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Quest for Self-Discovery in *The Zahir*

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Letter of Recommendation

Rajesh Yadav has completed his thesis entitled “*Quest for Self-Discovery in Paulo Coelho’s The Zahir*” under my supervision. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva.

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The thesis titled, *Quest for Self Discovery in the Zahir by Rajesh Prasad Yadav* submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee:

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Abstract

Coelho draws the picture of an imagined narrator who is indeed similar to the writer himself to a greater extent and conveys the philosophical message that life is uncertain and everyone undergoes distinct levels of thoughts and psychological transmission in order for creating and getting one's human existence. The most powerful energy that makes one to exist with value, dignity, prestige, meaning, comfort, pleasure and harmony, is love and emotional attachment which indeed everyone requires as support for living. Furthermore, the instable and fluctuating stance of the narrator in the course of searching Esther, his wife left him and disappeared makes it clear that he is in the process of becoming and comprehending the sense of human life and its prominence in the family affair. After all, the mobility and keen quest for Esther and his self are focused in the sense that both of them are reciprocally concerned and affect each other. In the absence of Esther, his life proves worse than he has ever thought before and similarly in the absence of self identity, his life is futile and meangless. On the whole the entire text, *The Zahir* carries on this philosophical content that implicitly precedes everyone to assimilate in life to create meaning of human existence.

I. Journey as Metaphor in Paulo's Novels

Paulo Coelho, the author of *The Zahir*, was born in the Botafago neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on 24th August 1947. Coelho developed his artistic career in writing which his upper middle class family disliked. Because of this his schooling was troublesome. He wanted to read the works of George Luis Borges, his literary idol and the person who inspired Coelho from his childhood to become a writer. The concentration in such work put him back in study for which he was admitted to the strict Jesuit school, Colegio de San Ignacio in Rio de Janeiro where he learned to be disciplined in life but he also lost his religious faith. Yet, his love for art and literature was still strong.

Coelho was always a nonconformist, a seeker of new things and taste. This made him try everything good and bad that came in his way. During the guerrilla and hippy movement of 1968, he was the follower of Marx and Angles. He took part in election and demonstration. It was during this period, Coelho linked himself with drugs, hallucination and traveling. He accumulated a lot of experiences out of the long journey and his visit to different places. Soon his father brought him back and admitted in Law University of Rio de Janeiro. But he left the university in 1970 to work in the theatre. With the money he had earned as an actor and after escaping from mental asylum, he moved to the States. Writing was still his strong interest, and so he tried journalism. He also started a magazine that brought him in contact with Raul Seixas, the burning music producer of Brazil whom he joined as a lyricist. The singer was popular

inside as well as outside Brazil. So Coelho too made a lot of money which enabled him economically.

During his working years with Raul, he also developed an interest for black magic under the inspiration of Aleister Crowley. It was the hardest and most difficult experiences of his life. When he managed to put himself up from the abyss of black magic, "where he was kidnapped and tortured by a group of Para militaries who were active during the Brazilian dictatorship.

Almost miraculously, he escaped from the kidnapping and decided to lead a normal life and worked as the lyricist for many music companies. But in 1978 his writing passion took him away from Brazil to U.K where he worked as the correspondent for many Brazilian magazines. He had also written his biography including his childhood experience in the Jesuit School, and his hard times of life. This book was never published because he left the manuscript in a pub and forgot there. Whatever the writer has written in this book is about his personal life experience and different situations he went through. Most often he talks about his love affairs with many women turn by turn and his true love for Esther. In fact there has never been peace and stability into his life and at the same time his alienated situation has made him feel much pessimistic and disappointed about life. He is no happier in the sense that he runs after different tastes of life. His hedonist nature has brought about a kind of earthquake into his personal life and eventually he remains alone in the pool of boredom and monotony. The narrator's alienated life makes him an experienced person and eventually leads him to the point of realization of his previous mistakes and his

present condition. He also gets to the world of epiphany after being awakened from his slumbering state and the credit for this goes to his disappeared wife Esther.

After the failure of three marriages, he married a painter, Cresting Oiticia, with whom he was sharing the greatest success of his life as a world famous writer. After his marriage they set out for the tour to Germany. Later he underwent the deep spiritual experience which brought him back to the Catholic belief of his parents. During that period he went seven hundred kilometers walking pilgrimage to Santiago de compositely which took fifty days on feet. By covering the experience of his journey from France to Spain he published his first book, *Waring of Magic* which is later retiled as *Pilgrimage*. The journey of writing which started from the pilgrimage continued and he wrote other books, *The Zahir*, *The Alchemist*, *Maual of the Warrior of Lights*, *The Valkyries*, *The Fifty Mountain* and *Verorica*. These books led him to the zenith of glory and he is one of the top ten best writers of the world. Nowadays, Coelho lives in his Rio de Janeiro home located near the Copacabana beach.

Pilgrimage talks about the journey of Paulo from France to Spain to visit Santiago, a pilgrimage where his training as a white magician explained. He tries to compare the experience of his black magic period with the journey to a religious place. His *Valkyries* is an account of Coelho's 40 days in the desert to meet his angel. The Fifth Mountain is a story about fate and importance of destiny in one's life.

Vweinica, the female protagonist in *Veronica* seems to have every things she could wish for but she is not happy and she decides to die for which she takes overdose of sleeping tablets and wakes up in the local hospital. There she is told that although she is alive now, her heart is damaged and she has only a few days to live. This story follows her through the intense days of her life. During this period her attitude is changed. She gets different meanings of her own past experience. In this situation she discovers things which she has never before. This develops the interest for love and she works to live if possible.

In *Devil and Miss Prim*, a stranger arrives in the small mountain village of Viscas searching for the answer to a question that torments him. Are all human beings, in essence, good or evil? In this famous novel Coelho, an usual protagonist, sets a moral challenge to the town from which they may never recover a fascinating meditation on the human soul. The novel illuminates the reality of good and evil as usual and our unique human capacity to choose between them.

The Manual of the Warrior of Light is an invitation to each of us to live our dream, to enhance the uncertainty of life and to rise to meet our own unique fate. In his inimitable style, Paulo Coelho helps us to discover the warrior of light within each of us. Here the warrior of light is the one who appreciates the miracle of being alive, one who accepts failure and whose quest leads him to be the person he wants to be.

Eleven Minutes tells the story of Brazilian girl Maria, whose first innocent brush with love leaves her heart broken. At a young age, it convinced

her that she will never get true love. A negative attitude to love develops in her and the story ends with her working as a prostitute.

The writing of Paul Coelho gives us a sense of conversation. We get the sense that a person, whose experience is with us, is instructing us the right way of life. The writing of Coelho can be understood more by the words of Eisinger. He writes, "This is the reason behind the fame of Coelho which he has achieved by using only these people as character which he himself has lived" (145).

Paul Coelho wrote *The Zahir* in January and June 2004 while he was in his own pilgrimage in Paris. In this text, the writer shows journey of the protagonist to discover his wife who disappeared, the police drag the narrator on for questioning, but soon release him, telling him he is "free" to go. Indeed freedom is one of the central themes of the book. While technically free, the character is the slave of his obsession with Esther just as he has always been the slave of his appetites, his ambition and his work. When he met Esther the narrator was already a successful song lyricist whose hit numbers gave him financial independence but little satisfaction. He had longed to be a writer but procrastination prevented him from starting a novel. Then she joined him in Paris, where the couple took up residence. Although he thought they were happy, they began to spend less and less time together. He was busy playing the literacy star and womanizing while she was off on assignment. Nevertheless to the narrator's mind, it was satisfactory marriage.

