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Existentialism in no exit by Jean Paul Sartre and Shadowless by Hasan Ali Toptaş

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# A Comparative Study: Existentialism in *No Exit* by Jean Paul Sartre and *Shadowless* by Hasan Ali Toptaş

Karşılaştırmalı Bir Çalışma: Jean Paul Sartre'in *Çıkış Yok* ve Hasan Ali Toptaş'ın *Gölgesizler*'inde Varoluşçuluk

Hilal Kaya\*

## Abstract

Existentialism has influenced a lot of literary works throughout history. Existentialism can be studied in literary works by means of foregrounding the existential themes and techniques. Some of these themes are being, change, freedom, self-cognizance, isolation, responsibility, free-will, and alienation. Traversing the boundary between philosophy and literature, this essay aims to analyse the existential themes of Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* or *Huis Clos* (1944) and Hasan Ali Toptaş's *Shadowless*<sup>1</sup> or *Gölgesizler* (1993) with an intertextual and comparative approach. This essay considers Sartre's *No Exit* and Toptaş's *Shadowless* as postmodern texts. Before exploring the existentialist themes and techniques in *No Exit* and *Shadowless*, this study aims to discuss the tradition of existentialism in literature. After presenting an introductory review on such existentialist concepts in literature as existence, essence, freedom, angst, and absurd, some recurrent themes in Sartre's and Toptaş's works will be highlighted and analysed. After a brief exploration of the influence of existentialism on Turkish literature, the essay will focus on the textual analysis. *No Exit* will be analysed from the perspective provided by such concepts as "being-for-itself", "being-for-other", "isolation and claustrophobic

<sup>1</sup> Dr. öğr. gör., Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt Üni., Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, hkaya@ybu.edu.tr ve misafir Dr. öğr. gör., The University of Edinburgh, IMES, hilal.kaya@ed.ac.uk

existence”; as for *Shadowless*, “being and nothingness” and “anxiety of uncertainty, emptiness and meaninglessness” will serve as the existential themes reflected in the novel. Within the framework of existentialism, an intertextual approach to and a comparative analysis of *Shadowless* from Turkish Literature along with *No Exit* from French Literature is an attempt of situating Modern Turkish Literature within the broader regional and global context. As a last point, this paper also aims to contribute both to critical studies on Sartre’s work and scholarship on the works of Hasan Ali Toptaş whose works of fiction have rarely been discussed from a comparative or world literature studies perspective.

**Keywords:** *Sartre, Toptaş, existentialism, the absurd, Turkish literature*

## Öz

Varoluşçu felsefe tarih boyunca birçok edebiyat eserini etkilemiş bir düşünce sistemidir. Varoluşçuluk felsefesi, varoluşçu tema ve tekniklerin uygulanması yoluyla edebi eserlerde analiz edilebilir. Bahsi geçen bu temalardan bazıları var olma, değişim, özgürlük, öz-anlayışı, soyutlanma, sorumluluk, özgür irade ve yabancılaşmadır. Felsefe ve edebiyat gibi disiplinler arasındaki sınırları kaldıran bu çalışma, Jean Paul Sartre’in *Çıkış Yok* (1944) ve Hasan Ali Toptaş’ın *Gölgesizler* (1993) adlı eserlerinde varoluşçuluk felsefesine ait özelliklerin metinler-arası yaklaşımla ve karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmesini amaçlamaktadır. Bu makale Sartre’in *Çıkış Yok* ve Toptaş’ın *Gölgesizler* eserlerini, postmodern metinler olarak ele almaktadır. *Çıkış Yok* ve *Gölgesizler*’de yansıtılan varoluşçu felsefenin tema ve tekniklerini incelemeden önce; bu makale, edebiyatta varoluşçuluk geleneğini tartışacaktır. Varoluş, öz, özgürlük, kaygı ve abes (absürt) gibi varoluşçuluk felsefesiyle ilgili kavramlara dair giriş niteliğinde bir inceleme sunuşundan sonra, Sartre ve Toptaş’ın eserlerindeki tekrar eden temaların altı çizilecek ve analizi yapılacaktır. Türk Edebiyatında varoluşçuluk düşüncesinin etkisinden kısaca bahsedilmesinden sonra, Sartre ve Toptaş’ın eserlerinin analizine geçilecektir. *Çıkış Yok* adlı oyun “öz için var oluş”, “başkaları için var oluş”, “soyutlanma ve klostrofobik var oluş” gibi perspektiflerden ele alınacaktır. *Gölgesizler* romanı ise, “var oluş ve hiçlik” ve “belirsizlik, boşluk ve anlamsızlık kaygısı” gibi varoluşçu düşüncenin temaları açısından incelenecektir. Varoluşçuluk felsefesi çerçevesinde, Türk Edebiyatından *Gölgesizler* romanını, metinler-arası ve karşılaştırmalı bir yaklaşımla, Fransız Edebiyatından *Çıkış Yok* ile birlikte incelemek, Modern Türk Edebiyatını daha geniş bölgesel ve global edebiyat sistemleri içerisine yerleştirme teşebbüsüdür. Bu makale hem Sartre’in eserleri üzerine yazılmış olan eleştirel çalışmalara hem de romanları karşılaştırmalı veya Dünya Edebiyatı çalışmaları perspektifinden nadiren incelenmiş olan Hasan Ali Toptaş’ın romanları hakkında yazılmış incelemeler bütününe katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Sartre, Toptaş, varoluşçuluk, abes (absürt), Türk edebiyatı*

