



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

Redefining Identity: Existentialist Themes of Arbitrariness and Autonomy in *The Holy Woman*

Humaira Yousaf (Principal Author)

PhD Scholar, Department of English Linguistics and Literature, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar. Email: humaira_yousaf@ymail.com

Dr. Abdul Hamid Khan (PhD Supervisor)

Associate Professor, Department of English Linguistics and Literature, Qurtuba University of Science and Technology, Peshawar. Email: a.h.k.aries@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper investigates the existentialist themes of arbitrariness, ambiguity, and self-determination in Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman* (2001), focusing on the existentialist struggles of Zarri Bano, the protagonist. The study explores her journey from resistance to acceptance of arbitrariness, utilizing existentialist philosophy, particularly from the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Friedrich Nietzsche. For the analysis, Alan McKee's model of textual analysis has been applied to explore underlying meaning and interpretation of the target text. The method mainly relied on close examination of the selected text to explore the complex interplay between individual existence, societal constraints, and the search for Selfhood. This study intends to add to the body of knowledge by offering fresh perspectives on how willpower and anxiety interact to shape human destiny. Furthermore, it aims to close the gap for a better understanding of the intricacies involved in existentialism. The research's findings indicate that it is the complicated connection between Will to Power and Angst that play a crucial role in understanding how human beings go through their existential crises. It also finds out that Authenticity allows women to construct their identities without adhering to stereotyped roles.

Keywords: Existentialism, Arbitrariness, Absurdity, Patriarchy, Authenticity, Will to power

Introduction

The notions of arbitrariness, ambiguity, and human agency have long been central to the existentialist perspective. It has been argued by philosophers such as Sartre (1943) and Camus (1942) that life does not possess inherent meaning, and that individuals must create their own purpose despite the absurdity of it. Similarly, Kierkegaard (1844) stresses the anxiety and uncertainty of human existence, while Nietzsche (1886) encourages self-abnegation and value creation beyond the norms of society. In this study, existentialist ideas are applied to Qaisra Shahraz's novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) to examine the protagonist, Zarri Bano, and her experiences of self-acceptance within an arbitrary world.

In the novel, Zarri Bano is presented as a woman bound by patriarchal traditions and forced into religious seclusion after the death of her brother. While the shape of her narrative arc is obviously one of passive submission, it is also one of gradual self-definition over time. In spite of her initial resistance, she is eventually able to negotiate existential ambiguity by creating a sense of identity and autonomy within the imposed boundaries that she is constantly subjected to.



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

According to Sartre, a person's identity is formed through their actions, rather than a predetermined fate, which fits in with the idea of existence preceding essence. A useful parallel can be drawn between Zarri Bano's struggle against meaninglessness and Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

Through the lens of Zarri Bano's encounter with loss, societal expectations, and personal choice, this study explores how *The Holy Woman* embodies a number of key existentialist principles. This article explores the novel's commentary on freedom, resilience, and embracing life's uncertainties as an existential necessity. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the broader philosophical implications of Zarri Bano's journey, establishing her as a literary embodiment of existential endurance and self-creation despite the arbitrariness of life.

Problem Statement and Research Objective

The notion of arbitrariness, particularly within oppressive patriarchal structures, continues to remain one of the most crucial existential challenges of our generation. Zarri Bano undergoes an existential transformation in *The Holy Woman* (2001) as she struggles with the absurdity of the fate she has been forced to face, following the death of her brother, in which she is forced into religious seclusion as punishment. It has been noted that existing scholarship has examined the novel largely from a feminist and postcolonial perspective (Ahmed, 2015; Malik, 2018), but there remains a critical gap in understanding the relationship between Zarri Bano's journey and existentialist philosophy. The purpose of this study is to investigate how she navigates existential Angst, and ultimately embraces the arbitrariness of life, finding meaning within the constraints of her experience.

Essentially, the purpose of this study is to examine the process by which Zarri Bano is able to recognize and accept life's arbitrariness, and in the process finds a renewed sense of belonging and purpose for himself as a result. Taking into account existentialist concepts from Sartre (1943), Camus (1942), and Nietzsche (1886), the purpose of this study is to examine Zarri Bano's existential crisis, at first marked by resistance, and gradually evolves into an act of self-definition under the direction of Sartre. This study illustrates how existential acceptance contributes to the construction of personal meaning despite oppressive social structures through an examination of her internal transformation.

