



## Islamic Perception on Existentialism In Arabic Literature

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper aims to describe Islamic perceptions of existentialism in Arabic literature. The method used in this study is descriptive-qualitative, by describing and presenting the data, then analyzing it using a method that suits the data. The results of the study show that according to Islamic perception, existentialism is a heretical philosophical concept, because it does not believe in God. Their goal is to remove heavy burdens so that individuals can start living to achieve their existence, namely human essence. The concept of existentialism is very limited in the Arab world, namely only focusing on conflict and political issues. This became a benchmark for Arab rejection of philosophy. Existentialism has four characteristics, the most highlighted of which is that it only prioritizes content over form and pays attention to novels and drama, while poetry is ignored. Islam's perception of this sect is to only take the good side and reject the thoughts of those who depart from Islamic law. There are several Arab writers whose works are influenced by existentialism, including Ghassan Kanafani, Nawal as-Sa'dawi, Najib Mahfuz, and 'Abdur Rahman Badawi.

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### Introduction

The condition of Arabic literature before entering the modern era experienced decline and decline, and this was different from before, namely in the Jahiliyyah, early Islam, Umayyad and Abbasid eras. In the Middle Ages, Islamic leaders from outside Arabia paid little attention to Arabic literature. A bright spot in the revival of Arabic literature began to appear when Napoleon Bonaparte's expansion into Egypt in 1798 (Anwari, Khanif, 2012). This provided an opportunity for Arab countries to come into direct contact with western civilization which had been interrupted during the Ottoman Dynasty. Therefore, hope arose to revive the glory of Arabic literature (Setyawan, Mohammad Yusuf, 2021).

The rise of western literature was marked by the birth of developing literary schools. All genres

in literary works that were born and developed at a certain time. Therefore, the genre that is the model for the literary work of a certain period becomes characteristic of the literary work in question. (Setyawan, Mohammad Yusuf, 2021). Many literary trends that developed in the west were then adopted into Arabic literary works, especially modern. These currents are classicism, romanticism, realism, symbolism, Parnassianism, surrealism and existentialism. Literary genre is a regularity that is not tied to time and place (Budianta, Melani, 2016). This article will focus on discussions related to Islamic perceptions of existentialism in Arabic literature.

Basically, all of these schools are related, for example similarities in views, trends, or differences between several of these schools. For example, the school of existentialism has different characteristics from other schools. In addition, sometimes a flow is a response to a previous flow. Existentialism focuses on individual experience which tries to suppress subjectivity, creativity and concrete action, for example that each individual must construct knowledge in their own minds and give meaning through real experience (Fajrin, Suhaimi, 2021). Existentialism emerged after the outbreak of World War 1 and developed in France after World War 2. Existentialist thought discusses individual freedom, so this thought acts as a way out for individuals experiencing a crisis of freedom.

In modern times, the Arab nation is faced with problems of thought, art and literature that need to be studied and observed. Researchers have carried out a review to deal with the problems of thought, philosophy and faith. The problem is that western trends have begun to penetrate the literary life of Arab writers and critics. Therefore, an Islamic perspective is very necessary to filter the western flow.

## **Method**

This research uses a descriptive method, by describing and presenting the data, then analyzing it using a method that suits the data (Sudaryanto, 1993). The descriptive method uses data in the form of words which are then observed and explained as they are (Zaim, M, 2014). The research results will be presented in systematic descriptive form, so that the problems that have been formulated will be answered clearly. The data sources in this research are divided into two, namely primary data and secondary data. The primary data sources are books that explain Arabic literary schools. Secondary data sources are the results of research related to Arabic literary genres, articles and other sources.

