

Existential Challenges on Female Lives in Liane Moriarty's 'Three Wishes'

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Abstract

Integrating existential philosophy with feminist ideas provides an opportunity for women to redefine womanhood on their terms, challenging essentialist views of gender. This research paper intends to offer insights into women's experiences, challenge traditional patriarchal narratives and propose new frameworks for achieving gender equality and personal autonomy. The fundamental ideas of existentialism such as bad faith, existential angst, existential crisis, anguish, forlornness, despair and existential authenticity have been explored through the female protagonists of Liane Moriarty's novel 'Three Wishes'. Liane Moriarty uses Simone de Beauvoir's perspective on motherhood and children, with a symbol to depict the challenges of mothers. These existential themes aid in a deeper understanding of the complexities of women's lives and promote gender equality and personal liberation in society.

Keywords: Existential feminism, bad faith, anguish, forlornness, despair, existential angst, existential crisis and existential authenticity.

Introduction

The concepts of liberty, interpersonal relationships and the experience of living as a woman are emphasized in Existential feminism. Simone de Beauvoir was a renowned existentialist and one of the principal founders of second-wave feminism. Beauvoir examined women's subservient role as the 'Other,' patriarchally forced into immanence in her book, 'The Second Sex', which some claim to be the culmination of her existential ethics. Beauvoir's freedom-loving and existential views formed the basis of the struggle for equality. Also, they resulted in magnificent philosophical works about life, love and women in this world. Liane Moriarty's 'Three Wishes' revolves around serious issues like adultery, divorce, abusive romantic partners and the complications of pregnancy. It examines the themes of multiple-birth identity, learning when to hold on and when to let go and the necessity of attitude adjustments in the face of life's changing situations. The novel is about the life of the Kettle triplets- Catriona, Lyn and Gemma who are extremely close but emotionally dramatic and combative toward one another. Moriarty's depiction of the characters reflects a keen understanding of the diverse experiences and challenges faced by contemporary women. Moriarty crafts her female protagonists with depth and authenticity, making them relatable and engaging. Throughout 'Three Wishes', the characters undergo significant personal growth. Moriarty portrays their journeys towards self-discovery and empowerment with sensitivity and realism.

The Concept of Bad Faith

According to the concept of 'bad faith' in existentialism, individuals suppress their desires and surrender themselves to the external pressures of society through self-deception. As a result, the individuals disown their freedom by adopting their actions with societal expectations rather than acknowledging their own choices. Simone de Beauvoir made a central claim in 'The Second Sex' that gender-based subordination is not just something done to women, but also something women do to themselves- women often make genuine choices to engage in genuinely subordinating practices. Beauvoir has marked such subordinating practices as 'moral fault'. Three main types of women acting in bad faith are the Narcissist- the woman who denies her freedom by construing herself as a desirable object, the Mystic- the woman who invests her freedom in an absolute and the Woman in Love- the woman who submerges her identity in that of her male object as defined by Beauvoir.

For young women it is the only means of integrating into the community, and 'if they remain unwanted, they are, socially viewed, so much wastage'. The young woman is given in marriage, whereas young men get married, they take a wife. In their case 'They look to marriage for an enlargement, a confirmation of their existence, but not the mere right to exist... They have a perfect right to prefer celibate solitude, some marry late, or not at all. (Mahon 130)

The female characters of Liane Moriarty's 'Three Wishes' were the victims of bad faith. Catriona, the eldest of the triplets had a miscarriage and envied her other sisters for having children. Though her husband cheated on her by having an illicit affair, she forced herself into an unhappy life to win back her husband, to have a child of her own like her other sisters and to conform herself to societal expectations. Hence, she is considered as a Narcissist. The bad faith of Catriona led her to suffer in solitude as her husband moved to France with his new girlfriend. Lyn, the elder is the mother of a toddler and a fourteen-year-old stepdaughter, Kara. Lyn has taken over the job of raising Kara from her birth mother, Georgina because Kara's father left Georgina for Lyn. The latter feels guilty for it and tolerates snide remarks from both the ex-wife and stepdaughter. Lyn's self-sacrifice and denial of expression caused her panic attack, as an indicator warning Lyn that she has been overextending herself. Lyn comes under the mystic category of Beauvoir. Gemma, the youngest of three tries to act as a peace-maker like the love-making woman of Beauvoir. This caused her trouble asserting herself. Gemma's engagement with an abusive fiancé further warps her chances for happiness. Thus, the women characters suffer from inadequacy, unhappiness and unfulfilled potential as a result of their bad faith.