The theme of love constantly appears in the novel. Furthermore it is the crux of the text with which all the characters are entangled. The eternal energy of love

urges the readers to embrace it. The central unnamed character gives the impression of a man with somewhat shallow feelings; he has been married three times or more and even in his latest marriage he concedes to occasional acts of infidelity which serve to undermine his credibility as a man worthy of the woman he is married to. He finds new 'love' not long after his wife's unexplained disappearance and continues to flirt, or invite sexual encounters.

Despite the issue of love, some of the intellectual, philosophical and spiritual issues seem to occur in most of Coelho's work as well. Similarly the extramarital affairs do appear in *The Zahir*. The relationship of Esther with Mikhail and the narrator's indulgence in the sexual acts with many women do justify the fact that Esther and the narrator keep extramarital affairs. Coelho's dealing with the philosophical tenet is that there is always a kind of conflict between the mind and heart. Coelho thinks that spiritual guidance comes to us in a particular form-not the rational answers that philosophers climb up their towers of logical abstraction to reach, and not the presentation of intelligible reasons. In the same way the idea of chasing happiness is another prominent theme. As Coelho says:

One of the great traps for human being is 'the search for happiness'. Even though she's successful in every aspect of her life, Esther, the writer's wife, is not a happy person. But instead of doing what most people do, i.e. ignoring her feelings and keeping herself busy so as to avoid having to think about the meaning of

life, she decides' to go in search of this thing called 'happiness'.

(21)

Coelho reflects on the human condition, recognizing that human beings are not perfect, but does not see this as a big deal. So in one interview he agrees that “humans have problems, we are sometimes not as good as we should be” (23). But he doesn't seem to see this as very significant. In *The Zahir* he writes: "This cannot keep us away from the spiritual path. We have to accept ourselves as we are and stop worrying, instead of trying to become perfect" (19).

So far as his style is concerned he adopts a 'symbolic language, to communicate his ideas. He is right to stress the inability of man to exhaustively express what God is like. If God really is God-infinite, transcendent and above all limitation-then this emphasis is crucial. However, Coelho doesn't seem to want a God who is distinct from the cosmos; rather he sees God as the cosmos-'the soul of the World' that communicates with him. However, the possibility of a supernatural revelation isn't mentioned, and as Coelho describes himself as a Catholic this is a very strange omission. For a Christian, the Bible is God's revelation of himself, and contains his spiritual guidance for life. Those questions about love, freedom, fidelity and the human condition all find their answers in the pages of the most relevant and incredible book ever written.

Since the novel *The Zahir* appeared in literacy arena in 2005, it has received a chunk of criticisms from different perspectives. It is reviewed basically as a meaning in life. It is "through the narrator's journey from Paris to Kazakhstan, Coelho explores various meanings of love and life, but the impact

of these lessons is dismissed significantly as they are repeated in various forms by various characters"(59). Margaret Flangan opines that the novel is philosophical and spiritual chronicle of one man's quest for self-discovery. She writes:

Submitted a novel of obsession, this tale is the philosophical and spiritual chronicles of one man's self-discovery. Stunned by his wife's inexplicable disappearance from their Paris home and immediately suspected of foul play by the authorities and the press. (21)

In the same way another critic Ala Galleys in her reviews states that the novel *The Zahir* is as a spiritual awakening, like Coelho's other novels. She writes: "*The Zahir*, like Coelho's previous work, concerns spiritual awakening and life-altering transformation as it follows the disappearance of the protagonist's wife and a man who may be her lover" (1).

Similarly Barbara Mujica takes *The Zahir* as an autobiographical novel. It can evidently be seen in her words: "Although the narrator remains unnamed, there is clearly an autobiographical element in the book. The protagonist is a famous author who lives in Europe. He writes in a language not widely read outside his own country, which has relatively small reading public" (63). Thus another renowned critic Dr. Wisam Mansour views this novel with the perspective of gender issue:

Like Barth's *Shahrayar*, Coelho's man undergoes a radical change that meditates centuries of prescribed conventional masculinity and

ends by not only condemning female fidelity, but also legitimizing it by his reunion with his wife in spite of the fact that she is pregnant by some other man. (94)

The narrator's view and activities are similar to the writer's. The writer is much radical in the sense that he undergoes a number of changes and works as a distinct type of male that is not in the conventional pattern. He considers seduction as a game and derives pleasure a lot out of seducing different women and still demonstrates that he is love in with Esther, the wife who left him without telling the reason of her departure. At the moment he plays with the memories of the days and good companionship of Esther he had before her departure. However, he feels short of happiness and satisfaction due to her absence and his alienation. After all he fails to attain the meaning of his self and then remains in the world of hopes that Esther would love him and he would have the time of love and support. With this hope and efforts for succeeding it, he lives.

II. Existentialism and Sartre's Stand

Existentialism is quite a wide intellectual movement to which Russian idealist philosophers have paid tribute. It has left its mark on the theory of creativity developed by Nikolai Berdiaev and Lev Shestov's theory of freedom. The existentialist philosophers come out with a critique of preceding philosophy, attempted to reinterpret radically not only the most important philosophical problems but the very mode of philosophical thinking as such. Thus they claim to introduce their own unique "existential" way of thinking. This is how existentialism is usually viewed in the west. Valentin Ferdinandovich Asmus, a doctor of philosophical science further says, "Heidegger is widely known critique of metaphysics is seen as exposing the falsity of the most general and basic approaches of philosophy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle" (5). In the course of history, these approaches seem to have become increasingly rooted in West European thought and culture in general. But the existentialists are equally anxious to show that their philosophical position is not only unique but also distinctively universal. For them the existential type of thought and world perception is something that always takes place in any human being, including the thinker, but for some reason tends to be concealed, rejected, or externally completely unrevealed.

Existentialism insists that choices have to be made arbitrarily by individuals, who thus create themselves, because there are no objective standards to determine choice. Existentialism draws attention to the risk, the void of human reality and admits that the human being is thrown into the world

in which pain, frustration, sickness, hatred, alienation, malaise and death dominate.

During the World War II, Europe finds itself in a crisis and faces death and destruction and existentialist movement begins right from that time. Existentialism reaches its zenith in the year following the war, the time when Europe is in despair and pessimism. The dark aspect of life of the contemporary time contradicts the life of the nineteenth century which is full of optimism and brightness. The very scene can be perceived in the works of the great personalities of the world such as Karl Marx, Soren Kierkegaard and Fredrich Nietzsche. In fact these writers and philosophers have contributed a lot in the promotion of human dignity and their spiritual and material aspects of life. Their works are concerned with the existence of human beings.

