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EMBRACING THE VOID: AN EXISTENTIAL STUDY OF ABSURDITY, ALIENATION AND SUFFERING IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *WAY TO GO*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the existential themes of absurdity, alienation, and suffering in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Way to Go. Grounded in existential philosophy, particularly the works of Kierkegaard and Sartre, the paper examines how the characters, disillusioned with life in contemporary India, grapple with a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. The novel's depiction of an individual trapped in an intense feeling of alienation—both from society and from his own self—reflects the larger existential dilemmas confronted by individuals in the modern era. Through an examination of Chatterjee's narrative techniques, character development, and thematic preoccupations, this paper delves into how characters' search for identity and purpose evolve into a journey through suffering and absurdity. The paper concludes that Way to Go offers a critical commentary on the incoherence of modern life, emphasizing the human condition's exposure to the existential void inherent in existence. In confronting this void, the novel suggests that one must accept the futility of searching for ultimate meaning, offering instead a reflection on personal and existential freedom.

Key words: Upamanyu Chatterjee, *Way to Go*, absurdity, Isolation, Suffering, Existential crisis.

Introduction

The concept of 'Existentialism' is challenging to define because it encompasses a wide variety of thinkers and philosophical aims. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that many philosophers linked to the existentialist movement, despite their differing views, were significantly influenced by Kierkegaard's ideas. His work played a crucial role in shaping existentialism's focus on individual experience, personal choice, and the search for meaning (Stewart, 2011). Existentialism focuses on the individual's experience of existence, viewing the world as inherently chaotic and humans as fundamentally isolated, rather than as social beings. This philosophy emphasizes personal freedom of choice, while also acknowledging the responsibility to face the consequences of those choices. Existentialism urges a deep exploration of the human condition, encouraging individuals to confront their existence. Existentialists argue that people must exercise their freedom to make independent decisions within the context of their unique life circumstances. By embracing this agency, they believe individuals can help alleviate the widespread anxiety, distrust, and conflict found in many aspects of life. "Existentialism lays stress on…anguish, anxiety, alienation, boredom, choice, despair, dread, death, freedom, frustration, finitude, guilt, nausea, responsibility etc." (Singh & Somvanshi, 2017, p. 2).

Upamanyu Chatterjee is a prominent Indian novelist known for his insightful investigation of contemporary Indian society. He has contributed significantly to Indian English literature, authoring several short stories, including *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi* and *Watching Them*. His repertoire of novels includes *English, August*, *The Last Burden*, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, *Weight Loss*, and *Way to Go*. Chatterjee's literary works vividly depict the fluidity of human existence, where the boundaries between rationality and irrationality,

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reverence and irreverence, meaning and meaninglessness, essence and absurdity, as well as the ideal and the real, become increasingly blurred. In his portrayal of life, these seemingly opposing concepts collapse into one another, leaving little distinction between them. What remains, albeit with a sense of uncertainty, is the recognition that the existential nature of human life dictates much of our understanding of human beings. Confronted by the inherent absurdity of existence, individuals are compelled to adopt a resigned stance towards life's chaotic and meaningless aspects. Chatterjee's vision of life is dark and tragic. He is often compared with Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Milan Kundera and Saul Bellow. "The miseries and disease of life presented in his novels very vividly and vertically" (Verma et al., 2016, p. 132).

This existential framework profoundly shapes the narrative of Chatterjee's *Way to Go*, where the absurdity of life becomes a central theme, reflecting the complexities of human experience. Hence, this paper is an attempt to will focus on how *Way to Go* offers a compelling portrayal of existential themes, particularly absurdity, alienation, and suffering, within the context of modern life. Set against the backdrop of a bustling urban environment, the novel's narrative reveals the inner turmoil of its protagonist as he grapples with the overwhelming meaninglessness and chaos of existence. Through a blend of dark humor and stark realism, Chatterjee (2010) paints a portrait of a character caught in the throes of existential despair, a condition that mirrors the broader philosophical inquiries into the nature of human existence, as explored in existentialist thought.

