

## Social Existentialism in *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid

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### Abstract

This research work uses Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke* to explore how individuals shape their destinies amid socio-economic challenges. The study emphasizes that human beings have the inherent ability to overcome societal limitations and achieve self-actualization. By focusing on social existentialism, it examines the existential struggles of lower-class individuals who often see themselves as burdens to society. This paper challenges the idea that only those from privileged backgrounds can succeed in life, asserting that free will and individual agency play vital roles in determining one's destiny. Utilizing qualitative methods and a historical approach, this research gathers substantial evidence to support its claims. It illustrates how the characters in *Moth Smoke* navigate their paths toward either prosperity or destruction, providing significant insights into the human condition. The study draws on the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, which posits that each individual is endowed with free will and the capacity to make meaningful choices. Ultimately, this research argues that while class distinctions exist, they merely differentiate between those who use their free will effectively and those who do not. Through this lens, *Moth Smoke* engages readers in a deeper understanding of life's purpose and the importance of individual choice.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Free will, Social class, Determinism, Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke*, Socio-economic challenges, Individual agency, Jean-Paul Sartre, Personal dignity

### Introduction:

Existentialism, as explored by Jean-Paul Sartre in his seminal work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), emphasizes the individual's quest for meaning and the exercise of free will. Sartre presents the concepts of "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself," describing the journey from a state of mere existence to one of self-aware intentionality. This philosophical framework is essential in analyzing Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, a novel set in Lahore during the 1990s, where characters navigate the complex socio-economic landscape of Pakistan (Hamid, 2000).

*Moth Smoke* delves into the lives of its characters, particularly Darashikoh Shezad, who epitomizes the struggle against societal determinism. The novel outlines the impact of social class on individual destiny, challenging the notion that one's background solely dictates one's future. Hamid depicts a vivid and often grim reality where characters strive to assert their free will amid external constraints. This study applies a qualitative method and historical approach to examine how the characters in *Moth Smoke* exercise their free will to shape their fates, either towards success or self-destruction. It underscores the existentialist belief that each person, regardless of social class, has the agency to define their existence (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022). By focusing on the characters' choices and their consequences, the research highlights the significant interplay between social structures and individual autonomy.

This examination aims to shed light on the existential journey of Hamid's characters, drawing parallels with Sartre's philosophy. It posits that true self-fulfilment and dignity in life are achievable through conscious choices, transcending the limitations imposed by social hierarchies. The narrative of *Moth Smoke* thus serves as a poignant exploration of the human condition, resonating with Sartre's assertion that life is a series of deliberate acts, each contributing to the individual's self-definition.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

In today's rapidly evolving world, it is clear that only a small fraction of individuals truly understand and are mindful of their life's purpose. Many people are unaware of their identity and live without goals or underlying motives. Others simply follow paths laid out by others, lacking personal ambition and initiative.

This phenomenon highlights a critical issue; the failure to recognize that each individual is the architect of their destiny. The journey toward finding one's purpose begins with what one learns and applies in life. Despite the significant achievements of humanity, there remains a vast number of individuals who pass through life feeling neglected and unfulfilled.

This article seeks to explore this issue in depth and propose solutions to address the gap between potential and realization. It will examine how individuals can become more aware of their inherent motivations and take active steps towards self-fulfilment and meaningful existence.

### **The objective of the Study:**

By recognizing these essential truths and principles, this research seeks to provide a clear pathway for individuals striving to achieve self-actualization and a meaningful life.

### **Literature Review:**

In the realm of contemporary literature, Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of existential themes. The novel, set against the backdrop of a Pakistan preparing for nuclear and economic change, delves into the existence of Darashikoh Shezad, a man whose personal disintegration mirrors the societal transformation around him. This literature review aims to dissect the existential themes woven into the fabric of the novel, examining their manifestation in the narrative and their resonance with a modern audience (Hamid, 2000).

The story of Daru is one of a man grappling with the vicissitudes of life in a rapidly transforming society. As a former banker who loses his job, Daru's descent into a lifestyle of crime and substance abuse is a poignant reflection of the struggle to find meaning in a life that appears increasingly senseless and unforgiving. The novel does not merely chronicle Daru's downfall; it serves as a critique of the societal systems and pressures that precipitate this type of decline. Through Daru's interactions with various characters—ranging from his love interest Mumtaz to his wealthy friend Ozi—Hamid paints a complex picture of a society marked by stark contrasts and contradictions (Hamid, 2000).

