

FORMS OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S NORWEGIAN WOOD: TORU WATANABE ANALYSIS

Dyah Ayu Prameswari¹, Linusia Marsih²

¹Faculty of Cultural Science, University of 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

²Faculty of Cultural Science, University of 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

*Corresponding author, E-mail: aprameswari28@gmail.com

Abstract

This study will focus on Toru Watanabe's forms of existential crisis reflected in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987). To analyze the existential crisis experienced by Toru Watanabe, Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of existentialism is applied. Furthermore, Buténaitė-Świtkiewicz's theory of components of existential crisis is also used to describe the components of existential crisis, namely emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. This study applies the descriptive qualitative method. In addition, philosophical and psychological approaches are employed in this study due to the fact that this study is concerned with the existentialism in philosophy and existential crisis in psychology. The results of the study show that Toru Watanabe suffers from an existential crisis because of his inability to seek meaning for his existence. His existential crisis is indicated through the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. However, he is able to overcome his crisis through self-motivation, acceptance, and friends' support. After conducting the analysis, the writer finds out that despair from existential crisis can pave a new way to overcome the existential crisis phase.

Keywords: *Existential Crisis, Existentialism, Philosophy, Psychology*

Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical theory that focuses on human existence, where all individuals have their way of life and have differences from one another (Inglis, 2022:31). Existence is a typical human way of making themselves exist. It assumes that every individual who lives has the awareness to do something and create value for themselves. The highest value of existentialist thought lies in authenticity or originality (Khan, 2007:5). However, in line with the concept of existentialism, the limitless freedom of choosing how to create a value can lead to anxiety and despairs. An individual can also experience a crisis state of existence and begin questioning his existence. French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre put forward the concept of 'existence precedes essence' to sum up human existence, which means there is no predetermined meaning to human existence (J. P. Sartre, 1946:3).

The concept of existentialism itself believes that life is tragically meaningless, so when it reaches to individual's logic, they can often have a feeling of disorientation or confusion in the world described as meaningless and disorganized (J. P. Sartre, 1946:13). Therefore, individuals are in charge of giving meaning to their life because. There lies absolute freedom in interpreting and choosing, but it also comes with a big responsibility that provides individuals with a reason to feel anxious and burdened in determining the steps in their lives (J. P. Sartre, 1946:3). Every individual must endure this kind of responsibility, but the shakiness and pressures that individual experiences in life cause him to despair in the performance of that responsibility. Kehr in (Andrews, 2016:105) stated that despair encourages an individual to share a much deeper existential crisis.

Numerous people struggle with their identity to determine who they are in some life periods (Andrews, 2016:104). That is called an existential crisis. Doubting the concept of life and its meaning, confusion about personal identity, and occasionally thinking about life and death can be strong signs of someone experiencing an existential crisis.

Existential crisis can be found in a literary work like a novel. One of the novels that tell about the existential crisis is a novel written by Japanese author, Haruki Murakami, entitled *Norwegian Wood*. The story tells about a young boy named Toru Watanabe who has to anguish the death of Kizuki, his best friend who committed suicide at the age of 17. Toru is forced to deal with a traumatic incident resulting in his feeling that he must depart from Kobe, his origin place, as soon as possible. Tokyo become his choice to reorganize his life as a student at a private university. However, fate brings him to meet again with Kizuki's ex-girlfriend, a beautiful girl named Naoko. As the story goes on, Toru feels a strong attraction to Naoko, but the girl's mentality is too fragile because of her grief to be able to continue living. Naoko ended her life, just like Kizuki. She hanged herself and added to the burden of grief for Toru. The poor boy has not been able to recover from Kizuki's death and now has to endure his loss to Naoko as well. The journey of Toru's story makes him unable to cope with reality and sink into a phase of existential crisis, finding himself in trouble creating meaning for his existence. Therefore, this research will analyze how Toru Watanabe questions his existence using existentialism theories developed by the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre.

