

# Existence and Essence in A Candle in the Wind: An Existentialist Reading of Munir Ahmed Badini’s Novel

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## Abstract

The present study analyzed the concept of existential crisis through the protagonist of the novel ‘A Candle in the Wind’ by Munir A. Badini. Existentialism is a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the individual's existence, freedom, and responsibility in creating meaning and purpose in life. It rejects the notion of a predetermined essence or universal values and instead focuses on subjective experience and personal choice. Qualitative research paradigm has been selected and content Analysis has been used to study existential crisis instances in the selected work. The analysis shows that humans have always been held hostage by their values, beliefs, traditions, and customs. So much so that these values occasionally surpass the worth of human life. These ideals rob people of their freedom and right to live.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, existential crisis, content analysis

## Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in response to the crises of meaning that followed the two World Wars, questioning the nature of human existence, freedom, and individuality (Macquarrie, 1972). At its core, existentialism challenges the assumption that life has an intrinsic purpose (Veit, 2018). Unlike traditional philosophy, which often privileges objective reasoning, existentialism emphasizes subjectivity and regards personal experience as a foundational element of philosophical inquiry (Lavine, 1984; Van Dung, 2020). The fundamental principle of this philosophy is that “existence precedes essence”—a notion that individuals exist first and then define their purpose and values through

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conscious choice and action. This notion subverts the idea of predetermined human nature and instead asserts that meaning is constructed, often in the face of anxiety, alienation, absurdity, and despair (Heidegger, 1962; Camus, 1942).

One of the most profound manifestations of existential thought is the experience of existential crisis. Defined as a confrontation with the perceived meaninglessness of life, existential crises provoke questions of mortality, freedom, isolation, and authenticity (Tillich, 1952; Yalom, 1980). These crises are not merely abstract reflections but are deeply rooted in individual encounters with suffering, loss, or disillusionment. Sartre (1943) explains that this confrontation can lead to anguish as individuals recognize the weight of responsibility to create meaning in a world that offers none inherently. May (1994) further asserts that such crises arise especially during moments of personal upheaval, offering a stark awareness of finitude and human vulnerability.

While existentialism has been extensively explored in Western literary canons, its thematic presence in South Asian literatures remains under-examined. Pakistani English literature, for instance, offers rich terrain for existential inquiry, shaped by the region's colonial legacy, Partition trauma, religious norms, political instability, and global cultural flows. Novels such as *The Pakistani Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa (Farhan et al., 2022), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (Farooq, 2018), and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie (Muneeza, 2015) foreground struggles with identity, cultural alienation, and personal freedom—hallmarks of existential thought. These narratives explore how historical trauma and societal expectations catalyze an individual's search for selfhood in an often-indifferent world.

Similarly, Balochi literature presents a powerful yet overlooked corpus for the study of existential themes. Rich in cultural, historical, and political nuance, Balochi literary works reflect existential questions of identity, alienation, resistance, and the meaning of life under socio-political oppression. Writers such as Gul Khan Nasir and Munir Ahmed Badini exemplify this tradition. Nasir's poetry serves as a call for cultural awakening and self-realization, while Badini's prose navigates the individual's moral and psychological battles within a transforming society (Spooner, 1989; *The Baloch News*, 2017). Badini, in particular, has produced an extensive body of literature—around 100 books including 80 novels—that engages deeply with existentialist concerns, humanism, and Baloch social realities.

Among Badini's significant works is *Dil Jam Ke a Zandag Inth* (2009), later translated into English by Khuda Baksh Shakaib as *A Candle in the Wind* (2022). This novel narrates the life of Safar, a blind yet intellectually gifted boy with a fervent desire to become a writer. However, societal limitations and personal afflictions prevent him from realizing this dream. The narrative explores a range of existentially charged themes such as thwarted desire, love, societal conformity, psychological disillusionment, and political disempowerment.

This paper investigates how existential crisis is manifested through the character of Safar in *A Candle in the Wind*, arguing that his experiences encapsulate broader cultural and existential conflicts in modern Balochi society. Specifically, the study analyzes how Safar's psychological turmoil, longing for authorship, and experiences of social alienation illustrate key tenets of existential philosophy, such as freedom, absurdity, and the construction of meaning. While prior studies have extensively examined existential themes in European and Western narratives, there is a noticeable gap in the application of existentialist frameworks to South Asian literatures, especially within the Balochi literary tradition. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to expand the philosophical discourse on existentialism to include diverse cultural contexts, contributing to a more globally inclusive understanding of existential literature.