Existentialism as a school of thought devotes to the interpretation of human existence. As a matter of fact, the term, “existence” comes from the Latin root Ex “out” + Sistere “to stand” (Cuddon 316). Thus existence means to stand out in the universe. It takes human being as an isolated existent into the alien universe. The feeling of despair and separation give idea that people have to create their own values and meaning of life. This is why one is bound to make choices and create self. One exists up to the time, s/he makes choices. After all, it focuses on the lack of meaning and purpose in life and solitude of human existence. It indeed concerns what particular way people have to follow and how they deal with the negatives such as depression, frustration, pain, anxiety, alienation which are the byproducts of modern society.

As a matter of fact, existential philosophy is concerned with the existence of the individual's life and death. They search for what it is like to be an 'individual' human being in the world. Whether the thing is true or false which eventually depends on the decision an individual makes. There is no final meaning and definition of any thing. Rather its nature is fluid and relative. The existentialists make it clear that the human choice is temporary and personal since every individual makes one's choice keeping oneself away from any biases. As people choose things in accordance with their taste and need, they are responsible for any kind of consequence their choice brings about. Macintyre says in this concern: "Even if I do not choose, I have chosen not to choose" (149). Hence he makes his personal stand clear regarding the choice of his liking and disliking. After all, the existentialists stress on the freedom that is accompanied by responsibility and in the world devoid of meaning. Sartre says: "We are condemned to be free" (56). He means to say that people are cursed to be free and they keep on making choices to please their taste on this ground their freedom turns a curse and they indeed never become free at all. Their freedom proves harmful and unbeneficial to them.

There is a deep concern of existentialism with the man's pre-philosophical attempts to attain self-awareness and understanding of existence. Out of many prominent figures, Sartre's view is relevant here to bring about into light. He mentions in his book *Existentialism and Human Emotions* about the individual and her/his potentials to become more than what s/he is, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (15). To him humans have immense

potentials that they use and create their outstanding presence in the world they live in. Furthermore, he claims, “there is no reality, except in action” (32). Reality is the concern of action. There is no action, no reality. Reality and action are concerned with each other. They are relative. Sartre puts living in two different compartments of authentic and inauthentic. He chooses authentic living and focuses that one must choose and make a commitment to better it. He makes a clear distinction between being-in-itself (en-soi) and being-for-itself (pour-soi). En-soi applies to things; this means a thing is basically what it is. In case of human being, existence precedes essence. Therefore man is pour-soi: “The best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God” (63). To him human first exist, appear and then make a choice and eventually create their identity.

French existentialist Albert Camus reflects on the loss of certainties in the postmodern world. To him, each individual has a plan in her/his own life as a project. The individual is responsible for the choice and even failure of the very design as well. Hence his concern is with the freedom and responsibility of the individual and their alienated state that is due to social mechanism and difficulty that one faces due to lack of belief and homage to the almighty. His entire focus is on the absurd life of individuals and their meaningless engagement in the materialistic acts. He thinks that human existence is futile. The modern world is full of injustice: millions work in cyclic way that is exploitative. Furthermore, he thinks that humans should rebel against the absurdities just by discarding to participate in such futile things. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he says that Sisyphus

represents the modern people and creates his own fate though he knows the implication of his deed is no more fruitful. Camus says:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe hence forth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of the night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.(70)

To get released from the anxiety, depression and frustration of the absurd world, one needs to obey the dictates of the God or he/she should submit to death. But to the modern man either of the choices is ridiculous coward. Rather s/he prefers to live in the absurd world struggling hard. Sisyphus disobeys the God and creates his own fate though this fate is much challenging and complicated and similarly the plight of modern people is. They create their future which is dreadful and extraordinary. Camus makes a glimpse on the miserable plight of the modern man:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.

(13)

Camus believes that human being is an isolated existent in an alien universe. The universe does not possess any inherent truth, value or meaning. “This universe”, states Camus, “henceforth without a muster seems to him neither sterile nor futile” (Ellmann 852). Camus concludes that the condition of man becomes absurd when he realizes that the speculative system of past provides him no reliable guidance for life. When the man in the absurd world becomes aware of his futile living, he is naturally filled with anxiety and helplessness. At the cost of his pleasure, he chooses the fate and life full of anxiety, helplessness and depression.

Existentialists are obsessed with the meaning of life. They focus on the life of individuals. Life is very difficult and does not have any objective meaning, existentialists attempt to create meaning in this modern world full of alienation, isolation, loneliness, frustration, lack of authenticity and absurdity. After all, existentialism deals with man’s disillusionment and despair.

Existential philosophers like Nietzsche and Camus do not agree in fatalism. They reject the ideas that our fate is determined and we cannot avoid or change it. Nietzsche rejects any interpretation that considers fate as a manifestation of benevolent divine providence. To him, fate is faceless therefore any individual never becomes victim to its hand. People blindly believe in fate like thing. It is just our coincidence what happens in our action. He argues that an individual has a kind of goal and the course in the world that must be oriented towards fate. He calls “free will” is the highest power of fate which is felt in the medium of freedom of will.

To Nietzsche fate is not a compelling power. Rather it is an experience of free will. Through freedom we can experience fate. Free consciousness experiences this world as resistance, struggles to establish its own latitude within it, and in doing so experiences itself as “free will”. However this will is free only in the self-perception of consciousness. Safranski further considers about the interrelationship between free will and fate and determinism and adopts the views of Nietzsche as follows:

He reflected on the circumstance that reflecting reason is sufficiently free to allow the problem of freedom to emerge in the first place. Even the question itself-“How is freedom possible?”- manifests a “free will”. Although free will does belong to the universe of determination, it is still free enough to be able to distance this whole world conceptually. To this liberated consciousness, the world appears as the grand Other, the universe of determination. Nietzsche called it “fate”. (37)

Nietzsche’s views on the mystery of freedom are parallel to the idea of fate. To him if relationship between freedom and fate is constituted such that it depends on the individual to connect the two spheres in his own life; every individual becomes an arena of the world as a whole. Each individual is a case in point of the link between fate and freedom.

Camus considers individual freedom as well. He thinks that an individual can make his own fate. He debates that the individual must not bow down before

God or authority and should neither negate nor objectify him. He worries about the false spirituality, religion, and authority in *Myth of Sisyphus*:

It is Camus's insight into the awareness of Sisyphus during the process-his insight into the fact that Sisyphus knows what he is doing-that gives Camus courage. Like Sisyphus, Camus tells us, humans make their own fate, their own choices, and to that extent are in control of their own destinies. By defying the gods, Sisyphus made his choice and his fate. (*The Creation of Knowledge* 67)

Oedipus is alone to fight against the catastrophe extant in Thebes: Plague that has ravaged almost the entire city. The struggle between these two forces is evident in Sophocles's next play *Antigone*. Antigone is legally obliged to accept the state law i. e., not to bury her state claims traitor brother Polyneices but she is more obliged to accept the divine law, on once it depends on the proper cremation of her brother Polyneices. This becomes the cause of the tragedy of Antigone. Jacobus further says: "The main conflict 'Antigone' centers on a distinction between law and justice, the conflict between a human law and a higher law" (70). Antigone emerges as a hero who possesses forward in the full conviction that she is right. She must break the law of the state; she must answer to what she regards as a higher law. Thus, in the struggle between individual force and divine force, individual force seems very weak and the divine force remains always victorious.