In *Way to Go*, absurdity is not merely an abstract concept but a lived experience for the protagonist, manifested in his futile search for meaning in a world that seems indifferent to his personal struggles. This futile search evokes the existential notion of the absurd, as articulated by Camus, where the human longing for meaning collides with the inherent meaninglessness of existence. Alienation in the novel emerges not only as a personal experience of detachment but also as a consequence of the disintegration of traditional societal structures. Chatterjee's (2010) protagonist is alienated not just from his surroundings but from the very institutions—family, work, and society—that are meant to provide structure and meaning. This mirrors Sartre's conception of existential alienation, where individuals feel estranged from their authentic selves in a world that imposes restrictive societal roles. The protagonist's alienation is further compounded by the oppressive urban environment, which serves as a metaphor for the modern human condition. In this space, he is disconnected from both his inner self and the world around him, reinforcing the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. Suffering, a central motif in *Way to Go*, transcends the external to become deeply internalized. The protagonist's emotional and psychological torment embodies the larger human struggle, reflecting the existential perspective that suffering is an inherent part of the human condition. Chatterjee's (2010) candid portrayal of suffering echoes the works of existentialists like Camus, who contended that suffering, though often inescapable, can be a means through which individuals confront the absurdity of existence and, paradoxically, find a form of freedom. The novel's refusal to offer easy resolutions or escapism challenges the reader to confront the absurdity of life directly, while probing the possibility of finding meaning and agency in a world marked by suffering and alienation.

Research Questions:

1. How does Chatterjee's *Way to Go* explore the existential themes of absurdity, alienation, and suffering in the context of modern human existence?

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2. In what ways does Chatterjee's depiction of the protagonist's search for meaning align with the existential philosophies of Kierkegaard and Sartre?

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze how *Way to Go* portrays the existential themes of absurdity, alienation, and suffering, and their implications for the protagonist's journey in a modern, chaotic world.
2. To examine the influence of existentialist thought, particularly the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Sartre, on Chatterjee's portrayal of the characters' internal and external struggles.

Literature Review

Existentialism, a major 20th-century philosophical movement, emphasizes individual responsibility and autonomy. It focuses on the unique subjective experience of each person, highlighting the disorientation and uncertainty felt when confronting the complexities and ambiguities of the world. Heidari and Sharifi Abnavi (2022) contend that existentialism is a central branch of modern philosophy, encompassing a diverse range of ideas and works characteristic of twentieth-century intellectual movements. A key theme shared by existentialist thinkers is their rejection of transcendental philosophies. Unlike transcendentalists, existentialists argue that cognition arises only after an object's existence and assert that an object's existence is not inherently necessary. This view of existence as non-essential allows for human freedom, but existentialists emphasize that individuals are responsible for creating meaning in an otherwise absurd and purposeless existence through the exercise of that freedom.

Ramamurthy (2017) maintains that Anita Desai and Anita Nair, as novelists, deal with existentialist themes to examine the human condition, particularly focusing on the muted suffering and helplessness of married women facing existential dilemmas. As female authors, both have created a unique narrative space that delves into women's emotions, feminine sensibility, and psychology. Their female protagonists confront the absurdities of their circumstances, often wrestling with life's darker aspects. By placing their heroines in precarious situations, they offer a somber perspective, portraying these characters as complex individuals who must endure hostile environments. "Existential anxiety is a symptom of this terrible conflict between the individual and their adverse surroundings" (Ramamurthy, 2017, p. 131).

Viswanathan (2019) focuses on the family dynamics and cultural values in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go*. His novels focus on the complex relationship between family and culture in India, celebrating the joint family system and the enduring love within it, as seen through characters like Urmila and Shyamanand. Chatterjee's works offer valuable lessons on depicting family themes in Indian literature while also representing Indian culture. His novels often conclude with didactic lessons from the protagonists and contribute to the Indian English literary scene by examining societal issues related to culture and family. "Chatterjee has a strong message morally, spiritually, and culturally through the depiction of amoral and dishonest characters. He depicts the capacity to alter the thinking of people through his writings" (Viswanathan, 2019, p. 734).

Issack and Vaseekaran (2020) claim that Chatterjee deals with the dynamics of an Indian middle-class family, highlighting the challenges faced by women within it. These struggles stem primarily from the lack of responsibility and accountability exhibited by each family member towards the collective well-being. Through his novels *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go*, Chatterjee focuses on the themes of post-colonial bureaucracy, relationships, development, and

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politics, portraying the complexities of Indian middle-class families and the characters within their intricate social dynamics. "The novelist's position on the contemporary issues is voiced through many characters in his novels. His views about Indian middle class families are scattered throughout the novel" (Issack & Vaseekaran, 2020, p. 6). Relationships are vital for human happiness, especially within families, as they impact emotional and social well-being. In Indian families, strong emphasis is placed on bonds between husband and wife, and parents and children. In *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go*, Upamanyu Chatterjee "brings out the importance of such relationships in an Indian middle class family" (Issack & Vaseekaran, 2020, p. 7).

