

Portrayal of Bangladeshi Existentialism: “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” in Context

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Abstract

Shazia Omar, a Bangladeshi novelist, depicts the less-known imagery of modern Dhaka in her debut novel “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” (2009) where she portrays Bangladesh infected with depression, drug addiction, power-play, corruption and fundamentalism. Deen, the protagonist, is lost in addiction, isolated from his mother and outer world but in love with Maria, aware of the future of Bangladesh and eager to search for the meaning of life. Deen, which literally implies the earthly life in Bangla, is an existentialist who is conscious of himself and the people around him. He is aware of his capacity, limitation, existence and essence. He comments on different orders and institutions that hinder at the path of freedom, and about politicization and islamisation in Bangladesh. Not only Deen but also his widowed mother, his friend AJ, drug peddler Falani, the sergeant of the Police, Deen's girlfriend Maria- all are conscious of their existence and essence. This novel is about a journey from a dark and aimless world to redemption, to a meaningful life. Omar presents existentialism and existential crisis as noticed in Bangladesh in her novel where almost all characters try to find the meaning of life, though in different ways. Omar says in an interview that the novel “explores their feeling of alienation in the chaotic metropolis of Dhaka city” and her protagonist struggles “to find a spiritual connection”. Before writing this novel, Shazia Omar researched in a rehab in Mumbai, visited slums of Bangladesh and thus shaded light on the darker and less-discussed imagery of Bangladesh. “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” is thoroughly examined in the light of existentialism, developed by Descartes, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Heidegger. This paper analyses how “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” represents Bangladeshi existentialism, and existentialists who are conscious of existence and essence. It also discusses the observation, of Omar's characters projected in the novel, about established orders and institutions and finally, desire for freedom and searching for meaning of life.

Keywords

Existentialism, Freedom, Power-Play, Depression, Addiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

*“Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
“Like a Diamond in the Sky”.”*
(Jane Tylor, 1947)

In darkness, especially at night, stars show travelers the path- which might not be crystal clear but very helpful. Shazia Omar's debut novel "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*" is named after the fourth line of the above-mentioned poem by Taylor where Omar depicts a character named Deen who floats in two ways in the sky like a diamond: when he took drugs and got drunkard and at the time of last breath, he felt like floating in the sky. Second way of floating in the sky indicates an implied point that Deen is represented as such a character who can think and at least show the path to others, though to a little extent. Deen is an epitome of twinkling diamonds. He is depressed with his present condition of life, almost lost in drug addiction and disturbed with the existing systems of institutions like education sector, politics and so on. He is conscious of his downing in addiction, his failures, his waste of time but he cannot change the scenario around him or even cannot save himself from addiction.

Even being lost in addiction and depression, the novel's characters play the role of twinkling stars like a diamond. All of them are in search of essence of their lives. Maria, a university student and Deen's girlfriend, falls in love with Deen to have an amazing meaning of life and finally being failed to get him as her own, she plans to leave the country to ensure her existence. The police sergeant Akbar takes bribes, hates drug peddlers or even bows down to those who possess power. Young characters are almost addicted, sometimes they are depressed, sometimes they are cautious about other youth's falling down. They get depressed with the death of their friends. This concern also ensures their essence of life. The consciousness of being and existence assure the readers about their existential crisis.