## Introduction

Existentialism is a primarily European philosophical movement that flourished around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is the philosophy of existence itself. It is a philosophy which declares as its first principle that existence is prior to essence. Existentialism is quite different from other philosophical movements. Tanzer asserts that existentialism is an unusual study of existence in that it occupies a liminal position between the boundaries of philosophy and literature (2008, 1). His ideas seem to be proven when one considers many writings of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus, Beckett and Sartre in terms of their existential messages. In spite of presenting various differences, the writings of these writers share a set of common themes which can be described as a common existential outlook.

### 1. Principle existentialist concepts

#### 1.1. Existence precedes essence

Jean Paul Sartre dismantled the long-established traditional principle of metaphysics which argues that essence precedes existence and he objected and reversed this belief by arguing just the opposite of it because existentialists believe and reckon that first human beings exist and after that they construct values, meanings and identities on the basis of their consciousnesses. Sartre in his 1945 lecture “Existentialism is A Humanism” puts forward that prioritizing essence or human nature over existence is a gloomy and pessimistic way of describing the human predicament and what is further depressing, to Sartre, is this way of thinking itself that restrains people either by religious (God) or legal (politicians or police) powers. Yet, when he asserts that existence comes before essence he thinks that humans have a possibility of choice and this renders his argument more optimistic than the traditional doctrine (2007, 19).

Sartre’s idea of two ways of being should also be pinpointed here to understand the statement that claims existence preceded essence. As Tanzer claims,

The two types of things, in Sartre’s ontology, are those that are conscious, whose way of being he names ‘being for itself’, and those that are not conscious, whose way of being he names ‘being in itself’. Sartre maintains that conscious beings are structured in such a way that their existence precedes their essence, whereas beings that do not possess consciousness are structured in such a way that their essence precedes their existence. And because he sees human beings as the only conscious beings, we can understand the characterisation, concerning the relation between existence and essence, by examining the way that he conceives the nature of human consciousness (2008: 39).

As Sartre puts it, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards” (2007, 23). In Sartre’s thinking, the idea that “existence precedes essence” means that a person exists first and after that he chooses to be what kind of a person he wants to be. In his ontology, a person is defined according to the things he chooses to say and do. Here the significant aspect is his/her choosing what/how to behave and say. S/he is totally responsible for his/her actions and sayings.

## 1.2 Freedom and responsibility:

According to Sartre, being responsible is the natural result of a human's being free. As human beings are free to choose, whatever happens at the end of their choices, they should carry the entire responsibility for it. Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word responsibility in its ordinary sense as consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object (Sartre, 2007: 52).

Moreover, a person's indeterminacy, plays a great role on the idea of his/her freedom. Human beings, Sartre maintains, lack an essence, so they are indeterminate and ambiguous. In this context, Tanzer also states that

Because the ego is formed through the acts of empty consciousness, these acts are not beholden to any restrictions regarding the ego-content that they can construct, thereby rendering all ego-content intrinsically revisable. Thus, despite its accrual of ego-content, the human being remains without any essential, unrevisable determinations, without a univocal conceptual identity. In view of this, Sartre... must confront the apparent implication that human life is an amoral free-for-all in which anything is permitted (2008: 90).

Having the constant luxury and responsibility to make a choice is part of the human condition. For Sartre, free choice means action. No matter what a person confronts, no matter what her/his constitution, that person has a choice in how to respond, in how to act. Furthermore, a person's most basic choice is living in the background of his mortality. For Sartre, suicide is always an option and a choice that man can make. Whether you live or commit suicide that is a matter of choice. Therefore, human beings are free to create what they will become. This sort of freedom is not easy for man to cope with. As Sartre maintains, it creates forlornness for human beings:

I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant (195: 57).

Freedom means responsibility and that can be difficult to face and Sartre's statement that asserts that a person is condemned to be free should be kept in mind. Sartre underlines the inescapability of that freedom. Furthermore, that freedom may be a burden because it is a tremendous responsibility at the same time. If freedom is inescapable, then so is responsibility. If a person is coward, then he is so by choice. However, Sartre believes that if there is a choice, there is hope, too because choice means an opportunity to solve the problems and change the difficulties that man undergoes.

Moreover, for Sartre's brand of existentialism, as God does not exist, no external and objective measure of value exists. However, man's free choice constantly creates *human* meanings and values. All in all, a person's freedom creates who she/he is. Freedom creates human values and it defines what it means to be a human being with choices and consequences of those choices.