Literature Review

Existentialism in Literature

The existentialist philosophy of Sartre (1943), Camus (1942), Kierkegaard (1844), and Nietzsche (1886) has deeply influenced literary narratives that explore themes of meaning, absurdity, and individual responsibility. Existentialism posits that individuals must navigate an inherently meaningless world by forging their own purpose. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943) explores the idea that existence precedes essence, arguing that human beings define themselves through their actions. Camus (1942) further extends this idea in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suggesting that the absurd hero derives meaning through persistent defiance of meaninglessness. *The Holy Woman*, based on Zarri Bano's existential struggle, provides a framework for analyzing Zarri Bano's existential struggle within these philosophical tenets.



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

Feminist Critiques and Agency in *The Holy Woman*

A feminist approach to *The Holy Woman* has frequently been adopted in academic discussions, focusing on themes of gender, autonomy, and patriarchal oppression (Ahmed, 2015; Malik, 2018). According to Ahmed (2015), Zarri Bano's forced seclusion reflects societal constraints on women's agency, aligning with Beauvoir's (1949) argument in *The Second Sex* that women are frequently relegated to roles dictated by external forces. Shahraz's novel is a critique of both cultural and religious justifications for female subjugation. Malik (2018) contends that Zarri Bano's transformation is a manifestation of existential resistance.

Previous Scholarship on *The Holy Woman*

The work of Shahraz has been analyzed in several studies within the context of postcolonial literature and Islamic feminism (Khan, 2019; Yaqoob, 2021). By situating *The Holy Woman* within a postcolonial feminist discourse, Khan (2019) argues that the novel complicates simplistic readings of oppression by portraying Zarri Bano's agency within the constraints of structural privilege, thus complicating simplistic approaches to oppression. Yaqoob (2021) examines the intersections between religious devotion and self-identity, arguing that Zarri Bano's acceptance of her fate can be interpreted as a form of existential surrender, together with a notion of feminist autonomy in order to make sense of her fate. The contributions of these perspectives contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning Shahraz's portrayal of female agency in relation to existentialist self-definition or cultural determinism.

Synthesis and Research Gap

While previous studies have focused on the feminist and postcolonial aspects of *The Holy Woman*, little attention has been paid to the existential aspects of the novel. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by positioning Zarri Bano's journey within the philosophical frameworks of Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche. As a result, it is intended to provide a deeper understanding of how existentialist thought manifests itself in contemporary South Asian literature.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, specifically applying Allan McKee's textual analysis method, to explore the existentialist dimensions in *The Holy Woman* (2001) by Qaisra Shahraz. McKee's approach is well-suited for analyzing literary texts as it allows for an in-depth examination of the ways in which texts construct meaning through language, imagery, and cultural representations. The analysis focuses on the protagonist, Zarri Bano, and her existential struggle as she grapples with the themes of arbitrariness, ambiguity, and self-determination within a patriarchal and religious framework. McKee's method involves interpreting texts not only by considering their immediate content but also by understanding the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated. The study specifically examines how existentialist philosophies—particularly those of Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard—inform Zarri Bano's narrative of self-creation and resistance. The textual analysis will involve identifying recurring themes of freedom, agency, and the absurd, while also considering how these themes interact with the broader societal and cultural



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

norms presented in the novel. A detailed exploration of the linguistic choices, symbolic representations, and character development will reveal how Zarri Bano's journey is framed within existentialist discourse. By applying McKee's method of textual analysis, this research uncovers the philosophical underpinnings of the text, offering new insights into the intersection of existentialism and feminist literary critique in contemporary South Asian literature.

Zarri Bano's Journey: Embracing the Arbitrariness of Life

Unpredictable is life, for it does toss some challenges which tend to subvert our conscious subservience of being in control (Camus, 1942). To keep an open mind in negotiating and compromising with arbitrary existence is thus very important, especially for women – a term used to describe a category of beings who have always been treated traditionally by the male through socialized rules and practices that tend to nullify free will and autonomy.

Zarri Bano from *The Holy Woman* shows the existential struggle of recognition of the absurd and acceptance thereof. Externally, she was an educated, confident girl who hoped for more freedom, most importantly, in choosing her husband. The sudden death of her brother snatches away this apparent power and forces her into the character of Shahzadi Ibadat, a holy woman who has to renounce marriage and spend her life in religious penance. It is here that for the first time she encounters absurdity – a recognition that life was not ordered by principles of justice and reason. Later, she first attempts to struggle against irrational obstacles, quite similarly to Sisyphus who rolls a rock to the top of a hill through lifetimes of labor, in Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. She struggles emotionally, opposing her father's choice and wondering why she is suffering.