Existentialism states about "the internal struggle of man to establish his identity" (Ghosh 2017, p.1). Establishment of identity, thinking about nothingness of life, attempt for a better future and concern about other youths who are getting addicted day by day- everything shows existential crisis of characters presented in "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*". The novel is thoroughly analyzed in the light of existentialism. This paper examines consciousness about existence, comment about established institutions and orders, eagerness for individual freedom and searching for meaning of life. The study also sheds light on the fact- to what extent, Sartre's idea of death of God is applicable in "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*" as there are adverse comment about *Ijtima* and Mullahs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism, developed and widely interpreted by Descartes, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger and Camus, refers to humans' consciousness about their existence. It is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It began in the mid-to-late 19th century, but reached its peak in mid-20th century. According to Hornby (2015), the term existentialism indicates the "theory that humans are free and responsible for their own actions in a world without meaning" (p.532). Cuddon (1998) says, "the term existentialism means "pertaining to existence"" (p.294). In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) writes, "existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does not render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity" (p.24). To elaborate the idea, Sartre adds, "existence precedes essence, we mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- defines himself afterward" (p.28). To discuss different criteria of existentialism, he mentions freedom, especially individual freedom. He writes, "there is no determinism- man is free, man is freedom" (p.34). He directly compares man with freedom as humans have the option to choose and nothing is predefined. He further adds that "man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." As man is free, he needs to make choices- choices that define humans' essence. By only existing and acting in a certain way, people can give meaning to their lives. To sum up, Sartre focuses on the thing that nothing of humans is predetermined and they create their own meaning, they have the freedom to assert own meaning. Man is free to comprehend their meaning and meaning of all other things. According to Sartre, at first humans get conscious of their existence and then essence. Without existence- either physical or not- humans can never get the importance of essence. Existence confirms the essence.

Heidegger (1889-1976) defines existentialism in such a way where he mentions, humans are alienated from the world and they create their meaning of existence. “Heidegger regarded... the individual is “thrown into the world,” into the midst of other beings, so that in order to project himself he must exist among them and utilize them.” (Britannica). Heidegger writes in *Being and Time* (1996), “Da-sein always understands itself in terms of its existence” (p.10). Here, Da-sein means essence. Albert Camus also says, humans create their own meaning and they are “to live without appeal” (Wikipedia). Both Heidegger and Camus emphasize that people emerge in the earth being isolated, and then they create the meaning of their lives. From the discussion of Sartre, Heidegger and Camus, it is evident that humans are born in the earth without any meaning. They live in an isolated world. Only people can give meaning to their lives with the works what they do. They do and plan to do what they want to be.

Now comes the idea of Bangladeshi existentialism. Bangladesh faced no great devastation which might lead people to existentialism or even absurdism. Despite this, there are many factors which drive Bangladeshi people in existential crisis. People of Bangladesh, living in a third world country, are serious to ensure their existence and essence of life with their decisions, comments and attempts. The term and idea are present in Bangladeshi literature. AL-Mahmud (2017) begins an abstract with the statements, “*Tree Without Roots* is an excellent example of existentialism along with modernist elements. The protagonist is proved to be an existential modern hero by Sayed Waliullah.” Chowdhury (2010) discusses different features of existentialism in *Tree without Roots*. Here he sheds the light on “Majeed’s self-created value or essence for his life” (p. 3). The novel focuses on such a character who affords and finds the meaning of his life from nothingness. Majeed came to the village empty-handed but he gradually manages his livelihood. He not only confirms his livelihood, rather he ensures his power-practice in the village. Thus, Majeed became an epitome of existentialist, especially a Bangladeshi existentialist.

Elements of existentialism are also profoundly found in Shazia Omar’s “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*”. The novel was not unnoticed, rather reviewed, analyzed and interpreted from different perspectives. The reviewers including the author comment on Deen, the protagonist, the main ideas of the novel, drug addiction of the young generation and many more. Shamrao & Dhondiba (2017) write, “the protagonist of the novel, Deen struggles to find himself... Deen is a smart, intelligent and he cared deeply about the future of Bangladesh” (p.128). Mohua (2020) comments about the text, “It tells of drug addiction, rave parties, drug dealers, gangsters, prostitutes and corrupt police officers” (p.532). Mohua adds, “Omar’s novel offers a picture of Dhaka that goes beyond the privileged areas of Gulshan and Banani” (p.532). All these comments indicate the prominent issues the novel deals with. Drug addiction, unseen sceneries of the privileged part of Dhaka and their struggles to find a meaning of life are the prime concerns of the text.