Damodar and Rajitha (2020) point out that Chatterjee's writing presents a fresh perspective on issues facing 21st-century India. His works, including *English, August: An Indian Story*, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, *The Last Burden*, *Weight Loss*, *Way to Go*, *Fairy Tales at Fifty*, and *The Revenge of the Non-Vegetarian*, reflect the changing dynamics of Indian families, flaws in the country's administration, and the sense of rootlessness experienced by the youth in modern India. Chatterjee captures the voice of the educated upper-middle-class youth drawn to Western culture. His engaging diction, lifelike characters, and humor resonate deeply with readers. "Chatterjee throws light on family life, institution of marriage, love, sex, gender inequality, extra marital relationship, child abuse, bisexuality, corrupt administration and the dilemma and indecisiveness of young India" (Damodar & Rajitha, 2020, p. 992).

Although *Way to Go* has been extensively analyzed for its depiction of middle-class Indian family dynamics and patriarchal structures, its existential dimensions remain un-explored. This gap highlights the need to examine the novel through the lens of existentialist philosophy. By focusing on themes of despair, alienation, and the search for meaning, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of existential struggles in the context of human relationships and modernity.

Research Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative, literary analysis approach to examine themes of suffering, alienation, and the absurd in Chatterjee's *Way to Go*. Grounded in existential philosophy, particularly the works of Kierkegaard, and Sartre, the research focuses on how these themes reflect the characters' struggles with meaning and existence. A close reading of the novel will identify narrative techniques that illustrate the characters' internal and external conflicts, particularly their confrontation with death, illness, and emotional stagnation. Secondary sources, including critical essays on existentialism and *Way to Go*, will complement the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Existentialism, a key philosophical movement of the 20th century, focuses on the individual's role as a self-determining agent, accountable for their choices and actions. At the heart of existentialist thought is the affirmation of personal autonomy and the importance of subjective, individual experience. A foundational concept within this tradition, often referred to as "the existential attitude," encapsulates the profound sense of disorientation or unease individuals encounter when grappling with the complexities and ambiguities inherent in existence. Although existentialism encompasses a wide range of perspectives, several core themes consistently emerge across its diverse interpretations. One of the most prominent is the relationship between existence and essence. Existentialists argue that existence precedes essence, meaning that an individual's existence is the starting point, and through their actions and choices, they define their essence or purpose. However, this relationship is also seen as reciprocal, where

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existence, as an act, determines essence by giving it being. On the other hand, existence itself is shaped by essence, as it is the potentiality of becoming a particular type of being, which reflects the tension between what one is and what one can become (Tripathi, 1987).

Sartre (1948) argues that existentialism is fundamentally rooted in individual agency, asserting that "in a lifetime, each person must make countless choices" (p. 4). These choices, while shaped by past experiences, remain ultimately the responsibility of the individual. Sartre further emphasizes that even when confronted with two options, one of which might carry dire consequences, "it remains his choice and his choice alone" (p. 4). This idea is reflected in Sartre's (1972) famous assertion, *'Existence precedes essence,'* which encapsulates the existentialist belief that humans are not born with an inherent essence or predetermined nature. Instead, individuals must create their own essence through their choices and actions, exercising radical freedom to define who they are in a world that offers no inherent meaning. The connection between these ideas lies in the existentialist view of human existence as a process of self-creation. Sartre (1948) suggests that we are "thrown into existence" without a predetermined essence, and only through the decisions we make do we define ourselves. This self-creation process is at the heart of Sartre's existentialism, where the individual is free from external constraints, such as societal expectations or divine will, to shape their own identity.

Sartre (1972) extends this notion by discussing the inherent *absurdity* of human existence, which arises from the conflict between our search for meaning and the universe's indifference. Without the guidance of a higher power or ultimate authority, Sartre (1972) argues, there is no objective framework for determining the rationality or justification of human choices. In this way, existentialism confronts the absurdity of existence: the human desire for purpose in a world that offers none. Ultimately, Sartre's (1972) philosophy asserts that while the universe is indifferent to our search for meaning, we are fully responsible for the choices we make in defining our existence.

Søren Kierkegaard is widely regarded as the foundational figure of modern existentialism, introducing the key concepts of "existence" and "existentialism" within a philosophical framework. His radical rejection of the dominant political, social, and religious ideologies of his time, which aligned individuals with external institutions like the state, society, and church, laid the groundwork for the existentialist emphasis on individual autonomy and the subjective nature of human experience. Kierkegaard's exploration of concepts such as anxiety, despair, freedom, sin, the crowd, and sickness would later become central themes in existentialist literature (Stewart, 2011). Kierkegaard argues that individuals are constantly confronted with immediate possibilities, compelling them to make choices that reflect their unique existence. This perspective challenges the idea of Christianity as the inevitable, linear end of human history, critiquing any attempt to establish ethical principles detached from personal faith and commitment. He emphasizes that Christian ethics require immediate, personal engagement, resisting any rationalization through external systems of thought. This critique is linked to his broader existential belief that the individual's freedom and engagement with life cannot be systematized or reduced to abstract principles.