Paulo Coelho's novel, *The Zahir* carries on the existential themes that are alienation, frustration, depression, hopelessness, mechanical human relationship, meaninglessness, absurdity, instability, uncertainty etc. The narrator's quest for self is the focus of study and search over here. Sartre's views are much pertinent in this regard. For him if an essence really existed, another person's thoughts would not affect someone else's. Instead a person makes choices from birth and the different decision that one chooses form a pattern and creates one's character. Sartre says: "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life" (769). This exemplifies the point that man is the product of his actions and has complete control over his own life. The soul and personality that are given to a person do not limit him in his actions; the judgments that he makes depict the type of person that he is. Therefore the essence does not create the man, the man creates his essence. One's choices and decisions create a code for as well.

Sartre's views regarding atheistic existentialism is much worthy here to get highlighted. It declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. He says, "That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality" (214). What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? He means that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees, he is not definable; it is because to

begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing-as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity." Sartre concludes existentialism stating,

what is at the very heart and centre of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity-a commitment always understandable, to no matter who in no matter what epoch-and its bearing upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment. (216)

He hence focuses on commitment that one makes. For him one must observe equally the relativity of Cartesianism and the absolute character of the Cartesian commitment. In this sense every one makes the absolute by breathing, by eating, by sleeping, by sexing, or by behaving in any fashion whatsoever. There is no difference between free being-being as self-committal, as existence choosing its essence-and absolute being. To him existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position. Its intention is not in the least that of plunging men into despairs. Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence

of God. It declares, rather, that even if God exhaust that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save his from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confining their own despair with ours that Christians describe us as without hope.

III. Mobility, Instability and Recognition of Self

In *The Zahir*, Coelho tells us the story of its male narrator who like Coelho himself, is a celebrated artist, lyric writer and novelist. The narrator-artist, whose name significantly remains disguised, finds himself obsessed with the mysterious and sudden disappearance of Esther, his third wife. Esther, a journalist and a war correspondent, in spite of her love and support to the narrator artist disappears and leaves the artist confounded and confused. For him she becomes the *Zahir* that haunts his days and nights. Though he forges various love affairs during the enigmatic absence of Esther, he cannot suppress Esther's virtual existence in the data of his brain and heart cells. Eventually, the writer begins to collect clues about the whereabouts of Esther. He enlists the aid of Mikhail, an epileptic visionary young man whom Esther helped bring to France from Kazakhstan after he worked as her interpreter in his religion. The writer learns that his wife lives in a village in the steppes of Kazakhstan weaving carpets and teaching French to the locals. In order to solve the enigma of her sudden disappearance and to free himself of the *Zahir* that has colonized his being, he embarks on an odyssey to find his wife. The narrator's indulge in sexual intercourse with many women shows his flexibility of mind and change of taste. In this regard, he says:

It was even easier a woman, another journalist, a friend of my wife, and divorced-which is why she doesn't mind revealing that she slept with me-came forward as a witness in my favor when she heard that I had been detained. She provided concrete proof that I

was with her on the day and the night of Esther's disappearance.

(5)

In fact the narrator is confused and does not feel contented with any sort of situation of his life. The reasons for it are many in number. His sleep and encounter with different women reveals his inner feelings and movable sense of taste for life. He is in the search of his self that he has not found yet despite his entanglement with many people. He replaces one woman with other to make his existence meaningful. However, he finally finds his self in dilemma and severe crisis.

His life is full of pleasant and sexual moments that he remembers every time and drives pleasure now just going back to the experiences and further questions to him. The writer reflects on his fluctuating mind in *The Zahir*:

He asks still more delicately if she suspected that I was having an affair with her friend. I tell him that it was the first-and last-time that her friend and I had slept together. It wasn't an affair; it came about simply because we had nothing else to do. It had been a bit of a dull day, neither of us had any pressing engagements after lunch, and the game of seduction always adds a little zest of life, which is why we ended up in bed together. (7)

He believes that having sexual relationship with a woman is not an affair. Rather he takes it as way to pastime. Moreover he takes sex as a game of seduction. His life is concerned with unfulfilled desire. He is not happy with the situation he is undergoing. He believes that sex is the source of pleasure since it adds spice to

the life and life becomes much more delicious. Now he feels free, for his wife has departed from him. In this sense he loves loneliness and enjoys each moment as he wishes. He denies a routine life as well as he finds it boring and monotonous. He doesn't care anyone and even does not value the role of any one in his life. Even he does not feel sorry on the disappearance of Esther since he takes women just as the source of pleasure and entertainment. He keeps on replacing one with other for his independent existence. The evidence below adds something more to this fact about his attitudes and feelings:

I'm free. I'm out of prison; my wife has disappeared in mysterious circumstances. I have no fixed timetable for work. I have no problem meeting new people, I'm rich, famous, and if Esther really has left me, I'll soon find someone to replace her. I'm free, independent. But what is freedom? (8)

The presence of Esther in his life is probably troublesome and disturbing. This is why he even feels happy while Esther is away from him. His indifference to her disappearance speaks out the bitter truth of his mind that he is self-centered and thinks of him and his pleasure. To him love can hardly be found in everyone. He laments what he perceives to be his slavery. Then he describes how he fought for his freedom-against parental expectations. His other expectations concerned with other boys at school, the world of work, the affection of his childhood sweetheart against the will of her parents, the hostile world of journalism-and the courage to launch into the adventure of writing a book.

Despite the fact that he has made many efforts to get love from his wives, he eventually remains failed and feels frustrated. He expresses his views and inner troubles as such:

I fought for the love of my first, second, and third wives. I fought to find the courage to leave my first, second, and third wives, because the love I felt for them hadn't lasted and I needed to move on, until I found the person who had been out in this world to find me-and she was none of those three. (9)

The woman he loved is in his memory that is not any of the three who has had sexual relations. The impression and soft feeling that he has for are troubling him and triggers him frequently to capture the bygone moments but he finds him disabled of doing so. He is much philosophical in the sense that he is able to differentiate between what freedom means and how slavery troubles people: "I know that freedom has a high price, as high as that of slavery; the only difference is that you pay with pleasure and a smile, even when that smile is dimmed by tears" (11). He draws a picture of both freedom and slavery which is indeed significant simply because smile is in both of the cases. When people are free and simply laugh and share they experiences with other people but the slaves' smile gets dimmed due to tears. Thus there is dual character of life which dominates the entire world to him. He is thus roving in the world of imagination and philosophy.

The tension between freedom and fidelity is explored further as the abandoned author considers the possibility that his wife Esther has met another

man: “It was part of the rules not to mention any extramarital [...] I never asked questions, and she never told me anything. We were both free, and we were proud of that” (15). No matter why he loves freedom a lot but it is significant that he derives pleasure out of freedom. He means to say when partners are free they do not feel problematic to have extramarital relations as well. To him fidelity is not important. Rather he loves seduction that he can have when he is not bound to the marriage commitments and other formalities. He wants to be practical even regarding the emotional activities as well. He thus expresses his attitudes about the type of life he prefers:

I need to be practical, to study the options; after all, life goes on. I may not be the first nor will I be the last man whose wife has left him, but did it have to happen in a sunny day, with everyone in the street smiling and children singing, with the first signs of spring just beginning to show, the sun shining, and drivers stopping at pedestrian crossings? (13)

To exist in the world, the narrator believes in the options and makes a choice of out many so that he can live life with pleasure. He has to make choice means he is not free in any way. Rather he is entangled with the options and choices. In fact he is in the mood of romantic flavor and feels contented while observing around him. The surrounding is full of life and he perceives everything with a target of getting pleasure and sort of bliss from the nature and her entities.