### 1.3. Angst/Anxiety

Angst, anxiety or despair is another existential concept by which Sartre means the state of acceptance that human beings accept that they have limitations. The despair in Sartre's thought should not simply bring in pessimism or passive waiting in the face of the obstacles. The human being should be aware of his/her limitations yet still try to act in the best way possible to control what is in his/her hands. The concept of freedom requires people to choose to behave in a way and this freedom which brings forth responsibility and despair. Despite the feeling of despair, existentialism believes in the transcendence of human beings who takes responsibility of the results of their choices and can go beyond themselves.

It can also be seen in relation to the previous point how angst is before *nothing*, and "this is what sets it apart from fear which has an object" (Wartenberg, 2008: 72). While in the case of fear, one can take definitive measures to remove the object of fear, in the case of angst, no such 'constructive' measures are possible. This is *the anguish of being*. Furthermore, the 'immediacy', man's typical way of living in the world, is not true to what man is. The immediacy makes man forget the question of his existence. However, anxiety emerges and shatters the world of immediacy and man is woken up. "Anxiety puts you in the position to do that by overwhelming you in a mood that breaks you out of your immediacy and creates a space for you to once again ask those important questions" (Panza & Gale, 2008: 65). This sort of anxiety is a mood that senses the nothingness, or lack of foundation, at the core of the world and human being. For the existentialists, a kind of nothingness pervades man's existence, as Sartre puts, "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of Being – like a worm" (1943: 21). This idea also reminds one of being "thrown into the world" (Sartre, 1957: 23) and that the whole systems of meaning are just castles built on sand. Thus, the meanings that make up one's world are entirely accidental and groundless. This kind of anxiety makes man sense himself different and alienated from these meanings because anxiety takes away the illusion that man had and made his life neat, clean, comfortable and in order. So, in anxiety man seems to have nowhere to turn. He is surrounded by nothingness on all sides. Anxiety, in this sense, reveals the nothingness at man's core. Therefore, anxiety shows man that he has the power to create himself, because he is not essentially any of the roles or meanings that his world assigns to him. Hence man is possibility because he can take hold of his own existence. Briefly, for the existentialists, nothingness means freedom to human beings.

### 1.4. The notion of the absurd

The concept of the absurd concerns the idea that there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what meaning we give to it. This meaninglessness also encompasses the amorality or "unfairness" of the world. Absurdity is a human condition. What is absurd is the situation in which the world is irrational and people long for clarity. Life becomes absurd when man tries to impose clarity to an irrational world. Absurd is the inconsistency of the world around a human being with the way he thinks of. "The existentialists think that the world has no necessary structure, no intrinsic meaning, no innate meaning, no innate significance, no internal purpose whatsoever on its own" (Panza & Gale, 2008: 79).

According to Camus, absurdity is a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a divorce between two ideals. Thus, he states, “The world in itself is not unreasonable, that is all can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus, 1991: 19). Camus defines the human condition as an absurd one because the confrontation between a person’s wish for meaning and certainty on the one hand and the indifferent or silent world on the other. He maintains that there are some specific human experiences which bring about a sense of absurdity. Such a realization or encounter with the absurd provides a person with such choices like suicide or acceptance of the absurd. To Camus, the acceptance of the absurd in the universe is the only sensible choice. According to Camus, a person can be contented, if not happy at all, with the acceptance of the absurdity of the universe, but continuing to impose meanings to the world, regardless of absurdity.

## 2. Existentialism in Turkish Literature

After the WWII, the echoes of Existentialism have started to affect Turkey, too. In *Tercüme* (magazine) there appeared some translations called “New Opinions” (*Yeni Görüşler*). Sabahattin Eyüboğlu translated Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes*. Moreover, Oğuz Peltek and Erol Güneş translated some works of Merleau Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and D. Aury. They also gave a speech about Sartre’s work *Existentialism is A Humanism* (2007). What is more, Turan Oflazoğlu translated works of Nietzsche and Heidegger, ... and Önay Sözer and Sina Akşin translated Kierkegaard’s some works in 1960s.

Existentialism started to influence Turkish literature in those years. One of Turkish writers, Demir Özlü wrote his collection of short stories, namely *Anxiety and Breathing* (*Bunaltı ve Soluma*) under the influence of existentialism. There were others such as Orhan Duru, Ferit Edgü, Bilge Karasu, Adnan Özyalçın and Leyla Erbil whose works bore the traits of existentialism. Although they are not regarded as existentialist poets, Edip Cansever, Turgut Uyar and Ahmet Oktay studied some existentialist themes such as solitude, isolation, anxiety and alienation in their poems.

## 3. *No Exit* by Jean Paul Sartre

### 3.1. Being-for-itself

Humans do not all act the same; we vary in emotional response, career preferences, physical attraction, physical appearance. These factors essentially are formed from our acknowledgment of our consciousness and employment of choice based upon free will. In his book, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines subjects, those have the capability to formally recognize and address consciousness, and objects—which lacks said ability—as two types of “beings”; a being-for-itself and a being-in-itself. Humans function as a “being-for-itself” by the temperament of free will, but remain to be incomplete due to their lack of definitive purpose. The means in which we define ourselves eventually come to exist as our function, whereas the function of a tree—such as providing carbon dioxide as well as housing units for many animals—is truly definitive.

