

## Existential Crisis and Identity: Reading of the Novel *Parvana's Journey*

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### Abstract

Refugee crisis is one of the greatest humanitarian concerns encountered by the contemporary world. Inability to restore peace in the Third World countries even decades after the World wars underscores the need to study militancy and its repercussions. Literature has been successful in painting the war-torn lives of people. The Canadian fiction writer Deborah Ellis is acclaimed for her writings that unveil the sufferings of the Third World children. "*Parvana's Journey*", the second novel in the author's international bestseller "*The*

*Breadwinner*" trilogy, is a text that explores the lives of children who are victimized by militancy in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and the Afghanistan war. The novel focuses on the journey that this young girl, Parvana, makes and how she is forced to be an adult much before she should have to be. The approaches of trauma studies open a chance to make a detailed study of the traumatic experiences faced by the children. Through a textual analysis of the novel *Parvana's Journey*, this paper attempts to study the existential angst and the psychological dilemma experienced by those children who are exposed to war and militancy. The proposed paper intends to evaluate the traumatic experiences of the Afghan children in particular and their journey to adulthood.

**Keywords:** War, militancy, Afghanistan women and children, trauma, adulthood, violence.

Exile has been part of history since time immemorial. Political instability and natural catastrophes force people to undertake the life of a refugee. They set out with an aim to build a new home and identity but their lives change irrevocably after the displacement. Their unpleasant past has solid psychological influence among the refugees and it accompanies them till their grave. The traumatic memories haunt them to their graves. As Freud observes, reminiscences of the traumatic past can have solid adverse effects on the victims (Gay 71). Refugee narratives sketch the lives and the trauma experienced by the refugees.

Afghanistan is the country with world's highest number of internal refugees. The ongoing war and the stories of violence in Afghanistan have remained in the headlines ever since the Taliban regime started. The violence unleashed by the militia during the Taliban regime and the decades of war with the United States produced a massive number of internal refugees in the country. The agony of this displaced population is worsened by the adverse climatic conditions in the terrain, making life difficult for them even in the present time. Studies made by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reveal that 4, 61,000 new displacements were recorded in 32 of the 34 provinces in Afghanistan in the year 2019. In the first half of 2020, armed conflicts caused as many as 1, 17,000 new displacements and 30,000 displacements as a result of natural disasters. Around three million people were dislocated by the end of the year as a result of the four decades of

conflict ("Afghanistan"). Political uncertainties, natural disasters and the resulting economic crises have made life most difficult to the Afghan people.

Life during the exile and in the incompetent refugee camps adds to the distress of the people. The demographic changes caused by the displacements cannot be restored to the former status. Temporary settlements and lack of land ownership causes a perpetual emotion of non-belongingness. Inadequate sanitation facilities and health care escalate the death rate too. The unsettled political disputes throw the people to the peripheries where they fail to receive the security of a government. It is even more tormenting for women and children who are forced to endure the oppression of the patriarchal orthodoxy.

Images of the refugee women and children are often portrayed in literature. Within the fabric of patriarchy, women are denied their voice and their existence is controlled by the system. As the author Candice Marie Jenkins observes, "Control, domain and independence are quintessentially masculine" (Jenkins 993). The masculine dominance not only persecutes the female existence rather, it also subjugates the identity of children. There is a tendency to subjugate anything that engenders a threat to their autocracy. Being the citizens and the potential leaders of the future, children pose a challenge which they seek to suppress. Thus the dominating power structures take control over their identity. As Gramsci declares, these people who are excluded from the institutions of the society and denied their voice can be considered the subalterns. In that sense, children adorn the subdued identity of a subaltern.

Children are deeply impacted by such upheavals. Many writers have been successful in portraying the pathetic lives of such children. Deborah Ellis is one such renowned fiction writer who effectively presents the pain and agony of the victimized children of the Third World. Her award-winning trilogy *The Breadwinner* sketches the life of a girl Parvana, who is deserted in the war-stricken valleys of Afghanistan. Left alone amidst bombs, landmines and abject poverty, Parvana evolves as an adult over the course of the trilogy, coping with her distressing life experiences.

