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## Abstract

*This research article delves into the philosophical foundations of the novel, Echoes, which centers on the central character's pursuit, as a teacher, of goodness over greatness and his existential quest for meaning. With the objective of examining the novel's themes and narrative structure from eco-existential point of view, the study investigates the principles of ecological existentialism and the interplay between human existence and the natural world. Central to this exploration, as the research questions, are the concepts of solitude, freedom, and Karma, which the author employs to advocate for existentialism within an ecological framework. By employing ecocriticism and existentialism as theoretical lenses, the article elucidates how the novel portrays the co-existential relationship between humanity and ecology, emphasizing human responsibility and the freedom to imbue life with meaning. This analysis is significant in fostering environmental values and highlighting the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural environment. The study underscores the novel's potential to illuminate paths towards ecological harmony and deepen understanding of existential philosophy, particularly as it pertains to questions of individuality, freedom, and the search for meaning in the context of environmental ethics. Ultimately, it advocates for a holistic approach to existence that acknowledges the profound influence of ecological factors on human life and underscores the importance of aligning existential values with environmental stewardship.*

**Keywords:** Co-existence, ecology, existentialism, karma, solidity

## Introduction

The relationship between nature and human beings appears confronting and ramming, especially due to the human activity of exploiting nature and defining nature from the point of view of human pragmatics. In such conditions, ecology and human existence appear to be reversely related. Human beings have created narratives about nature as the means of human happiness and pleasure. It is the cause of an endangering situation for the existence

of nature. The author, Ishwar Kadel has created a plot in *Echoes* converging the theme of life as journey. It contains “no ecological facts, no shocking revelations about our world, no ethical or political advice, and no grand tour of ecological thinking” (Morton, 2018, p. xii), but still the book speaks about the value of nature for its own existence and the value of human life for happiness.

This research work intends to explore the ideas of human existence connected with ecological co-existence in *Echoes* using the theoretical concepts of existentialism and ecology to explore how the novel reveals the author’s wisdom of human solitude, freedom, and *karma* as the modes of human existence accompanied with ecological harmony. Ecology means something earthly and pedestrian; “it’s something to do with quotidian relationships between humans and nonhumans” (Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 2010, p. 1), which is not limited only to the issues of global warming and the changes taking place in natural phenomena; rather concerns to love, loss, passion, feelings of loneliness, and psychosis. This research further attempts to show how the author has expressed the aspects of love and loss, loneliness and companionship between humans and nature in the new mode of human-nature relationship.

This is a qualitative research work, so this study depends upon secondary sources to analyze the primary source, *Echoes*, and it uses the theory of ecological existentialism as a tool to interpret and analyze the text.

### **Ecology and Existentialism**

The connection between ecology and existentialism is difficult to locate. Ecology, as a discipline of environmental study, examines the role of nature and the environment in universal harmony. It deals with the relations of creatures, animals, plants, the earth, and the atmosphere to one another and their interconnectedness. In literary studies, it observes relationships between human beings and the nonhuman environment, and how this relationship is presented in literature. Existentialism, on the other hand, tries to find the meaning of life, especially of human beings. One focuses on the meaning of the natural world, and the other on the meaning of human beings, more particularly the existence of an individual. Existentialism ponders upon the existence (of humans); ecology ponders upon the coexistence (of all beings). The relationship between ecology and existentialism therefore depends on the relationship between existence and coexistence. The combination of these concepts results in the principle of “Eco-existentialism” as the mode of transition from existentialism to coexistentialism.

Ecology and existentialism theories meet at a point because “not being able to be in the middle is a big problem for ecological thinking” (Morton, 2018, p. 1), and this problem of ‘not being in the middle’ is an existential problem, a quest as the search of meaning. It could be the meaning of physical, psychological, material, spiritual and many others as “Existentialism can be found in every affirmation of existence over against the system of rigor that captures existence and reduces it to the calculations of instrumental rationality. Existentialism is a yes to life and a refusal to live one’s life according to a system” (Mickey,

2022, p. 146). Ecology, in this sense, also provides ‘yes’ to life for individual existence, or a way of refusal to live in a defined system. However, ecology is essential to human prosperity and well-being because it empowers the natural world with interconnection between humans and nature postulating new knowledge of interdependence in matters of vital needs, especially material ones, but existential philosophy does not focus on the level of interdependence alone. It gives equal priority to psychological and mental existence. As a result, Nietzsche has raised questions about the existence of God: “God is dead.”