The protagonist of “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” is elaborated and commented from different focuses. Hassan (2009) writes, “Deen, the protagonist of the novel, struggles to find a spiritual connection but he is unable to transcend his physical reality, all the more so because of his addiction to drugs. It’s his journey to redemption” (p.1). Munddit (2010) asserts that “he [Deen] cared deeply about the future of Bangladesh.” He adds, “He is actually conscious of his failings”. By quoting from the novel, he writes, “Disappointments churned in his stomach like rotten eggs and bad music.”

When Shazia Omar was interviewed, she commented from her experience and even as an author she shared her experience of writing the novel. She (2010) says in an interview that “the story explores their feeling of alienation in the chaotic metropolis of Dhaka city and the social fabric of the community around them” (p.1). She adds, “The protagonist, Deen, struggles to find a spiritual connection... This is his journey to redemption” (p.1). In ‘Preface to the 10th anniversary edition’, Professor Firdous Azim (2019) writes about the “meaningless existences” but she did not focus on specifically existentialism. She emphasizes on the lifestyle, which is apparently meaningless, and on the darker side of the aristocratic areas of Dhaka.

All the works, researches and reviews done on "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*" focuses on the content of the text, the protagonist, the incidents and circumstances happened at the aristocratic area of Dhaka. They also focused on the journey to redemption. But the present research unearths how existentialism works in the novel, especially Bangladeshi existentialism which was not discussed in previous works.

3. DISCUSSION

The characters of Shazia Omar's novel "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*" crunch with life's problem. They epitomize despair, hopes and aspirations of a generation struggling to put up with the severe realities of life in modern Bangladesh. This research draws different issues which are related to the elements of existential consciousness and others. These are portrayed below:

3.1 *Addiction, Depression and Consciousness of Existence*

Effect of acute drug addiction is depicted in "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*". Shazia Omar discovers how university youths from well-to-do and powerful family are addicted and even rehab is not an appropriate solution for them. But at the end of the novel, addiction is shown as a medium of redemption as with the help of drugs, they want to forget the burdens and failings of life and even to get the meaning of their lives. So, consciousness of existence and essence come from the point when people see no light but lost in addiction and depression.

In the novel, Deen along with his mother, AJ, Maria and even Falani, is conscious about their existence. First comes the name of Deen, the protagonist of the novel. Deen, AJ, Maria, Shagor, some other friends and juniors are addicted. Deen and AJ do not hesitate to rob in the busy roads, not to afford their livelihood, but to afford drugs. The novel begins with a snatching scene where it is seen that Deen and AJ are involved in snatching a bag. When Deen and AJ cannot manage money, AJ suggests Deen to borrow money from Partho. He says, "Try Partho, he's loaded" (Omar, p.65). Even Deen is trying to borrow money from juniors like Partho but also seen to steal money from the purse of his beloved Maria. Deen is drowning in the depth of depression and addiction.

Here raises a question about depression. Deen is from an affluent family. His father was a social thinker and worker who was "a self-made billionaire, but like all honest men in corrupt countries, he had his balls unceremoniously ripped out by the first government with the guts and the gall to do it. In less than one decade, his entire enterprise was snatched away and he moved into a two-bedroom apartment in DOHS with his wife and son. When M Karim passed away five years ago, there were no friends at his funeral, although 2000 people had attended his 25th anniversary the year before" (Omar, p.51). When his father was given chemotherapy, even at that time, Deen could not resist his heroine. Deen wanted to do the right thing for the family but "he didn't have the strength" (p.52). Deen had the sense that "he was wasting his life" (p.52). He could also change the society like his father. "He sat on a seat of privilege from where he could make a difference, start schools like his father had done" (p.52). "Deen wanted to be connected, but he didn't know how. He was a lousy son, a waste of time, a khor2core" (p.52). Deen's "mother had been an activist. She fought for the downtrodden and protested against oppression. She embraced motherhood with the same fervor and nurtured her passion in Deen" (p.49). But Deen was not like his parents. He was an addict. Sometimes it is quite difficult to differentiate whether Deen's addiction is liable for his depression or his depression is liable for his addiction or he is simply addicted for no reason. Moreover, he was also conscious of his limitation that even if he approaches to change, he cannot. To forget all these, he takes drugs and flies in the sky like a diamond. During taking drugs, when AJ asked Deen about how high he was, "Deen pointed upwards and said solemnly. "High as diamonds in the sky"" (p.42).