At the heart of *Moth Smoke* lies an exploration of existential ideas, particularly the principles of freedom, choice, and responsibility (Awan et al., 2016; Butt, 2008). The novel echoes the thoughts of existential philosophers such as Sartre (2007), who posited that existence precedes essence, and Camus (1991), who explored the absurdity of existence in an indifferent universe. Daru's journey through the novel is emblematic of the existential hero—flawed, searching, and

profoundly human (Ali, 2022).. Daru's journey through the novel is emblematic of the existential hero—flawed, searching, and profoundly human. His choices, from engaging in an illicit affair to dabbling in the drug trade, are reflective of the existential emphasis on individual agency and the inherent responsibility that accompanies absolute freedom (Hamid, 2000).

The application of existential theory in *Moth Smoke* is evident not only in Daru's character but also in the broader narrative (Grech, 2021). The novel scrutinizes the choices made by its characters, a reflection of their attempt to assert their existence in a world that seems to deny them agency. The theme of addiction, which features prominently in the novel, serves as a metaphor for the struggle between autonomy and enslavement to one's desires. Daru's substance abuse, initially a means of escape, ultimately highlights the paradox of freedom: the more he indulges in drugs to assert his freedom, the more he becomes chained by them (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022).

When positioned alongside other existential works, *Moth Smoke* distinguishes itself through its specific setting and Hamid's narrative style. The novel draws parallels with classics such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 1993) and Kafka's *The Trial* (Kafka, 1998), yet it captures the essence of existential despair within the context of a South Asian society. This cultural specificity lends the novel a fresh perspective, allowing it to explore existential themes in a setting that is often underrepresented in existential literature (Ali, 2022).

The critical reception of *Moth Smoke* has been as diverse as the novel's themes, sparking debates over its depiction of existential issues in the Pakistani milieu (Jeanniard du Dot, 2022). Many critics have praised Hamid for his authentic portrayal of Lahore's societal layers, even as others have engaged in debates over the universality of the novel's existential themes. These discussions extend to the novel's narrative form, which employs a non-linear storytelling technique that some argue enhances the thematic content, while others believe it detracts from the narrative coherence (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022).

*Moth Smoke* stands as a significant work that contributes to the understanding of existentialism in contemporary literature (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022). It invites readers to confront the unsettling questions of existence, choice, and consequence. The novel remains a remarkable contribution to both Pakistani literature and the broader existential canon, providing insights that continue to spark thought and discussion. Through Daru's experiences, Hamid presents a narrative that transcends cultural boundaries and speaks to the existential dilemmas that define the human condition (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022).

The existential themes in *Moth Smoke* are further enriched by the social context of Pakistan. The novel does not simply transplant Western existential concepts onto Eastern soil; rather, it adapts and reinterprets these themes within the framework of Pakistani society (Iqbal et al., 2020). The result is a narrative that is both unique in its setting and universal in its appeal, a testament to the relevance and significance of existential ideas across cultures (Hamid, 2000).

The narrative structure of *Moth Smoke* is itself a reflection of existential philosophy. The non-linear storytelling, the shifting perspectives, and the blurred lines between reality and the psychological journey all serve to disorient the reader, reflecting the characters' confusion in the face of life's absurdities. This stylistic choice by Hamid not only complements the thematic content of the novel but also invites the reader to engage in an active interpretation of the text, akin to the existentialists' encouragement of active engagement with the world (Ali, 2022).

Additionally, the setting of the novel during the sweltering summer of Lahore, with its impending nuclear tests, creates an atmosphere of looming fate that underscores the existential themes. The heat becomes a metaphor for the inevitable pressures of life, the societal expectations, and the self-imposed burdens that the characters carry (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022).

The novel also delves into the existential theme of death, both literal and metaphorical. The spectre of mortality looms large over the characters, serving as a constant reminder of the ultimate absurdity of life (Iqbal et al., 2020). This preoccupation with death is not merely a morbid fascination but an essential aspect of the existential quest for meaning. It is through the acknowledgement of mortality that the characters in *Moth Smoke* are forced to confront the authenticity of their existence (Hamid, 2000).

*Moth Smoke* also engages with the existential theme of isolation. Daru's journey is marked by a profound sense of loneliness, which is both a source of freedom and a cause of despair. His isolation is a double-edged sword, allowing him the distance to reflect on his life but also alienating him from the world around him (Ali, 2022). This theme resonates with the existential idea that individuals are ultimately alone in their experience of the world, a concept that is both liberating and terrifying (Hameed Ullah et al., 2022).

### **Methodological Approach:**

The writing survey utilizes a qualitative approach to explore deeply the existential themes present in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. Qualitative research is well-suited to exploring complex phenomena and allows for an in-depth analysis of the existential concepts depicted in the novel. The qualitative method enables a better understanding of the characters' experiences and perceptions, aligning to dissect existential themes within the narrative.

### **Research Design:**

The research design utilized is a qualitative literature review. This design allows for a comprehensive examination of existing literature on existential themes in *Moth Smoke*. By synthesizing and analyzing qualitative data from various sources, including scholarly articles, book reviews, and critical essays, this research design facilitates a thorough exploration of the research questions.