*Parvana's journey* is a novel that can be read independently from the other works in the trilogy. It illustrates a few early years of Parvana's teenage. This novel starts from her life in a camp for the internal refugees and ends when she is reunited with her long lost family. The physical journey Parvana makes in search of her family and return to her home sets the base plot of the novel. But the novel also reveals a psychological journey that she makes in search of a safe life. This paper attempts to make a textual analysis of the novel *Parvana's Journey* to study the instances through which the novelist tries to uncover the effects of militancy in the psychology of children and how it snatches their childhood from these children and forces them to adorn adulthood at a tender age itself.

## War, exile and identity

A study focusing on the child characters in the novel within the frames of trauma studies and the Culture of Violence theory will help to understand the psychological distress and imbalance faced by children who are fundamentally denied of residential and parental care. The UNICEF research reports reveal that 1 in 18 Afghan children fail to reach their first birthday ("The situation of children and women in Afghanistan"). This suggests that the story of Parvana cannot be passed over as a mere imagination of the novelist. The setting, story, characters and life portrayed in the novel is not an isolated one, rather it is the undeniable reality of the Third World nations, especially Afghanistan. This stresses the need for more authentic studies to be made regarding the condition and rehabilitation of the Afghan children. A study of their psychological status and the short and long term impact the armed conflicts have on them will help to understand how these children are falling prey to the militancy and necropolitics. Achille Mbembe considers the people who have no sovereign power over their own body as dead. Their inability to decide their life and actions, due to excessive political interference, make them both socially and politically dead (Achille). The land that breeds war also breeds a large population of children who are denied the right to live.

The 'essence' of human existence has remained a fascinating topic to thinkers. The famous proposition of Sartre urges us to think that "existence precedes essence" (Flynn 45) and it somehow reverses the traditional notion of universal conformities. In that sense, it is rationally valid to assume that human beings are responsible for the questions such as what they are, why they are so and who they are in this uncertain propagation of social living. The existentialist philosophers believe people as free agents with the power to decide their actions, life and identity. Jean Paul Sartre says, "human reality may be defined as a being such that in its freedom is at stake because human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom" (Sartre 567). According to Sartre, 'freedom is a choice', but the basic privilege of choice is hampered by the regressive apparatus. Humans, the free agents, authorized the hierarchy of community living. It is the same „hierarchy“ that prompted the first appraisal of violence in the world and the same is nourished, nurtured, and nullified within the ambit of societal politics.

Violence is the strongest tool used to perpetuate the power structures. But it disrupts the established order of living, and hence the mental as well as emotional sanity of people. Such disrupted social orders create string collective psychological dilemma among people regarding their very own existence. The environment has great impact on the way one comprehend meaning. It starts with establishing an identity to the Self. "Choices that feel identity-congruent in one situation do not necessarily feel identity-congruent in another situation. This flexibility is part of what makes the self useful" (Oyserman et al. 70). The arbitrariness of self becomes clear when social milieu changes drastically from time to time. This idea is evident in the novel *Parvana's Journey*. The spatial relevance of the novel fulfills the ideal execution of war-torn Afghanistan as a medium that stimulates the successful rendition of objective correlative in the narration. Hence, the existential crisis experienced by the characters in the text is very much related to the spatial possibility of the setting.

Generally, the existential school of thought evaluates the philosophical questions encountered by the adults who have encountered diverse life experiences and are perplexed by the way the world works. But *Parvana's Journey* portrays the ideas of existentialism from children's perspectives. The teenagers who have not even met their parents and known their family tries to tackle with the puzzling questions regarding the meaning of life and existence and try to create their own identity. The psychological predisposition of the major child characters in the novel is rendered in such a way that it blatantly exposes the meaninglessness of armed conflict by juxtaposing the political milieu with the idea of existential absurdism experienced by them.