The data collection technique used is the observation method with the basic note-taking technique. The author listens and reads directly from the data source. After the research data is obtained, it will be recorded and arranged according to the needs of the problem formulation. The researcher's stages in using this technique are as follows: Read the data source carefully and repeatedly; Record or document the required data; Process the data obtained according to the

needs of the problem formulation; and arrange and present data systematically in paragraph form.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. Understanding and Philosophical Foundations of Existentialism

#### a. Understanding Existentialism

The basic word for existence is *existere* which comes from the Latin words *ex* which means 'to come out' and *istere* means to appear, appear, stand. So, existence is something that exists, appears, or has actual existence (Bagus, Lorens, 2005). This kind of thinking in German is called *dasein*. *Da* means there, *Sein* means being. Being for humans always means there, in place. There can be no human being who is not in place. To be situated means to be involved in the physical realm and to be at one with it. The meaning of existential philosophy is exactly what the word means, namely a philosophy that places the way of human existence as the central theme.

The philosophy of existentialism is included in the category of modern philosophy proposed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). The emergence of existentialism was influenced by philosophers Soeren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Wihelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), and in the 20th century it was boomed again by Martin Burber, Karl Jasper, and Jean Paul Sertre (Ekawati, Dian, 2015).

Existentialism views a phenomenon as stemming from existence, which means existence. Existence is the way humans exist in the world, and this is different from the way an object exists. All objects are not aware of their existence, and are different from humans. Objects become meaningful because of humans. Because the way to differentiate the existence of the two in the philosophy of existentialism is that an object only "exists", while humans "exist", so only humans exist (Hadiwijono, Harun, 2001).

#### b. Philosophical Foundations of Existentialism

This flow of existentialism emerged as a reaction to the views of materialism and idealism. For existentialism, humans must be understood as a whole or concrete, namely as an existence that has consciousness (subject). Humans are not just thought about objectively, but lived (Muzairi, 2002). Adherents of existentialism argue that the special nature of humans regarding their way of being is denied and neglected by materialism. The human position is only as an object, even though he is also a subject dealing with objects (Snijders, Adelbert, 2004).

Materialism assumes that human existence is the same as the existence of other objects, existentialism rejects this view. Because their way of being is not the same, humans are aware of their existence while objects are not. According to materialism and in literary

terms, humans are only being-in-self, not being-for-self. Humans know the benefits of trees, stones and one of them is that their life has meaning. Humans as subjects mean those who are aware and conscious. The objects of which one is aware are called objects (Tafsir, Ahmad, 2006).

Existentialism emerged as a reaction to idealism. This understanding stems from the fact that humans are thinking subjects, consciousness or thoughts are everything to humans. This view is opposed by existentialism, because it is clear that idealism erases the world as a reality. They consider humans as consciousness or subjects, even though there is no subject without the world. Humans are attached to the world, and vice versa.

Existentialism strongly opposes objectivity (humans come second) and impersonality. If humans are given an objective and impersonal interpretation, then life becomes shallow and meaningless. This emphasis has brought the importance of existence, freedom, and a sense of responsibility. This flow raises questions about individuality and human personality (Titus, Harnold H. et al., 1984). Therefore, humans must have direct and subjective awareness, because if they are recognized as subjects they will find meaning in their lives. Existentialism emphasizes this. The flow of existentialism appears not only as a way out because it departs from the complete human way of being. Not as a material object as materialism says and not just consciousness as idealism views it, but as a subject who faces the world aware of himself and everything he encounters.

Existentialism is an atheistic sect that does not believe in the existence of God. Sartre, as the pioneer, said that this thinking gave up the existence of God, there was no essence, ideals, definite moral values. The goal is to release heavy burdens, so that individuals can start living to achieve their existence, namely human essence. Existentialist claims that their philosophy is not about rational abstraction, but rather about the study of the phenomenon of existence as manifested in something that exists. There are three basic ideas in existentialism, namely:

- 1) Existence Precedes Essence

Man exists first and essence follows. Because humans were created without an essence, and they are the ones who must create this essence themselves. The goal is to give meaning to life so that you can become a rational being. In reality, humans are nothing but what they make themselves, meaning that a person's existence is their choice about what they want (Qasab, Walid, 2005). Humans initially had no identity or inherent values. Because both were created by individuals themselves, their existence is more meaningful.

