



Anguish, Agony and Death: An Existential Study of *The Blind Owl*

Fauzia Shafi¹, Zeeshan Ali², Rimsha Sameen³

Abstract

The Blind Owl (1937) is the novel in which the pains and sorrows of the narrator are presented in the monolingual way. The narrator has become prey of anguish and agony. Present study is conducted to understand the notion of human existence as presented in the novel *The Blind Owl*. The study is qualitative and the adopted framework of analysis is of Kierkegaard (as cited in Rempel, Gerhard, 1959, and in Copleston, 1963). The results of the study show that pains and sorrows lead humans towards a state of alienation, agony and anguish, then a human accepts death as the relief from the pains and sorrows.

Keywords: Agony, Anguish, Alienation, Death

1. Introduction

The Blind Owl, written in 1937 and translated in 1974, is a distressing story of loss and spiritual decline that follows the suffering of a young opium addict following the death of an enigmatic lover. Through a series of deftly interwoven incidents that revolve around the same set of mental images, an old man with a spine-chilling laugh, four dead black horses with rasping coughs, a hidden urn of poisoned wine, the narrator is forced to record his obsession with a beautiful woman even as it drives him further into hysteria and madness (Sadeq, 1937 (Published in 1974)).

A well-known Persian author is Hedayat. Many languages have been translated into his works. He is well-liked by readers because of his well-known book "*The Blind Owl*." His artwork frequently depicts existential ideas. We shall approach his writing from an existential standpoint. His writing is unparalleled and enigmatic to the reader. He expresses his inner agony and pain in his writing. Through his writing, he has communicated his innermost sentiments. He was a man who belonged in two places, but he also experienced homelessness in his mind. Hedayat has distinguished himself among other writers thanks to his style of writing and nihilism. His stories are an expression of his inner suffering. Hedayat has portrayed the ideas of human life as one of estrangement, nothingness, bareness, desperation, and dissatisfaction.

Hedayat observes humanity as a lost hound wandering aimlessly through this universe's wasteland. He represents the dog metaphor for the rejected, alone, and estranged man who is left in this world without a purpose. It also signifies a man who is enveloped in darkness and cannot see any sign of hope.

Through his work, Hedayat has demonstrated the pitiful and wretched state of humanity. Through his writing, he has captured the aimlessness, purposelessness, and darkness that surround humans.

Every story in the collection depicts loneliness, abandonment, estrangement, hatred against others, despair, frustration, a person who has been misled by fate, a malfunctioning romantic relationship, an erotic connection, and the meaninglessness of existence.

The hopelessness, helplessness, meaninglessness, despair, depression, frustration, alienation, and absurdity of life are felt by Hedayat's characters. His characters are constantly surrounded by these emotions.

Present study is also conducted to understand the state of agony, anguish and death as existential feelings being portrayed in the novel *The Blind Owl* (1937).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Pain and sorrow are the base of life which either can stand a person or let towards lifelessness and agony. Feelings of anguish remain in humans when the surrounding is not supportive to the person.

1.2. Research Objective

- To understand the notions of agony, anguish and death in *The Blind Owl*.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Present study helps to explore the state of mind of the author which leads a person towards accepting death. The study explores the existential state of mind through which the human anguish and agony can be understood as portrayed in the novel *The Blind Owl* (1937).

2. Literature Review

The literature of Hedayat conveys an enduring fickleness, anxiety, and restlessness. From the first story, Hajji Murat, through the last one, Buried Alive, we find brittleness and instability in his collection of short stories. We note that Hedayat poses existential queries in all of his works. Hedayat has sparked debate about everything from his existence to his commitment to reason. The artwork of Hedayat depicts a cryptic universe of mental derangement.

¹MS English Literature, Government Sadiq College and Women University, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

²Corresponding Author, Lecturer, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus, Pakistan, zeeshanali@cuiatd.edu.pk

³MPhil English Literature, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Depression and disappointment are discussed in the 1995 novel "The man who destroyed his passion." When a leader we had believed to be holy and ethereal is revealed to be immoral, conservative, and dishonest, we all experience a comparable level of sadness and depression. This expresses the internal sensation of depression and disillusionment. Through his writing, Hedayat has expressed thoughts of despondency, depression, and hopelessness (Hedayat, 1977). In the 1959 films Three Drops of Blood and Buried Alive, the main protagonists become conscious of their suffering. They become aware of the futility of their existence and their compulsion to highlight the existence paradox through their literature.

In *The dog stray*, Hedayat uses the dog as a representation of humanity (Hedayat, 1995). Hedayat uses a dog to illustrate the pitiful state of humanity in the universe. He chooses a dog as the book's protagonist to symbolize how humans are left on their own in this congested and paralyzed society. The best animal to depict contemporary man is a dog. Hedayat portrays the world as being ruthless, merciless, and hostile.

