

## Existential Enigma and Spiritual Development: A Comparative Analysis of the Selected Translated Texts

Sadaf Afreen<sup>1</sup>, Maira Raza<sup>2</sup>, Shamaim Munir<sup>3</sup> and Wajid Riaz<sup>4</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2023.12.3.54>

### Abstract

*The present paper deals with the metaphysical philosophy of existence, the quest for the meaning of life and the ascension towards God to be an elevated self. The journey carries a chain of afflictions on the way to finding meaning in one's existence. Comparative analysis of Attar's poem "The Conference of Birds" (1177 A.D) and Coelho's novel "The Zahir" (2005) portrays this existential enigma and the quest for meaning in life, additionally examining the cultural and historical backgrounds and narrative techniques used by the authors to achieve transcendence in the stories. Employing Kierkegaard's (1855) conceptual framework of Existentialism, the paper examines anxiety, death, and despair in this journey. Examining major questions on human existence, the study concludes that the quest for being results in the finding of truth and its reflection in the pure soul of the seeker as an accomplishment. The existentialist perspectives in the selected texts encourage reconsidering our purpose of life and fulfilling the gaps that cause anxiety, depression, death and despair and to achieve the ultimate goal of connection with God.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Spirituality, Mysticism, Quest, Existence, Anxiety, Depression.

### Introduction

The term "Existentialism", coined by the famous theorist Soren Kierkegaard (1855), has been defined by different literary figures, including Simone de Beauvoir (1994), Friedrich Nietzsche (1884), Martin Heidegger (1889), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1980). It refers to "a denial to accept all the tyrannical abstract thinking, rejection of an absolute rational or scientific philosophy; in brief, a repudiation of the absoluteness or entirety of reason" (Roubiczek, 1966). The connotation propagates how different concepts, including anxiety, authenticity, absurdity, despair, existence, and search for meaning, relate to the term (1954). "Existentialism centres on individual existence, freedom, and authenticity, embracing challenges, including absurdity and anxiety while seeking personal meaning" (2023).

The term "peregrination", according to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, means a holy journey or pilgrimage, which has been referred by Dubisch and Winkleman (2005) to the fact that the pursuit of deity is not a simple, direct, or linear path but rather a very difficult, demanding, transformative, and serpentine exploration of the reality. A quest is a passion, a careful, thoughtful, or arduous

---

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus. Email: [sadaf.afreen@ell.uol.edu.pk](mailto:sadaf.afreen@ell.uol.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> M.Phil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus. Email: [maira.world3@gmail.com](mailto:maira.world3@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> M.Phil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus. Email: [shamaimmunir@gmail.com](mailto:shamaimmunir@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus. Email: [wijisami@gmail.com](mailto:wijisami@gmail.com)



search for something challenging. It means to set out on a journey that is philosophical, mystical, tranquil, spiritual, or self-possessed in order to find a connection with the truth of being. It necessitates a deep inspection of the ultimate truth, meaning of life, nature of being, and eventual reality. Philosophical reflection, self-examination, and a search for spiritual awakening (Barber, 1993) are all part of this pilgrimage, frequently influenced by religious or philosophical practices or teachings, a holy journey toward a sacred place (Skyes, 1982). Existentialism is also related to the freedom of an individual. This school of thought declares man at the center and focuses on individualism very much. In this way, a man can choose whatever he wants, giving him freedom of choice; that is, “*man is nothing other than what he makes of himself*” (Sartre, 2021). It can be deduced that everything is meaningless and purposeless until a human being gives meaning or purpose to something with the help of his consciousness and mind (Sartre, 2021). The unique characteristic of human beings is their ability to develop themselves into what it is to be, and it is done only by participating in the process by which they grow to define themselves.

In the poetic text by Attar (1177 A.D.) and the prosaic text by Paulo Coelho (2007), the quest is the same; the enigma they face is real; their search for the soul while running from the attachments and delusions are the same, but the path and the stages that they have been through are different. Farid Ud Din Attar Neishabouri (1221), also known as the Attar of Nishapur, was a Persian poet who theorized mysticism. Paulo Coelho (1947) is a Brazilian novelist, political activist, and lyricist with a profound interest in spirituality. *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) is also known as *Mantiq al-Tayr* (1177 A.D). Mantiq in Arabic means language or speech, and al-Tayr means bird. It is a collection of poems that is translated into different languages. Similarly, *The Zahir* (2005) has been translated into nearly 68 different languages, and the term has an Arabic meaning that is clear and apparent. *Translation* is the revision of an original work of art (Bassnett & Lefevere, 2003).