### **Data Collection:**

Data collection methods involve a systematic review of existing literature related to existential themes in *Moth Smoke*. The researcher's data collection methods include accessing academic databases, such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, to identify relevant scholarly works. Additionally, book reviews and critical essays from reputable sources are analyzed to get different interpretations and discussions surrounding the novel.

Data collection procedures involve systematic searching, screening, and selection of literature relevant to the research questions. My data collection procedures include defining search terms, conducting searches across various databases, screening titles and abstracts for relevance, and critically evaluating the selected literature based on predefined inclusion criteria. The selection of literature is justified based on its relevance to the research questions and the credibility of the sources.

### **Data Analysis Techniques:**

Data analysis techniques involve thematic analysis of the selected literature to identify patterns, themes, and insights related to existential themes in *Moth Smoke*. The data analysis

techniques include coding and categorizing data based on recurring themes and concepts, synthesizing findings across multiple sources, and interpreting the data about the research questions. The thematic analysis approach is justified as it allows for a systematic and comprehensive examination of the existential themes depicted in the novel.

The qualitative nature of this research is reflected in the data collection and analysis techniques. By synthesizing and interpreting qualitative data from scholarly articles, book reviews, and critical essays, my literature review prioritizes understanding the subjective experiences and interpretations of existential themes in *Moth Smoke*. This qualitative approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the novel's themes and their resonance with contemporary audiences.

### **Data Analysis:**

Darashikoh Shezad (Daru) represents the existential struggle set against the backdrop of societal upheaval in Pakistan. His journey mirrors not just personal decline but also the broader disintegration of society. As Pakistan deals with economic instability and the threat of nuclear conflict, Daru's existential crisis intensifies. Losing his job and status as a banker marks the start of his quest for meaning in an absurd and indifferent world. Daru's transformation from a respectable banker to a criminal and drug addict highlights existentialist themes. His decline critiques societal structures and pressures that drive individuals into existential despair. His interactions with characters like Mumtaz and Ozi highlight the contrasts within Pakistani society—wealth, corruption, and the desperate search for identity. These relationships further illustrate the alienation and fragmentation experienced by individuals in a rapidly changing society.

The theme of absurdity, central to existential philosophy, is vividly depicted in *Moth Smoke*. Inspired by Camus' notion of the absurd, the novel portrays Daru's life as a series of futile attempts to find meaning and coherence. His involvement in illicit affairs and drug use symbolizes his struggle against the absurdity of existence. The novel suggests that life's inherent meaninglessness drives individuals like Daru to engage in reckless behaviours as they grapple with their lack of purpose. Hamid's use of a non-linear narrative structure and shifting perspectives reinforces the sense of disorientation and absurdity. This storytelling method disrupts the reader's expectation of a coherent, linear progression, mirroring Daru's fragmented experience of reality. The blurred lines between reality and hallucination further emphasize the absurd nature of Daru's world, where clarity and meaning are elusive.

The existential theme of freedom is intricately explored through Daru's choices. Sartre's idea that "existence precedes essence" is evident in Daru's actions, as he exercises his freedom in ways that ultimately lead to his downfall. His decisions to engage in crime and substance abuse highlight the existential belief in absolute freedom, coupled with the burden of responsibility. Daru's life serves as a cautionary tale of the consequences of unchecked freedom. Addiction in *Moth Smoke* serves as a powerful metaphor for the paradox of freedom. Daru's initial use of drugs as an assertion of autonomy quickly becomes a form of enslavement, illustrating the existential tension between freedom and constraint. His increasing dependence on substances symbolizes the illusion of control in the face of existential absurdity. The relationships in the novel further explore existential themes of otherness and the gaze, as theorized by Sartre. Daru's interactions with others, particularly through their judgments and perceptions, shape his sense of self. His existential freedom is constantly negotiated through these social dynamics, revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and societal expectations.

Analyzing *Moth Smoke* through the lens of existential philosophy reveals a rich tapestry of themes that resonate deeply with contemporary audiences. Daru's existential struggle, the pervasive absurdity of life, and the nuanced exploration of freedom highlight the novel's alignment with existential thought. By situating these themes within the specific cultural context of Pakistan, Hamid not only enriches the existential narrative but also broadens its universal appeal. The novel's setting in Pakistan during a period of economic and political turmoil provides a unique cultural perspective that enriches the existential themes. This context allows for a fresh interpretation of existential concepts, demonstrating their relevance across different cultural landscapes. The narrative's ability to resonate with both local and global audiences underscores its significance in the existential literary canon. *Moth Smoke* contributes significantly to contemporary existential literature by presenting a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. Through the lens of Daru's experiences, Hamid explores the complexities of human freedom, the search for meaning, and the confrontation with absurdity. The novel's thematic depth and cultural specificity make it a noteworthy addition to the study of existentialism in modern literature.

