

An Existential Journey: Finding Meaning through the Existential Crisis of Apu in the Apu Trilogy by Satyajit Ray

Angana Nandy^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Existentialism is a quest to investigate personal freedom, choice, meaning of life, and the experience of one's existence. Shedding light on the importance of movies in understanding life from a different perspective, the present study focuses on the character analysis of Apu from the movie Apu Trilogy by Satyajit Ray. The study explores the existential journey of Apu's life experiencing existential crises to finding his life's purpose. This article identifies Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy principles of 1) Facticity, 2) Bad Faith, 3) Responsibility, and 4) Transcendence to explore the Existential journey of Apu shown through the lens of legendary Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray.

Keywords: *Existential Crisis, Apu Trilogy, Sartre's Philosophy, Freedom and Responsibility, Cinema*

Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine of what actions to take and therefore a liberating, optimistic, and humanistic teaching (Sartre, 2022). Existentialism explores the quest for human existence and lets our thoughts delve into our lives meaning, purpose, and values. The important components of existential philosophy include freedom of choice and individual responsibility during self-exploration to find out the purpose of individual life. Existentialism proposes that the individual has free will, which means he can create his purpose in life (Barrett, 1947). The existentialists' thought included anxiety, dread, and existential crisis when experiencing ambiguous situations. According to Sartre (1961), "*man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.*" He said a human's existence precedes its essence. As there are no preexisting or inherent goals of human life, one has the freedom to make decisions of their free will and take actions for their responsibility.

Existentialism gained its popularity during the 20th century, especially after World War 2 when the human existence purpose and meaning were at the notion of existential questions (Schnipke, & MacKay, 2023). Among the notable existential philosophers, Jean-Paul Sartre's work is one of the central focus of discussion. His "*Being and nothingness*" elaborates on the concept of individual freedom, responsibility, and the nature of human existence (Sartre, 2022). Therefore, in times of extreme adversity, human beings understand the need to question human existence among the loss, suffering, and chaos of human life.

¹Masters in Psychology, Calcutta University, India

*Corresponding Author

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Satyajit Ray left an incredible mark on world cinema with his creation of “*Pather Panchali*”, the first film of the Apu Trilogy (1955), a masterpiece released during the post-World War period. (Jain, 2022). Ray showed a realistic picture of rural Bengal. The film executes poverty, sorrow, and suffering of the movie's characters so that the audience can resonate with their crisis in the story (Yadav & Mehta, 2022). Ray not only explores the existential themes in his story but also uses his creativity to bring hope and the silver lining amidst the vulnerable adversities of human life. In the first part of the Apu Trilogy, *Pather Panchali* depicted the experience of little Apu revolving around his mother Sarbajaya, his father Hariharan, and his independent elder sister Durga. Little Apu witnesses the death of his elder sister Durga and becomes all alone, playing, and roaming around all by himself (Paganopoulos, 2020). The absence of Durga made him feel void and empty inside but he learned to live independently.

In the next sequel of the Apu Trilogy “*Aparajito*”, Apus' family moves to the holy city of Varanasi. Apu in his teenage years starts studying in Kolkata. Apus' father soon dies of illness (Cardullo, 2019) and Apu is left with his mother who sacrifices a lot for Apus' possibility to study. Though Apu successfully got a scholarship to study in Calcutta, Apu witnessed the death of his beloved mother which left him devastated. (Kaur, 2023). In the third and final sequel of the Apu Trilogy, Apu now a man finds a job and gets married to a girl named Aparna. Apu finally gets companionship and love to fulfill his void life. But soon Apu's wife dies during childbirth and at this time Apu finds himself in an existential crisis where he feels a life with no purpose and meaning (Landy, 2010). He felt that all his reason to live had died with the death of his beloved wife. Apu also refuses to accept his son and keeps the child with his grandfather.

Research Questions

- How did Apus' life choices take him to the ultimate existential crisis?
- How did he find his new purpose and meaning in life?

The first question leads to the exploration of whether the environmental cause of Apus' misery led to his existential crisis or whether he had the freedom to choose his purpose in life. The next question needs to explore what made Apus' life meaningful among all these years of environmental misery and loss of loved ones. We also need to explore Apus' life choices, decisions, and responsibility to understand his reason for existential crisis and how he overcame it.