## Review of the Literature

### ❖ Foundations of Existential Thought

The emergence of existentialism as a distinct philosophical movement occurred in response to the decline of religious and metaphysical certainty in the modern era, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. Aho (2023) explicates that although early intellectuals like Augustine, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Pascal have been referred to as existentialists; the word should only be used to refer to a contemporary group of thinkers who were reacting to a set of ideas that became popular in the nineteenth century. The scientific view of reality and truth as a meaningless, value-free collection of material things in causal interactions is one of these viewpoints.

Another is the contemporary perception of society as an artificial construct that is inherently at odds with the goals of the individual. German Idealism had made an effort to oppose the consequences of these novel concepts, but by the 1840s, it had

mostly failed, leading to a rising perception that man is ultimately alone and unaided in an indifferent and meaningless cosmos.

According to Flynn (2006), existentialist thinkers engage with similar themes, differing only in their expressions. He identifies five major themes within existentialism. The first is that "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals define themselves through their actions rather than being predetermined by an inherent essence. The second theme is the emphasis on time, which existentialists view qualitatively rather than as a mere measurable entity. The third theme is humanism, as existentialism focuses on individual meaning-making in contrast to mass society's constraints. The fourth theme, freedom and responsibility, posits that human beings are fundamentally free, but this freedom comes with the burden of responsibility for one's choices. Lastly, ethical considerations remain paramount, as existentialists encourage individuals to critically assess their personal and social existence.

#### ❖ **Theistic and Atheistic Existentialism**

There are two kinds of existentialism: theistic and atheistic existentialism (Kaufman, 1956, Andayani, 2018). While Theistic existentialists believe in the existence of God, the atheistic refute it. Notable proponents of Theistic existentialism include Paul Tilich, Karl Jasper, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gabriel Marcel, Thomas Aquinas and Soren Kierkegaard. Atheistic existentialists include Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche.

#### ❖ **Søren Kierkegaard and Christian Existentialism**

Soren Kierkegaard's writings served as the foundation on which succeeding philosophers and creatives developed the existential philosophical edifice. Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, had a passion for Christian ethics and human psychology. His main interests were people's responses to adversity and the decisions they made while deciding how to live their lives. *Fear and Trembling* (1843), one of his most well-known writings, explores the nature of religion in the face of total loss and dread. It was an analysis of Prophet Abraham's psychology and feelings when God called upon him to sacrifice his child Isaac. *Fear and Trembling* is a foundational text in the Christian existentialist canon.

Stewart (2011) identifies two central concepts in Kierkegaard's existentialism: despair and anxiety. Despair is the condition in which an individual believes all hope

is lost, while anxiety is an inherent part of the human condition, often manifesting without an obvious cause. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard argues that individuals are responsible for defining themselves and cannot blame others for their failures. Similarly, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, he explores how Adam's anxiety before committing the original sin reflects the broader human condition of existential guilt and self-awareness (Asy'ari & Andayani, 2021).

#### ❖ Heidegger and the Search for Authenticity

Martin Heidegger, an early existentialist, focused on the concept of "being-in-the-world" and the pursuit of an authentic existence. In his seminal work *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger argues that individuals often live in a state of "inauthenticity," conforming to societal norms rather than engaging with their true selves. This inauthenticity leads to existential crisis, which he suggests, is a moment of self-confrontation that forces individuals to rediscover their authentic existence.

#### ❖ Friedrich Nietzsche and the Death of God

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is one of the most influential existentialist philosophers. His major works, including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), challenge religious and moral traditions. Nietzsche's declaration of the "death of God" reflects his belief that traditional religious values were eroding, leaving humanity to face an existential crisis of meaning. He introduced the concept of the "Superman" as an individual who overcomes conventional morality to create new values. His philosophy significantly influenced existentialist thought by emphasizing the necessity of individual willpower in shaping one's destiny (Ashokan & Paul, 2017).

#### ❖ Albert Camus and the Absurd

Albert Camus, a French-Algerian journalist and writer, is a key figure in existentialist thought. His works explore the concept of the absurd, which arises from the conflict between human expectations of meaning and a universe that offers none. Camus examines this idea in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), where he likens human existence to Sisyphus's endless task of rolling a boulder uphill only for it to roll back down. Although this effort appears futile, Camus argues that Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning through perseverance. He suggests that embracing life, despite its absurdity, is an act of defiance and a form of existential resistance (Macharia, 2022; Romo, 2019).

Camus asserts that existential crises stem from the realization that life lacks inherent meaning, leading to feelings of alienation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he explores two possible responses to this crisis: suicide or acceptance of life's absurdity. He concludes that choosing to live, despite the lack of purpose, is an act of rebellion. By continuing to push the metaphorical rock, individuals assert their own meaning in a meaningless world (Snehsata, 2013; Romo, 2019).

