

From Capitalist Crisis to Nomadic Selfhood: Existential Triumph and Nomadism in Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland*

Ms. Joypearlinlucia S.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Loyola College, Chennai, India.
joypearlin105@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7336-0132>

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Abstract: The research paper titled 'From capitalist crisis to Nomadic Selfhood: Existential Triumph and Nomadism in Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland* ', analyses the real-life experience of the people who resist the failing capitalism of the 21st century. Bruder's *Nomadland* portrays the tough realities faced by working-class people and their resistance against the consequences of unemployment and homelessness as nomads. The never-ending economic crisis and modern slavery of capitalism push them to the edge of nomadic existence. It further advocates that the increasing subculture of urban nomadism has become a lifestyle by choice for some, while the only way of surviving for others. The paper argues that the realities portrayed in *Nomadland* are not something that exists only in America, but have become a global phenomenon. Therefore, the research paper examines the ability of the proletariat to navigate the effects of capitalist exploitation, pandemic, socio-economic consequences, and forced displacements through the lens of existentialist theory. Furthermore, the study advocates how nomadism decentres the conventional notions of homelessness and emerges as a means of self-discovery, resilience and chosen identity for individuals confronting the persistent socio-economic crisis as nomads.

Keywords: Existentialism, capitalism, economic crisis, unemployment

Introduction

Existentialism is one of the well-known philosophies surviving from the days of Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher. In his day, existentialism remained only as a philosophical idea. It was at the dawn of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the peak of the Second World War, that the literary world witnessed the influence of existentialism. The timely arrival of some prominent existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, and, through their well-furnished philosophies, existentialism was frequently transmitted in literary works.

Existentialism crucially focuses on the concepts of human existence, and existentialists claim it to be an everyday experience. The tenets of Existentialism, propounded by various existentialists, deal with different aspects of life; thus, it is considered an overarching study of human life itself. Existentialism has flourished as a much broader and liberal philosophy. It now greatly influences the world of literature of different genres like fiction, non-fiction, novels, etc., because all these works are rich with existential themes. Jessica Bruder's 2017 non-fiction *Nomadland* is one such work that permeates the tenets of existentialism. It is obviously a general fallacy to view and limit existentialism to more popular and pessimistic concepts like existential shattering, existential vacuum, existential objectification, despair, suffering, and absurdity. The scope of existentialism is broader than these concepts, for it also delves into more optimistic tenets of freedom, responsibility, meaningful existence, and authenticity.

Nomadland is an eye-opening exposition of the living conditions of real-life nomads in the post-recessional world of America, penned by Jessica Bruder in 2017. The study explores nomadism as a new universal paradigm of existential transcendence and resilience for people who witnessed unfettered capitalism as modern slavery. Caren Kaplan says, "nomadism is expected to rescue the postmodern West from its crisis just as Western writers and critics employed the related tropes of exile and wandering to counter the ills of modernism" (Kaplan, 26). The paper explores how the living characters of *Nomadland* transform into urban nomads and discover a sense of self-redemption and survival triumph in mobile life. She closely witnessed the existential challenges undergone by the urban nomads due to the modern slavery of capitalism; she documents her observations in the work *Nomadland* in a Justifiable manner. Bruder's realization of the increasing population of the nomadic community made her travel almost 15000 km as a nomad by herself to bring out the hidden world of nomads to the world.

The research paper explores the harsh conditions of the working-class people and their resistance against the consequences of joblessness and homelessness as nomads. She also states that one *Nomadland* may not be enough to justify the marginalization experienced by the nomads. Bruder, through portraying the resisting action taken by the real-life survivors of the great economic clash in *Nomadland*, authenticates the existential claim that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 28). The economic depression and increasing rate of unemployment and homelessness are something that happens not only in America, but exists as a prevalent issue in many parts of the world. The article explores the existential crisis of

nomads hidden in dark economic corners and the unseen, increasing homelessness in humankind.

It further focuses on bringing out these marginalized people's willingness to fight against their state of being the victims of a failing social system to a triumphant nomadic community, alienation to freedom, prejudiced civilized lifestyle to a meaningful nomadic lifestyle, houseless people to vandwellers, self-doubts to self-discovery, and inauthentic to authentic existence to public notice. All the characters in this book portray the problems faced by the middle-class people after the great financial collapse. Furthermore, their transiting ability signifies an individual's quest to create meaning even beyond the inevitable crises in life. Their existential approach permeates the Sartrean philosophical idea of 'existence precedes essence'. As these nomads at the time of despair took the responsibility of identifying their authentic essence through nomadic existence, this could be seen through the words of Thornburg in this work, "The Great Depression reduced millions of Americans of every age and class to the powerless condition of adolescence. But a few saw opportunity amid all this chaos, the opportunity to rebuild their world, their values along with more personal "(Bruder 76).