METHODOLOGY

The current research work is conducted qualitatively based on Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of existential philosophy. To analyze the existential crisis of the character of Apu from the movie of the Apu trilogy by Satyajit Ray, Primary data collected from Sartre's philosophical concepts are taken from his book entitled *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Facticity, Bad Faith, Responsibility, and Transcendence.

Also, in Sartre's work, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (Sartre, 1948) he states that human beings are the creators of the essence of their existence by their free will and choice, which suggests that there might be a possible way where Apus' existence had a new meaning. Therefore, the current paper aligns these principles of Sartre's existential philosophy with the life story of Apu which explores his crisis, meaninglessness, life decision, free will, and transcendence. This paper can further contribute to understanding the origin of existential

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crisis and how to overcome it in the life of an individual who can relate to the ordinary life of a simple boy struggling to find purpose in life.

The aim and objective of this research paper is to explain the journey of the transformation of Apus's state in existential crisis to finding meaning in life and attaining transcendence. Furthermore, as a researcher of this paper, it is important to understand how Apu was getting extremely dependent on his wife Aparna which restricted him from finding meaning in life. Therefore, after her death, Apu got into an existential crisis (Bhaumik, 2020). In *Apur Sansar*, Apu's suicide attempt on the railroad tracks indicates the void in his life (Shambu, 2019). This paper further investigates what led him to escape from his responsibility of accepting his child after his wife's death through Sartre's existential philosophy. It is also imperative to analyze and examine what gave his existence a new meaning when he became all alone and was in crisis of his existence after Aparna's death.

Facticity

Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* described that certain facts cannot be changed even though how free or radical we become. Fichte first termed the word "*facticity*" and it refers to the "*thrownness*" from the environment (Kisiel, T. 2014). For example, the socio-economic condition of a family, the birthplace, or the physical condition of an individual's body. These environmental situations cannot be chosen by us as they are the Givens from the environment, the unchangeable aspects of our life. The environmental givens are mostly the biological or sociological aspects of our life that cannot be changed is called Facticity (Scott, 2022).

In the film *Apu Trilogy* by Satyajit Ray, we see Apu's life has many unavoidable life circumstances and misery (Chattopadhyay, 2018). The givens of life as portrayed by Ray in the *Apu Trilogy* explores the everlasting poverty of the Apus Family and their helplessness. The concept of death first emerged in Apus's life during the death of his aunt Indir Thakrun who was very close to Durga (Ray, 2021) followed by the death of his beloved sister, Durga. The more factual life circumstances evolved around Apu when he was 10 years old and was learning to cope with his father's illness. Despite Apu struggling to find his own identity and purpose, life circumstances led him to face the death of his father Harihar. Apus's mother became extremely protective of his son as she had no one else in the family after their death. At seventeen years of age, Apu faces the death of his mother who eagerly waited for her son's arrival to see him. Apu couldn't visit in time and had to encounter the empty house all alone. He again started to travel a lone path to undertake a new journey of life (The Criterion Collection, 2023).

By now Apu lost many people in his life and was somehow filled with guilt, regrets, sorrow, and a void within him feeling that he has no one in this world that he could call a family. In the last film, *Apur Sansar*, he accidentally married Aparna, and the young bride's death during childbirth was another important factual event that happened in Apus's life during which he broke down totally and detached himself from the rest of the world (Academy Museum, 2020).

Bad Faith

According to Sartre, Bad faith is a form of self-deception where the individual consciously or unconsciously acts to deceive oneself of their freedom and responsibility (Pozen, 2015). It happens when one denies the fact that they have freedom and claims that whatever happened

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is because of their external circumstances. Simply because they were unlucky it happened to them and thus one can radically escape bad faith (Haynes-Curtis, 1988). For example, one might say *"I am cursed because whoever stays with me dies"*. The individual who has bad faith ignored the fact that there might be other possible reasons like ill health or accidents that led to their death and not because of their mere presence.