### ❖ **Jean-Paul Sartre and Existential Humanism**

Jean-Paul Sartre (2007) presents his existentialist philosophy in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, originally delivered as a lecture in 1945. He argues that existentialism is a human-centered philosophy emphasizing individual freedom and responsibility. According to Sartre, existence precedes essence, meaning that people define themselves through their choices rather than conforming to a predetermined nature.

Sartre rejects determinism, insisting that individuals are always free to make choices despite external influences. However, this freedom comes with the weight of responsibility. He argues that moral values are not imposed by a higher authority but are created through individual actions. He emphasizes the importance of authenticity, urging individuals to live in accordance with their own values rather than conforming to societal expectations. Sartre's existentialism ultimately advocates for a life of self-awareness, personal responsibility, and ethical engagement with the world.

Although existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre offer profound frameworks for grappling with human freedom, alienation, and the search for meaning, their perspectives are largely grounded in Western philosophical and theological traditions. This Eurocentric focus, while analytically rigorous, often overlooks how existential themes manifest within non-Western cultural and socio-political contexts. For instance, while Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism and Sartre's atheistic humanism engage deeply with personal moral agency, they do not account for collective identity, indigenous knowledge systems, or the impact of colonial legacies.

### ❖ **Balochi Prose Fiction**

According to Jahani & Badal Khan (2023), Balochi literature was predominantly oral for centuries, with poetry being the dominant form of expression. The emergence of

written prose, particularly fiction, was a relatively late development, influenced by broader socio-political and linguistic factors. One key aspect they explore is the role of colonial and post-colonial education systems in shaping modern Balochi literature. The introduction of printing presses and formal education in the Balochi language during the 20th century provided a platform for prose fiction to flourish. The scholars also point out that early Balochi prose was largely non-fictional, consisting of historical accounts, religious writings, and translations. In addition, Fictional prose in Balochi literature typically explores localized themes, portraying Balochi society along with its injustices, biases, superstitions, and struggles. A recurring subject is illicit love. Most writers adopt a social realist style, often concluding their narratives with tragic endings. In their analysis, Jahani & Badal Khan (2023) acknowledge prominent writers such as Ghani Parwaz, Munir Ahmed Badini and Hakim Baluch who contributed to the growth of Balochi prose fiction.

Munir Ahmed Badini is accredited for his contributions in revitalizing Balochi Fiction by modernizing Balochi storytelling, introducing psychological realism and intricate narratives. Ali (2013) argues that the characters in Badini's literary works such as *Pil Gosani Miranen Nasl* (Dying Race of Elephant-eared People); *Murgani Bal* (Flying of the Birds); *May Daptar* (Our Office); *Kasanen Mard a Dusmin* (Abuse of the Old Man) are embodiments of the existential aspects of human existence, reflecting themes of bad faith, self-realization, and authenticity.

Fictional prose in Balochi literature, particularly the works of Munir Ahmed Badini, engages directly with themes of identity, despair, injustice, and the moral ambiguity of social life. Badini's narratives portray existential dilemmas not through abstract philosophical constructs, but through the lived experiences of individuals navigating oppressive social norms, illicit love, and cultural dislocation. However, despite their thematic resonance with existentialist thought, these literary voices remain under-theorized within global philosophical discourse. This paper seeks to address this gap by critically engaging with Balochi prose fiction through the lens of existentialism, thereby expanding and challenging the boundaries of the philosophical tradition. By placing Badini's work in dialogue with classical existentialist thinkers, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of existential thought—one that recognizes the cultural specificity and narrative richness of non-Western articulations of despair and meaning.

## **Methodology**

The present study qualitatively analyzes the novel *A Candle in the Wind* by Munir Ahmed Badini through the theoretical lens of existentialism. To explore the representation of existential crises in the text, qualitative content analysis has been employed as the primary research method. According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis involves the systematic interpretation of a body of texts, images, or symbolic material, often independent of the intentions of the author or the perceptions of the audience. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) further define qualitative content analysis as a method for subjectively interpreting textual content through a structured process of coding and identifying recurring themes or patterns.

This method is particularly well-suited to the current study, as it allows for a systematic examination of subjective experiences and philosophical dilemmas as portrayed in literary narratives. In the context of *A Candle in the Wind*, content analysis provides a structured approach to investigating the protagonist's internal conflicts.

