

**RESONANCE OF EXISTENTIALISM ON PANDEMIC  
LITERATURE: AN INTROSPECTION OF PANDEMIC  
LITERATURE OF THE PRESENT**

Dissertation submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language  
and Literature.

**MA English Language and Literature**

**AUGUST 2022**

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled *RESONANCE OF EXISTENTIALISM ON PANDEMIC LITERATURE: AN INTROSPECTION OF PANDEMIC LITERATURE OF THE PRESENT* is a bonafide record of the studies and research carried out by Clincy Clament at the Department of English, All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram, under the guidance of Dr. Nishel Prem Elias, Assistant Professor, Department of English, All Saints' College, Thiruvananthapuram and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.

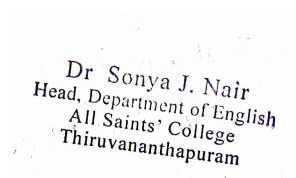


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## DECLARATION

I, Clincy Clament, do hereby declare that this dissertation titled *RESONANCE OF EXISTENTIALISM ON PANDEMIC LITERATURE: AN INTROSPECTION OF PANDEMIC LITERATURE OF THE PRESENT* is a record of studies and research conducted by me under the guidance of Dr. Nishel Prem Elias at All Saints' College and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature. No part of this dissertation has been submitted before for the award of any other degrees, diplomas, title or recognition.

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**Clincy Clament**

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## **PREFACE**

Literature has always been influenced by the abysmal state of mind of humanity living in a specific time and era. The Abysmal State of Mind is not only a mirror of the time and place of literature, but it also depicts the thoughts and feelings of the people living in that period of time. A feeling of meaning, or crafting an explanation, exhibited in literature during the horrific current crisis of the pandemic, undoubtedly resonates within existentialist paradigms. Not addressing the effects of the humanitarian crisis on humans through literature is equivalent to living in a time bubble, oblivious to the catastrophe all around us. Interdependence is the main idea of humanism; the greatest hubris and existential crisis in human existence can be understood as an examination of our role in this ecosystem, since we control nature.

The epidemic, undoubtedly one of the most heinous calamities in contemporary history, has had an almost irreversible impact on human outlook, imagination, and thought. It will undoubtedly have an indelible impact on modern literary dialogue. The interactions that occur during a crisis of such proportions, as well as the various literary works, scenarios, and interpretations that they generate, offer a revealing window on humanity and its propensity to search for answers in its construction of the world. Humanity is ultimately helpless in the face of uncontrollable, global pandemics, as a corrupted or otherwise godless world has its way with man. Its socioeconomic and political ramifications will continue to ripple throughout society in both a negative and positive fashion for decades to come. This has an indelible impact on the way literature is distributed at the time, as literature effectively represents society and its sentiments in general.

Survival is at the heart of the present, with death hiding around every corner, and this is the basis of an existential way of existence that pervades literature as well.

This can be assessed by looking at historical pandemic writing, and the purpose of this study is to look at the resonance of existentialism in pandemic literature of the present. The analysis of the pandemic genre in order to explain, elaborate, and underline the theme of survival in literature might more effectively reflect how existentialism influences literature.



## **Chapter-1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Disease has been a part of human life from the beginning of time, whether caused by bacteria, viruses, or other malevolent microbes. That's especially true now, when COVID-19 has affected almost everyone in some way. Each narrative of every disease is fascinating in and of itself, but historical pandemics may teach us a lot about the interplay between science and society. We can learn about the beginnings of quarantine by researching the bubonic plague whereas Cholera demonstrated the significance of cleanliness in our cities and launched the career of the father of modern epidemiology. More recent pandemics, such as the Spanish flu, SARS, and MERS, have demonstrated the value of communication and infrastructure in the fight against disease.

Everyone has probably heard of the word "pandemic" by now, and some of you may have even been a victim of one of the world's pandemics. What really is a pandemic can be answered as a disease prevalent over a whole country or the world—it's what happens when a disease outbreak, or epidemic, grows to a worldwide scale. Today, the World Health Organization is the authority that declares when an epidemic has escalated to a pandemic. For example, on March 11, 2020, they announced at a news briefing that COVID-19 had become a pandemic.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the resonance of existentialism in pandemic literature. Literature has always been influenced by the deplorable state of mind of humans living in a specific time and era. A sense of meaning, or forging an explanation evinced within literature during the calamitous contemporary crisis of the pandemic, definitely resonates within the existentialistic paradigm. The pandemic, arguably one of the most horrific disasters in modern history, has had an almost

irreversible impact on human outlook, imagination, and thinking. It will undoubtedly have an indelible impact on modern literary discourse. The interactions that occur during such a crisis, as well as the various texts, practises, and socioeconomic and political ramifications, have an indelible impact on how literature of that time is distributed, as literature effectively represents society and its sentiments in general. The essence of the present is survival, with death lurking around every corner, and this is the foundation of an existential way of living, which is reflected in literature as well.

Literature not only has an undeniable and profound impact on people and society, but it is also shaped by the complexities of life, the resonance of human nature, its joys, sorrows, epiphanies, and experiences. Literature reveals the realities that are intertwined with the lives of all living consciousnesses on the planet. Humans have described their reflections from within the recesses of their mental states in various situations, and have also resonated with the very conditions of life within such situations, in various forms of literary outpourings.

Pandemics cause life-altering and irreversible changes in the lives of humans undergoing a critical and extensive upheaval. During a catastrophic tribulation such as a pandemic, people experience shifting realities, distorted insights, and fundamental shifts in reality paradigms. We notice a striking similarity in the distressing situation after cognitive rumination of the literature representing past pandemics.

Literary works, according to Jones. S, supplement philosophical texts, and the urgency of how one should live is felt acutely during stressful times such as pandemics. She also believes that while both literature and philosophy address the existential question of how to live in such moments, books, novels, and movies about such times are more successful in answering it. There are insightful insights gained

into the thought processes and perceptive realities of people living in such apocalyptic manifestations of the pandemic. Within a pandemic, uncertainty becomes the only reality, and how existentialist thought prevails in literature can be examined in depth. The existential insanity is captured in many kinds of writing and movies, where the very life becomes a source of anguish resulting from the depravity of hope, as well as an investigation into the everlasting trauma created by the invisible force of nature eating through humanity's interwoven texture.

The spread of COVID-19, also known as coronavirus, is the most recent example of a pandemic. Diseases, on the other hand, have spread throughout human history. The spread of an infectious disease through Ethiopia, Egypt, and Libya was one of the earliest known examples. The disease eventually reached the Mediterranean region and the city of Athens, where roughly one-quarter of the city's population died from sickness while under siege by Sparta from 430 to 426 B.C.E. during the Peloponnesian War. Pandemics, or outbreaks of disease that spread across large geographic regions and eventually affect large numbers of people worldwide, have become less forgiving over time.

The History of Pandemics is presented by Encyclopaedia Britannica. A famous example of a pandemic is the Black Death, responsible for wiping out some 30 to 50 percent of Europe's population. It made its way to Sicily in 1347 and spread from there to mainland Europe like wildfire. Asia and North Africa's populations were also decimated. Following Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Americas in the late 1400s, the plague spread to native populations. Other infectious diseases carried by Europeans included smallpox, typhus, cholera, and influenza. The native populations of North and South America were devastated by disease because they had no prior exposure and thus no immunity to these diseases. Some scientists even believe that

the impact on the Native American population was so severe, with a death toll estimated at 56 million, that the climate entered a cooling cycle due to a lack of crop rotation.

A wide array of hosts can carry and transmit disease, including insects, rodents, livestock, wildlife, and, of course, humans. Many factors can contribute to the emergence of a pandemic, and some of these factors have fuelled an increase in the occurrence of pandemics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Disruption of natural biodiversity, increased human-to-human contact in cities, and increased global travel have all contributed to disease spread. The 1918 influenza pandemic was one of the most severe in recent history. Though the virus's origins are unknown, it spread throughout the world between 1918 and 1919. The first cases in the United States were among military personnel. It is estimated that by the end of the pandemic, one-third of the global population, or 500 million people, had the virus. Some estimates put the global death toll at 50 million, with the United States accounting for 650,000 of them. While COVID-19 is currently on everyone's lips around the world, it is only one example in a long history of pandemic inflection points.

Life is filled with a lot of big questions: What's the point? What's the meaning? Why am I here? These questions can lead to despair or they can lead to curiosity. Humans have an insatiable need to discover the solutions to everything unknown and beyond. Being human entails being "thrown" (as Heidegger puts it) into a universe devoid of any logical, ontological, or moral framework. We use immense ingenuity to hide from death, uncertainty, ourselves, and Being-Itself (Tillich), but with self-destructive results. Extreme circumstances make hiding impossible, and as a result, they are frequently the subject of philosophical and literary reflection on human fear.