2) Individual Freedom

In the flow of existentialism, what limits humans from acting freely is that they must submit to religion, customs and inherited values. Existentialists always elevate the status of the individual, exaggerate subjectivity, and become masters of the universe. Humans are the source of legislation, free thinkers, do not need the rules of a creator, religion or custom. According to them, freedom does not take the form of chaos or destroying society, but rather destroys what is inherited and replaces it with new values created by humans themselves. The goal is to achieve the desired freedom (Qasab, Walid, 2005).

3) Sense of Responsibility

Existentialism upholds freedom based on a sense of responsibility. This school teaches the meaning of freedom for humans with the concept of complete freedom in existence. In this case, it is not freedom without a sense of responsibility from the perpetrator (Ahmadi, Anas, 2019). The freedom given to individuals is not absolute, because it is still bound by human control and thought. It is like an obligation where a person must go beyond his position to realize human and social values, so as to change them for the better. They call their literary output literature of attitude or commitment, because the author defines his position on the problems of his time completely (Afifi, Rif'at Zaki Mahmud, 1992).

c. Existentialism in the Arab World

Existentialism entered the Arab world and dominated literature in the first half of the 20th century. The basis for the emergence of this sect was due to the Palestinian political conflict and the Suez Canal war. Western existentialism aims to seek freedom and liberation from existing limitations, such as theological, political and social, so that a person can be responsible for their choices.

Arab existentialism brought this flow into the political realm. In his article "Shall we Return to Existentialism?" An Egyptian journalist, Anis Mansur (1924-2011), argued that existentialism is an ideology that is suitable for the Arab world because of its values of freedom, its emphasis on one's actions and attitudes, as well as a sense of responsibility for one's actions and choices (Mansour, Anis, 1990). To be human, he must be free. Freedom means being responsible for every opinion and decision taken, for yourself and for others.

The basic understanding of Arab politics that dominates existentialism is the desire to be free from a dictatorial government that deprives its people of their rights at will. Apart from that, there is a desire to free their homeland from colonialism which destroys peace in their country. Mansur called for man's realization of his freedom and existence as a human

being. He denied determinism (previous events outside of will) and stated that people are what they make of themselves. In his article, the spread of existentialism in Arabia reflects the gloomy experiences, struggles, depression and neglect of the 6 Day War (Aldegheishem, Hadeel, 2015).

Ibrahim Jabra in his article "Modern Arabic Literature and the West" tries to explore the development of Arabic literature over the centuries and the strong influence of Western literature on contemporary Arabic writings. He commented on existentialism and said "one does not have to agree with everything Satre said, but his ideas were very important for a new generation of writers engaged in the political and social issues of their time" (Jabra, Ibrahim, 1980).

This shows that there is a limited conception of existentialism in the Arab world. Arab existentialist writers only focused on conflict and political issues. They discovered the relevance of self-serving philosophies. Therefore, this became a benchmark for the Arab people's rejection of the theological connotations behind philosophy. That was an attempt to maintain the general idea and limit it only to the political context and away from its philosophical essence, and that was the general Arab approach to western philosophy (Aldegheishem, Hadeel, 2015).

## 2. Characteristics of Existentialism

Existentialism is dominated by philosophical characteristics, so that this school has several literary characteristics (Qasab, Walid, 2005), namely:

- a. Commitment, in the perspective of existentialists, is rooted in a sense of responsibility. Writers must place their literature to serve problems in their society, defend human freedom, and enter the political arena of their time. Sartre said that the outline of commitment in literary works is a social reality, and the writer before creating a work must believe in it because he is responsible for everything. He could write about winning or losing a war, about rebellion and deterrence. He is not only a writer, but he is a human being, for him life and writing must become one. Art is not to save life, but because life is an artistic expression.
- b. Existentialism prioritizes content over form in a literary work. The function of existentialist writers is not to create beauty, but in their work they have social, political and ethical functions.
- c. There is a certain meaning in existential literature that comes from its philosophy about God, the universe, life and humans. What is visible from this meaning is anxiety, abandonment, despair, rebellion against the universe and God, absurd life, and error. Existentialists feel that they have nothing or Anonymity, alienation from their homeland,

boredom, fear of the mysterious unknown. Existentialists believe that the universe is meaningless, anxiety and loneliness must be born within it. There will be a difference between calm and peace and despair.