The characters in *No Exit* display their reactions and definitive characteristics before we are introduced to them as they continue through their mortal life. As the play progresses, however, we are slowly exposed to the attributes that they accumulated on Earth but have, inevitably, brought down to Hell with them to live with for all eternity. Joseph Garcin is the first character introduced in the play. He was a coward who ran away from his country because he did not want to fight. In the play, he projects a cowardice status by relying on the two women to decide whether or not he is a coward in his own mind when he asks Estelle, “Well, Estelle, am I a coward? (Sartre, 1990: 37). The second character is Inés Serrano who is divulged to be a cynical and conniving character as she was killed by a woman she taunted in her Earthly life. This is an admitted trait that has been developed over time and is demonstrated in her dialogue with Joseph as she admits that “When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get on without making people suffer” (Sartre, 1990: 26). She then goes on to taunt Joseph by refusing to believe he is more than a coward, and tries to seduce Estelle into becoming her love. The third significant character is Estelle who initially denies that she belongs in Hell by forcing a false sense of innocence which only she is blind to as she declares, “I haven’t a notion, not the foggiest. In fact, I’m wondering if there hasn’t been some ghastly mistake. Isn’t it better to think we’ve got here by mistake?” (Sartre, 1990: 14). After these characters disclose their inner most despicable reputations, they are exposed to the judgment of each other.

The acceptance of being-for-itself has a considerably dangerous consequence which Sartre discerned in *Being and Nothingness* as the threat of the “other” (Sartre, 1943: 307). This phenomenon is greatly explored by Sartre in *No Exit* by the pure plot and setting as Joseph enters the room and notes “No mirrors, I notice. No windows. Only to be expected” (Sartre, 1990, p. 4). At first glance, this observation is seemingly innocent. With each person that enters the room, however, the gravity of the lack of reflective substances becomes more perceptible.

Sartre argues that although we are ultimately in charge of defining our essence, this right is compromised when in the company of another being-for-itself. Humans become influence by the presence of another in such a manner that they immediately become aware of all “gestures, and expression, acts and conducts” (Sartre, 1943: 307). This gaze of another compromises an individual’s notion of inherent freedom by unavoidably becoming objectified by that person or persons, for better or for worse.

### 3.2. Being-for-others and the power of the gaze

In the case of Joseph, Estelle and Inés, the power of the gaze is the definition of eternal damnation. Although Joseph suggests trying to forget each other’s presence, Inés retorts that it is impossible “To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I *feel* you there, down to my marrow. Your silence clamours in my ears” (Sartre, 1990: 24). They have all found themselves stuck in each other’s company, perpetually yearning to prove what they perceive their function to be to the others in the room. According to Sartre, though, these three individuals will never again fully be able to develop their functions due to the influence of the watchful eye of the additional inhabitants of the room. Sartre argues that others can more assuredly reflect the true nature of anyone better than any mirror. This is demonstrated when Inés volunteers



to be a mirror to Estelle when she comments “[I can see] every inch of you. Now ask me questions. I can be as candid as any looking-glass” (Sartre, 1990: 23). According to Sartre, the existence of the gaze threatens individual definition and functionality by allowing them to become objectified by another—much as a being-in-itself is objectified. The danger of the other can clearly be classified by the fallacy of wrongly identifying with a being-in-itself is a hindrance to individual development. As Sartre puts “The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein* [or, being-with]; it is conflict” (1943: 451).

### 3.3. Isolation and claustrophobic environment

Environment and milieu are defining factors and can be applied to two types of being-for-itself. The first type is one who is ultimately thrust into an environment that is pre-arranged so much so that the inhabitants have limited input. To some extent, this is true of the inhabitants of Earth—while we can diminish features of the planet, such as rainforests, animals, air, etc, the geographical borders of countries and islands are significantly controlled by the sea coasts that act as limits. In *No Exit*, this theory extends itself from the boundaries of life on Earth to the eternally damned existence of Hell. One by one, each person is lead into a singular room that is decorated in Second Empire (French) furnishing. The room dawns three sofas, a mantle with a strange bronze mantelpiece, a paper-knife (but no books) and a bell. Beings that find themselves in such a situation have no choice but to adapt to the setting and define their essence from that point onward—such as the souls of Joseph, Estelle and Inés trapped in a singular room. As Cox states, “Without windows, mirrors, darkness, sleep, dreams, books or anywhere to escape to, there is no respite, none of the distractions that made Joseph’s life on earth bearable, distractions that made Joseph bearable to himself” (2009: 133). Therefore, he asks, “I shall never sleep again. But then – how shall I endure my own company?” (Sartre, 1990: 23). The setting traps them in each other’s company. In this situation, although they have nothing in common, they have to endure each other. Joseph will continue to denounce his cowardice to Inés, Estelle will continue to lust for Joseph, and Inés will continue to lust for Estelle despite the set boundaries.