To achieve self-definition under a crisis of such magnitude as a pandemic, one must confront the difficulties given by the anxiety flux perpetuated by the apocalyptic situation inside existential frameworks. Malpas (2012) discusses existentialism in literature as an expression in literary works that figure inside existential crises, citing Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett as examples. In his research, he looks at how existentialism manifests itself in literary, yet philosophical, terms. Despite occurrences at various moments in human history, Choudhary S. believes that the spectrum of responses have been caught within existential paradigms at various levels and bear a commonality regardless of the time when such crises occur or are captured.

One cannot help but notice the literary imprint of one of the deadliest pandemics of the previous century while drifting into the light of how this shaped the works of literature of the time when contemplating reflection of literature during the Spanish Flu of 1918. One notices that in such writing, there is a constant threat of death, which results in ludicrous behaviour. While elaborating on this absurdity, Ingram(2016) claims that during the pandemic, the constant fear of mortality and a sense of disorientation leads to a rise in 'absurdity' and subsequent 'panic afflicted' conduct. This absurdity seeps into and pervades literary representations of people's existential situation during a pandemic's chaotic disarray. Outka (2020) notes that both T.S. Eliot and his wife caught the flu during the Spanish flu pandemic, and Eliot felt weighed down by what he called "domestic influenza" of both his health and life concerning his home, as well as an impending sense of worry that his mind had been affected by his illness.

Pandemic literature has always existed because there have been outbreaks of mass contagion that have resulted in terrifying experiences, the rawness of anguish in human existence, and a sense of futility and despair. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The*

*Decameron*, a portrayal of bawdy stories delighting in carnal pleasures while seven ladies and three men were quarantined in a Tuscan Villa near Florence, is one of the earliest examples of such writing. Later mediaeval texts such as the *Decameron*, according to Riva, Benedetti, and Cesana (2014), stressed human behaviour and that the fear of contagion was responsible for an increase in vices, which led to physical and moral death. Such vices were a coping mechanism for surviving and coping with the bleak reality of disease and mortality. According to Riva et al. (2014), Greek literary masterpieces such as Homer's *Illiad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* show a causal relationship between plague and morals. Pandemics elicit a wide range of reactions, some of which are psychosocial in character and others which are ludicrous. These reactions are a direct result of the epidemic, and they show the absurdity of the plague echoing throughout humanity's existential battle. Within the context of tragedies like pandemics, such sentiments find permeation and an expressive outpouring in literature of all eras.

Pandemics change people's lives, and people's existential paradigms evolve before, after, and during them. The menace of the invisible and seemingly invincible spirochete, which threatens humanity's fundamental existence, has triggered existential madness. This has consequences across the broader cultural milieu, as literature bridges the gap between the past and the present and forms a narrative that honours human perseverance. In literature, pandemics are depicted as a powerful force capable of changing lives and redefining the parameters of what is considered 'normal.' Literature evinces an expressive empathy in the existential landscape rather than a vicarious destructive account of the precarious nature of the human predicament during a cataclysm like a pandemic, which parallels the existential turmoil heightened during such a time.

Existential philosophy attempts to answer many of these concerns in order to aid humans in their search for meaning and insight. It's an idea that philosophers have debated and pondered for the past two to three centuries. Existential theory is a philosophy that has been around for centuries. It promotes individual autonomy and choice. It asserts that humans make their own decisions about their own life and significance. Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, is regarded as one of the founders of existential theory. Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre came after him and expanded on his ideas. These thinkers felt that the only way to know your own identity was to have self-awareness and self-respect. Personal progress, they argued, was required because things were continuously changing. Life was constantly changing. The only constant was that it was up to each individual to select what they wanted to be and how they wanted to be it in the moment.

Existentialism is concerned with, among other things, the search for meaning through free will and choice. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, existentialist philosophers were largely from Europe. Many existentialists believe that people should choose their own worth without respect to rules, laws, or tradition. Some existentialists are well-known for their philosophy and works of literature, such as Sartre's play "Huis-Clos," which is about a man's liberal views on free will and choice, as well as his eventual integration into a Communist cell. Huis-Clos is a drama on the meaning of life and how to live one's own life, regardless of external pressures or tradition.

The existentialist school of thought encompasses a wide range of ideologies. Although their perspectives differ, they are all concerned with the person and his or her independence in the world and society. It is one of those titles that developed after the fact to define a diverse range of concepts that have similar ideals in the area of

philosophy. Many of the ideas in the so-called existentialist school of thought are difficult to comprehend for some individuals and will put your intellect to the test. Some people wallow in the full terror of an uncaring world, while others laugh at the thoughtless. But that's part of the enjoyment.

Literature has always been influenced by the impoverished condition of mind of humans living in a specific moment and era, and it can be regarded of as a mirror of society. Throughout the catastrophic modern epidemic problem, existentialist views undoubtedly resonate with a sense of purpose or developing an explanation presented in literature. It's like being in a time bubble and being immune to the carnage all around you if you don't discuss the effects of the humanitarian crisis on humanity through literature.

The pandemic which is arguably one of the most horrific disasters of modern times has nearly irreversibly affected the outlook, imagination and thinking of humans. It will definitely have an irrefutable impact on the literary discourse of modern times. The interactions during a crisis of such proportions, the various texts, practices, the socio-economic and political repercussions have an ineradicable impact on the way the literature of that time is doled out as literature effectively represents the society and its sentiments in general. The essence of the present times is survival, with death gaping at all within close quarters and this is the root of an existential way of living which reflects in literature as well. This can be ascertained by introspecting pandemic literature of the present and the purpose of this paper is to analyse the resonance of existentialism in pandemic literature.

With the global coronavirus pandemic in its third year, the world is still in chaos. Even though the death rate and spread of the disease are minimized, that doesn't mean everything is back to how usually it was. The coronavirus has officially



placed a large portion of the world under voluntary or involuntary quarantine. Isolated individuals, confined to the relative comforts of their own homes, are turning to their streaming services for some iota of connection in a socially distant world. While some viewers seek solace in escapism and absurdist reality television, others seek a more dystopian alternative: films about pandemics. According to Kathryn Van Arendonk of Vulture, "this current pandemic crisis makes me terrified, and a story about exactly that same thing is one way to grapple with that fear." (45)

Steven Soderbergh directed the 2011 American medical thriller film *Contagion*. Matt Damon, Laurence Fishburne, Elliott Gould, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet, Bryan Cranston, Jennifer Ehle, Sanaa Lathan, and Marion Cotillard star in the ensemble. The plot revolves around the spread of a virus spread by respiratory droplets and fomites, efforts by medical researchers and public health officials to identify and contain the disease, the loss of social order during a pandemic, and the introduction of a vaccine to halt its spread. The film employs the multi-narrative "hyperlink cinema" style popularised by several of Soderbergh's films to follow several interacting plot lines. *Contagion* premiered on September 3, 2011, at the 68th Venice International Film Festival in Venice, Italy, and was released theatrically on September 9, 2011. Commercially, the film grossed \$136.5 million against a production budget of \$60 million. Critics praised it for its narrative and performances, while scientists praised it for its accuracy. The film regained popularity in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2021, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock revealed that watching the film's vaccine scramble inspired him to order a much larger quantity of COVID-19 vaccines for the U.K. than he was advised, allowing that country to begin its vaccination programme ahead of other European countries.

*Bird Box*, a 2014 book by Josh Malerman, may exist on the edge of horror and thriller, but the story proves to resonate with the current climate. The story, which has also been adapted into a Netflix feature film starring Sandra Bullock, is about an epidemic in which people are driven to deadly violence after witnessing a mysterious phenomenon. Scattered survivors remain, living in an abandoned home near the river, unable to venture outside without full vision. Malerman's story depicts a horrifying snapshot of a world trapped and unable to risk exposure to outside surroundings, seemingly foreshadowing the social isolation many are forced to practise in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Malerman is also planning to release *Malorie*, a sequel to *Bird Box*.

*#Alive* is a South Korean zombie film directed by Cho Il-hyung that will be released in 2020. It stars Yoo Ah-in and Park Shin-hye and is based on Matt Naylor's 2019 script *Alone* (which is also becoming a film), which he co-adapted with Cho. The story follows a video game live streamer's struggle for survival as he is forced to stay alone in his Seoul apartment during a zombie apocalypse. It was released in South Korea on June 24, 2020, and worldwide on Netflix on September 8, 2020.

*Happiness* is a 2021 South Korean television series produced by Studio Dragon that stars Han Hyo-joo, Park Hyung-sik, and Jo Woo-jin. It's an apocalyptic thriller set in a world where infectious diseases have become the norm. Happiness occurs in the near future, when the release of a failed Covid-19 treatment drug known as 'Next' has caused a worldwide pandemic known as the Rita Virus, also known as "mad person disease." Those infected by Rita experience brief bouts of insanity and bloodlust before regressing completely into a zombie-like state. The South Korean military and police are attempting to contain the spread of Rita and Next through extensive investigation and authoritative quarantine measures, while civil rights

organisations protest, claiming that the infected are still capable of normal human interaction.

All of these movies, series and books make it abundantly clear that the characters are fighting, fighting to survive. The onset of the pandemic has a significant impact on the lives of all of the characters in the literary work. Characters who had a different outlook on life before the tragic event had to or unconsciously had to change. This change opened up a new path for them to discover their true self, but discovering one's true self and discovering meaning in one's life are not the same thing. Believing in one's own existence can pave the way for a fulfilling life. Existentialism theory seeks the same conclusion.