But now the narrator regrets that he should have been able to understand her feeling and freed her to do what she liked. Thus he reflects on each and

every that he did in the company of Esther before she left him and went somewhere he does not know. He memorizes the time Esther was with him:

Even if she had slept with him and fallen in love, wouldn't she weigh in the balance all the time that we had spent together and everything we had conquered before setting off on an adventure from which there was no turning back? She was free to travel whenever she wanted to, she lived surrounded by men, soldiers who hadn't seen a woman in ages, but I never asked any questions, and she never told me anything. We were both free, and we were proud of that. (15)

Now he muses that he did not interfere with her private life and ever allowed her to do what she liked. But he does not make efforts to see any sort of mistakes on his part. Rather he enjoins him with her and acclaims that he along with she was free to enjoy the life of their choice. He suffers since her images are penetrating into his mind and heart in such a way that he cannot stop remembering her feeling alone. As a matter of fact he lacks companionship of Esther for commendable survival but does not accept that thing. There is existential crisis in his life. His being is no more satisfied with the present condition.

The issue of freedom has become much of significance into his life. After all, he states: "I want to believe that it is wonderful to be free. Free again. Ready to find my one true love, who is waiting for me and who will never allow me to experience such humiliation again" (16). He is in the world of fantasy and does not try to understand the value of marriage and its sacredness. Rather he takes it

very simple and dreams of getting forgiven by Esther as she will not become grave enough that she humiliates him in any way. He does not try to understand the feelings and wants of a woman who is once tied to a marriage bond. Fidelity is the matter of no significance to him. Rather freedom is needed every time.

The writer reflects on the human condition, recognizing that human beings are not perfect, but nor seeing this as a big deal. So in one interview he says: "Humans have problems, we are sometimes not as good as we should be." But he does not seem to see this as very significant. In *The Zahir*, he writes: "This cannot keep us away from the spiritual path. We have to accept ourselves as we are and stop worrying, instead trying to become perfect" (19). Hence the concept forwarded is much conservative and satisfactory. He does not want to see changes in life. Furthermore, he attempts to convince him with the situation as it is. He associates him and Esther that both of them are on the spiritual path and are all right. In fact this is the way to console one self even with the miserable life. However, there is no certainty with his determination. He further tells us about his life:

The same conflicts I had with my previous wives begin to surface: women are always looking for stability and fidelity, while I'm looking for adventure and the unknown. This time, though, the relationship lasts longer. Nevertheless, two years on, I decide it's time for Esther to take her type-writer back to her own apartment, along with everything else she brought with her. (19)

The demarcation line he draws between men and women is of great significance here. He deliberately makes it clear that women seek for stability and fidelity whereas men run after adventure and other strange things. In fact he sees adventure in seduction of women and changing life partners not for the perspective of having a formal and social life but for getting new and different taste of sex in them. Hence he wants to separate Esther away from his life and indulge in the sexual intercourse with women whoever comes in his life. Furthermore, he shows the problems of human life that probably every one suffers: “We humans have two great problems: the first is knowing when to begin, the second is knowing when to stop” (29). After all, he is right since knowledge brings a sort of tempest to the human mind and once people know when and how to commence something and when and how to stop, they do not suffer any more. People are confused and roam here and there how and when to start. The author, Christian de Duve of *Vital Dust: Life as a Cosmic Imperative* says:

For Coelho, spiritual guidance is more emotive. His teaching owes much to the rejection of organized religion, as well as the way in which it offers an antidote to the inadequacy of atheistic existentialism in supplying meaning, value and purpose. [...] for someone to tell us to change gear and to find some soul, which is certainly a part of Coelho’s message. This all builds towards a model of spiritual guidance that throws off anything that would have the slightest whiff of authority or submission. It is a personal

and individual approach. (14)

The critic focuses on the vitality of religion into human life and how spirituality affects an individual to change the approach of life. Coelho indeed discards the concept of the organized religion and favors the life which promotes the human pleasure and dignity. After all, his criticism highlights the purpose and mission of Coelho in writings. He upgrades the personal freedom and taste since both are required to have pleasure in the materialistic world. Humans should live atheistically since there is no much trouble with life. The narrator recaptures the moments and features of his marriage and views:

Apart from the normal conflicts in any marriage, I am contented. I understand for the first time that all the frustrations I felt about previous love affairs and marriages had nothing to do with the women involved, but with my own bitterness. Esther, however, was the only woman who understood one very simple thing: in order to be able to find her, I first believe she is the love of my life, and although I do occasionally fall in love with other women who cross my path, I never consider the possibility of divorce. I never ask her if she knows about my extramarital affairs. She never makes any comment on the subject. (35)

He confesses the mistakes he committed in his conjugal life immediately after the departure of Esther from his life. He makes philosophical statements about the marriage and its measures and challenges. He is absolutely correct in saying that no marriage is free from conflicts and despite such tussles, one should learn

to live and feel contented with the marital life. Now he finds him guilty not the women he frequently married. This epiphany comes to him when he has experienced the absence of Esther from his life. He is living a redundant life that does not precede any further hope and pleasure. He appreciates Esther a lot as she remained silent throughout the marital life and she never questioned about his relationships with other women. She remained submissive and played the role of a good woman in the eyes of society. But he now realizes that after all he was responsible for the frustrations and other mishaps. Hence he tries to understand her love for him and her fidelity into their marriage bond.

It is factual that humans cannot feel happy just only with material gains and economic prosperity. They need love and care from nears and dears. The narrator consents with the very fact:

Precisely that. I have everything, but I'm not happy. And I'm not the only one either; over the years, I've met and interviewed all kinds of people: the rich, the poor, the powerful, and those who just make do. I've seen the same infinite bitterness in everyone's eyes, a sadness which people weren't always prepared to acknowledge, but which, regardless of what they were telling me, was nevertheless there. (38)

Nobody regardless to the class, gender, sex, community and so on can be happy without love as it is the source of all sorts of pleasures and happiness. His experience of the long life span convinces him that one cannot feel happy even if he has everything except love and someone's inspiration into life. Happiness

is concerned with the soundness of mind that is when one is emotionally satisfied and pleased. He further exposes his plight describing his almost all aspects of him:

I have the woman I love, the career I always dreamed of having, the kind of freedom that is the envy of all my friends, the travel, the honors, the praise. But there's something [...] I have the idea that, if I stopped, life would become meaningless. (39)

His life is futile in the sense that women he is in love with do not love him. They have sexual intercourse with him which is just like the relationship of prostitution with their clients. Love is free from all sorts of greed and selfishness. It does not wait for any gain in return. After all, he is free in all ways but not happy. The life without happiness is absurd. His life has become like a life of a Robert as a Robert can do everything despite lacking emotions and feelings. He is true to a greater extent that life is valueless if there is no charm and friendship. As a matter of fact marriage is a very sacred institution that requires very meek and polite handling and sweet care. In the absence of common and mutual understanding it fails and gets broken into pieces apart. In the course of assimilation of his previous experience in the company of Esther, he further says:

If I had said: Choose between me and becoming a war correspondent, I would have been betraying everything that Esther had done for me. I wasn't convinced by her declared aim-to go in

search of freedom, to get out and about, to experience strong emotions. (45)

Hence it gets clear that Esther was not happy and did not feel free in his company. He is sure that she was undergoing some sort of mental turbulence and trail that he could not understand. In case she wanted to go and search freedom outside the marriage life, there would be some kind of misunderstanding and conflict that needed common understanding but no conversation took place. Meantime, the narrator did not make efforts to stop her from going outside. He even did not offer choice but simply kept silent without any concern. Now he regrets that he should have asked her whether he chose to be a war correspondent or remain at home as his lovely and faithful wife. Thus his self is shattered and roving in the crooked way. There is no normalcy into his life though he tries to find some sort of meaning into it.