However, Zarri Bano's internal conflict persists as she gradually transitions from rejection to reluctant acceptance. Her experience is similar to Camus' contention that one must accept the absurdity of existence without turning to nihilism or false hope. Instead of giving in to hopelessness, she progressively recovers agency in her forced world. "I intended to throw [the hijab] away two years ago, but now I can't live without it", she says in an interview with Jane (Shahraz, 2001, p. 284). Her existential metamorphosis is not a mindless surrender, but a deliberate act of self-definition within absurdity. By accepting her situation and creating her own meaning by the book's end, she exemplifies sincerity and demonstrates Camus' theory that real freedom is found in embracing the ridiculous and leading a determined life in spite of it.

The story of Zarri Bano, a Pakistani woman in *The Holy Woman* (2001) is forced to marry the Quran after the sad incident of her sole brother, is a painful example of the arbitrary experiences of life. Despite the trauma and injustice she suffers, Zarri Bano chooses to compromise with her circumstances, using her experience to challenge the patriarchal norms that perpetuate such injustices (Khan, 2018). She loses her control over her life where she calls herself a "Wax- Doll" which has been moulded and created by her own father.

She gains the insight of her life arbitrariness and realizes that compromising with the ups and downs of life would be the right decision. While she becomes submissive enough to accept the role of becoming a holy woman, she starts spending more time with herself. Due to which she is able to talk to her inner-Self. This series of episodes leads her towards her self-realization. Her story



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

highlights the importance of resilience and adaptability in the face of life's unpredictability.

Similar to Zarri Bano, many modern-age women also struggle to accept and compromise with life's arbitrariness. The pressure to live up to society's expectations and achieve perfection can lead to the feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and disillusionment. Higgins, et al. (2010) argue that women are much more likely to suffer an unreasonable amount of stress and anxiety around work-life balance versus any social pressures exerted upon them, mainly because such attitudes are deep-rooted in cultures with strong traditional gender roles. This raises the need for women to reassess their prioritizations and stance toward life, guided by the flexible and adaptive life pursued by Zarri Bano. With the ceaseless search by human beings for meaning in life and purpose, existentialism offers the only concrete tools for dealing with the uncertainties of life. Existentialist thinkers like Sartre (1946) and Kierkegaard (1943) have propounded that life has no inherent meaning; thus, it is the very lack of meaning that compels people to confront the inherent arbitrariness of existence. The acceptance, rather than the rejection, of the arbitrariness of life empowers an individual to live in a self-affirming and purpose-oriented way, which freedom permits.

Zarri's Awakening to the Arbitrariness of Life

Sartre (1946) suggests that life has no intrinsic meaning, and it is this very lack of meaning that impels one's exposure to the absurdity of existence. Such awakening usually commences with a simple insight into the arbitrariness of life, generally triggered by a significant life event or even a crisis. This awakening can be both unsettling and liberating, as one begins to question the notion that life has a predetermined plan or meaning. Zarri Bano is an intelligent, independent lady at the start of the novel who dreams of a time when she will be in charge of her own life. She holds the belief that her life would unfold in a predictable manner. She plans on marrying Sikander, whom she is in love with.

Nevertheless after her only brother, Jafar, passes away in a terrible accident, her entire existence is upended. In addition to being a personal loss, his passing marks a huge change in her life. In this context the story opens with an unfortunate incident in the life of the protagonist, which is so uncertain even when Sikander informs her about the sudden demise of her brother Jafar, she comments, "How [is] it feasible for a young, attractive man to pass away suddenly?" (Shahraz, 2001, p. 53). Sikander bitterly curses his *kismet*. However, Zarri Bano at this stage is neither able to make sense of the situation around her nor shed tears. Her father states to his wife, "The death of her brother has set the seal on her future as a Shahzadi Ibadat. When only sons of our class passed away, this is what has always happened." (p. 67). This is the first stage, after which whole series of different events occur to her which force her to accept the arbitrariness of life.

This marks the first time that Zarri Bano starts to realize how unfair and arbitrary life is. It is due to circumstances outside her control, not her own choices, that she is denied agency over her own future. She loses faith in the justice of the world as she realizes that fate is capricious, snatching her brother's life and then enforcing a harsh, irrevocable fate on her. At first, she fights, begging her father and relying on her mother and other family members to help



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

her. But she quickly learns that in her culture, a woman's wishes are not very important when compared to family honor and male power.

In addition to her forced transformation into a holy woman, Zarri Bano's relationship with Sikander ends tragically and abruptly. Their previously passionate and hopeful affection suddenly ends by her father's order. Like Zarri Bano, Sikander finds it difficult to accept this fact. His initial reaction is to fight for her since he does not think she will voluntarily accept a life of religious seclusion. He, however, is powerless to overturn the customs that have seriously dictated her life.