## **CHAPTER-2**

### **THE PREVALENCE OF EXISTENTIALISM IN HOLLYWOOD PANDEMIC MOVIES**

People tend to anatomize themselves or their own lives when they are in a situation that may endanger or stand in the way of their existence. For example, when a person enters a high-tension situation or place, their behaviour will be much more self-conscious and careful in comparison with their behaviour in a low-tension situation. Similarly, when a person is nearing death, he will be unknowingly aware of his own crisis, and this will be the moment when the person will be most genuine, perhaps not to others but to himself. He would undoubtedly do what he truly desires or wants, even if it comes at the expense of others.

James Joyce used this style of writing, in which the narrators were frequently aware of themselves and their perception of a current situation. His writing style allows the reader to see inside the minds and personalities of his characters. He employs this writing style to describe his characters' inner feelings and thoughts when they are most vulnerable and truthful to themselves. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus is aware of his surroundings. He knows that he is in school learning the trivium, and that after this term, the more rigorous curriculum known as the quadrivium will begin. This is self-realization. This may be a rather simple example, but as the situation gets more complex, so does our resolve. We can observe it more commonly in a person who is facing a disaster.

Consider a drowning person who suddenly becomes aware of his situation and begins to struggle vigorously in an attempt to save himself; how powerfully he grasps the will to live. Here in this situation, his existence is being questioned and the person's energy to survive is brought out, in which he digs deeper into his will for

survival. When a person's life is threatened, he or she will seek survival, whether knowingly or unknowingly, consciously or unconsciously. Surviving the situation that calls their existence into question drives them to seize the opportunity to live or survive before anything else.

This condition causes them to do something in their own way that no one else can emulate or predict. These unpredictable and extraordinary scenes can only be comprehended with the assistance of a motion picture or movie. Through various stories, films have touched multiple angles of existentialism. Filmmakers have presented us with numerous stories that portray these existential conditions.

The offset of COVID-19 has resulted in the rise of pandemic films, which has set the stage for various situations that attempt to portray the concept of existentialism. Existentialism is also heavily represented in today's Hollywood films, particularly in pandemic films. *Contagion* is one such film. The elements of existentialism are clearly visible in the film *Contagion*. It frequently deals with the perplexing struggle to find personal meaning in an absurd world that offers no evidence of it on its own.

*Contagion*, a medical thriller film released in 2011, was widely praised for its realistic depiction of a global pandemic scenario. As the real-life coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak spreads around the world, there has been a surge of renewed interest in the film. The virus depicted in the film is many times deadlier than the one that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) and the mayhem it causes is also far more severe than what we're likely to see as a result of our current pandemic. Nonetheless, *Contagion* has important information to share with today's viewers as we collectively weather COVID-19.

*Contagion's* fictional virus is known as MEV-1. It's a novel virus, like SARS-

CoV-2, which means it's never been in the human population before, so no one is immune to it. It also has a similar origin to SARS-CoV-2, first appearing in China and spreading from animals to humans through contact with infected animal products. Its fatality rate, on the other hand, is at least ten times that of SARS-CoV-2. Moreover, unlike SARS-CoV-2, which primarily affects the respiratory system, MEV-1 attacks both the lungs and the brain, resulting in headaches and seizures in addition to coughing and fever. Gwyneth Paltrow plays Beth Emhoff, an executive who contracts the first documented human case of MEV-1 on the south coast of China and then brings it to the United States.

*Contagion* expertly juggles multiple plot threads and geographical locations. Beth reunites with her family in Minneapolis, where she unknowingly infects her husband, Mitch (Matt Damon), and son, Clark (Griffin Kane). Other unsuspecting victims succumb to MEV-1, including a London woman who dies in her bathroom and a Hong Kong man who falls in front of an oncoming truck. Dr. Leonora Orantes (Marion Cotillard) of the World Health Organization (WHO) begins tracing MEV-1 back to its original carrier in China. Dr. Ellis Cheever (Laurence Fishburne), director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), begins responding to the U.S. outbreak at the agency's headquarters. And in San Francisco, unscrupulous blogger and conspiracy theorist Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law) starts cooking up a scheme to get rich off the disease.

Dr. Erin Mears is Cheever's dedicated and no-nonsense protégé (Kate Winslet). Mears, who is sent to Minnesota to investigate Beth's death, serves as the film's vehicle for introducing key concepts and terminology to the audience. She defines fomites, for example, as surfaces that transmit pathogens after picking them up from infected people. Mears also explains the concept of  $R_0$ , a mathematical

equation that tells how many people a disease-infected individual will infect on average. With a  $R_0$  of two (the low end of the range for both MEV-1 and SARS-CoV-2), the numbers quickly add up, going from two to four to eight to sixteen in just four steps.

The film teaches viewers how epidemiologists identify people who may have had contact with disease-infected people, a process known as contact tracing. Beth visited a casino while in China, which is one of the most fertile potential breeding grounds for a virus due to the large number of visitors who handle the same chips and use the same slot machines. Dr. Orantes and her Chinese colleague, Sun Feng (Chin Han), examine security footage of Beth in the casino, pausing at key points where Beth may have contracted or transmitted the virus. This scene not only provides scientists with crucial information about the early transmission of MEV-1, but it also teaches viewers about how a pathogen like MEV-1 can spread.

The spread of MEV-1 is exactly like how real epidemics progress. Isolated cases give way to clusters, which lead to an explosion due to the power of exponential growth. The explosive phase tends to sneak up on us because most of us aren't used to thinking in terms of exponential change. There just seems to be a point where the virus becomes ubiquitous.

*Contagion's* realism stems from extensive input from experts in epidemiology, veterinary pathology, and other related fields, who reviewed the film for scientific accuracy at every stage of production. They made sure the scientist characters had the right lab equipment and used the right jargon. Even small details like the idle banter between two CDC virologists (played by Jennifer Ehle and Demetri Martin) as they work on sequencing and analysing the MEV-1 genome have a ring of authenticity. The characters' willingness to bend and break rules and laws, some for completely

selfless reasons, others to avoid the loss of loved ones, and still others for personal gain, is a central theme. Dr. Ally Hextall, Jennifer Ehle's CDC virologist, breaks protocol in the most valiant and noble way possible. She risks death by testing her experimental MEV-1 vaccine on herself, as Jonas Salk did with his polio vaccine, knowing that waiting for formal clinical trials would result in the loss of untold lives. At the opposite end of the morality spectrum is Krumwiede, who ends up being charged with manslaughter for encouraging his followers to reject the MEV-1 vaccine in favour of a naturopathic remedy he knows to be ineffective. However, by the end of *Contagion*'s four-month interval, the death toll has risen orders of magnitude above the number of fatalities, and civil disorder has reached a level that we have thankfully yet to see in reality. Desperate people raid stores in search of food, water, and medicine, and authorities are powerless to stop the chaos. On the plus side, things improved dramatically with the development and global distribution of a MEV-1 vaccine.

*Contagion* also effectively captures the loneliness that comes with self-isolation, as Mitch's teenage daughter Jory (Anna Jacoby-Heron) struggles to cope with prolonged home confinement, unable to attend school or see her boyfriend exactly what many people are experiencing right now. Jory's isolation from the world, her loved one etc. made her question her life. What is the meaning of living a life if we are not living it? Existentialism, as we know, investigates the problems of human existence. We begin with the assumption that our lives are governed by chance, that everything has no meaning, and that we must accept these facts of life. It primarily investigates the meaning of life, the purpose of human life, and the worth of existence.

In the movie *Contagion*, we meet such key players as Dr. Ellis Cheever



(Laurence Fishburne) of the CDC in Atlanta; Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet) of the Epidemic Intelligence Service, who tries to track the spread with on-the-spot visits; and Dr. Leonora Orantes (Marion Cotillard), an investigator from the World Health Organization in Geneva. They have worked together before, are skilled, and operate urgently. And in a laboratory, there is Dr. Ally Hextall (Jennifer Ehle), trying to perfect a vaccine and impatient with the time being lost before she can test it on humans.

A core theme of *Contagion* is its characters' willingness to bend and break rules and laws, some for completely selfless reasons, others to spare themselves the loss of loved ones and still others for personal gain. Jennifer Ehle's CDC virologist, Dr. Ally Hextall, commits what is unquestionably the bravest and noblest breach of protocol. Like Jonas Salk before her, with his polio vaccine, she risks death by testing her experimental MEV-1 vaccine on herself, knowing that to wait for formal clinical trials would be to let untold additional lives be lost. Here she is willing to sacrifice herself for the existence of the human race. She was ready to take the shot which may or may not kill her, but for her, this act, which she was full heartedly ready to take up, meant something to her. She found this action to be something that meant value to her existence. After vaccinating herself with the MEV-1 vaccine, she went straight to her father, where she had a conversation with his father. She then tells her father about the experiment done by Berry Marshal where he thought that bacteria caused ulcers and not stress, and he proved it by giving himself the bug and then curing himself. She told her father that this was told to her by him, and then she revealed that she was testing the vaccine on herself. Her father rejected the idea and told her not to take that chance. The conversation was like:

ALLY'S DAD: I don't want to get you sick. Ally you can't take that

chance.

