



EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY THROUGH ZEBI: A HEIDEGGERIAN READING OF TARIQ RAHMAN'S *THE BURDEN OF SISYPHUS*

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Abstract

This research explores existential philosophy in Tariq Rahman's short story The Burden of Sisyphus (2024). It focuses on the main character, Zebi, and how his repeated struggles in life reflect the ideas of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The study uses a qualitative method and analyzes the story through Heidegger's concepts such as Dasein (being-there), authenticity, and being-towards-death. The findings show that the story reflects the human condition of living with confusion, burden, and the search for meaning. This research helps us understand how Pakistani literature can express deep philosophical ideas about life and existence.

Keywords: Tariq Rahman, The Burden of Sisyphus, Existentialism, Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, Pakistani literature, Zebi, Dasein, Authenticity

Background of the Study

Existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on the individual's struggle to find meaning in life, especially in the face of death, freedom, and personal responsibility (Sartre, 2007). Martin Heidegger, one of the main existential philosophers, introduced the concept of Dasein, which means "being-there." He explained that people must live authentically by facing their true nature and accepting their mortality (Heidegger, 1962).

Writers from around the world, especially in the West, have used existential ideas to explore human suffering, freedom, and inner conflict. However, fewer studies have applied these ideas to South Asian or Pakistani literature. In Pakistani fiction, writers like Tariq Rahman have touched on similar themes, showing characters trapped in struggles and routines, questioning their existence and purpose (Rahman, 1997).

Thus, this study focuses on Rahman's short story *The Burden of Sisyphus* and uses Heidegger's philosophy to understand how the character Zebi reflects an existential crisis. It fills a gap in literary research by connecting Western existential thought with Pakistani literature.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how existential ideas, especially those of Martin Heidegger, are shown in Tariq Rahman's short story *The Burden of Sisyphus*. The study aims to understand how the main character, Zebi, represents an existential struggle, such as feeling lost, searching for meaning, and dealing with the burden of life. By using Heidegger's key



concepts like Dasein, authenticity, and being-towards-death, the research explains how Rahman's story reflects deep philosophical issues that are rarely studied in Pakistani fiction.

Literature Review

Existentialism has deeply influenced literature by highlighting themes like freedom, anxiety, and the human struggle for meaning (Sartre, 2007; Camus, 1991). Among existential philosophers, Martin Heidegger stands out for focusing on how humans relate to their being, time, and death. His concept of Dasein, or being-there, shows how people live with awareness of their mortality and the need for authentic existence (Heidegger, 1962; Inwood, 2000).

Moreover, literary scholars often apply Heidegger's ideas to Western texts (Cooper, 1999; Guignon, 2006), but few have explored Pakistani literature through this lens. Rahman's short story *The Burden of Sisyphus* presents a character named Zebi, who repeatedly struggles with inner desires and the absurdity of life. His struggle resembles the myth of Sisyphus, who endlessly rolls a stone uphill, only for it to fall again (Rahman, 1997; Camus, 1991). This aligns with Heidegger's idea of living in a cycle of inauthenticity unless one faces the truth of their existence (Heidegger, 1962).

Some local scholars have explored existential themes in Urdu fiction (Ahmad, 2010; Iqbal, 2015), but an in-depth analysis using Heidegger's concepts remains limited. This study fills that gap by using Being and Time to analyze how Zebi's character reflects existential burdens in a Pakistani context.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature as it focuses on interpreting and analyzing meanings, experiences, and philosophical concepts within a literary text. Qualitative research is suitable when the aim is to explore subjective interpretations rather than measure numerical data (Creswell, 2013).

In this connection, the data was collected through purposive sampling. The short story *The Burden of Sisyphus* by Tariq Rahman was selected because it deeply aligns with the themes of existential philosophy, particularly those found in Martin Heidegger's work. Specific lines and events in the story were purposefully chosen whenever they reflected existential ideas such as Being, temporality, thrownness, authenticity, or death.

Lastly, for data analysis, the study applied Heidegger's existential concepts as presented in his seminal work *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962). These key ideas were used as a theoretical framework to interpret the selected textual evidence, allowing a deeper understanding of the existential elements embedded within the story.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy from his book *Being and Time* (1927/1962). Heidegger explains that humans, called Dasein, are unique because they are aware of their own existence. His main ideas include authenticity (living true to oneself), inauthenticity (living by others' expectations), thrownness (being born into situations we did not choose), anxiety (feeling that life can be meaningless), and being-toward-death (accepting that life is limited). These concepts help to understand how the character in *The Burden of Sisyphus* struggles with desire, disappointment, and the search for meaning in life.