The Blind Owl (1937) was analyzed by Andre Burton, who established surrealism in France, who named it one of the greatest works of the 20th century. Famous American author Henry Miller declared it to be the best book he had ever read (Burton, 1981).

In the opening to his book *The Exception of Hedayat's Works*, Dr. Yarshater introduces Hedayat as an authoritative spokesperson for Iran's traditional and ancient truths (Yarshater, 2022).

According to Jalal al-Ahmad, a man's *The Blind Owl* vengeance becomes repetitive, futile, and his adjacent life when he becomes aware of his impermanence (Al-e Ahmad, 1977).

3. Research Methodology

The two main categories of research are qualitative research and quantitative research. In this study, qualitative research is used. Our research uses a qualitative, not a quantitative, methodology. The current work is both argumentative and descriptive in that it provides a thorough explanation of the idea of existentialism. In order to examine how sorrow, agony, and death are shown in the life of a contemporary man, a close textual analysis of Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* is required, with emphasis on the main character.

Existentialism, in the opinion of Kierkegaard, is strongly related to human freedom. He defined existence as the ability to realize oneself through free will. According to Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), as described in Rempel, Gerhard, 1959, "He places emphasis on the premise that humans have individuality and he is distinct from others, which is why this term is applied only to human beings and no other things." In these lines, Kierkegaard explains his perceptions: "An existing individual is himself in the process of becoming ...in existence the watchword is always forward" (Kierkegaard as cited in Copleston, 1963, p. 348).

Additionally, he clarifies his beliefs by saying:

"Existence is the child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a constant striving".

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Existence precedes essence

The Blind Owl is mostly an internal monologue that is described in the first person. The main character of the book is the storyteller. The narrator of "*The Blind Owl*" explains the efforts made to develop a complete understanding of existence in life. The narrator no longer believes in God. He believes that only he is capable of understanding his suffering and putting an end to it. From the narrator's perspective, he does not need guidance to reveal his presence. Before death claims him and puts an end to his existence, he makes an effort to understand himself better. As a result, he gathers memories from his life and decides to write them on the wall of his bedroom. By doing so, he hopes to make himself less recognizable to others than his own shadow. He decides to complain about his pain to his own shadow, emphasizing freedom. He chooses to spend the rest of his life as a pen-case painter after using liquor and opium as a defender to ease his suffering. The narrator believes that he has total control over himself because he has abandoned his trust in God. Here, the narrator's approach of explaining his life improves comprehension. According to Sartre's account of existence prior to essence, a man creates his existence by his freedom of choice by rejecting God as his creator, followed by his knowledge of his responsibility to others as a coherence of his freedom choices, and finally by being a notable individual. Existentialism, however, gives a man the opportunity to have a perfect existence. It gives a man the option to choose the kind of life he wants. The narrator continuously makes use of his freedom to offer any solace that strengthens his belief in God.

The Blind Owl's narrator experiences horrible things in his life. He chooses images of demise. He makes an effort to reveal himself through the picture of death and by telling stories about his experiences with life, joys, marriage, attempts, humanity, and faith. He thinks that God abandons him to deal with his spouse, rejection, illness, and a difficult community. He decides to assert his superiority above God in an effort to gain control over others. He loves himself so much as a result of his absolute freedom that he loses faith in God.

The narrator says:

"I did not wish to know whether God existed,"

His confidence in God has waned because he believes that he is left to endure suffering and anxiety alone in this life and that God does not offer salvation.

“I found creed, faith and belief to be weak and childish”.

The narrator claims that because religion does not bring him any comfort, he has no interest in it and considers it to be weak and infantile.

4.2. Alienation and Estrangement

In his socially oriented method of thinking, Hegel transmitted the idea of alienation. The possibility of alienation has developed since Hegel in two very different philosophical perspectives, Marxism and Existentialism. Estrangement has been evaluated in particular terms by existentialists. Distance in existentialism implies a person's confinement from the normative society and others. Estrangement is frequently analyzed as the current network's atomism. Sometimes a person sees distance and detachment while ignoring his own reality. He encounters many kinds of complexity throughout his life, and this is why.

“They are persuaded that cutting edge man lives in a fourfold state of estrangement; from God, from nature, from other men and from his own actual self” (Alssid & Kennedy, 1996, p. 206).

Iranian author Hedayat's 1937 novel “*The Blind Owl*” is a representative work of Iranian literature from the 20th century. The narrator is a character who has been “alienated,” and he is led to speak to his reflection and image in order to vent the weight of life. He indulges in misbehaviour by painting pen covers with pictures of an impolite-looking elderly guy and a seductive young woman, taking solace in the bygone innocence he may never have had. The man is biting the nail on one of his fingers while the girl hands him a blue flower. The narrator makes the decision to maintain his isolation from the outside world. He decides to reside in the city's outskirts since he does not want to be a member of the mob. He has no interaction with the people or surroundings around him.