ALLY: Oh, dad you're here because you stayed in your practice treating sick People even after everyone else went home. You took that chance. You took that chance every day.

She told her dad that it was he who made her make the decision to take that chance, just like her father did. He was someone who took that chance, who took that chance every day. So, for her, this action of hers gave a whole lot of value to her life or her existence.

Another notable character in the movie is that of Dr. Erin Mears. She was an Epidemic Intelligence Service officer working for the US CDC. She helped coordinate and was involved in the public health response to the MEV-1 pandemic. She is portrayed by Kate Winslet. Dr. Mears was sent into the field by Dr. Cheaver to the Minnesota Department of Health to assist in communicating, coordinating, and implementing the public health response to the growing number of MEV-1 cases in Minnesota. She assisted in implementing public health controls with the Minnesota Department of Health, communicating MEV-1-related epidemiological information, creating a temporary MEV-1 field hospital, as well as in contact tracing infected or exposed patients. After being exposed to with a cough, headache, and fever of 38.8 °C and was subsequently admitted to the field hospital she had previously helped create. When she was diagnosed with MEV-1, she was contacted by her superior, but she was neither complaining nor pleading with him to get her back home.

Dr.CHEAVERS: Are you alone?

Dr.MEARS: I definitely infected other people.

This is what Dr. Mears told her boss. She wasn't too concerned about her physical condition because she knew that if she chose this path, she would be affected

in some way. However, she was more concerned with others. She sounded upset and concerned because she suspected she had infected others as well. She was being herself in this situation as well, a concerned, caring individual who wanted everyone to be safe and well. She desired that her existence be meaningful. The pandemic or apocalyptic situation has already caused global chaos, and many people rely on her for survival. She claimed that becoming infected with the virus rendered her helpless. She was broken because she couldn't fulfil the purpose of her existence. She expressed her frustration and helplessness at being unable to save herself or the world. "I'm sorry, I couldn't finish," she said. She was upset because she couldn't finish what she had started. Her plan to implement public health control had to be halted. She felt more helpless in this situation. She was grieving that she couldn't complete what she started. She was experiencing a state of helplessness. She felt her purpose of existence had become useless. She felt less confident about herself. She felt the purpose of her existence had become nothing. She was experiencing a state of inefficiency. She was transferred to a university medical centre for MEV-1-infected medical personnel, where she died shortly afterwards. Her body was buried alongside other MEV-1 patients in a mass grave. A person who gave her life to ensure the safety of others had to surrender herself to death without even being able to complete her purpose. She found her essence of living when she had to face the traumatic chaos that the pandemic brought.

Alan Krumwiede, who ends up being charged with manslaughter for encouraging his followers to reject the MEV-1 vaccine in favour of a naturopathic remedy he knows to be ineffective, is another notable character in the film. He is played by Jude Law in the movie, and is a blogger that writes articles on the internet. While the rest of the main characters in the film are doctors that do their best to

support the people and one parent that struggles to keep their daughter safe, Alan is the outlier in the cast because he objectively doesn't further the plot in a meaningful way. He is a static character, and not only are most static characters uninteresting, but they rarely give the viewer a reason to like them. Alan acts the same way throughout the whole movie without any drastic change. He perpetrated a fraud, supposedly for the good of the public, but he downright started a conspiracy, which led to several crimes being committed by people that believed in him. Even though we may find his actions improper or even unethical, he found his purpose in life or in his existence after the virus outbreak. He never had the virus, yet he lied to the public and fooled them into believing that Forsythia was the cure for the virus by taking a dose after claiming he showed symptoms, which was a lie and he was already healthy. He gave many people false hope. Furthermore, there is no explanation for why he lied to the public. Possibly for money, since he did profit off of his scam. As Soren Kirkgaard said, "An individual is responsible for his own life or the meaning of life." Alan created a personality of his own. He put his existence over others and his own survival over others. One could argue that Alan Krumwiede is nothing more than a ruthless money-grabber looking for fame.

The pandemic creates an atmosphere that is so dense and difficult to untangle that the senses are permanently infused with it. This sensorial reception of the catastrophe finds expression in literature. In his paper describing existentialism in the context of the American novel, J. Bruneau (1948) claims that existentialists are responsible for a synthesis between the objective and the subjective, as well as the absolute and the relative, while novels bring forth the primordial life gushing forth with its temporal verity. The reality of death looms large in Pandemic literature, fueling impending anxiety. While Neimeyer and Brunt (1995) believe that this has

been extensively researched, they believe that 'death anxiety' might be defined as the innate force that is the driving motivational influence that tends to impact upon various aspects of behaviour and interaction. Such behaviours are prevalent in pandemic literature and reflect the catastrophic crisis.

Nothing extraordinary occurs at the level of events in Susanne Bier's late-2018 existential thriller. All of the real drama takes place at the level of a self-discovery process that the film attempts to elicit in each viewer, and the story is meant to be everyone's story: the most mundane and universal certitudes of birth, ageing, loss, and grief. Susanne Bier's *Bird Box* is arguably Netflix's most successful original release to date. This post-apocalyptic thriller was viewed 45 million times during its opening weekend, according to the streaming service. The majority of its power comes from a well-directed ensemble capable of conveying the high concept of a nightmare situation without losing their relatable humanity.

The film's starting point is a classic existential one: one is not born a human being; rather, one must actively, or rather, interactively, become human. The film is based on a theory of how to do this, which includes an explanation of why it is so difficult to pull off. According to this theory, the challenge of becoming fully human consists in temporarily ignoring all the ways we can be damaged, saddened, or traumatized as a result of the vulnerability inherent in what the film refers to as "connection," i.e., meaningful relationships that involve bonding and thus vulnerability to loss, disappointment, or betrayal. However, once we have successfully navigated the threshold of bonding with the other, the sensitivity that appears as a neurotic aversion prior to bonding can be repurposed as a healthy alertness to the inherent riskiness of life, rather than remaining a self-defeating hyper-vigilance that makes us want to "put the birds in the freezer," i.e., to disengage

ourselves from the unavoidable vulnerabilities that we carry around with us like (or boxed birds).

The thriller that follows begins with Malorie (Sandra Bullock) instructing her two children to wear blindfolds and not remove them or they will die. We then go back in time to five years ago, when the apocalypse first began. As it turns out, some unknown creatures (that we never see) have persuaded people to commit suicide simply by meeting their gaze. This forces the survivors of the world to blindfold themselves and navigate the treacherous terrain without the ability to see. The film alternates between the past and the present. In the first, Malorie joins a group of survivors as they search for safety and encounter danger. In the present, she is holed up in a cabin with her children and boyfriend (Trevante Rhodes). They've heard about a sanctuary for survivors. The only drawback is that getting there requires a perilous trip through white water rapids while blindfolded. Malorie and the kids are forced to brave the journey when danger finds them and kills her boyfriend.

Malorie does not strike us as the maternal type when we first meet her. For starters, her children are simply referred to as Boy and Girl, and the way she speaks to them is more akin to a military instructor than a caring mother. While it's clear that she cares about the children's survival, we get the impression that she doesn't want to take long-term responsibility for them. The premise of *Bird Box* is fairly standard. The idea of trying to survive in a mad world without the ability to adds a unique twist to the story, but overall it's just another tale of survivors looking for a safe place to live.

The real story, however, is about Malorie's journey to accept responsibility for the children and, eventually, to embrace them. The most telling scene occurs when their boat is drifting towards the most dangerous part of the river and Malorie requires

one of the children to remove their blindfold and tell her where to steer. However, she is unable to make a decision and instead decides to gamble on their luck. As a result, the boat is overturned, and the trio is led to shore, which presents a new set of problems. Malorie and her children must travel through the woods in search of the sanctuary after arriving at the land. However, because neither of them can see, they separate. This is when Malorie demonstrates genuine maternal concern; she is concerned about these brats. Malorie then wanders around the woods calling their names in the hopes of establishing an emotional connection, and despite the creatures that hunt them doing everything they can to manipulate the family, they are eventually reunited and find their safe haven. The sanctuary is a blind school that has been unaffected by the apocalypse. Here we see a thriving community that provides security to its residents. Malorie then decides to name her children, indicating her willingness to love and care for them in the future. Malorie's story is one of hope; she overcame loneliness and fought for a better future for herself and her children. That is the message of *Bird Box*: no matter how bad things seem, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

According to the film, what makes this adventure difficult is that proximity to the other generates what (in one scene) a car's GPS system labels a "proximity alert," that is, a heightened sensitivity to the vulnerability inherent in connection. In the face of these "proximity alerts," one's instinct is to flee or fight. However, according to the film's growth theory, these paths both lead to a kind of self-defeat or self-destruction: one becomes too "hard," as one self-identified "soft" character puts it, to fully enter one's own fragile humanity. One becomes infatuated or entranced by the seductive fixation on how one might be harmed by connection. This is the kind of misery that "loves company," according to a truism that this film takes literally. That is, despair

manifested as a compulsion to draw others into one's neurotic fixation on the 'proximity alert,' to join in one's obsessive will to gaze into the abyss of despair, in the paradoxical expectation that spreading the (classically "infernal" or hellish) "abandonment of all hope" to others is the only comfort on offer.