After all, he associates Zahir with Esther and proudly acclaims that his Zahir is Esther and further vitalizes this name as well. He says it has a certain identity and position in the society. Thus he keeps on adoring her in almost all ways. He says: “My Zahir is not a romantic metaphor-a blind man, a compass, a tiger, or a coin. It has a name, and her name is Esther” (51). In Arabic language Zahir means the visible. It means things that appear and people can vision them. In that sense his Esther is now in his eyes and can see into her mind and heart. Now he sees meaning into life if she reenters into his life and forgives him for the mistakes he committed earlier. He finds in *The Zahir* that his missing wife becomes his Zahir and that in the course of searching for her, he goes through

his own emotional journey which culminates in him truly finding himself. Thus the narrator slowly recognizes that through everyday ordinary situations and events, the 'soul of the world' (the soul or consciousness that every thing has) is trying to communicate with him. The story wraps itself around questions like, how does his reaction to love affect the way that he loves? What does it really mean to love one person and to be loved by one person? As well as these themes of obsession and love, themes like choice, feelings, suffering, guidance and wisdom are discussed. One of his key themes is the tension between freedom and fidelity, and he questions if monogamy really is the best pattern for relationships.

The long experience of being alone and the life he has ever lived brings him into light and gets aware of the things he did not take notice of before. The flaws he has had, he comments on and says sorry for that. Likewise he moves into different directions so that he can see meaning and sense in the remaining life. He reflects on his memories concerned with Esther: "Sensationalism was only made to last fifteen minutes, to find a new love, to back to writing books, and to put away any memories of my wife in the little drawer that exists on the frontier between love and hate" (53). He is in dilemma whether he neither loves her nor hates. He is sure about his position and thus there is no stability in his mood and attitude as well. He is having uncertain life that lacks a foundation and emotional support. As a house without pillars is shaking and can fall down at any moment so is his life that requires true love and stability. He is in the process of getting wise and familiar with his life and surroundings that

implicitly or explicitly affect him and his life. He says in this regard: “Although it may have been good for my soul to unburden myself of my feelings, to blame or to bless Esther, I began to realize that I was becoming the kind of boring person no one wants to be around” (54). Hence he finds him a monotonous and boring person around whom nobody likes to remain. This hatred towards himself is the byproduct of his flaws that he never remained faithful and honest into his marriage and to his wife Esther. Whoever comes to his life, he simply takes them as the source of entertainment and sexual pleasure. This fluctuating taste for women excites him to towards the pool of emotional knowledge and epiphany. Thus he is discovering self which has ever remained away from recognition. He is slowly recognizing him and his inner self.

After all, he cannot feel good while he is alone. He needs somebody as way to spend his spare time. He keeps his eyes open for women and as he is convinced one or another is fit to him, he dreams of her further. He says: “There was only one possible solution: a girlfriend” (54). Marie is a girl whom he meets and takes her as an alternative to Esther. Though he tries to live life with the memories of Esther, he cannot and seeks for substitutes to Esther. He does not see life without sexual intercourse. After all, seduction is the most prominent aspect of his life. He does not believe in the permanent girlfriend or wife. Rather he prefers a temporary girl for pleasure to the permanent one since he does not see adventure and new taste in that. Thus he expresses his attitudes towards.

She fills everything. She is only the reason I am alive. I look around, I prepare myself for the talk I am to give, and I understand

why I braved the snow, the traffic jams and the ice on the roads: in order to be reminded that every day I need to rebuild myself and to accept-for the first time in my entire existence-that I love another human being more than I love myself. (60)

He gets tired of and feels convinced with the idea that life he is living is vain and futile without Esther. This wisdom he has come with after a long chain of ups and downs in his life. He does not feel comfortable anywhere. Everywhere there is darkness and emptiness and absurdity. His life is without fruit and juice while Esther is detached and staying away from him. He gets conscious of himself and his life and further plans to rebuild his life that has long been demolished and shattered. This reconstruction of his remaining life is a sort of enlightenment. He understands the value of love that he senses is true in Esther. Others simply came with other purposes. In fact his understanding about love is true that one's life becomes meaningful when the person loves somebody else more than oneself. Thus he is enlivened in the matter of love and life. He understands the significance of love and how it affects all aspects of human life. He says: "Absurd I may seem I discovered love" (65). After his failure to regain his love that is possible only when he meets Esther and she forgives him and reassures him about the love she has ever had for him, he finds himself absurd and futile, he perceives no meaning in his life since there is no one faithful and honest to him. After a long trail he has been in position to discover love and its impact on the human life. Before he was in illusion and ignored the existence and significance of true love in a person. Now he realizes that indeed love is

source of all sorts of pleasure and happiness and simply making frequent choices for girls does not please and give him mental satisfaction. He further philosophizes:

Our true friends are those who are with us when the good things happen. They cheer us and are pleased by our triumphs. False friends only appear at difficult times, with their sad, supportive faces when, in fact, and our suffering is serving to console them for their miserable lives. (66)

He despises sympathy that people show in the bad and unfavorable time. He respects those appear when one is in the pleasant and triumphant situation to celebrate the moments of happiness and pleasure. He considers such people as true friends but equally hates them who simply show pity when one is in the miserable condition. This philosophical statement he makes when finds Esther absent in the miserable and reminds him of the time when he was in the heyday with Esther. After all, this is a way to express his anxiety and frustrations just by consoling and prioritizing Esther who is the most required person into his life.