Through a novel entitled *Norwegian Wood* written by a Japanese writer named Haruki Murakami in 1987 and finally translated by Jay Rubin in 2000, this study will focus on the main character Toru Watanabe, who is experiencing an existential crisis during his youth. Toru Watanabe's description of existential crisis is well illustrated in *Norwegian Wood* through his emotional, cognitive, and behavioral conditions. Through this novel, Murakami tries to show the dark side of the social life of teenagers in Tokyo, which is integrated with Western culture in the 1960s by mentioning many songs that are mostly in the pop-rock genre, just like the title of his novel, which is adapted from the song of the legendary band The Beatles.

Literature Review

a. *Existentialism*

Man is nothing but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism (Sartre, 2000:5). He believed that humans exist with self-awareness and that there is no existence of other objects that can resemble human existence because, for humans, existence means openness while the existence of other things takes place simultaneously with their essence. The concept emphasized by him is that existence precedes essence (J. P. Sartre, 1946:3)

Whatever meaning an individual wants to choose for their own, the only one who must be responsible and in control is himself. Every individual can choose a good path in this never-ending human endeavor or vice versa (J. P. Sartre, 2000:5). Every choice made is a unanimous decision of his own and must be accounted for. Individuals cannot blame anyone, including God, because the decision reflects the individual's self-image (J.-P. Sartre, 1984:29). Sartre meant the responsibility to create that particular work not only for oneself but for all of humanity. The first effect of existentialism is how it puts every man in possession of himself as he truly is, and also carries the whole responsibility for his existence alone. Yet, when a man is responsible for himself, it does not mean that he is responsible for his individuality, but also for all people (Archie & Archie, 2004:300).

The concept of freedom that Sartre believes in is absolute freedom and without this absolute, freedom existence is absurd (J. P. Sartre, 1946:12). Absolute freedom supports humans to express themselves and find value in their own lives freely. In man's constant pursuit of meaning for himself, this means talking about the present and the future. More specifically, deciding on the present also means the future. A concept like this supports the teaching that absolute freedom is owned by every individual because without freedom this cannot happen. The decisions that every human being makes are a true expression of their right to freedom (J. P. Sartre, 1946:5).

Talking about this existence means acknowledging the fact that an existence will end when death arrives, which can then be concluded that death is one of the limitations of human freedom (Iwuagwu, 2019:358). With the concept of death ending existence, the concept of absolute freedom is contradictory to the existence of death, but Sartre has other ideas about death. For Sartre, death cannot be predicted when it will come even though it does not deny the fact that death will surely come (Iwuagwu, 2019:358). Death is an absurd concept because its arrival is unexpected and beyond our choice, so death has nothing to do with existence because with the arrival of death, existence is finished. Death helps to embody the fact that after existence comes essence. Sartre believes that death is beyond existence because when humans die, the meaning of death is not for themselves but for others who are left behind. Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that to be dead is to be prey for the living because the dead remains quiet, and the meaning of his death becomes a burden for those left behind (J.-P. Sartre, 1984:543). They are the ones who give meaning to someone's death. Therefore, as long as humans are still alive and become a real existence, the absolute freedom they have is still an undeniable fact because humans are still free to create themselves and continue to process in the form of personal responsibility (Iwuagwu, 2019:359).

Human reality is free, basically, and completely free (J.-P. Sartre, 1984:453). The absolute freedom that humans have is accompanied by responsibilities that are also without limitations, and this form of responsibility is an existential burden that is also heavy to bear.

b. *Existential Crisis*

An existential crisis arises when our sense of logic finally comprehends that our existence has no meaning as life itself is meaningless. That meaninglessness makes humans have to create meaning for their own lives by prioritizing authenticity, as Sartre believed (J.-P. Sartre, 1984:344). Humans are not created for a specific purpose, therefore, this is a form of great responsibility and freedom.

Man is condemned to be free. Condemned, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does (Sartre, 1946:5). The moment humans were born and exist in this world became the moment they will grow and bear the responsibility of creating meaning for themselves.