It's reasonable to complain that *Bird Box* lacks subtlety. For example, vulnerability is sometimes portrayed symbolically in overly blunt ways, such as when characters are repeatedly asked to "open the door" to an unknown other, with no guarantee of safety, and so on. Once we understand what the film is trying to say, there is a bit of beating us over the head with it. And the film's personal growth theory is far from unique, bearing the unmistakable influence of traditional North-American psychotherapeutic ideas with a pinch of San Francisco-style or, if you prefer, a dash of Chogyam Trungpa. So, don't expect a new, unexpected insight to emerge from all the drama. In any case, the film's goal is not to invent a new idea, but rather to draw the viewer into a specific style of self-awareness.

Another unoriginal symbol appears, albeit in a more intriguing and inventive manner. The central metaphor of the film is that one can only enter fully into one's humanity by strategically looking away from the scariest possibilities inherent in it, as if navigating its dangers while wearing a necessary blindfold. This is a reimagining of an ancient Greek trope: the figure of the "blind seer," similar to Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (and Greek mythology more generally). "You ridicule me and call me blind, but your eyes cannot see your own corruption." Tiresias says to Oedipus. Similarly, we learn in this film that those who stare into the abyss with their eyes wide open are "blind" to life's possibilities. Those who refuse to look into the abyss of despair, on the other hand, are able to "see" (in the sense of navigating) their way past the threshold to 'connection.'



Some of the characters have "Dickensian" names, such as "Olympia" (an allusion to Mount Olympus, identified in Homer as the "celestial threshold") and "Mallory" (a transliteration of the French word, "malheur," misfortune, the ever-present danger that insistently demands her attention, constantly calling out to her, as a disembodied whisper, "Mallory, look at me!"). Indeed, the film employs an entire logic of "interpellation," calling one's name and inviting one to identify. But to what end? What about the abyss? Or is the risk of reaching the other worthwhile? That is the entire drama and existential dilemma that each character in *Bird Box* faces. The film is not without flaws. However, it is genuinely interesting and, at times, illuminating.

On one level, *Bird Box's* entity-wind force monster demonstrated how quickly mass hysteria and fear spread in society. We also see how they effectively and abruptly upend society. We see lawlessness in place of laws. Chaos ensues, and Sandra Bullock, who is pregnant, is nearly trampled. Everyone is looking out for themselves, and society has completely disintegrated within 20 minutes. *Bird Box* demonstrates how thin the fabric that holds society together is and how, if we give in to our fears, the trust we have in each other and our way of life erodes completely.

There are a number of metaphoric and allegorical threads one could extract from this story-line, including interpreting the entity as some kind of god, and the blindfolding of the masses as the inability to face this God, whether in the biblical sense where a face-to-face encounter results in death (e.g. Exodus 33:20), or in the figurative/spiritual sense of modern humanity having turned away from God (for better or worse). While modernity and the Enlightenment undoubtedly brought us a number of epistemic, political, and societal benefits, they also created their own set of problems that have yet to be resolved.

Blindfolding yourself, i.e. shielding yourself from the monster that represents fear, is one way to protect yourself in *Bird box*. And in the film, we see how dependent we are on others to keep us blindfolded, protected, and fearless. We rely on one another to stay sane. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, the fear made the characters in *Bird box* suspicious, paranoid, and distrusting.

Because of the many hardships associated with the human condition, religion and belief in a God or gods often fill a void in people's lives, and so even if there is a conscious decision to reject this emotional or spiritual crutch, there is an unavoidable trade-off that can make life much more psychologically challenging, as exemplified by the burdensome journey undertaken by Malorie and her children. On the other hand, those who come into contact with this God or God concept, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may be hypnotically drawn in by it, committing a form of intellectual suicide in the process.

What if "the entity" is a representation of the intellectual content or philosophical paradigms that have emerged in our modern age? Modernity has brought various manifestations of existentialism, postmodernism, scepticism, and atheism, as well as a revaluation of our morals and the meaning and purpose we ascribe to our own lives. It is, without a doubt, unsettling to face and contemplate our own existential status, including, among other things, the fact that we are but an infinitesimally small and insignificant constituent of an unfathomably old and vast cosmos, and that our lives are relatively short as we approach our inevitable death.

Most people would prefer to ignore these unpleasant facts, even if it means unconsciously adopting any number of ideologies or belief systems that serve as a means of epistemic isolation and psychological comfort. Many people who try to confront and navigate this seemingly alien existential space, whether intentionally or

by chance, are overwhelmed with anxiety, depression, and the like, leading some to contemplate or commit suicide. If a person's sense of meaning and purpose is shaken, it's natural for them to feel lost in this world, even losing the will to live. In short, many people are simply not mentally prepared to deal with a number of uncomfortable existential truths, nor are we all equally well-equipped to deal with many of the challenges we face in our human condition. Even if their interpretations or responses to this particular problem differed, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Marx, and a number of other great thinkers of the modern era were all too aware of this fact about "the masses."

The blindfolding of the masses could be interpreted as a fairly common reaction to modernity's realisations, manifesting as a kind of reflexive blindness to the current state of affairs but also resulting in aimless wandering, where people are in need of some kind of direction, a structure or system to guide them through what has become a very unfamiliar and often disturbing world.

When Malorie and her children make radio contact with a stranger named "Rick," he instructs them to travel through the woods and down a nearby river, an almost 48-hour arduous journey to what appears to be their last hope of refuge. They arrive at their long-desired sanctuary after overcoming a few obstacles along the way, including a violent run-in with a madman and a near-death experience after capsizing their boat. It turns out that the sanctuary is a school for the blind, and Malorie discovers that the stranger she had spoken with on the radio is himself blind, thus granting him and a number of others at this sanctuary their own reliable means of protection from the entity.

In essence, the character has sacrificed some of their humanity in order to protect themselves from the outside world. Fear held them together while also tearing

them apart. And who are we to blame? That monster, which we purposefully avoided seeing, was terrifying! Nonetheless, the fact that the second pregnant woman who entered the house was almost shot and that her death could have been quickly justified by some of the characters, or even viewers as needed, demonstrates fear's ability to warp our sense of right and wrong.

The constant existential fear that the characters felt was, in my opinion, the true monster in the film. That fear was evident in the speed with which Sandra Bullock draped the towel over the children on the boat. Every new member of that house was greeted with trepidation. I believe the audience never sees the monster for a reason. We weren't supposed to. If we saw the monster, our fear and attention would be drawn away from the characters' constant dread and fear and toward the monster and how it looked, moved, and preyed. Instead, we are only left to see how the characters react to this terrifying threat and deal with their fear. This nuance is critical to comprehending *Bird box*'s resonance.

Keeping on the subject of fear, I actually thought the more compelling part of the monster, which was giving me "Lost" smoke monster vibes, was near the end when Sandra's character and the kids who somehow survived capsizing in rapids had to withstand voices in their heads that sounded like they were coming from people they trusted but were actually the monster. It was interesting to see that closing your eyes and not looking at your fear was not enough, and that the characters also needed the mental fortitude to not listen to them. This, I thought, was the film's truest challenge. The film also made the poignant point that when temptation comes from those closest to you, your chances of succumbing are the highest. Fortunately, our characters held their ground.

*Birdbox* resonated because it depicted a world where fear had rendered us

blindfolded, unable to see, and deeply distrustful of others. Fear caused children to be raised without proper names (boys or girls) and without love. This is why I found Trevante's character telling the children a story to be so touching. He was teaching them to laugh, hope, and imagine. They were unburdened and had smiles on their faces. Fear eventually robbed many *Birdbox* characters of their humanity and destroyed civilization.

Fear can never support a society. Walls, internment camps, and travel restrictions are all symbols of a society desperately trying to protect itself from fear. But by then, the moral corrosive process had already begun. We are not great because we are afraid. It never has and will never be. Instead, it abandons us in the dark, making us appear insane and weak.

Finally, Sandra's hope is realised as *Birdbox* concludes in a safe haven. We see a multicultural, multi-abled, harmonious community living freely in this safe haven. Members appear to genuinely care for one another. The safe haven the family finds, which is actually a school for the blind, represents a perfect society within the story. All of its inhabitants have their eyes open but are unaffected. They are not afraid to confront the 'aliens,' removing the blindfolds that represent ignorance. When the birds Malorie had kept in a box to serve as a warning of danger—suggestive of the stigma society carries—are no longer needed, they are released. Finally, this is *Birdbox*'s symbolic meaning. We must choose hope over fear in order to survive.

As the film's intention is fully revealed in the finale, the questions raised remain merely that. The true form of the monster is never fully revealed. What matters most is the protagonist's changing attitude. She is not afraid to look or speak. Finally, any answers we seek can be found solely in our own ability to accept others. Only in this way can we let go of our judgments and blindfolds.

Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does – John-Paul Sartre.

It is the philosophy of existentialism that says that a human being is free and fully responsible for his actions and for his life. On a structural level, the directors Steven Soderbergh and Susanne Bier deliver a beautiful message: the respective pandemic films imply that people who are confronted with a perilous situation involving their existential rights are free to choose their purpose in life, and their actions depict what gives meaning to their lives.

To convey the message, both directors used strong characters as the subject who gains their own freedom to choose in life and thus identifies themselves. Everyone is free to decide what she needs, but she must consider the risks and responsibilities that come with it. In *Contagion*, the man who could not tell his wife about the outbreak of the virus has to cope with the question of whether he should disclose the truth to his wife; his morality and emotions urged him to disclose the truth, but as a government official he couldn't disclose it until the situation was grave enough. In other words, while both films present different approaches to risk-taking, they both make us consider the freedom to choose. Thus, it is up to you what you want to choose.

# CHAPTER-3

## THE PREVALENCE OF EXISTENTIALISM IN KOREAN PANDEMIC MOVIES

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we've seen a variety of broadcasters scramble to work COVID into their plotlines. The west has been especially virulent in portraying this, from *Grey's Anatomy* to *This Is Us*. The scriptwriters with the real talent can be identified by their inconsistent mask wearing, on-the-nose dialogue, and patronising characterization.

An existential film is one that explores a world or a life without any established purpose, laws, or justice. It frequently addresses the baffling quest for personal meaning in an absurd world that shows no sign of it on its own. Korean movies and series like *#Alive*, *Happiness*, *Train to Busan*, *All of us are dead*, and *Sweet Home* portray the traits of an existential film in every way. These are films that force us to examine life and realise that we have two options: embrace the truth and exercise our conscious free will to make our own decisions, or perhaps choose the simpler path and let the structures of our society around us determine the course of our brief existence. Or perhaps we are compelled to painfully realise this futility because we have no other option. The only option would be to accept this reality and laugh at how ridiculous everything is.

Some of the films make us want to hug ourselves in existential dread and sob softly over how terrifying it is to be conscious of your own loneliness and mortality in a vast, unconscious world. What can we do? How do we decide? However, these bizarre and surprisingly beautiful films are beneficial to everyone.

Movies with existential themes serve as a helpful reminder that you are your own agent, that you have the power to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless

universe, and that freedom can be found by letting go of the absolute truth. Keep in mind that, we struggle because we desire happiness. The existential crisis serves as a therapeutic tool. Although Nietzsche acknowledged that "God is dead," he also urged us to cling to our passionate "will for Nothingness."

*#Alive* is a 2020 film featuring Yoo Ah-in and Park Shin-Hye, directed by Cho Il. The movie does so many things well, but what makes it different and likable the most is the genuine human moments in the film. It really isn't something we expected from the genre. It tells the story of Joon-woo (Yoo Ah-In), the everyman, blank slate character that watchers can project themselves onto. He is simply a regular guy who, whether by good or bad luck, is in an unusual situation. We discover that Joon-woo is a PC gamer with a knack for technology who lives with his parents in an apartment building in Seoul before everything goes horribly wrong. That's about it. He's more of a stand-in for generic young folk, presumably to let them fill in the blank. At home by himself, he awakens. Money and a note from his parents informing him that there is no food at home are both on his living room table. The main conflict is revealed when he turns on the television. Three minutes into the film, we are thrust into the chaos without any delay. There is no waiting around. The audience will like how they thrust you right into the action, especially considering how zombies have become a staple of contemporary horror. There isn't a drawn-out, complicated introduction to the characters or a description of the virus that is spreading. The viewer is immediately thrust into the chaotic and violent time frame of a zombie invasion.

Jun-u simply leaves his room and goes to the balcony, where he can see the entire chaos from above: people screaming and running through the streets, cars colliding, and people being eaten by the infected. By using shaky cam during the most



frantic parts of the scene and cutting from the commotion to Joon-Woo response, these scene really immerses you in the action.

You can tell that what he has seen has physically affected him. He is powerless; all he can do is watch the chaos unfold. And so, this turns into his reality. He is stranded in his apartment with no food or water, and he is all by himself in a complex overrun with the living dead. His determination to survive starts to erode as he spends more days locked inside his apartment by himself, oblivious to the horrors that may be lurking outside the door. Ah-portal In's of a bereaved survivor in this scene really makes his acting stand out. We watch him struggle psychologically with the idea of being the last person standing despite being the only survivor. The subsequent breakdown he experiences feels so unfiltered and sincere that his sorrow is almost audible.

Despite the fact that zombie movies have become somewhat overdone, this one is unique. *#Alive* focuses on the human element, in contrast to movies where the hero instantly transforms into a gun-wielding badass who can kill the infected like flies. There are no guns and no heroes. While most zombie films involve some form of brainwashing or voodoo, the infected here remain primarily motivated by cold-blooded desire. We don't see a group of survivors being eliminated one by one as they make their way through the wasteland of the dead as they battle hordes of the undead. Instead, we witness the decline of society through the eyes of "everyman" Joon-Woo, and it seems as though there is no hope for change.

Some events seem hardly believable, but I suppose that's par for the course. In some more absurd situations, suspension of disbelief is necessary, but so is the belief in reanimated, flesh-eating corpses. The most terrifying aspect is that these zombies appear to have some connection to their previous existences because they can perform

routine tasks like opening doors, which the undead are not permitted to perform. The stakes are raised by this as well as the fact that they appear to have an incredibly keen sense of hearing. They aren't just the mindless robots that we typically see on television. The movie uses sound very strategically, which heightens the horror. The use of sound enhances the atmosphere and builds suspense and tension. Rarely does the film combine the suspenseful music with characters' whispering and gasping, which really draws you in and makes you feel their fear.

When a mysterious virus turns his fellow citizens into flesh-eating monsters, Joon-Woo chooses survival. Joon-Woo makes the decision to survive when a mysterious virus transforms his fellow citizens into flesh-eating monsters. He organises his food, insulates himself indoors, and even consumes some of his dad's high-end alcohol because he tells himself from the start that he will survive. But he also has the potential to fall just as hard because of that towering kind of confidence. Joon-Woo puts in some all-out emotional work as he documents his emotional journey as things get worse when food starts to run out and loneliness really sets in. Just before he gives up permanently, he discovers Yoo-Bin (Shin-Hye Park), a tenant who lives across the street. She has developed her own means of surviving as well, and she is even craftier (as evidenced by the spiked chair she uses as a trap for her front door). Joon-Woo tried to commit suicide by hanging but was rescued by Yoo-Bin. After some scenes, Joon-Woo tries to express his gratitude for helping him avoid committing suicide. But what Yoo-Bin said was,

JOON-WOO: I should thank you. For saving me....thank you so much.

YOO-BIN: I didn't save you..

JOON-WOO: What?

YOO-BIN: I said, I didn't save you. You saved yourself because you

wanted to live. Your eagerness to live is what's keeping you alive."

This is most prominently demonstrated by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. But Karl Rahner articulated it, maybe in the most colourful way, when he said that people are only one big decision (in his case, for or against God). We are constituted by our decisions. We are conducted by our choices. We are all the products of our own decisions. We cannot appeal to systems of law or convention or tradition as decisively furnishing instructions for life choices; every choice has to be personally appropriated. In fact, being human sometimes involves decisions that transcend the realm of moral and conventional concerns. The conscious act of choosing is rarely solely a matter of one's own conscious rational control; the sum total of our choices defines the material reality around us.

The word existentialism means nothing more than just survival, or what is normal in the daily lives of every living person. Just like how the actor Joon-Woo is portrayed at first in the movie. He may not even have cared about living or his existence before all of what was going to happen to him. Just like every common folk, he too was busy with his own life, even if it seemed meaningless to others. Like how an everyday, lazy teenage boy starts his day by 10 am and goes through the pretty normal daily stuff. Here we can see that this everyday stuff doesn't cause any fear or stress for his survival. But this whole situation takes a turn after his gaming friends tell him something unusual is happening, and he watches the news reports stating a phenomenon is happening which causes civilians to act aggressively. From then on, a gush of emotions takes effect on the protagonist.

Every person has their own right to exist, but as we watch these pandemic movies, we find that even if it is a viral attack or a zombie apocalypse, the people affected are being denied their basic right, the right that they have from their birth till

death takes them apart, the right to exist or the right to survive. The fundamental right of a person is denied here. Their right to exist is taken away from them by any external or scientific mishap. A person has to act not according to his will, as if he has become another person. One among many instances in the movie is that of a school student and her mother. As the pandemic breaks out, people act all crazy, sucking out others' blood and tearing the human flesh out of their bodies. A mother stands there with a knife, waiting for her daughter to return from school. She holds the knife in hand as if she could slash any zombie that comes to attack her or her arriving child. The protagonist sees all this from his balcony, and he sees a school girl, the woman's daughter, approaching the lady. As soon as the lady saw the child, the child called her mother out, and her mother ran and embraced her. This may have created a glimpse of hope in the mind of the hero that he too would get reunited with his family or something of that sort. Even before this thought gets accepted by his heart, the child turns into a zombie and attacks her mother. There we can see a shocked as well as frightened protagonist now in the brim of a survival or existential crisis.