With the absence of a definitive God figure in this play, Sartre’s assertion of existentialism being a function of humanism can be applied here. As earlier noted, Sartre’s allegation is that existence precedes essence. Therefore, a man exists and then proceeds to define himself further. In the wake of an absence of religious margins or a God-like figure, the powers associated with both are then delegated to Man, himself. The responsibility of human existence, then, is to utilize this power to most greatly benefit the most amounts of people in this world. Sartre referred to this idea as humanism.

Each character in *No Exit* fails in their respective manner to benefit society in the least, while also effectively devastating the lives of others; at times even cause deaths other than their own. The actual deaths and the following swift damnation of each soul of Joseph, Inés and Estelle are contingent upon this very notion. Joseph attempted to flee a country to avoid fighting in a war, Inés tormented a woman and led her away from her family for the sake of Inés’s pure sexual gratification, and Estelle threw her baby off a balcony to dispose of the evidence of her infidelity. These actions not only caused the death of their respective executors, but also directly affected and caused pain to others in the world.

### 3.4 Human being is free so s/he is a possibility

Sartre, like John Locke, was a representative of the theory of tabula rasa, or blank slate. He believed that we are not born with any innate, biological, ethical standards in place and that the outcome of individual personalities is a direct result of the nature in which they are brought up in. The universal indifference to the existence of human nature is a factor to be considered when assessing a potentially influential setting over the course of one's life. The absence of religious and biological implications is the make up behind the concept of freedom of choice. This negates the theory of human nature and thus, every man is fundamentally anchored to reason by the development of perception of life at any given moment. In conjunction with this assertion Sartre made his famous quote that "man is condemned to be free," in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1957: 4). *No Exit* exhibits both the positive and negative aspects in this declaration. On a more calamitous scale, the freedom of choice can lead to awful decisions such as in the case of Joseph, Estelle and Inés. The choices they made in real life not only created, but followed them into the afterlife. Because of these decisions, they are condemned to the eternal objectification of others most clearly demonstrated by Joseph's exclamation of "Hell is—other people!" (Sartre, 1990: 45). "Hell is other people" is also explained by Cox as in the following:

The existence of other people and the profound and often disturbing impact that their existence has on the nature and value of our own personal existence. In short, he [Sartre] wants to examine the phenomenon of *being-for-others*... it was argued that every person exists for others as well as for himself. A person is his being-for-others, but he is it over there for the Other. The Other only has to look at him to take possession of at least a part of what he is. Under the Gaze of the Other he is made to be responsible for what the Other sees. He is subject to the Other's judgement of him, and although he can try to influence this judgement he can never gain complete control over it or even know for sure what it is (2009: 137).

Angst, despair, and abandonment are all emotions that various characters in *No Exit* explore and experience. According to Sartre's thought of existentialism, these characters did not face these emotions in a negative manner, but in a modality of acceptance; acceptance that they are abandoned by the refuted existence of God and thus they are forced to freely walk the Earth and only make decisions for themselves. Anguish acts as the concern upon realizing that individuals are forced to act upon this notion of free will.

### 4. *Shadowless (Gölgesizler)* by Hasan Ali Toptaş

*Shadowless* is a novel which is based on two important ideas: existence and disappearance. The divergent and fragmented parts of the novel take place in a village in Turkey. In this sense, Toptaş brings the notion of existentialism to a village, which makes the novel more interesting.

In the novel it is difficult to talk about a plot because the narrative structure of the novel is disclosed in a two-fold style. There are two planes of time and space. In one of these planes, the

narrator is found in a barber shop and he makes small talk with the barber: “‘Why don’t you say something mister?’ said the barber. I said ‘What do you want me to say?’ ‘Whatever you like’ he said; ‘just talk... Let’s say, do you still write novels? Talk about that’”<sup>2</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 6). From this conversation, the reader learns that the narrator of the novel is also a novelist.

On the other dimension of time, the head of the village is introduced. He has just been elected as the head of that village. The interesting incidents happen in the village as each villager starts to disappear. The head of the village lets one of the villager’s, Cıngıl<sup>3</sup> Nuri’s, sudden disappearance gets him down:

The head of the village patiently listened to her [Cıngıl Nuri’s wife] by considering everything carefully as if he had been the head of the village for one thousand years. At the same time, he was sitting in the waves of cigarette smoke. The head of the village couldn’t believe that one of these villagers, who don’t know how to get lost except being buried in a grave, was able to disappear suddenly... This idea frightened him; made a huge vacuum in him<sup>4</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 14-5).

After Nuri’s sudden disappearance his relatives set out to look for him. No matter how much they look for him, they desperately return to the village with no clue about Nuri. After years a barber appears in the same village. Although he looks like the lost Nuri, he is not explicitly mentioned to be him. He says that he once knew Nuri.

