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**The Features and Criteria of
Existentialist Novel**

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The Features and Criteria of Existentialist Novel

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Abstract

The reason for human's existence has become the most researched field in philosophy. Philosophers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Marcel, Ponty, Husserl, Beauvoir, Jaspers, have deepened the idea of "existentialism" which began with Kierkegaard. Existentialism has also been examined by its various assumptions by different writers and by different written texts such as novel, story and theatre. There are many writers in world literature who reflect existentialist thought to their works such as Sartre, Beauvoir, Dostoyevski, Kafka, Beckett In this study, the principal features of existentialist philosophy and existential novel type are described.

Keywords: Existentialism, Existentialist novel.

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It is impossible to make a single definition of existentialism. Almost every existentialist thinker offers another existentialism proposal. (Verges & Huisman, 2002: 125; MacIntyre, 2001: 10; Topçu, 2010: 28; Foulquier, 1995:33). However, there are some dominant features of the existential thinkers. As an example all existentialists to *Philosophia perennis*, have been opposed to the top of the all-time immortal philosophy and took a firm stance to the sovereignty of the mind. (Mounier, 2007:8). Descartes, when he marked the age, did not match up with existentialists with his rational approach. Pascal, contemporary of Descartes, is a perfect example of existentialist thinker leaning anxiety, sin, eternal salvation and "the eternal silence of infinite spaces" in the man's loneliness,

Two things that are common for all the existential thinkers, to change their readers, the desire to offer them a new way of life (Kierkegaard, 2010a: 35). Thinkers, can help writers to diagnose the age, but can not do much more than that (Kuçuradi, 2009: 112). The purpose of existentialism, "to change the perception of the reader's life," is the author's primary duty. As a critic Badiou (2010: 20), indicates that the sole purpose of art education is its own existence, it is important that people who are examine a work of art encounter with this existential.

It is said that Sartre's increased the reputation of existentialism with the novels more than essays he wrote (Aksoy, 1981: 314, 315). In response to the independence of literature, its indirect power of affecting human life triggers the application of existentialism for the novel. After the 1930s, the leading writers of novels dealing with the existentialism are Sartre and Beauvoir. Some critics think that some other authors also have traces of existentialism such as Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beckett and Faulkner (Bal, 2007: 30-32; Aksoy, 1981: 316, 317). In this study, unlike many critics statements, the idea of 'Camus is not an existential novelist' will be revealed. Prior to that, we should refer to the existential novels especially the characteristics of the characters of existential novels. This is because, the most important variable to differ existentialist novel from other novels is that the character is variable. The changes that can be observed on an individual who begins to question the existence, takes place visibly by the existential character of the novel. The quest of existence is a quest that requires comprehensive and depth, that can not be seen every kind of novel. Reader questions himself with the existential novel character, thinks with him and changes with him.

The characters and the issues of existentialist novel exposes the fundamental problems of existentialist philosophy with transparent examples.

The existentialist writers try their aesthetic admission and philosophical thoughts in their novels and they offer their readers to try such issues in their own inner world too. (Novack, 1966: 15).

General characteristics of the existentialist novel characters are as follows:

1 - The characters of existentialist novels are fictionalised for the universal reader: They do not feel intimate to the traditions, moral values, beliefs, and environment in which they live. With these characteristics, they are not local, they refer to universal reader.

2 - Existentialist novel characters are alone and in grief: They look at life from a distance but they act as a school for the reader with their critical attitudes. All existentialist writers in fact want to change the life of their readers, they want to encourage them to action-oriented experience (Charlesworth, 1976: 31). The loneliness of existential novel characters, is a dramatic loneliness originates from the fact that they are far apart from religion, traditions and moral values and their belief that there is nobody rather than themselves, that can respond to questions they ask to life. "The form of novel is an expression of love of being rootless or a epic of a world that has been left by the gods (Lukacs, 2007: 12)". The assumptions such as; being presented in showing off the fact that life is nothing, human being's being surrounded by the familiar responsibilities that he undertakes historical diachronically, individual's incapability of exiting the circle that the society imprisons him, makes existentialist novel characters sad in the eyes of the reader. "Reading, may offer solace and serenity that can not be found anywhere else, validating that I am not entirely alone and there are the others like me who think or feel the same. I feel myself accepted with this close relationship experience, I get rid of the fear of invisibility and the terror of being invisible (Felski, 2010: 48)".

The existential character of the novel who is supposed to be in trouble with his solitude other hand relieves his reader: When the reader encounters with the characters asking similar questions about the meaning of life, he strips from his solitude, so he experiences a catharsis (catharsis).