For Kierkegaard, existence is a process of becoming, where the individual must strive to realize their true self, particularly through a personal relationship with God. Failure to engage in this relationship leads to despair, often unknowingly (Hall, 1980). As Gardiner (2002) notes, Kierkegaard insists on the necessity for individuals to freely choose their own paths, recognizing

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the profound uniqueness of each person's freedom. In this way, his existential approach highlights the inherent challenges that arise from everyday life, where the central question is "How can I exist"? Kierkegaard's assertion that choosing one option excludes all others demands intense focus and consistency, rejecting distractions that might obscure one's true purpose. Kaufmann (1980) further emphasizes this critique, suggesting that modern achievements, far from solving the fundamental problems of existence, serve only as distractions from the core existential questions. The connection between these ideas lies in Kierkegaard's insistence on individual freedom, choice, and the personal engagement required to live authentically. His exploration of existential themes, particularly anxiety, despair, and freedom, set the stage for later existentialist thinkers, including Sartre, who would build upon these concepts in developing their own philosophies of radical freedom and personal responsibility. Ultimately, Kierkegaard's philosophy presents existence as a continual process of becoming, where the individual's choices define their essence and the meaning of their life, free from external systems or distractions.

Textual Analysis

Way to Go is divided into three parts, each with similarly titled chapters, potentially highlighting the monotony of life. In the first part, Jamun's eighty-five-year-old, half-paralyzed father, Shyamanand, disappears, leaving Jamun distressed by his sudden absence. Shyamanand's refusal to embrace death in the conventional, peaceful manner intensifies Jamun's emotional turmoil. "He must've left at three or four or so; I mean, I thought he was dead but when I woke up, he'd gone" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 6). Jamun feels a deep sense of guilt for not having loved his father enough and is consumed by thoughts and self-reflection, wondering about his own inadequacies and the missed opportunities to connect with his father. "FOR NOT HAVING LOVED ONE'S DEAD father enough, could one make amends by loving one's child more (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 3)? Jamun, emotionally detached and withdrawn, refrains from sharing his inner struggles. Despite filing a police complaint about his missing father, he receives no assistance. Reflecting on past interactions with his father, he composes a heartfelt speech in anticipation of his return:

> You, irresponsible fool, where have you been these thirty- two hours, Jamun, trembling with relief, would scream at him. Shyamanand would then throw his head back and cackle through his beard at the sky, ecstatic that his absence had been noticed - and indeed, had caused some disquiet (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 21).

For Jamun, the lonely "Life was quiet and dreadful. The only one for whom it had been worse had been his father but he seemed to have got away" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 19). The house, filled with memories, serves as a constant reminder of Jamun's father. While a house is usually considered a home—a personal sanctuary and a symbol of one's place in the world— for Shyamanand and Jamun, it feels more like "a concentration camp." This metaphor highlights the strained relationship between them and the suffocating, oppressive atmosphere they experience within the house. Jamun recalls that Shyamanand has both appreciated and resented the barbed wire and the cemented gate. At times, it gives him a sense of security, but at other moments, he feels foolish, as if he had invested his life savings in a housing estate that had, almost overnight, turned into "a sort of concentration camp," where every possible escape route was being

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systematically blocked (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 18). For Shyamanand and Jamun, the house was not a nurturing nest providing warmth, comfort, and security. Instead, it symbolized a place of confinement, devoid of solace or belonging.

> While his mother had been alive and they had all lived together under one roof as one large, unhappy family, the house had then seemed too small, difficult to breathe in. Upon Burfi's departure for Noida four years ago and on Jamun's return to the city of his mother's death- for that is how he had come to think of it, forever polluted- father and son had suddenly found the house too large and filled, moreover, mainly with the discomposing phantoms of memory - such as the imagined sounds of Urmila, Jamun's mother, clearing her throat in another room, and of the infant Doom bawling and bleating against his elder brother to an unheeding Joyce (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 29).