The novel *The Zahir* (2005) revolves around the narrator’s quest for his disappeared wife, Esther. The narrator, with the help of a translator and Mikhail (Esther’s closest male friend), came to know that she left her husband to find peace, happiness, and meaning in her life. On his journey to find his wife, he realizes that he has to “*find himself*” first. His quest to find it becomes his obsession and his wife becomes his “*Zahir*”. *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) is an allegorical poem that deals with the journey of a group of birds guided by a wise bird, Hoopoe (Ghosh, 2021), to find the legendary Simourgh, the ultimate truth. Most of them died on the way, while a few perished because of fear, illness, and thirst. They had to shed their egos in order to meet the *Simourgh*. The study aims at highlighting the physical as well as spiritual quest of characters towards the ultimate truth; the texts have been analyzed through different perspectives as techniques, cultural and historical backgrounds, and character transformations in order to disclose marked perspectives on self-determination, faith, and the search for the meaning of life.

### Research Objectives

1. To investigate the existential dread faced by the characters in both texts.
2. To explore cultural and historical events which influence characters and invoke the existential enigma and quest for meaning in life.
3. To examine the narrative techniques and structures utilized in the selected texts to convey the depiction of a quest towards God.

### Research Questions

1. What kind of existential dread do the characters face in both texts?

2. What influence do the cultural and historical events have on the authors after the existential enigma and quest for the meaning of life?
3. What are the narrative techniques and structures utilized by the authors for the depiction of the quest towards God?

### Significance

The present research provides insights into the concepts of Sufism, spirituality and self-realization, which demands a disconnection from worldly desires and then proceed towards a strong connection with divinity. It helps individuals understand and navigate their quest for meaning, purpose, and spiritual fulfilment. Exploring different paths towards spirituality can foster the researcher's identification of commonalities, shared values, norms, and universal principles. The research is significant enough to enrich and contribute to the well-being of an individual as well as society collectively.

### Literature Review

During the 1940s and 1950s, "Existentialism" enjoyed a great deal of fame and popularity and still has a substantial impact on literature. The common ground on which different theorists, including Nietzsche (1884), Soren Kierkegaard (1855), Husserl (1938), Sartre (1980), and others stand is their interest in freedom of human beings in search of providing meaning to their existence. They all want their readers to experience the taste of space instead of just contemplating the nature of freedom (Warnock, 1970). In *"Anxiety: The Dizziness of Freedom—The Developmental Factors of Anxiety as Seen through the Lens of Psychoanalytic Thinking"* (2019), Kierkegaard defines, *"Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom...he, who has learned to live with anxiety in the right way, has learned the ultimate"* (1884). Existentialism describes itself as a philosophy distinct from other philosophies because it relies on the principle that existence is prior to essence. Existentialism is a personal, individualistic experience (Perry, 1989). Self-fulfillment is viewed as a conclusive goal of every individual and his desire to gain the tendency to achieve his potential (Goldstein, 1939, 1940).

*"The Stranger"* (Prasetyo, 2002) scrutinizes different elements of Existentialism, including an atheistic belief system, the anxiety of death, freedom of choice, and life responsibilities by analyzing the protagonist's character deeply. Some people do not believe in the existence of God and live according to their free will. Freedom of choice allows people to live without fear and anxiety. The study describes the fundamental concepts of Existentialism in two of the most renowned works of art, namely, *Hamlet* (1603) by William Shakespeare (1616) and *The Blind Owl* (1957) by Sadeq Hedayat (1951). The prevalent existential elements in the texts include self-realization, self-fulfillment, freedom of life, free will, decision-making power, authenticity, anxiety and awareness of death, and many others (Farahmandfar & Samigorganrood, 2015). The aim is to show the protagonist's quest to spend his life with authenticity. This journey is also captured in two famous works, namely, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett (1989) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915) by Franz Kafka (1924), which probes into the existential analysis of both texts. It examines existential absurdity and alienation by the comparative analysis of the selected texts. Both texts are distinct and belong to different genres, yet they have a similarity that unifies them as one, and that is the portrayal of Existentialism. The thesis problematizes the existence of the main characters as absurd and alienated.

Coelho's fiction (Suganya & Dr Geetha, 2017) explores the writer's obsession with different forms of quest encountered by different characters through distinct prose narratives. It aims to examine

the paths or stages the guides, leaders, or helpers suggested they pass through to meet their inner selves. All these narratives help us understand the exact meaning of life and claim that life is not a bed of roses but a journey full of adventures. Through Santiago's journey, it is clear that self-actualization is achieved by facing complex challenges. Similarly, *The Pilgrimage* explores the nature of truth through the simplicity of life, and the rest of the narratives depict that the search for the soul is the same, but the paths are different. A study on *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad explains one common aspect of Existentialism, that is, Existential Humanism, by using Sartre's ideology to uncover the existential crisis faced by characters in the novella. The main focus is to unveil existential problems like anxiety about death, responsibility, freedom, absurdity, meaninglessness and pointlessness of being in the world by analyzing characters, settings, plot, themes, and literary elements which makes the text coherent (Herizi & Aissa, 2017).