In Sartre's concept of bad faith, the character of Apu in the Apu Trilogy can be portrayed as a philosophical, optimistic, dreamy idealist individual (Ebert, 2001). Apu's bad faith can be evident from his life choices of embracing his responsibilities. For example, after the death of his sister Durga or death of his father Harihar, it was expected that Apu would become a more active member of his family and provide strength during the hard times of his family (Jotted Lines, 2019). However, the character of Apu was more of a dreamy nature and not ambitious enough to regain the resources and financial stability for his family. Apu loves to be in his world of dreaming of an ideal society that doesn't prioritize competition, survival, or ambition. Therefore, it can be said he was more of an idealist than a realist. In the end, when Aparna dies, Apu refuses to accept any more responsibility for life (Neher, 2015). His resistance to accepting the life challenges or the Givens of life can be interpreted as a form of Bad faith. All his life Apu's fate derived from where he was standing in the present and even his marriage with Aparna was accidental. The fact that Apu never dared to dream about creating his destiny might have come from the circumstantial miseries of his life. But as said by Haruki Murakami *"You can't choose how you are born but you can choose how you die"* (Murakami, 2000).

Responsibility

Defining our essence is indeed a unique feature of Sartre's philosophy which is empowering but it also comes with responsibility (Maden, 2023). For Sartre, human nature does not exist because *"there is no God who understands it"* (Carroll, 2019). Human nature means that there is an essence to being human, but Sartre denied this. Therefore, human nature must be determined by us as individuals. We define what human nature is and that is where our responsibility lies. We are responsible when we choose to leave suffering and inequality in the world. *"If I know about inequality in my neighborhood and doing nothing about it, I am defining human nature and I am responsible for it."* Sartre thus suggests that we all bear the burden of freedom because with freedom comes responsibility. Avoiding this responsibility is dishonest. Therefore, we are free to choose our life decisions and act accordingly. But with the freedom of choice comes the responsibility of taking consequences for our actions (Nelkin, 2011).

In the first film of the Apu Trilogy by Satyajit Ray Pather Panchali, Apu initially appears to be a free-spirited child and has the personality of a daydreamer frequently lost in his imaginative world (Seagull Books, 2023). He is seen wandering around the fields lost in thoughts of exploring and gaining intellectual pursuits often ignoring the daily household responsibility or thinking of a way to get rid of the poverty. Moreover, the death of his loved ones had a great impact on him. His father's death signified the loss of his childhood self, his mother's death signifies disconnection from his past and his wife's death signified his disconnection from any kind of responsibility (Cinematary, 2017). Apu abandoned his goal of completing his novel and tried to escape from any significant life moments. Apu is devastated after the death of his wife Aparna and abandons their child to live as an orphan (Firstpost, 2018). All these actions of him can be seen as an escape from the harsh and ruthless reality of the present into a more imaginative idealist world.

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However, it is crucial to remember that Apu's character changes significantly throughout the trilogy. Apu progressively discovers himself throughout his life's journey (Sanyal, 2023). He grows more conscious of his obligations and the effects of his decisions on other people as he gets older and deals with the hardships and tragedies that life hands him. The trilogy tells Apu's coming-of-age tale, tracing his development from a carefree young child to a man who struggles with the intricacies of life, love, and grief. Apu's character develops from a carefree and inquisitive youngster to a man facing life's challenges (Bertocci, 1984). As he manages societal expectations, personal losses, and the rigors of family life, his feeling of duty grows. Therefore, his sense of responsibility deepens as he navigates personal losses, societal expectations, and the demands of family life.

The subjective conception of responsibility is based on free will which contributes to the development of individualization and spiritualization in an individual (Sapiro, 2006). Apu grows up and leaves his village to pursue an education in the city, he faces new challenges and responsibilities. He strives to improve his academic ability and understands the importance of education in shaping his future. However, this persecution also strains his relationship with his mother. Apu is torn between his academic ambitions and his responsibility to his family. Apu made some life decisions which further led him towards the feeling of existential void like choosing to stay away from his child and deny his connection with him when he had a choice to embrace his child after his wife's death. Apu chose to discontinue his unfinished novel where he wrote the story of his life which might have given him a greater purpose to live accepting the fact that life and death are part of life. Sartre's philosophy acknowledges that a responsible self emerges by recognizing one's past and future occurring of life circumstances (Baird, 2007). However in the end it can be seen that Apu struggles with the responsibilities of fatherhood and the unexpected challenges of life come to an end. Apu becomes a single father and embraces the responsibilities of raising a child.