Death is a recurring theme in Chatterjee's novels, reflecting the author's persistent preoccupation with mortality. In *Way to Go*, too, death permeates the narrative, serving as a subject of deep contemplation for both father and son, Shyamanand and Jamun. Their shared meditations on death highlight its omnipresence in their lives and relationships. Death binds them: "[Death] was a topic that bonded together father and son. They couldn't most of the time tell the difference between it and suicide" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 34). Jamun frequently envisions his own death in vivid, poetic imagery. He imagines standing on a wall, "straight and slim on tiptoe," gracefully leaping into the void. As he stretches his arms, he envisions himself soaring with the seagulls, diving over the sea's waves. When the act of flapping his limbs becomes tiresome, he pictures letting go of his will and soul, "bid it farewell as it wafted across the water like a fluffy seed," before finally plummeting to the rocks below, ending his life like a coconut that has grown weary of waiting and falls from its tree (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 25). Shyamanand frequently voices his longing for death, articulating his readiness to embrace the inevitable end and his weariness with life's prolonged struggles. " I want to die! Want to die" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 33)! Shyamanand dislikes it when Kasibai serves him excessive coffee, as it disrupts his sleep. He often complains about this, expressing his frustration with the unintended consequence of staying awake: "You stare at the ceiling fan right through till the wee hours, wondering if it could fall on you and whether that would suffice to put you to sleep permanently" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 36). This reflects that, when awake, Shyamanand's mind is constantly consumed with thoughts of death, as he finds little peace or distraction from his contemplations on mortality. He contemplates his own death: "When I die, I will leave behind two sons whom you will have to negotiate with" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 52). For Jamun, death represents an escape, a way to end his futile, meaningless, and barren existence. However, it is his father's presence that holds him back from taking his own life, serving as a reluctant anchor in his troubled world. Amid the quiet desolation of his solitary life, Jamun secretly feels a sense of fulfillment, knowing that his father's "burdensome companionship" has, time and again, prevented him from ending his own life. The very thought of his father, despite the weight it carried, keeps Jamun from taking that final step (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 63). The theme of death, often perceived as morbid and unsettling, offers Jamun a peculiar form of respite. Throughout the narrative, he reveals, "I've thought of myself as already dead. It teases up things inside" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 60). For Jamun, life is not viewed as a divine gift, but rather as an unremarkable and repetitive routine, akin to a mere habit. Shyamanand's philosophy of life is equally peculiar. he believes that neither the living nor the

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dead has any real interest in him, whether he is alive or dead. For him, life is simply a habit, and keeping secrets from the world serves as a means to sustain whatever dwindling interest he has left in it. As he puts it, "the second was a means by which a flagging interest in the first could be kept breathing" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 65).

Shyamanand, Jamun, and their tenant, Dr. Mukherjee, are preoccupied with thoughts of death, suicide, and abandonment, with Dr. Mukherjee ultimately taking his life. In a conversation with Jamun, he states, "The more the time passes, the more depressed you become. True. And the more you dream of killing yourself" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 69). This sentiment highlights the bleakness of their existence—none of them have anything to look forward to, living not truly but merely existing. Dr. Mukherjee's death leaves a lasting, indelible impact on both Shyamanand and Jamun. In the morgue, Jamun is consumed by the thought of ending his life. With Shyamanand's disappearance, he feels a profound sense of purposelessness. He envisions lying down among the dead, curling up for eternity, shielded from the air-conditioning by the furry coats of rodents, never to rise again. With his father gone, Jamun realizes that there is no longer anyone whose presence could persuade him to continue living (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 89). The only wee bit of happiness that is there in his otherwise melancholic life is due to his daughter Mithi. He loves spending time with her. He throws a birthday party for her but Kasturi does not completely trust his ability to keep an eye on the children. "That too was insidiously depressing. Off and on, he wondered what in his life was not"(Chatterjee, 2010, pp, 9 l-92):

In the second part of the novel, Mrs. Naina Kapur, Jamun and Shyamanand's next-door neighbor, goes missing. Monga, a builder and friend of Burfi, Jamun's brother, along with Jamun, visits the police station to file a complaint. They complete a lengthy form filled with various questions about the missing person. As Jamun fills out the form, he begins to suspect that Monga may be somehow involved in Naina Kapur's sudden disappearance. During Monga's bonfire party, the narrative takes an unsettling turn, adding tension to the events of the night:

> To enjoy more the heat on his face, he directed Vaman to stand behind him and hold on to the loops of his trousers while he, belly on parapet, arms flat at his sides, leaned over till his legs left the floor. The blood rushed to his face, as though to meet on his cheeks and his forehead the rising warmth of the fire. He watched the occasional spark mount towards him and like an orange snowflake dissolve into the powdery night. All things are on fire; the eye is on fire, forms are on fire, eye - consciousness is on fire, · the impressions received by the eye are on fire and whatever sensation originates in the impressions received by the eye is likewise on fire. If he asked Vaman to let go off his pants and instead hold his feet, the dunce'd be witless enough to actually released his grip to move back a couple of steps, thus giving Jamun enough time to sail over the edge of the parapet. That was one option (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 162).