For further analysis of the existential crisis of Deen, many examples can be given from the novel. Deen felt "hollow" after the death of Chinx and comments that "for an eternity of NOTHINGNESS ELSE, may be. Bones in the graveyard. The end" (p.145). Here, Deen is brooding over the end of a life, which is totally meaningless. Nothingness also covers everything. This sense of nothingness refers to the sense

of existence. Raosaheb (2016) opines that “Man’s entire existence is believed to be suspended between the two poles of nothingness- that before birth and that after death” (p.17). He adds, “Kierkegaard believes that one’s being is an existence towards death. Heidegger observes that death is a pure fact like birth” (p.18). In the novel, nothingness, which came to mind after thinking about death, refers to a fact of life. Deen sees death as an end which indicates a quite nothingness. This is a clear example of his consciousness about existence.

While leaving the last breath of life, Deen felt that he was floating in the sky like a dazzling diamond. Omar writes, “Deen felt himself floating up, “Like a Diamond in the Sky”, high above the world, looking down on himself, on his ravaged body... Deen was overwhelmed by a sense of deep, irrevocable regret” (p.217). Deen wanted to cry, to sob but he was unable. It is relevant that from the beginning of the novel, Deen tries to get rid of his situation for many times but he failed and, in the end, he took the measure of drug as redemption. Mark Bartholomew (2020) appropriately comments, “The essential thing is that we care about Deen and, so, worry for him when he's ill, when he tries, tries and tries to give up all the chemical paraphernalia that, at times, make him feel trapped because he can never make his escape”. His attempts to avoid drugs indicate his deep concern for existence.

Maria is also depressed and lonely. She wanted to change with all her effort. She said, “The future of our country depends on OUR generation. As a journalist, I will raise awareness and make a difference” (p.107). She was so depressed and isolated that whenever she got Deen as a suitor, she grabbed the opportunity. Maria told Deen, “I live alone” (p.54). Though physical affection and sex were at the center of concentration, she gradually fell in love with Deen and “became the epicenter” in Deen’s life (p.53). But when Deen was imprisoned, she felt alone again and decided to go abroad for higher studies. At the end of the novel, she tried to phone Deen many times but he was fired in a raid at the slum. Her depression, loneliness and lack of love led her to the path of addiction. She wants to ensure her future and she knows her limitation, hence, she plans to leave the country and live abroad. It can appropriately be commented that Deen and Maria are in existential crisis, they are addicted and depressed and even in this miserable condition, they think about their existence which emphasizes their consciousness.

3.2 Perception about Established Institutions and Orders

Existentialist people possess a distinct perception about established institutions and orders as these create obstacles for people’s freedom and enjoying the essence of life. The established institutions and orders indicate the existing systems, laws, customs and practices in the country. Almost all people do not raise any voice against the order, rather they keep following them. Only those who are aware of existence, of being and of nothingness, can question the order. In “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*”, Deen not only commented on the education system but also “he didn’t want to be part of that system. BBA, MBA, fast tract to the grand life where you spend your precious hours like a greedy bastard salivating over balance sheets for some foreign firm that rips resources off your land and degrades your people to poverty. Corporate people were the worst snakes of all, no integrity” (p.45). Deen was also very enthusiastic to take-over the education system of Bangladesh. He says to Maria, “I’ll start a hundred schools and change the education system in Bangladesh” (p.56). He adds, “I’ll lead a revolution... I’ll overthrow the government and the madrassahs. I’ll destroy every man who stands in my way” (p.57). Here, Deen wants to lead a revolution and change the existing order which does not ensure the essence of humans. Deen wants to change the systems which chain people and stop the option of freedom in life.