Both ecological and existential philosophies have some issues in common. One persistent commonality of both relates to the recognition of what is right and what is wrong, especially in the context of today’s moral anarchy. Another, both constitute a meaningful way of life in a given world. Is it with nature or without nature? There are so many things that human beings do not know about nature and even about themselves. Unknowable and unproven things in the world make humans suspicious of everything and raise questions about the meaning of life. Suspicion is the real cause of existential questioning. These questions may be about the physical or the metaphysical. Suspicion about physics is a question about the material world and nature, whereas suspicion about metaphysics is a question about God. Jean-Paul Sartre raises a similar question on the human nature of disapproval, “The human being is not only the being by whom negatives are disclosed in the world; he is also the one who can take negative attitudes with respect to himself” (Sartre, 1956, p. 241). Many factors influence an individual’s essence, including society, nature, culture, religion, and many others. Therefore, for existence, making a connection between universal existence and individual existence is essential. Universal existence is the principle of ecology while individual existence is the principle of existentialism.

Existentialism “aims to elaborate on the central structures of our lives, around which all the things that we do are built” (Webber, 2009, p. xi). It focuses on ‘one’, but it does not negate ‘us’. This theory respects the meaning of one’s life in relation to others, “The better we know ourselves and the better we understand one another, the thought runs, the more successful we are likely to be in our relationships with one another and in the fulfilment of our hopes and dreams in general” (Webber, 2009, p. 1). Knowing ourselves is knowing one another’ is the essence of the existential quest. Likewise, eco-theory investigates the relationship between nature and the human world with the belief that the pattern of nature has been very kind to human beings. Albrecht examines how ecology can be a solace for human beings’ existence:

A person, or a landscape, might give solace, strength, or support to other people. Special environments might provide solace for those looking for consolation. If a person lacks solace, then they are distressed and in need of consolation. If a person seeks solace or solitude in a much-loved but desolated location, they will be distressed. Solace is what provides “heart’s ease”; it soothes the disturbed mind and brings that which was discordant back to harmony. (Albrecht, 2019, p. 38).

The environment always provides solace to all living beings. The lack of solace results in distress in life, from where the problem of meaning begins. An individual starts to question many things, “the patterns in the way an individual sees, thinks, feels, and behaves reflect the projects that individual has chosen to pursue and could choose not to pursue” (Webber, 2009, p. 19). Human beings are free to pursue or not to pursue the way of life they are given to live. The matter of existence is equally the matter of thought and emotional state. The universe guided by the ecological system shares some emotions with other beings, including humans, in a designed way, “Emotions such as caring and nurturing can also be found in an orderly universe, and in the ways other Earth-bound living beings share the instincts, patterns, and urges that propel life, sex, birth, hunger, safety, and death” (Albrecht, 2019, p. 7). However, realization of the emotion of ecology or nature is difficult.

Ecology, as a system of nature, provides the space for human beings to exist. It is the essence of human beings. Existentialism, on the other hand, is the philosophy that provides knowledge for the inquiry of existence outside of its essence. Therefore, Kierkegaard says, “the ethical as such is the universal.” Again, it is the manifest, the revealed. The individual regarded as he is immediately, that is, as a physical and psychical being, is the hidden, the concealed. So, their ethical task is “to develop out of this concealment and to reveal himself in the universal” (Kierkegaard, 2013, p. 142) that life becomes meaningful when one raises him/herself to the universal by bringing natural desires and inclinations under the moral law, which represents the “telos” that *ought* to be. In his book *Rethinking Existentialism*, Webber further explains the core of existentialism: “*Existentialism* is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values. It is grounded in a theory of what it is to be human that Sartre summarized in the slogan “existence precedes essence” (Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 2018, pp. 1-2). Sartre’s motto “existence precedes essence” conveys the idea - “a human being has no inbuilt essence, no innate or fixed personality, but instead creates their essence, or their character and outlook, through the values and projects they choose to adopt” (Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 2018, p. 3). The essence of being human is ethical and universal, and “the relational property of having a set of parts ordered in such a way as to collectively perform some activity” (Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 2018, p. 3). As a mode of collective activity, the existence of nature depends on the existence of humans, and the existence of humans depends on ecology, the mode of co-existence.