- d. Existentialism pays special attention to novels and drama. The goal is clear, namely that with these two genres, they are able to present philosophical ideas and values and express commitment/truth in their literature. Sartre frees poets from commitment, he equates poetry with painting, sculpture and music which are all beyond commitment. Facts are an expression of the content of commitment and it is not the poet's aim to explore facts and present them. For Sartre, poets do not use the same language as in prose.

### 3. Figure of Existentialism in Arabic Literature

The flow of existentialism was born and developed in the west. After this school entered the Arab world, Arab writers applied it to their literary works, but still adhered to limited rules. The following are several figures and their works that are categorized as influenced by existentialism:

- a. Ghassan Kanafani

Ghassan Kanafani is known as one of the leading figures in the liberation of Palestine. He is also known to have a sharp pen, for his writings which directly address the interests of imperialism behind Israel's aggression against Palestine. In his novels and short stories, he always talks about the condition of the Palestinian people who live displaced in various refugee camps in various countries. In 1948, Israel attacked Palestine, at least many people were expelled from their homeland, including Kanafani and his family. Kanafani sided with the oppressed classes, especially the workers and peasants. Literature about Palestine does not only talk about the condition of the people and country oppressed by Israel, Palestinian literature must serve revolution and liberation. Kanafani's literature is only limited to politics, but it is also influenced by the 20th century literary movements, namely modernism and existentialism. One of Ghassan Kanafani's drama works entitled "The hat and the prophet" contains elements of existentialism. He shows the implications of different philosophies in Arabia and the West.

- b. Nawal as-Sa'adawi

Nawal as-Sa'dawi is an Egyptian writer, activist, doctor and feminist. She has written extensively on women in Islam. While practicing, she observed that women's physical health and mental health problems were linked to an oppressive culture. On average, women experience oppression by the patriarchal system, class oppression in society, and imperialist oppression. The double burden of Egyptian women is the object of his research. Nawal wrote very productively about the position, psychology and sexuality of women.

Danger had become a part of his life, the moment he started picking up a pen and writing. For him there is nothing more dangerous than the truth in a world full of lies. Nawal's work is inseparable from the thoughts of the western existentialist philosopher, namely Simone de Beauvoir, so that Nawal is nicknamed the Beavoir of the Arab world. There is one of her novels that contains Beavoir's concepts, feminist existentialism, namely "al-Mar'ah fi Nuqtah as-Sifr".

c. Najib Mahfuz

Najib Mahfuz (1911-2006), was an Arabic novelist and short story writer from Egypt who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1988 (Kurnia, Anton, 2019). He earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1934, but chose to pursue writing even though he also worked as a civil servant at the Ministry of Culture. Egypt between 1954-1971 until he served as ministerial advisor. After that, he became editor of the daily Al-Ahram which specializes in literature. He began his literary career by writing short stories. His prose writing style is characterized by the blunt expression of his ideas. His literary works cover a wide range of topics, including controversial and taboo topics such as socialism, homosexuality, and God. His famous works include the novel trilogy Bayn Al-Qasrayn, Qasr Al-Syauq, and Al-Sukkariya (1956-1957). In the trilogy known as the "Cairo Trilogy", Mahfuz depicts the changing fate of three generations of a family in Cairo from the 1920s to the second world war. He often uses historical settings to describe Egyptian politics. In the trilogy there are depictions of sexual phrases and scenes. Apart from that, his other works include Zaaq al-Madaq, al-Qahirah al- Jadidah, Bidayah wa Nihayah, Hikayat Haratina and 'Absu al-Aqdar. His view of humans is in line with atheist existentialism. With existentialism, his novels confirm that he was greatly influenced by the statements of French existentialists, especially the views of Albert Camus, in his insistence on the idea of resurrection. This can be seen from the characters in his work who are influenced by his view of conventional rebel heroes. The facts, tension, uniqueness and isolation in the characters of his literary works are nominated as existential heroes.