Life is never organized in the perfect manner and one cannot achieve the freedom of her/his choice since the degree of temptation grows of human beings gradually. After all, one has to consent on the present situation whatever the nature of it is. The narrator says regarding the freedom with the clear the sense that freedom is the matter of choice and there is no complete freedom at all:

You've often said that absolute freedom doesn't exist; what does exist is the freedom to choose anything you like and then commit

yourself to that decision. The closer I was to my neighbor, the more I admired you: a man who decided to go on loving the wife who had abandoned him and who wanted nothing more to do with him. (82)

As Sartre states that one has been thrown into the world and s/he is compelled to choose the things of one's choice and then eventually s/he gets bound to the very choice. The excerpt above makes it pretty clear that the narrator loves his wife very much despite the fact that she left him long time ago. His love for her is not purposeful but for the mental satisfaction and to console him with lively memories. He is much sorry for the mistakes he and she caused to occur into their life unknowingly. Now he reflects on them and thus says:

I respected her decision to leave, but the very person who had helped me build my life had very nearly destroyed me. She had always been so brave: why, this time, had she fled like a thief in the night, without looking her husband in the eye and explaining why? (85)

To him he was all right in the matter of conjugal life since he never disagreed with her decision while being with him. This respect for her decision is because of her great sacrifices and help in building up his life. Later on she destroyed his life as she left him so secretly that even he did not know initially about it. His above statement makes it clear that his life was completely dependent on her presence in his life. But in fact he overplays her role into his life. In case she was so much significant in his life, he would remain faithful to their marriage

commitments and honest in the sexual intercourse as well. But the case is quite contradictory and he is found to have flirted and shown being in love with multiple women who came into his life from time to time. It is his hypocrisy that he regrets and feels sorry for the present situation. Furthermore he highlights the mannerism and meaning of love:

The world will become real when man learns how to love; until then we will live in the belief that we know what love is, but we will always lack the courage to confront it as it truly is. Love is an untamed force. When we try to control it, it destroys us. When we try to imprison it, it enslaves us. When we try to understand it, it leaves us feeling lost and confused. (92)

There is contradiction in him in the sense that on the one hand he says people do not know the way how they should love and on the other he seems to be defining what love is and how one has to deal with it as well as how it affects our life. To him love is like an untamed force which destroys us if we try to overcome it and at the same time it enslaves us if we attempt to bring into our control. After all we should not make efforts to comprehend it since it leaves us in the world of confusion and illusion. Hence he appears as if he knows a lot about love. On the whole his definition of love is based on the experience he has gained out of his life. He further defines love and says: "Love is the only thing that activates our intelligence and our creativity, which purifies and liberates us" (96). Every thing he does is for the sake of his mental satisfaction and quest of his self that has ever been unclear and unfound. In the absence of Esther he feels lonely and

becomes frustrated a lot. So to get an outlet he expresses his anxiety just by defining love that he ultimately thinks is possible only in Esther who is geographically away from him. Time and again he blames him for his indifference to his love and care for Esther: “I don’t believe Esther would have left me if I had respected her love” (99). He is still in doubt why Esther left him. his suspicion on him makes it clear that her presence in life plays a crucial role for betterment and prosperity of the narrator’s life. After all, love is of great value and prominence since it enlivens the deadly scene and provides the long life to it. He indulges into writing just for the sake of his life and expressing his frustrations, loneliness and repentance. He says:

Well, Esther fills up every space in my life. I thought that by writing about my feelings, I would free myself from her presence. Now I love her in a more silent way, but I can’t think about anything else. I beg you, please, I’ll do anything you want, but I need you to explain to me why she disappeared like that. (100)

He is looking for the reason she left him. He does not know why she left him so secretly and he is left alone in the pool of anxiety and frustrations. As a matter of fact a human’s life becomes crucial when s/he is away from the concerned people. The worth goes higher and life becomes precious to others in the sense the gap creates a sort of meaning that every one gets committed to searching it out. Esther was not as meaningful and indispensable till she was with the narrator. As soon she disappeared, the narrator found him alone and started being in love with her.

If someone is capable of loving his partner without restrictions, unconditionally, then he is manifesting the love of God. If the love of God becomes manifest, he will love his neighbor. If he loves his neighbor, he will love himself. If he loves himself, then everything returns to its proper place. History changes. (106)

The narrator is getting more philosophical due to the immense impact of his wife's absence in his life. To him love is the greatest thing in one's life and there is nothing as such that can be compared with it. It is compatible to the God only. He puts both God and love at the equal height and dignity. He has high regards for his love for his wife Esther. He brings about the biblical reference as well and restates, "love thy neighbor thyself" mentioned in the holy Bible. Thus he sees grandeur in love and takes it as an energetic source and force that affects human life a lot. It is love that changes the shape of history as well. After all he does a lot of things to release him from the pool of frustrations and anxiety that have been caused by the absence of Esther into his life. Thus he says:

I could not bear having to think about it any more, analyzing all the possibilities, and trying various ways out: deciding simply to accept the situation, writing a book, practicing yoga, doing some charity work, seeing friends, seducing women, going out to supper, to the cinema [...], to the theatre, the ballet, to soccer games. *The Zahir* always won, though; it was always there, making me think: 'I wish she was here with me. (121)

Writing books, practicing yoga, doing charity work, seeing friends, seducing women, going out to supper, to the cinema and so on have become his way of life. He does all these simply because he is frustrated and feels anxious. There is a lot of pressure and tension in his life. To get free from this, he is condemned to choose these things. He cannot forget her wherever he is whatever job he is doing. The image of Esther comes and strikes him everywhere and anytime. This kind of life of uncertainty he is undergoing and waiting for the true meaning of his self in this materialistic world where people are condemned to run after material gain. But in contrary to them, he seems to be overwhelmed due to lack of emotional relief and satisfaction. He attempts to justify his habit of seducing women simply stating: "Because it goes against human nature-if a man and a woman get together, have a bit to drink and talk about personal things, they're bound to end up in bed!" (133) To him it is unnatural if two opposite sexes do not have sexual intercourse while being together and having the conducive environment for that. To make his position strong, he brings about all sorts of precedents.

When he fails to regain his lost love and the source of love, he simply compromise with the present condition and says:

I should accept what life was offering me, not follow Esther's example, not look at anyone else, but remember Marie's words, and build a new life with her. [...] If I behave in the way people expect me to behave, I will become their slave. It requires enormous self-control not to succumb, because our natural

tendency is to want to please, even if the person to be pleased is us. If I do that, I will lose not only Esther, but Marie, my work, my future, as well as any respect I have for myself and for what I have said and written. (139)

He chooses a substitute to Esther in order for his sake of love and deriving pleasure so that he can exist longer. In fact humans are situational and submissive to the circumstance whatever nature it has. The narrator succumbs before the situation and indulges into the life of Marie and sees the image of Esther into her. He compares his situations and tendency with the natural one since he has to make his stand acceptable and welcoming. He is hypocrite as well in the sense that he keeps on changing his stand point and fluctuates here and there. He is in the world of uncertainty and in the state of fluidity. He keeps on moving but gets stoppage nowhere. Joseph Blair states in *Parody in the Zahir* concerning his fluctuating mind:

Life of the narrator in *The Zahir* is the life of every postmodern person whoever s/he is in the world. Nothing is sure and nothing can be taken for granted since everything moves ahead in crooked way that one is not convinced about. The previous philosophy once proven impractical, changes it and follows a new one that can help to forget the harmful and unpleasant moments. The similar situation is of the unnamed narrator in *The Zahir*.