Furthermore, the same concept of Existentialism is highlighted by Aron Ralston in his work, *Between A Rock and a Hard Place* (2004). The protagonist passes through three stages defined by Kierkegaard (1994) named aesthetic, ethical, and religious. These are discussed to define the protagonist's struggle to deal with the outdoor activities and realize himself and his connection to God (2020). *Waiting for Godot* (1952) highlights all the forms of absurdity, i.e., fear, waiting, agony, misery, suffering, and uselessness. It raises questions on the existence of Godot for whom the characters are waiting, which makes their existence pointless. There is no alternative to existence, but to exist is the only goal. Waiting itself is absurd, which implies that the existence of a human being is futile and that his existence will end one day (Albert, 2015).

A famous novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) by Elif Shafak, brings into the limelight the relationship of the human body, psyche, health and disease with spirituality. Every one of us faces existential angst at some point in our lives. One of the most essential phenomena which have a more substantial impact on our minds is Sufism. It is essential to bring harmony in one's life, keep one's mind healthy and pure, and justify one's existence. The main aim of the research paper is to provide insights into the relationship between Sufism and Spirituality with Existentialism and to shed light on how Sufism helps heal our mental problems and pass through existential crisis (Mehdi et al., 2021).

*The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) probes into analyzing the existence of characters by utilizing Soren Kierkegaard's framework of Existentialism (1980). It provides insights into the character's struggle in search of meaning and the lives of people who faced existential angst in their lives, which made their lives absurd. The focus is to highlight the importance of the "Leap of Faith", which helps make decisions and choices in life because choices and decisions are essential if a person wants to add essence to his existence. Through this, a human being can realize his true self, and realization is not only crucial to achieving the meaning of life but also adds happiness and peace in life (2022). Similarly, a study of Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) refers to the existential crisis faced by the characters; their *struggle to adjust their principles with the values and norms of society shows their search for meaning and finding the truth. The novel portrays the protagonist's journey at different stages of her life* (2023).

## Research Methodology

This research employs the "comparative qualitative method," which is used to draw comparisons between the selected texts by Paulo Coelho and Farid ud Din Attar entitled *The Zahir* (2005) and *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D), respectively. The primary sources are the texts of *The Zahir* (2005) and *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D), while the secondary sources are research papers, articles, journals, etc.



## Theoretical Framework

Existentialism has been given different names, including nihilism, individualism, pessimism, and humanism. Although all these terms have different meanings, they are inter-related concepts. Kierkegaard (1855) identifies various psychological states, including anxiety, fear, and melancholy, but he claims that despair is the highest among all; the main problem is the understanding of God, his existence and man's relationship with Him. An individual is "*in despair*" if he is not capable of aligning himself with the Divine. People lose interest in self-defined as "*the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation*" (Kierkegaard & Lowrie, 1946). It is not a physical death but a spiritual death.

Anxiety is defined mainly in the book "*The Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation of the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*" (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980) as it is anxiety which helps the self to be aware of its relation with the self and other, finite and infinite, and worldly and eternal. "*Anxiety as Saving through Faith*", "*therefore he who about guilt is educated by anxiety will rest only in the Atonement*" (p. 52). Existence, according to Kierkegaard (1855), is a complex concept which can be understood by distinguishing three stages, i.e., "*aesthetic*", "*ethical*", and "*religious*". The highest among all is the religious stage. These aspects force questions about human existence, his purpose in life, the nature of reality and mainly the existence of godly or heavenly power. The solution to get rid of these psychological states is through faith (1980). It also includes an exploration of spiritual or religious teachings, traditions, and norms, as well as some transcendental experiences.

*The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and despair from the book *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) deals with existential enigma and spiritual development. An existential enigma is a state of mind that leads a person to undergo psychological traumas like anxiety and despair. In the book *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard (1855) presented the "self-theory" about one of the concepts related to existentialism: despair suggested as a disease for the self. Kierkegaard (1855) delineates that anxiety, despair, actuality, and depression all play an essential role in individual transformation, and these are the outcomes of the individual's self-alienation (May 1994). The disease (despair) that is worse than death. The sickness in the book's title is not only the physical sickness but mainly the spiritual sickness called despair a sin. "*To exist before God is an intensification of self, of despair, of sin*" (p. 82). Anxiety (1954), according to Kierkegaard, is not only a human's psychological state but also a fundamental aspect of their lives. Anxiety is considered a negative emotion, but it is necessary to embrace it. The term is defined in "*The Concept of Anxiety, A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation of the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*" (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980). Anxiety is the path to our feelings of freedom and unease. It arises when we are aware of the unknown. "*It is an existential condition that arises from our awareness of the gap between our finite selves and the infinite possibilities of existence*" (Gron, 2008). For instance, Adam felt anxiety when he sinned (Tanner, 1992). Anxiety is in our consciousness; our desires for freedom and our fear of the unknown go side by side. The study focuses on the existential enigma encountered by the characters of both texts that have passed through several stages to fulfil the quest. "*Leap of faith*" is a truth that is the basis of Kierkegaard's life, and he holds the leap of faith till his last breath. To understand oneself is not the only goal of one's life, but to stand before God translucently and to accept his existence should be the main aim of humans, which helps overwhelm them.