The analysis began with a thorough reading of the novel to gain a holistic understanding of its narrative structure and philosophical undercurrents. The text was then segmented into thematic units, each representing a distinct episode or passage relevant to existential inquiry. These units were coded based on predefined existential categories, including freedom, alienation, despair, absurdity, and authenticity, derived from key existentialist thinkers such as Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard. Recurring motifs and linguistic expressions reflecting these themes were identified and categorized accordingly. This thematic categorization enabled a deeper understanding of how existential crises are articulated through the experiences, choices, and psychological states of the characters, particularly the protagonist.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The researcher has opted the theory of Existentialism to explore existential crisis in the novel *A Candle in the Wind* by Munir Ahmed Badini. Existential philosophy is rooted in the conviction that human beings possess absolute freedom and that this freedom enables them to shape the essence and purpose of their own lives. This philosophy asserts that "existence precedes essence," suggesting that individuals are

not born with predetermined nature but instead create meaning through conscious choices and actions (Sartre, 1943).

The foundation of this school of thought is often attributed to Søren Kierkegaard, who emphasized subjectivity, inwardness, and personal responsibility in confronting despair and the self (Kierkegaard, 1954; Westphal, 1987). Later thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus developed key themes like freedom, authenticity, absurdity, and anxiety in their philosophical frameworks (Camus, 1942; Heidegger, 1927). Sartre particularly explored the idea of bad faith—when individuals deceive themselves to escape the burden of freedom—while Camus introduced the concept of the absurd, the tension between human longing for meaning and the universe’s indifference (Camus, 1942; Flynn, 2006).

Existentialism is a school of thought that contends that due to the hardship and suffering that result from a person's lack of fulfilment, power, and control over his or her existence, human life is an unsatisfactory experience (Mckillican, 2019). It is crucial to recognise that each person is born into an environment with complex social systems that have evolved over thousands of years. These social structures were created as a result of social acts, disputes, and traditional beliefs. In such a setting, a person starts to learn about themselves and derives meaning from their own free will, decisions, and accountability. The core idea of existentialist philosophy is that individuals make decisions based on their experiences, beliefs, and views in order to discover who and what they are as they move through life (Barrett, 1990).

## Analysis

*A Candle in the Wind* is a story of a young blind boy named ‘Safar’. The plot is set in rural Balochistan. Safar’s father was head of their tribe and his mother was a house-wife. Both of them have passed away during Safar’s childhood. Safar has an elder brother ‘Hammal’ to look after him. Safar wants to be a writer and marry his cousin Pairoza. Salman, a businessman and friend of Hammal, falls in love with Pairoza and sends a marriage proposal to the girl’s parents through Hammal.

Safar tells his brother about his affair and warns him against asking for Pairoza’s hand for Salman or else he will commit suicide. Pairoza belongs to the middle class, her father is a teacher. Her family is happy to receive the marriage proposal for

Pairoza from a businessman. Pairoza, on the other hand, is upset because she likes 'Safar' and her parents are against her desire to marry Safar. Hammal cannot fulfil Safar's wish of getting married with Peroza. He is under obligation of Salman's monetary support in elections. Hammal justifies his favouring of Salman through cultural values as in Balochi culture having love marriage is a 'stigma'.

Eventually, Pairoza gets married to Salman and Safar is deprived of becoming both writer and marrying Pairoza. Safar is desperate and spends most of his time in introspection and contemplation. He questions the nature of truth and purpose of his life. He highlights the need of alteration of traditional values of society and realization of the essential liberty of individuals. The novel ends with Safar suffering from auditory hallucination at night and follows the sound he hears which asks him to come along and he is lost.

#### ❖ **Theme of Alienation**

From the beginning, Safar is introduced as someone "who had a care to know maintaining a relationship to this world to understand it" (p.11), suggesting a yearning for connection and meaning. Yet, his physical blindness, emotional distance from others, and intellectual isolation mark him as a deeply alienated figure.

This alienation is particularly evident in his childhood memories:

"he felt life very boring, tasteless and hard... then he wanted to die but he liked life with all its obstacles" (p.66).

These lines echo Kierkegaard's notion of existential despair—a state where the individual is trapped between the infinite (yearning for meaning) and the finite (the crushing reality of limitations). Safar's longing for his absent mother signals the loss of emotional grounding, a void he continues to grapple with throughout his life.

His alienation is compounded by society's rejection when he is denied the possibility of marrying Pairoza. Despite mutual affection, their union is blocked by societal and familial constraints, reinforcing Camus' notion of the absurd—the conflict between human desires for meaning and a world that denies it.

#### ❖ **The Search for Meaning and Existential Crisis**

Safar's existential crisis is articulated with clarity:

“I know without making stories and fictions I cannot make this world newer... otherwise it is meaningless...” (p.24).