The first sentence can be seen as anabridgment of the book; it can also be interpreted as a study of estrangement and alienation:

“There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker”.

The narrator feels wholly cut off from the outer world. His entire life is restricted to the house's four walls. He is cut off from the outer world. He is cut off from both God and the natural world. To pass the time, he chose the absurd profession of pen case cover painting. His home is located outside of the city, far from the daily commotion of city life. “I withdrew from the crowd,” the narrator continues. I absolutely gave up hanging out with the lucky and foolish people. I then turned to drink and opium for melancholy. I've lived and am now living my life within the confines of my room. I spend all of my time inside four walls. In this situation, the narrator feels cut off from his surroundings and the outside world. He is confined to the four walls of the house and cut off from the rest of the world. He is removed from the activity of the outside world. The narrator claims that he is not in the company of fools. He's gone from the group of folks. In addition, the narrator feels cut off from God, nature, and society. When a person believes that a loving God only imposes intolerable burdens, they may feel alienated from him or her. When a homo sapien learns that finding comfort in God during a time of loss, he feels cut off from God. Disbelief in God results from this alienation. *The Blind Owl*'s narrator feels as like he has been abandoned in this world to endure suffering, which further distances him from God. He consequently feels cut off from God. Feeling cut off from the outer world, the narrator. He feels cut off from society as a whole. He perceives himself as being outside this planet. I can only have a meaningful conversation with my shadow, he claims. I am made to speak by him. I am only known to him. He understands, that much I am confident. The narrator discusses his separation from society and the outer world in these lines. He is also estranged from himself, which is why he wants to understand himself. He desires to pen works for his shadow. He is curious about himself. He makes the decision that his shadow will whine about his pain. At the very least, he hopes his own shadow can identify him. He is curious about himself. He desires to look for his true identity. He wants at least his shadow to know him. He says this because he wants to introduce himself to his shadow.

To introduce himself to his shadow that is why he states:

“I write only for my shadow, which is cast on the wall in front of the light. I must Introduce myself to it.”

In this sentence, the narrator expresses his desire to be recognized and understood, if not by others, then at least by his own shadow because he cannot be understood by others. He thus longs to be recognized by his shadow. The narrator merely wants to be recognized as his shadow. He wants to be known by shadow since he feels distant from himself. The narrator is driven to become weak, helpless, and faceless as a result of his alienation from God, himself, other people, the outer world, society, and other people. He won't be able to offer trust in every circumstance. Thus, the narrator also loses confidence in everything since he believes God does not provide atonement to put a stop to his suffering; as a result, he develops a strong affinity to death. He thinks that the only thing that will put an end to his pain is death. He thinks that since death never lies, it is the only thing that can bring him comfort. He will therefore find perfect peace and comfort in death. Therefore, it may be said that the narrator of *The Blind Owl* feels cut off from himself, society, and the outside world. The emphasis on isolation and alienation in *The Blind Owl*, according to Al-I Ahmed, can be understood politically:

“When a person is afraid to talk to his friends, his wife, his colleagues, or.....[anyone] else, ultimately he can talk [only] to his shadow”.

This situation shows that when a guy is cut off from his friends, nature, and society as a whole, he can disclose himself to his shadow. His shadow is here in order to identify and comprehend him.

The narrator finds comfort in his or her isolation and loneliness. He doesn't have many relatives. His wife, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and father-in-law are the center of his universe. The only relative he has is his uncle. In front of his shadow, he expresses his misery and anguish. He believes he is completely cut off from the rabble's world. In his own words:

"In my limited life, a mirror is more important the world of the rabble, which has no relation to me".

Hedayat's sense of alienation from his contemporaries, which he emphasizes in his most recent work, "The Message of Kafka," can also be seen as personal. In most of his writings, including *The Stray Dog*, *The Man Who Killed His Passions*, and *Buried Alive*, he talks of his melancholy, misery, and alienation.

His entire body of work has the defining characteristics of existentialist, particularly alienation and absurdity.

4.3. Anguish and agony

One of the key elements of existentialism is thought to be anguish. The absence of meaning in life, which causes man to feel exhausted, anxious, and uncertain despite being free, is the source of the experience of misery.

"Anguish is the manifestation of freedom...." (Ellis & Bochner, 1999).