The narrator is like a postmodern hero who is not sure of his stand and of the future. He is living in uncertainty and mobility. He is reshaping and creating

new identity to exist even at the cost of something of great value and significance. He does many things to shadow the image of his wife Esther which is conditioned by the forces that precede him to live longer. After all he bows down before the timely force as it tries to enslave him and to keep him from this slavery of memory, he takes shelter in other things such as food, sex, seduction, and marriage despite the fact that he knows these things will not help him fight against the death. He says in this regard: "I know I'll die one day, but that just makes me live each day as if it were a miracle. It doesn't make me think obsessively about love, happiness, sex, food and marriage" (155). He makes it clear that he is not obsessed with love, happiness, sex, food and others since he takes them simply as means to get to the death which is the ultimate state of a living creature. As a matter of fact the narrator considers him as a helpless creature in this vast universe. He feels alienated and expresses his frustrations in the form of writings. He says: "But I think too: "What a shame, I'm going to die and nothing will be left of me. I may only capable of losing a life, not bringing a life into the world" (155). This thought is completely pessimistic and thinks that there is a superior power to him that creates and he himself is improvised and cannot do anything creative. He is convinced with the concept that he knows the death that comes sooner or later but does not know how to create anything. The expression of such anxious feelings makes it clear an individual is compelled to live futile life and struggle against the worldly problems. The absence of Esther makes him worried and tense. He is expecting Esther to come in his life so soon that he can live the left life with pleasure and mental satisfaction. There is a sort

of violent earthquake in his mind and keeps on moving. He says: "I was sure of my love for Esther and yet I easily fell in love with other women, merely because the game of seduction is the most interesting game in the world" (170). The excerpt above the ambivalent position of the narrator and how surprising it is that he takes seduction as the most interesting game. Perhaps this heavy seduction is a means of expressing his anxiety. His position is ambivalent in the sense that he loves Esther and at the same time he clarifies that he has fallen in love with so many women.

Furthermore the narrator does not want to remain in the pool of frustrations and disillusionment. After all he says in this regard: "If we try to make it go in the direction we want, we end up desperate, frustrated, disillusioned, because that energy is free and wild" (171). He does talk about freedom from time and again and vitalizes this in the human life. But sometimes it lacks its use in life in very nice way. The narrator repents a lot simply because his life is over obsessed and he is fed up with the life he is living at the moment. As a matter of fact, he is trying to find out the meaning of his life but fails to do so in the sense that he is alone and nobody is there to take notice of him selflessly. Rather he finds everyone selfish and redundantly behaving with him. He says: "I was, of course being a coward. I was ashamed of myself, but that was what life was like and –in a way I couldn't really explain-I loved Marie too" (178). His fluctuating nature makes it clear that he simply loves women not for the sake of emotion but for the sake of living and passing moments of life. He was being coward does mean that he was not coward but trying to be so for his

self satisfaction and relaxation. He himself does not know why he loves Marie as well. Thus he is leading the life of confusion and uncertainty. He further says:

I'm saying that, during the time I spent in hospital, I came to realize that I was always looking for myself in the women I loved. I looked at their lovely, clean faces and saw myself reflected in them. They, on the other hand, looked at me and saw the dirt on my face and, however intelligent or self-confident they were, they ended up seeing themselves reflected in me and thinking that they were worse than they were. Please don't let that happen to you.
(179)

As a hedonist he is running after women and trying to see his face in theirs. All these things he does for discovering self and to understand who he is. After all, being unsure of his self and identity, he is dedicated to create his self and expose him as a human being who deserves value and meaning. Thus he keeps on making efforts to discover his self in his alienated life that is far left by women he has ever been in love.

In fact he is committed to finding out Esther in whose presence and self he sees his self and meaning of his life. He becomes happy enough when he comes to know that the little girl is nobody except Esther. He looks bright and thinks his journey has reached to its destination. Thus he says in the regard of this discovery:

The moment she says this, the little girl's presence fills the whole place, and I understand that this is the person I have been waiting

for all my life. She is my way out, and I neither must nor miss this opportunity. I tell her that, if she wants, I can be her interpreter. She says that I obviously have a job already and, besides, she needs someone older, more experienced someone who is free to travel. (201)

The narrator suddenly turns much flexible that he is ready to do anything for the sake of her and if Esther likes her to work as her interpreter, he is ready for that as well. This compromising scaffolding makes a sense that he realizes and has got to know that Esther is much significant and loving to him. Without her, his life remains meaningless and futile. He sees gradual change in his life and thinks that the genuine cause behind all these radical changes is because of Esther's love for him. he is in the process of changing as well. After all he is a postmodern hero who takes everything as right and gets committed to doing for the sake of temporal happiness and contentment. Now onwards all his efforts are for the protection of his self that lies in the presence and company of Esther. He says: "Better to go hungry than to be alone. Because when you're alone-and I'm talking here about an enforced solitude not of our choosing-it's as if you were no longer part of the human race" (250). To him hunger can be endured since it physical but he cannot tolerate the moments of forced solitude and created peace since he cannot mentally feel satisfied and merry. Sartre's view is true in the sense that people have to make a choice for living and creating one's identity in this modern world which is much capitalistic and selfish. When the narrator gets fed up with such worldly experiences, he decides to go back home where his

family members are desperately waiting for him. He thinks family life is far better than anything of the world since in home is protection, love, emotional attachment and common and mutual help in each other's ups and downs. This knowledge he derives after he experiences the moments and situations in the absence of Esther. Thus he discovers who he is and how he should live the meaningful life. After, all meaning of his life lies in the family and emotional attachment not in the temporal and false love he has frequently attempted to get from different women by seducing them.

IV. Conclusion

The narrator is much instable and uncertain about his own self but committed to searching out the meaning of it. Initially the presence of Esther in his life is probably wearisome and alarming this is why he even feels happy while Esther is away from him. His unconcern to her disappearance speaks out the bitter truth of his mind that he is self-centered and thinks of him and his pleasure. To him love can hardly be found in everyone. He laments what he perceives to be his slavery, then describes how he fought for his freedom-against parental expectations, with other boys at school, to get into the world of work, for the affection of his childhood sweetheart against the will of her parents, in the hostile world of journalism -and for the courage to launch into the venture of writing a book. Despite the fact that he has made many efforts to get love from his wives, he eventually remains failed and feels perturbed.

To exist in the world, the narrator believes in the options and makes a choice of out many so that he can live life with pleasure. He has to make choice means he is not free in any way. Rather he is entangled with the options and choices. In fact he is in the mood of romantic flavor and feels contented while observing around him. The surrounding is full of life and he perceives everything with a target of getting pleasure and sort of bliss from the nature and her entities.

But now the narrator regrets that he should have been able to understand her feeling and freed her to do what she liked. Thus he reflects on each and

every that he did in the company of Esther before she left him and went somewhere he does not know. He memorizes the time Esther was with him

He confesses the mistakes he committed in his conjugal life immediately after the going away of Esther from his life. He makes philosophical statements about the matrimony and its measures and challenges. He is absolutely correct in saying that no marriage is free from conflicts and despite such tussles, one should learn to live and feel pleased with the marital life. Now he finds himself blameworthy not the women he frequently married. This epiphany comes to him when he has experienced the absence of Esther from his life. He is living a redundant life that does not precede any further hope and pleasure. He appreciates Esther a lot as she remained silent throughout the marital life and she never questioned about his relationships with other women. She remained submissive and played the role of a good woman in the eyes of society. But he now realizes that after all he was responsible for the frustrations and other mishaps. Hence he tries to recognize her love for him and her trustworthiness into their marriage bond.

In fact he is dedicated to find out Esther in whose company and self he sees his self and meaning of his life. He becomes happy enough when he comes to know that the little girl is nobody except Esther. He looks bright and thinks his expedition has reached to its target.

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