This reflects Sartre’s central claim that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1956). In other words, meaning is not preordained; it is something each individual must create. Safar’s decision to become a writer is his act of existential affirmation, a conscious attempt to impose order and meaning on an otherwise indifferent universe.

However, his blindness prevents him from writing independently, introducing a painful irony—he can envision meaning but cannot fully manifest it. This limitation parallels Camus’ absurd hero Sisyphus, condemned to repeat a futile task, yet persisting in his efforts.

#### ❖ **Authenticity and the Role of Choice**

Despite his circumstances, Safar attempts to assert authenticity, defined by Heidegger as “being true to oneself rather than conforming to the ‘they’” (Heidegger, 1962). His desire to be a writer, independent of societal expectations, is one such act of authenticity:

“Now for days I feel that my life has no meaning except to be a writer...” (p.24).

Yet, the persistent external pressures—cultural norms, his brother’s political entanglements, and societal restrictions—impede his ability to fully live authentically. His rejection of absolute moral values is expressed starkly:

“Virtue, law, history, good deeds, ethics and care were the self-made stories and myths of weak...” (p.84).

This sentiment aligns with Nietzsche’s critique of herd morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), where societal norms suppress individual greatness and reinforce mediocrity.

#### ❖ **Societal Constraints vs. Personal Freedom**

Safar’s existential philosophy is in tension with his societal reality. When Hammal refuses to intervene in the proposed marriage of Pairoza to Salman, citing societal expectations, Safar observes:

“It becomes stigma for us; no one accepts it in society...” (p.77).

This highlights the conflict between personal freedom and social determinism. According to Sartre, humans are “condemned to be free” and thus wholly responsible for their choices. However, Safar’s capacity to choose is limited by structural forces—family honor, political loyalty, and superstition—all of which erode his agency.

While existentialism emphasizes the freedom of the individual, this case reveals how social realities can restrict existential freedom, offering a valuable counterpoint to more individualist readings of Sartre or Nietzsche.

### ❖ Absurdity and Rebellion

The concept of the absurd, as theorized by Camus, is central to Safar’s journey. Repeatedly, Safar is confronted with a world that denies his desires—love, authorship, recognition. Despite this, he persists.

His reflection: “Safar didn’t know how to face life, how to be happy in life” (p.87), captures his disorientation, yet also a refusal to surrender.

Like Camus’ Sisyphus, Safar does not give in to nihilism. Though hallucinating and psychologically unraveling by the novel’s end, his internal struggle—his persistent questioning of life’s values and pursuit of self-definition—suggests a form of rebellion against absurdity.

While Safar’s existential struggle appears to affirm individual choice, one might question the effectiveness of that choice. His reliance on others to write his stories, his emotional dependency on Pairoza, and his psychological breakdown suggest that existential autonomy is perhaps more fragile than the theory suggests. Additionally, his hallucinations and eventual detachment from reality might imply a psychological descent rather than philosophical awakening. In this reading, Safar becomes a tragic figure, illustrating the cost of failed existential self-realization in a hostile world.

## Conclusion

The existential analysis of *A Candle in the Wind* reveals that Safar’s journey is emblematic of the deeper struggles faced by individuals striving to find meaning in a world governed by limitations—both intrinsic and imposed. His physical

blindness becomes a metaphor for existential isolation, while his intellectual and emotional quests reflect core existentialist concerns such as alienation, freedom, absurdity, and authenticity. Safar's desire to become a writer, despite societal and physical barriers, exemplifies Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence," as he attempts to define himself through choice and action. At the same time, his disillusionment with political corruption, societal norms, and inherited traditions highlights the absurd condition of human existence, resonating strongly with Albert Camus's vision of a meaningless world that must nevertheless be confronted with defiant creativity and personal responsibility. The novel ultimately portrays Safar's internal conflict as a microcosm of broader cultural tensions in Baloch society, where inherited norms frequently collide with the individual's quest for selfhood and existential authenticity.

This study opens up several avenues for future research. A comparative approach could investigate how existential themes are expressed in other regional or postcolonial literatures, providing insight into the universality and specificity of existential dilemmas across cultural contexts. Additionally, Safar's blindness invites deeper inquiry into the intersection of disability and existentialism, especially in how physical limitations affect ontological and psychological self-construction. Gendered perspectives on existential experience, particularly through characters like Pairoza, may further illuminate how patriarchal norms shape individual agency. Moreover, Munir Ahmed Badini's philosophical depth suggests a broader trend within Balochi literature toward integrating existential motifs, meriting a closer study of philosophical fiction in the region. Finally, the novel's closing scenes—with Safar's descent into hallucination—offer fertile ground for psycho-existential readings, bridging mental health discourse with existential literary criticism.

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