Another aspect of existence to be examined in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* is the tenor of apprehension. *The Blind Owl* talks on the existential anguish, the anxiety of being human, the strange terror of death, and the fear of having the freedom to choose, do, and be right. In this novella, Sadeq Hedayat describes his misery and incurable pain. The opening paragraph of *The Blind Owl*, which is often quoted, describes the anguish of perception and experience. In life, there are those wounds that, like a canker, eat away at the Soul in solitude and weaken it. It is impossible to discuss these great hardships with others because it is common to categories them as exceptional and singular incidents and happenings. People pretend to accept them with snarky remarks and suspicious smiles if one does talk or write about them. They actually adhere to prevailing views as well as their own ideas about them. The lack of a treatment for these pains is the cause. The only cure is artificial sleep brought on by opium or wine, or both of these substances. Unfortunately, these medications' effects only last briefly. After a while, they prolong the suffering rather than relieving it. This idea lessens life's circumstances and its anguish. The storyteller must imagine his own consciousness and circumstance. This powerful and judgmental phrase captures the reader's attention. In these lines, the narrator expresses his extreme psychological suffering and inability to find relief. The reader is made aware of the narrator's passion for a lovely damsel by this phrase. Because there is no treatment for this suffering, the narrator must endure it for the rest of his life. This claim describes the entire novel. It might be taken as a novella synopsis. This sentence serves as the narrator's description of his sorrow and interminable suffering. According to him, there is no cure for these pains. He uses pills to try to forget the pain, but because their effects are just momentary, they only make it worse. Throughout the entire book, the narrator has expressed his inner suffering and agony. He is aware of his suffering. He talks about how painful it was to lose that mysterious supernal girl. Because he is alone and cannot find a genuine relationship wherever in the world, the narrator portrays the misery of alienation.

"My life is like a fresh stump of wood lying at the side of a tripod: it is scorched and charred by the fire of the other burning wood, but it neither burns thoroughly nor stays fresh and green_ the smoke and the fumes suffocate it."

The narrator has expressed the torment of his existence and his agonizing pain in these lines.

4.4. Death

Death is a key component of existentialism because it helps people better understand their non-being, which is the denial of being. Heidegger shifted the topic of conversation to death. As death deprives man of a true understanding of his nonexistence, death is an intense topic of existentialist. Existentialism holds that man must accept death. Life's mnemonic is death. It is a process of being, not one that must come to a conclusion. It reveals how we function. Heidegger claims:

"Death is not a forfeiture, but is something that should be understood as existential" (Heidegger, 2014, p. 31).

For Hedayat, the enigmatic fear of impending death is significant. Hedayat portrayed death as calming, which would lessen life's anxieties. Relief and tranquility are provided by death. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* says.

"My one fear is that I may die without having come to know myself".

The narrator wants to be recognized by both his shadow and himself. Before he passes away, he wants to be known by himself.

Additionally, he says:

"Death, death where are you? The thought of death soothed me."

Hedayat here uses death as consolation. It calms us and helps us avoid the burdens, suffering, and problems of a tedious and materialistic existence. He can only be freed from the follies, fears, and cares of life by death. Only passing away will provide him relief. He needs to unwind because he is worn out. By dying, he will be free of his woes and worries. Only passing away will bring him comfort. He is requesting the comfort of death in order to feel at ease and be free of his worries for this reason.

The narrator further told:

“The presence of death annihilates all superstition. We are the children of death and it is death that rescues us from the description of life. In the midst of life, he calls us and summons us to him. At an age when we have not learnt the language of men, if at time we pause in our play it is that we may listen to the voice of death.....throughout our life death is beckoning to us.” (*The Blind Owl*)

Hedayat has portrayed death in these lines as a soporific. He asserts that the truth is death. We are all doomed to pass away; everyone has to die. Death is a tranquil lap in which we seek refuge from the woes of the world, just as a child finds peace in the lap of a mother. It eliminates all of the current fanaticism. We work hard for our existence every day to breathe and live, and with each day that goes by, we go closer to passing away. Death appears and frees us from the tribulations, sorrows, and suffering of this weary life. Therefore, death is the ultimate gateway to a quiet place of solace from this worldly world. It delivers us from the pressures and concerns of this world. It eases our suffering and pain. Death is an unavoidable fact of life. We must pause in life when we reach a certain age because we must pay attention to the voice of death. At any age, it might contact us. Death is the ultimate fact; thus everyone must confront it. Man must thus accept his death. This idea is related to Heidegger’s idea of “being toward death” or “being near death.”

He is drawn to death and desires to pass away in order to be at peace and escape the chaos of this life, which offers him no comfort. He wishes to depart from this world. He declares “I fervently wish to die, to quit being”. He believes that death will provide him with a final respite from the suffering and concerns of life. *The Blind Owl* exhibits a propensity for dying in an effort to leave this world of scum behind. To escape from the harsh realities of life, he begins to use opium. Only death will provide for this escape.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the story is about the narrator who has left believing in God due to his sufferings. His sufferings made him alienated and prey of anguish and agony. He is willing to accept the death and consider the death as the relief from the pains. Existentialism gives answers of the existence of the human being based on the materials and surrounding people where happiness and pleasure are necessary for living. Presence of pain and sorrows causes agony and anguish in human life and a person is willing to accept death as the relief from the pains and sorrows.

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