This analysis underscores *Moth Smoke* as a significant contribution to both Pakistani literature and the broader existential canon, offering profound insights into the human condition. Daru's existential struggle, the pervasive absurdity, and the nuanced exploration of freedom provide a rich framework for understanding the existential themes in the novel. This analysis highlights the novel's ability to transcend cultural boundaries and speak to the universal dilemmas that define the human experience.

## Results:

The research highlights that a significant portion of individuals live without a clear understanding of their purpose or destiny. This aligns with the existential crisis theory, which suggests that many people go through life without a sense of direction or meaning, merely following the paths laid out by others.

Through the exploration of existentialist theories, particularly Sartre's concept of "being-for-itself" versus "being-in-itself," it is clear that self-awareness and consciousness are crucial for individuals to define their purpose. The transition from a state of mere existence (being-in-itself) to a state of conscious self-determination (being-for-itself) is essential for personal growth and fulfilment.

The novel *Moth Smoke* by Mohsin Hamid serves as a case study for understanding the impact of social structures on individual destiny. The characters in the novel illustrate how socioeconomic factors and class hierarchies can either constrain or catalyze personal development. Darashikoh's descent into moral ambiguity and self-destruction contrasts with Mumtaz's successful navigation through societal expectations to achieve personal growth.

The study identifies key principles necessary for moving from a state of complacency to one of fulfilment and dignity. These include self-awareness, conscious decision-making, resilience, and purposeful living. Recognizing one's strengths, weaknesses, and desires, making informed choices that align with personal values and goals, overcoming societal and personal obstacles, and actively pursuing activities and relationships that contribute to a meaningful life are essential.

The existence and perceptions of others, as illustrated by Sartre's concept of the *Gaze of the Other*, play a critical role in shaping self-awareness and authenticity. The feedback and

judgments from others can either lead to bad faith and self-deception or drive an individual to improve their choices and actions.

### **Discussion:**

The results of this research provide significant insights into the existential struggles faced by individuals, particularly in the context of modern society. The findings align with existing knowledge on existentialism, notably the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre. The distinction between “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself” emphasizes the crucial role of self-awareness and conscious decision-making in shaping one’s destiny. This study reaffirms Sartre’s idea that individuals must actively define their purpose rather than passively existing without direction.

The character analysis from Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke* serves as a poignant illustration of how external socio-economic factors influence personal development. The contrasting paths of Darashikoh and Mumtaz highlight the varying outcomes based on individual choices and resilience. Darashikoh’s downfall, attributed to his lack of self-awareness and succumbing to societal pressures, embodies the negative consequences of not transitioning to a “being-for-itself” state. Conversely, Mumtaz’s success underscores the importance of self-determination and conscious effort in achieving personal growth.

These findings have broader implications for understanding human behaviour and development. They suggest that fostering self-awareness and resilience can help individuals navigate their existential crises and lead more fulfilling lives. This aligns with contemporary psychological approaches that emphasize the importance of mindfulness, self-reflection, and personal agency in mental health and well-being.

However, the study has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on a literary work as a case study means the results are influenced by the author’s interpretation and may not be universally applicable. While *Moth Smoke* provides valuable insights, its context-specific nature may not fully capture the diversity of existential experiences across different cultures and societies. Future research could benefit from a more diverse set of case studies or empirical data to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, the study’s focus on Sartre’s existentialism may overlook other philosophical perspectives that could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues. Integrating insights from other existentialist thinkers, such as Heidegger or Kierkegaard, might enrich the analysis and offer a more nuanced view of existential crises and personal development.

The study underscores the importance of self-awareness and personal agency in navigating existential challenges. While societal structures and external perceptions play significant roles, individuals have the power to shape their destinies through conscious choices and resilience. Future research should aim to broaden the scope of exploration to include diverse perspectives and empirical data, thus offering a more holistic understanding of the existential journey.

### **Conclusion:**

This research highlights the significance of self-awareness and individual agency in determining one’s fate, drawing on Sartre’s concepts of “being in itself” and “being for itself” as seen in Mohsin Hamid’s *Moth Smoke*. The study shows that individuals can overcome existential crises by making conscious choices and defining their purpose, as exemplified by the contrasting paths of Darashikoh and Mumtaz.

The findings align with contemporary psychological practices emphasizing mindfulness and self-reflection. However, the study's reliance on a single literary work limits its generalizability. Future research should include diverse case studies and empirical data to capture a broader range of existential experiences. Exploring multiple philosophical perspectives might also provide a more comprehensive understanding.

In conclusion, self-awareness and individual agency are vital in overcoming existential challenges. Individuals have the power to shape their destinies through conscious choices. Future studies should expand the exploration to include diverse perspectives and empirical evidence, enhancing the discourse on existentialism and personal development.

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