Analysis & Discussion

Tariq Rahman's *The Burden of Sisyphus* is a deceptively simple short story that portrays a young boy's persistent longing for a dagger he first sees on Eid. However, beneath its childlike surface lies a deeply philosophical and existential narrative about desire, time, disappointment,



and the search for meaning. Through the lens of Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, particularly his foundational ideas in *Being and Time* (1927), this chapter aims to unfold the existential hidden feelings of Rahman's story. Heidegger's key concepts, such as Dasein, Being-toward-death, authenticity, inauthenticity, thrownness, and anxiety, serve as valuable tools to understand the protagonist's evolving relationship with the world, with himself, and with time.

The Protagonist as Dasein

Heidegger introduces the concept of Dasein, a German term meaning "being-there," to refer to human beings not merely as biological entities but as conscious beings aware of their own existence. In Rahman's story, the young protagonist, Zebi, can be interpreted as a developing Dasein. As a child, he moves through the world with joy, excitement, and emotional intensity. But even at this early stage, he exhibits the self-awareness and capacity for meaning-making that Heidegger considers central to Dasein.

Moreover, Zebi does not simply desire the dagger as a toy; he attaches symbolic and existential meaning to it. The dagger becomes a representation of strength, beauty, power, and adulthood. His desire is not materialistic in the superficial sense, it is existential. The dagger embodies a projection of his possible self, a central aspect of Dasein, which always projects itself into possibilities.

It was a real dagger—one of those Mahsud ones people keep in their drawing rooms... Perhaps Aladdin's genie had presented him the very same one!

These lines reflect how Zebi does not merely want the dagger for play; he is imagining a whole identity around it, a classic case of Dasein projecting itself toward the future.

The Burden of Time and the Weight of Futurity

Heidegger argues that time is not just a clock-based phenomenon; it is existential. Dasein is a being that exists ahead of itself, that is, we always live with a sense of the future. Zebi's entire existence for months and years becomes oriented toward one single goal: acquiring the dagger. His being is absorbed in anticipation.

That whole year, I hoarded money... I saved thirty rupees... sold the rest. I got eighteen rupees. Here, time becomes burdensome, echoing the Sisyphus myth. Zebi rolls the stone of his desire up the hill again and again, saving, waiting, sacrificing, and yet the goal constantly moves further away: from 50 rupees to 60, then to 80, and finally to 200 rupees. This endless striving and disappointment reflects Heidegger's point that human existence is often trapped in a cycle of postponing fulfillment, a form of inauthentic temporality.

Thrownness and Everydayness

Heidegger describes "Geworfenheit" (Thrownness) as the condition of being thrown into a world not of our choosing, where we must make sense of existence with limited tools. Zebi is thrown into the economic and social world of his family, a middle-class household where money is limited, and indulgence is modest.

He has no control over the increasing price of the dagger, or the decisions of his father (who takes him to Murree), or the arrival of school fees. These uncontrollable circumstances represent his "thrown" condition. Heidegger calls the repetitive, ordinary structure of life everydayness, where people engage in daily routines that distract them from deeper questions of Being.



Zebi's initial struggle may seem mundane, just a child saving for a toy, but Rahman elevates this struggle into a metaphor for life's relentless and often fruitless striving, making Zebi's condition existentially significant.

Anxiety and the Awareness of the Abyss

In Heidegger's philosophy, "anxiety" (Angst) is not fear of something specific; it is a profound and vague sense of the meaninglessness of things. At several points in the story, Zebi experiences the collapse of meaning when his plans fail.

A fear rose up and stuck in my throat, blinding my mind. Stinging moisture welled in my eyes. This moment of emotional collapse is not childish sulking, it is a form of existential anxiety, when the object of his projected self (the dagger) is taken away, and the gap between desire and reality becomes painfully clear. The dagger, then, is no longer just a thing, it is a symbol of existential futility, echoing Sisyphus endlessly rolling the boulder uphill.

Authenticity vs. Inauthenticity

Heidegger distinguishes between authentic existence, where one confronts reality, accepts mortality, and chooses freely, and inauthentic existence, where one follows the crowd and avoids responsibility.

As Zebi grows older, the dagger transforms from a magical object into a symbol of a childish fantasy. His adult self reflects on the past with a mixture of amusement, detachment, and regret. When his own son Kamran desires the same dagger, he refuses it, not with cruelty, but with detached pragmatism:

No, darling Kamran—it's not for children," said my wife.

"Too expensive," we agreed.

