The central character places truth above all else; nothing else holds value for him. The professor is a man of depth and justice, yet wherever his principles intervene, hostility arises. His uncompromising devotion to truth even leads to the breaking of Razia's engagement, turning affection into resentment. At one point, she declares:

"No, I cannot enter. You are impure; the odor of disbelief rises from your room. They have told me not to step outside before you, to observe purdah from you." 5

Concerning the character of the professor, Khalid Ashraf writes:

"The professor has lost trust in every relationship within his society. Mother, sister, pretended friends, and relatives appear to him devoid of worth and sincerity, for he lives amid the decayed values of a class driven by greed and avarice. He is unwilling to sacrifice himself for anyone, because he refuses to give anything further to a system that has already stripped him of his freedom and individuality." 6

Thus, the existential drama within the Urdu novel unfolds as both personal and collective tragedy—a profound meditation on truth, alienation, and the fragile dignity of the self in a fractured world.

In *Udas Naslain* by Abdullah Hussain*, one encounters pronounced existential elements, particularly in the philosophical reflections on religion and death, which bear a striking affinity to the thought of Albert Camus. The novel's central character, Naim, closely resembles Meursault, the protagonist of Camus's *The Stranger*. Both figures are marked by uncertainty, emotional detachment, and a tendency toward abrupt, unpremeditated decisions.

Like Meursault, Naim often acts without deliberation. At one point, he becomes responsible for the death of a soldier—an act that occurs almost without conscious intention. Similarly, carried away by emotional impulse, he joins a clandestine political organization, thereby entangling himself in further complications. These events leave him overwhelmed by fear, defeat, despair, and a sense of inadequacy, plunging him into an existential crisis.

Later, Azra offers him support and takes him to a rehabilitation center, where efforts are made to restore both his physical and psychological stability. During his treatment, he forms a friendship with Dr. Ansari, who counsels him to seek self-recognition through religious and Sufi reflection. Thus, the novel establishes a subtle yet significant bridge between existential anxiety and spiritual introspection.

In conversation with Naim, Dr. Ansari remarks:

"The greatest instrument of religion is worship. Worship, when harmonized with the temperament and disposition of a person, becomes a living passion—one that grants him the strength to look within himself. Whoever has truly known and recognized himself has done so through the discipline of worship. It is a path on which a man may wander through the whole world, only to return at last to himself. It is that hidden and narrow way which ends in one's own being and then descends inward. When a man, hesitant and fearful, enters into his own self, the path grows luminous and expansive. The longing to reach that sacred light glimpsed at the end of the journey urges him forward and bestows upon him a purpose. When that purpose aligns with his personality, he becomes absorbed within himself. First the veils of consciousness are lifted; then, gradually, the doors of the unconscious open. And when he attains a universal plane, he begins to perceive and comprehend what lies beyond." 7

He further said:

"Imagination cannot be set into motion without a cause. To preserve the mind and its thoughts from decay, you must possess a reason, a justification. Only then can you think coherently and save your intellect from ruin. If you attempt to ground your thoughts upon Nothingness, they will not advance in any direction; instead, they will scatter wildly and shatter the mind. Direction arises from the quest itself—from the effort to discover the true nature of one's existence. Without that quest, imagination is futile." 8

Over time, the Urdu novel has undergone numerous experiments. New linguistic textures and narrative techniques have been adopted, and the form has remained responsive to diverse literary movements and philosophical currents. Many Urdu novels stand as representatives of particular intellectual traditions or ideological frameworks. Fortunately, the breadth of the Urdu novel is such that it accommodates every conceivable theme. Existentialism, as a dynamic and vibrant philosophical movement, found resonance within the social and historical realities of the subcontinent. It cannot be asserted that novelists consciously constructed their works under the explicit banner of existential theory. Rather, it was the lived experience of individuals—shaped by upheaval, uncertainty, and transformation—that naturally aligned with existential concerns. In subsequent chapters, this critical theme may be examined in greater detail.

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