### **Nature and Life Exist Identically: Ecological Existentialism in *Echoes***

Human-nature relations always happen to be secretive, and even problematic. Is human life completely different from nature? Can human beings exist ontologically without nature and the environment? Can nature exist ontologically without humans? Does humanity always destroy and harm nature? Such questions really touch the heart of the human-nature relationship, and “human societies have sometimes achieved a measure of stability in their relations with their environment” (Jordan & Lubick, 2011, p. 9). Human-nature relations

have not moved in a smooth pattern which go on changing with multiple interpretations of the values. Jordan and Lubick further examine this trend:

As far as human relations with the nonhuman environment are concerned, the picture that emerges from a historical overview is mixed, with humans (like any other species) bringing about changes in an ecosystem when they first invade it but then, at least in some cases, settling down to a more or less stable relationship with the altered—and to some extent “humanized”—system. (Jordan & Lubick, 2011, p. 11)

Human thinking of nature as “other” has become a common means of natural exploitation throughout history. *Echoes* establishes a link between human-nature relationship and preserves the values of both ecological and existential quests. Existence of nature does not vary from human existence; “weather is also like human life. No one knows what comes next” (Kadel, 2014, p. 7). Natural events and human thinking can be identical in many ways. Natural phenomena can be predictable, but they are not certain and the human situation goes the same way. Human thinking changes in the way it happens in either condition; “it was not a rainy season but the sky unexpectedly changed” (Kadel, 2014, p. 7). This change is seen in the sky and the movement of clouds even more clearly, “sometimes clouds formed a baby on its mother’s lap and again there appeared an elephant and again an old man in the posture of a yogi” (Kadel, 2014, p. 11). A formless cloud creates different images, and those images resemble any of the images of human imagination. These imaginative figures in the sky represent human psychology of existence, but nature does not appear to be taking interest in other natural forms, “The river below the mountain was flowing at its own speed, indifferent to the changing forms of the clouds in the sky” (Kadel, 2014, p. 11), as if river has a concern to the life forms on earth.

Humans are aware of only those events that have a direct and advancing impact on their lives and happiness, but “the primary fight of a person is for livelihood. They were so close to nature that they used to spend most of the time of their lives either on their farm or in the shade of their cattle” (Kadel, 2014, p. 166). It is an instrumental value conception of human understanding of nature; “Nature can be understood as a means of producing consumer goods such as wood, water, and food” (Hull, 2018, p. 66). Nature satisfies their needs quite silently, but human beings don’t realize this fact. Their obliviousness and indifference to nature and its contribution to all life forms is not a problem of nature; rather, this obliviousness and ignorance has become a factor in nature’s injury and destruction. The result is that humans find themselves in danger of their existence, and this appears to be even worse in the days to come if not realized in time. The existence of man and tree stands identical and sets an image of a mute old man, who cannot speak, but he has the stories to tell; “both of them could witness but not speak. Both of them had a long story to tell but nobody to listen to them” (Kadel, 2014, p. 14). A tree is never silent. It never reacts, but it exists and witnesses the world. Likewise, many human beings exist but cannot tell their stories in the way a tree does.



Likewise, human life similitudes with a river. Having the choice as a teacher by himself, the central character of the novel, Hari, has realized the similarity of the life of a teacher with a river. “A guru is simply a river who never feels tired of giving knowledge. Many rivers originate from him, helping to quench the thirst of the world and taking shelter in him at last” (Kadel, 2014, p. 38). He talks about the river of knowledge, and this analogy shows his belief that nature and human life exist in the same pattern. The boatman’s existence depends on the river, and the river also survives with the boatman, an interdependence of existence; “the same river gets flooded sometimes and roars with the boatman. But the boatman remains cool and keeps rowing his boat in the river in all seasons” (Kadel, 2014, p. 39). This analogy justifies the life of a teacher as that of a boatman, whose life is understood only by the river. A teacher is a boatman who survives in the river, by the river, and with the river. The existence of ‘one’ has a link with the existence of ‘other’, “The Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This does not imply nothingness as a distinct element of separation between the Other and myself” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1956, p. 230). Sartre’s acceptance of one with the other equals the obligatory existence of man and nature amid the traditional binary of man as ‘one’ and nature as ‘other’ and here, the boatman as ‘one’ and river as ‘other’ coexisting in *Echoes*.

Existentialism respects ethics; “each existentialist understands the ethical, as with ‘freedom’, in his or her own way. The underlying concern is to invite us to examine the authenticity of our personal lives and of our society” (Flynn, 2006, p. 8). Existential ethics regards the meaning of all organisms equally. The existence of one does not disturb the existence of another with everyone’s intrinsic value, “Existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat this structure of human existence as intrinsically valuable and as the foundation of all other values. This is what Sartre means when he refers to existentialism as a type of humanism” (Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism*, 2018, p. 11). The world is a set of binary things. A rose is beautiful because of the thorns in it. Shiva is a cosmic whole because of Shakti. A day is beautiful because of the night, and a man is beautiful because of his naughty behavior. “There is no existence of any living being without binary oppositions” (Kadel, 2014, p. 173). Equal possibility of living and nonliving, human and nonhuman existence give rise to significant attitudes that value nature equally.