For Zarri Bano, this is another painful reminder of the harsh and arbitrary nature of reality; she is torn away from love for reasons over which she has no control just as she becomes aware of it and starts to visualize a life with Sikander. She becomes more disillusioned when she realizes how easily happiness and love can be set aside for the sake of old customs.

What upsets her even more is the fact that she is being forced to participate in her own imprisonment. Even if her heart is aching, she must openly accept her new identity as a holy woman, wear religious clothing, and talk about her devotion. The sharp discrepancy between what she really desires and what she is compelled to become is what makes this moment tragic. It is expected of her to repress her feelings and desires so that the outside world cannot see her internal suffering.

Heartbroken and unable to wait for a woman who has been deemed off-limits, Sikander eventually weds Ruby, Zari Bano's sister. For Zarri Bano, this incident is yet another sad setback. It reaffirms the idea that life goes on regardless of one's own suffering. She loses the love she previously had such a strong belief in, and she is powerless to get it back.

As the years go by, she accepts her role as a holy woman in spite of the profound emptiness she feels within herself and accepts her fate. She persuades herself that perhaps sacrifice has significance and that she is achieving a greater spiritual goal by accepting this existence. However, when she discovers that her suffering does not result in the benefits she had hoped for, her belief is finally destroyed.

One of the most significant awakening in her life is when her father, following the loss of his son, motivated more by selfish desires than by morals, decides that his younger daughter, Ruby be married to Sikander. Zarri Bano is furious by this hypocrisy. She observes how males, especially those who profess to follow religious traditions, demand complete sacrifice from women while bending the laws for their own benefit. After forcing her into celibacy out of honour and devotion, her father now unquestionably enjoys the joys of marriage.

This insight is a pivotal moment. Zarri Bano is aware that the cultural and religious rules that are placed on women are frequently motivated more by preserving power and control than by morality or faith. Her father only used it as a means to further his own agenda, so she never had to make the sacrifice. This epiphany makes her face the harsh reality that justice is not assured and that life does not adhere to any rational moral framework.

Resistance and Denial

According to Sartre (1946) when any individual grapples with the concept of arbitrariness, he initially resists or denies its implications. This resistance can manifest as a desire to control or manipulate external circumstances, or to



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

comfort rigid beliefs or ideologies. At this stage, Shahraz tells the reader how after the shocking death of Zarri's only brother Jafar, when Habib (father of the protagonist) tells his wife to "Tell Zarri that she must not converse with strange men", as "It is not good for my daughter's reputation" (p. 60). In a time when he and his family are vulnerable, he tries to regain control. This choice is entirely related to Zarri Bano's attempt to influence fate by upholding strict cultural norms, not his actual actions or moral character.

Zarri Bano is still a little unaware of how arbitrary life is at this point. At first, she reacts to her father's order with bewilderment and disbelief. She is not sure why her life has to change so dramatically just for something outside her control, having grown up with reasonably free, educated, and believing in love and choice possibilities. This is very similar to Sartre's expounding on the concept that people first fight, when they realize how stupid life is, trying to find meaning that fits their original philosophies on the matter. Zarri Bano at first believes her father's choice must be based on justice and reason. But as she finally realizes that customs, not reason or morality, dictate her fate, her sense is being wronged becomes deeper and deeper.

Habib Khan best illustrates the larger societal mechanism by which control is imposed in turbulence. Much like how Sartre describes how humans cling on to some ideology to veil the futility of the randomization of existence, Habib Khan enforces stark gender stereotypes in order not to fall in dejection over the realization of the fact that his son's death has stripped his family of any shaft of survival. The wish to curb the freedom of Zarri Bano stems more from tradition as a bulwark against life's uncertainties than moral imperatives or religious piety. Being initially informed of her daughter's plan to wed Sikander, Zarri Bano's mother fights her husband's choice by claiming that Sikander is not unfamiliar to their family. Habib Khan responds, dismissing her worries, saying, "Maybe it is *kismet*. It was never intended for Sikander to join our family. Not as the partner of Zarri Bano" (p. 60). This claim reflects a larger human inclination to blame unfavorable occurrences on fate, which absolves people of accountability and upholds social standards. Habib Khan validates his own power and defends his imposition of patriarchal customs by portraying Sikander and Zarri Bano's separation as inevitable. This demonstrates how cultural notions of fate are frequently employed to uphold current hierarchies of power and suppression of individual's autonomy.

