

BEYOND ABSURDITY: IDENTITY CRISIS AS THE ROOT OF EXISTENTIALISM IN POSTCOLONIAL SOCIETIES: A CRITICAL READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S THE COURTER

Asif Raheel¹, Syed Hasan Askari^{*2}, Muhammad Hasnain³

¹asifraheel297@gmail.com, ²askarisyed207@gmail.com, ³hasnidotpro@gmail.com

Corresponding Author:

Syed Hasan Askari^{*2}

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ABSTRACT

This study reinterprets existentialism in the postcolonial context by exploring how identity crisis—not absurdity—emerges as the central source of existential suffering. Departing from the traditional Western framework defined by Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus this paper examines Salman Rushdie's short story "The Courter" as a compelling literary example of existential struggle shaped by colonial legacies, cultural fragmentation, and linguistic dislocation. The story's diasporic characters, suspended between two worlds, reflect the psychological turmoil of those unable to anchor themselves within a fixed cultural identity. Through close textual analysis and postcolonial theoretical grounding, this research argues that Rushdie's narrative replaces the absurd cosmos of Western existentialism with a crisis of belonging and fractured selfhood. The experiences of Ayah, the narrator, and the Courter underscore a longing for coherence in a world that has rendered their identities unstable. This paper calls for a decolonized reading of existential literature—one that understands meaninglessness not as metaphysical, but as a consequence of historical displacement and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: existentialism, absurdity, identity crisis, postcolonial.

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, as developed in the Western philosophical canon, grapples with the human condition in a universe stripped of divine order. Influential thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard focus on alienation, absurdity, freedom, and the search for authentic existence in the face of a godless or indifferent cosmos. Drawing from Sartre (1943/2003), existentialism is defined as individual's search for meaning and opt for originality in an absurd world. As Sartre declares, "*existence precedes essence*," suggesting that individuals are not born with a predetermined nature but must define themselves through their choices and actions. Similarly, Kierkegaard (1992) insists that "*subjectivity is truth*" emphasizing personal responsibility and the struggle for authenticity. Camus (1991) observes that "*the absurd is born*

of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world," yet insists that "*one must imagine Sisyphus happy,*" revealing a defiant embrace of life despite its meaninglessness.

Their characters confront existential despair not because they are dislocated from society, but because they are dislocated from metaphysical certainty. However, such a framework—though profound—fails to adequately explain the existential anxieties of individuals living in postcolonial societies, because it stems from a Eurocentric understanding of alienation and freedom (Young, 2001). In these contexts, the crisis is not universal absurdity but fractured identity.

This paper explores this alternative model of existential struggle through South Asian fiction "The Courter" written by Salman

Rushdie, published in his collection 'East, West' (1994). South Asian fiction, deeply contributes to the overlapping fields of existentialism and postcolonialism, particularly in exploring questions of identity, race, and belonging (Hashmi et al., 2025). In this short story "The Courter", the story centers on an Indian immigrant family in London, particularly the narrator's relationship with his Ayah (nanny) and a Central European porter she calls "the Courter." Rushdie's narrative captures the psychic dissonance of individuals torn between cultures, languages, and homelands—dislocation not merely physical, but existential.

Postcolonial existentialism, as argued here, is shaped by cultural hybridity, linguistic alienation, and historical violence. As Gupta and Chatterjee (2020) highlight in their study of South Asian writers such as Mohsin Hamid, these authors "recast existential isolation as a postcolonial condition, where the self is perpetually negotiated against the gaze of the West" (p. 143). Here in the short story "The Courter", the immigrant does not ask: 'Is life meaningless?' but rather: 'Where is my place in this world? Who am I in the aftermath of colonial erasure? This notion helps explain how Rushdie's characters in *The Courter* experience alienation not as metaphysical absurdity, but as a struggle for recognition and belonging. The Courter's characters reflect this very struggle—the longing for belonging in a world that demands cultural translation at the cost of authenticity. Thus, this research proposes a new interpretative lens—one that centers identity as the root of existential inquiry in postcolonial literature. Through a close reading of Rushdie's text and insights from postcolonial theorists, this study redefines the terrain of existentialism from metaphysical doubt to cultural fragmentation. Similarly, the research method is qualitative textual analysis. The article explores narration, dialogues, and symbols in *The Courter* to understand meaninglessness not as metaphysical, but as a consequence of historical displacement and cultural hybridity.