Parvana is caught up in the fight for survival. Her existence supersedes her goals and mere survival becomes her primary goal. Even though she had a greater prospect to find her mother in the camp, she turns away those opportunities as she had to search for food to survive. Many days Parvana fails to fetch food even after waiting in the queue the whole day. The unending waiting for her family since the beginning of the novel and her waiting for provisions in the camp resemble the long wait Becket portrays in his play *Waiting for Godot*. Even though the novel ends when she reunites with her family, Parvana becomes totally disillusioned as she becomes unable to find a meaning for her existence. She fails to understand the purpose and meaning of life. The text hence establishes the existential crisis and psychological conundrums of the characters. Parvana exclaims as the novel ends, "Is this it?"... "Have I come so far just to be here? Is this really my life?" (Ellis 180). These words reveal her torment in its maximal level. Her hope for comfort in life, which fueled her journey in her tough life, gets crumpled by the end of the novel. She encounters her ultimate reality and realizes that it is far away from the home she had in her dreams. And the sweet hope is nothing but a delusion.

The linguistic tone employed is adept in delivering the anguish of the characters. The motto that keeps the children moving in their journey itself is filled with fear of death. They say at multiple occasions, "If we stop, we die." At an age, when they have not even left their

infancy, these children are thrust with the inescapable truths of life. Death is the reality they are introduced to even before they know the world of possibilities, peace and life. Dead is a lingering presence in the life of these children and hence it appears in their choice of words too. The metaphors they use are also indicative of this. Parvana imagines Leila as a spider who waits for a fly to become trapped in her web (Ellis 114). They survive out of the provisions they grab from those who are killed by the land mines. They strongly cling on to Leila's belief that the "minefield would take care of us", by feeding them and by reuniting them with their family. This reveals their acceptance of the truth that our existence has no mighty claim to make. If survive by consuming others and our deaths will be celebrated by other creatures.

The narrator exposes the ideas of existentialism in a cosmic level. Even though the narration centered on the life and experiences of Parvana, the novel does not restrict the exposition as an isolated reality in her life. Rather she is presented as an archetype of oppression. The narrator says, "The eyes were dead. There was no life left in them" (Ellis 28). The aforementioned statement describes Parvana's state of mind amidst the chaos. The 'dead' eyes of Parvana is not just her physiological reality, rather, it symbolizes the lack of hope she has. This absence of expectation is the reality of their existence. Since Parvana represents the repressed minority of the country, her eyes relate the self-reflection of the war-scarred Afghanistan. In that sense, the existential dilemma, which results from the fear of the anticipated death, is perpetuated through the minds of characters in the novel. Parvana's father once says to her, "some people are dead before they die" (Ellis 28). These words of her father enlighten her regarding the truth of existence, which she shares with her newly found siblings. The dichotomy of death and meaninglessness pervades their whole existence.

The conversations in the novel also resemble the literary motifs of Becket's master pieces of absurdism. The deep dejection of the characters is reflected through the language employed in the novel. Parvana's dilemma is epitomized when she says in her letter to Shauzia that "Hope is a waste of time" (Ellis 178). She was one of the most optimistic characters in the novel who was persistent in finding her lost family. Despite of the countless miseries that she encounters, she was moving ahead with her plan. But towards the end of the novel, we find Parvana as being totally engulfed by the absurdity of existence. Standing in the lines for the whole day in search of food and water, Parvana fails to search her mother and siblings. She plans to look for them. But she is caught up in the greatest struggle of life where she is forced to choose between existence and essence. Finding her family was the purpose of Parvana's life. But over the course of her journey she fails to focus on her goal.

The delineation of the baby character Hassan in the novel adds an extra thought to the conviction of existential crisis. Presence of Hassan is set forth through his cries. His incessant 'cries' demands an immediate response, which is an allegory to indicate the political situation. The narrator mentions, "It cried as if it had been crying for a long time and no longer expected anyone to come" (Ellis 32). The helplessness of the child and every single child deserted in the land is indicated through this line. The inability to restore in their lives and their incompetency to decipher the meaning of their existence is revealed through Hassan's cries. He has no control over his life and no knowledge regarding his identity and the present condition. But still he is enduring the trauma of war. The sudden and miraculous intervention of an unknown savior is least expected in the plot. By depicting the agony of a child who has hardly any role in the mechanics of politics, the novelist demonstrates the absurdity of war and its far reaching impact on the unarmed lives.