At this stage, Zarri Bano, listening to the declaration of her father grapples with this resistance to this argument on the very death day of her beloved brother. She decides to disclose the truth to everyone especially her father that she wants to marry Sikander without considering that it is not the suitable time for it. She says, "I must tell everyone that I have, at last, found the man I want to marry. Where is Mother, I must tell her!" (p. 56). This is the second stage of her where she shows resistance to her father's decision before accepting the arbitrariness of life.

At this point, Zarri Bano resists her father's choice fiercely for a while before facing and embracing life's unpredictability. According to the existentialist philosophy of Sartre, people first fight against the knowledge that life is unfair and meaningless, frequently trying to impose their own sense of order (Sartre, 1946). Zarri Bano, who was brought up with education and a fair amount of independence, resists the unfair limitations placed upon her rather than merely



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

accepting her lot in life. She laments the loss of her love for Sikander, quarrels with her father, and declines to accept the responsibilities of a Shahzadi Ibadat. Her rejection fits Sartre's concept of bad faith, in which people reject life's absurdities and try to find comfort in the delusion that outside systems, such as cultural customs or religious laws, give meaning (Flynn, 2014). At this point, Zarri Bano continues to resist her father's order rather than simply accepting it because she still feels that reason, justice, or her own free will should determine her destiny.

Nevertheless, Zarri Bano gradually comes to the existentialist understanding that existence is random and outside of one's control when her attempts prove fruitless. Under the strict framework of her patriarchal society, her father's rationalization, which is based on the idea of *kismet* (fate), compels her to acknowledge that things happen for no apparent reason and that resistance can be pointless. This acceptance is in line with existentialist theory, which holds that people face life's absurdity when they realize that outside factors determine their situations in a way that is illogical and unfair (Camus, 1942). Zarri Bano's transition into a holy woman is a painful acceptance that struggling against her imposed fate would not alter her reality, so she chooses submission.

Exploration and Experimentation

In the concept of "Existence precedes Essence", when a human being begins to accept the arbitrariness of life, he may enter a period of exploration and experimentation. This stage is characterized by a willingness to take risks, challenge assumptions, and explore new possibilities, according to Sartre (1943). Though Zarri Bano shows resistance to her father's plan for her upcoming life, however, she compromises with the flow of life events and accept the role of becoming a holy woman. In this regard she had to take certain training regarding religion in Egypt. Where she meets a girl of another faith and during a conversation with a stranger girl named Jane , she finds it a bit uneasy to talk about her past and the *burqa* , nonetheless, upon query of Jane about her earlier modern life she replies,

It's true that when I first started wearing the hijab, Jane, I thought it was very weird. I wanted to throw it away two years ago, but now I can't live without it. The veil has restored my dignity, respect, and sense of self-worth. Most importantly, it has liberated me from vanity. I have been able to rid myself of the trappings of female vanity, even though I never imagined it would be simple. (Shahraz, 2001, p. 284)

A testament to how people deal with life's uncertainties by creating stories that enable them to withstand enforced realities, her chat with Jane exposes her internal development. Despite first opposing the hijab and the limitations imposed on her, Zarri Bano's statement to Jane illustrates this existential development as she ultimately accepts them as a source of purpose and value. But this transition does not necessarily mean true acceptance; rather, it means adjusting to a life that she was powerless to reject. Her experience reflects Sartre's contention that people frequently give seemingly meaningless situations purpose in order to maintain control over their life when confronted with the arbitrary nature of existence (Flynn, 2014).

At this point in her journey, Zarri Bano starts to experiment with and investigate the arbitrary nature of existence, turning her resistance into a kind of



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

adaptability. She fights against the limitations placed on her when she is first made to play the part of a Shahzadi Ibadat, but eventually she starts to internalize some of her new identity. According to Sartre, people frequently look for methods to reinterpret who they are in the context of their imposed circumstances when they face the absurdity of life—the knowledge that circumstances are out of their control (Sartre, 1946).

Additionally, Zarri Bano's shifting viewpoint can be examined via the theoretical framework of Camus' concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). According to Camus, people who acknowledge the randomness of existence are forced to choose between finding personal meaning and despair (Camus, 1942). It is possible to interpret Zarri Bano's change of perspective about the hijab and her religious role as an effort to recover control over an otherwise random destiny. By claiming that the veil has liberated her from vanity and given her self-worth, she is deliberately reinterpreting her situation in an attempt to create meaning. This acceptance, however, does not lessen the existential conflict she has faced; rather, it is a reflection of her struggle with fate, in which she creates meaning in a world that she previously rejected.