Literature Review

The discourse of existentialism in postcolonial literature has been increasingly re-evaluated by

scholars who argue that the Eurocentric emphasis on metaphysical absurdity fails to encompass the cultural and historical specificity of colonized and diasporic experiences. As such, postcolonial theorists have proposed alternative frameworks that emphasize identity, hybridity, and displacement as the defining elements of existential anxiety in formerly colonized societies.

Homi K. Bhabha (1994), in his seminal work "The Location of Culture", introduces the concept of the 'Third Space' as a site of cultural negotiation and identity formation. He argues that individuals living between cultures exist in an in-between state, where meaning and identity are constantly produced and reproduced through ambivalence. This hybridity becomes a site of both creativity and crisis, as the subject grapples with fragmented affiliations. Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity is essential to understanding the characters in Rushdie's 'The Courter', particularly the narrator and Ayah, who exist wholly neither in the British nor Indian cultural paradigms.

Frantz Fanon (1986), in "Black Skin, White Masks", delves into the psychological trauma of colonized individuals who internalize the values and language of the colonizer. Fanon describes how this leads to an identity rupture, resulting in alienation and a fractured sense of self. This notion resonates with the experience of Rushdie's narrator, who confesses to attempting to become 'more English than the English', highlighting a self-erasing performance driven by the desire for acceptance in a dominant culture. Stuart Hall (1996) further expands the discussion in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", where he contends that identity is not fixed or singular but is always in a state of becoming. For Hall, diasporic identity involves a constant negotiation between the past and the present, the homeland and the host culture. This fluid identity is clearly portrayed in Rushdie's story, where characters are suspended between memory and adaptation, between what they were and what they are becoming. Edward Said (1978), in "Orientalism", critiques the way Western discourse constructs the East as its exotic and inferior Other. While Said's primary concern is with cultural

representation, his work has profound implications for understanding how identity is externally imposed and internally resisted. In *'The Courter'*, the misrecognition of Ayah and the Courter by British society echoes Said's argument, emphasizing how the dominant gaze distorts and marginalizes non-Western identities. Critical studies on Salman Rushdie also affirm the relevance of these theories. As noted by Suleri (1992), Rushdie's characters often inhabit 'postcolonial spaces of discontinuity and irony', where language, memory, and belonging are constantly contested. *'The Courter'* exemplifies this through its complex engagement with linguistic hybridity and cultural translation, where characters speak, love, and suffer across fractured tongues and unfamiliar geographies. As Hashmi et al. (2025) note, while postcolonial studies (e.g., Loomba, 2015) has explored issues of race and identity extensively but have seldom employed existentialism as a lens for interpreting the lived struggles of South Asian narratives. These foundational texts and critiques provide the theoretical scaffolding for analyzing *'The Courter'* not as a narrative of absurd existence but as a poignant exploration of postcolonial identity crisis. Through Bhabha's hybridity, Fanon's psychological alienation, Hall's diasporic fluidity, and Said's critique of representation, this study positions Rushdie's work within a broader intellectual tradition that redefines existentialism through the lens of postcolonial fragmentation.

Discussion

Rushdie clearly shows postcolonial existential struggles in *The Courter*. Through the daily lives of people who have left their homeland, he turns abstract ideas of absurdity into real human experiences of loss, confusion, and search for belonging. Throughout the short story *"The Courter"*, Rushdie dramatizes the condition. At the very beginning of the short story, he highlights the linguistic confusions which become the lived existential crisis for the characters. In the short story narrator says that "we were all mixed-up, in those days. Language, too" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 112). This shows that language itself becomes a source of struggle and displacement because English is

not their mother tongue. The characters find it hard to express themselves or connect with others because their languages, like their identities, are divided between two worlds. For them, communication does not bring understanding—it reminds them of what they have lost.