The value of nature is unquestionable, but questionable is the nature of value. Amid the human priorities on the instrumental value of nature with pragmatic purpose, nature has intrinsic value, “natural objects either have a value independent of human valuers or at least are valued for their own sakes rather than for their usefulness, their instrumental value” (Callicott, 2009, p. xxi), and “A plant with or without flowers and fruit both exist in this world” (Kadel, 2014, p. 66). But the general effect is that “a tree with flowers or fruit attracts many birds, insects, small children and tired pedestrians towards it” (Kadel, 2014, p. 66), and hence humans are not completely detached from nature, “If any tree does not bear flowers and fruit, if it does not provide shade, no one hovers around this tree, it feels lonely”

(Kadel, 2014, p. 66). The search for nature's pragmatics for human existence is a real problem today.

### **Human Solitude, Freedom, and Karma in *Echoes***

Nature functions in a set of patterns. The combined pattern of nature is the world. Ishwor affirms, "The world we live in itself is like a well-composed music produced from dozens of different musical instruments under the guidance of a perfect musician. One does not need to find harmony in it" (Kadel, 2014, p. 7). This world has its own harmony within itself. This harmony is better than any of the harmonies human beings have imagined, even better than well-composed music. A human being is also a component of worldly harmony. Humans have to accept the fact that they have to act according to the system of the world. Cooper examines the relationship between human existence and the world:

A sense of estrangement is rooted in the fact that, while human beings are embodied occupants of the world, their powers of reflection, self-interpretation, evaluation, and choice distinguish them from all other occupants of the world – from animals, plants, and mere things. It would be wrong, though, to infer from this distinction that there is no intimate relationship between human beings and the world. (Cooper, 2012, p. 29).

Human beings are deeply rooted in the world's existence and are inherently connected with other things in the universe. The way they try to keep themselves different from other beings with the power of reflection and self-realization determines their distinct existence. This leads to the sense of freedom, individualism, loneliness, existence, co-existence, or whatever else. Individualism is the essence of existence. This individualism leads to eccentricity, and then it leads to a sense of solitariness. For an existential thinker, the feeling of solitariness could become a problem, but it also becomes a source of ecstasy, "When you are alone, you feel a kind of freedom... You know, the most important one is individualism" (Kadel, 2014, p. 18). Loneliness, for him, is the surest form of individualism and freedom. "Not only every successful person but also the rest of us are alone on this earth. From birth to, we have to make our journey alone. Our family, friends, and relatives are the people whom we meet on the way" (Kadel, 2014, p. 44). Life is essentially solitary and humans are just temporarily attached to each other. Therefore, the meaning of life is in solitude.

The novel respects the ideas of Thomas R. Flynn, "Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom... In this sense, we are always "more" than ourselves. But we are as responsible as we are free" (Flynn, 2006, p. 8). Man is more responsible and self-sufficient when he is free. Our ability to move from the totality to the individual and from the individual to the totality is the essence of our existence, "A man lives in totality when he is surrounded with pain and suffering" (Kadel, 2014, p. 63). An individual searches unity for meaning and unity searches for an individual for the meaning of life, and therefore life becomes a journey of search, "For my journey is to give meaning to my life... one learns to compromise with time and place" (Kadel, 2014, p. 19). Human beings are slaves in one sense; they are slaves of time and space, and therefore they want freedom. It is the quest for individuality and existence.

Human quest for freedom from the whole and individuality sometimes generates dilemmas within them, “Our dilemma is that we must and that *we* have summoned an astonishing arithmetic composed of single numbers, one by one, personage upon personage, to act out upon the stage of life her/his truth” (Tobias & Morrison, 2018, p. 107), and for this, Sartre’s slogan, “existence precedes essence”, best represents the idea of existentialism. It “may serve to introduce what is most distinctive about existentialism, namely, the idea that no general, non-formal account of what it means to be human can be given, since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself. Existence is “self-making-in-a-situation” (Fackenheim, 1961, p. 37). The meaning of life can be discovered after existence, and existence is the search for meaning; however, Ishwar intends to discover the meaning of life by keeping the world within; “I want to keep the world in my eyes as much as possible” (Kadel, 2014, p. 19). This situation, resoundingly, “calls upon the individual within the species, whether we have philosophically or scientifically rallied to the point of ascribing individualism or not” (Tobias & Morrison, 2018, p. 107). Thus, freedom and individualism are the factors that ensure human survival.