For a hopeless person with no aim or resolve to overcome this crisis, he may need a little warmth of support. Here in #Alive, the protagonist gets it from his mother's simple message, which is "My son, you must survive." While in the kdrama "Happiness", when one of the protagonists (Jung Yi Hyun) lost all his hope and was waiting for death, his wife's (Yoon Sae Boom) words made him determined and hope for a better situation. His wife told him,

SAE BOM: I'm here. What's really important is who I'm going to be with in my house. So I'm going to stay with you.

Happiness is a straightforward but incredibly powerful project with a modest filmography. It's a hybrid horror/drama, but more importantly, it's a deftly written

analysis of how people would fare in a pandemic. It perfectly illustrates how we become more wary, cynical, and afraid of people after a disaster. After COVID, this story takes place. Even though Korea and the rest of the world are only now beginning to recover, there is unquestionably still a sense of unease. When Next Drip-Feed, an experimental vaccine, is introduced to the market, it quickly becomes clear that they are the starting point for another, far deadlier outbreak than Corona.

The virus is spread by bites and scratches as well as by taking the pills—and causes an insatiable thirst for water and a state of madness to overtake those who have it. Even though *Happiness* takes some time to explain how everything works, it's actually quite simple. This, however, actually increases its unpredictableness, which is a plus. There are similarities to Netflix's *Sweet Home* here as well because the viral outbreak happens just as Sae-Bom and Yi-Hyun move in together. As the season goes on, we learn more and more about the various characters who live in the complex Seyang Forest Le Ciel.

The growth of all the supporting players is what we may find to be especially fascinating in this situation. While Sae-Bom and Yi-Hyun each have their own perspective and are working with Tae-Seok, a government official, to find a vaccine, the real focus of the narrative is how the various property owners and tenants in this block react.

Over the course of the 12 episodes, the flimsy facade of manufactured smiles and empty promises crumbles to reveal everyone's true selves. There are selfish people everywhere, opportunistic tenants out to get rich quick. There are also loners who want to endure it alone but end up at the mercy of envious and avaricious neighbours who knock on their door. There is definitely nowhere to hide in this area. When a person is faced with a grim reality, he may seek ways on how he could

survive that situation or how to be the person who stands alive till the end. He will either be selfish or selfless. When a person's existence is questioned, his inner self or characters that he hides from others get exhibited. There are also some beautifully poetic juxtapositions in *Happiness*. One story involves a particularly sleazy doctor called Joo-Hyeong. He's been sleeping with a mistress (Sang-Hee) behind his wife Min-Ji's back. She's hidden under the bed when the announcement comes in for a lockdown. What begins as a simple set-up soon shows shades of grey. The pretty mistress winds up becoming the ugliest character of the trio, while

Joo-Hyeong becomes ever-more pathetic as the season progresses—a far cry from the confident and opportunistic crook he begins as. The example above is just one set of residents, and stories like this occur for almost every character. The Building Rep, Yeon-Ok, and her religious husband, Woo-Chang, have their own story to tell, while little Seo-Yoon and her infected mother, Eun-Ji have a more sentimental edge. The Building Rep, Yeon-Ok is a con artist, together with her husband, putting on the air of a rich tenant. She persecutes and degrades others according to their social standing. Her greed and love for social standing are worsened when she finds that nothing is going as she wanted it to be. Her existence, which she found through her petty ways, was falling. This made us see how her character reveals the worst characteristics in her when confronted with a crisis.

Being human is finding oneself "thrown" (Heidegger) into a world with no clear logical, ontological, or moral structure. We hide from death, from uncertainty, from ourselves, from Being-Itself (Tillich) with enormous creativity but with self-destructive consequences. When we try to analyse the characters of the protagonists of *#Alive*, we find them really trying their very best to stay alive. Even when faced with death every single time they had to face the zombie attacks, they fought through.

But as they were both restrained and let down by a person whom they trusted, they lost all hope, as if they didn't want to turn into some emotionless creature, so they decided to kill each other and put an end to their lives. In a split second they are willing to put away what they worked all this time. They put aside their hard work to reach the goal, which was to survive. They were willing to let this all go due to a small crisis they faced a small existential crisis that they faced. A small pushback made them make a choice which they had every right to make. Here they were thrown into a situation where not many choices were given for them to choose. Either they die or turn into some monster, which was equal to death for them. Their conversation was like,

WOO-BIN: Joon-Yoo, we're still human, you know. And we are together. It's okay now.

She was indicating Joon-Yoo that it was okay for him to shoot her and she was ready to die. Here Woo-Bin is forced to show her fear, her fear of losing, her fear of doubts, her fear of death. Extreme situations make our hiding impossible, and so they often become the focus of philosophical and literary reflection on human anxiety. Life is both random and structured, but randomness can also give it structure and purpose. The absurd and the absurdist tradition both ask how we might interpret and grasp the random events that make up our lives. True randomness occurs when an observer can't explain why one event followed another, a result that illuminates the unpredictability of life, in which all events are radically unpredictable.

Existentialists must support a strong form of freedom since we are not defined by what happens to us, if Sartre is correct and our lives are fundamentally up to us. Why should we pick one set of standards over another if the standards are up to us? In other words, if there is no outside standard by which we can determine if we have

made the right decision, how can we make sense of the idea that there is a right way to live and a wrong way to live? All the important figures in Existentialism struggle with this challenging topic, which is a difficult one. The answer we'll consider here is that we may locate a standard within our own actions that decides whether they're being done correctly or poorly. This is what existentialists call authenticity.

One of Dostoevsky's existential messages is that the purpose of life is to act properly by being authentic yourself. As Dostoevsky asserted, there is no way to advance in a lofty direction and feel happier than to keep one's place in the general scheme of things. One of the biggest differences between existentialists can be seen here, which may reflect how ambiguous the world is and how difficult it is for humans to make judgments that have meaning. All existentialists agree that a decision regarding it is the most important matter for people, despite the fact that the nature of that field of life and its terrain are hotly contested. The idea that there can only be one free reality on the globe has been put forth. This means that neither God nor humans can be free at the same time. While denying both freedoms results in an intolerably meaningless and literally impossible world, affirming both freedoms results in insufferable theodicy and contradiction difficulties. Many unusual and different philosophers agree on this premise. In a nutshell, existential movies are about meaning (or lack of it) in life in an absurd and indifferent universe, and the search for and creation of that meaning and personal freedom (or not) in this existence that we all find ourselves in together.



## **CHAPTER- 4**

### **CONCLUSION**

According to the existential theory, people are free agents who have control over their choices and actions. Existentialists believe that society should not restrict an individual's life or actions and that these restrictions inhibit free will and the development of that person's potential. Even if the external factors have led to the awakening of the inner self of the person, pandemic movies could truly exhibit the existential actions through its characters. The findings of the existential approach are clear in the way these characters act and develop throughout the movie.

A pandemic that endangers the lives of people and causes utter destruction of the world has created a total chaos in the lives of every person, may it be an infected or a survivor. Both of them had to face the disaster, and they had to work their way up until they could survive. All four movies by Steven Soderbergh, Susanne Bier, Il Cho, and Ahn Gil-ho helped to portray the existential actions that a person takes.

As we take note of the characters in an existential movie, it is quite notable how the characters take responsibility for their own actions, which is an acknowledged existential action. Likely, there are many other characteristics or actions of characters that can be seen in the movies of the abovementioned directors that give us a glimpse of existential action.

While philosophers including Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche questioned essentialism in the 19th century, existentialism was popularised by Jean-Paul Sartre in the mid-20th century following the horrific events of World War II. As people questioned how something as catastrophically terrible as the Holocaust could have a predetermined purpose, existentialism provided a possible answer: perhaps it is the individual who determines their essence, not an omnipotent

being. The pandemic exhibits a similar situation that we see and encounter during times of war. Identity crisis, depressive symptoms, stress, anxiety, insomnia, denial, fear, death, panic, and anger all over the world. A chaotic world created by man where every person has to pay a price; unbiased. If a pandemic takes hold, it is on each individual and not a mysterious law that selects which members of the human race will die. The description of life during the pandemic highlights a negative vision where "death, fear, depression, anger, denial, and panic" run rampant throughout the world. The pandemic creates a stage for an unethical world, just like the world after a war. People start to question themselves, and it would be hard to find someone there who hasn't asked themselves the big questions.

For thousands of years, the concept that your life's purpose was designated before to your birth happily solved these questions. Existentialists, on the other hand, disagreed. Existentialism is the philosophical notion that we are all responsible for giving our lives purpose or meaning. God, governments, teachers, or other authority do not give us our specific purpose and significance. They conduct their lives regardless of widely accepted religious or societal ideas. In any case, the nature of death and life is something that each individual must decide for themselves.