After a while another villager’s, Reşit’s, daughter Güvercin<sup>5</sup> suddenly disappears. Her family is devastated by her absence. The head of the village this time looks for the missing maiden, Güvercin. He thinks to himself:

The head of the village scanned the courtyard again with his eyes. He thought that everything would necessarily leave a trace behind; nothing could disappear without a trace; even the birds left traces in the sky, words on the teeth, glances on the face... Güvercin... couldn’t have disappeared by erasing everything behind her<sup>6</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 39).

After a girl’s disappearance, both the head of the village and watchman, the two officials who represent the government, decide to undertake the task of finding Güvercin. The most probable suspect seems to be Cennet’s<sup>7</sup> son. Although he claims that he has nothing to do with Güvercin’s disappearance, he cannot make them believe that he is innocent. He is heavily beaten by the watchman. After this incident, Cennet’s son starts to behave like a crazy man. He keeps asking “‘Why does it snow, why?’”<sup>8</sup> (108). Meanwhile, the head of the village goes to the main district to check if they have had any news about Güvercin. Güvercin’s father, Reşit and her uncle, Rıza also look for Güvercin. Rıza wants them to go and get help from the imam of the village as the last option. Reşit does not believe that imam could help them find Güvercin. Rıza arranges a sort of trick with his son, Ramazan to make Reşit believe in İmam’s power and abilities. However, this small game ends up with the tragic death of Ramazan. He is killed by an angry horse in the middle of the village in front of everybody’s eyes. The head of the village is also believed to be missing. After a while, his office is unlocked and his body is found as he has committed suicide there. Towards the end of the novel, the crazy

son of Cennet brings Güvercin. She looks so desperate and miserable. It is learnt that she is pregnant. No matter what her father does she does not confess the person 'who' kidnapped and raped her. As another interesting incident, Cennet's son is killed by one of the snakes with which he has been playing. At the end of the novel, the narrator is depicted when he writes his novel. Interestingly, his son tells him about latest news on the newspaper: It is a piece of news about a girl who was kidnapped by a bear. Although the novel has no specific plot and theme, it is full of existentialist themes.

#### 4.1 Being and nothingness

The novel analyses the idea of being and nothingness with many different examples. Nuri and Güvercin disappear and these villagers are terrified by the idea of being nothing:

The head of the village sat back; he looked at the blood stain on the floor, and he wondered if there was a nothingness of everybody in the village. He regretted not having come to this conclusion before. Maybe he was right, everybody in the village had a nothingness; there was a group of nothingness as many as villagers and this group of nothingness comes and leaves houses, goes to the local coffee-house and drinks tea, works in the fields, comes together in the shade of the plane tree and they lament for losses and celebrate the weddings like villagers<sup>9</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 81).

The existential idea of Sartre, 'being and nothingness,' is also underlined through the notions of 'to be born' and 'to die':

'Alas!' regretted the watchman, 'alas... People are born before our eyes; they live again before eyes, then they suddenly vanish into the thin air and we cannot notice that.' They were walking to the gate of the barn together. When they reached the threshold, the watchman seemed thoughtful. He was going to say to Hacer 'As we cannot notice all these things happening around us, then we must all be nonexistent?'<sup>10</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 107).

A person's lack of being is the main structure of the novel, and Toptaş has been obviously influenced by Sartre's ideas as Sartre claims, "It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation." (1943: 7) Thus, Toptaş describes it, "Everything has been out of the joint from now on"<sup>11</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 32).

Furthermore, in the novel Cennet's son is another character that can be analysed in terms of existentialism. As Toptaş states,

The situation was really bad if Cennet's son vanished in the thin air twice like his mother said because he had already ended himself within his existence before. These disappearances could result in the vanishing of the entire village gradually. Perhaps the village didn't already exist but nobody could understand that<sup>12</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 113).

His disappearance is a literary one. Another disappearance in the novel is Cıngıl Nuri's. Both of their states of nothingness have some other dimensions in the novel. They get rid of physical constraints and their conscious is released. In this sense, they are able to lead free lives.

#### 4.2. Anxiety of uncertainty, emptiness and meaninglessness

Almost all characters in *Shadowless* suffer from the uncertainty. They are uncertain about their existence of characters, time and space. The idea of being unsure is painful for each character. For instance, after Güvercin's disappearance especially the head of the village feels to be plunged into an infinite sorrow. He for the very first time feels that he can have control on nothing. He realises the absence of facts that he trusted and according to which he ordered and lead his life. He is crushed under the unbearable notion of uncertainty. His state of anxiety is depicted with an insect analogy:

... he was overwhelmed by the weariness of all these years and boredom of trying to be moderate, successful and of suppressing thousands of wild passions have left traces of wrinkles on his face. He felt like a tired insect that is crashed by its own burden; he was kicking and stamping with his invisible legs and arms although ne never moved<sup>13</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 99).

...

In fact, he was afraid... of the sudden disappearance of Güvercin, the persistent silence and everything that can happen after this horrible silence. According to him, there was something wrong with the village, a haunting feeling...<sup>14</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 45).