According to Sartre this is the third stage of accepting and negotiating with arbitrariness, where human beings start experimenting their new choices of life. (Sartre, 1943). Acknowledging the arbitrary nature of life enables individuals to embrace existential freedom. For Sartre, accepting life's lack of inherent structure liberates individuals from societal and cultural expectations, allowing them to act based on personal conviction rather than external pressures. In his view, this freedom is a double-edged sword, as it confers both the power and responsibility to choose one's path, a responsibility Sartre famously called "the anguish of freedom." He argues that humans often avoid accepting this freedom by subscribing to societal roles or beliefs that absolve them of personal accountability, a concept he termed "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943).

Embracing Uncertainty and Ambiguity

According to Flynn (2006), "the individual who avoids choice, who becomes a mere face in the gathering or tool in the bureaucratic machine, has failed to become authentic" (p.74). In contrast to Hegel's conception of existence, Kierkegaard (1843) created this theory of human existence. Hegel (1807) presented a perspective on human life that can be described as passive. According to Hegel, humans seek to overcome arbitrariness through reason and dialectical reasoning, aiming for a rational, teleological understanding of the world. On the contrary, Kierkegaard emphasizes the individual's existential leap of faith, acknowledging the paradoxical and absurd nature of life, and advocating for subjective truth and personal responsibility. He disregards the uniqueness and rationality of human beings and, according to his beliefs, humans cannot be considered free individuals because everything originates from a single absolute entity. (Hegel, 1807; Kierkegaard, 1843)



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

However, the religious understanding of human life is conflicting with Sartre's perspective, in which the latter conveys the idea that the core of humanity formed in God's imagination before it existed (Flynn, 2006). According to Sartre, there is no intrinsic value or essence in humans. They are created initially, and then they evolve into their essence. It contradicts the theological belief that God fore-created man and that God subsequently validated human existence. According to Sartre, every human being is free to choose how they want to live and how they want to survive in this world. His essence is formed by this decision and evolving lifestyle.

Each human being is a unique individual with an identity and soul of his own, and as everyone is free to create and live as they see fit, no one can be evaluated or supervised alongside another person collectively. In the story, Zarri Bano is seen embracing the ambiguity of life at every level. First, at the death of her only brother. Her father states, "My Zarri Bano is destined to this fate" (Shahraz, 2001, p.67). In response she states, "This kismet is so cruel". Then, being assigned the role of holy woman; She responds to her mother, "It is a task sent by God, but I must triumph, I will!" (p. 236). Later, when her father sets her free from the vow of not getting married, She replies to her father, "There is no one, I want to marry. There was one but a long time ago!" (p. 291). Next, after the death of her sister Ruby, who was the wife of Sikander, She utters, "Fate conspired against us. Circumstances forced me to turn you away" (486). Finally, when Sikander proposes her for marriage once again after the death of Ruby, she replies, "Don't ask me to fall in love with you again, Sikander. I couldn't cope up with it. I have suffered so much. I truly believe that I am emotionally bankrupt now" (p.488).

When she navigates life's tragedies, she frequently faces significant loss, betrayal, and social pressures, yet throughout each experience, her resilience is demonstrated. She faces loss with silent fortitude, letting herself grieve while figuring out how to move forward. She reclaims her story with dignity after choosing self-worth over resentment in the face of betrayal. Notwithstanding the criticism she faces, she embraces her own self and resists the attempts of society to constrain her. Through each difficult phase, she learns to persevere and develops into a person who authentically carries both wounds and wisdom. She is not defined by her difficulties; rather, the fact that she has persevered in the face of them is evidence of an unbreakable spirit.



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

At first, Zarri Bano fights against the expectations her father and society have placed on her, defying the artificial limitations placed upon her. Throughout her mourning, loneliness, and compulsory religious devotion, she starts gradually to forge herself a sense of individuality in an attempt to leave her mark in the world. If Sartre theorizes that a person gives himself essence through what he has lived through, then she does not passively accept it as fate, as she makes a new identity by choice. Not merely to submit does she redefine the quality of her religious duty, but this act preserves her autonomy within prescribed boundaries, showing us how Sartre viewed existential significance to arise from humanity's arbitrary conditions. Finally, it is Zarri Bano's journey that highlights and insists on Sartre's premise regarding the making of essence by man's reaction to the uncertainties of life. It shows the individual's journey from rebellion to adaptability and from self-definition to the really deciding factors of how we choose to engender our identities via choices and acts, rather than just passively co-existing within hard-set frameworks. Zarri Bano redefines her life's meaning, reclaiming agency despite being compelled to live a life she did not choose. She has freely chosen how to deal with her forced reality, rather than being merely the result of patriarchal domination. This supports Sartre's theory that although people cannot avoid life's arbitrariness, they can decide how to deal with it.