## Data Analysis

### Existential Dread

Desire to understand existence is an old and terrifying phenomenon which deals with the questions: *who am I? Why do I exist? and What is my Purpose?* invoked by the needs of the soul, it leads to finding meaning of existence but in a practical way *"To what extent can a man realize himself by withdrawing from the irresponsibility, superficiality, and forgetfulness of everyday life?"* (Kierkegaard, 1980). Life is a quest of comprehending and discovering who we are; such is the proposition of Attar when Hoopoe says, *"What essence lies In surfaces? A void! Direct your eyes To meaning's core;"* (p. 139) in order to *"escapes existence"* (p. 216) because *"existence has deserted me"* (p. 277). The self has to pass through the stages of death and rebirth in order to become an authentic self, negligible in its destroyed parts (Roskowski, 2013). Though living in an irrational world, human beings keep on defining the true meaning of life and try to make rational decisions in order to embrace nothingness. *"Human beings are spiritual creations ( Kierkegaard, 2007)"* so the transitions do not happen suddenly; rather, they have to pass through several spiritual stages to shape their lives and achieve the true meaning of their existence. The poetic work *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D), which is an allegory full of various anecdotes and fables that help describe human difficulties and boundaries, begins with *"The world's birds gathered for their conference"* (p.36) because they need *"a king and must inquire for one"* (p.36) who will lead them wisely. The only way to live in peace and prosperity is to have a wise leader with whom *"a kingdom can be justly run"* (p.36). They also give a reason for having a leader *"All nations in the world require a king; How is it we alone have no such thing?"* (p.36). Whereas, the thought at the center of the suggestion, given by Hoopoe, is the very problem faced by all human beings who strive to find meaning in life, an aim to give a suitable name to their existence as narrated, *"Drink down the wine of meaning and be wise?"* but it cannot be achieved *"Until the Self has gone;"* (p.135). Their journey of the spiritual quest towards God while leaving every tinge of material attachments and worldliness, whether in the form of riches or desires, would end in finding the "truth." The enigma Hoopoe faced, which led him to motivate the birds (humans) to question their existence, lies at the heart of the existential void faced by every individual who tries to explore that path of spirituality. Before the birds began their journey, they asked various questions from their guide that showed their curiosity and fear, which is called anxiety in Kierkegaard's words. To their curiosity, Hoopoe replied, *"Do not imagine that the Way is short; vast seas and deserts lie before His court"* (p. 39). Hoopoe finds it necessary to tell them the hurdles that might come their way.

The Hoopoe, the wisest bird, leads a group of birds to find *Simurgh* (God), a symbol of truth and enlightenment. Hoopoe asks them, *"If you desire this quest, give up your soul and make our sovereign's court your only goal"* (p.39). Hoopoe considers himself a traveler on the way towards the *Simurgh*, and still, he guides them to start their journey (Sis, 2013) as he says, *"I am a pilgrim of our sovereign's Way"* (p. 39). During their journey, many birds died, some because of fear, while others because of despair, health, thirst, hunger, and anxiety. *"Nothing is precious like a precious stone"* (p. 50). The excuse of the partridge is due to his love for stones, which he cannot leave; another miserable bird replies, *"I love gold alone; It is life to me, like marrow to a bone – When I have the gold I blossom like a flower; With restless pride, I revel in its power"* (p. 139). Hoopoe convinces them by pointing out the worth of these stones: *"Without their colors, they are nothing more than stones, and to the wise, not worth a straw"* (p. 51). The excuse of the Nightingale, i.e. *"One being understands my heart—the rose. I am so drowned in love that I can find"* (p. 42) portrays her love for Rose, which serves as a symbol of attachment in the life of a traveler; *"Her*

*worship is sufficient life for me*" (p. 42) delineates that her only purpose of his existence is to admire his beloved and "*How could I leave her for a single night?*" (p. 42). Hoopoe illustrates the anecdote of *King Solomon and his ring* to convince him by saying this;

*No jewel surpasses that which Solomon  
Wore on his finger. It was just a stone,  
A mere half-dang in weight, but as a seal  
Set in his ring it brought the world to heel (p. 51)*

By confronting their fears, doubts, and attachments, the birds "*united now as one*" (p. 326), gradually unveil their true identities and spiritual potential. Hoopoe's character emphasizes the importance of introspection and self-realization in pursuing enlightenment, highlighting the transforming power of looking within oneself achieved only by detachment of the self from material pursuits. On the other hand, *The Zahir* (2005) is a peregrination of the protagonist's love and loss. "*I sit on the terrace and look back over my life, a young man who dreamed of becoming a famous writer and suddenly saw that the reality was completely different*" (p. 15). These lines depict that the narrator once wished to be a famous writer, and his wife helped him achieve his ambition, and she is "*a wife proud of her husband's success*" (p. 101). The narrator does not find the reason behind his wife's escape as narrated; "*When I walk down the street, I will keep seeing women who could be her*" (p. 15). He sees Esther in every other woman he meets, even though there are no physical resemblances between them. It shows his love for his lost wife, who had left him without any reason. The enigma he faces throughout his journey to find his lost wife forces him to realize that the reality of living in the world is not just the love to achieve material things but knowing the purpose of his life in the world, and his journey proves that the path towards God is the only way to find solace in life. People come and go, as is the case with Esther. Life is entirely of uncertainties; impossibilities result in the form of naked truth, as the protagonist observes; "*I do not believe Esther would have left me if I had respected her love*" (p. 58). She leaves her husband and marries another man because she wants to find peace in her life. The quest of the protagonist is a portrayal of the author's intention in describing ways to maintain a relationship. During their journey, Makhail and the narrator discovered that Esther was pregnant, but nobody knew that she was pregnant. Dos, her former husband, considering her situation, persuaded her to stay safe. In this way, she left him again and set out on a journey to find "*Zahir*". The novel centers on the quest to find his lost wife, understanding the true meaning of life, what it means to be happy even in pain, and most importantly, what is the meaning of following your heart.