3- The existentialist novel characters, themselves decide who they are, because they are free: They measure their position in life, revise their relations with other people, finally they come to a decision for their existence and values: they say I am this or that. These decisions are in fact not only theirs, it is concerned with the fate of all mankind: "Man alone is not only responsible for himself but anyone else. When he is self-responsible, he will be responsible for all. When choosing myself, I choose the man". (Sartre, 1981: 322). "

Existentialism, when you go out beliefs or social values arising from growing 'hopeless, pessimistic attitude, it's understandable that this intellectual movement emphasises on man is free at his choice. Existentialism argues that, man describes his own assets himself, but also determines his own the fate himself. Existential novels' fictions are multi-layered in terms of creating sub-text. The characters' mental dynamism is ahead of their physical dynamism.

4-Existentialist novel characters have hope: They have hopes for life because; they take responsibility for shaping their own lives and they believe that the world will change in the case every person takes the responsibility for their own lives. Therefore, the existentialist novel characters are resistant to confront and solve the problems.

The founders of the existentialist novel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are both the writers who say they wrote existentialist novels. No other author claim this; Camus said that being taken into this classification discomfited him.

We may exemplify the features of the four main characteristics of existential novel that are mentioned in the axis of a novel that bears the trace of some existentialist philosophy writers:

Sartre has shaken his reader and directed him to think on the meaning of life with his amazing, realistic and unpretentious language. Antoine Roquentin the main character of *Nausea*, as an individual, observes his physical existence with foreign eyes, also observes that everyone exists as himself.

Antoine Roquentin is helpless towards higher things than acquisition of knowledge, love, aesthetic and physical existence. Everything is empty and absurd, there is no point in anything. Existence, takes place at a dizzying slowness; throughout the novel; we observe how the meaning of life is gradually decreased and how much he is alienated at Roquentin's everyday movements. Every action like eating, sleeping, reading and dressing up repeat each other.

"Now I understand. The other day at the beach, when I got a pebble on my hands I remember what I felt now better. I was deathly pale. That was such an unpleasant thing. I have no doubt that this feeling came from pebble, it passed to my hands. Yeah, yeah, itself, a kind of nausea felt at hands (Sartre, 2012: 28). "

The reader experiences the nausea with Roquentin, too. In fact Roquentin is not bothered by the nausea because losing his peace shows that he is close to the reality. Nausea's existential character finds the opportunity to redefine himself and his life with the expired, ontological relations he established with the other. Because of that so many things appear superficial and silly to him.

The existential character of Simone de Beauvoir's novel *The Blood of Others* is Helene. She tries every way to get Jean Blomart that she loves passionately and she manages. Jean, is the son of a wealthy family, but he leaves behind a life of bourgeois risking everything. This heroic attitude impressed Helene so much. Helene represents a woman's existence that is gathered with love, politics and art. Helene reflects the questioning of intellectual and modern women for the man, war, motherhood, and many new-old conceptions.

Jean, changes Helene so much. for a long time, Helene has not understood the language of anti-war intellectuals around Jean and worries for Jean that she thinks he would get into trouble. She says "It's almost like the world you have created," to Jean and she accuses him for taking so much responsibility. She implies that he can not change the world alone. Jean responds to him:

"I did not create the world. But I create it again every second with my presence. As everything happens I see them happening through my eyes (Beauvoir, 1990: 133)".

Jean refers to the ideas of Sartre in a part of the novel:

"One day I read something. Each of us are responsible for everything and to everyone. It seems to me that it's true (Beauvoir, 1990: 133)".

Although Jean adopts the principles of existentialism, the existentialist character of the novel is Helene; because she listens all of these principles from Jean, tests on herself and in the end adopts. When she was an ordinary woman she becomes a free individual.

The *Blood of Others*, is the most successful novel of Beauvoir, a novelist who believes love, womanhood, sisterhood, friendship, etc. sincerely, in a strong lyricism. Helene has understood the world with love, while she was an ordinary woman, she turned into an individual and became an intellectual woman, sensitive to the society and the world.

All the characters of Dostoevsky, questions human existence the life from outside to inside. Soviet literature is a literature struggling to express the magnitude of person for all the people (Bonnard, 2001: 64). Dostoyevsky, gets out of the socialist gaze of Soviet literature, and exceeds his era but also managed to tell the universal but the individual person shedding light to the age we live in. (Camus, 2011a: 121)

According to Freud, Dostoevsky who stands right next to Shakespeare in terms of creativity, tells the story of a forty year old man who resigns from his official job and refuses the rules of social life in 'Notes from underground' (Dostoyevsky, 2011:36) *Underground Man*, criticizes the insincere manners of everyday life. He constantly stumbles like a pendulum between good and evil, he is sometimes a self-loving man and sometimes a man who does not love himself. An evening he was invited to a dinner of his wealthy friends by his own force.