Accepting the ambiguity of life is not a sign of weakness, but rather of existential resilience, as Zarri Bano demonstrates that one may forge an identity that is distinctively their own even in the face of uncertainty. From this whole process of analysis, she devises her own level of survival. Her choices and developing ways for her living become her essence. Instead of erasing her past hardships, Zarri Bano's embrace of the hijab, accepting the tragic death of her brother, sacrificing on her love, and her role as a holy woman shows that she deals with life's uncertainties by giving meaning to an otherwise imposed reality. Instead of a passive surrender, her transformation is a deliberate adjustment to an uncertain life.

Likewise, when Zarri Bano takes the decision to retrieve control of her life, it is her final awakening. She decides to overcome the restrictions placed on her after years of being pushed into religious seclusion. She no longer wants to spend her life in accordance with the capricious choices of others. Not only is her choice to renounce her status as a holy woman an act of personal disobedience, but it also represents a rejection of the idea that suffering must be accepted without inquiry. This last act of rebellion represents the full extent of her self-realization. She now realizes that power, tradition, and human decisions influence life rather than fairness or divine intervention. By deciding to take back her independence, she rejects becoming a victim of fate any more. Moreover, Sartre contends that as each person lives their life in a unique way and independently, only they are accountable for their deeds. Its essence cannot be attributed to God or anybody else (Flynn, 2006). Similarly, Zarri Bano's journey culminates in a deep acceptance of the uncertainty and ambiguity that underlies human existence. All the decisions Zarri Bano takes for her new life are fully owned by her till the end of the story. This acceptance is not about resignation or hopelessness, but rather about embracing the freedom and creativity that arises from the arbitrariness of life (Sartre, 1943).



Conclusion

Throughout the novel's narrative it becomes clear that life is a complex phenomenon. Shahraz portrayed Zarri Bano constantly navigating the chaos of life and time. The dynamic journey of hers showing resistance, denial, experimentation and later accepting the arbitrariness gives her a chance of Self exploration. Moreover, it allowed her to experience moments without being burdened by what she cannot control, fostering a deeper connection to her surroundings and her loved ones.

Another key finding emphasizes the notion that in arbitrary nature of life since people are thrown into it with no predetermined path or assurances, forcing them to live their lives according to their own rules. Zarri Bano's and Sikander's situations demonstrate the unpredictable nature of their existence. The two characters experienced how Arbitrariness and human choices interacted during various life events. The marriage between Zarri Bano and Sikander was cancelled because Jafar died. The passing of Ruby united the two teenagers in friendship again. Despite the unpredictability of life which arose from human involvements and natural Arbitrariness both characters chose to direct their lives according to their own discretion.

Thus, *The Holy Woman's* Zarri Bano reveals her profound understanding of how the arbitrary factors of life govern existence. A series of decisions and experiences shows her strength beyond the uncertainties and uncontrolled elements of life. Her understanding of life's erratic nature serves as a primary symbolism indicating that one achieves true empowerment through embracing uncontrollable uncertainties while disregarding attempts to resist them. She embraces the commitment to hijab along with her holy woman duties to maintain control of unpredictable situations by adding order to something otherwise forced upon her. Her change represents a deliberate switch to an unknown environment in place of helpless submission. According to the writer ambiguity in life demonstrates existential toughness instead of weakness since people can create their personal identities when living with uncertainty.

The novel emphasizes the journey of acceptance towards thoughtless arbitrariness in Zarri Bano's life. By accepting uncertainty and the ambiguity of human existence, she finds herself in the medium of immense freedom, creativity, and empowerment. Existentialism, as a whole, is the philosophy that life has no inherent or prescribed meaning or purpose. According to Sartre (1943), humans create meaning in an indifferent universe culturally and amiss in respect to the individual's aspirations and values-system. The arbitrariness of life rests upon: a man comes into being without any direction or guarantees, thus emphasizing an entrepreneur's independence in accentuating existence characteristically in his own personalized way. Therefore, acceptance of life's arbitrariness is at once an empowerment for emotional and intellectual freedom, resilience, and, of course, Authenticity.