Another existential crisis issue could arise if someone manages to deny their freedom by living as a society's product, following a popular common template, and living to copy another person. It is very obvious, that freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others (Sartre, 1946:12). Therefore, when a man follows others' principle or copies the way others lives, it can be concluded as an existential crisis. By copying others' way of living, it can be assumed that someone is taking the easy way out but it surely neglects one of the characteristics of existentialism which is authenticity.

The limitless amount of freedom a man has can lead to despair in choosing and giving a value for themselves, but Sartre argued that despair can also pave a new way to create meaning in life. The way someone views despair they experienced determines their next step as long as they keep viewing despair as a way to enter a new path, then the existential crisis could be passed (J.-P. Sartre, 1984:377)

The existential crisis raised the question of whether life has any meaning, purpose, or value. Meaning, purpose, and value are elements of existence. This means that they cannot be separated from the concept of existence. The absence of meaning, purpose, or value signifies an existence in a state of crisis. According to Buténaitė-Šwitkiewicz et al., (2016), an existential crisis is divided into three basic components, i.e emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Emotional components relate to human emotions and feelings that indicate an existential crisis that is being experienced. Emotional components consist of feelings such as emotional pain, despair and helplessness, anxiety, and loneliness. Emotional pain is considered to be one of the fundamental reasons life can lose meaning. When an individual experiences an existential crisis, they will be faced with situations such as emotional distress and self-awareness about death.

Cognitive components involve perceptions, prejudices, and values that are believed to be in assessing existential crisis. Cognitive components consist of the loss of meaning and purpose and the loss of values (Buténaitė-Šwitkiewicz et al., 2016).

The last component of existential crisis is behavioral components. Behavioral components are divided into three aspects such as restricted actions, relationship loss, and anti-social behavior (Buténaitė-Šwitkiewicz et al., 2016). In a phase of existential crisis, an individual's behavior can show that the person is having conflict within himself.

By classifying existential crisis into three aspects such as emotional, cognitive, and behavioral, the existential crisis phase can be further studied by matching them to the attitudes and characters shown, whether they belong to the emotional, cognitive, or behavioral aspects.

Methodology

This study conducts descriptive qualitative methods, approach from the perspective of philosophy and psychology. The data is in the form of novel quotations, and the source of the data will be taken from Murakami's Norwegian Wood. The collection of the data technique will use observation and classification. The data analysis will use analyzation, interpretation, and making conclusion.

Result

The result of the data collection will be provided in a table.

Table 1: *Toru Watanabe's Crisis Identity Analysis*

Form	Analysis	Quotation
Emotional Component	The emotional component is an element that relates to a person's emotions. It takes concern in emotional matters and feelings. Toru Watanabe's emotional component of existential crisis can be overlooked from his emotional pain, despair and helplessness, anxiety, and	"The melody never failed to send a shudder through me, but this time it hit me harder than ever. I bent forward, my face in my hands to keep my skull from splitting open. I straightened up and looked

	loneliness. Emotional pain can affect a person's well-being because pain is intense.	out of the window at the dark clouds hanging over the North Sea, thinking of all I had lost in the course of my life: times gone for ever, friends who had died or disappeared, feelings I would never know again." (Murakami, 2000:5)
Cognitive Component	The cognitive component is an element that relates to a person's intellectual activity. It takes concern in cognitive activity like thinking, reasoning, and remembering. Toru Watanabe's cognitive component of existential crisis can be overlooked from two aspects that are the loss of meaning and purpose of life as well as the loss of values.	"And so I went from 18 to 19. Each day the sun would rise and set, the flag would be raised and lowered. Every Sunday I would have a date with my dead friend's girl. I had no idea what I was doing or what I was going to do. For my courses I would read Claudel and Racine and Eisenstein, but they meant almost nothing to me." (Murakami, 2000:36)
Behavioral Component	The behavioral component is an element that relates to a person's behavior. It takes concern in communication, attitude, social interaction, and work (Buténaitė-Świtkiewicz et al., 2016). Toru Watanabe's behavioral component of existential crisis can be overlooked from three aspects i.e. restricted actions, relationship loss, and anti-social.	"All I managed to do was isolate myself more than ever from the other students. By remaining silent when my name was called, I made everyone uncomfortable for a few seconds. None of the other students spoke to me, and I spoke to none of them." (Murakami, 2000:59)