The paper carried out a qualitative research methodology to examine and analyze the resilience and the willpower of an individual to fight back the uncertain social systems. The study advocates its research objective by exploring the non-fictional literary text of Jessica Bruder's *Nomadland* through the lens of existential theory and nomadic community.

The Unstable Capitalism and Evolving Urban Nomads.

Capitalism remains not only as a legal business strategy, but also as the domineering economic system in the world today. The twenty-first century witnessed capitalism as a failure of the social system, and the world is mired with the displacement of the working population. Workers are forced to work long hours without adequate pay for their labor in terrible conditions. It traumatizes the working classes to generate profit for the authority that legally owns them as chattel enslaved people. Capitalism, which once developed the concepts of the free market, is formulated to wipe away the hegemonic slavery to achieve economic freedom. Still, now it's failing to serve this sector of society, as it is vividly confessed by one of the nomads in the book, "I'm just an average guy that has fallen victim to the current economic downturn" (77).

The Era of Permanent Economic Clash

Economic breakdowns have always been a major reason for the existential crisis, which impacts the proletarians, who still live in the shadow of the Great Recession. Bruder's writings depict the renewed significance of John Steinbeck's claim on the Great Depression in 'The Grapes of Wrath'. Bruder's depiction of the nomads' resilience in searching for work to survive beyond the depressing work immobility, and their quest for meaning in their existence, resembles the Joad family's immigration to the West in search of work for their mere existence in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The world is now again witnessing the financial crisis at the peak of the pandemic's dire circumstances and its terrible impact on the existential crisis of the people.

The resurgent height of Unemployment, economic exclusion, poverty, and houselessness signifies the revival of precarious recession. This crisis is more frightening than before and has substantial, uncertain impacts on people's living conditions. Even the unpredictable lockdown challenged the mere survival of the people. Historical evidence of economic crises implies an ever-relevant financial crisis and the failures of capitalism in the contemporary era. The peak of the Pandemic revolved around the new global recession, which affected and challenged people's living conditions. It calls into question the idea of job ethics and the belief that hard work leads to a better existence.

Existential Shattering

Existential shattering is one of the major concepts of existential crisis undergone by an individual. Tom Greening propounded the idea of Existential Shattering. He defined it as "the sudden unexpected dismantling or shattering of one's self-conception and worldview as a consequence of an event or process that the individual has experienced" (Vallejos L,6). When an individual goes through existential shattering, they experience the loss of self-conception and worldview whereby their fundamental systems of belief, meaning, and relations with society and its people are blown apart. All the victimized working class of Nomadland have lived all their life with persisting crises, wherein they do not really experience life but rather become subjected to it ruthlessly, as Bruder states, "Wages and housing costs have diverged so dramatically that, for a growing number of Americans, the dream of middle-class life has gone from difficult to impossible (7).

Existential Vacuum

An Austrian philosopher and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Emil Frankl, proposed the term Existential Vacuum. He propounded the Existential Vacuum as part of his logotherapy, which describes an individual's motivational force to search for meaning in their life. Existential Vacuum defines the state of an individual's meaningless existence in the form of inner emptiness or void within oneself. The weight of injustice, unexpected losses, a sense of displacement, and lack of recognition despite hard work evoke a sense of emptiness in an individual's life. It results in psychological trauma for a person. An individual undergoes the phase of existential vacuum while witnessing their existence as meaningless. It raises the question of what life is worth living for. The sense of void within oneself urges an individual to search for the real purpose and meaning of human existence.