## **Acquiring Spiritual Fulfillment**

### **Existential Angst**

Anxiety (1954), according to him, is an attraction to and abhorrence of the meaninglessness of the possibilities of the future. Thus, anxiety refers to the hallmark of human freedom. It means explaining free human choices. It is one of the emotions faced by birds in the poem. As they started their journey, one by one, they started feeling these emotions. They experienced anxiety because of the unpredictable situations they thought they would encounter. It leads to one's fear of the unfamiliar and failure. However, they started to confront their fears and anxieties when they started trusting the guide, Hoopoe, the wisest of all. The parrot faces anxiety because he finds himself incapable of crossing the hurdles. The Hawk faces anxiety because he has been indulged in worldly pleasures.

*She trilled: 'I have been caged by heartless men,  
But my desire is to be free again;  
If I could reassert my liberty  
I'd find the stream of immortality (p. 45)*

In *The Zahir* (2005), the protagonist's fear and anxiety are shown through his actions, such as he does not like drinking in his life, but in Paris, he is drinking and considers himself sinful and culpable for not doing well in his life. He realizes that he hurts many people, including his wife. He pours out these words, which is a clear indication of his anxious state of mind.

*"I'm free," the inspector tells me. It is true that I was free in prison, and that I am still free today. Freedom is still to me the thing that I value most in the world. It's led me to drink wines I didn't like, to do things I shouldn't have done and won't do again. It's also caused me to injure my body and my spirit, and it's caused me to harm others, although I've since begged for forgiveness. If my wounds were medals, I wouldn't want to forget the terrible moments. If you want to pay for freedom, you have to do it with joy and a smile, even if that smile is tempered by tears." (p. 10).*

The same is the case with birds, the hardships and feelings that the various birds experience as they battle dejection, worry, and terror. However, as the poem goes on, they progressively overcome these challenges and discover their inner fortitude, bravery, and faith in their spiritual journey. Similarly, the problems faced by an unnamed narrator are also an example of a person who embarks on a journey but is anxious to fulfil it.

### **Despair a Sin**

Despair (1849), according to Kierkegaard, is a condition that is more fearful than death because every human has an element of eternity. When they start losing the element, it means they are refusing to be themselves (Kierkegaard, 1980). *Despair* is when some people are less enthusiastic about life while others are hopeless. People who are facing despair are constantly struggling to make their hearts feel at their fullest because they feel like there is no reason to live in the world, and their lives are full of emptiness and aimlessness. However, it is curable, as Hoopoe narrates: "*Pray always, never for one moment cease, Pray in despair and when your goods increase*" (p. 105). The same state of despair is represented in "*The Conference of the Birds*" (1177 A.D) as a hurdle that comes their way to stop them from embarking on a journey that is spiritual and mystic. The birds symbolize human souls, expressing the same feelings of hopelessness, meaninglessness, pointlessness, and despair. They are swamped by the greatness of the world, challenges and the miracles they witnessed on their way. Although the poem depicts despair as a problem or hindrance, it demoralizes individuals from seeking the moral truth and the true meaning or purpose of life. However, it is a manual for the people who have decided to embark on a spiritual journey that they must overcome despair.

Similarly, in *The Zahir* (2005), the protagonist faces despair, which can be seen when he tries to do everything except write a book, which is his job. The reason behind his procrastination is his loss of interest and energy; that is why he does not want to write anything anymore, which is expressed in the following manner; "*I accomplished everything but write a book. My career as a*



writer was ended for me because the woman who had given me my start was no longer around" (The Zahir, 2005).

Despair is the state when people start losing their interest in everything, and when it turns around, the tide pulls hope and a sense of completeness, as explicit in *"The Zahir"* (2005), *"But the Zahir, about which I initially used to think with either irritation or affection, continued to grow in my soul. I started looking for Esther in every woman I met"* (p. 33). Everything he sees, he finds the reflection of her wife in it as an intoxicated lover of God finds on the way of his spiritual quest. As Coelho's words say it well;

*"If someone is capable of loving his partner without restrictions, unconditionally, then he is manifesting the love of God.  
If the love of God becomes manifest, he will love his neighbor.  
If he loves his neighbor, he will love himself.  
If he loves himself, then everything returns to its proper place.  
History changes"* (p. 61).