Existential angst and Existential crisis

Existential angst causes anxiety and fear during a transition about one's purpose of existence especially when one finds it difficult to adapt themselves to changing situations. Women usually fall prey to existential angst when they move away from their homes after their marriage. Gender roles, societal expectations, inequality and cultural expectations play major roles in shaping women's existential concerns. These external pressures and complexities contribute to women's search for identity and the meaningful purpose behind their existence. Women struggle to meet societal and family requirements, being unable to balance their career and family thereby developing existential crisis within them. Joseph Mahon comments about Simone de Beauvoir's view on marriage in 'Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir', Marriage, she begins, is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. Marriage, she continues, has always been a very different thing for each of the sexes, a fact which reflects the unequal status of men and women (Mahon 130).

Catriona's existential crisis was because of her unsuccessful marital life, strained relationship with her sisters, her struggle with infertility and power struggles in her workplace. Catriona compares her existence and life with her sister's life to navigate the purpose of her existence. 'Cat buried her nose in a lavender-smelling towel and wondered whether it was she or Lyn who was leading the 'right' life, the one they were predestined to lead' (Moriarty 119). The lack of loyalty within her family, challenges in her professional and personal life evoked feelings of confusion, uncertainty thus questioning her family place as well in the universe.

Lyn's existential crisis was explored by Moriarty through Lyn's journey of inner turmoil and external conflicts. Lyn developed a sense of guilt within her because her husband divorced Georgina to marry Lyn. The verbal abuse of Lyn's stepdaughter and Kara's birth mother further infuriated her, 'Lyn snorted "Right. So, she can have someone to abuse daily' (Moriarty 219). Lyn's meaningless struggle and suppression of her feelings after the marriage led her to suffer from panic attacks. Joseph Mahon states in his 'Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir' that a woman enjoys relatively brief happiness for about the first twenty years of her life, and then, following marriage, her life, in a sense, comes to an end: 'Mistress of a home, bound permanently to a man, a child in her arms, she stands with her life virtually finished forever' (Mahon 138). Gemma's existential angst is fuelled by various factors such as relationship conflicts, career uncertainties and the complexities of family dynamics. Gemma was belittled by her other two sisters from her childhood, and her engagement to an abusive fiancé suppressed her further. After he dies in a car accident, Gemma distrusts all the men she dates and destroys relationships before they have a chance to become serious. She was forced to quit her teaching job and choose a caretaker job. Gemma wishes to be a successful woman in her career like her other sisters. She inherently seeks purpose for her existence and life. She promised her unborn child to her eldest sister Catriona, but when she changed her mind Cat attacked Gemma with a fork on her pregnant belly.

Anguish, Forlornness and Despair

Twentieth-century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, in his seminal essay 'Existentialism is a Humanism', explains that anguish, forlornness and despair result from existentialism's shift in the responsibility of each human being's existence to the individual himself. Anguish, in existentialist terms, refers to the profound anxiety that comes with the realization of one's absolute freedom and the immense responsibility that accompanies it. Individual not only defines themselves with the choices they make but also choose to influence people around them and future generations. Forlornness describes the feeling of abandonment and isolation that arises when one realizes that there is no God, no preordained path and no ultimate meaning inherent in the universe. It's the sense of being utterly alone in making decisions and creating meaning in life. Despair occurs when individuals recognize the limitations and constraints of their existence, particularly when they are confronted with the impossibility of achieving certain desires or goals. It is the acknowledgement that some aspects of life are beyond one's control, leading to a sense of hopelessness. Though these three concepts are distinct from each other, they are interrelated concepts, highlighting different facets of the existentialist perspective on the human condition, emphasizing freedom, isolation and the inherent struggles of existence.

Joseph Mahon presents Simone de Beauvoir's view on abortion in 'Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir' that repressive legislation against abortion is hypocritical, dangerous to women and incapable of preventing women from terminating their pregnancies. Men tend to take abortion lightly, and are also hypocritical about it: universally men condemn abortion, but individually they accept it as a

conventional solution to a problem. Even when a woman does procure an abortion, 'even desires it, a woman feels it as a sacrifice of her femininity: she is compelled to see in her sex a curse, a kind of infirmity and a danger. Catriona's marital breakdown because of her husband's infidelity forced her to confront the reality of her marriage. Catriona's anguish led her to shape her future despite the betrayal. Her husband blamed her and the miscarriage as a cause of their divorce to hide his illicit affair. She was left alone with no one on her side to make decisions. He stood up abruptly from the bed. 'O.K. I get it. It's my fault. Your miscarriage is my fault'. Cat pulled herself up into a sitting position. It was good to be fighting. It made her feel awake. 'My miscarriage? Isn't it our mis-carriage? Wasn't it our baby? You're twisting my words.' (Moriarty 200).