Jamun shares an unconventional bond with his daughter, Mithi, marked by companionship rather than overt affection. While driving her to a school fancy dress competition, his thoughts wander to darker themes. He wonders, "Should he therefore commit suicide, he'd sometimes wondered while idly sweating away behind the wheel in a traffic jam. It was a pretext worth considering" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 174). This moment reflects his ongoing internal struggle and sense of despair, even in mundane situations. Jamun is acutely aware that Mithi, despite being his daughter, does not truly need him, which intensifies the sense of futility that pervades his life. In the third part of the novel, Jamun himself goes missing, and it is his brother Burfi who

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returns to inhabit Shyamanand's house, taking over the space that had once been shared by the family. This shift highlights the continuing sense of displacement and the unraveling of familial bonds.

Burfi's life is far from fulfilling. Despite being married, he lives apart from his wife and sons, who neither like nor need him. When asked the casual question, "How are things?" he often responds with, "How are things, how are the shards of shattered life" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 254)? Burfi's life appears as futile as Jamun's, and he maintains the belief that life itself is a meaningless existence, devoid of connection or purpose. Burfi reflects on the nature of life and death, questioning the conventional definitions of death. He considers the concept of "a corpse being ventilated" rather than life being maintained, noting the absurdity of sustaining biological functions artificially while the brain is dead. He recalls a cardiologist's words spoken over his mother's comatose body in Intensive Care years ago, words that Burfi has since applied to various aspects of his life. He likens his father—half-paralyzed and grumpy—his marriage, his parents' marriage, the house they struggled to build, and his relationships with his sons and younger brother, to "near-corpses being ventilated." In his view, the living are merely a form of the dead, their existence as hollow and lifeless as those who have already passed. "Give the dying an airing, the living being only a species of the dead" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 254). Burfi, now residing in Shyamanand's house, wants to dispose of it, as it brings back painful memories of the time he spent there with Joyce and his sons. He sadly contemplates: "Get rid of the house, Burfi felt, cut loose, start anew, wondering all the time whether it would at all be possible" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 277).

The mystery surrounding Naina Kapur's disappearance is resolved in the third part of the novel. One day, the police arrive with laborers, and after digging up a portion of Naina Kapur's cemented verandah, they uncover a corpse, its wrist adorned with bangles. The body is taken for post-mortem, and Monga emerges as the prime suspect in her murder. After the post-mortem, the corpse is electrocuted, reducing it entirely to ashes. The ashes, contained in a plastic bag, are discarded at the city's dumping ground. Burfi, who had once been closely associated with Naina Kapur, retrieves the ashes and brings them to his house, further complicating the sense of loss and abandonment that pervades the novel. He feels that: "Death was not the end; beyond death continued the indignity. No one escaped from life. Everyone, annihilated, returned- perhaps five hundred years after - as bits and pieces of five hundred different things" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 312). Burfi meets Kasturi and Mithi, and Jamun contacts Burfi through Mithi's cell phone. During their conversation, Jamun confesses, "Living is just so much more stressful than dying, incredible the fuss we all make about splitting" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 306). Together, Burfi and Jamun devise a plan to murder Monga and avenge Naina Kapur's death. Burfi, with the help of some troublemakers, successfully murders Monga, and then travels to the holy city of Benares to meet Jamun. Jamun had gone there in search of his lost father. In Benares, Jamun is overwhelmed by the pervasive presence of death. It seems to haunt him in every corner—the garland adorning a photograph, the images on the dining room wall, and unexpectedly, even in the perfume of the passersby, the language of the relatives, and the giggle of the diner at the next table. Death is everywhere, subtly intertwined with life.

For Jamun, life is something to be despised, as he finds it unbearable and devoid of meaning. However, for Burfi, despite the dissolution of his marriage and the emptiness in his existence, he does not wish to end his life. Instead, he yearns for the sustenance of life, seeking

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the vitality that life, in its complexity, still offers. Burfi's perspective contrasts with Jamun's, as he holds on to the hope of finding fulfillment, even amidst the disillusionment. As Jamun and Burfi take a long walk on the river bank, towards the end of the novel, they feel that:

> The dead would always remain in service of the living. The living would forever depend for succor on the dead. To Burfi it seemed that he and his brother, standing motionless amongst the dead and the dying had reached the end of the world- for his marriage, it was over and done with, its ashes he could not possibly rekindle, for his children, they had grown out of reach (Chatterjee, 2010, pp. 358-359).