The belief in Karma is another strongly insinuated theme in *Echoes*. With reference to the karmic activity of Sisyphus, “the same nature of work every day, month, and year makes a man Sisyphus” (Kadel, 2014, p. 83), the novel focuses on karma, central character destined to be like Sisyphus. This reference appears repeatedly in the novel. In a different context, Ishwar says, “We have been doing the same work every day for a living, but we are not satisfied yet. We can neither leave the work we are doing nor can we meet our own goals” (Kadel, 2014, p. 62). One who feels satisfied with the work to be done has a different sensation from one who does not.

The work of Sisyphus is karmic work. It indicates the thing that you need to do the work, no matter if you are satisfied or not. “The wisdom of Sisyphus is not to make the rock stay put but to get the thing off his toe! We are advised to pursue limited but attainable goods – like the Ancient Stoics” (Flynn, 2006, p. 59). It is wisdom too. Sisyphus is not all sad to accomplish an endless job; “Camus claims to consider Sisyphus happy at the moment he turns to retrieve the rock once more at the base of the hill” (Flynn, 2006, p. 48). Work cannot be the true source of happiness and sadness, satisfaction and dissatisfaction; it is our attitude and perception of work that is the source of these emotions. Ishwar also refers to the waiting of Godot for the tireless work of a life; “We are hanging on the branch of the same tree where the actors are expecting Godot” (Kadel, 2014, p. 63). Godot is the karma and the desire of human beings that oblige humans to participate in every day’s activities.

Happiness comes from nothingness, which Sartre regards as neither ‘one’ nor ‘other,’ “This nothingness does not derive its origin from myself nor from the Other, nor is it a reciprocal relation between the Other and myself,” he says. On the contrary, it is the foundation of all relations between the Other and me because it is the primary absence of relation. This is because the Other appears to me empirically on the occasion of perception



(Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1956, p. 230). But for Ishwar, the best way to happiness is loneliness, and this happiness comes from nothing:

Learning to live alone is the best lesson to happiness comes from nothing. It creates in us. This nothing is inside a big nothing. If you take out nothing from big nothing, what remains is also nothing. If you add nothing to nothing, it will be nothing. This nothingness is complete, full. Nothing is perfect (PURNA). This Purna is infinite, so untouched by any external or internal elements. (Kadel, 2014, p. 192)

Happiness is not an outer matter. It is within us. It depends upon our realization. One may achieve nothing. Nothingness is itself a whole. *Echoes* gets concluded with the existential question of nothingness and wholeness. Both nothingness and wholeness are parts of existential wisdom.

### Conclusion

The relationship between humans and nature has long been complex and enigmatic, prompting inquiries into the fundamental link between human existence and the natural world. Viewing nature as separate and exploitable, Kadel's views, has led to a disregard for its intrinsic value, and therefore he reflects an interconnectedness of human and natural existence. Analogies drawn between human life and nature, such as a teacher compared to a river, underscore the inherent interdependence and mutual survival in their relationship. As Sartre's existential philosophy further highlights the coexistence of humans and nature, Kadel's *Echoes* advocates for an ethical framework that acknowledges the intrinsic value of all organisms. Yet, amidst the prevailing instrumental view of nature in human society, the intrinsic worth of nature often goes unnoticed, raising concerns about the sustainability of this relationship.

In essence, the discourse on human-nature relations reveals a complex interplay between existence and value, emphasizing the crucial need for a deeper appreciation of nature's intrinsic worth to ensure the well-being of both humans and the environment. In Kadel's *Echoes*, nature is depicted as operating within intricate patterns that define the essence of the world. His analogy of the world as a well-composed music piece orchestrated by a divine conductor underscores the harmony surpassing human imagination. Despite their individualism, humans are integral components of this cosmic harmony and must recognize their place within the intricate web of existence. The novel delves into the intricate relationship between humans and the world, highlighting their unique capacities for reflection and their inherent connection to the universe. While existentialist thinkers like Sartre stress the responsibility inherent in human freedom, the theme of karma in the novel underscores the repetitive nature of existence and the quest for meaning within it. The notion of happiness residing in nothingness echoes existential wisdom, suggesting that fulfillment is found in embracing the complexities of existence. Ultimately, *Echoes* explores existential questions of existence, individuality, and the pursuit of meaning amidst the rich tapestry of the universe.

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