He isolated himself in a room to disconnect from the world. His despair forced him to think that people would take advantage of his condition because he had lost his wife. His despair hindered his focus on the job for which he struggled severely, *"I accomplished everything but write a book. My career as a writer was ended for me because the woman who had given me my start was no longer around"* (p. 49). The despair the protagonist is passing through is summed in these lines. The despair shows that his love, life, and affection are for his wife only; he loves all the things associated with her, but the hierarchy of finding God is to find himself first.

### **Cultural and Historical Background**

*The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) is profoundly embedded in the cultural and historical context of Sufism, Islamic mysticism, asceticism, and Persian literature. The poetic text's features illustrated the importance of self-realization, spiritual enlightenment, and union with the Higher. The poem is highly influenced by the teachings, values, and belief systems of Attar's time, which help create a mystical text for the upcoming generations. The journey of the birds shown in the text and the valleys they cross to find the Simurgh portray how Sufis pass through seven stages of spiritual enlightenment. Throughout the poem, the poet works on reflecting the historical, cultural, and religious influences of his time by narrating various fables, anecdotes, and stories that help delineate the character's quest for divine love, their quest to detach themselves from earthly desires, and finally their journey to meet their inner selves. In this way, if a person can shun his ego and neglect those attributes that come his way, then the light of God divine shines on him, and his heart gets purity from the negativity (Altntaş, 1986, p. 47; Cebeci, 2005, p. 200). A wide range of historical and cultural influences are considered to create an artistic work, *The Zahir* (2005). The poet has an intense interest in Sufism, mysticism, esotericism, spiritualism, and philosophical concepts after scrutinizing various traditions. A recent work entitled *Journey: A Journal of Discovery by Paulo Coelho* (2020) mainly describes the path towards the divine by asking forty-five questions and describing the omens and hurdles along your journey. In this thought-provoking and engaging journal, Paulo takes the reader down the path of reflection and imagination. The narrative of the novel *"The Zahir (2005)"* is shaped by the author's journey of self-enlightenment and his interest in studying and discovering the esoteric teachings of his time. The novel depicts the author's exploration of the existential enigma by portraying the characters as confused about

the answers to their questions about self-freedom, free will, and the quest for purpose and meaning in life.

## Narrative Techniques

### Narrator

*The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) is narrated by the wise bird Hoopoe, who describes the poet's point of view about the challenging path towards self-realization and enlightenment. At the same time, *The Zahir* (2005) has an unnamed narrator whose real name is unknown to the reader but whose identity is mentioned that he is a famous best-selling novelist.

### Symbolism

Symbols play a significant role in both texts because "symbolism is one of the most crucial facets of unique and serious, insightful, imaginative, and inventive literature" (MacMahan et al., 1986). Authors and poets usually use symbols to support their arguments and enhance the meaning of their aesthetic works. In the poem "*The Conference of Birds*" (1177 A.D.), the verses spoken by *the Nightingale*, who is the symbol of love; the *Parrot*, who is the symbol of generosity, long life, and freedom; and the *Hawk*, who is the symbol of bravery, strength and leadership. The chosen bird characters undergo several negative traits of human beings, like despair, anxiety, and fear. From the beginning till the end, their queries represent their absurd state as they do not understand the true meaning of their lives.

On the other hand, from the prosaic text, the symbols used in *The Zahir* (2005) include the railroad track with which the protagonist becomes obsessed with every step he takes. The track is symbolized as marriage in the novel, and "*That is just the way things are*" (p.71); one of the railroad track people replied to the question asked by the narrator about the measurement of these tracks. Using blood cloth as a symbol, the narrator tries to tell the audience that true love leaves no bounds to find you because it is always selfless and unconditional.

In *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D), their spiritual journey symbolizes different stages, including self-realization and spiritual incitement. Different birds represent different human qualities. For instance, the Hoopoe is the master who leads them toward the Divine. The peacock is the symbol of immortality, beauty, and vanity. The Parrot symbolizes human behaviour; he searches for the origin, which leads to eternity.

Furthermore, Attar's use of symbolism for *Simurgh* is a direct reflection of Sufis' concept of self-actualization and the annihilation of the self. He has created a new meaning for *Simurgh* (Darbandi & Davis, 1984). On the other hand, the novel *The Zahir* (2005) is itself symbolic. It is full of symbols like the search for truth, the meaning of life, and the quest for the divine, expressed in the garb of different things and people in the text. Zahir's attraction and the main character's growing infatuation portray the struggle humans face to find meaning in transience.