It was a revolutionary idea at the time. You were born with a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, and it is up to you to discover the purpose or meaning of your life. Existentialists, while not necessarily atheists, think that there is no divine intervention, fate, or outside forces actively pulling you in certain directions. Every decision you make is entirely your own. Through your activities, you establish your own purpose. This personal obligation to determine the meaning of your own life carries tremendous anxiety-inducing weight. Many of us go through the so-called existential crisis, in which we question our choices, careers, relationships, and the point of it all.

We have numerous alternatives. How do we pick the right ones to create a meaningful and fulfilling life?

Man is condemned to be free, as John-Paul Sartre stated, because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for whatever he does. Normally, freedom is depicted positively, but Sartre posited that your level of freedom is so enormous that it is "painful." To truly understand your freedom, you must recognise that you are solely responsible for generating or failing to create your particular purpose. Without rules or order to guide you, there is so much freedom that it can be overpowering.

Life may be amusing. However, this is not what existentialists mean when they speak of the absurd. They describe absurdity as the search for answers in a world devoid of answers. It's the thought of being born into a meaningless world that forces you to create purpose. Existentialists think that we must all find our place in this perplexing universe, whatever that position may be.

The ludicrous asserts that there is no single truth, no innate principles or guidelines. This implies that you must create your own moral code to live by. Sartre warned against looking to authority for guidance and answers because no one has them and no one truth exists. The expression "living authentically," (56) coined by Sartre, denotes "living with the understanding of your responsibility to govern your freedom despite the absurd." (88) You create any meaning or purpose in your life.

If you prefer to live by someone else's rules, whether they are religious or your parents' wishes, you are refusing to accept the absurd. This refusal is referred to as "bad faith" by Sartre since you are choosing to live by someone else's idea of meaning and purpose rather than your own. So, what really is the meaning of life? If you're thinking like an existentialist, the solution to this issue is both simple and complex. You already know the solution; all you have to do now is claim it. This is where self-

awareness takes place. Existential self-realization is defined as a sudden realisation, revelation, or reaffirmation of a person's existence within this cosmos. This generally feels like a sudden and profound wake up or rebirth that results in an incredible sense of motivation, an increased sense of purpose to one's life, a sudden knowledge of their own circumstances, an appreciation for life, and a sense of urgency to make the most of it while it lasts. During this condition, no new knowledge is gained, but previously known information about their existence is reintegrated in a quick and profound manner, resulting in a strong sense of appreciation for the improbable circumstances of their own existence. The residual impacts of this effect frequently carry over into sobriety, perhaps resulting in long-term favourable implications for the individual.

Malorie, the main character in the film *Bird Box*, exhibits the most existential action. Here, Malorie is choosing her own path. As we know, according to existentialists, the act of choosing or the selection process is the most terrifying. This is where a crisis, or an existential crisis, is felt by the character Malorie. Every person must make decisions in life, but in a pandemic crisis, those decisions must be made in an instant, and even if that person want to modify his decision, he cannot. In a pandemic situation, it's as if you're either alive or dead; the wrong option could even kill you. In the movie *Bird Box*, Greg and Tom's decision resulted to their death. But they were prepared to take the risk. They decided for themselves. When it comes to a decision made amid a crisis, there is no going back. The pandemic film *Bird Box* vividly depicts the gravity, or weight, of every decision and how it affects others.

An existential crisis, by definition, is a collection of feelings and questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives. These are difficult questions to address, and this can leave us feeling stuck. We are unclear of how to respond or which path to take, and this can have a detrimental impact on our lives if these sentiments persist or

increase. Existential crises are frequently thought to have a negative effect on a person's life, however we often overlook the possibility of a positive outcome. An existential crisis presents us with the chance to reassess our values, sense of meaning and purpose, and the direction we wish to take with our life. This can assist us in assessing, planning, and adapting our course of action in order to live the life we desire and will be content with.

The truth is that existential crises are more prevalent than you might imagine, and they know no bounds in terms of age or gender. Everyone will face an existential crisis at some point in their lives. So, why are they so prevalent? They usually occur when we - as humans - are confronted with circumstances, changes, or transitions in our lives that are difficult for us to adapt to, or that leave us wondering if this is the path we want to take in our lives. Whether these transitions are intended or not, we may experience restrictions that cause us to doubt the path our lives are following. People frequently feel disoriented, unsettled, and as if they have lost touch with their ideals and life's purpose while they are going through an existential crisis. If you're feeling this way, you could be unsure of whether you're going through a crisis of meaning or depression. Worry will consume the entire mind. It's possible that you're dealing with existential depression and troubling ideas that you find difficult to ignore in your regular life. You might experience the sensation that whenever you are not distracted by anything, your mind tends to ask the same questions and think the same thoughts repeatedly.

These unfavourable feelings are a result of this ongoing worry. The emotions we experience and the accompanying physical reaction are influenced by our thinking. Therefore, we experience anxiety and sadness as a result of these recurring thoughts. Because of this, existential crises can unfortunately really harm our mental

health if we allow them to spiral out of control. Our "why," or the reason we act the way we do, is the foundation of our drive. Lack of motivation may occur if we are struggling with our "why" and believe we are still searching for the answer. It's challenging to see the point in doing anything when one is experiencing the detachment and sense of meaninglessness that come with an existential crisis.

Depending on a person's life, circumstances, ideals, and ambitions, several factors might lead to an existential crisis. Having your first kid or relocating to a different nation are just a few of the many potential outcomes that this could entail. What decides whether or not we feel this with a particular shift is that not every significant change will result in an existential crisis, and it also depends on the person. The significance of a change in our circumstances in terms of our purpose and direction determines whether or not it leads to an existential crisis. We may begin to feel an existential crisis if the shift isn't in line with — or if it causes us to doubt — our purpose.

An unexpected turn is another circumstance that could bring on an existential crisis. A sudden, unexpected turn or change that is not anticipated. For instance, our life plans are put on wait as a result of an unavoidable reason, or we are dismissed from the work we believed we were progressing so much at (COVID-19 pandemic is a big one that comes to mind). The pandemic might be thought of as one of the unanticipated and unexpected sharp turns. As we watch these pandemic movies, we become aware that the pandemic itself is one of the conditions that could most easily result in an existential crisis.

Another catalyst for an existential crisis could be death or another form of loss. An existential crisis can result from the loss of a loved one, whether it be a family member who has died away or a breakup that leaves us feeling hurt. This is

particularly valid if the person in question was a cornerstone figure in our life.

We question our existence and its purpose during this type of existential crisis. We begin to doubt our ultimate motivation for living the life we do and wonder what it is all for. This dilemma typically arises when we are at a fork in the road and are unsure of our course. Because we might not be quite satisfied with the ideals we had up until this point, we feel that we need to rethink the principles upon which we base our lives. We could go through an existential crisis if we experience a change that requires a reorientation in our lives. This may occur as a result of the shift being unanticipated or because we must adjust to it, discovering ourselves once again in the process.

Grief and, occasionally, an existential crisis follow a loss of any kind. When we are forced to confront a loss and a reality without someone or something, we may begin to doubt previously unquestioned beliefs. Sometimes in life, we may feel that our behaviour is not in line with who we would like to be. This type of existential crisis can assist us in assessing the values we are upholding and refocusing on those that will enable us to stay true to the people we aim to be.

It can be incredibly lonesome to endure an existential crisis. It might also mark a turning point in a person's life, though. Finding methods to reconnect is the cure for the feelings of separation, annoyance, and meaninglessness. Reach out to a therapist, spend time with loved ones, or even play with your pet. Your life means more than you may realise, and you are not alone. If the person experiencing the existential crisis or his surroundings had been normal, as opposed to the chaos of death and the pandemic condition, these coping mechanisms might have been viable.

Through the movies and series, *Contagion*, *Bird Box*, *#Alive*, and *Happiness*, we are able to find the presence of existentialism where each is responsible for

creating purpose or meaning in their own lives after being confronted with a crisis. So, the theme of existential crisis has been around forever. People enjoy these movies even though they contain heavy subjects. The underlying issues of human existence, the need for purpose and meaning, relationships with others, creating one's own self-identity, the strength of the social conscience; these themes are important in the lives of every living person, but when confronted with a global outbreak or disaster, people try to find the meaning of their life through their own actions. Each and every person in these movies has either survived or died, but it doesn't matter to them as they were already determined to face what was in front of them and how they could survive. They chose their choice and were ready to face the struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

People must adjust to a shift in existential beliefs before, after, and during pandemics since they have life-altering effects. The fear of the invisible, seemingly unstoppable chaos that threatens humanity's fundamental life is the source of the existential madness, which has many different manifestations. This has implications for the entire cultural setting as literature connects the past and present together and creates a language that champions the triumph of human resiliency. In literature, pandemics appear as a calculating force that can affect people's lives and change the parameters of what is thought to be "norm."

Literature is evinced in the existential landscape with an expressive empathy rather than a vicarious destructive account of the precarious nature of the human situation during a cataclysm such as a pandemic, which mirrors the existential strife heightened during such a time. Ultimately, the solution is to get in touch with the existential essence of these emotions, which are communicated through literature.



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