d. 'Abd Rahman Badawi

Badawi studied existentialism before Sartre became trendy. He tried to synthesize Western philosophy with the Arab philological tradition. Badawi became an existentialist philosopher in the Arab world before 1970. He was educated at the meeting of two major currents, namely classical Islam and Western modernity. His work examines how time shapes individual existence, which incorporates Heidegger's interpretation of subjectivity and the concept of existence. From this study, he obtained two axioms from existential philosophy, namely radical individualism and freedom. The brilliance of Badawi's



existentialism makes young people who feel anxious, confused, alienated an effective medicine. In his work entitled "Humum al-Syabab", the meaning of increasing one's potential is found, namely individualism, authenticity, fear, a sense of responsibility and freedom.

#### **4. Islamic Perception of Existentialism**

Islamic literature does not reject ideas raised by the West. Islamic literature chooses and selects what is right and rejects what is wrong. The following is the perception of Islamic literature regarding the flow of existentialism (Qasab, Walid, 2005):

- a. Islamic literature agrees with the conception of existential literature, namely by calling for commitment. This means that in his literature, the writer serves society, because he has the position of being a writer. But in Islamic literature this commitment is different from the moral commitment of western literature. Islamic literature puts forward values that come from God, as well as the concept of freedom and responsibility towards humans. Meanwhile, the West's commitment to freedom is free from religion, belief and individualism which sometimes comes at the expense of society. All literary genres in the Islamic conception can be practiced, including poetry and other speaking arts. Poetry is a kind of words and sentences and that is dangerous. The poet is the speaker, and everything he speaks must take into account the existing context. These words will be respected if they are true according to the facts, and punished if they are wrong. A poet must not lie or make things up, nor should he deviate from the facts and exaggerate beyond reason and logic. Because poetry is an imaginary art, but one that is disciplined by the rules of sharia and reason. Poetry is not necessarily unrestrained speech that is exempt from commitment.
- b. Western existentialist literary perception places more importance on the content of literary works. To express literary identity and determine its degree of brilliance and sustainability, form must in no way be ignored or tolerated. Because what is contained in the words of literary works is merely a form of artistic value. When content is presented without a good form and regardless of the value and brilliance of the content, it seems as if it just becomes a conversation that resembles political slogans and media propaganda.
- c. All the meanings put forward by existentialists in their literature are negative meanings. They represent the loss of human freedom, confusion, and a sense of the absurdity of life. This causes despair and pessimism in the recipient/reader, because it is presented with a damaged conception of existentialism. It should not be made or presented, except with the concept stated by Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Badawi is to calm, flatter moral desires, religion, or other conditions in life in the world. Islamic literature does not object to the meanings offered by the west, but Islamic literature discusses them with the right view and presents

them in a positive way.

- d. Islamic literature is not fanatical about one literary genre and ignores others, because it is believed that each literary genre has its own characteristics, enjoyment and style in conveying its message.
- e. Freedom does not mean destruction and chaos such as chaos in the homeland or anything that limits one's ability to be free. That will happen without determining any goal to guide him after this liberation.
- f. This philosophical school is rejected by people who believe and understand. Something is said to be a flow, if there is wisdom in it.

In the end, although existentialism contains elements of disbelief in god and anomaly, nothing it presents about intellectual and literary perceptions is inconsistent with Islamic beliefs and values. However, it is still found among Arab writers and critics that they adopt, admire and support it.

## Conclusion

Existentialism is a heretical philosophical concept, because it does not believe in God. Their goal is to remove heavy burdens so that individuals can start living to achieve their existence, namely human essence. The concept of existentialism is very limited in the Arab world, namely only focusing on conflict and political issues. This became a benchmark for Arab rejection of philosophy. Existentialism has four characteristics, the most highlighted of which is that it only prioritizes content over form and pays attention to novels and drama, while poetry is ignored. Criticism of Islamic literature in this school only takes the good side and rejects the thoughts of those who depart from Islamic law. There are several Arab writers whose works are influenced by existentialism, namely Ghassan Kannafani, Nawal as-Sa'dawi, Najib Mahfuz, and 'Abdur Rahman Badawi.

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