Again, Detective Khan thinks about changing the system. Omar writes, “The entire system needed reform, but where to begin?” (p.121). These urges of reformation are also questions to the established order. Even, Deen is noticed to compare GOD and GOB. GOD is the chief of religious order while GOB is the government of Bangladesh. Both GOD and GOB are silent and therefore they are criticized by Deen. He says, “God-forsaken. GOB-forsaken” (p.113).

Omar focuses on power structure and its impact on the life. She writes in the novel, "Organized religion was nothing more than an elite power structure. Power is defined by institutions, popes, scientists, investment bankers. Alternative ways of being were banned, eradicated, disempowered. Deen wanted to fight the power, smash G8, but what happens to those who fight? Pariah! Reject! Outcast!" (p.48). Money is another instrument of power. She writes, "And money was an artificial construct. An agreement to give up one's freedom to those in power" (p.50). Money works as a catalyst in power-play. A powerful man loses his freedom as he is not free to do or go anywhere if he possesses money. A man with money needs social security which threatens his freedom of choice. Obviously, it gives him the right to buy anything, even to corrupt and provide bribe or something like these, but he loses his physical freedom which shackles him within a boundary made with money and wealth.

At the same time, people without power cannot even think of changing the existing order. Maria says, "Sometimes I feel like I'm doing enough for the country... I don't have power. I don't have any say in what goes on. I don't want power. Staying in power is tedious work" (p.56). Getting disappointed with having no power, she expects no power as it is also not a comfortable job to have power and utilize it correctly. Weapons are another assurer of power as the person with a deadly weapon becomes powerful. In the novel, it is seen that "the weight of the weapon in his hand gave him a sense of power" (p.126).

Thus, "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*" advocates the active consciousness of people about different structures, institutions and orders of the society that need to be changed, overthrown and redesigned. Azim (2019) appropriately comments that "Deen fulminates against the injustices he sees around him, of the lives of Falani and her cohorts, of the ways that ministers and business people exploit and use people."

3.3 Eagerness for Individual Freedom

Desire for freedom plays an important role in existential approach. Deen, his mother, Maria and many others cherish freedom of living and freedom of doing whatever they want. Deen could not save himself or his other friends from addiction but at last he wanted to save Falani, the supplier of drugs who is a slum-dweller. Omar writes, "He could not keep his friend away from junk, he could not keep his lover happy, he could not quit smack. He would save Falani, even if it was the last thing, he ever did" (p.152). Finally going to save Falani, he died which epitomizes his passion for freedom of living. Again, he approached to Maria about her choice of love but did not force her as he respects her choice and that of Maria also. Even, to ensure Neena's freedom of choice, AJ and Deen stopped Partho, who was trying to dance and make love with Neena forcefully in a party. Thus, he sets examples of yearning for freedom. Deen's mother wanted Deen to be like his father who will work various charity works for the society. This eagerness of his mother represents her passion for freedom- which is to present a livable society to the dwellers.

In the novel, there is an explicit example of freedom which occurs with Maria. Maria lost Deen and wanted to leave all her thoughts. Omar writes, "She wanted to drive away from her thoughts, away from her life. She yearned for freedom" (p.212). Hence, yearning for freedom is very prominent which is one of the most important criteria of existentialism. Thus, the entire text deploys the urge and keenness on freedom- where people can breathe freely but they are confined within the four walls of power referring to their limitation.