Similarly, Mary's declaration, when she says "I must go ... Yes, certainly. Bas. Enough" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 113), highlights the bodily toll of exile: London, which the narrator states, "was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India" (p. 113). This moment shows how deeply displacement affects her both physically and emotionally. She feels trapped in a place that does not feel like home. She is surrounded by people who cannot understand her language or her pain. Her longing for India turns into silent suffering. This shows how 'exile' slowly weakens not only the body but also the spirit. The Courter's erasure is equally striking: after defending Mary, "we never saw him again" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 114). His heroism does not form identity because the system refuses recognition. These textual moments anchor the argument that existential suffering in the postcolonial context arises not from cosmic absurdity but from denied recognition, fractured language, and cultural dislocation. In *The Courter*, Salman Rushdie offers a powerful and layered portrayal of identity crisis as the core of existential struggle within postcolonial societies. The characters in *"The Courter"* grapple not with abstract absurdity or philosophical absurdity, as found in Western existentialism, but with a deep sense of fragmentation brought about by historical displacement, cultural conflict, and linguistic alienation. This discussion explores how identity becomes the central site of existential pain in *"The Courter"*, making it a literary reflection of the kind of existentialism that arises uniquely in postcolonial settings.

At the center of the story is the figure of Ayah, a woman who once held dignity and confidence in Bombay but becomes diminished and silent in London. Her dislocation is not only geographical but deeply psychological. She struggles with English, cannot adapt to British norms, and remains emotionally and socially isolated. As Nair (2021) explains, "in South Asian narratives,

belonging is an existential quest, perpetually deferred by the violence of history and the instability of home” (p. 92). Her failure to integrate is not due to personal weakness but because of the violent shift from one cultural system to another. She is not absurd; she is unplaced. The world has not lost meaning—rather, she has lost her position within that meaning. Her language, her gestures, and her role no longer carry the value they once did. She is surrounded by people, including those she cares for, yet she exists on the margins of their world, unable to assert herself. This collapse of self-definition marks the existential crisis in postcolonial reality: when the individual’s roots are cut off, and no new soil allows them to grow.

The relationship between Ayah and the Courter is also central to understanding this crisis. They do not share a language, but they share a form of quiet empathy. However, this love cannot be fully realized because it occurs in a space that does not support it—socially, culturally, or linguistically. Their relationship is sincere but ultimately fragile. When Ayah is attacked in a racially charged incident, and the Courter defends her, he is removed from the building and never seen again. There is no justice, no redemptive arc—only disappearance. The narrator simply says, “We never saw him again.” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 114) This line encapsulates the existential instability experienced by those on the margins. Their identities are not only unrecognized; they are erased. The problem is not absurdity in the philosophical sense, but a structural absence of belonging. As Patel (2023) captures this vividly, stating that “Racial otherness in South Asian fiction is an existential catalyst, compelling characters to confront their being against a backdrop of systemic rejection” (p. 84).

Another key moment in the story is the narrator’s own admission that he was “trying to be more English than the English.” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 105) This statement shows how identity is not something that can be adopted at will. In his attempt to assimilate, he performs Englishness, but it is always a performance, never a transformation. His internal conflict is rooted in the pressure to abandon one part of himself in order to

survive in another culture. His hybrid identity does not give him peace—it splits him in two. He cannot fully return to his Indian self, nor can he ever be accepted as truly British. This is the existential condition of the postcolonial subject: to be caught in a liminal space between two worlds, unable to reconcile them into a stable sense of self.

The phrase “Mixed-Up,” used to refer to the Courter, also operates as a metaphor for everyone in the story. The narrator reflects, “We were all mixed-up, in those days. Language, too.” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 111) This sentence highlights the confusion and disorientation experienced by diasporic individuals. Language, which should be a tool of communication and self-expression, becomes a source of confusion and even alienation. Ayah cannot speak English. The Courter cannot speak Hindi or Urdu. The narrator speaks both but finds that his bilingualism does not make him whole; instead, it contributes to his sense of in-betweenness. The mixing of languages reflects the mixing of identities, and in this mix, something is always lost. The narrator feels the loss of authenticity, of certainty, of rootedness. This is not a loss of universal meaning, but a personal unraveling due to cultural displacement.