Discussion

Emotional component of existential crisis can be explained by analyzing Toru Watanabe's emotional component. Toru is a 37-year-old guy who sits on an airplane that has just arrived in Germany when he hears the melody of the *Norwegian Wood* song by The Beatles start playing. The song evokes Toru's painful memories of his youth, filled with the suicide tragedy of the people around him. It starts with his best friend, Kizuki, who commits suicide at 17. Then a few years later, Naoko followed Kizuki's way. He has a deep affection for Naoko. So when she died, it brought Toru great agony. Toru reveals that the melody of that song never failed to make him shudder, even when years had already passed, the pain still lingers on him. Naoko used to request that particular song meanwhile, the existence of Naoko is essential to him. Toru is still filled with painful memories and nostalgia trapped in his yearning for times and feelings of his youth because losing people because they commit suicide is different because the one who left behind is never ready for the loss. Toru implicitly reveals the pain he felt so much in the course of his life. He remembered his gloomy youth by referring to the times, friends, and feelings he would never know again just by listening to the melody of *Norwegian Wood* by The Beatles.

Cognitive component of existential crisis can be identified in Toru Watanabe's cognitive component. Toru is living his life as it is, following an everyday routine that he might copy from everyone else. He describes his life beyond his ordinary daily routine because he fails to imply meaning and purpose. He exists and blends with everyone else without knowing much about which direction he is on. The meaning and purpose are guidelines for him to live, but he does not have them with him. He claimed that he had no idea about his life and that nothing mattered to him. His view of the society around him is also hollow because nothing much sparks his interest to be concerned. Toru's second loss of meaning and purpose can be signified by his thought towards students' strikes at his university.

Behavioral component of existential crisis can be signified in Toru Watanabe's behavioral component. Toru shows no attempt to enhance his social skill by making friends with people in the lecture. He does not even want to speak when his name is called to register and it makes people in the class getting uncomfortable. However, Toru grows a close relationship with Naoko as time goes on, then her sudden disappearance affects him to have disorientation with life. He has trouble engaging in society. He is unable to carry on with his daily life and has no choice but to isolate himself from other people because he does not want to try to engage with anyone else. His broken relationship with Naoko causes him to isolate himself from society.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the writer concludes that existential crisis is reflected in Toru Watanabe, the main character in the novel *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami. The existential crisis is an issue regarding to an existence. It refers to a phase of despair when individuals realize that there is no predetermined meaning for their existence, so they should be responsible for creating meaning for themselves. There are three components that can reflect his existential crisis. It is reflected through his emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. By analyzing these components and their aspects, Toru Watanabe's existential crisis can be elaborated.

Reference

- Andrews, M. (2016). *The Existential Crisis*. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bdb0000014>
- Archie, L., & Archie, J. G. (2004). *Reading for Philosophical Inquiry: A Brief Introduction to Philosophical Thinking ver. 0.21; An Open Source Reader*. GNU Free Documentation License.
- Buténaité-Świtkiewicz, J., Sondaite, J., & Mockus, A. (2016). *COMPONENTS OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS*. <https://doi.org/10.7220/2345-024X.18.1>
- Inglis, D. (2022). Existentialising existence theory and expanding the sociology of existential milestones. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 22(1), 30–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X211049126>
- Iwuagwu, E. K. (2019). Death as a Limitation to Human Freedom: A Critical Look at Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Position on Freedom and Death. *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies*, 7(8), 353–360. <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2019/v7/i8/hs1908-100>
- Khan, D. T. (2007). The concept of authentic existence in existentialism. *University*. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/52180%0Ahttp://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/handle/1060>

3/52180

Murakami, H. (2000). *Norwegian Wood*. The Harvill Press.

Sartre, J.-P. (1984). *Being and Nothingness The Principal Text of Modern Existentialism*. 636.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429434013>

Sartre, J. P. (1946). *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. World Publishing Company in 1956.

Sartre, J. P. (2000). *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. Citadel.