Way to Go is an ironic elegy on human life, depicting the dysfunctional and melancholic lives of Shyamanand, his sons Jamun and Burfi, and other interconnected characters. Defined by disconnection and existential uncertainty, the narrative explores themes of futility and the search for meaning. Jamun, weary and resigned, is deeply anguished by his father Shyamanand's unexplained disappearance. As he reflects on the situation, Jamun says, "He must've left at three and four or so; I mean, I thought he was dead but when I woke up, he'd gone" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 6). When the policeman inquires about Shyamanand's religious beliefs, Jamun's response is both darkly comic and profound, offering a cynical reinterpretation of both life and death. His reply highlights the absurdity and emptiness that pervade their existence:

> How can one tell the difference between Life and Death? Between God and Death? Did the Buddha return to the Life Cycle because Nirvana was too empty? A time to be born, a time to die, a time to go? (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 14).

Jamun's frustrations with life lead him to assume death as a natural outcome for his father. However, his despair and vivid portrayal of his father's imagined death reflect the broader human struggle with an absurd existence filled with pain and suffering:

> Jamun himself had always believed - and during debates with his father, energetically maintained- that to be run over would be a hideously painful, messy and incomplete way to go. He'd always marvelled at suicides who placed their necks on the hot metal of railway tracks and waited, through the trembling and shaking of the steel at their throats, for the monstrously heavy, burning, thundering wheels to guillotine them (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 16).

The notions of life in death and death in life have become meaningless, as even such reflections could inspire a will to live. Instead, there is neither a will to live nor to die. Within knowledge systems, death often symbolizes an end to life's suffering and, in some cultures, is celebrated after one fulfills worldly duties. For Jamun, however, death holds no significance; it is merely another occurrence in the human world, devoid of seriousness of purpose—happening as arbitrarily as life itself. The characters in Chatterjee's world just exist neither living life with any aim or motivations nor dying with any sense of loss or gains:

> The future stretches before us hot and empty. Life is long and narrow, and speckled mainly by painful maladies and their expensive treatment. To calm yourself, it is best to think of yourself as already dead. However, that is not always possible because of mosquitoes and soon. Option Two is to tell yourself on the first that you're going to live only- a reasonable span- till say the forth of May. Give yourself too short a future - less than three days and waiting for the end, you wouldn't do anything- eat or bathe or read or argue. Then after fading away till the forth of May, you jump up and reset your sights on the tenth (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 83).

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Chatterjee (2010) deconstructs the traditional concept of death as the profound culmination of life, equating it instead with mundane activities like eating. This perspective is reflected in Jamun's recollection of discussions with his father, where food and death hold equal significance, imbued with a similar sense of wistfulness. The narrative also trivializes the Indian philosophical concept of time as the ultimate arbiter of existence. By initially portraying time as a deterministic force and subsequently undermining its relevance to the triviality of daily life, Chatterjee (2010) diminishes its power. The protagonist encapsulates this deconstruction, remarking on the stressfulness of living compared to the simplicity of dying, reducing death to an ordinary, unremarkable event. The novelist succinctly reflects on Dr. Mukherjee's death, attributing it to the inevitability of his time being up, framing it as a simple, matter-of-fact occurrence: "So will be yours and mine sometime. Time is the boss, he juggles free will and determinism…all the other big concepts in his hands like planets, get it" (Chatterjee, 2010, 70)? The novelist, after briefly acknowledging Dr. Mukherjee's death as a result of time running out, shifts focus to the deeper existential concern of the rule of nothingness in human life. In this reality, even great concepts, aims, and transcendental powers fail to make a difference. Time, instead of offering meaning, reveals both fruition and the peeling away of illusions. Jamun and Shyamanand, drawn to the fine green color and jasmine scent of Dr. Mukherjee's hair oil, decide to keep and use it. This episode parallels another moment between Jamun and Mithi. On the way to Mithi's school for a fancy dress competition, Mithi admires a watch gifted by Kasturi to Jamun. Jamun, sensing her attraction to it, offers it to her, but Mithi declines, saying, "No, no, it's okay—perhaps only after you're no more" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 176).