This reflects inauthenticity. The narrator, now an adult, has repressed his younger self's authenticity, suppressing wonder, imagination, and longing in favor of economic rationality and social conformity. His adult Dasein is absorbed in business, cars, and contracts, disconnected from the real question of Being.

Being-Toward-Death and the Absence of Miracles

Heidegger emphasizes Being-toward-death as the most authentic mode of being. Only when we accept our mortality can we live authentically. While there is no physical death in Rahman's story, there is the death of innocence, the death of desire, and the death of imagination.

The age of miracles was no more.

This line is loaded with Heideggerian tone. It signifies a turning point, the protagonist's transition into adulthood, where desire is repressed, and miracles are replaced by market prices. The fantasy of acquiring meaning through objects ends, and what remains is the memory of a futile struggle. This is existential death, not of the body, but of the soul's freedom to imagine.

Intergenerational Repetition: Sisyphus Reborn

The final scene, where Kamran desires the same dagger, reveals the cyclical nature of existential longing. It is not just Zebi's burden, it is humanity's burden, passed down through generations. Just like Sisyphus, the stone rolls back down the hill, and a new child begins the climb. The title "The Burden of Sisyphus" is now completely justified, not just by the child's struggle, but by the repetition of longing, disappointment, and resignation that defines human existence.

Through a Heideggerian lens, "The Burden of Sisyphus" becomes a rich existential allegory. Tariq Rahman subtly illustrates the tension between being and having, childhood imagination and adult pragmatism, and authentic longing and inauthentic resignation. The dagger is not just

an object; it is a symbol of projected meaning, of desire that shapes the self but also disappoints. Like Heidegger's Dasein, Zebi exists in a world of thrownness, temporality, and anxiety, constantly navigating between possibility and limitation. Ultimately, Rahman's story becomes a meditation on the human condition, a tale where a child's failed quest becomes an adult's silent grief, and where Sisyphus rolls the stone once again, this time as a little boy named Kamran.

Findings

1. Zebi as Dasein

Zebi, though a child, exhibits the qualities of Heidegger's Dasein, a being that is aware of itself and engaged in constructing meaning. His attachment to the dagger transcends materialism; it becomes an existential projection of who he wants to become.

2. Temporal Struggle as Existential Weight

The repetitive cycle of saving and failing to attain the dagger reflects Heidegger's idea of Being-in-time, where human life is defined by anticipation, deferment, and the burdens of futurity. Zebi's efforts mirror the Sisyphean struggle against time and unattainable goals.

3. Thrownness and Limitations

Zebi's circumstances, economic, familial, and societal, highlight Heidegger's concept of thrownness (Geworfenheit), where individuals are cast into a world not of their choosing and must navigate it with finite control.

4. Moments of Existential Anxiety

Zebi experiences more than childish disappointment. His emotional breakdowns are existential Angst, moments when meaning collapses, and the absurdity of desire becomes clear.

5. Loss of Authenticity in Adulthood

The adult Zebi succumbs to inauthenticity, suppressing the wonder and passion of his younger self. His rationalization of not buying the dagger for Kamran reflects a retreat into social norms and economic logic, signaling a disconnect from authentic being.

6. Death Without Dying

The narrative contains no physical death, but several symbolic ones, of wonder, innocence, imagination, and existential openness. Heidegger's Being-toward-death is realized as a psychological and spiritual closure.

7. Cyclical Human Condition

The closing scene reveals that the existential burden is not individual but generational. Kamran inherits Zebi's longing, showing that human beings are destined to re-enact this cycle of desire and disappointment.

Conclusion

Tariq Rahman's *The Burden of Sisyphus* is not merely a story of childhood yearning but a profound existential parable. Through the theoretical lens of Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, the story reveals a deeply layered commentary on desire, time, identity, and the human condition.

Zebi is not just a boy saving for a dagger; he is a stand-in for every human being who longs for something just out of reach, projects meaning onto objects, and is inevitably let down by the realities of the world. His journey from enchanted longing to disenchanting adulthood is the story of Dasein's fall from possibility into resignation.



Furthermore, the final repetition of the cycle through Kamran suggests that the burden of Sisyphus is not personal but universal. In every human life lies a dagger, a dream, a hill, and the silent choice to keep rolling the stone. Rahman, through deceptively simple narrative choices, manages to illuminate Heideggerian truths about authenticity, temporality, and the quiet heroism of enduring disappointment.

Lastly, Zebi becomes Sisyphus, not because he is condemned, but because he chooses, again and again, to desire, to strive, and to hope, even in the face of inevitable failure. That, Heidegger might say, is where Being becomes meaningful.

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