### Allegory

Allegory is "*a story within a story, a piece of art from which many possible meanings or expressions can be generated*" (Yeats, 1961b, p. 116). There is a difference between allegory and symbolism; symbols can be imaginative, while allegory is whimsical (20th cent.). The use of narrative structure shows how the author makes stories and how he can interpret the whole wide world (Lawler, 2002). *The Conference of the Birds* (1177 A.D) is an allegory with different sections, and each section has different stages necessary for the birds to cross. Whereas, *The Zahir* (2005) is also an allegory which is prosaic. The narrative differs in the way that Attar

presents a group's quest, while Coelho narrates the quest of an individual, but the transformation of characters brings their works on the same show. The birds do not find themselves capable of embarking on a mystical journey; similarly, the unnamed narrator is confused about finding the reason for his wife's disappearance. Both authors have shown their struggles differently and uniquely while following the same goal.

### **Framing Narratives**

The frame narrative is like drawing a painting. The frame of the painting is the first narrator who makes it possible for the reader to enter the story's world, while the painting itself is the main narrator who describes the happenings in the story. The same narrative technique of framing was used in *The Conference of the Birds* (1177 A.D) when "*The world's birds gathered for their conference*" (p.36) and realized that they needed a king. After that, the narrative started following the individual journeys of those birds who participated and their struggle to find *Simurgh*, the legendary bird. The framing narrative technique used in *The Zahir* (2005) and *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) helps keep the text cohesive and coherent.

### **Anecdotes and Fables**

*The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D) consists of several different anecdotes and fables that help describe Attar's interest in discovering and exposing the facts about spirituality and mysticism by giving examples from the lives of Sufi saints (Memorials of the Saints, p. 13). In their curiosity, the birds asked several questions about the nature of the journey itself, the length of the journey, the seven stages, the hurdle, and many more. Hoopoe tackles the excuses by taking evidence from these anecdotes and fables (p. 17). The anecdotes include the story of Adam (p.48), the Story of Khezr (p. 46), the story of a Dervish and a King (p. 43), King Solomon and his ring (p. 51-52). On the other hand, *The Zahir* (2005) describes mythological stories, i.e., Ulysses (1922) and Ariadne (1932).

### **Conclusion**

In order to conclude the above discussion in a nutshell, the characters in *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D.) and *The Zahir* (2005) find meaning in their existence by putting themselves into the tasks consecrated for them. The existentialist enigma that keeps haunting them causes a sense of despair and anxiety in them. These psychological factors are brought into the limelight by describing the character's dialogues, speeches, and actions, as well as the cultural and historical influences that shaped the themes, narratives, and perspectives of both texts, resulting in the artistic portrayal of spiritual and mystical journeys. Either despair and anxiety faced by the protagonist of *The Zahir* (2005) or the birds in *The Conference of Birds* (1177 A.D) because of their lack of spirituality, "*I was in touch with the energy of the universe,*" he replied. "*God passed through my soul*" (p. 57). The protagonist in *The Zahir* (2005) accomplishes his goal, achieving the true meaning of his existence, when he truly connects with God, leaving everything behind.

Similarly, only those birds who are true to themselves and bear everything on their way find the *Simurgh*. The enigmatic existence of the characters from both texts acquires free will and freedom of choice and faces troubles, fear, anxiety, anguish, and despair throughout their journeys. However, they are successful when they shun their egos and find their true selves to give meaning to their existence. The document suggests spiritual peregrination as a solution to the battle between body, mind and soul by searching for the true meaning of life. As Attar suggests, "*If you desire*

*this quest, give up your soul and make our sovereign's court your only goal. First wash your hands of life if you would say: 'I am a pilgrim of our sovereign's Way'; Renounce your soul for love;''*

## References

- Akbar, M. (2020). *The Existentialism Study in Between a Rock and a Hard Place Novel by Aron Ralston*. English Department, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya.
- Albert, R. (2015). Absurdity and Existentialism in “Waiting for Godot”. *Research Scholar an International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, 3(4).
- Altıntaş, H. (1986). *Tasavvuf tarihi [History of Sufism]*. Ankara, Turkey: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi.
- Attār, F. A. D. (1984). *The conference of the birds*. (Trans, Darbandi, A., & Davis, D.) England: Penguin Books.
- Azarian, R. (2011). Potentials and limitations of comparative method in social science. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(4), 113-125.
- Barber, R.(1993). *Pilgrimages*. London: The Boydell Press.
- Bassnett, S., Lefevere, A. (2003). *Translation/history/culture: A source book*. London:
- Beabout, G, R.(1988). "Kierkegaard on anxiety and despair: An analysis of "The Concept of Anxiety" and "The Sickness Unto Death"". Dissertations (1962 - 2010) Access via Proquest Digital Dissertations. AAI8904252.
- Borges, J. L., & Sillevs, A. (2010). *The Zahir*. Books on Tape.
- Cebecioğlu, E. (2005). *Tasavvuf terimleri ve deyimleri sözlüğü* [Glossary of Sufi terms and expressions]. İstanbul, Turkey: Anka Yayınları.
- Darbandi, A., Davis D. (1984). *The conference of the birds by Farid al-Din Attār*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Definition of peregrinate. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/peregrinate>
- Dubisch, J. (2005). Healing the wounds that are not visible: A Vietnam veterans’ motorcycle pilgrimage. In J. Dubisch & M. Winkleman (Eds.), *Pilgrimage and healing* (pp. 135- 154). Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
- Evans, C. S. (2009). *Kierkegaard: An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Farahmandfar, M., & Samigorganroodi, G. (2015). "To Thine Own Self Be True": Existentialism in Hamlet and The Blind Owl. *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*, 3(2), 25-31.
- Ghilzai, S. A., Hussain, A., & Batool, A. (2023). Exploring Existential crises in Nadeem Aslam's Maps for Lost Lovers. *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 5(02), 8-16.
- Ghosh, S. (2021). Illustrating a classic – revisiting artworks on “The Conference of the birds” or the ‘Mantiq al tair’ by Attar of Nishapur. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 9(1), 2320–2882.
- Grøn, A. (2008). *The concept of anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*. Mercer: Mercer University Press.
- Hafeez, F., & Abbas, S. (2022). Analyzing Mysteries in Shafak’s The Forty Rules of Love: An Existentialist Study. *Research Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 2(1), 85-103.
- Herizi, I., & Aissa, R. A. Y. (2017). *Existential humanism in Joseph Conrad’ s Heart of darkness* (Master Thesis). Boudiaf: University of Mohamed Boudiaf-M’Sila.