In *Way to Go*, the three sections open with scenes at a police station, where characters lodge complaints about missing persons. The repetition of absurd questions, the description of the oppressive atmosphere, and the vague responses from the complainants emphasize the meaninglessness and triviality of life. Chatterjee focuses solely on the registration of these cases, with policemen repeatedly asking the same senseless questions. This echoes the myth of Sisyphus, where individuals are trapped in a cycle of meaningless acts, even in times of crisis. The police station becomes a metaphor for the human world, where complaints are made without any intention or capacity for real action. The narrative suggests that humans are stuck in a world of signifiers, detached from meaning, sense, and action. The morgue, as Jamun approaches it, represents the most depressing and nauseating space, symbolizing the loss of human dignity and purpose. He has a nauseating feeling. In the office, the tables are full of "hillocks of case histories and medical records" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 81).

In the novel, death is not portrayed as a liberating force. It does not bring peace or cleansing; instead, it reduces the body to a heap of ashes, unable to claim the dignity that individuals long for throughout their lives. Both life and death exist in a state of meaninglessness. The crematorium scene where Burfi goes for collecting Naina Kapur's ashes redefines the meaning of not just life but even death too:

> By the next morning, Naina Kapur, having lost to the heavens all the oxygen in her system, had been reduced to a white plastic grocery bag- itself biodegradables, as per the new sterner Municipal laws- that contained a little less than five kilograms of ashes, of phosphates, calcium, sulphates, potassium, sodium, silica, aluminum oxide, magnesium, iron oxide and some other chemical compounds that have survived the incinerator.

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Alongside three other similar grocery bags she sat on the floor at the rear of the blue van. The mouths of all of them were knotted tight against spillage (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 309).

The novel's depiction of life's indignity, extending even beyond death, is evident in its chaotic narrative structure, where death and disease disrupt the sense of order. This may lead to accusations that Chatterjee loses a minimum sense of propriety, causing discomfort for readers. The description of Naina exemplifies this: "Naina looked like a coiffured skull. Her face powder, splotchy over the creases of flesh at her jowls, reminded him—out of the blue—of the stains on the folds of the stage curtain of his old university theatre. She smiled, a stretching that her wrinkled skin seemed unable to control. 'Oh it's you, Jamun-ji,' she rasped in a voice cracked and reedy. 'Sorry! I thought you'd be the widow who'd brought me the tea!' Her eyes were jet-black, accusing coat buttons in the waning of her face" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 60). This portrayal, with its stark, almost grotesque imagery, challenges conventional narrative decorum and may unsettle the reader.

The novel deliberately violates the sanctity of life and death, creating a nauseating effect. Naina Kapur's leucoderma symbolizes a deeper malaise within human life, with the novelist's grim portrayal offering no reprieve. The disease spreads over her neck and lips, and her bypass surgery, instead of alleviating her condition, exacerbates it. The treatment triggers the spread of her leucoderma, with every morning revealing new blotchy patches that quickly enlarge: "every morning practically—here, with eyes wide with sorrow, she had paused beside a flea-infested stray dog to turn to Jamun—she discovered on herself new areas, pinpricks that in a matter of days seemed to grow to the size of coins—of blotchy skin" (Chatterjee, 2010, 85). This graphic imagery intensifies the sense of decay and helplessness, reflecting the broader theme of life's absurdity and suffering in the novel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Way to Go* by Upamanyu Chatterjee offers a profound exploration of existential themes through its portrayal of absurdity, alienation, and suffering. Chatterjee's (2010) characters, grappling with the monotony and meaninglessness of life, become a vessel for the larger philosophical concerns of existentialism. The novel presents a world where the search for meaning is continuously thwarted by the chaos and randomness inherent in existence, echoing Albert Camus' notion of the absurd. The characters' futile attempts to find purpose within an indifferent universe highlight the existential tension between the desire for significance and the overwhelming void of life's inherent meaninglessness. Chatterjee (2010) masterfully deals with the alienation experienced by individuals in a fragmented, modern world, where personal identity is eroded by societal expectations and the dehumanizing forces of urban life. This alienation is both existential and social, as characters struggle to reconcile their internal desires with the external pressures of society, family, and professional life. The narrative's depiction of suffering is unflinching, revealing the painful realities of human existence while also acknowledging the possibility of resilience in confronting life's hardships. Ultimately, *Way to Go* is not merely a tale of despair but a nuanced meditation on the human condition. Chatterjee (2010) invites the reader to embrace the void, not as an overwhelming force, but as a space where the potential for personal freedom and self-realization exists. In this way, the novel suggests that although suffering and absurdity may define human existence, it is through the acceptance of these conditions that one can hope to find a semblance of meaning and autonomy in an otherwise indifferent universe.

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