The self-realization of Catriona made her choose a new career. She wanted to inspire teenagers and add purpose to their existence. A miscarriage and a marriage breakup were the turning points of her life. Maxine's advice to Catriona made her take a new path in her life. 'Not many people get the chance to enjoy a miscarriage and a divorce. How unfortunate for them. Not many people get the chance to choose a new life,' said Maxine. 'You're young, smart, talented, you've got no ties, you can do whatever you want' (Moriarty 354).

Catriona took steps to publish a sort of self-help title for teenagers. Cat gets her life back on track and begins to look forward instead of back. To overcome the forlornness, she began her career to add a purpose to life independently.

Lyn wishes to maintain a perfect image which she projects to the outer world as a successful businesswoman, wife and mother. The inner turmoil and seeking perfection everywhere and in everything provoked her to mental illness. Lyn experiences loneliness and isolation after her marriage. Her relationship with her sisters, husband and child were strained. She wanted to please Georgina and Kara by tolerating their abuse. She feels disconnected from those around her, unable to fully express her vulnerabilities. Her husband was passive and inexpressive which made her feel that true connection, love and understanding were often missing in her relationships. The inner battle she faced was due to the quest for a fulfilling life. Her inability and deteriorating health issues drive her into a state of despair. Joseph Mahon mentions de Beauvoir's 'The Ethics of Ambiguity', in which Beauvoir argues that there is a constant tension built into our being: a tension between success and failure, between being human and wanting to be superhuman, between negativity and positivity. The task facing each of us is to acknowledge and support this 'ambiguity' which is so characteristic of us.

Gemma's anguish stems from the traumatic relationship in her past and a deep-seated fear of commitment. The history of short-lived romances in her life and her struggles with maintaining long-term relationships causes her emotional pain. The death of her first fiancé left her traumatized, being unable to move on. The anguish she feels is a constant undercurrent in her life, affecting her ability to form meaningful connections and causing her to question her self-worth. Despite being triplets, Gemma is fraternal, while her other two sisters are identical. She has been different always both in appearance and personality from her other two sisters. She frequently disconnects from her sisters, often feeling a profound sense of loneliness and isolation. This contributed much to her forlornness. Gemma's despair is deeply linked to her traumatic past and repeated failures in life. She feared that she was incapable of sustaining love and that she was destined to be alone. This despair was a significant barrier to her personal growth and happiness, as it prevented her from taking risks and fully engaging with life.

Existential authenticity

Existential authenticity is a concept in existentialist philosophy that emphasizes living by one's true self and values, rather than conforming to external pressures or societal norms. It involves a deep sense of self-awareness, personal responsibility and genuine engagement with one's existence. A few examples of Existential authenticity include making career choices and lifestyle choices, holding personal responsibility and creating one's meaning and purpose in life. The key elements of existential authenticity are applied to discuss the existential authenticity of female protagonists in the novel. To begin with, Catriona's self-awareness behind her existence, and her ambition to lead an independent life prevented her from confining within the four walls even after a sequence of tragedies in life. She neither blamed her husband nor her siblings, instead, she started from scratch all alone with no one to render support. Her thoughts were wide that she wanted to instil awareness in the forthcoming generations too. She went back to work seven days after her miscarriage, two days after Dan moved his things out of the flat. It was the first time in her life that she had lived her own. No sisters. No roommates. No boyfriend. No husband. Just her (Moriarty 251).

Lyn's quest for perfection is another barrier to her existential barrier to existential authenticity. She had been constantly striving to be the ideal mother, sister and businesswoman, which leads to an internalized pressure that distances her from her genuine desires and emotions. This pursuit of an unattainable ideal prevents Lyn from experiencing life fully and authentically. This proves that authenticity serves as a reinforcing factor in an individual's life, however, ignoring authenticity leads an individual to suffer from an existential crisis. At the end of the novel, when Lyn started to accept imperfections. This shift brought a drastic change in her mental health. She began to prioritize genuine connections over superficial success. By embracing her vulnerabilities and acknowledging her limitations, Lyn moves closer to a more authentic existence. Through Lyn's professional success, personal crises and eventual acceptance of imperfection, Lyn's character illustrates the complex interplay between societal expectations and personal fulfilment. Lyn's journey underscores the importance of authenticity in achieving a meaningful and satisfying life, highlighting the transformative power of embracing one's true self amidst the chaos and challenges of everyday life.