Importantly, the story does not present its characters as defeated or passive. They try to form connections, to love, to adapt—but the structures around them make belonging impossible. Ayah’s social decline is not her fault; it is the result of her uprooting. The Courter’s kindness is genuine, yet it cannot protect him from being discarded. The narrator’s intelligence and effort to fit in do not bring him peace, but a deeper awareness of his divided self. These are existential realities born not from meaningless existence but from a world that forces people to abandon their past without guaranteeing a place in the present.

Rushdie’s narrative remains grounded in the ordinary. There is no dramatic existential climax. There is no revelation. There is only slow realization. This makes the story even more effective. It reflects how existential crises in postcolonial societies are not always explosive—they are often quiet, chronic, and

unresolvable. The pain lies in daily disconnection, in conversations that fail, in gestures that go unnoticed, in memories that cannot be shared across languages. In this sense, Rushdie shows that the true existential crisis of the postcolonial subject is not “Why am I here?” but “Where do I belong?” and “Who am I, now that my past has been silenced and my present is uncertain?”

Finally, The Courter challenges the Eurocentric model of existentialism. Rushdie does not reject the existential concern; rather, he relocates it. His characters are not searching for meaning in a godless cosmos. They are searching for themselves in the ruins of colonized identities. Their struggle is historical, not metaphysical. Their despair is rooted in cultural dislocation, not cosmic indifference. They do not contemplate suicide or absurd freedom; they live with quiet suffering and fragmented identities, trying to hold onto something that feels whole. Their pain is human, real, and political.

In *The Courter*, the misnaming of the porter as “Mixed-Up” is more than a linguistic accident. It symbolizes the distorted perception of identity in a colonial and immigrant context. The porter’s real name is never revealed, and his existence is reduced to a child’s mishearing. Yet this nickname, ironically, captures the condition of everyone in the household. Their identities are fractured – not just culturally, but linguistically. The inability to name correctly reflects the inability to situate people correctly in social and cultural systems. Naming here is not empowering; it is alienating. The “Mixed-Up” label becomes a symbol of loss, where people are assigned roles, they never asked for and stripped of the ones, they previously owned.

Though Ayah is at the story’s emotional center, the narrator’s mother also embodies the quiet erasure of identity. Once the family moves to England, she too is largely silent. Her routines become mechanical, and she fades into the domestic background. This is not indifference, but a symptom of displacement. Her role as a mother is preserved, but her identity as an individual woman – perhaps once vibrant in Bombay – becomes muted. She no longer navigates a world that reflects her values or rewards her experience. She is

not existentially paralyzed by lack of meaning but by the fact that her own history no longer has a place in this new world.

The Courter’s kindness to Ayah is deeply human, yet tragically invisible to the system they inhabit. He assists her, defends her, walks her home – but these gestures, which should build his identity as a moral being, are ignored by the larger world. When he is removed after intervening in the assault, the event is not recognized as heroism, but as disruption. The system does not reward his humanity because his identity – as an immigrant, as an outsider – renders his moral actions invisible. Ahmed (2019) explains this dynamic, noting that “race in diasporic South Asian literature functions as an existential boundary, delimiting the possibilities of selfhood within structures of power” (p. 67). Rushdie’s portrayal of the Courter exemplifies how racial hierarchies restrict recognition and confine one’s moral being within oppressive systems. This is existential disintegration: when your good actions do not shape who you are in the world because you are denied recognition altogether. Throughout the story, the narrator reveals subtle guilt about Ayah’s decline, especially in his admission that he began to speak to her in English – and more coldly – as he tried to assimilate. His identity crisis includes a betrayal of cultural memory. He is caught between respecting where he comes from and wanting to survive where he now lives. His gradual distancing from Ayah is a form of internalized colonial pressure, where survival demands erasure. This emotional tension is not metaphysical but historical. It stems from being taught, implicitly, that one’s original culture is inferior and must be concealed. The result is a divided self.

The setting of the apartment block, and especially the lift where the Courter works, becomes a subtle symbol of hierarchy and movement – who goes up, who stays down. The Courter operates the lift, but he himself is stuck in place, symbolically denied upward mobility. His existence is functional but not respected. Ayah, too, travels in the lift but only to complete her duties. Both are confined within the system – not just physically, but in how their identities are structured by colonial and racial categories. They move within the

building, but they do not belong to it. The lift becomes a metaphor for their existential state: always moving, never arriving.