Furthermore, sometimes the state of being 'nothing' is explained in a metaphorical and paradoxical way. For instance, the nothingness of Cennet's son is different from that of the head of the village. When Cennet's son becomes insane, he is regarded as absent:

The head of the village was silent and he was thinking of Cennet's son. From now on the son was also nonexistent according to the head of the village. Moreover, his way of disappearing was much more different than that of others... he publicly disappeared; he retreated to the depths of his appearance... like in the old days he would be met every day and everywhere; would be heard and smelt but never be reached<sup>15</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 100).

It is an anxiety that functions like a threat of nonbeing to the spiritual life. This threat derives from the man's finitude and estrangement and leads to more despair. To get rid of it, one tries to give up her/his own freedom and thereby sacrifices his genuine existence. The suicide is reflected on in Toptaş's novel as follows: "The watchman pushed the door with his elbow; the hinges expand with a squeaking sound. After that a terrible foul odour pervaded... Cennet's son raised his head and looked inside; the head of the village was there"<sup>16</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 189) ... "It was the barber who took the head of the village's body from the hanging rope"<sup>17</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 193). The suicide is a way out for the head of the village to escape the torment of uncertainty and meaninglessness of the world.

The narrator of the novel is also under the influence of anxiety of fate. The anxiety of fate is derived from the threat of nonbeing against a human's "ontic"<sup>18</sup> affirmation. It is a foundational, universal, and thoroughly inescapable. What brings about the anxiety of fate is the contingency of man and the reasons which determine him without any rationality or ultimate necessity. His anxiety is highlighted as in the following:

Human beings are odd creatures who do not have a choice other than walking on the same path; without realizing the repeat is just a veil of other repeats they live at the very same point with a longing for a faraway adventure they do the same wavings, same laughings, same walkings or same sittings<sup>19</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 156).

The narrator realises the absurdism of life and this quotation above makes the reader remind of Camus' *the Myth of Sisyphus*: The narrator realises he is in the same plight as Sisyphus, who was condemned to roll a rock up a mountain for eternity, only to have it roll down again once it reached the top. The realization of the absurd in the universe, according to Camus, requires, revolt, not suicide. He then outlines several approaches to the absurd life. His essay concludes, "The struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (qtd. in Kaufman, 1956: 345-369).

At the end of Toptaş's novel, the narrator, who is a writer as well, mentions the difficulties that a human being should encounter. This is the idea of human predicament. According to existentialist thinkers, a human being who realises her/his predicament should not try to solve this problem by committing suicide, since it is regarded as an escape, a presentation of defeat. Rather, she/he should try to create their own meanings and purposes like Sisyphus. Therefore, Toptaş's narrator/writer chooses not to give up or suicide. "When I had come to the front door, I raised my head and looked at the window of my apartment on the third floor; as usual the window was open. Climbing up the stairs I told to myself 'This is good. In spite of several obstacles that I faced, I apparently do still write...'"<sup>20</sup> (Toptaş, 1995: 231).

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be asserted that existentialism is a significant philosophy of thought which have influenced many people of letters throughout the history. Existentialism can be explored in literary works in terms of application of existential themes and techniques as studied in this paper. Existentialists are concerned with existence, change, freedom and self-cognizance, among other things. Two postmodernist texts, as it were, Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Hasan Ali Toptaş's *Shadowless* embody existentialist features and themes such as existence precedes essence, freedom and responsibility, anxiety and absurd. What these writers underline in their works is that existentialism is an influential philosophy which is concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. A comparative analysis of the existentialist features of Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit* or *Huis Clos* (1944) and Hasan Ali Toptaş's *Shadowless* or *Gölgesizler* (1993) has attempted to contribute both to critical studies on a French writer, Sartre's work and scholarship on the works of a Turkish writer, Hasan Ali Toptaş work, and both works of literature have been discussed from the World-literature studies perspective.