The child has no history or identity. When Parvana names the child Hassan, she attempts to give an identity to the child. Her pronouncement after the 'naming ceremony' of Hassan also provides its explanation to assert that why is it so important to have a name of one's own, "because everybody has to have a name" (Ellis 36). Even when she names the child she is unaware of its purpose which makes the whole exercise an irony. She is at a point where she has to be an adult but she has failed to grow. Their growth have retarded as they do not have anything to look up to or look forward to in their lives. Parvana's decision to name Hassan also parallels her quest for identity which is utterly ambiguous in the narrative voice of the novel.

The invalid body of Asif is another metaphor to indicate the fragmented identity of the characters. His static leg reminds the readers the trauma of his past. After his parents passed away, he was badly tortured by his uncle causing him to lose his leg. This symbolizes the persecution that are happening under the new political developments in Afghanistan. Even at a very young age Asif is behaving like a very old man who has endured too many things. His concern for Parvana, his affection for Leila and the way he takes care of Hassan pictures him as a fully grown adult. He emblemizes the high rate of children who are forced to adorn adulthood at a tender age. All of these kids have equal right to enjoy their childhood, ignoring the games of the politics. But they are forced to lead a life under the fear of persecution. Multitudes are denied of their right to lead a peaceful life under the sky. As the protagonists of the novel does, they have a perpetual presence of danger lingering above them. Every time they see an aeroplane, the children are feared that a bomb will fall on them and kill them. Sky is usually treated as an archetype for hope and lofty dreams. But for Parvana and her siblings, sky is a constant reminder of dead and denial of their rights.

Similarly, the worms that come out of Leila's unhealed wound are connotative of the reverberations of war. Even after the traumatic experiences its scars remain imprinted in the psyche of the affected. The worms that come out of the wounds on the face of other children Parvana encounters during the journey reminds her of the pain and suffering they have had. Even after she reunites with her family she fails to regain her former self. The death of Leila is yet another metaphor for the lost happiness, the perpetual pain and the inability to restore the true identity.

The presence of books and letters in the novel suggests a yearning for an established identity. Parvana's letters to her friend Shauzia appears as a motif in the narration which symbolizes her desire for security and belongingness. She addresses her anguish and aspiration to her friend whom she has not met for a long time. But she feels relieved when she writes those letters. She uses them as a medium to not forget her linguistic skills. It is also her solace to get rid of the isolation and the abject absurdism that engulfs her present and her hope for a secure future. Those letters are the unadulterated feelings of a helpless child, a denied childhood. The unstable livelihood of the child characters suggestively ensures the questions of 'meaning' and 'essence' in life. Hence, writing letters to Parvana's friend is an indication towards her endeavor to confront or reconcile with her 'essential' questions of instability.

War and displacement greatly impact the way in which people perceive the world and generate meaning. Their way of understanding life and the world will be different from a common man who is distanced from a world of hostilities. Mutual respect, security and ethics should be the parameters for the functioning of a society. However, the execution of power may sometimes disrupt the harmony of social synthesis. The morale of an individual is indeed a by-product of collective social and personal memory. When the memory of an individual is tormented, his or her psychological stability willingly or unwillingly undergo a psychic metamorphosis. If such mental reversions happen during childhood, the child may tend to dismiss the 'normal' social etiquette. Human beings undergo a longer period of mentoring, getting prepared to be an adult. Proper academic and parental care is given to them to shape them as fitting adults. But the children who are born during the times of conflicts are deprived of such care and security. This drastically affects their identity and their way of meaning making. The children who are separated from their family at a very young age are forced to set up their lives alone. They are forced to make adult transition at a tender age itself. This transition to adulthood happens despite of any guidance, communication and education which submerge them with a traumatic state of mind.

Child characters such as Parvana, Asif and Leila in the novel *Parvana's Journey* exhibit the same kind of mental trauma which is inflicted through their physical exile caused by the unexpected turn of events during warfare and the subsequent emotional turmoil. Such circumstantial proceedings infer that the existential conflicts in children are the resultant force of a

greater psychological trauma. For that reason, the lucid account of existential dilemma in the novel convicts the battle-scarred country and its rulers. A deeper understanding of the psychology of children from such backgrounds can contribute immensely to the expansion of various studies including literary studies and trauma studies.

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