In *Nomadland*, unexpected unemployment, homelessness, economic downfall, and shattered retirement dreams made the characters feel the emptiness of life. Linda's loss of lifetime savings during the Great Recession paralyzed her existence. The absurdity of the abrupt economic clash, which transformed the characters into unemployed and homeless people, made them experience the void of life. Frankl states that the emptiness of life can be filled with either meaningless or meaningful things. At the time of existential void, Linda filled it with her goal of building an Earthship. It evokes the meaning of her living beyond the chaotic existence. Similarly, Bob filled his inner emptiness by guiding the homeless people towards the nomadic lifestyle, in which

he felt the purpose of his existence, "As Bob grew into adulthood, he fended off feelings of emptiness. In the coming years, he'd try to fill that void with whatever was at hand" (72). Frankl states that individual awareness of suffering pushes them to search for a meaningful existence. Victimization of the working class people pushes them to self-discovery. The characters find their nomadic lifestyle as a solution to the existential void in the depth of despair.

Existential Objectification

In the capitalist system, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. When capitalist ownership focuses on profit, it uses workers as objects to reach its target level, prioritizing profit over people. This depicts the concept of existential objectification, where workers are treated as objects under the constructed dominating subjective role of ownership. People experiencing poverty continue to work harder for minimum wage, with which they couldn't even afford the needs of basic survival amidst the inevitable system of high-cost living. Capitalism has also been one of the crucial factors for the rise of high-cost living in the 21st century.

Essence of Choice for Existence

In the broader sense of Existential philosophy, the tenets of choice play a crucial role in defining human existence. According to many prominent Existentialists, every individual has choices to direct their way of living. This helps an individual make radical decisions in their life despite irrational experiences. Humans should use their freedom of choice to realize their autonomy and prove their self-identity beyond the destructive forces of society, as was stressed by Bob Wells in *Nomadland*, "The idea of choosing one's destiny, as it turned out, was a big deal. I heard this time and time again no matter how narrow the options one had to pick from, the choice was key" (204)

Essence of Freedom

These nomads use their freedom to navigate themselves away from the dominance of capitalism and the oppression of civilized lifestyles, which made them feel like financially unfit people. They use their freedom to define themselves as houseless but not homeless people by finding their survival on wheels. Even Linda, Bob, and Swankie realize that their transition to nomadic existence gives them the freedom from the prejudiced social norms to which they have been subject throughout their civilized traditional lifestyle. Through the term, Freedom, Sartre states not the freedom to do whatever one wishes, but he means the freedom as a capacity to make choices. His philosophy of freedom means "the autonomy of choice" (Sartre 483). Similarly, in *Nomadland*, the victimized people use their freedom to make radical decisions that will help them to define their purpose and will. The inherent freedom of the victims of the 2008 recession gives them the eyes to see beyond the struggles and traumatic experiences.

Nomadism as a Way of Authentic Existence

Nomadic existence is an unambiguous illustration of modern-day itinerants, which is a choice of leisurely life for some and the only inevitable way of survival for

others. When Linda May and Bob Wells find themselves between the extremes of lack and the depth of social displacement, they formulated their newfound ability to survive life with what they have. The erosion of the Great Recession draws the death of American dreams at the hands of capitalistic powers like Amazon and many other similar workplaces. The 2008 recession bent the ordinary lifestyle of American citizens, leaving them astray. All human beings are in a constant urge to unfold their identities behind the perceptible hostilities of life in many forms. Linda's resilient approach to building an Earthship proves her triumph against the cruel game of economic clash and houseless situations. Similarly, Bob Wells' desire to live and to authenticate the nomadic community depicts the essence of responsibility he took over his life.

Conclusion

The non-fiction take for the study has become an eye-opener of capitalism as modern slavery and its impacts on the existential crises of the people. The researcher's endeavor here has been an investigative and descriptive explanation of the thesis statement. The study is a personal journey into the narrative of Bruder's *Nomadland* to disclose the existential conditions pertinent to the characters of the work and also to examine its relevance in the real-life existence of humankind in general. Their journey from existential shattering towards self-discovery depicts them as transcendental beings. As many characters, after tolerating the predicaments of existence, emerge enlightened and victorious, so too humankind, in general, has the immense scope of existential triumph.

Existentialism is a never-outdated philosophy since it deals with the daily life of a human being, which has no end. As this philosophy permeates the living experience of an individual, it can be relatable to date. The ultimate purpose of human life is to search for authentic identity and to create meaning in one's existence beyond experiencing internal and external catastrophes in society. As long as the human race exists on Earth, it is urged to achieve the purpose of life and strives to trace its meaning to the world. Thus, this paper is an audacious reflection of an individual's inevitable crises and their ability to overcome those crises through one's freedom of choice and resilience. This makes the topic of this study more relevant and appropriate even in the present time, especially as an observational research of everyman's resistance.

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