**Endnotes**

- 1 When this study was written, Toptaş's novel *Gölgesizler* was not officially translated into English; therefore, all quotations from the novel are translated from Turkish to English by the writer of this study. Nevertheless, the original quotations in Turkish are provided as endnotes throughout this study. Also, *Gölgesizler* was translated into English as *Shadowless* by Maureen Freely and John Angliss and published by Bloomsbury Publishing in 2017.
- 2 “Neden konuşmuyorsun beyim dedi?” berber. ‘Ne anlatayım’ dedim... ‘Ne anlattırsan anlat,’ dedi; ‘yeter ki anlat...’ ‘Hala roman yazıyor musun sözgelimi, onu anlat’” (Toptaş, 1995: 6).
- 3 A local nickname. It literally means a small bunch of grapes.
- 4 “Muhtar bin yıllık muhtar gibi her şeyi ölçüp biçerek, sabırla dinlemişti onu [Cıngıl Nuri'nin karısını]. Bir yandan da peş peşe ateşlediği sigaraların dumanına boğulmuştu. Mezara girmekten başka kaybolma yolu bilmeyen şu köylülerden birinin, kendi kendini ortalıktan sileceğine inanamıyordu... Bu düşünce korkutmuştu onu; içinde kocaman bir boşluk yaratmıştı” (Toptaş, 1995: 14-5).
- 5 A female name which means pigeon.
- 6 “Muhtar avluyu yeniden taradı gözleriyle. O her şeyin mutlaka bir iz bırakacağına inanıyordu, izsiz şey olamazdı; kuşların bile izi vardı gökyüzünde, sözcüklerin dişte, bakışların yüzde... Güvercin... ardındaki her şeyi silerek kaybolamazdı” (Toptaş, 1995: 39).
- 7 A female name which means heaven.
- 8 “Kar neden yağar kar?” (Toptaş, 1995: 108).
- 9 “Arkasına yaslandı muhtar; gözleri yerdeki kan lekesinde, yoksa bu köyde herkesin bir yoku mu var, diye geçirdi içinden. Böyle bir yargıya daha önce varamadığı için hayıflandı. Belki de doğru düşünüyordu; herkesin bir yoku vardı köyde, herkes kadar bir yoklar sürüsü vardı da evlere girip çıkıyorlardı insanlar gibi, kahveye oturup çay içiyor, tarlada çalışıyor, çınarın gölgesinde toplanıyor ve ölümlerde ağlayıp düğünlerde oynuyorlardı” (Toptaş, 1995: 81).
- 10 ‘Ya,’ diye hayıflandı bekçi, ‘ya... İşte böyle, insanlar burnumuzun dibinde doğuyor, burnumuzun dibinde yaşıyor, sonra birden yoklara karışıyor da biz fark edemiyoruz.’ Samanlık kapısına doğru yan yana yürüyorlardı. Eşiğe geldiklerinde bekçi düşünceliydi. Hacer’e, ‘Bütün bunları fark edemediğimize göre yoksa biz de mi yokuz?’ diyecekti... (Toptaş, 1995: 107).
- 11 “Her şey yörüngesinden çıkmıştı artık” (Toptaş, 1995: 32).
- 12 “Cennet’in oğlu kendini kendi varlığında yok etmişken, gerçekten kadının dediği gibi bir kez daha yok olmuşsa durum kötüydü. Bu işin sonu yavaş yavaş köyün tamamen yok olmasına dek gidebilirdi. Belki köy zaten yoktu da bunu kimse anlayamıyordu” (Toptaş, 1995: 113).
- 13 “Bunca yıldan beri hep akıllı davranmanın yorgunluğu çökmüştü omuzlarına; ölçülü olmanın, başarmaya çalışmanın ve içinde köpüren binlerce arzuyu bütün bunların gerisine atmanın yıllanmış bıkkınlığı gelip yüz çizgilerine oturmuştu. O anda kendi ağırlığıyla ezilen yorgun bir böcekti sanki; hiç kıpırdamadığı halde, görünmeyen bacakları ve kollarıyla çaresizlik içinde tepinip duruyordu” (Toptaş, 1995:99).
- 14 “Korkuyordu aslında. Güvercin’in ansızın kayboluşundan, ortaya çöken sessizlikten ve bu sessizliğin arkasından gelecek olan her şeyden korkuyordu. Köyde bir uğursuzluk dolaşıyordu ona göre” (Toptaş, 1995: 45).
- 15 “Muhtar susmuştu ve Cennet’in oğlunu düşünüyordu. Artık ona göre o da yok’tu; hem de yok olma yöntemi şimdiye kadarkilerden oldukça farklıydı... Göz göre göre yok olmuştu o; kendi görünürlüğüünün derinliklerine çekilmişti... Her gün her yerde karşılaşılacaktı eskisi gibi, sesi işitilip kokusu duyulacak, ama asla ona ulaşamayacaktı” (Toptaş, 1995: 100).
- 16 “Bekçi kapıyı dirseğiyle itti sonra; menteşeler, gıcırtyla genleştiler. Ardından, leş gibi bir koku yayıldı ortalağa... Cennet’in oğlu hayretle başını kaldırıp baktı, muhtar içerdeydi” (Toptaş, 1995: 189).

- 17 “Muhtarını ipin ucundan berber indirmişti” (Toptaş, 1995: 193).
- 18 In philosophy, ontic is a physical, real or factual existence.
- 19 “Aynı yolda yürümekten başka çaresi olmayan tuhaf birer yaratıktı insanlar; tekrarın tekrarlarının örtüsü olduğunu anlayamadan, aynı el sallayışlarının, aynı gülüşlerin, aynı yürüyüşlerin ya da aynı oturuşların içinden geççe geççe damaklarına bulaşan uzak bir serüven tadıyla dönüp dolaşıp aynı noktada yaşıyorlar” (Toptaş, 1995: 156).
- 20 “Apartmanın önüne geldiğimde, başımı kaldırıp üçüncü kattaki odamın penceresine baktım; her zamanki gibi bir kanadı açtı. İşte bu iyi, dedim merdivenleri yorgun adımlarla tırmanırken kendi kendime, karşıma çıkan onca engele karşı hala yazıyorum demek ki...” (Toptaş, 1995: 231).

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