He makes his friends get annoyed with his truthful words and ruins the dinner. On the one hand he wants to live comfortably like them, but as self-contradictory he is not a man of "flattery" so he never gets a promotion and works for a low salary. However, his colleagues live in high standards, with inherited fortunes, or with high salaries they got by getting on well with their bosses. With *Notes from Underground* Dostoyevsky, reflects the pain of the individual who is in a tight situation between adopting the values accepted by society and living in a comfort and the desire for separation from the degenerating society. The *Underground Man* "There are accepted interests in society, but could not be anyone else who wants to remain out of these interests?" He thinks:

According to *underground Man*, many values in the world are imposition. Noone actually believes in them. That's because 'Other's impose these values to individuals and those values continue to live.

It they protest, even the one being protested trusts that he will not be 'marginalised', maybe the world would change, but he thinks there is not such a possibility.

The existential hero of *Notes from Underground* criticizes relentlessly all his life around from starting himself,. According to him, the human's remaining virtuous or being guilty, doesn't effect the existence of the world. The Nature processes without caring about the human. In such a world, in which ways would a person be able to find a response to how to live? The

Underground Man, experienced the state of disgust / nausea of existence so long ago from Sartre's Roquentin.

Kafka, discusses the human's the necessity of explanation and to defend himself towards "absurd rules of society", "the requirements of life, for no reason" in his novel *Case* (2011). He tries to find answers to the question "Why is a human in this world and why does he suffer?". *The Case* mocks with the loneliness of human against society and desperation against life.

K is arrested one morning. It is not said what was his crime, K helplessly surrenders. After the query, it is said that he is still being detained, but he can work as before and continue his daily life. K's uncle Leni comes. He was surprised to hear that Josef K. has a case, he becomes angry. He finds a lawyer to him. He recommends K, that he has to fight or he should return to his village instead of living in this city with this shame. This case defames the family's name.

K refuses to return to the village, because to escape means accepting the crime and. The lawyer could not defend him wisely. There is only the name of the query judge, K does not see him at all. Continuously it is said that Query Judge has a lot of work to do, so K's case is postponed everytime. K,wants to get rid of the crime as soon as possible. At last he finds a prison priest and tells his status to him. The priest tells him a story. A man goes to court every day, to learn the result of the trial, but he never enters through. In the end he asks of the guard why he can not enter through the door. The guard says this door is only for him, if only he wants he could come, if he does not want he does not have to come.

Kafka expresses that the human being is born to this world unintentionally in his novel *The Case*. People have to give an account to the query judges even they can not see their face. People are all alone in this system. They can not oppose, if they do they would get nothing. Game has already been installed. One may be punished for something that he is not responsible, he may become poor, he may be unhappy, but a human being has a memory enough to question all of these All movements in the novel *The Case* are fake, grotesque are theatrical. Kafka tells the meaning of life is not clear as it has been said in the language of community.

Virginia Woolf's existential character of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (Woolf, 2012), is Mrs. Dalloway's Clarissa who is going to give an evening party at. Clarissa goes to the mall to get some flowers for the party. On the road she encounters with Peter who has recently returned from India and she used to be in love and corresponded. She realizes that she has missed him, as a married woman she removes those thoughts away from her head and returns home. Party time comes, but guests are late. This is because of a news that a resident of London; the suicide of Septimus. Septimus is a married man who lost the meaning of life when his friends died in the army, tired of living only with drugs and eventually killed himself in his thirties. Clarissa who has been confused with seeing Peter short time ago, splitted from the party after the news of Septimus's suicide. She thins about Septimus and appreciates him.

Clarrisa, feels that she is required to review her life. She realizes that she leads a dummy, status-oriented life. She's a woman. Realizing all these does not mean anything. During that period, women are not free. She can leave her husband and go after Peter. She has no economic freedom, she can not establish her own life. Contributing to the development and the birth of feminism Woolf, becomes an existential novelist with exultant Mrs. Dalloway.

Irresistible Lightness of Being Milan Kundera's novel, is the story of Sabina's existence.

Franz, does something that he has not done for a long time: he leaves his wife for his lover Sabina. Sabina wanted Franz to leave his wife, because she has chosen to have a relationship with the flexibility that she can go at any moment. Therefore the day Franz left his wife, Sabina left Franz too. In this respect Sabina reminds Mathieu at the 'paths of freedom'.