Gemma is depicted as a free spirit who resists traditional paths. She often moves from one job to another and avoids long-term commitments, particularly in relationships. She embraces the bohemian lifestyle. The reason behind Gemma's quest for authenticity is due to the struggle to move from her traumatic past. She explores different paths. This exploration is a manifestation of her desire to find a vocation that she feels passionate about rather than settling for a job that merely provides financial stability. Gemma and Charlie were pregnant, but they were unprepared to look after their child. Gemma had promised her unborn child to Cat, who longs to have a child of her own after numerous miscarriages. Unexpectedly, both Charlie and Gemma changed their mind, they wanted the child with them. And Gemma did not want to miss being with her child. This decision of Gemma disappointed Cat, when Gemma said 'Cat. It's not about you. It is about me. This is my baby!' (Moriarty 325). In 'Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir', Joseph Mahon states that as the pregnancy advances, the relationship between mother and foetus changes. The foetus is firmly settled in the mother's womb, the two organisms are mutually adapted and between them, biological exchanges take place that enable the woman to regain her balance. In particular, says Beauvoir, she no longer feels herself the prey of the species; on the contrary, 'it is she who possesses the fruit of her body. Moreover, as she recognizably becomes a mother-to-be, her infirmities begin to work to her advantage. Joseph also adds that everything they do is for their benefit and the welfare of the child'

(Mahon 141). She decided to have the child with her even after Cat attacked her. The decision to raise the child by herself reflects Gemma's authenticity as she holds personal responsibility and genuine engagement with her existence as a mother. Thus, the decision of Gemma reflects her courage to live by her true self, despite societal pressures and personal fears.

Babies as symbols: Exploration through Simone de Beauvoir's perspective

In 'Existentialism, Feminism and Simone de Beauvoir', Joseph Mahon presents Beauvoir's view on motherhood and having children. Simone de Beauvoir not only rejected marriage but also children. Beauvoir explains to Deirdre Bair as

He asked me if I would feel deprived in later years if I did not have a child. I didn't tell him everything I felt, I said no. But I wrote in my memoirs about how children never held any attraction for me. Babies filled me with horror. The sight of a mother with a child sucking the life from her breast, or women changing soiled diapers- it all filled me with disgust. I had no desire to be drained, to be a slave to such a creature. No, all I said to Sartre was that I had no desire to recreate myself and since I had him, I had no need of a miniature or substitute. (Mahon 139)

In the novel 'Three Wishes', the babies are featured as a source of contention regarding their existence as well as their behaviour. The most obvious example is the triplets themselves because the fractious relationship among the sisters begins practically from birth as they all start screaming to be fed. Maxine is faced with the formidable task of raising three unruly girls who frequently exhibit awful behaviour toward one another and act even more immature than their youth would suggest. As adults, Lyn and Cat conduct a covert sibling rivalry over which one has a child and which does not. Cat's quest to have a baby devolves into an obsession that becomes more dangerous after her miscarriage. Her most egregious example of destructive behaviour is when she stabs the pregnant Gemma in the abdomen after being denied Gemma's baby. The triplets are not only the example that babies breed conflict. At one point, Maxine describes Maddie as a demon. Maddie slaps another baby who covers her book. Kara, though a teenager, is also a source of irritation to both Lyn and Michael because of her rude behaviour and irrational rage. Even the newborn Sal during the first few months, when would cry and cry for no reason, sounded to Gemma like a cry of grief. So, he is described by his parents as a baby from hell because of his fussiness. His very existence is the ultimate source of contention and the impetus for the fondue fork debacle.

Conclusion

Existential feminism has significantly influenced contemporary feminist thought by providing a philosophical basis for understanding and challenging gender oppression. Existential feminism, through Beauvoir's work, offers a critique of gender roles and advocates for women's liberation through self-determined choices and rejection of societal impositions. Beauvoir challenges the notion that biological differences justify gender roles. She argues that societal norms and expectations shape gender identity, not biology. Beauvoir is pivotal in understanding how cultural and social conditioning contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Similarly, the triplets' stories emphasize the importance of personal agency and the courage to make life-altering decisions. By the end of the novel, each sister has confronted her fears and emerged stronger, highlighting the theme of empowerment. Moriarty addresses broader social issues through the personal lives of her characters, such as societal expectations of women, the stigma surrounding infertility, and the pressures of modern motherhood. The intersection of personal and

social issues enriches the narrative, making it not only a story of individual journeys but also a commentary on the societal constructs that influence women's lives.

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