3.4 Searching for Meaning of Life

Searching for meaning of life is the most significant feature of existentialism which can also be found in "*Like a Diamond in the Sky*". People lose the meaning of their lives. It is often mentioned in the text that they have lost the meaning of their lives. They are somehow leading their lives, but without any meaningful existence. Apparently, they want a relief from that life but they are unable to overcome that one. Meanwhile, they, the drug addicts, are considered as saddest people who want a sense of life. Omar writes, "Junkies were the saddest of all people" (p.120). Sundari, playing the role of a prostitute who is doing this business only for her survival and dreaming of a new life, says, "Stop putting up a wall

between us” (p.177). This wall indicates lack of communication and a gap between them. She knows that a wall between them will harm their relationship. Existentialists are conscious of that barrier.

Deen is disturbed with his monotonous and boring life. He cannot give up his life and even is unable to start a new one. He asked, “What it would be like to jump on a train and go off to a new life? Just go, with nothing of this life on you, and start again afresh, some place far away” (p.128). This thinking of beginning a random journey and starting afresh give a message of searching of a meaningful life. “He was fascinated back then by the multitudes of people cramped together despite the diversity of their thoughts or experiences, traveling, each with a different purpose, running away from something, or running to something, in search of something, somewhere else” (p.156).

In eleven chapter, when Deen was in jail, Maria came to meet him before going abroad and talking about having a meaningful life, instead of sinking in the depth of addiction. She says, “Deen, don’t give in to the drugs. Live, Deen, live” (p.199). Here, Maria voices for a meaningful life. She is also conscious of her own existence and according to the decision of her mother, she was going abroad. Deen’s intention of leading a revolution also voices for the meaningful life. He says, “I’ll lead a revolution” (p.57). In the end, it can certainly be said that characters projected in “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*” search the meaning of their lives and a life what they can sense.

3.5 Death of God and Comment on Islamization

According to the existential idea of Sartre, God is dead and man is free to do whatever he wants. Deen is also noticed to hate religion, especially Islam, fundamentalism and overall *islamization*. It does not mean that he hates God for his personal reason, rather the crowd of *Ijtema* created troubles for craving drugs and this is why he hated *Ijtema*. Even to AJ, the *Ijtema* became a matter of disturbance as it hindered them to take drugs easily. ““Fuck the mullahs.” AJ shrugged. He had no respect for religion or religious men and the second largest Muslim pilgrimage in the world meant only one thing to him- an obstacle to his addiction” (p.40). Addiction mattered, not the *Ijtema*. Another issue is that as a dweller and citizen of a secular country, characters of the novel sympathize for the secularism. It can be seen in the novel that “We’re a secular nation, why is religious dogma forced on us?” (p.117). Thus, comment on islamisation cannot be denied in the novel but there is no direct attack against religion and fundamentalism, especially against islamisation, rather it was a hindrance to their addiction. Though Sartre’s idea of death of God is not applicable in “*Like a Diamond in the Sky*”, the comment on religion indicates that they only think about their existence, they do not care about other people’s religious views and beliefs.

4. CONCLUSION

Like a Diamond in the Sky represents the persona who are in the crisis of existentialism. They are downing in addiction, corruption and power-play but still conscious of their existence, essence and failure. Bangladesh, though did not face existentialism due to devastation and wars, experiences depression, corruption, pollution, power-play, underground politics and so many which lead people to existential crisis. The novel especially lights on the fact how young people are wasting their lives by taking drugs. Even, this drug works as a medium of journey to redemption. The paper sheds light on prominent characteristics of existentialism which are found in *Like a Diamond in the Sky* namely concern for being and essence and consciousness about different orders hindering to the path of enjoying the essence of lives. Freedom and meaningful life are also significant features of existentialism analyzed with textual references. The study also discusses how *Ijtema* and religious issues are dealt with. For all these examples, it can appropriately be concluded with the statement that Bangladeshi existentialism is perfectly depicted in the novel of Shazia Omar.

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