Sabina cheats all the loved ones with the fear of attachment. When Sabina's friends accused her with betrayal she told to herself:

"Betrayal. Our father, our teacher starting from the young age, keep us saying that betrayal is the most despicable crime that can ever be thought. So what is betrayal? Betrayal is breaking down the sets and going away by oneself to the unknown. (Kundera, 2012: 28)".

Sabina, will not attach to anyone until the end of the novel. Although she may seem cruel, Sabina is consistent. The reason of not depending on a single person is not her desires, it is the fear of being hurt or being broken and staying stuck to somewhere. Against possible criticisms to her independent femaleness Sabina thinks that;

"To be a woman is not a fate that Sabina has chosen. We can not assume the thing we have not chosen as our virtue or failure (Kundera, 2012: 95). "

Sabina, refuses the characteristics attributed to her gender. She expresses that the person builds the characteristics of his character and soul originally himself.

Sabina leaves the war, her love and her Czech friends behind and goes to America. There she hopes to start a new life with a new identity. Because life is a combination of both despair and hope and you shouldn't stick on to both of them too much.

The existentialist novel character Addie Bundren of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (Faulkner, 2007), becomes sick and dies on the tenth day of his disease. Cash, Darl, Dewey Dell and Vardaman are her children from her husband Anse. Her favorite one was Jewell, her son from Whitfield whom she fell in love after the marriage and but he then left her.

Addie, is a young girl Jefferson who has no family or relative when she met her husband Anse. She gets married with Anse because there is no other option to live for her. All her life passes with having children from Anse and looking after her husband and children. Anse is an ordinary man and he does not care any sense of his wife. Entrusted himself to God, he leads dispassionate, aimless life, desiring that his children and his wife will continue their life dependent to him. In fact, after he has buried his wife, immediately he has his teeth fixed and finds a new mom to his children. Addie, takes her place in the novel as a life-

long worthless woman. Neither her lover nor her husband or her children, give the worth to her.

As *I Lay Dying* is a harsh criticism to the human behavior of ordinary people's lives that are composed of eating, getting married, being thankful, sleeping and going to work. Everyone is in a sacred commitment to his family forcedly, but this economic, and social commitment depends on a cotton yarn. Community life and neighborly relations are handled in the novel, too. Neighbors constantly evaluate each other under the spotlight in context of morality or tradition. No neighborly relationship is sincere and genuine. Addie is a woman who is aware of all of them, but she lives and dies knowing that she can not change this situation. The thing that brings her to the limit of existence is not the intellectual but the action of her love affair. She does not take up this relationship for her lover but her own. She has an affair with the man of her choice, gets pregnant and gives birth to a child and does not feel herself guilty for that. In this regard, she lives consistently. As Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Faulkner tells the women who do not live the life that they want but the life charged by the society. Addie Bundler is a lonely woman that could not have an education and get married with the one she wants because of economic reasons. Naturally, she agreed to get married with a man who is ready to take her self-defense, but the result is nothing but misery. This novel blends existentialism from a feminist perspective.

Anse, has never been aware of that, his wife Addie's gradually been moving away from, because he was insensible. Anse, goes to church regularly, sees his life as a place difficult to bear, but never questions his life. Although from time to time he complains in the end he always repents. For example, Addie explains to appropriate something:

"The winners are the urban shops owners, without sweating, subsisting on the expense of other's sweat. The winner is never the hard-working man or a farmer. Sometimes I'm confused, why do we continue this. Because there is our gift on the above, or somewhere they can not take their automobiles. Everyone will be equal there, and God will take from the rich and give the poor.(Faulkner, 2007: 90). "

Anse, sees this world temporary and transfers all the expectations to the other world.

In Faulkner's world, children surrender to the life that they raise sharp questions when they grow up.

William Faulkner, is a writer who has been praised by Sartre. According to Sartre, Faulkner delivers the pains of existence to the provinces (Leha, 1973: 35). In the novel *Nausea* Sartre's uses the term "existentialism", while Faulkner explains the characters "unexistentialist". The author in all of his novels gives place to the adventure of people who are surrounded by the rules of society and tradition but finding nothing but misery in their lifetimes.

The characteristics of the characters of Sartre, Beauvoir, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Woolf, and Kundera's novels s attributes overlap with perspective of existentialist philosophy. However, Albert Camus is not an existentialist novelist who never accepts that he is existential, although he is often

mentioned in the existentialist literature. We can explain its reason with the characters and novel perspectives of Camus' novels such as *Stranger*, *The Fall* and *The Plague*:

In *The Stranger* (Camus, 2011a) novel, Mersault, shoots two Arabs for no reason. He did not feel sorry for the death of his mother and he was not sad that he was in jail. However, an existential denies life, but also queries what happened to him; such as K in *The Case* and Sabina in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Existential character is interested in his own choices and is extremely sensitive to what is happening around. He does not allow the other to dominate him and he opposes on the other's oppression. Mersault does not believe in God so he does not give value to life. Mersault, is not in an effort to contribute to the life. However, existentialism requires to contribute the life with a respect of life and a responsibility of living as an individual.

Camus, by implying that atheism pushes people into useless stuff and implicates that people do not believe in God like Mersault can easily shoot two men because people who do not believe in God are not afraid of punishment:

"... Mersault argues with the priest who comes into his cell. He was an atheist. Thus, the concepts such as regret or surrender does not concern him. He is sorry that he is going to die, but that is all (...) He assaults the Priest. He is not cold-blooded. More than that he seems angry. His atheism is almost as an expression of his anger to the absence of God, that point will remain important for Camus in the following years (Gülsoy, 2011). "

According to Camus the absence of God makes the people living in the world vicious, so only one case of existentialist philosophy is handled In *The Stranger*. It is that 'the life is hung by a thread and man leads his life randomly. The two Arab who are killed at a time and place that they have never predicted represents this state. Camus, as shown not only overthrows the atheistic existentialism, and also rejects to compliment my life as religious existentialists.

The novel *The Plague* (Camus, 2012), begins with plague in the city of Oran. The city is quarantined. Dr. Rieux is the only one who can save the people there. While struggling with the plague Dr. Rieux himself could not entirely get rid of it; his all life becomes completely plague after the outbreak. In *The Plague* people appear as a poor asset. In the meaning world of Camus he portrays that people undergo natural disasters, deaths, diseases and plague in this world.

People are helpless in the face of these disasters. Death usually comes to people as a result of chance, they are always caught unprepared. Camus disobeys this situation. If the life starts and ends coincidentally, then it has no value. So why does Dr. Rieux attempt to defeat the disease? Because resistance is an impulsive state. The human being is survival oriented. Dr. Rieux fights against the plague not because he believes in life, just because he does not know how to live except for treating patients and he has no choice other than living.

Dr. Rieux, does not believe in God but his denial of God is not as the denial of an existansialist. Existentialists do not get crossed with the world that

they think there is no God, they try to make it sensible again. They try to rebuild ethics, values. Whereas DR. Rieux lives as well Mersault as if he is exiled. Camus, does not believe that existentialism can change the world. No matter what the human being does ,he surrenders to the evil and accepts his fate. The life of the human being is surrounded by, rules, laws and obsessions, just as the impossibility of getting rid of the plague.

There are references to the concept of the absurd in his novel *The Fall* (Camus, 2006), which he handled in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 2011b). The main character of the novel judge Clamence is an absurd man. He is strange and sometimes frightening, however, more than it he is sincere and sometimes it reaches to madness. The reader likes him and at the same time hates him. It sometimes surprises the reader to find his thoughts brutal which are said heartily. In Clamence's thoughts human beings' dark sides and the purest sides can be seen side by side. Clamence is not an existential character. Instead of questioning how does he live, he continues the satisfaction of living with thoughts full of contradictions. It is thought-provoking that he is a judge. The world is ruled by the people with conflicting ideas and the justice is provided by them.

Camus' characters do not fit the the general structure of the existentialist novel characters. Therefore, it is not right to put Camus into the classification of ' existentialist novel authors.

Conclusion

The characters of the existentialist novel, have common characteristics and the stance of life. These are summarized in the following items. They pose questions to life, take the responsibility of surviving, they give effort to fill the gaps they see in life, that they have questioned. They criticize the norms, traditions and values in life, they are peaceful and hopeful; they are sad to see the challenges and to take the responsibility for changing the life and, but not hopeless and selfish. They think that by taking the responsibility of their own environment, they take the responsibility of all the world.

Existential book characters are fictionalised to provide the reader to question their own lives. Therefore, the existentialist novels deliberately take the task of changing readers.

Albert Camus, although have contributed the existentialist philosophy, his novels do not contain any trace of this philosophy. According to Camus's characters, life is meaningless and there is no need to deal with it. There is an imbalance between the individual and the society. It is impossible to ensure this balance in the context of freedom. Community always makes its members unhappy. People should remain as honest as possible in the world, but it is unknown if it will work out or not.

Though there are similarities between the characters of Camus and existential characters in the sense of inquiring the life and taking the the responsibility of living in their hands, they move away from existentialism as

they suppose the meaninglessness of life is their destiny and they are far to give new meanings to the ridiculousness of life.

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