- Kierkegaard, S.A. (1954). *The Sickness Unto Death*. (Edi and Trans Walter Lowrie). New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Kierkegaard, S. (2023). *Søren Kierkegaard's Skrifter*, N. J. Cappelørn et al. (eds), Copenhagen: Gad, 1997–2013, 55.
- Kierkegaard, S. A. (1980). *The Concept of Anxiety a simple psychologically orienting deliberation*. New Jersey: Princeton University.
- Kierkegaard, S., & Lowrie, W. (1946). *The sickness unto death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lawler, S. (2002). *Narrative in social research*. In T. May (Ed.), *Qualitative research in action* (pp. 242-258). London: Sage.
- Mairet, P. (1984). *Existentialism and Humanism*. London: Penguin Books.
- May, R. (1994). The origins and significance of the existential movement in psychology. In R. May, E. Angel & H.F. Ellenberger (Eds.), *Existence* (pp. 3-36). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- McMahan, E., Day, S., & Frank, R. (1986). *Literature and the writing process*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Mehdi, M., Mehmood, A., & Ali, A. (2021). Role of Sufism and Spirituality in Psychological Well Being: A Study of Elif Shafak's 'The Forty Rules of Love' From a Cognitive and Existential Perspective. *Journal of English Language, Literature and Education*, 2(03), 1-18.
- Muthmainah, C. (2009). *A main character analysis of The Zahir using hierarchy of human needs of Abraham H. Maslow's theory*. (Master Thesis). Jakarta: Islamic University Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.
- Prasetyo, R. R. (2002). *Existentialism as seen through Mersault in Camus' The Stranger* (Doctoral dissertation). Petra Christian University.
- Priest S, Jean-Paul S (2001). *Basic Writings*. New York: Routledge.
- Priest, S. (2000). (ed.). *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*. Routledge.
- Rempel, G. (1959). "Soren Kierkegaard and existentialism". Retrieved from <https://www.sorenkierkegaard.nl/artikelen/Engels/041.%20Soren%20Kierkegaard%20and%20Existentialism.pdf>
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client-centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*. London: Constable.
- Roskowski, M. (2013). Absurdity and the Leap of Faith. *Journal of Student Research*. Pp. 15-23.
- Roubiczek, P. (1966). *Existentialism for and Against*. CUP Archive. Routledge.
- Sartre, J. (2007). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. London: Yale University Press.
- Sartre, J. P. (2021). "Existentialism is a Humanism." *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale
- Sartre, J. P., & Mairet, P. (1960). *Existentialism and humanism*. London: Methuen.
- Schönbaumsfeld, G. (2007). *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199229826.001.0001
- Sis, P. (2013). *The conference of birds*. Penguin Books.
- Slater, P. (2019). Anxiety: The Dizziness of Freedom—The Developmental Factors of Anxiety as Seen through the Lens of Psychoanalytic Thinking. In *Psychopathology-An International and Interdisciplinary Perspective* (p. 129). IntechOpen.

- Subramanian, L. (2022). “Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities.” *Fantastic Fusion of Fables and Fairy Tales in the Works of Paulo Coelho. Integrated journal for research in arts and humanities*. 2(3), pp, 15-19.
- Suganya, S., & Dr. Geetha, B. J. (2017). “Research Paper.” *A Spiritual Odyssey of Quest for the Mysteries of Life: A Study of Paulo Coelho`S Fiction*, 5(3), 2320–2882.
- Sykes, J. B. (1982). *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*. (7th ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tanner, J. S. (1992). *Anxiety in Eden: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Warnock, M. (1970). *Existentialism*. University Press.
- White, D. (2001). *Freedom and Responsibility: Existentialism, Gifted Students, and Philosophy*. *Gifted Child Today*, 48-65.
- Yeats, W.B. (1961b). ‘*Blake’s Illustrations to Dante*’, in *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan