
CONFRONTING THE ABSURD: AN EXISTENTIAL READING OF CHRISTY LEFTERI'S *THE BEEKEEPER OF ALEPPO*

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ABSTRACT

This study of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (Lefteri, 2019) offers a compelling exploration of existential themes. By examining aspects such as absurdity, nothingness, meaning construction, choice, responsibility, and authenticity, this paper highlights how the characters navigate their life in Syria and derive meaning from chaos. Drawing on the existentialist ideas of philosophers like Sartre and Camus, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how individuals survive in the face of overwhelming adversity. Additionally, it emphasizes the relevance of existential philosophy in modern literature, providing a critical analysis of the human condition amid war and destruction, and illustrating the resilience of the human spirit in confronting existential crises.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Absurdity, Nakba, Syrian war, Christy Lefteri*

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1. Introduction

Syria has a long history of dictatorships and oppressive regimes after its independence in 1946. In 1970, an Air Force Commander and then Minister of Defense Hafez al-Assad, executed a bloodless coup and assumed power which allowed him to rule Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000. Following his passing, his son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him making Syrians initially hopeful that Bashar would break from his father's authoritarian rule. However, he adopted the dictatorial policies, leading to broken promises of reform and a regime characterised by pervasive surveillance, repression and curbing dissent. Under the Assad government, opposition was met with fear of imprisonment, torture, or death. A pivotal moment came when a group of teenagers in *Daraa* were imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated for anti-regime graffiti, sparking widespread protests. This rapidly escalated into a full-scale revolt, eventually igniting the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The conflict devastated major cities, including Aleppo and Damascus, reducing infrastructures to rubble and destroying ancient landmarks. The war resulted in massive loss of life and the displacement of millions (Rehman, 2015; Sharma, 2023). As homes were destroyed and communities disbanded, feelings of alienation and uncertainty grew, forcing Syrians to re-evaluate their values in a world marked by profound hardships (Arthur, 2023).

1.1. Syrian Literature in English

War literature often portrays the psychological trauma and suffering endured during times of conflict. Arshad et al.'s study on Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017) uses Cathy Caruth's (1996) trauma theory to analyse the experiences of two Palestinian women from different generations, linked by shared suffering. The study emphasizes the often-overlooked voices of Palestinian women and draws parallels with South Asian women facing similar cultural constraints, contributing to broader discussions on gender, trauma, and resilience. Similarly, Miri (2021) examines trauma in Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), focusing on the generational impact of the 1948 Nakba. The research highlights how collective trauma shape identity across generations and explores the potential for healing through resilience and memory. Both studies underscore the importance of representing marginalised voices in literature and contribute to the discourse on trauma, identity, and justice in conflict-affected communities.

Syrian authors like Atia Abawi have made significant contributions to literary works that reflect the harsh realities of their country both before and after the 2011 civil war. However, many of these fictional works by local authors have remained primarily within a specific Arab context, struggling to reach a wider international audience. In contrast, Western writers, such as Christy Lefteri with *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019), have written novels centered on the Syrian war and its aftermath. Lefteri was born in 1980 in Cyprus and lived as a refugee in London when her parents fled from their country in order to save their lives. Her famous works include *A Watermelon* (2010), *Songbirds* (2021), and *The Book of Fire* (2023) but her most acclaimed work is *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) which earned an Aspen Words Literary Prize in 2020 and is considered as a *Sunday Times* bestseller novel.

Lefteri through her captivating prose writing style provides an extensive insight into the unstable lives of people who are facing war and enduring in a war-torn environment. She stays away from needless complexities so that the emotional impact of her story writing can flow naturally (Walsh, 2020). Her writing often blends the harsh realities of existence with the quiet frequently missed moments of resiliency and beauty. In order to describe the spirit of one's perseverance, Lefteri often sees how people find resilience in situations of extreme adversity. Thereby, she is a prominent voice for those who have suffered displacement in war (Nunziata, 2020).

The Beekeeper of Aleppo shows the struggle of a Syrian couple Nuri and Afra who fled war in order to save their lives. Their meaningful and stable lives were destroyed and the war threw them into the life full of chaos and indifference. Nuri was a beekeeper before the war he had a family but the demolished his purposeful life. After the death of his son, he lost his identity being a refugee, on the other hand Afra's struggle forced her to question her existential existence as she became blind. Nuri and Afra escaped from their country in order to save their lives but their journey was perilous and throughout their travelling they faced immense alienation. They have to travel through new pathways which were unfamiliar to them, facing a lot of aloofness which leads them to question their meaning of life.

1.2. Research Questions

This descriptive qualitative research intends to explore the following questions

- How is the theme of absurdity and nothingness amidst Syrian war depicted in the novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*?
- How do existentialist theories of Sartre and Camus help us understand the process of meaning construction for characters in the war-torn environment of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*?
- How do the key characters of the novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* reflect the existential themes of choice and responsibility in an environment of displacement and trauma?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The twentieth-century philosophical movement known as existentialism started in France and gained popularity following World War II. The earliest existentialists who are associated with this intellectual movement include Friedrich Nietzsche and religious philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. In the 20th century, Jean Paul Sartre (2007) and Albert Camus (1955) are credited for drawing a huge amount of attention from across the globe to existentialism. Existentialism gained popularity as people's awareness of their fear of existence grew due to world wars, bloodshed and thousands of deaths, making people wonder about the purpose and essence of their own lives. Even while existentialist had many distinct meanings, its main points of emphasis were man and his relationship to God, the purpose of human being, and the role that existence plays.

By the mid-1800s, the question of human identity began to take on a new and more radical form: man, it was argued, had become estranged from himself and needed to rediscover his purpose and identity. While some believed that a return to Christianity was essential for European man to reconnect with the religious core of the self, Kierkegaard

proposed a more radical return—one that transcended organized Christianity and its institutions, calling for a return to the faith of the early Christian followers (Barrett, 1958). Kierkegaard's existentialism, often described as Christian existentialism, emphasizes faith and the subjectivity of truth, independent of scientific reasoning or logic.

Nietzsche famously proclaimed "God is dead," signaling the collapse of traditional faith in a divine being that directs human existence. With this shift, individuals are left with the profound responsibility of defining their own lives, making personal choices, and taking decisive action. They must create authentic lives for themselves, avoiding the trap of losing their identities in the crowd and escaping from the reality of existence (Mallah, 2016). Nietzsche's declaration implies that the conventional belief in a higher power guiding human existence no longer holds, leaving individuals to confront the task of self-definition and to live fully by embracing their true identities rather than conforming to the majority.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, especially as articulated in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (2007) and *Being and Nothingness* (1992), serves as a crucial lens through which to explore the characters in Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019). With his profound statement "existence precedes essence", Sartre has an arduous impact in the theory of existentialism. Sartre's dictum underscores a radical departure from traditional views of human purpose, emphasizing that identity is not preordained, but forged through individual choices. In his seminal lecture *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946), he illustrates that humans are inherently different from objects like knives because in their lives there is no inherent meaning; one has to give their existence meaning by their own actions and choices. In Sartre's view, in a universe devoid of God, each human being must establish their own meaning for life because there is no predetermined essence. This concept emphasizes the need for people to take control of their own lives and highlights the great freedom and duty that come with being human. God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality (Sartre, 1992). Jean-Paul Sartre, a central figure in existentialist philosophy, offers key concepts that provide a rich framework for understanding the characters in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019). Sartre's existentialism, particularly as articulated in his 1946 essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*, presents a radical view of human freedom and responsibility that directly informs the lives and choices of the novel's protagonists. Central to Sartre's philosophy is the idea that "existence precedes essence," which posits that individuals are not born with an inherent purpose or predetermined nature; rather, they exist first and define themselves through their choices, actions, and experiences. This emphasis on freedom and personal responsibility aligns with the journeys of Lefteri's characters, who must confront and navigate the meaninglessness imposed by war and destruction.

Sartre further distinguishes between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself* in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which explores the relationship between consciousness and existence. *Being-in-itself* refers to the static, unconscious existence of objects and beings that lack the capacity to shape or alter their reality. In contrast, *being-for-itself* pertains to self-conscious individuals who possess the freedom to make choices and take responsibility for their actions, thus creating meaning in an otherwise indifferent world. This distinction is

particularly relevant in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, as characters such as Nuri and Afra are depicted as individuals struggling to transcend their existential void and engage with their freedom to define themselves and their futures amidst the devastation of war.

This view is crucial in the analysis of Lefteri's characters, who, like Sartre's philosophical subjects, must navigate the trauma of war and loss to rebuild their sense of self. They are confronted with the existential responsibility of constructing meaning in a world that offers no inherent purpose, reflecting Sartre's assertion that human beings are condemned to be free and responsible for defining their own existence. In doing so, the novel offers a poignant exploration of the tension between despair and the possibility of existential transformation through choice, reflecting the enduring relevance of Sartre's ideas in contemporary literary contexts.

In Sartre's view, freedom is both a gift and a burden. The notion of *being-for-itself* contrasts with *being-in-itself*, where the former describes conscious beings capable of making choices and taking responsibility for their actions, while the latter refers to beings that are mere objects, unable to influence their circumstances. This existential distinction is vital in understanding the characters in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, as Nuri and Afra are forced to confront the absurdity of their situation and the overwhelming weight of responsibility for shaping their future in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. They, like Sartre's *being-for-itself*, must grapple with their capacity for choice and the implications of their decisions, even in a world that offers no inherent meaning or comfort.

Sartre's existentialist framework suggests that meaning in life is not inherent but must be actively constructed through human agency. This insight is crucial to understanding the survival and psychological resilience of Lefteri's protagonists, who, in the aftermath of war, must create purpose in a world defined by loss, chaos, and fragmentation. Sartre's insistence on the primacy of individual choice and personal responsibility resonates strongly in the novel's depiction of characters who must rebuild their lives from the ruins of their former selves, choosing to act in ways that reflect their enduring humanity.

By applying Sartre's ideas to *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, this study argues that the characters' journey is a reflection of Sartrean existentialism, where meaning is not given, but must be chosen and acted upon. In doing so, the novel illustrates the tension between despair and the possibility of self-actualization, offering a nuanced exploration of how freedom and choice can serve as means of transcendence in the aftermath of trauma. Through this lens, the characters' struggle to reconstruct meaning in their fractured lives provides a poignant reflection of Sartre's existentialist ideals in a contemporary literary context. It is thus up to each individual to determine how their own destiny will be shaped (Mirkhan, 2022).

War and brutality characterised the tough period of history that Jean-Paul Sartre lived through. He was taken a prisoner of war for ten months after being enlisted in the army during World War II. His perspective was drastically altered by these encounters. Sartre concentrated more on individuality prior to the war. But following his imprisonment, he developed a greater concern for society and the welfare of humanity. Like a soldier utilising a weapon in combat, he begun using his writing as a tool to aid those in need. In his

existentialist philosophy, Sartre placed a strong emphasis on the worth and significance of every individual. He established the notion that humans have a special and important function because of his deep belief in this “Existence precedes essence” which means man is himself responsible for creating meaning around him (Cheng, 2023).

French-Algerian existential philosopher Albert Camus frequently addressed the meaning of existence in an indifferent world. Camus came to view life as a battle against a world because of his difficult upbringing and battle with tuberculosis. He perceived the world as devoid of clear guidance. He thought that although the world is silent and indifferent to, the natural desire of human for happiness and understanding. He referred to this conflict as the “absurd,” which is the conflict between our quest for purpose and the absence of it in the world. Through his personal suffering, Camus gained a profound understanding of this and utilised it to illuminate how we might confront this absurdity. His seminal work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) elaborates his notion of absurdity as man standing face to face with the irrational. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and “the world's indifferent silence” (1942). He argues people are inherently drawn to pleasure, meaning, and purpose. There is a sense of absurdity because the universe fails to provide us any intrinsic meaning or solutions to our existential queries. The realisation of man's temporality of death, which exposes the meaninglessness of human life, the shock caused by realising the ultimate meaninglessness of daily existence, or any combination of these factors can give rise to the feeling of the absurd.

There is a sense of absurdity in the mismatch between our desires and the world's inaction. Further he states we continually hope for things that might or might not happen, which makes our lives frequently filled with a sense of hopelessness. This hope serves as a diversion from the harsh fact that the universe doesn't care about our wants or well-being. Moreover, adhering to hope or looking for a deeper meaning is similar to deceiving oneself to avoid facing reality. This, for him, is an instance of “philosophical suicide,” in which we adhere to delusions of hope and escape reality (Khachiche, 2021).

Camus' concepts of absurdity and nothingness, introduced in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), form the basis of this existentialist study. These ideas assert that humans must create meaning in an indifferent, inherently meaningless world. Camus defines absurdity as the clash between the human need for meaning and the universe's lack of response, leading to a confrontation with life's inherent meaninglessness (1942). Rather than fostering hopelessness, this recognition of absurdity encourages rebellion and the acceptance of a purposeless existence. By embracing absurdity, individuals can live fully and authentically despite the lack of inherent meaning.

Nothingness, which emerges from rejecting traditional sources of meaning like religion, intensifies the feeling of absurdity. This emptiness forces individuals to confront the lack of meaning in their lives. According to Camus, while the universe is silent and indifferent, humans must still strive to create meaning and to avoid chaos of existence, even if it remains unattainable. Central to Camus' existentialist philosophy is the idea that human beings, in the face of an indifferent and inherently meaningless universe, are compelled to

create their own meaning. Absurdity arises from the tension between the human desire for significance and the universe's irrational indifference. This confrontation with meaninglessness, as Camus argues, does not lead to nihilism, but rather to a form of insurrection—a refusal to succumb to despair despite the absence of inherent purpose (Camus, 1942).

In this context, absurdity and nothingness are interlinked. Nothingness, which emerges when individuals reject conventional sources of meaning such as religion or ideology, amplifies the experience of absurdity. It is not simply a void, but a confrontational space in which individuals are compelled to grapple with the realization that meaning is unattainable. For Camus, the human condition is marked by the silent, uncaring universe that demands human effort to survive and create meaning, even in the absence of ultimate fulfillment. The absurd, then, is born from the persistent human striving for certainty and purpose in an indifferent cosmos, a paradox encapsulated in Camus' statement: "I am filled with a desire for clarity and meaning within a world and condition that offers neither" (1955).

3. Textual Analysis

3.1. Absurdity and Nothingness

This study examines the key existential concepts of Absurdity and Nothingness, which Albert Camus explores in his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this work, Camus illustrates the futility of human existence through the myth of Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to endlessly roll a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back down each time. Camus uses this metaphor to describe the human condition, where individuals search for meaning and purpose, only to face the opposite—an absurd reality. According to Camus, the absurd arises when humans strive to understand life, only to encounter an unreasonable, illogical universe. The term "absurd" itself originates from the Latin *absurdus*, meaning unreasonable, highlighting the inherent irrationality of existence (Camus, 1942).

In parallel, the concept of Nothingness pertains to a life devoid of purpose, leading to feelings of despair, emptiness, and futility. Confronting Nothingness often engenders a profound sense of hopelessness, as individuals grapple with the void and meaninglessness of their existence.

3.1.1. Nuri and Mustafa

Nuri refers to the situation as getting "bad" but he wants to "continue living" like they were living before (p. 16) despite knowing the destruction. When the situation gets worst and there was an attack on Nuri's field of bees, he described the situation after the attack on his bee apiary like the bees had been 'died' and the whole apiary was 'black'. He vowed that he will not forget that 'silence' the deep and 'never-ending' silence (p. 18). The destruction of the field of Nuri's apiary illustrates the meaninglessness and that is now hovering over the head of Nuri after the loss of his profession in his life he has nothing left and suddenly encountered a feeling of absurdity that is related to the idea of Camus given in *The Myth of Sisyphus* "[a]t any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face" (1942) this reflects that the human existence can experience absurdity at any time to which the universe is indifferent. All this destruction inculcated the feelings of emptiness and

nothingness in Nuri as his feelings are described with 'emptiness' and a 'quiet nothingness' every time when he tried to "inhale" (p. 18). It shows whenever Nuri recalled that apocalypse of apary the demolition plunged him into the state of emptiness and purposelessness leading him to question his existence and its purpose like the question of 'why' given in an essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942) in which he explicates the repetitive cycle of the performing the tasks on daily basis but the question 'why' sometimes strike the mind of a person that keeps the person conscious to find the purpose in their lives so the 'why' discloses the profound question of existence.

Moreover, one of Nuri's closest friends and cousins, Mustafa, discovered the lifeless body of his son. Overcome with grief, he wrote "My beautiful boy" next to his son's name and, in an attempt to explain the cause of his death, inscribed the phrase "this broken world" on a piece of paper (p. 21). Mustafa's words encapsulate the senseless violence of the world during the war time it lacks the rationality because the innocent people were losing their lives without any reason. The irrationality of the world is also depicted in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942) which illustrates that man is facing 'irrationality' man has some desires but the irrational world has an 'unreasonable' response towards man's longing of being happy. Amidst all this chaos there was no ray of hope for the Syrian people the emptiness and a dark ray of hopelessness was lurking everywhere and when Mustafa had fled the Syria during his refugee journey, he wrote an email to Nuri and described his feelings as he may find some 'hope' but he also knows that if he will go to another side of the world, he will still find 'darkness' there (p. 29). This illustrates that the people who were facing that war situation were becoming hollow from inside without a ray of hope. The 'darkness' on the other side of the world aligns with Camus' idea that despite finding the meaning in the world man will encounter an unyielding universe that will give no response to it only 'an unreasonable silence' (1942). Further, in reply to Mustafa's email, Nuri shared his inner feelings admitting the 'darkness inside me' (p. 29) referring to the chaos about his own existence as he is continuously fighting with the inner emptiness. Camus (1942) illustrates the realisation of being absurd always start from the inner self.

The city of Aleppo is portrayed as completely destroyed, with its structure reduced to rubble with "houses described as the 'carcasses' if you could see that, you would start crying" (p. 31). During the war, the houses were silent, with no 'echo' of 'life' just like the dead bodies empty of their souls (p.33). The phrase "the silence was hollow" captures the overwhelming 'nothingness' the people endured during the war, having lost both their homes and their sense of self. This imagery not only conveys the desolation of empty homes but also illustrates the existential conflict, with the hollow silence embodying the void in their lives.

Nuri then expressed his despair after the death of his son Sami in an explosion by labelling the world around him as so fragile that it could 'break' at any time. The house could 'crumble' and 'fell apart' (p. 39). Nuri's words about Sami's world where everything could break depict the existential realisation of life where everything is fragile and reflects the unpredictable world where expectations and hopes can be shatter at any time. In the words of Camus, it means the "absurdity can strike the face of man at any anytime" (1942). Further in

the text, Nuri's story about the city of Brass, earlier made of precious jewels but currently "empty... and "like useless dust" echoes the same sentiments (p. 96).

After that Nuri and Afra somehow managed to escape from their own war-torn country Syria and undergo a perilous journey to England via Turkey. In an email to Mustafa Nuri believes he is unwell and he has "no dreams left" (p. 76) referring to existential crisis which he was facing at that time. While the protagonist of *The Fall* Jean-Baptiste Clamence has accepted the emptiness of life with no meaning in it due to having lost everything but Nuri was still struggling to grapple with his loss of the dreams (Camus, 56). Nuri again shared another experience when he was travelling on a ship with other refugees as he heard that Muhammad question, "What if they fall into the water? Will they be lost to the ocean, as everything else is?" He recalled and heard Sami's voice in his ears, "Houses don't break down like these ones do, collapsing so easily". Nuri got overwhelmed by the depth of these two questions leading to deafening silence (p. 109).

Next, Nuri, in another email to Mustafa, exhibits the loss of war writing 'this war ripped away our 'dreams and work' making them 'homeless'. He postulates that he is not sure whether he would be able to live this life, expressing himself as being 'dead inside' (p. 115). When Nuri argues that this war has ripped away 'our work' that is the indication of their purpose in their lives which has been lost due to this war and the phrase that the war has deprived us from 'our sons' shows the great grief and irreplaceable loss of someone who was very closed to their heart and this loss is not fixable.

3.1.2. Afra

Afra is the wife of Nuri who lost her vision and seven years old son Sami in a bomb explosion. The boy was playing in the garden in front of the house and Afra was watching him from the window. Her loss diminished the purpose and joy in her life, leaving "nothing to smile" (p. 31) that once was the part of her existence and she, now, has to face the absurdity of life.

When soldiers attacked Nuri's house, he and Afra hid inside a blackhole in their backyard. Nuri referred to her 'soft breathing' and peaceful sleep in the blackhole as it was the safest place for her where her 'inner darkness' met the 'outer darkness' (p .37). Afra's life had some meaning and purpose before the war that was rooted in her family and her art work but the war stripped away and replaced her familiar world with a world full of estrangement. It became unrecognisable for her as she was overwhelmed with chaos and uncertainty struggling to accept the absurdity striking on her face and the chaos in the life. As Camus (1942) purports, the universe which is deprived of 'illusions and 'lights' so the man feels like a stranger in that world. The black hole, which represents Afra's encounter with life's absurdity, is where her "inner darkness" and the "outer darkness" merged as a reflection of the intense sorrow, loss, and pain she has carried inside of her, particularly since losing her son and become blind to the outside world. Afra's time while hiding in the black hole serves as a potent metaphor for this conflict of inner and external worlds where both forms of darkness merge with each other.

Nuri shared his dark feelings, whilst still in the blackhole, over getting Afra out of misery by ‘breaking’ his wife’s neck and providing her the peace she wanted (p. 38). It illustrates that the life they were having at that time during the time off war was so miserable and purposeless that the only option Nuri had was to take her life. This idea resonates with the idea of suicide given in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus, 1942) demonstrating that there is only one ‘philosophical’ solution and that is ‘suicide’. Camus (1942) explains that most of the people live in a meaningless world when encounter absurdity and nothingness so they believe that to end their lives is the only solution to get rid of their absurd life same goes with Nuri’s his question whether to kill his wife in order to end her miseries highlights a profound sense of despair and nothingness; taking her life seems easier than to continue living in that absurd world. In *Happy Death* (Camus, 2012) there is line which illustrates the same meaning that sometimes suicide becomes more easier than to continue living in world full of misty chaos. The same idea can also be seen in the play *The Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1952) when Estragon asks Vladimir “what about hanging ourself?” depicting their deep despair and meaninglessness as an escape from the worldly sufferings.

3.2. The Role of Choice and Finding Meaning

The choice of making actions plays a vital role into the lives of those individuals who want to create meaning in their lives despite the chaos as Sartre views in *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946) that humans are born free and they are responsible of creating their own meanings in their lives. The characters of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* put a little effort to reconstruct their own meaning in life by the role of choices they make in order to come out of that chaos. As Nuri, Afra and Mustafa represent the larger human struggle against absurdity and nothingness in a world that doesn't appear to care about their pain. The story elucidates their tenacity and the decisions they make in their quest for purpose among chaos by means of their psychological. Nuri expressed the situation of war in Syria as “life was normal and they locked their doubts in the deep dark areas of their minds and they kept on making future plans” (p. 17). As in *Existentialism is Humanism* (Sartre, 1946) the idea of “man’s freedom” is depicted that man is forced to be free when he is thrown to this world now, he is responsible for whatever he does; Similarly, Nuri and Mustafa were making their future plans for their survival if the situation would get worsen and get out of control.

Mustafa’s email to Nuri states “where there are bees, there are flowers and wherever there are flowers there is no life and hope” (p. 25) – his words embody construction of hope and construction of meaning in life even in the worst situations is possible and that only depends on the choices and actions of an individual.

3.3. Absurdity and Nothingness

Nuri and Afra represent an existential struggle against absurdity. Nuri had the knowledge that things would get worse as the war attacks his country, yet he was persistent about them going about their daily lives as if nothing has changed. This reaction to the spreading chaos is consistent with the idea of absurdity that Camus purports in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) arguing that absurdity results from people carrying on with their quest for meaning and purpose in an apparently irrational and uncaring universe. Nuri’s determination

to continue living a normal life irrespective of the terrible reality of war serves as an example of how difficult it is for people to find meaning in a world that frequently seems to be devoid of it. His daily activities and attempts to keep his life in order can be interpreted as an illustration for Sisyphus' never-ending battle, emphasizing the sense of hopelessness and futility that frequently accompanies human. Nuri's blindness is an attempt to distance her from the outside world and to avoid dealing with the turmoil and senselessness which the war has caused into their life. Afra, like Nuri, carries on with her daily activities while being blind, symbolising the existential struggle to find purpose in a world when warfare has totally disrupted the society.

Mustafa also experienced the absurdity in his life in the aftermath of the war. Mustafa is left to deal with the senselessness of the violence and the absurdity of his surroundings after the tragic death of his son during the conflict. For Mustafa, losing his son is a turning moment because it makes him realise how absurd it is that disastrous events like this can happen in the world without any rationale or reason. Mustafa shares his grief with Nuri to search for hope in what seems to be a hopeless world. He shares that sometimes he thinks if he continues to move forward, he could ultimately find a little hope, but he is also aware of the fact that the darkness is waiting for him everywhere this shows extreme despair. This expression of helplessness and awareness that he will always be unable to leave the darkness behind him is an effective depiction of the absurd situation that Camus describes. Camus contends that the universe is indifferent to human distress, and that it might often seem futile to continue looking for purpose in such a world. The journey that Mustafa takes through the chaos and his ultimate escape from Syria are the visible manifestation of his inner battle with absurdity. In addition to escaping actual danger, he is fighting the existential despair that has overtaken him as he runs from the devastation of war. But Mustafa discovers that the darkness which is residing inside him is unavoidable despite his best efforts to escape from it. This insight is consistent with Camus' notion that people must make a decision about how to deal with absurdity either by accepting or giving up in despair.

Nuri struggles more and more as the story proceeds with his feelings of nothingness. After the death of his son Sami in a bomb explosion, Nuri begins to reflect on the uncertain fragility of life. This particular instance is a potent illustration of Camus' theory, which holds that life is fundamentally unstable and unpredictable. Camus argues that the absurdity of existence might strike at any time, reminding us that there is no obvious explanation or warning for the unexpected change or the end of our lives. This realisation increases Nuri's sense of hopelessness by making the world appear even more chaotic and pointless. Nuri's encounters with Muhammad, a little child he meets while travelling as a refugee, serve to emphasise his desperate state even more. Muhammad asks Nuri if they would fall into the water and Nuri notices that Muhammad's question and the one his own son had asked prior to the war are quite similar. Nuri falls silent at this realisation, struggling to accept that no matter how much they try to avoid it, they are all headed towards the same absurd end. He is faced with the possibility that their attempts to flee the war and find shelter may be in vain,

which only serves to confirm the sense of futility and hopelessness that Camus discusses throughout his philosophy.

3.3.1. Mnemonics

Throughout the novel numerous places and things are used to symbolize absurdity and nothingness. Nuri discovers the key, which can no longer open a door because the war has destroyed all the houses and buildings, among the remains of a demolished buildings and houses is one example of such a symbol. The key symbolises the pointless or worthless effort of trying to find purpose in a world destroyed by war. Like the struggle of Sisyphus, it is an effective symbol for the futility of holding to something that is no more.

Aleppo itself, which is depicted as being turned to “carcasses” of buildings, lifeless, and resounding with empty silence, is another important metaphor. This illustration captures the existential devastation after the war that accompanies the war's physical damage as well. The vibrant city that has been transformed into a cemetery of dreams and memories captures the overwhelming sensation of emptiness that Nuri and Afra feel as they make their way through the remnants of their past life.

The apiary serves as a moving metaphor for nothingness and emptiness, representing the immense loss Nuri feels as the war tears apart his existence. The apiary, which was once a place of life, production, and purpose, is abandoned following the end of Nuri's beekeeping business. The sight of the burned, destroyed hives and the death of his bees represent the total destruction of everything that formerly gave Nuri's life purpose. After losing his bees, Nuri talks of a never-ending silence that is more than just a real lack of sound; rather, it is a symbolic emptiness that engulfed his life. This silence, echoes and depicts the nothingness in Nuri's world that has been destroyed. The apiary, which was once bustling with life, now serves as a sobering symbol of the worthlessness of Nuri's efforts to maintain meaning in a world deprived of it, highlighting the severe effects of loss and the inevitable presence of emptiness in his life.

The sea appears as a potent symbol of folly and emptiness in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, mirroring the dangerous and unpredictable voyage that Nuri and Afra must embark. The expanse of the water stands in for the unknown, an emptiness that appears to them forever and offers neither a way out nor any assurance of safety. The sea is a symbol for their existential doubt as they are ready to cross it a line separating their unsure past from their uncertain future. The protagonists' internal conflict and the sense of absurdity that surrounds their existence are mirrored in the sea's dark, limitless depths. As a literal and metaphorical obstacle in their quest for a fresh start, the sea thus represents the absurdity and nothingness that characterize their existence.

3.4. The Role of Choice in Creating Meaning

Despite the extreme turmoil and destruction caused by war, the decisions taken by the characters in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* are crucial in assisting them in creating a sense of purpose in their lives. The existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, as presented in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), which illustrates that people are born free who shape their own lives by taking their own decisions, aligns with this theme. According to Sartre,

people are forced to be free, which means that regardless of the situation they find themselves in, they must use that freedom by making decisions that define who they are and give their life purpose. Nuri, Mustafa, and other characters in the novel demonstrate this existential freedom by making purposeful decisions to give their lives meaning despite suffering trauma, loss, and displacement.

In an email to Nuri, Mustafa states bees and flowers as emblems of hope. This is one of the main instances in the novel where the topic of responsibility and choice is shown. Mustafa's words align with the idea given by Sartre that meaning is not inherent rather it is something which individuals can create by his own choice of doing actions. With the bees and flowers as symbols for starting afresh, Mustafa illustrates the idea that life and hope are always obtainable if one chooses to search for them. This illustrates the existentialist notion that, even in moments of apparent hopelessness, individuals have the ability to create their own lives through the decisions they make.

5.3.3 Being for itself and Authenticity:

The significance of choice in creating purpose in life is further emphasized in Nuri's email to Mustafa. Nuri knows that he has a long journey ahead of him, Nuri declares that he won't give up until he meets Mustafa. Nuri wanted to live a life that was meaningful and worthwhile by holding onto hope despite the incomprehensible physical and emotional suffering that he and Afra endure on their journey from Syria to England. His will to continue moving forward reflects Sartre's stance of radical freedom, even in a situation of the absurdity of displacement and conflict, which causes him to doubt the whole purpose of his journeys. Nuri deliberately created his own purpose for his existence by making his own decisions, as evidenced by his decision to dream and go on. He does not wait for an outside force to achieve this.

Mustafa replies to Nuri's email expressed that he struggles to get away from past because he did not want to be overwhelmed by the darkness. Here, Mustafa makes a purposeful choice to concentrate on the present rather than letting hopelessness engulf him. He demonstrates Sartre's belief that people must take responsibility for their life, even in times of extreme adversity, by making an effort to avoid his traumatic memories. Mustafa exemplifies existential freedom by refusing to let his past define him. Rather than passively accepting his suffering, he actively chooses to focus on the present moment, which enables him to find meaning and purpose in life despite the absurdities he has met.

The delusion of the fictional character Muhammad is one of the most important ways that Nuri uses to cope with his existential struggle. As Nuri asserts "there are times when we make illusions so we don't get lost in the darkness" (p. 56). Nuri finds mental solace from the agony of his loss in Muhammad, a little child, who reminds him of his late son Sami. Nuri is able to maintain hope because this delusion prevents him from falling into complete despair. Sartre's existential theory holds that every individual needs to identify their own purpose in life, and Nuri's choice to create an illusion illustrates how people deal with the nothingness they experience in the face of great adversity. Nuri, echoing Sartre's belief that individuals are free to construct their own reality and meaning, even if it requires relying on illusions,

creates a method to survive and move forward rather than succumbing into the darkness of the plight.

4. Conclusion

The two foremost figures of existential philosophy, Camus and Sartre, differ in how they go about creating meaning in life, but their insights about how they examine absurdity slightly go parallel to each other. As the characters in *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* eloquently demonstrate, both recognise the fundamental absurdity of the human situation, where the search for meaning clashes with a chaotic and uncaring universe. Like Camus, who argues that life has no essential value, Nuri, Mustafa, and Afra dealt with the deep absurdity that results from displacement, loss, and the devastation of war. But while Camus stresses the significance of revolt arguing for the acceptance of life despite absurdity; Sartre concentrates on extreme freedom, suggesting that people must construct their own meanings by making their conscious choices. This goes with Nuri's deliberate choices like his desire to restore his life and get back in touch with Mustafa goes parallel with Sartre's theory of deliberately creating meaning. These decisions also represent Camus' idea of insurrection, since Nuri fights hopelessness and strive to give his life meaning and purpose. This dichotomy illustrates the complex relationship that exists between accepting the absurd and taking an action trying to give purpose in one's life. The experiences of the protagonists show how existential philosophy provides a framework for comprehending the difficulties of human existence in difficult situations.

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