In one scene, the Courter tries to share a record with Ayah – a small gesture of affection and cultural expression. But this music, though beautiful to him, is unfamiliar to her. What should be a moment of connection becomes another example of how communication fails between displaced people. The music does not bridge their gap; it widens it. It reminds the reader that cultural expression, too, can become fragmented and futile in exile. Their inability to share beauty across cultures reinforces how exile erodes not just language and home, but joy and intimacy as well.

Years later, the narrator reflects not with philosophical detachment but with emotional regret. His voice is mature, but it carries mourning. He is not mourning death – Ayah did not die – but the death of a relationship, a language, a shared past. This kind of mourning is a core part of postcolonial existentialism: the recognition that something essential was lost not through catastrophe, but through slow erasure. His tone is nostalgic but pained, and the reader understands that the crisis of identity does not resolve with time. It persists, quietly and perpetually.

The story presents England not just as a location but as a psychological state. The coldness, unfamiliar routines, and social indifference act upon the characters, not as a setting, but as an existential force. In this environment, people like Ayah and the Courter lose not just physical comforts but the symbolic systems that validated them. This reinforces the idea that postcolonial existentialism is not about universal human suffering but about historical and systemic disenfranchisement – a suffering rooted in being made alien in one's own narrative. Rao (2018) observes that "globalization in South Asian fiction amplifies existential dislocation, as characters navigate a world that celebrates mobility yet punishes difference" (p. 139). Rushdie's characters, though mobile within this global space, remain outsiders whose difference denies them belonging.

The final passages of *The Courter* do not offer resolution. The Courter is gone. Ayah's

condition is irreversible. The narrator has grown but at a cost. The story ends not with clarity but with the acknowledgment of ambiguity – that none of them fully belonged, and none ever will. There is no moral, no redemption, and no philosophical closure. This is the most honest portrayal of postcolonial existentialism: a crisis that cannot be solved through personal effort because it is caused by historical violence and inherited dislocation. What remains is memory – fragmented, painful, and incomplete – and the burden of living with it.

Conclusion

In examining "*The Courter*" Salman Rushdie does not engage with existentialism in its Western, absurdist sense. Rather, he reveals how existential crisis in postcolonial societies emerges not from cosmic meaninglessness but from cultural displacement, fragmented identity, and the inability to belong. The story's characters are not searching for meaning in a void – they are navigating the painful dislocation of selves torn between histories they cannot return to and cultures that do not accept them. Ayah's fading presence, the Courter's disappearance, and the narrator's inner conflict all reveal a quiet but persistent existential anguish rooted in broken language, lost roles, and denied recognition. The existential questions raised are not universal abstractions but historically situated crises: "Who am I now that the world has moved without me?" and "How do I live when my name, my tongue, and my past have no meaning in the present?"

Rushdie's narrative rejects melodrama and instead captures the silent, enduring trauma of those caught in between – migrants, caretakers, lovers, children of empire – all struggling to forge identities in a reality shaped by colonial rupture. His characters are not merely confused; they are "mixed-up" in the deepest sense, unmoored from inherited systems of meaning and yet unable to find new ones that fit. In portraying this, *The Courter* offers not just a story of nostalgia or immigration, but a profound critique of identity's instability in postcolonial experience. This paper suggests that postcolonial existentialism must be read not through the

lens of absurdity or atheistic freedom, but through the lived tensions of hybridity, exile, and un-belonging. The Courter stands as a literary testament to this reality – a narrative in which meaning is not absent, but inaccessible; where the crisis is not of belief, but of being. In reclaiming this perspective, Rushdie compels us to reconsider what it means to exist when the very fabric of selfhood has been pulled apart by history. Desai (2021) sums it up poignantly: “Contemporary South Asian literature uses existential uncertainty to reimagine identity, not as fixed but as a process born of racial and historical flux” (p. 176). Rushdie’s *The Courter* exemplifies this fluid identity, showing how displacement reshapes selfhood. Existentialism in the postcolonial context is not about rejecting gods – it is about mourning homes, names, languages, and selves lost in translation.

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