It opens the doors for confronting the world on one's terms, beyond social expectations. A certain embrace of arbitrariness would mean lessening her pathological terrifying fears and anxieties regarding the uncertainty of life, which she associates with kismet, by averting her gaze from controlling life's occurrences to interpreting some meaning about them. Acceptance manifests itself in some satisfaction and self-empowerment in Zarri Bano's life. In modern



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

circumstances, the way to do so may be by virtue of accessing the Japanese philosophy of 'wabi-sabi' that propagates the beauty of transience and imperfection (Koren, 2008). Setting forth on accepting life's imperfection and unpredictability, a woman strives towards letting go of the impossible knot of striving for the perfection that restricts her and moves in the direction of cultivating the inner peace of being satisfied from within.

It is a riveting yet heartrending probe into the acceptance of arbitrariness and unpredictability by people; the loss of brotherhood, the loss of love, and the finding of the double face of her father make her realize that life is not morally or justifiably ordered. This traumatic awakening helps her eventually take charge of her destiny. It teaches Qaisra Shahraz, through her vision of Zarri Bano, a lesson of endurance and calls attention, rightfully, to the suffering incurred by patriarchal traditions. The tale of Zarri Bano is an evidence of the tenacity of women who, incarcerated in repressive traditions, rally the courage to revolt and take their own lives back. Mindfulness and the cultivation of self-compassion are a further means that women can apply.

Studies have shown that mindfulness practice- yoga and meditation- lowers stress and anxiety while simultaneously elevating self-awareness and acceptance in the individual (Hölzel et al., 2011). With their burgeoning sense of self awareness and self-compassion, women can now move on to a more complex and realistic view of themselves and their place in the world. Camus explores this concept in his work, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus presents this work as an allegory for human life, where Sisyphus is condemned by the gods. Sisyphus, according to Camus, represents mankind's scuffle with the absurdness of life; an endeavour filled with repetitive tasks that ultimately lack purpose. However, by accepting this absurdity and choosing to "imagine Sisyphus happy," Similarly like Sisyphus, Zarri Bano finds contentment in embracing life's arbitrariness and crafting their own subjective meaning within it. (Camus, 1942)

Ultimately, like Zarri Bano ,who belongs to the modern age in *The Holy Woman* (2001) for accepting and compromising with life's arbitrariness requires a fundamental shift in perspective. She, rather than resisting or fighting against the unpredictability of life, learns to flow with it, using each twist and turn as an opportunity for growth, learning, and Self-discovery. Women of modern age can also embrace the imperfections and uncertainties of life and can cultivate a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfilment.

The arbitrariness of life, once accepted, comes with the positive and the negative. It may relieve a person of the burdens of his choices and allow him to live more-sized and truly in the moment. However, it also opens the person to the possibilities of apprehension, irresponsibility, and lack of ambition. These anguishes of existence are keenly described, through literature, by characters who traverse these rocky roads, representing the very threshold of acceptance of arbitrariness bringing richness to living and the difficulty in striking the balance to stave off the darkling side of despair creeping into interpretation of life. Abandoning control in favor of randomness may help to understand our humanity even more: at the very least, it can help in the pursuit of freedom.

References

- Ahmed, R. (2015). *Women, agency, and resistance in South Asian literature*. Oxford University Press.



Vol. 3 No. 4 (April) (2025)

- Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Camus, A. (1942). *The myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Penguin Books.
- Flynn, T. (2006). "Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction". OUP Oxford.
https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=sJLi1RgatPcC&source=gbp_ap
- Flynn, T. R. (2014). *Existentialism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1807). *The phenomenology of spirit* (A. V. Miller, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Hölzel, B. K., Lazar, S. W., Gard, T., Schuman-Olivier, Z., Vago, D. R., & Ott, U. (2011). Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain density. *NeuroImage*, 56(1), 338-344.
- Higgins, C. A., Duxbury, L. E., & Johnson, K. L. (2010). Part-time work and gender: Work-life balance and career advancement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(4), 761-774.
- Khan, M. A. (2019). *Postcolonial feminism and literary resistance: A study of contemporary South Asian fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1844). *The concept of anxiety* (R. Thomte, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Koren, L. (2008). *Wabi-sabi for artists, designers, poets & philosophers*. Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing.
- Malik, S. (2018). *Gender and seclusion in South Asian literature: A feminist critique of Qaisra Shahraz's narratives*. Routledge.
- Nietzsche, F. (1886). *Beyond good and evil* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Random House.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *Being and nothingness* (H. Barnes, Trans.). Methuen.
- Yaqoob, T. (2021). *Islamic feminism and existential autonomy: Rereading Qaisra Shahraz's The Holy Woman*. Bloomsbury Academic.