Transcendence

Jean-Paul Sartre's transcendental philosophy is a central aspect of human consciousness and human existence. According to him, transcendence refers to how human consciousness transcends itself and engages with the world and other beings (Gardner, 2010). It's about always going beyond oneself, engaging with the world, and being aware of how one is seen by others. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy is often associated with existentialism, and the concept of transcendence plays an important role in his work. Transcendence is closely related to Sartre's ideas about human freedom and responsibility. Transcendence is the gesture to put oneself at risk and the only way to achieve an authentic life (Daigle, 2013). When individuals go beyond themselves in their decisions and actions, they also take responsibility for those decisions. Therefore, the freedom to transcend is both liberating and burdensome.

Apu's journey can be seen as an exploration of *existential choice* from his early childhood in 'Pather Panchali' to his academic pursuits in 'Aparajito'. Further to his experiences as a husband and as a father in 'Apar Sansar', Apu faces various situations that force him to make crucial life decisions. These decisions contribute to the construction of his identity and transcendental journey. According to Sartre's transcendence through relationships, Sartre's concept of "*being for others*" includes the idea that individuals transcend themselves by considering their relationship with others and themselves (Veltman, 2009). In the trilogy, Apu's relationships with his family, friends, and lovers shape his self-confidence. Apu's

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influence on his life and his awareness of others' perceptions contribute to transcendence. Sartre's concept of "the gaze" or look is an important form of social interaction (Vaz,1995)." The gaze" is reflected in the moment when Apu is observed by others. For example, in "Aparajito", Apu faces the expectations and judgments of his mother and society during his training. This outside perspective influences his decisions and confidence. Further Apu's life choices, such as pursuing education, deciding to marry, and accepting the responsibilities of fatherhood, reflect Sartre's emphasis on personal freedom and responsibility.

Apu's journey involves constantly negotiating his freedom in the face of societal expectations and personal circumstances. Satyajit Ray's storytelling is deeply rooted in Indian culture and social norms, and while it may not be drawn directly from Sartre's philosophy, the existential themes of the Apu trilogy speak volumes about the human condition. Apu's experiences can be interpreted through an existentialist lens, highlighting universal themes of choice, responsibility, and the constant search for meaning in life.

CONCLUSION

During Apu's lifetime, he has experienced many deaths starting from the loss of his dearest sister, then his father followed by his mother. During his adult life, Apu again starts living by finding happiness in his world. He loved to play flute, write novels, and dream about a beautiful life. His new phase of life started when he accidentally married Aparna. Apu felt void and empty after Aparna's death because he was emotionally invested in his relationship with Aparna. After her death, he was shattered and in misery. He felt that he had nothing to live for and had lost the basic meaning of life. His sense of responsibility was diminished with Aparna's death. He couldn't find his meaning of existence after Aparna's death.

Apu was in denial of reality for a long time after Aparna's death. He abandons his little boy right after his wife's death. He avoided seeing the reality of the presence of his son. Life has scarred him so many times due to the death of all his beloved people, that he was scared of any more attachments. Since he never met the child and denied the child's presence in reality, he could never connect with the child. He even abandoned his novel based on his past life experience which he used to write to express his feelings. After Aparna's death, he felt no need for the novel as he lost himself and had no intention of publishing. The movie ends on a positive note where despite many miseries in Apu's life, he understands that escaping from responsibilities will not bring what he has lost. Therefore, he gives himself one more chance to be happy and gladly accepts his responsibilities to live a more fulfilling life.

This research paper aims to explain the journey of the transformation of Apu's state in existential crisis to finding meaning in life and attaining transcendence. In finding the answer to these significant research questions "How did Apu's life choices take him to the ultimate existential crisis?" and "How did he find his new purpose and meaning in life?" Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy principles helped in the understanding of the transcendental journey of Apu. Therefore, it can be understood that there was some unavoidable life circumstances (Facticity) that prevented Apu from accepting life challenges or responsibilities (Bad Faith). At last Apu transcends himself by embracing his responsibility of his child through free will. Therefore, people do have choices to make decisions and accept one's responsibility. This research paper can lead to an important

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contribution to a deeper understanding of self-discovery and self-exploration of human life journeys through an existential lens.

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Conflict of Interest

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